CASCADIA

A Future Fable of Destruction and Redemption

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Prelude

It is Friday, the 21st of June 2024, just past 9:30 p.m. A full moon has begun to rise above Mt. Hood. The dark, volcanic mountain silhouetted against the moon and the Willamette River flowing silver in the valley below is a classic snapshot of one of the world's most beautiful cities.

There are three such cities in Cascadia, prosperous, active, set in the midst of spectacular and wild scenery. Seattle and Vancouver, like Portland to the south, are slowly settling into the summer night. People are finishing their dinner, children off to bed, maybe a late glass of wine this evening, maybe out with friends and just wrapping up an evening on the town, blissfully heading home, highways not too crowded, the weather balmy, the scene a delight.

Then, very suddenly, all over Cascadia, from Point Mendocino, California to Vancouver Island, British Columbia, dogs begin to bark and howl. In those three cities and all the rural stretches in between them from the I-5 corridor to the coast, the howling becomes a blanket of sound, cacophonous, thick and dense. Just as suddenly, flocks of birds of every size appear in ferocious clouds of flight. Everywhere amid the trees and bushes furry animals scurry from their hidey-holes and head uphill.

Beneath all this movement and noise, faintly at first, a rumbling begins, the sound deep and rhythmic like kettle drums beating in the distance and coming closer, getting louder. Abruptly, the ground begins to tremble, move from side to side, and then to heave and sink in waves.

Trees are thrashing back and forth, clouds of leaves are flying through the air and dust is rising in huge gusts. The pulsing waves grow stronger, shaking people off their feet, vehicles off their wheels, trains off their tracks. The ground begins to come apart, crevices open in the earth and the pavement ruptures. The rivers suddenly are boiling like white water rapids, the bridges are swaying wildly, and then in the midst of all the mayhem and the noise, there is a sound as sharp and distinct as a gunshot in the quiet, a blast crystalline and profound.

Throughout Cascadia along a stretch of nearly 700 miles and almost simultaneously every window in every building shatters, those of the residences and small buildings bursting in shards and granules from their frames, the skin of the high-rise offices and condominiums peeling away and falling in jagged slabs to the streets below.

Still, the shaking continues, seeming to grow even stronger, the waves of energy lifting and dropping the earth like a carpet being tossed repeatedly, the ground literally heaving everything on it loose of its moorings.

Homes are roiling on their foundations. Everything in them that isn't strapped down is falling into a jumble on the floor. In the kitchen, the appliances are shuffling from side to side, suddenly animate, the stove and refrigerator waddling across the room, the water heater in the basement tipping over and breaking free of the gas line, which bursts into flame.

Sawdust spurts from the joists of the roof and large cracks open in the walls. Those on the sides of hills, and that is very nearly all the homes in Cascadia, are especially vulnerable, shaking from their foundations and sliding down the slopes into a pile of rubble, virtually everything in them destroyed.

Sirens everywhere are shrieking. The buildings and streetlights have gone dark. Only the headlights of automobiles still are lit and they are shining at a crazy jumble of angles into the night sky. The light of the moon is eerie, filtered through the thick dust in the air.

Finally, the shaking stops. Perhaps 10 minutes have passed, seeming an eternity. Fires are burning everywhere, the dust and the leaves are drifting in the air, the sirens continue to blare; otherwise, it is very still. There's nearly no sign of life for the moment. Everyone is too dazed to move.

Even in the dim light of the moon, the devastation is stunning. Cities, towns, villages, individual farms and ranches, remote cabins, everything has been damaged and much of it destroyed. Tens of thousands of people are injured, some grievously, and thousands more have died. All in 10 minutes time. But the worst is yet to come.

Some fifty miles off the coast of Cascadia, miles below the surface of the Pacific Ocean and only 10 minutes ago, pressure built up between two massive tectonic plates over more than 300 years finally

gave way. Along a 700-mile fault line, the Juan de Fuca plate slipped a few meters beneath the continental shelf, setting off one of the largest, most powerful earthquakes in history, of 9.5 or even 9.6 magnitude.

Long stretches of the coastline dropped five to ten feet, flooding the land and causing major damage. Like the rest of Cascadia, the destruction from the earthquake was widespread. Homes, shops and businesses were damaged or destroyed, roads ruptured, bridges fell into rivers and ravines, landslides covered large swaths of the coast.

That was before the tsunami. Deep in the water offshore, along the fault line, the force released by the shift in the tectonic plates sent a jolt of energy up through the water that spreads in all directions.

Shortly after the earthquake ended, maybe 5 or 6 minutes later, a wave traveling beneath the surface at nearly 500 miles per hour begins to lift as it nears the shoreline, slowing and rising in a wall of water in some places 100 feet high when it slams into the coast.

15 hours later, as it did in 1700 when the subduction zone last ruptured, the tsunami traveling west will hit Japan. They at least will know it’s coming, and they already are better prepared.

The waves as people might imagine them were not to be. These are not the breakers that surfers ride, those elegant crests of water curling into the air and running dramatically to shore. Rather, it is as though the entire body of the ocean lifted up 100 feet above its normal level and moved inland en masse. The water when it came just kept rising, drowning everything in its path.

When it hits Cascadia, it will obliterate many places along the coast. Oregon is especially hard hit. Many of the homes and other buildings near the shore were badly weakened by the earthquake; when the tsunami hits, many of them fall into rubble, much of which is carried away as the tide recedes. Bodies of the drowned, those killed by being slammed into walls, rocks or trees, and those crushed by collapsing buildings, float amidst the debris that covers the ocean for miles out to sea.

Towns like Seaside, Oregon, a municipality of some 6 square miles where 6,500 people reside at 12 feet above sea level, simply cease to exist. Everyone there likely is killed, most of them washed to sea, never to be found.

Elsewhere in Oregon, low lying towns like Cannon Beach, Manzanita, Lincoln City, Depoe Bay, and Waldport suffer a similar fate. Bandon, at 20 feet elevation, North Bend, Yachats, and Gold Beach, closer to 40 feet, fare a little better but still are very badly damaged.

In Washington, the damage is extensive, with some towns like Westport totally destroyed; others like Clearwater, Copalis Beach, and Oysterville very nearly so.

Other towns along the coast suffer somewhat less egregiously, but all of them are severely damaged. It is the beginning of the high season. Tourists in motels and guest homes hard by the shoreline are killed by the thousands as the giant surge of water pounds the coastline.

The degree of destruction is relative, but Oregon seems hardest hit. Towns to the south like Gold Beach and Bandon are scoured of their commercial areas, which lie low along the coast. Homes rimming them on the upper hillsides are off their foundations and surrounded by debris. Landslides have covered whole neighborhoods. The waves have put out the fires, although the smell of gas wafts through the air and fires will erupt again as sparks reignite them. Highway 101 is destroyed, much of it fallen into the ocean, its bridges collapsed into the ravines they once spanned.

For those who have survived, those who still are fit enough to flee, once they have regained their senses, quickly realize there is nowhere to go and no way to get there. All access in and out has been sealed off and lost.

Part One

Chapter One

David Worthy was unsettled. Frustrated. He sat in the driver’s seat of his 700 series BMW in space 1912 of the parking garage, his ten-year old daughter beside him. Her arms were crossed, holding her backpack tight to her chest, her face a mix of curiosity and resolve.

“He just wants money, right? We could give him some. Just a little bit, couldn’t we?”

It was the same scene nearly every evening. Pick her up at lessons after work, drive through rush hour traffic – fortunately not too far – small talk all the way home. And even before they circled the block off Lovejoy to 10th and around to the garage, he’d catch sight of the raggedy old bum a hundred feet down 11th hunched against the wall.

Always the filthy raincoat, regardless the weather, always unshaven and reeking, always the stoic look from dark, deep-set eyes, almost always a cardboard sign: Anything Helps, or Human Kindness? or Hungry Need Help.

Nothing clever like the younger guys, panhandlers with at least a little wit – Bet You Can’t Hit Me With A Quarter! – Please Help Before My Mother Sees Me Like This! – I Ain’t Lying, I’ll Spend It On Booze! – Pay Your Karma Forward!

Nothing clever with this guy. Just a bum with a sign and every time they see him, Gracie starts in.

“Daddy, he says he’s hungry. Why don’t we help him?”

That was how it began. That was some weeks ago when he first showed up. Just another street person. No shortage of them in Portland, even in the Pearl. They moved on after a day or two, going who knows where? But this guy stayed.

“There he is again, Daddy. Let’s ask him what he wants.”

✦

After a week or so, Worthy talked to management. They ran a very clean building. The Metropolitan was 20 stories of condos $1 million bucks and up. The Worthys had 3,000 square feet on the 19th floor. Management paid attention.

“Mr. Worthy, this is Captain Sink, Security. Can I help you.”

“There’s a man at the door to the garage…

“Yes, we see him on the camera. He’s been there awhile now.”

“He’s upsetting my daughter.”

“He said something to her?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Just the sight of him. She sees him every evening when I bring her home. Wants to know why he’s there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I guess I do, too.”

“We’ve asked him to move along, Mr. Worthy. I spoke to him myself. More than once. There’s not much more than that we can do. Has his rights.”

“Maybe the police could check him out? Get his attention, you think?”

“I am the police, Mr. Worthy. Captain with PPD. 20 years with the Department. This is my off hours job.”

“Sorry, Captain Sink. I didn’t know that.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Worthy. I’m paid to be anonymous around here. Watchful but anonymous. I know you, of course, and your family. Everybody else who lives here, too. Not many of you know me. I live here myself, as a matter of fact, nice little apartment on the first floor, back of the offices.”

“That’s a comfort, Captain. Good to know you’re keeping an eye on things. I don’t mean to be difficult about this guy, just that I don’t like him hanging around the gate to the garage.”

“I understand. Safety is what you expect at the Met. Your lovely wife, that beautiful child, you want to know they’re safe. We watch that gate very closely. Truth is, though, he’s never done anything out there except panhandle. Hardly even says a word to anyone. There was a time when we could run these guys off. Vagrancy, you know. Not anymore. Law’s no longer on the books. These days, unless they’re aggressive with you, give you a reason to fear ‘em, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Well, it’s frustrating. Makes your job a lot harder, no doubt, and for us there’s always to question: who is this guy? Even if he’s not a threat, and I take you at your word, Captain – you sure know better than I do about these things – even if he’s just an eyesore to the neighborhood, it’s frustrating.”

“Tell you what, Mr. Worthy. I’ll ask a couple of the boys to pay him a visit. Check him out. We might get lucky. Maybe there’s a warrant somewhere on him.

Maybe just make him uncomfortable. We'll see what we can do, sir."

✦

"Why are they hassling him, Daddy? He isn't bothering anybody. He just stands there all the time. He's not hurting people. They can't make him leave."

She was right. They didn't. They leaned on him a little and after a time the police gave up and went away.

"Has ID," Sink reported. "Ex-military. Honorable discharge. Even a passport. Cops ran him and nothing. No warrants. No record. Nothing. Means there's nothing we can do. This is what we're left with."

✦

"You need to explain it to her," Ellen said. "She doesn't understand."

"Explain homelessness, alcoholism, post-traumatic stress disorder?" said Worthy. "To a ten-year old?"

"She's smarter than you think," said Ellen. "She sees a lot. All the kids do. And there's the danger, too. We don't want her curiosity getting her in trouble. Who knows who these people are?"

"You're her mother. Maybe you should kind of bring up the stuff about child molesters."

"David!"

"Well, I wouldn't know what to say. Dammit, we make a million bucks a year between us, live in a place like this, and we get Skid Row at our doorstep. For what all this costs, we shouldn't have to deal with this crap."

✦

David Worthy ran a small, very successful company that sold visualization software as a service to clients worldwide. His offices overlooked the Willamette River across Naito Parkway and the Riverwalk in lower downtown.

From his corner suite, he could see the daily parade of happening young people who make Portland among the hippest, most desirable

cities in the country. Walking, jogging, biking, even the unicyclist, young mothers with baby carriages, the Porches, Audis, Beemers, Teslas, cruising down the parkway. It was simply the place to be.

Seattle, for all its charm and scenery, was a nightmare of traffic and congestion, its infrastructure overwhelmed by growth and hemmed in by geographic limits on expansion. Microsoft and Amazon made it ungodly rich and expensive, but it got overcrowded. Mostly, the weather sucked, too.

Vancouver was, well, for one thing, it's in Canada. Full of junkies, too. Ah! Actually, it was a helluva fine city, and Seattle was excellent in so many ways. But, in the Northwest, PDX was the place these days. Smaller, manageable, easier to get around, and thanks to global warming, the weather was getting better. More sunshine, less rain. And the economy was minting money.

People lived well in Portland. The most successful of them lived very well, indeed. Jobs were plentiful, living was large. They were young, sleek, smug. They were happening. They were where everyone wanted to be.

Every corner of the inner city was booming. Everyone was buying. The restaurants, coffee shops, theaters and galleries were packed. You couldn't find a parking place to save your soul, but, once you did, there was no end to the ways you can indulge yourself.

But port towns everywhere have a legacy of vagrants wandering the streets and alleyways, especially in the Northwest where the weather rarely freezes. A lot of people whose ship never came in. Restless wave of seafaring or just poor-faring folks wash up on the shore and have nowhere to go.

Maybe it's just a whole lot more people and so more homeless people, but sometimes to Worthy it seems like every corner has a beggar these days. He can live with it downtown. What choice does he have? But a bum at his front door?

Not what we're looking for in this life of good and plenty. Not what he's willing to put up with, not any longer than necessary.

✦

He left work early afternoon, headed home. Parked on the street out front and walked around the corner, down 11th.

The bum watched him coming, not wary especially, just interested. Didn't move even a little as Worthy approached.

He was taller than Worthy expected, younger, too, unshaven and shabby, but his eyes were clear. His lean face was scarred through one eyebrow and across his cheek nearly to his ear. A powerful odor surrounded him and his breath when he spoke was pretty rank.

"Got a deal for you. Interested?"

"Deal?"

"Like it if you'd find another place."

"Why should I do that?" His eyes narrowed and his head crooked to one side as he said it.

"Make it worth your while."

The bum said nothing, just kept staring.

"Maybe you could find another street to work?"

"I bothering you?"

"My daughter. She doesn't understand."

"You the one that sent the cops?"

"She gets worked up every time she sees you. This is where we live."

"Where I work."

"I could give you money."

"That's why I'm here."

"I mean to go elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? Bother somebody else, you mean?"

"Yeah. I'd pay you."

The bum looked up and down the street, leaned back against the wall, folded his arms across his chest, looked at Worthy again. "I like it here," he said.

"What's the difference? Lot of other streets. Buildings just as good as this one. I can make it worth your while."

Worthy pulled $100 bill from his pocket and held it out to him. The bum focused on it like a bird on a very fat worm, but he didn't take it.

"I like it here," he said again. "Close to where I sleep. Awning keeps me dry in the rain. Lot to recommend it, see?"

Worthy dug in his pocket again. "$200, nah, here, take it all, $300. All the cash I've got. Take it. It's yours."

“You give me $300 bucks to go away? Is that right? Just to go away?”

He looked at Worthy and Worthy nodded, holding the money toward him.

The bum reached down and collected his sign. Picked up a battered backpack and hooked it over his shoulder. “Just to go away?”

He shook his head, in disbelief, in sorrow? He didn’t seem in any way happy for a guy who was just about to score. Who knows what he was thinking? Worthy kept nodding yes and held the money nearly in his face, eyes boring in on him. The bum looked at him hard once more, shrugged his shoulders slightly and bobbed his head, snatched the money from Worthy and slowly shuffled away down 10th, away from the Pearl, headed maybe to the rail yard to the North, wherever these guys go when they aren’t underfoot.

Worthy watched the raggedy bum until he was nearly out of sight. He was surprised to notice he was sweating, his armpits damp, his breath short and his pulse pounding. He felt just a little bit shaky. He was exhilarated.

✦

“Daddy, stop! Where is he? He’s gone.”

“Honey, people like him move on. They’re homeless. That’s what it means. Nowhere that’s home. They’re here, then they’re not.”

She looked at him suspiciously.

“Did you make the police take him away? You did, didn’t you”

“No, no, nothing like that. He just decided to take off, I guess. You have to understand, honey. He’s not like you and me. No job, no school, no home. Nowhere to go to. People like him just wander the streets. Could be anywhere.”

✦

“She actually wanted to go look for him,” he told Ellen. “Can you imagine?”

“You paid him to go away? You cut him a deal?”

“Not so loud,” he said, moving to close the kitchen door before he answered her. “Yes, I made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. A few hundred bucks to solve our problem.

“He was sort of an interesting guy up close like that. Smelled awful and his breath was overpowering. But there was something in his eyes that was different, almost solid, the way he looked at you. Like ‘don’t think I’m a fool,’ you know? He negotiated with me.”

“The master deal maker is proud of buying off a street person? David, you’re kidding.”

“No, just a little surprised. He had me going for a while. Like I had to bid him up to get him out of here.”

✦

“So, you got rid of the guy?” said Brandon Boldon, his CFO. “Good for you.”

“Well, I had to pay him off,” said Worthy.

“The American way,” said Boldon. “Buy their balls. These goddamn bums are everywhere these days. Every streetcorner. Jesus, I get sick of it.”

He started to walk away, then said, “I was in Ashland last weekend for a couple of plays. The paper there calls them ‘People on the homeless spectrum.’ Ha! The homeless spectacle is more like it!”

✦

“I heard what Brandon said,” Holly Weller told him. His VP Marketing, she was no slouch. One tough broad in a business that’s still mostly male. “Thought it was unkind.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah! We were still babies when Reagan threw all these people out on the streets. Emptied out the mental hospitals, cut down the safety net, turned them loose. Like they were supposed to fend for themselves, right? Maybe Brandon doesn’t know that.”

“Before my time. But I think it was about tax reform.”

“Trickle down economics, they called it,” she said. “By the time it got to them…”

“Yeah, it was a trickle…I got you. Have to say, it’s all I can do to run this business, let alone solve those kinds of problems. I don’t know what the answer is. They say its drugs and alcoholism that most of them are suffering. How do you deal with that?”

“These days, one at a time is all we can do.” She hesitated, thought about it before she said, “Ailey, the au pair that takes care of my kids?”

“Sure, I’ve seen her when she brings them by.”

“She was homeless for nearly two years. A friend, a psychologist, helped to get her off the streets. What a mess. Really ugly story. But I got involved, just some money at first, then some counseling, sponsorship. Then, I gave her a job.”

“In your home? Yikes! Brave of you. Weren’t you worried about theft, that sort of thing?”

“I was worried about my kids. That was my concern. I watched her like a hawk for more than a month. She was great with them. Incredible, in fact. These days I worry they like her better than me.”

“So, you think I was wrong to chase the guy off?”

“I think being cruel is wrong. Brandon struck me as cruel. As long as you weren’t unkind, I have no opinion.”

“Actually, I was kind of struck by how much presence the guy had, you know? Situation was reversed, I imagine I’d be a little intimidated. He never flinched. Sounds funny, but for a while when we talked, it felt like peer to peer.”

✦

“Do you think we’ll ever see him again, Daddy?” she asked.

“I doubt it, Honey. I think he’s gone for good.”

The street was blissfully clear, a light rain falling, sun hanging low in the sky to the west. The big, wide gates opened to the command of his remote control, the Beemer eased through and down the slope of the drive into the clean concrete bowels of the building where he and his family lived, an edifice to urban prosperity and burgeoning growth, now unburdened and feeling to him renewed.

Chapter Two

Weller was wrapping up her presentation. Boldon spoke first.

“It looks like a great opportunity. Do we have the staff to get it done?”

Everyone looked at Damian Moody, the CTO. Moody was one of those aptly named individuals whose personality was sometimes murky for a man in his position. Still, he was a brilliant programmer and an appropriate if unusual leader of the company's cadre of gear heads. Despite his sophistication and presence, he knew his code, was at heart a nerd, a well-known gamer, and that was enough to command their respect. There probably wasn't another industry where his personality would let him reach senior management. In software, here he is.

"There would be a number of challenges to overcome between now and rollout," he said, looking at each of them at the table in turn, then at the table. "We could meet the specs, sure, but not with a robust system, not at first."

He hesitated and Boldon jumped in. "Mr. Under Promise and Over Deliver sets a suspenseful stage. What I'm asking is: do we have the resources? What would we need to add to take this on? Do we ask the board to boost the budget?"

"I understand what you're asking," Moody said somewhat sharply, his dark eyes boring into Boldon for a moment, before scanning the others in the room. Then he softened his tone. "It's a very big project. The entire Northwest, from I-5 to the coast in sharp relief. Topos and GIS will have to be resolved upward to, maybe a meter we can get by with for most of it, a foot or less in the cities would be better. There's aerial for the urban areas. Digital Coast at NOAA has good imagery. So, there's a large chunk to get us started."

"And FEMA has a lot of imagery to contribute," Weller added. "Base maps, that sort of thing. We've worked with them before."

"The buildings," Moody said, "all of them in every city in the urban corridor, to render them with fly-through. That will take some doing. Truth is, BIM is still in its infancy. And, yes, the more resources we can add to our capability, the better what we deliver."

"Do they really have the funding to pay for this?" Boldon asked.

"It's inter-agency, Federal and State both." Weller said. "After Katrina and Sandy, there's, shall we say, a sharpened sense of need? Still can't talk climate change – third rail for the Rs in spite of it all. And it's still OPM with most of the managers, but some of the appropriators are starting to make serious noise about earmarking

them if they don't quit passing the buck. Other people's money or their own, none of the bureaucrats want to go back there."

"Federal money is always six months out, minimum," Boldon said, looking at Worthy. "We have to ramp up. We'll have to borrow what we need."

"We can do that if the deal makes sense," Worthy said.

"And the Northwest. Why here?" said Bolton.

"Cascadia," she said.

"Cascadia?"

"The subduction zone, plate tectonics, all that." She looked around the table. Worthy nodded: go ahead. "Every three hundred years or so, one plate about 50 miles offshore slips a few meters beneath the continental shelf."

"Like the San Andreas fault?" Boldon asked.

"Completely different." Everyone looked at Moody. "San Andreas is two plates side by side. They move up and down against each other. Compared to Cascadia, it's a B movie. Sorry Holly."

"As usual," she said, "Dam is right. This plate, the Juan de Fuca, runs for 700 miles just offshore, all the way from Cape Mendocino to Vancouver Island. It's stuck beneath the West Coast, trying to move east. The pressure builds up over centuries. Actually moves the coast eastward maybe 50 or 100 feet over time. Every 300 years or so, it gives way. The Juan de Fuca slips a few meters further under the Northwest Coast. And the coast snaps back to the west where it started. And, whew! Watch out!"

"So, this has happened before?" said Boldon. "And we know that how?"

"It happened in 1700," Weller said, "most recently. And we know it because of a lot of good scientific investigation."

"1700? Not a lot of civilization around here then," Bolton said, "just the Indians. Guess nobody got any pictures, huh? No accounts in the newspapers?"

He shrugged and smiled, looking around the table. Moody groaned. Nobody else acknowledged him.

"The Native people did leave us some evidence, as a matter of fact," Weller said, fighting the urge to roll her eyes. "There are stories a number of the local tribes tell of the very old days when the ground

shook and fell away and the water rushed in and everybody disappeared. They all drowned, washed out to sea, never seen again."

She looked from face to face, letting that thought sink in. Even Boldon appeared to be subdued.

"But what we know from people who keep records, verifiably accurate, written records, comes from Japan."

Moody said, "When the tidal wave hit them the next day."

"Exactly. Records there confirm what scientists here theorized and eventually came to prove. There's a place on the Copalis River in Washington, you know it? Near the coast."

"The Ghost Forest, it's called," said Moody. "Looks like a graveyard."

"It's a grove of dead cedar trees. Scientists always wondered what the story was. In digging around, and this was only in the last 20 years or so, they uncovered evidence that those trees had been growing near the coast when they were suddenly inundated with salt water. The reason, they eventually discovered, was that an earthquake had occurred. Tree ring dating and some extrapolation from other evidence showed on the last week of January, 1700 that it dropped the entire coastal area by 6 feet or more."

"And the water rushed in," Moody said.

"15 hours later, January 27, a massive tidal wave struck Japan. It's said to be one of the largest ever recorded. They've been keeping track for 1,500 years."

Weller looked around the table, letting the information sink in. She was subtle, but a marketer through and through. She had dramatic flair and knew how to tell a story.

"So, the coast dropped six feet and the ocean swamped the land. That's how 'everybody disappeared?'" Boldon asked.

"In the history of seismography, there've been only four earthquakes ever of magnitude 9.0 or greater. This one is thought to have been that big, perhaps the biggest ever, maybe 9.5. Tremors that last five minutes, five minutes or more, rolling like waves of pure energy lifting and buckling the earth, totally remaking the landscape. And, fifteen minutes after the shaking stopped, a tidal wave perhaps 100 feet high and traveling at high speed slammed into the coast

along that entire stretch of the Northwest. That's how everybody disappeared."

"That bad? For real?" said Boldon. He wasn't being funny this time.

Moody said, "FEMA believes when it happens again, and it *will* happen again, it will be the worst natural disaster in the history of North America. It may be the biggest earthquake that's ever happened in the world."

Chapter Three

Worthy was still thinking about the afternoon meeting on his way to pick up Gracie from her lessons. A horrible scenario to contemplate, but a helluva business opportunity for his company. Maybe we could make a difference? Best case, it could double or triple revenues and play out over several years.

Creating a digital model of several major cities, many dozens of smaller ones, and the entire coastline from Vancouver Island to Cape Mendocino, with all its beach towns and resorts, and doing it all in high-resolution imagery, lighting and calendar-oriented sequencing, the whole panoply of stuff his company knew how to do in creating a virtual world, or at least the Northwest part of it.

What a rush. He was trying to contain his excitement, but more ideas kept surging through his mind. All the ways they could roll out the imagery grew sharper. A lot to think about and a great way to bump his company up a notch or two in the industry.

✦

"Daddy, I thought you were going to drive right past me."

"Sorry, honey, my mind was elsewhere. But I never could forget about you. You're always number one with me." He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Nothing is more important than you."

"Not even mom?" she asked.

"You and mom. Family comes first."

"Mrs. Bailey says God comes first. That's why we have to be good to each other, 'cause God wants us to."

“Ms. Baily is teaching you religion? That’s not her job.”

“She teaches social studies. About how we work together in communities.”

“Hmm! I’ll have to talk to her about that.”

“About social studies? Isn’t that what you do at work, help people build better places to live?”

“That’s a good way to put it. We give people tools so they can make smarter decisions about how they build things, where they put them, what they’ll look like when the sun is shining down on them some summer day or when the rain is falling in the winter. And how we can be prepared to help each other if something bad happens, um, like a fire or something. Pretty cool, huh?”

She nodded, looked around quietly for a minute, thoughtful. “God must like that, I bet.”

These conversations each evening when he picked her up after work were priceless to him. The way she brought him back from the daily pressure cooker at work to the clarity of her world never failed to amaze him. The mouths of babes.

He glanced down 11th as they passed on Lovejoy and, what? WHAT! The bum was back. She didn’t see him. He pulled over in front of the Met, parked in the loading zone, hazard lights flashing, and took Gracie in through the front door.

“Honey, I’m going to run you up to Mommy and be back in a minute. I just remembered something I need to take care of.”

✦

“So, what’s the deal?” he said.

“Deal?” said the bum.

“I thought we agreed you’d go away. I gave you money. You said you would!”

“I did go away.”

“Not for long. Just a few days.”

“Had to get back to work.”

“What?”

“Money ran out. Need some more.”

“More? From me, you mean?”

“I ain’t asking.”

“This isn’t right.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I mean you leaning on me.”

“I’m leaning on the wall. Nothing to do with you.”

“But why here?”

“You asked me before. I like it here. Got my regulars come by, some of ‘em every day. Give me a dollar, give me $5. It’s been good to me here.”

“Hell, man, I gave you hundreds. $300 in fact.”

“That was nice.”

“So you’d go away. For good.”

“For good? Good for you maybe. I got to make a living.”

“You call this…? Look, it bothers my daughter to see you like this.”

“Know how she feels. Bothers me too. Just the way it is, though. Nothing to do about it.”

“Nothing? Can’t we figure out a way to make it worth your while?”

“My while? What would be worth my while?”

“I don’t know. Something worth going away. For good.”

“You want to buy my business, is what you mean?”

“Buy your business?”

“Yeah, my business. That what you mean?”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Give it some thought,” he said, and winked. “I got to go now. Time for dinner.” He turned and shuffled away.

Chapter Four

Brandon Boldon was puffing a very large Cohiba, rotating it between his thumb and fingers, the flame from his Hermès lighter igniting that perfect burn. Once it takes hold, and he’s had the pleasure of smoking it a while, building an ash a couple of inches in length, he can set it down, finish his drink, order another, reflect for a minute or two on life, and return to that hand-rolled beauty of a smoke, ash it gently and with a puff or two rekindle the heat in the exact center of the cigar, where it begins to burn outward again in perfect symmetry.

The pleasure of a fine cigar and a couple of snifters of Leyrat XO. The way to finish a meal. That's what the Far Club is all about. Members only. Thick rare steaks with whipped potatoes and creamed spinach. Mushroom sauce if you want it. A Grand Cru Bordeaux. Cognac and Cuban cigars for dessert. A valet to shag your car for you when you're ready to call it a night.

But not yet. Too much to think about. This new project could finally put him over the top. Pull this off and he could smell the liquidity event in the offing. Five years as CFO, living large but not large enough. Not fuck-you money yet. Only when you cash out your options, when Autodesk or Trimble or one of the big boys comes calling, ready to pay a premium price for the technology.

They've been sniffing around, flirtatious and promising, but nowhere near ready to get into bed. Our stuff just isn't there yet. Too much of it custom, too many times we bend the tech to suit the customer because we need the cash flow. The opportunity cost of money eating our time and talent.

Moody's good, though. Give him the resources, free him from the custom solutions nonsense that's kept the company spinning its wheels, he can get us there. Hell, do it right, as good as we can, Google Earth is a natural buyer.

"Lost in thought or just trying to get sober?" It was none other than Samuel Stramm himself, VP Sales, Autodesk, speak of the devil.

"Mr. Stramm, have a seat, my friend. Buy you a drink?"

"Thanks, but no. Rain check, maybe? Just wanted to tell you my guys in Korea are talking about you."

"Ah, as they say, the sun never sets on the Autodesk sales force. Can I guess what's got their attention?"

Stramm smiled, waved away the cigar smoke that was enveloping him.

"I bet you can. Landed a nice little contract right out from under us. With one of our oldest clients, no less. Definitely got our attention."

"Yeah, it was great for us. Very sweet. No hard feelings, I hope."

"Never," he said, smiling again. "Competition brings out the best, and all that. Expect we'll survive it. Still, a feather in your cap, that

one. Your stuff is getting better and better. Keep it up, we'll have to buy you one of these days, just to keep the wolf from the door."

They both laughed at that, Stramm said good night, nodding greetings, shaking hands, slapping backs as he moved away through the crowd. Boldon swallowed the last of his drink, felt the burn all the way to his toes. "This is what keeps us going," he said to himself. "I like being here. Feeling I deserve it."

He thought about what it was, that feeling. A sense of being respected. One of the players. Someone who matters. What used to be called being a pillar of the community. The money, the luxury, it was these trappings that made that status possible. Being one of the stanchions that supported the city, that kept things upright and functioning. That's what he wanted. He could feel it looming.

✦

Holly sat with Ailey Madders, both of them tired, the kids just put to bed, dinner dishes in the washer, both of them feet up and head back against the sofa cushions. "Feel up to talking?" Holly asked her.

"Sure, what's up?"

"I worry about emergencies, what we'll do to protect the children." She paused, said, "It's been on my mind."

"You mean, like, um…what?"

"I don't know. A mother's worry, kind of misty and everywhere. Just think we should maybe make some kind of plans."

"You sound tired."

"Yeah, not too clear."

"Plenty to worry about. I get it. But what exactly do we plan for… you know?"

"We're working on a big project to do with preparing for disasters. Big ones. Earthquakes, tidal waves, that sort of thing."

"Okay. I know get under a desk if you're inside. Or a doorway. Protect your head. If you're outside, stay away from things that can fall, lie down if the shaking's bad. Tidal wave, I know get uphill as far as you can as fast as you can. What else?"

They looked at each other, stared, questioning, then they both started to laugh. "I guess that's the basics," Weller said.

“Maybe it seems silly. I just want to think my way through it. I know it’s not gonna happen, not likely, but shit! What if something did happen? What if I’m at work and you’re running errands and the kids are at school?”

“Yeah.”

“What would we do if something really bad happened?”

“Well, if I was alive, if I survived it, I’d get in touch with you. How are we going to get to the kids?”

“Get in touch how? No phones, no internet, no utilities, water, sewer, nothing. How?”

“Okay, I’d head overland and assume you’re trying to do the same.”

“If I’m alive.”

“Yeah, if you’re alive, if I’m alive. Ugh. This is gross. I was going to say: if the kids are alive. Do we have to go there?”

“I’m sorry. I said it’s silly. I just can’t stop thinking about it though. Let’s save it for another time.”

“Look, Holly, Ms. Weller, the kids are in school a mile from here. Most of the errands I do, groceries, gas, that stuff, even yoga, is within a mile or two. If something happened and we were cut off, no contact, I would head overland. Even if it’s really beat up, the streets, I mean, I can probably get there. I’ve been there before. At least now I’m sober. I could get through most anything to reach the kids. Until I do, or you do, the teachers will be watching them.”

They said nothing for a moment, then Ailey said, “I guess the next question then is what do we do once we get to the kids? Where do we take them? Home? This sweet place? To the top floor of a disaster zone?”

✦

“Have a minute?” Weller said to Moody. “Dam, here’s what I want to know. What is the chance of surviving an earthquake like that?”

He was looking at magnitude models when she interrupted him. Balls from the size of a typographical period increasing in size progressively by an order of magnitude, 1.0, 1.1, 1.2, 2.0, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and so forth to 2.9, then 3.0, and so on, each one 10 times the size of the one before it. 9.5 was as big as the room.

Anyone else, he would have been annoyed, but he liked Weller. She was real in a world that seemed to be increasingly, if vaguely, duplicitous. Too many degrees shy of honest.

“Compared to the tsunami, pretty good, actually,” he said, smiled, looked at her, and the smile vanished. “Compared to the rest of existence and daily life, it totally sucks.”

She was looking at him wide-eyed and wanting to say something, what? She’s actually scared by all this theoretical modeling. For her children, he bet.

“Look,” he said. “We can try to prepare for something like this, and it’s a good thing, maybe. No matter how well prepared you can possibly be, though, you don’t want to go through it. But look at it this way: the chances are one in three it will happen in the next 50 years. That’s about one chance in 20,000 it will happen on any particular day, probably for the rest of our lives. And it may not happen at all. Maybe not for another hundred years. So, just hope it doesn’t.”

They were quiet, thinking, taking it in.

He said, almost to himself, “Preparation, you’re just screwin’ the pooch.”

“What did you say? Did I …?”

“Ruing the smooch,” he said. “The Kiss of Disaster! Something like that. I mean, we’ll probably scare ourselves to death just studying it.”

She stared at him for a long time then. Screwing the pooch? “Look, we don’t live on the coast, so let’s talk about Portland, the earthquake. Like we live on the fifth floor of an old building, the entire top floor of a pretty solid-looking structure. I was told it’s been earthquake proofed. That’s good, right?”

He shrugged. “Better than nothing, for certain. That doesn’t mean it won’t collapse. At least be badly damaged. Just not as bad.’”

“What’s it mean then? Earthquake proof? What are we talking about?”

“Look, Weller. Holly. It’s an effort to deal with the problem. Little quakes like they have most places, earthquake-proof means very little damage, maybe none. Building remains structurally sound, safe, functional. Right? That’s what it means. We don’t have those kinds of quakes.

“New buildings here in town, the “real” quake proof high-rises and condos, office buildings downtown, they’re built to survive a 7.5 quake. Fukushima was 9.0, we saw what it did. Japan has much stronger building codes. Built to survive a 9.0. Some of it did, barely. A 9.5 is *fifty times* as strong as Fukushima. It’s *200 times* as strong as what our buildings hope to survive. *200 times!* Nothing is going to survive that.”

“Shit! So, like, what do we do? My family? My kids. Where do we live if the building falls down?”

“You’re better off than Worthy. Think of him, 19th floor of the Metropolitan. First class building. Down in the Pearl, worth a ton, not far from the rail yards and the river. Lot of those areas nearby are landfill. Quake comes, they liquefy. Anything standing on them floats until it breaks up and sinks in the muck.

“Told David the other day, when it comes to this stuff, he’s in a very precarious position. He thought I was talking about borrowing the money!”

They both started laughing, Worthy always company first. The watchdog.

“Did it register when you told him what you’re telling me?”

“Didn’t get nearly as far into it. But, when I told him his building was likely to be severely damaged, maybe uninhabitable, he appeared…thoughtful.”

“Guess he’s focused on the opportunity. Very big for our business. For you, too. For all of us. Frankly, it still scares the hell out of me.”

“Show of sanity. Bitter and sweet, may as well focus on the yum-yums. It *is* a hell of an opportunity.” With that, he turned back to his toys.

✦

Worthy in fact was not ignoring the dimensions of what Moody told him. He gave a lot of thought to the consequences of a disaster like the one they were going to model. Fucking staggering, to put it mildly. You can’t put a price on avoiding a disaster any more than not getting hit by a bus. But like a bus, you don’t really think it ever could happen, and you never see it coming until it knocks you on your ass.

And if this sort of disaster happens? He tries to see it coming. Tries to measure it.

His place was worth $2.2MM easy, maybe $2.5, or even more on a very good day. And it would be worth, like, nothing? In a matter of minutes? An act of God. Uninsurable. All that equity buried in the rubble.

Extrapolate that by the volume of equally valuable real estate across Cascadia, all the rest of the buildings, homes, warehouses, the ranches and farms, the businesses big and small, the schools and fire houses, court houses, the hospitals and clinics and senior citizen centers, the restaurants, movie theaters and shopping centers, the life and the ways and the material worth of the Northwest Coast…gone. The lifestyle of what? 15 million people, crumpled and soaked like paper playthings virtually wiped away and worthless.

Everything lost. Everything needing to be rebuilt from scratch. Light, heat, power, water, sewer, utility lines, streets and sidewalks, homes, offices, airports and trains, shit! Entire communities from the ground up. Talking trillions of lost value in real estate alone, not to mention all the businesses that will collapse.

Katrina is still a recovery in the works. The mayor telling us to have 10 days food and water on hand. Right? That'll keep us alive just long enough to realize how fucked we really are. Then what? 10 months to even the most basic needs, 10 years before something like normal.

Think about that and try to grok what life would be like. Cavemen. And women. And children. That's about where we'd be, like the Stone Age all over again. Except we'd know what was missing.

Very hard to imagine. No home – at least not one we'd call habitable today. No cars, not that would run after the gas tank hits empty. Nowhere to drive them anyway. No roads. No phones, computers, iPads, television, radio, no connectivity. No stores and no way to supply them anyhow. No food! No water. No sanitation. Power? Forget it. No electricity.

Toilets, showers, stoves, refrigerators, water heaters, lights, heat and air conditioning. Nothing! What would you do? What would *we* do? It's as though we're in this charming, nurturing, thriving, seductive, well lit, well-appointed place and suddenly the light goes

out on all of us. Tens of thousands, hell, several million of us stumbling around in the dark and the lights never come on again.

Too overwhelming to think about. Impossible to imagine. But we're going to build a model that's so real, so detailed and exact, they can kill people, drown the Coast and crumble the entire land of Cascadia, shake it and bend it and break it in different ways, so they can make plans for us to survive it. Right?

Thinking what all that will be like, the modeling and then, too, the possibility of what they're modeling actually coming to be. Some things are simply too large, too staggering, too far beyond the pale to grasp. Modeling disaster is one thing, but living it? Very hard to fathom.

"Shit!" he said half out loud. "Maybe we should bail. Sell the place while we can. Shit!"

Chapter Five

Clayton Embry was the only son and the fifth generation of a New England banking family that was moderately successful by old Yankee standards. Both his sisters were adventurous, farsighted, liberated, and capable, with a broad path of career choices and lifestyles available to them.

Running the bank was not among them. Clay was expected from the time he was born to eventually run the family business. He'd never given it much thought, one way or the other.

His childhood was largely untroubled. He was well cared for, loved even, in a way, and his aggressive nature was inborn rather than like so many of his friends and rivals driven from without.

It wasn't until he'd finished college, traveled for a year, and returned home that the trouble began. Very subtly, his family was pushing him toward what once was called a marriage of convenience and these days might be called a merger.

Emily was a lovely girl from a very good home who'd been a friend of his since childhood. A little high strung, nervous, birdlike in a way, a worrier at heart. She was guilelessly devoted to him and made no

effort to hide her attraction, even when she knew he viewed her as a companion and nothing more.

Her father had deep connections in investment banking that could elevate the Embry holdings. Banking today, you grew or got swallowed. Getting bought for the right price was not objectionable. Getting gobbled up at fire sale prices was another matter.

Embry didn't much care one way or the other, truth be told. Ambivalent about the business, about romance, about personal and family ambitions. But he didn't like being pushed around, not by anyone in any way, and even less liked manipulation. That he did care about. Eventually, he reacted to it.

Not in the way you might expect, and not for an obvious reason, either. It happened from something that unexpectedly stirred a patriotic fervor in him, a desire to serve his country.

Nobody in his family served in the military, not if they could help it. Well, in WWII, nearly everybody went, including his grandfather. But he served a very brief and soft stint, nowhere near danger. The rest of Clay's cousins always had deferments during the draft for one reason or another, as everyone expected they would. All during those days of conscription and on into the modern era of a professional military, for no good reason other than habit, the Embrys, Antons, Wrightlys, and Woods maintained a distance from any encumbrance with it all. They gave little thought to military matters.

Patriots they thought themselves, though. They respected tradition, the flag, the social order, and foreign policy; mostly, they just agreed. Convenience was the reason if you dug down deep enough to find it. Nobody did because nobody gave it that much thought.

When Embry reacted to the ongoing series of Islamic terrorist attacks and atrocities, it was a strain of emotion he'd felt with increasing severity since he saw the towers fall. The sense grew in him over the years with each successive incident that they were barbaric to a degree he had to resist. In person.

That would be startling enough. By then, though, just to add a special overlay of consequence, his ambivalence had led him, or allowed him to be led, a long way down the path to Emily's womb. He'd certainly visited it enough times with great pleasure if little

commitment, except whatever might be implied to a watchful audience hoping for nothing less than marriage.

Now he wants to go fight terrorists? The bank, the courtship, the prospect of happy resolutions on many fronts and, what? He's going to join the Marines, or something? They were much too genteel to say so, not aloud at least, but the prevailing thought was: what the fuck is this?!

"Actually, the security side of things," he told his father. The Old Man was dumbstruck, unusually subdued because he couldn't yet accept that it was real. If an orangutan walked out of the kitchen with a glass of his 40-year-old Scotch in hand, he couldn't be more astonished. "Sort of special forces," Clay said. "Intel. Different kind of a service, you know? Guy I know is involved. He helped me meet some key people. I've actually been considering this for some time. It just gets more and more real."

The words were pouring out, an unusual burst of passion from him for something other than sports, "In 60 days if all goes well, I'll be going overseas. Incredible group of people I'm with. They bring us along pretty fast if it clicks. The training's thorough, though, and ongoing. Always something to learn."

The Old Man puffed up in his chair, took a deep breath and tried to say more than, "But…but…but…" But it didn't matter. It was a done deal, everyone caught off guard to the point where none of them could make a serious effort to change his mind. He was good as gone before anyone came to grips with it.

Least of all Emily, who wondered if now was time, or not, she should tell him that his child had moved in? Was growing larger, more real, each day inside her? Was assumed to be a straight step to the altar, and now was anything but. Would she still want it, him, Embry, anyhow? Would he want the child?

"What are we talking here?" she said to herself. "Abortion? Or not? Peasant blouses for three months and the Bahamas for six. Then what? Adoption? Or maybe he's back and marries me anyhow, better late than … hmmmm, I am biting my lip and *not* liking this at all."

Chapter Six

Grace Worthy at age 10 – “almost 11” -- was already developing a world view that included a host of different people and possibilities than those her parents showed her. She was alert, observant, curious, compassionate. Not that her parents weren’t. It was just that they turned their back on some things that Grace was still naïve enough to find fascinating.

That homeless man downstairs, I mean. What was he about? She really wanted to know. She would like to ask him: do you really not have a home? Then where do you go when you aren’t here? Where do you sleep? Would you like to have a bath sometime, or not? I used to not like them but now I do. Don’t get the shampoo in your eyes and it’s okay.

When she’s hungry, Grace gets food from the refrigerator or the cupboard. Where do you get food when you’re hungry? Where do you keep what you don’t eat? I think about homeless, but I don’t understand. Where do you keep your stuff?

I want to ask him some questions, she thought to herself, again.

✦

Ellen Worthy loved her work, took it seriously, pursued it assiduously even though some would call it a hobby job, one that was supported by her husband’s substantial income. She was a designer when she met him, struggling designer, yes, but getting by and making a name for herself. A few realtors used her to stage homes for sale, particularly condos in high rises. That got her started. More than a few of the buyers turned to her for decorating ideas.

Her very sophisticated “’luxe now!” style was perfect for Portland, where high rise residences were coming to dominate the skyline and the lifestyle of the young, happening, affluent professionals who resonated with her very clean take on opulence just this side of ostentation. Tastefully over the top, she described it to her friends. Show them you can afford it she advised her clients. If you can.

Since she and David married, her business had stabilized. Of the many things she loved about him, his support of her career was near the top. He took her seriously, never made her feel his work was more

important, regardless of the difference in the income it produced. He genuinely admired her designs, her way with clients, her business sense, and encouraged her to pursue it. It was this generosity of spirit she so admired in him, in this and so many other ways.

That she didn't have to make a profit anymore from her business venture gave her a tremendous freedom to experiment. She took her clients seriously, treated them with respect, but she didn't need any one of them so badly she couldn't walk. Nice to be able to say, "Thanks anyway, but not!" and move on with her reputation intact, her "brand" unsullied by compromise. The less she needed them, the more they wanted her. The business prospered.

Their home was her show place, 3,000 square feet just a floor below the big penthouse in one of the best buildings in the Pearl. It was the epitome of what she wanted a home to be, how it should look, how it could feel. Thanks to her taste and the friends she and David now socialized with, their place brought one commission after another from people who visited, were wowed, were envious, wanted something like it for themselves. They could afford it.

Silk drapes, sculpted Chinese carpets, Roche Bobois furniture, especially Joana Vasconcelos, you know, highly embossed custom kitchen cabinetry and Wolf appliances, pressed concrete or granite counters, deep country sinks, metal, marble, and glass sculpture, lots of colorful, contemporary art, and the finest lighting fixtures in every room. Very modern. Very Luxe. Very. Much. So.

✦

Damian Moody was explaining the scope of the work to his team. Nothing beyond their abilities here. The scale and level of detail made it an exceptional project, but they could do it. No doubt. Mostly they were pumped about the many opportunities it would provide to tweak the technology for new applications.

"And the customer is who?" Dirk Primus said.

"Whom?" Moody said and smiled. "Multi-agency Fed and State. FEMA, DHS, DOD, ODOT, OHP, a multi-use model for the entire alphabet of agencies. Does it really matter?"

Primus shrugged and said nothing more, until after the meeting broke up. Then, when they were alone, he said very quietly to Moody,

“I think it’s all about command and control – on the front end, not after the fact.”

“Meaning what?” Moody said.

“Meaning this Administration could give a shit about the Northwest. All D’s so who cares? This is a lot more about what they can do with this stuff right now, IMHO. Comes the disaster, they’ll be glad to pave over the whole damned place. Let it go at that. Why they gonna rebuild the opposition?”

“So, we’re building a VR model and they’ll do what with it, exactly?”

“Lay over the top of it every database they have and start mining. Be dope what they uncover. Very dope! More than we can imagine. Wait and see.”

Dirk the Dark. My survivalist. Helluva coder but deep in the conspiracy theories. Stays in a dump of an apartment in town but has several hundred acres of property back in the hills somewhere. Rumored to be booby-trapped with dynamite, punji stakes and trip wires. Not the place for a walk in the woods.

“Scary to imagine, Dirk, but we need you on this job. You’re my main man. Are you good with it?”

“No. Not good with it, but game. I’ll do it.” He glanced over his shoulder, looked back at Moody, and said, “But it might have one very small bug in it when we’re done. Just one blurry spot. A blip on the map. A dropped thread in the tapestry. No matter what you do, it won’t come into focus. Doubt if anyone but me’ll even notice.”

✦

“You want to sell our home? David, what in god’s name are you thinking? Because of an earthquake? Forgive me, but that’s absurd! I’ve lived in Portland my entire life. We’ve never – never – had an earthquake. Not one. Ever.”

“I know. That’s just the point. The land here is incredibly stable. More so than just about anywhere else in the country. That’s because the whole of the Northwest, the Continental Plate, is sitting on top of another huge plate. The Juan de Fuca. Very solid, the way they fit together. Moves very, very slowly. But it does move. A few inches a

year. One slipping under the other. And little by little, the pressure keeps building, the coast keeps shifting slowly to the east.

“Guess what? There hasn’t been an earthquake here in more than 300 years. That’s exactly the point. It doesn’t happen but once in a long while. And, meanwhile, the land we live on has been pushed maybe a hundred feet inland. Getting ready to snap back where it came from. So, it doesn’t happen often. But, when it does. Holy crap! A catastrophe. And it’s overdue, honey, it’s overdue.”

“Oh, David. Stop it. My god, I mean, I know this is what you’re working on. It’s real to you for good reason. But let’s keep some perspective. This thing they think happens every three or four hundred years, just guessing from the last time it happened. We’re going to live our lives, make our decisions, choose our home, based on that? I mean, we could get hit by a meteor, too, right? It happens.

“So, what? We never go outside. We never go to the coast again because there might be a tidal wave. We can’t live in this beautiful building because we’re only safe on the first floor. Where do we draw the line?

“I’m not making fun of you, David. I really don’t mean to sound that way. But sell our home? I’m sorry. That just seems crazy to even think about.”

Worthy stood with his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched, staring at the floor in the middle of the kitchen, feeling sheepish. The way she made it sound, it’s crazy. Not my way to go overboard like this. CEO and all. Calm under pressure. Keep my composure, be cool, think it through, steady as she goes, never let ‘em see you sweat. All that crap.

“Ellen, I don’t mean to get over-amped. It just scares me to think of you and Gracie being in danger.”

“You’re always good to us, David. We love you for it. But the best thing you can do for me is leave me in peace, here in our very comfortable home. I’ll be just fine. Believe me, I know where you’re coming from, and I get what it’s all about. The Big One. All that. I just don’t think it’s worth my time to worry about it.”

Chapter Seven

Ailey Madders was into Kundalini yoga. Big time. The Breath of Fire was as close as she came to getting high these days. It filled something in her nothing else did. A place at once ravenous and peaceful. And yoga gave her what was needed to feed it, sate it for a while.

Her posture could be better. Her patience was wanting. No yogini she. The poses, the stretching, the discipline, she'd mastered none of it and likely never would. But when she assumed the lotus position, closed her eyes, and began the fierce breathing technique that burned her nostrils, rattled her sinuses, and set her heart pounding, it never failed to fill that place, feed it, calm it, bring it peace, at least for another day.

There was a time, not long ago, when nothing could quench the thirst, feed the hunger, still the rage inside her. No amount of pleasure could be had that didn't quickly turn to shit. No quiet moment absent the drumbeat that very quietly, insistently began and steadily gained in volume, becoming a pounding, throbbing, raucous presence howling in her ears. Nothing shut it out.

No amount of alcohol, no drugs of any kind in any combination, no endless intake of loveless penises ejecting their squalor into her very being. Debauchery, it seemed, was limitless and unavoidably anguished. There was no bottom to it and no solution short of death. No amount of it would salve the wound sufficiently to put it to rest, even for a moment. Nothing quieted the noise. Stilled the chaos. Numbed the pain.

Who does these things to a child? What human being is capable of such gross corruption of another person? Let alone a child! An innocent inflicted with your malignancy, your sordid, sick, sinister dick in the mouth of a little girl. How could you? What's wrong with me that made you do it? How can I say I'm sorry? I am so ashamed. Being me became being ugly. Being gross. Dirty and torn and taken. Being unspeakable. Irreparable. I didn't mean to get it on me, but I did!

Ailey angry, wounded, hurting. Scared all the time. Mad all the time. More and more withdrawn. Hiding. Running. Drinking,

drugging, dragging one asshole after another into bed. More ashamed. More frantic. More in pain.

Those few years on the street were all she knew of adulthood until the breakdown came. Hooking for crack. Beaten and sent out to fuck some more, suck some more, score some more. I am so ashamed, but I really can't feel it anymore. Just a howling in the distance. A flicker before the lights go out. Again.

Chapter Eight

An explosion nearby sent them for cover. Small ordinance by the sound of it, close enough to be dangerous. The six men huddled behind a short fence of stone and mud. Four were Delta Force, two were Intel. All of them wore night goggles and carried M-16s.

Search and destroy. The men who detonated that bomb were their target. Faceless, nameless, mission unknown. An irregular army of chaos and mayhem. Some were Taliban, some ISIS, some the soldiers of local warlords, each with his own version of the cause, each blanketed in righteousness by the holy book and somebody's interpretation of the Prophet. Each of them deadly and, each, in turn, marked for death.

The vicinity was perfectly quiet now. Noncoms were hiding in their homes, making not a sound. Being inaudible, invisible, non-existent was the closest one could get to being safe. Afghanistan at night was ghostly. Anyone who moved might get shot. Anyone who didn't move might be blown to bits. Nowhere was safe. It was all a matter of chance.

"Em," the Captain whispered, gesturing one direction. He set off with two of the men the other direction, hunched low behind the fence and around the corner of the nearest building.

Embry eyed the two Delts, nodded the direction and followed them closely down a narrow path between buildings and through the shadows of the street heading toward the bridge. At the corner they halted, stood stock still, looking past the faint strips of light to the halo of heat surrounding each bit of life in the darkness, saw rats and

dogs moving in the nooks and crannies, saw too the three people crouched at the base of a building, working intently, arming a bomb.

Knives drawn, he and his team moved toward them quickly and quietly, each grabbing one of them from behind, the two Delts slashing their throats and, as Embry pulled the body toward him, hesitated just a moment, felt the lightness, the softness, saw her eyes roll toward him over her shoulder, large, dark, with sorrow, fear, the first rush of hatred, then a roar and everything went black.

✦

It was five days later when Embry stirred from his morphine dream. A soft shaft of sunlight filtered through a shade lit the room and made him wince. A bit of pain, dulled but distinct, shot through his scalp to the base of his skull. The right side of his face itched, but his arms were restrained by straps to the side of the bed. Two tubes snaked their way from a tall rack near his side to the back of his wrist. A half-collapsed bag dripped slowly into the tube on top. The other was connected to nothing, at least not now.

He faded back into the haze for a time but woke again after a while. The light was softer now, coming through the shade at a lower angle. Someone was in the room with him. An orderly. He looked at Embry closely, smiled very slightly and nodded, then left the room.

He returned with a doctor and a nurse. The three of them were cartoon-like as he tried to focus on them, ballooning up before his eyes, seeming to bob and float, then shrinking back to size. The doctor leaned over him. His mouth was moving but he was speaking from very far away. There was an echo that made his words impossible to hear. Embry tried to tell him so, but his own voice didn’t seem to work. The effort exhausted him before he could find the strength to try again. He slept.

The next time he woke up, things seemed in sharper focus. His head hurt, his face itched, his arms ached from immobility. He needed to pee, realized there was a catheter in his penis, let his kidneys flow and felt relief. He could sense the monitors above his head but couldn’t hear them, saw the saline drip bag and the tube to his wrist, noted he was seeing with just his left eye, that his right eye was

blinded by bandages. He tried to clear his throat, felt the mucous rattle, vaguely heard the sound.

Apparently, the nurse heard him, too. She was at his side, looking at him closely, speaking, enunciating very clearly. Her voice sounded as though it was coming from another room, but he heard her, understood what she said, nodded yes, I hear you. I understand.

✦

The doctors briefed him when he was stronger. The orderly had worked with him, getting him briefly sitting up, then standing, walking a little, plodding behind his walker to the john, longer trips down the hallway, his legs feeling at first like lead and a big patch on his ass peeking out through the back of the gown below where it was tied together. After a week he was better. Now he was semi-functional.

No longer strapped down at night, alert enough to leave the bandages alone, even in his sleep. No catheter, no drip bags, no morphine. Pills at night so he can sleep. Low dose opioids for the pain, which was a constant throbbing. Lotions for his right ear applied into the canal twice a day, eye drops for his right eye each time the bandages were changed, a salve of coconut oil and vitamin E for the sutured gash on his right cheek, and for the front half of the crown of his head where it was stitched along his hairline.

“The bomb was attached to her belly,” the doctor told him. “Killed her and your colleagues instantly and shredded those parts of you that weren’t hidden by her body. The explosion peeled your scalp off the top of your head back to the middle of your skull. Probably sliced clean through by a piece of metal. Left a clean flap bald as a baby’s butt where the hair burned off.

“It blew a hole in your right eardrum, which might never be good again.

Burned most of the skin and some muscle from your left hand. We took a good-sized patch of skin from your ass and rebuilt your hand as well as we could. Plastic surgeon was excellent. Chances are you’ll have pretty normal use of it once it’s healed.

“We took a five-inch piece of shrapnel out of your face just below your right cheekbone and up to your temple, and a two-inch piece that

was imbedded in the corner of your right eye. Amazing that you can see out of it.

“Worst of it is the concussion to your brain, which was bleeding pretty badly. We drained it several times those first few days, and you seem to be doing pretty well, but time will tell how much of the damage is permanent.”

He nodded, numbly. “At least now I know where the pain is coming from,” he said. “Is that all of it?”

“That’s all of it,” the doctor said. “When the captain brought you in, none of us thought you’d make it. Damnedest part of it was, lying there naked, you had all those injuries surrounding a huge patch of you that looked untouched. It was the imprint of her body on yours. Needless to say, you’re very lucky to be alive.”

✦

It was as though he was walking through a familiar house. Maybe his parents’ home. Or somewhere he lived or had lived. Down a long, dark hallway. Just enough light to make his way. There is the living room. There is the dining room. The kitchen. The den. He recognizes them, begins to feel at home. Climbs the stairs, comes to a door, opens it. There is wind. A howling sound. A whirling. Nothing he knows, not even whether it is a room or an exit. Whatever was there, if anything, is gone. A door to a place without shape or definition.

✦

An Agency chief debriefed him. “It’s complicated. She was French. Parents were Moroccan. An ex-pat, came here to support the Cause. Married into what’s left of the old Muhamadzai royal family. The last of the Barakzai. Great-grandson of Mohammed Zahir Shah himself. Makes her something like a Shaykhah. Family supposedly supports us. Allies, right? But there she was.”

“I never killed a woman before.”

“Too bad you didn’t kill this one. Before she got us.”

He looked at Embry steadily, no disdain, no warmth either.

“We need to get you out of here. Back to the States. We’re moving you to a trauma center in Portland.”

“Maine?”

“Oregon. There’s a guy at Health Sciences there that is excellent with brains. Yours took a bad blow.”

“It’s coming around, I think. Still blank spots here and there, but I’m getting so I remember what there is to say.”

“Yeah? We want him to help you remember what there is *not* to say.”

Chapter Nine

Dirk Primus saw the truth. Something about his work as a programmer, the patterns emerging from endless series of zeroes and ones, the pulsating rhythms of on-and-off blinking madly, gathered before him one day a terrifying and irrefutable portrait of the connectivity of all the forces at work to wrestle freedom from the individual and exert control. The World Wide Web, indeed!

Freedom in the USA exists in direct proportion to the amount of revenue it generates for the people at the top. The ones in charge. Big boys. One percent. Well, yes them, too, but really for the one-tenth of one percent who call the shots. Fail them and see what happens. Choices? No! Freedom? Not!

People saw glimpses of it in their everyday lives: the way one’s job came to define who he was, what she was allowed to do, how to act, to talk, to dress, to socialize, and with whom. The cost of individuality was steep. Too steep.

They saw it when they checked their FICO score, when the small print in their credit card contract suddenly bit them in the ass, when the cost of a loan ballooned way beyond the imaginable to the simply impossible to believe.

You work, you pay your bills, you save a little, spend too much because the relentless pandering of capitalism sucks you in. You bounce a check, are late to pay your mortgage or your credit card, not often but only once or twice in ten or twenty years; guess what? You’ve failed (as they knew the chances are you would) and then the hounds of hell are loosed on you. That “interest free for 18 months” loan Wells Fargo made you? The fee for that transaction now is 29.9% applied retroactively to the day you fell for their gambit and signed on

the dotted line. The bankers get to gnaw your bones and will until they reach the marrow where the meat is sweet.

That is just the bankers, and they are the source point of a society driven by greed, one that keeps score with dollars and justifies the means as long as the end is enrichment, that allows the legal, the extra-legal, and whatever less than capital crimes brings home the bacon. The money lenders since the time of Christ are suspect, but the means by which they rob you now are so evolved and ruthless, one suspects the good Lord himself confronting them these days would merely shrug and shake his head with a wistful sort of ennui, resigned to the scale and shamelessness of what the god of greed hath wrought.

Once we were serfs, given a plot of land to work that provided a bare subsistence, just enough to keep one's strength to plow the fields and slop the hogs and fend off the wolves so that each year at harvest the landed gentry reaped rewards and we got to do it again the next year and the next, until we were too old, too frail, too sickly to be worth the credit and we were cast aside.

Now there is social security. Ha! A tax you pay on every penny you earn grabbed by the government and tossed into a pool of financial resources that hopes against hope you die young. And if you don't, you will eke out a life on the margins of survival, a monthly stipend of a few hundred dollars, maybe fifteen hundred or even two thousand, with which you can try to pay the rent, the utilities, the groceries, the upkeep on a car – and you are making it, brother! You are making it! This is your reward for a lifetime of service to the man.

Dirk is drunk. These thoughts keep bubbling up from the pool of emotions and hurt where he keeps counsel. He drinks too much these days. The city does that to him. The crude, rude, lewd city. Full of all these people wanting more.

He used to want it too. Had the skills, a good job, making some pretty serious bucks. Writing code for a tech-mad world, you could damn near write your own ticket if you were good enough. And he did. Had a strong run with a cocky bunch of kids from Stanford, hitting on all cylinders with the VCs, rolling in the bucks and all of it borrowed but nobody cared. Living large like pashas in mini-mansions, a swank

office building in Mountain View, riding to and from in limos, raking in the good life, taking no prisoners, young men in full.

Then the crash, 2000, and the crash, 2008. Now he's well past 40 and trying to live smart. Lost a lot of cash and crap, gained maybe a soul. Eyes pried open by the run of luck, good and bad both, that showed clearly where in the panoply of capitalists they were, these tech gods. First, do no evil! H'int right? Don't hear that said much around the Googleplex anymore. More now, like, first, do no less.

The new robber barons. Not so new anymore, but robbers more than ever. Like three card monte on the global boardwalk. Every one of us as the sucker, thinking we can find the card, giving everything we've got, every secret, every confidence, every shred of individuality, every bit of freedom for the thrill of an illusion. About ourselves. One we all can share. The thrill of connectivity.

5,000 friends on Facebook, liking my every word. Try borrowing money from them, yes, and see how many friends you've got. Joke 'em if they can't…

Dirk is really drunk. Not falling down but falling out. Ready to fight, but who? Whom, he hears Moody say. Whom you got? he says to himself. Bring them on! Like that.

Too many nights like this. Too often this hollow rage. Whom, indeed?

At the intersection of government and commerce is the beast. Hundredth, maybe the thousandth generation of the monster they bred. The one that eats your humanity and vomits your freedom. The one that looks in your face and sees only a number, a digit, a slot you fill. You are food, plain and simple. The monster has no heart, but it has an appetite. And there you are for the taking.

Dirk drinks. He ruminates. Creates code and cashes checks, puts the money into his sanctuary. A place in the woods at the end of the road, a pretty fine compound with a big generator and a good well, a spring or two and a stream, a battery of high-powered arms and a cache of dynamite. Three entire sections of very fine, very private land. What else does a guy need?

Chapter Ten

“For what it’s worth,” David Worthy said to Ellen, and then he laughed.

“What?” she said.

“Um, I was going to broach the subject of what I learned about the value of our home, but, um, starting by saying ‘for what it’s worth” seemed a little frontal.”

Ellen Worthy looked at him for a long time without saying anything. She wasn’t laughing.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” he said. “Just happened to run into an old friend, guy who arranged the lease on our offices, knows his stuff inside and out. He actually brought it up. Asked if we still were living here, said it was a great buy, come to be worth a ton. Seemed logical to ask: how much?”

“David, where are we going with this? I thought I made it very clear, I’m perfectly happy here. I love this building. I love our home. It’s what I always dreamed of. From when we first were married, remember, we talked about a place downtown, in the heart of it all. Christ! I would have settled for something not nearly as nice. When we bought this place, I couldn’t believe our luck. Our good fortune. I was so proud of you, what you’d accomplished for us. What we accomplished together. Like we’d bought a piece of heaven.”

He started to say something, but she stopped him, raised her hand, her head cocked at an angle, her forehead furrowed, her eyes dark and intense.

“You’ve raised the subject of our safety, the safety of our family, Gracie, me, you. I get it, David. I love you for your concern. But you have to understand. No matter how real this earthquake – this fucking earthquake – seems to you, no matter how possible you think the danger is, I’m asking you once and for all: get over it! Please, just stop!”

She was shaking her head from side to side, a look of pleading on her face. She reached for him, put a hand on his shoulder, took a deep breath and let go a long, deep sigh.

“I’m not stupid, David. I’ve thought about what you’ve said. Danger, yes. Danger is what we fear, what we hide from, what we buy

a barrier to and why we construct our fortresses. Our home, this place, this ‘worth a ton’ piece of real estate, is the safest place I’ve ever been, the safest that I’ve ever felt in my entire life. Can you understand that?

“This is where I want to be. With you, with Gracie, when our friends come calling. This is home. *Our* home. Please, please don’t talk to me about selling it. Because of some goddamned earthquake that chances are is never, ever going to happen. I’ve thought about it and, forgive me, David, I just can’t believe it’s real. That it’s worth our time to even think about, much less talk of selling our home. Can we, please, just agree to be done with it? Can you do that for me? For us?”

Chapter Eleven

Damian Moody was having a ball. Nothing made him happier than burrowing into a complex problem and generating solutions. This one was of a scale that matched his aspirations for dealing with really, really big stuff.

Unless you were in the biz, you couldn’t possibly appreciate the rush this stuff provided you. People got it when they pushed a button on their phone and sent a video halfway around the world at the speed of light. They got it when everything they wanted to know, see, hear, maybe even feel, was theirs for the asking instantaneously. When you don’t even need to leave your room.

When you were the one that made it so, the one who made it happen, who created worlds within worlds that never existed before, and found whole legions of followers clamoring to have what you made, to pay whatever they possibly could, whatever it took, to be there with you in that new and unexplored place, you were a rock star. A fucking god! That’s the way it felt.

Now we’re going to make the New Northwest. The entire coast in super high relief, a better version of what it is because we can manipulate it. Do with it what we will, make of it what we want, bend it, shape it, break it, and put it back together. Measure what these nearly unimaginable forces are going to do and do it to a millimeter. Model what the earth can do to itself, and to us, and what we can do

about it before the future comes to be. We can reinvent the future. Yow!

He got up, stretched, wandered down the undulating line of computer stations where his team did their thing, puzzling over this piece or that of the challenge and putting together this piece or that of the code that tucked it into the program. The one they would save the world with. This part of the world, at least.

Primus was at the farthest end of that place the team was gathered. The structure was less than formal by design. No other way these geeks would have it. Critically important that they felt the freedom to indulge their eccentricities.

Dirk was at the outer edge of that schematic, physically, psychically, maybe even emotionally. He was older than the rest, older even than Moody by a few years, and he was troubled. A fine balancing act he brought to work each day, never unable to do the job and never too far from obvious there was a lot unsaid going on with him.

Looks hung over, Moody thought, a not uncommon observation of the man at work. But no one was better, day in, day out. Had his shit together. Big time! Curious that he was so uninterested in doing any more than what he did. He could have been very big by now. Very rich. Very, um, fast lane.

Instead, he dwelled in some twilight land between the lush rewards of today's tech industry and the revelry of a survivalist ready and willing to make a stand against the inevitable demise of society gone mad. Expecting it any time now and not unhappy to see it come.

"Mr. Primus," Damian said, "can I interrupt you?"

Dirk looked at him from beneath hooded eyes, somewhat tortured perhaps as he looked up from his seat by the cornea of light from the bank of LEDs on the ceiling behind Moody's head. He said nothing in response, just waited with some opaque version of expectation on his face. A way of saying: what?

"Sorry, these lights are awkward sometimes. I've always thought indirect lighting would create a better workplace."

"More than enough indirect stuff in this life of ours to suit me," Primus said. "Straight on works."

“Let me be direct then. Something you said the other day has got me thinking.”

It was a straight man’s line, but Primus wasn’t biting. He squinted at Moody with less than open curiosity, his expression something of a mildly interested question mark.

“If you feel compelled to blur the image of your land – I assume that’s what you were telling me was going to happen? – then I’m wondering what the others will think about what we’re doing?”

“The others?”

“The survivalists. Redoubt. All those anti-government folks. Proud Boys, Three Percenters, those guys. Whatever they call themselves these days. You know what I mean. How are all those people – from what I hear, there’s a whole lot of them in the great Northwest—how’re they going to feel about a bunch of geeks in Portland creating a high-resolution look at their sanctuaries?”

“And, I should know, why?” Primus replied.

“Symbiosis? Hell, I don’t know. I’m not trying to paint you as this or that. Not meaning to suggest anything that might offend you. You’ve been pretty straight forward about what you think. All this stuff we capitalists cherish is a pool of crap. Society going to hell. All right, all right, I’m putting you on. Word!

“But, seriously, man, it’s no secret that you have a place somewhere in the hills. So do a helluva a lot of other people these days. As I understand it, they think the end days are at hand. No doubt there’s lots of different reasons, lots of different people, maybe not a lot in common. I don’t know. I really don’t. Except they, and you, are building secure homes – fortresses, really – in remote spots for whatever belief that drove them to it. Places where they are ready to make a stand. Am I right?

“And we are about to hand over to the USG a pretty vivid picture of what they’re up to and where they’re doing it. You indicated it concerned you enough to hide your place from view. I’m wondering if most of the rest of those folks might not feel the same way?”

“What if they do,” Primus said. “What if it concerns them a lot? What can they do about it?”

He looked at Moody for a long time with a steady gaze, not as though he expected an answer – there clearly wasn’t one – but rather

to emphasize the truth that all of them, all those people who for whatever reason feared the reach of the government, what they live with day in and day out. You can run, but…

"And you care, why exactly?"

"Well, I…I mean, we're operating at a scale that's new to us all, and…"

"And it's very fucking intrusive. It raises all the questions, doesn't it? All the stuff that oozes up from this relentless, voracious, monstrous thing we're building a piece at a time, a day at a time, a project at a time, a company at a time, one little innovation after another, one new bit of code layered on another, one nifty little application nobody ever thought of before, another whole new technology unleashed, and when you look around and you add it up, you step back for a moment and gather your wits and try to picture what the world was like before this all began, you get the sense it's a fucking cancer that's eating us alive."

They stared at each other for a time, each of them recalibrating their relationship and what they knew of each other, what the other knew of them. Primus smiled an ironic smile and said, "Buy me a drink sometime and I'll tell you what I really think." With that he returned to his coding.

Chapter Twelve

The night was very dark and wet. The sky a smudge of printer's ink, deeply diluted by water, dripping into the streets. Rivulets ran in patterns down the buildings, sliding over the sheets of glass, streetlights playing in their web. Puddles lit by headlamps of the cars splashing past. People huddled in the gloom, walking hunched against the cold, the wind, the rain. Portland in winter.

In the Pearl, the lights refract madly on the surface of the water. The buildings loom large over the streets, the commercial mayhem at street level is a riot of illumination, the rain persistently covers every surface, and herds of people prance, dance, dash, or trudge down the sidewalks, across the streets, in and out of doorways, and on to wherever it is that they are going, a metropolitan force on the move.

On the streets themselves, wet as it is, bicyclists swaddled in nylon and other rain-resistant fabric ride in aggressively rhythmic interface with motorists who are trying to be tolerant. They race up alongside stalled traffic, sneering as they blow past in the right lane, smug, self-righteous, environmentally superior to the carbon-burning drivers in a town where being correct is all.

The traffic every night is terrible. Every morning, too. To drive here is to test one's willingness to forgive. Periodically, someone snaps. Just now, a rogue Range Rover wraps a bike rider around a railing and roars off into the night.

The Tram glides past on rails, electricity pouring into it from the overhead cables, the cars brightly lit dioramas in motion, studies of standing people riding home, stoic, mostly inanimate, staring at nothing, perhaps, just lost in thought, seen in repose. The loop never changes, but the images do. Different people in different poses, but nearly all of them seeming almost somnambulistic in the drowsy routine of their commute.

Primus and Moody are in a bar somewhere in the gloom. A place more than a bit ramshackle, definitely downscale. From the look of it, inside and out, a place Moody never would have guessed was in the Pearl. Some sort of wart on the glamour puss. They walked there from the office, moving with purpose and without conversation, the path obviously familiar to his companion, a frequent destination one assumed.

They took a booth near the back, ordered a couple of beers, and looked at each other with a bit of curiosity. Moody considered several different things to say, ways to maybe get the conversation going. He rejected them one by one.

"You asked me about the Redoubt," Primus finally said, after several deep pulls on his bottle of beer. "About the contract we're working. How they rub up against each other. What I know about the Movement is not a whole lot. I can't pretend otherwise, no matter what you guys think of me. This commercial image of a survivalist, these guys holed up in the mountains, armed to the teeth, racist, homophobic paranoiacs. Maybe. I can't say. I don't know them. And it sure as hell isn't who I am."

“I didn’t mean to suggest…” Moody started to say, before Primus raised his hand slightly from the tabletop, the gesture saying: enough.

“I was raised to survive. That’s what my father taught me. It’s a dangerous world we live in. You have to steel yourself, be ready, tough it out, get to the end with your dignity intact.”

Dirk took a strong pull on his beer, set the bottle back on the table, looked at it thoughtfully as though sizing up how much was left.

“Like many people born poor, he had an idea of the Boss. Who it was we served. Someone to fear and resent. He hated the rich. “What man is worth that kind of money?” he’d say. He knew he wasn’t. Didn’t think that you were either.

“There was a very strict sense of right and wrong. Right was what he believed in. Wrong was everything else. If he had his way, every generation would be an exact replica of the previous one, maybe a little improved by comfort if not wisdom.

“No room whatsoever for experimentation. Knowledge was just a way to support what he already believed. What fit in the narrow perspective of his worldview. New ways of thinking, new experiences, all that kind of stuff was suspect. Travel was something to be undertaken rarely and very cautiously. Where you want to go anyhow? Better to stay close to home. Where you knew the drill. You could never be too careful.”

The waiter came by, nodded the question. Moody raised two fingers. Dirk inhaled the rest of his, turned the bottle on its side, spun it aimlessly. The room was dimly lit, the bar the length of one side, booths lined the other. At the bar, rumpled men sat hunched over their drinks, each stool a world unto itself. In the booths, mostly pairs of people speaking softly, drinking quietly. The jukebox played one plaintive country tune, then another, the volume low, the sound a little fuzzy.

“Funny how things progress,” Dirk said. “When I was 7, age of reason, I guess, he took me aside and gave me the talk, you know? The way it works. Keep your nose clean, go to school, study hard and get good grades, get yourself a scholarship to college ‘cause I sure can’t pay your way, earn that degree and get you a good job, maybe with the city or something in government where your job is safe. Nose to the grindstone, do your work, get your promotion, take your two

weeks off each year, and be thankful for the break. Do it right and you can retire in good shape when you're 65. If you're lucky, you'll have a few years to yourself before you die."

The waiter brought the beer. Dirk took a long pull on his, swallowed hard, seemed to slump a little.

"Scared the holy hell out of me," he said. "I remember it like yesterday. Just stood there, nodded 'yes' while he laid it out for me, but it gave me chills. I mean, literally. I felt nauseous. There I was, a little kid, and all of a sudden, the idea of growing up seemed like a place I didn't want to go.

"Afterwards, I couldn't stop thinking about it, what was waiting for me. It took a long time to calm down, think my way through it. I remember very clearly thinking to myself, 'I just want to have an interesting life.'

"I accomplished that much. If nothing else. Lived a whole lot of it in direct opposition to what he told me. Fair amount of cutting off my nose type of thing, I suppose. Really developed a lot of contempt for him as I grew up. A lot of anger.

"Funny thing is, over the years, in one sense, I came around to his way of thinking. At least I guess I got a feel for how dangerous things really are.

"They were different for me than for him. I made sure of that. Led a life as far from his as I could make it. But after a while, in a strange sort of way, from completely different perspectives we came to some of the same conclusions.

"You know, by the time I was 30, I'd already made more money than he'd made in his entire life. Lost more, too, for that matter. Not sure he ever lost any. Squeezed every dime 'til it bled for him, so in that sense, by some people's standards, he might have come out ahead. Like my super cautious CPA always said to me, 'It isn't how much you make, it's how much you keep.'

"But I did all of those interesting things I set my mind to, all that stuff that seemed to be so out of reach for someone like him. The kind of stuff he wouldn't even consider, let alone go after. Made him think I was a wild man, the way I lived and what I did to make a living. He couldn't imagine it. Even so, though, I could tell it fascinated him."

Primus took another pull on his beer and emptied it. Looked at Moody, who followed suit, downed his with a little more effort. The waiter was there as they finished, a guy who knows his job.

“Two more,” Primus said to him, looking at Moody again, then back at the waiter. “Make ‘em Boilermakers.”

So, they tossed down a shot and a beer, then another. Dirk told his story and Moody listened.

“Do you know early on, when we first began celebrating Christmas, that the poor gave gifts to the rich in order to curry favor? Hoping to raise their prospects just a little above the rest. That’s the way the largess flowed, from the poorest to the richest. The spirit of gifting. Ha!

“They say that capitalism is the rising tide that lifts all the vessels. Vassals is more like it. But let’s be kind. ‘Tis true the poorest among us today is better off than all but royalty 500 years ago. And yet. And yet? You know?

“Proportionately, it’s not much different. The poor today are as far from the throne as the peon was from the king. Same dynamic as always. He gets his food stamps, and she gets her abortion, we get our Audis and our Beemers. So what? We’re still sucking hind teat. No way we get near the dining table where the big boys eat.

“I had my time, you know. Rode that wave. In Mountain View with all the C-level characters. All of us living large. Limos, champagne, and caviar. Piles of VC money for the asking and no humility whatsoever. Just more of everything, all the time.

“I watched it make good people ugly. The money made them mad. Insane. The end justified the means. And the mean. Meritocracy was the rationale. The Rise of the Creative Class, right? More like the Coding Class, is really all we were. Just geeks with tweaks. Gates, Jobs and Wozniak, and a few others sensed what a micro-processor could be. Like the wheel or the printing press or steam power. Blew a hole in the equation and they crawled through. So did a lot of us after them.

“At first, it was all about productivity. It really was creative. For a while. But then it became all about fun. The very easiest addiction to feed. I’m bored, entertain me! Money follows fun. Right? The truest of the truisms. And that’s where things went south. When it became just

another narcotic serving up algorithms for every kind of bullseye advertising. All this cool stuff we built was just a gateway to the public's pocketbook.

"We're not talking anything here but onanism. Just playing with yourself. A lot of vapid and meaningless shit that people turn to out of boredom and sell their soul to have. Completely the opposite of creativity. More like a way to squander your energy and occupy your time. Need me my stupor, huh? While the big boys read the wrinkles in your brow and studied the hunger pangs in your gut. And sold you stuff to fix them."

Moody's brain was in an alcoholic fog, but he took the bait. Cleared his head just enough to argue. "Come on, man. There's a lot we've built that matters more than that. Tools to make us more effective, increase productivity, build better mousetraps."

He looked at Primus, squinted, said, "Sort of."

They both started laughing.

"Did I really say that?"

"You did."

"I must be drunk. Better mousetraps?"

"Tools to make us more effective. You said that first."

"Yeah, I did."

"So, let's think about that because it really gets to the heart of the matter."

"Your matter, that is."

"I think it's our matter," Primus said rather sharply, and then with a smile, "as a matter of fact."

"You want to argue about 'tools make us more effective'? I mean, c'mon, man. This goes back to the Stone Age."

"Yep, fire, clubs, wheels, all that. But what I mean is: what for? More effective for what? What's our purpose, Cave Man?"

They looked at each other through eyes that were watery, blurred with booze, ready to ease on into that place where the conversation becomes uncensored. That danger zone of raw thoughts and edgy expressions rolled out in search of honest conversation, saying not just what you think but what you feel.

“You asked about Redoubt, the survivalists, what they might think about these intrusions into their world that we’re so willing and able to sell to the USG. Their enemy, right? Or at least their boogeyman.”

“Big brother come calling,” Moody said. “Eye in the sky.”

“Yes! It’s *exactly* that. And we build it. Look, Dam, we’re both tech guys. We know what’s great about it. What drives all us gear heads. But…”

“But we need to recognize what else it’s becoming, right?”

“That’s the point. What kind of reach we’re making possible. The harm it can do. Is doing, for that matter.”

“Well, I mean, I get it, but isn’t that true of everything that gets built? Prolly weren’t no head on collisions before the wheel. Huh?”

Primus looked at him, scowled a bit, then burst out laughing.

“I *must* be drunk ‘cause that was funny, and nobody ever took you for funny.”

Moody just stared, a little pissed maybe, a little insulted.

“Moody is, right? That’s what everybody says.”

“This getting personal now? Did *not* see that turn coming.”

“Just funning you, man.”

“Dirk the Dark speculating on humor. That’s ripe.”

“The what?”

“The Dark. What we call you.”

“Black man calling me the Dark. That so?”

“Going racial now? You bring me to this dive just to give me shit?”

“Hey, man, that’s where I draw the line. Insult me, okay. But bad mouth my favorite tavern? I ain’t taking that from you!”

They sat back away from the table, sagged a little, looked at each other, slowly, one after the other, cracked a smile.

“Okay,” Moody said, “that was funny. Sort of.”

“Mousetrap,” Primus said, and they doubled over laughing.

They made enough noise that a few of the patrons glanced their way. This was the sort of place where people mostly kept their drunk to themselves. Primus and Moody toned it down, signaled with as much dignity as they could muster, “Two more,” and settled in for the next stretch of this careening conversation.

Moody said, “Look Dark, er, I mean Dirk…”

“Funny, ha ha.”

“Dirk, I get what you mean about the way all this tech has been corrupted, turned into a template for ads…”

“Stealthy ads…”

“True. Very exploitative. But that’s not what we do. The stuff we’re building is for, well, building. Sorry. Another blast of wit there. Just keeps happening.”

“Ha ha. This is getting repetitive.”

“So, I get where you’re coming from except I don’t. I mean, yes, tech has become a very manipulative way to milk the public, and yes, that sucks. But what does that have to do with us bumping up against survivalists with the stuff we’re building?”

Primus shrugged, settled back, lifted his newly filled shot glass, held it to the light like maybe he was finding an answer there.

“Winchester built a repeating rifle that was a big step up from the musket. That was cool. If you’re out hunting for dinner and you miss the first shot, you can snap off another before that buck gets away. Of course, it worked that way, too if it was another man you were shooting.”

“And your point is?”

“We’re building a very useful tool for USG. Very sophisticated, very precise, very focused. Can serve a lot of purposes. Very handy weapon for disaster planning, true. But a weapon still. And if you’re some guy back in the woods that values his privacy and wants his distance from the G-men, you don’t have to be a genius to see that weapon might be turned against you.”

“You seem to have the same concern as those folks. Gonna blur that image of your place, you said.”

“That I did. And I already did it. Oops. A techie’s version of the thumb on the scales. Weighing that project just a little in my favor. I may not be the notorious survivalist of your dreams, but I know what can be done to them can be done to me. And it damn sure can be done to you, too.”

Moody looked around the room, at the quiet revery of people however many drinks into their thoughts, the slightly tinny music layering the background, the balding bartender polishing glasses with a practiced pose, raised his shot glass to Primus, who mirrored his

move. They clinked them near enough to slosh a little but not quite, raised a toast to each other, and tossed them down.

Moody wiped his mouth on his sleeve, stood unsteadily for a moment before gaining his balance, reached out a hand to Primus and said, “I enjoyed this discussion, respect what you say, hope we never have to find out whether it plays out that way.”

“You walking back to your car?”

“Nah, I’ll leave it in the lot. Too drunk to drive. Cab R US tonight.”

“Makes sense. Plan on wading home myself. Short stroll in ankle deep water. Ducks R US forever.”

✦

Thirteen

✦

The dark places were growing larger, more encompassing. Embry couldn’t always make the connection between events in his past and the people who shared them. Not all of them. Trying to remember them, who was part of what, who was missing, was like reading a play without all the characters.

The doctor went through a lengthy series of exercises with him, the ins and outs of his mind. Went down that dark corridor with him, opened the door, saw the vastness, the empty space, heard the whirling, felt the movement, made one comment, then another. Took notes. Made more small comments.

Each time they walked it together, the contours seemed to change, one aspect or another became the focus. “It’s clear, you see,” the doctor would say, and Embry would sometimes agree or sometimes say nothing, but large parts of the space were still mysterious, the dark even deeper, the noise more disturbing, much of it ever less knowable.

His family knew very little. This is classified. Not to be repeated. There had been an incident, serious but he is mending. The mission was very sensitive and international alliances are involved. Your son is being debriefed and receiving the best possible care as he heals. He will be in touch with you as soon as he is able. Meanwhile, we’ll arrange regular briefings for you. At least monthly.

“That’s all we know,” Mrs. Embry was telling Emily by phone. “We’ll just have to be patient, my dear. ‘In its own time’, as it’s said. How’s your internship?”

Emily’s time already had passed one of her options by. She had long since decided to have this child. Soon enough she had to know whether to give it up for adoption or whether, by some vague chance, she and Clayton might raise it together. That last was her dream since childhood. Even now it seemed out of reach.

She was terrified to hear he’d been injured, relieved he was said to be healing, frantic to get in touch with him, and afraid of what she’d discover if she finally did. Still, an answer after all these months of uncertainty would be better than not knowing what to do. Who to do it with? Who to do it to? Whom?

It was so lonely here in the Bahamas, a little settlement in the Abacos, where she is interning with a global organization. So the story goes. God, it made her so nervous, just to be growing like this, gestating a child and nobody knows. Not supposed to, anyhow. Her friends must suspect, at least some of them. She was so suddenly out of touch, working elsewhere, gone for now.

Weeks later, another message. Finally. “Emily. Doris Embry. What a time it’s been. For all of us, darling. I have more news. Clayton had a severe shock to his brain. He’s recovering and in therapy. But he has ‘lapses,’ they say. Things he can’t remember.

“No, no. It’s not quite like that. Some of the forgetting is good. A positive. We forget trauma for good reason. But Clayton is forgetting some other things, too. People, for instance.

“It’s so hard to tell you this, but he can’t seem to remember you, darling. Oh, I know, I know. Poor dear! A terrible shock, but he may well recover that memory. You two were so close.

“Really, Emily! Pull yourself together. You’re not the only one. Not at all. I’m told he’s having trouble remembering me. His own mother. My god! How do you suppose that makes me feel?”

✦

“It’s mostly women. Have you noticed?” Embry and the doctor looked at each other closely. “There’s a presence, but not a face I can

put to it. Like I can feel them, but I can't see them. Each of them, the same."

"I can't imagine why that would be," the doctor said. He made more notes in the journal. He was thoughtful. It was working.

✦

Emily waded further and further into the water. He can't remember me? That simply didn't compute. I am carrying his child and he can't recall who I am? The very thought made her dizzy, her heart palpitate, her breath short. There was a buzzing in her head that persisted relentlessly. He doesn't remember me?

She was eight months along and surprisingly buoyant in the Bahamian surf. The pull of the tides was seductive. The water warm, soft, supportive. The roar in her ears subsided a bit, the confusion, the jumble of thoughts. About choices. About the foolishness of her aspirations. Marriage? Ha! First, we'll have to be introduced. Unbelievable. Jesus, who could imagine? It all seemed so far away. This quiet was blissful. She floated.

Not for long. A large wave slapped her sideways and submerged her for a moment. Almost a moment too long.

She rose up at the top of the next wave and saw the size of them, the peaks and valleys of the ocean. Was she still in the bay, or not? Maybe not? These were big waves. Her life and part of another life rode them. It seemed so easy. To go there. To not resist. To the sea. Sea of Love. Come with me. I want to tell you just how much I love you.

✦

In Ashland, a police officer says to the lady, "It's getting dark here, the park's closed, you can't be sitting here, you need to move on."

She replies, "Why do I have to move? Ain't bothering nobody."

"You're bothering me," he says, matter of fact, not angry but pretty emphatic, "get moving."

"I don't know why you're picking on me," she says. "I done nothing."

"Lady, I'm trying to be kind. You need to move along. Why? Because in this very white little town in a very remote part of the

country, you are a very black person who's breaking the law by being in the park after dark! I'm doing you a considerable favor by suggesting you get out of my sight, right now!"

He was sounding a little more forceful now, perhaps even a little angry. She noticed, but she still didn't move.

"I got cause to be here," she said, finally, after he began tapping the baton in his hand and leaned toward her, a look of expectation of his face, "a reason to be here and I can't be going."

"You do?" he said, almost humorously. "A reason? Guess what? I got a reason, too. A reason to be asking you to leave. It's called the law."

He stepped back a bit and stood up very straight, took a deep breath, and leaned in toward her until their faces were just inches apart.

"So, you got your reason and I got mine. Who do you suppose is going to win this debate, lady? You or me?"

She looked at him directly in the eyes for an instant, then away furtively, her eyes again on him briefly and then darting away to dark places in the trees surrounding them, as though she expected something or someone to appear.

"Lady, let's go!" he said, and reached with the hand that had been receiving the steady tapping of the baton. She could feel the heat in it and pulled away from him.

"Something bad!" she said, suddenly, looking hard into his eyes, a fierce, piercing look on her face. "Something bad is gonna happen. I can feel it!"

He wanted to react, to do something to move her along, but her words held him still for a very long moment. They seemed to echo in his head, becoming a ringing, a buzzing drone.

In the distance, dogs began to howl, a few, then many, near as next door, far away as across the valley on the far side of town. In the park, all around them, there is a flurry of movement in every corner of the dark, in the bushes, beneath the trees, from every hidey-hole and hollow, creatures are scurrying into the open and heading uphill.

Flocks of birds of every sort and size, flickers, wrens, sparrows, robins and jays, even owls and other raptors rarely seen, all of them take wing, the smaller ones, especially the jays, screeching madly, the

raptors more silently passing with a powerful beat of their wings, moving a lot of air.

A rumbling begins from far away, the sound and sensation of distant drums, big, deep drums beginning to beat. The sound comes nearer, becomes a pounding, and the ground begins to heave and sink.

The cop and the woman, alone in the park, are tossed to the ground. The world around them is erupting, waves of energy rippling under them, rising and falling like being at sea in very rough waters. They tumble and roll and stagger, the ground beneath them surging and fading, their bodies bounced about drunkenly as they try to cling together.

The trees are waving, shaking violently, thrashing the air and sending clouds of leaves floating slowly to the forest floor. At times, their ancient roots seem to flex the flesh of their purchase on the earth, their hold for the first time in 300 years or more uncertain, their place, their very grasp tenuous and twisted, as though they might be wrenched free and fall.

There is a fantastic sound, brief but so profound and piercing it seems in aftermath to last for minutes. All over town and throughout the valley, every single window in every building large or small shatters simultaneously. It is an explosion of glass in beads, in pieces, in shards, blown from their frames and falling to the ground. The sound is indescribable, a shrill resonance of brittleness in collapse, its volume in the midst of the cacophonous roar ear-splitting, painful.

That same sound spills out from the entire stretch of Cascadia, from Mendocino to Vancouver, one high note in the deep, destructive rumble that is devastating the Northwest. From I-5 west all the way to the coast, the earth is literally coming apart, ripped asunder and rent with deep fissures.

In the cities, Vancouver, Seattle and Portland, especially, but in Tacoma and Bellingham, Salem, Eugene and Roseberg, Medford, Yreka, Mount Shasta and Redding, the damage is especially pronounced. All the infrastructure of these cities is affected, nearly all of it severely damaged and much of it destroyed.

The windows in the office buildings when they shatter rain shards of glass in jagged slivers and sheaths on the people in the streets

below. Some of those windows are the skin of the buildings, the glass encased office buildings and condominiums, that burst from their frames or merely peel away and drop like daggers into the clusters of people sprawled on the sidewalks where they fell.

Sirens long since have begun to wail. Fires are burning everywhere one looks, explosions large and small punctuate the chaos as gas lines and pipelines rupture, buildings begin to crumble, bridges sway wildly and tear loose from their moorings, falling into the rivers below. The waterways everywhere are churning, boiling, foaming like Class Four rapids. Still the ground heaves and falls, roads and sidewalks fracture, huge crevices open up in the pavement as waves of energy toss everything on the surface of the earth like blanket shaken by an unknowable, irrepressible, and malevolent force.

In homes throughout Cascadia, everything that isn't tied down has fallen to the floor. Dishes, pots and pans, glasses, and cups shake free from the cupboards and crash to the floor. Refrigerators waddle across the kitchen until they tumble. Stoves and water heaters duck walk from their places, their gas lines break and burst into flame. The houses shake loose from their foundations, large cracks split the walls and the ceilings crumble away in chunks onto the floor. Puffs of sawdust spew from the joists where the wooden beams struggle to support the roof.

Homes on hillsides, and that is most of the homes in Cascadia, are either anchored to their foundations and are badly damaged, or, if they are not secured, they begin to shake free of the cement pads or the cinder block walls on which they sit and slid downhill into piles of rubble. Nearly everything in them is badly damaged or destroyed. The people who live there are injured or killed.

The destruction is nearly absolute in places and merely terrible in others. It has cut a swath across a stretch of land 700 miles from North to South and 50 to 100 miles East to West. The damage east of the I-5 corridor nearly all the way to the western edge of Montana is notable but nowhere is it catastrophic.

To the west, though, all the way to the coast, the land, its roads and bridges, its ranches, farms, and settlements, its cities of homes, apartments, stores, offices, hospitals, schools, government buildings, all of it is severely impacted, as though the foot of a giant came down

from the sky and flattened it. The entirety of it is closer to complete obliteration than to what it was before the earth began to shake. The loss of life is in the thousands, the injured a hundred times greater.

Far worse is the coastal area. The tsunami that followed the quake has literally obliterated some towns and severely damaged nearly all the rest. The loss of life from the wall of water that rose up and slammed into the coast in incalculable. So many structures, hard by the shore, full of people who live and work there, and the seasonal inflow of vacationers by the thousands who fill the “beach front” and “ocean view” rentals, are smashed into rubble and much of it washed out to sea. Some of the bodies wash up in flotsam of debris on the beach hours or days later. Some are never seen again.

Inland, Cascadia is spared the direct hit of the tsunami. But the cities are in ruin. Vancouver and Seattle, protected from direct exposure to the ocean, still are badly damaged, much of their downtown areas demolished. Whole sections of the waterfront have liquefied, the landfill turned to mush, the buildings on them collapsed. Further south, Tacoma is a sewer of toxic chemicals from ruptured tanks along the shoreline. Among the blizzard of incomprehensible images is a massive oil tanker driven through the middle of a massive oil storage tank, both of them ruptured and bleeding black gold into the bay.

Portland is the most insulated from water damage, but there, too, landfill has liquified along the waterfront, wreaking havoc at the site of so many luxury residences and prime retail space. High rises in the Pearl and along the river further south are badly tilting. Some in fact have pancaked, collapsed into one corner of the building, spilling debris into the street.

Some fortunate residents crawl or stumble their way down dark stairwells, soaked by the sprinkler systems that are relentlessly spraying fires that reignite jets of gas almost immediately after they are doused, feeling their way around places where the walls have separated from the staircase, the steps themselves in some places broken or missing. With luck, they make it to the ground floor and relative safety.

Most of the residents, though, in many of the buildings are killed by the falling of the condos above them into theirs and theirs into the

residences below. Twenty and thirty story structures have fallen, one floor into the next, crushing everything in their path, and leaving fractured streets and sidewalks where they come crashing down.

The damage in the large cities is most dramatic, but each of the cities and towns along the shattered stretch of I-5 from Vancouver and Seattle to Mount Shasta and Redding, and everything to the west of them is badly broken. Beneath the screech of sirens and the shriek of alarms, there is a profound silence among the people and the animals, all of whom are stunned and barely animate.

In Ashland, the only building of any height is the historic Ashland Springs Hotel, which amazingly is still standing and seemingly intact, except where the stairwell at the northeast side of the building has pulled away from the wall. Just blocks from there, the old woman and the police officer lie in the grass side by side and face to face beneath the redwood tree that crushed them. In death they hold each other still, his nightstick wedged between them.

Chapter Thirteen

Worthy's team was working late, all of them jamming to finish the latest release. Empty pizza boxes were stacked on tables, half-empty boxes with half-eaten slices in them littered desks throughout the fourth floor.

The irony was lost on none of them when the earthquake hit. Still, it took them time to accept that what was happening was real. Was It? The Quake! The one they'd been modeling, preparing for, creating in miniature. The one they'd been imagining so vividly, the chaos they'd created and played with in digits and pixels was now become real.

They stared at each other across stretches of space that was shaking violently, blurring their vision, corrupting their focus, their colleagues seen as creatures caught at a moment of disbelief in the process of turning to terror.

Perhaps better than anyone in Cascadia, they knew what was happening and what it meant. They had thought about it in great detail for several years. Now the event was upon them and the details,

the horrible and excruciating details, were soon to follow. Their lives, everyone's lives, were going to be very, very different.

"Under your desk! Get under your desk," Damian Moody was shouting. Pieces of the ceiling were beginning to fall on them, only acoustic tile, but a hint of bigger things to come. The lights flickered, then went dark.

The Executive team, Worthy, Boldon, and Weller, staggered into the room from their offices, wobbling with the tumbles of energy that seemed to be rippling the floor. Worthy and Weller stumbled on hands and knees to huddle beneath a table. Boldon, though, kept wending his way toward the stairs.

"Brian," Moody shouted at him, "take cover. Don't try it, man" he yelled, as Boldon disappeared into the stairwell.

Primus was scrunched into a space next to Moody. Chewing on a piece of pizza. Had a whole box of it with him. "He's toast," he said, quietly. "You can kiss Mr. Boldon goodbye."

"Dirk, Jesus!"

"No way he's gonna make it out there. Better off to ride it out here."

"How can you eat? I don't get it. I'm scared shitless and you're eating."

"Few days from now, you might give anything for this box of food. Anything! Want some?"

There was this noise their voices made, this garbled conversation huddled beneath a table, and the greater noise, the roar, the thunderous, numbing rumble that surrounded them and made their world at this moment a bubble in a very big, bad pool of chaos.

All the windows in the walls shattered. A breeze blew through the room. Moonlight suddenly poured in as a section of wall fell away, crashing inaudibly into the street below. The floor continued to heave and roil, then lurched at an angle and a long, slight crack snaked across it. Some of the desks and tables above the fissure slid toward them. The building tilted but didn't fall. Not yet.

Moody looked from under the desk at the faces of his colleagues, these people he'd worked with, fought with, celebrated with for many years now, and he saw the raw fear, the anguish, the jumble of feelings and thoughts, the sheer terror of realization that it was here.

The Big One! The event that would change their lives, everyone's lives, forever. They'd spent the past two years imagining it and yet it was still unimaginable. Even now. The scale was just too vast.

And the shaking continued. There was a rhythm to it, a pulsing that shook the earth and everything on it. Pieces continued to break away from the walls, the crack in the floor slowly widened, but it seemed the building had reached an equilibrium with the violence.

The fear each of them felt was compounded by a sense of dread for what was to come next. Reassembling the stuff of life from complete obliteration. They could feel the shaking out of everything they knew, all that was familiar, the basic elements of everyday life so well known, relied upon, and accepted that it rarely raised a thought. Losing it all was still incomprehensible in essential ways that defied the discussions they'd given it, the studies they'd undertaken to model just what it would be like to be without it and what it would take to recover from its loss. The earth itself was heaving. Their world was being undone.

✦

In the jumble of thoughts, Worthy was thinking about family. Where was Ellen? A reception, showcase, opening? Something? Where? What did she say this morning? Trying to remember. Gracie with the sitter. Her place or theirs? Shit, is the building holding up? Maybe they're at her place. A couple of miles from here, either way. He can get there. He *will* get there. One way or another. Checks his phone. No signal. Leave it on or save the battery? Leaves it on.

Weller was thinking about family. The kids are home with Ailey. Are they safe? They must be terrified. I'm terrified. Must ride this out. Survive it. Get out of this building in one piece. Get home. Checks her phone. No signal. Leave it on or save the battery? Save the battery. She shuts it off.

Moody watches them. Checks his phone when they check theirs. He gets no signal either. Pockets it and thinks about home. Eight miles from here. An old, elegant part of the near Northeast, where in this so woke city all of us black folks live. Still. Wonders how it's holding up? All those big, brick buildings. Mansions in their time. Mostly apartments now. How he'll get there without a car, without

transportation? Watches Primus. Still eating, looking calm. Wonders what the guy is thinking? What makes him tick?

Primus is thinking about the horses. Three of them and two mules. His. Boarded at a place out Southwest, just below Stafford Road. If they're unharmed. Open pasture, odds are good. If they're still there. If the fence is still standing. Even if parts of it fall, they stay close to where they're fed. If the ladies are still alive to feed them. Hopefully.

He can get there. Planned it carefully. Four or five hours walk from the apartment, maybe six. Maybe more. Depending, of course, on what he finds outside these walls. Bets the apartment will hold up pretty well. Old wooden structure, 2nd floor above the garage. Not rigid. Some supplies. Place for tonight? Maybe. Flexible, but? Who can really say what they're facing? Until you get there. Until the models become real. Like now.

✦

Ailey guided the children away from the television, down the stairs, and out into the street. "What's happening?" they kept asking, stumbling in the stairwell but hanging on to the railing, not falling. "This is really scary," one of them said as they knelt in the yard near the sidewalk, awestruck, like a game and they were the avatars, but they hadn't played this one before. They wanted their mother. Ailey did, too. About three miles away downtown, Holly was calculating exactly how long it would take her to get home. What she'd do when she got there, what she'd find, she had no idea just yet. First get to the kids. Then decide.

✦

By fortunate chance, Gracie wanted ice cream and Mary Minette agreed, so they were at Lovejoy Bakery across the street from the Met when the ground beneath them shook them off their feet. The lights went out, Mary's cappuccino spilled, two scoops of Double Chocolate Mint sat in a pile next to Gracie on the floor, the cone still held in her hand and a look of pure amazement on her face. "Daddy talked about this," she said aloud.

It was shortly before closing, not many people in the place. But outside, there were lots of people. They seemed to be running back

and forth, in and out, uncertain where to go. Gracie saw a car tip over on its side. There was a very loud noise and all the windows in the bakery burst. Broken glass lay in piles beneath the frames. A breeze that smelled like dust came in the room. Outside big pieces of glass and metal were falling onto the sidewalks and into the streets. People were screaming. Something heavy fell from the ceiling into the room.

Mary dragged her under a large table. She could just barely sit up straight beneath it, but she had to brace herself with her arms out to the side to keep from falling over. Mary was crouched on her knees, her forehead nearly touching the floor, her hands cupped over her head. “Oh, my god,” she kept saying. “Oh, my god.” She was rocking slowly back and forth, and trembling.

The floor was really moving. Up and down. Over and over. The glass counter where the bagels were kept seemed to lift in the air, slowly roll face first toward them, and lie face down, then rock back up onto its feet near where it started, but all the glass was cracked, and the bagels were in a pile.

The cash register fell off the stand and sprung open when it hit the floor. Coins rolled in crazy patterns and bills floated in the air. The big coffee tureen waddled down the counter like a duck on its little silver legs, right off the end and landed on its side. Coffee poured from its broken nozzle. The steam was a different color than the dust.

“Please, god, please,” Mary was saying now, still hunched over with her arms wrapped over her head and her voice shaky. This went on for a long time. Gracie felt sorry for her, but also a little scared. “Please, god,” she said again, over and over. At one point much later, just like that, the shaking stopped.

Gracie looked around the room and there, under that table, easy to see in the moonlight that was pouring into the room, was the homeless man! The man from their garage. He was looking at her, nodded to her, began to crawl out from under. She did, too.

He stood in the middle of the room, looking out into the street. She stood looking at him. Mary stood up finally, looked around, began to cry. “Oh, no,” she kept saying as she sobbed, “oh, god, no.” She seemed to forget Gracie, walked to the doorway, leaned against the frame, and cried.

When Gracie finally looked outside, it was frightening. Nothing looked the same. There were people crying, staggering about, bleeding, some just sitting there, heads held in their hands, some lying still on the sidewalks and even in the streets. Cars were parked at crazy angles, their lights shining every which way. There was trash everywhere, glass and metal and stuff that looked like it had been in somebody's house. The pavement was crumpled like ocean waves. Some of it was level and some was like peaks.

She noticed, too, that all the buildings were dark. There was the moonlight and the headlights and that was all. She remembers when the lights went out sometimes. The clocks stop working. The computers can't connect. Just for a few minutes, or as long as an hour. But you can see lights in the buildings up on the hill, maybe, or even right across the street one time. She had never seen it dark everywhere like this.

The homeless man was standing next to her. He was tall. She looked at him, he pointed at Mary, who was still sobbing, hunched in the doorway. "She yours?" he said. Gracie nodded, yes, but she was thinking about what he meant as he walked toward the doorway.

Mary Minette looked like she was about to scream when he approached her, tapped her shoulder, leaned away from her a little as she turned to look at him, then looked like she would scream. But she just stared at him, her mouth slightly open and pulled tight in a grimace and listened while he spoke to her. Soon, though, she looked away from him to the street again and began crying again, more quietly this time, her head moving side to side, a look of disbelief and complete despair on her face.

Gracie thought this was a time like in the movies where they have to slap a hysterical person to bring them back, but he doesn't. And besides there are lots of people Gracie can see who look hysterical, or shocked, or dazed, or confused. He just continues to talk to her very quietly, a couple of times looking at Gracie, nodding at her while he talked. Mary just kept crying. Nothing seemed to change about her, like he wasn't getting through and didn't want to slap her. He stopped talking, then, put his hands in his jacket pockets, like he was thinking what to do.

He walked over to her and said, "Are you afraid of me?"

She shook her head, no.

“I want to help you,” he said. “Where is your mother?”

“Working,” Gracie said. “A design meeting or a showcase or something, but I don’t know where. We could call her.”

“Your father is working, too?”

She nodded, yes. “A lot. At night, too. He has a big project.”

The homeless man looked very alert. “They’ll come for you,” he said. “We need to stay nearby. But we need to get out of here.”

In the distance, there were sirens. Alarms of all kinds were blasting their particularly raw noise into the night. The smell of smoke was getting stronger. The smell of gas, too. Little explosions were heard, were sometimes seen, fires would burst into flame and then be doused by sprinkler systems. Lots of water was being sprayed from pipes attached to fire alarm systems and lots of fires kept breaking out to trigger them. Water was running in streams down the sides of the high rises, those that house the condos, rentals, residences that populated the Pearl. Gracie looked at the Met and it looked very strange. Not bright and welcoming like always but dark and shriveled, like a marshmallow all black and blistered from being held too long in a fire. A big doll was hanging out a broken window up on the side of the building.

From the street, the moon could be seen dimly through the dust and debris. It lit the city brightly from above. Filtered through the detritus of tonight’s calamity, though, the illumination was faint enough to make slightly opaque the very harsh edges of the mayhem. Your eyes could soften as you walked through it, blur the burgeoning heaps of death and damage, the coming decay. Your raw senses could remain alert and yet still dodge a recognition of, and any coming to terms with, the specificity of what lies everywhere before you. If you dare look.

They walked that way through the street, across the shuttle tracks and down 10th past the garage door to the Met where he usually set up shop. The door was crushed beneath the foundation wall that had collapsed. The awning that shaded him those days when sun shined and kept him pretty dry when rain fell was neatly cleaved in half and staked to the ground by a huge shard of glass that fell from above. He saw that and more that he would rather not see, and she saw less than

he because a lot less of what it had previously been was familiar to her, and so the change, the loss, the devastation was less immediately apparent.

He was uncertain, clumsy, when they set out about how to deal with her physically, but almost immediately she took his hand, held the first two fingers of his right hand, and they went on like that. He was surprised and slightly flattered by her trust. No doubt she was scared. She'd said not much so far and mostly looked straight ahead as they walked down the street, around the heaps of debris, the abandoned cars, here and there the bodies.

It was aurally and visually cacophonous: the sight of so much destruction was underscored by the noise, the sirens, the hiss of gas escaping, the crackling of the fires it fed, the crunch of shoes and boots walking over the glass, and the sounds of people crying, moaning, pleading, breaking down.

He knew a place that likely was still standing, where they could be sheltered and still see the side of the building where he was certain her father, her mother, or both of them would come looking for her. For each other. There was a basement room where he often stayed in a two-story building scheduled for demolition. Closer than his main place, which was blocks from here. A place where they could be safe, warm, if not comfortable, in taking their first steps to face the new world that suddenly was.

✦

Ellen Worthy was holding a glass of champagne and talking to an older gentleman about her interior design concept, one of several in a showcase that was centered on a generous display of Chihuly glasswork, set on pedestals and counters throughout the expansive room where one huge version of his sculpted chandeliers was hung from the rafters high in the center of the ceiling. The building was a single-story hangar in the Northwest Industrial Park up near the end of NW Front Street, sheet metal skin over a web of trusses that arched the roof to a second story of empty space above the cross braces. As fragile as it might appear from any of multiple perspectives, it held up remarkably well when the earthquake came.

Several of the Chihuly's fell to the floor as the lights went out, but many of them survived the fall, more durable than they appeared. Some others suffered minor chips and only one actually shattered. Scattered around the floor with only the moonlight on them, they were more ethereal and mysterious than when they were normally lit. Ghostly orbs, wings, angles in this light. The fat pedestals and thin counters rolled and tumbled, but they were painted fiberboard, very light, and caused no damage. The building itself seemed to shift and rotate like an erector set being twisted by a petulant child, but it was flexible enough to hold together.

While the glamorous people in attendance with the artists and designers were tossed to their hands and knees, plunged into various degrees of sheer terror and mostly without room under the few tables to hide, they rode out the minutes of violent shaking with very little injury. A bruised knee, broken heel, a chipped nail or sprain, perhaps, but nothing serious; and throughout the entire time the huge, florid, multi-hued chandelier waved wildly back and forth above them, amazingly in this night of absolute amazement never to fall or suffer even the slightest damage.

Other than the champagne she spilled on her chest, Ellen was completely unharmed. But she was terrified. For herself, for her child, her family. For all she knew from David's work about what was so dramatically taking place, the cost it would likely extract from all of them, and the long, difficult way to recovery.

Like her pulse, her mind was racing, her thoughts a dogged struggle between knowing the need to keep calm, trying to talk herself down, and surges of pure panic. She needed to get home. Now.

The minute the shaking finally stopped, she barely paused to check herself over, feel that everything was working, before she bolted for the door. It wouldn't budge. Jammed shut. Someone near her was trying a window, pulling the last few shards of glass from the frame before it opened noisily. He went out before her. She climbed into the window frame, sitting on it and raising one leg at a time, hiking her dress up to her hips, and swinging them through to the outside. It was a way down, but she removed her heels, pushed off past the pile of broken glass below and dropped with her knees bent, ready for the

impact. As she left the window, she felt her dress snag, heard a faint rip. Otherwise, she was fine, upright, out in the moonlight and miles from home.

At first, she was deceived by the look of the warehouses, which, like the one she'd just left, were largely undamaged. The parking lot, though, was a jumble of vehicles, many like hers lying on their sides. The ground, as she crossed the yard, the sidewalk when she reached it, and the street as far as she could see, all of it was very broken. Rippled. Twisted. Heaved up waist high in places. She was in heels. Sensible ones but heels still. Walking very carefully.

Home was on the same side of the river but miles to the south. She made her way down Front Street toward the Fremont Bridge and I-405. As she neared the apartments and condos along the Willamette, there was more evidence of damage. The buildings seemed to have settled deep into the ground along the shore, some of them tilted at odd angles. People were standing on the roofs. Water was oozing up out of their lawns. Nothing though prepared her for the sight of the bridge, that huge stretch of steel span broken, disconnected some two-thirds of the way across the river, the far side of the long, graceful metal arch above it now driven with that entire section of the freeway into the water below.

There were people here and there, walking with purpose, or wandering in a daze, or lying on the ground. One man lying there grabbed her ankle as she passed, held on with a fierce grip, saying, almost inaudibly, "Please, help me, please. My, my kids," She knelt beside him, leaned close to his face, saw blood in his mouth, blood dripping from his ear, pooling beneath his head. Saw a tire track across his chest, the pickup crashed into a tree a few feet away, steam rising from the crushed hood, a body slumped over the wheel in the cab.

He looked at her with an astonished expression, a depth of desperation and pleading in his eyes, his mouth moving slightly, painfully, trying to speak. She started to say something, what to say? Anything to comfort him, to let him know they shared this moment of terror and complete disorientation, that her world, too, was shattered, turned upside down, and what? They'd survive? Get through it? That whatever cliché was handy they should latch on to and fight like hell

to sustain the belief that the sun would come up tomorrow, that the world would be rebuilt, they'd have a place in it, and all would be good and well again. She thought to say all those things to him, thought all those trite things and more while the blood ran from his mouth and his ears, his breath began to rattle in his chest, he gasped, a rush of air left him, and he died.

✦

Worthy crawled out from under the table when the shaking finally stopped, stood uncertainly, dazed, trying to think clearly about what to do, how to get out of this building safely, how to get home.

He looked at the stairwell, which looked intact, could dimly make out the steps all the way to the third floor below. He came back into the room, counted the people there, eight of them plus himself and Boldon, all except Brian present, accounted for, saw they were uninjured, ready to get the hell out of there.

"The stairs look safe. Let's see how far we can get." He led them out of there, the first few steps especially taken with caution, hesitation, wondering what was secure, what might fall. They went single file down to the third-floor landing, beyond which they saw the stairs had fallen away into a pile at ground level. The landing door opened into a hallway. Gaping holes in the wall exposed the offices beyond it. There was no sign of life in them, nobody working this time of night, and like their offices above, these were open to the outside where the structure had crumbled in places and broken away.

Worthy approached one of the outside walls very tentatively. The floor was uneven, the boards separated in places, plaster and glass everywhere underfoot. He looked out to the street below.

These were very tall floors. The old Community Bank building, brick and stone with four marble pillars out front and four floors from ground to roof some 75 feet in height. Still a long way down from where they were. How to get there?

"Fire escape?" said Moody. "Let me look." He made his way down the hallway to the back of the building. Came back, said, "The slide looks like it's still attached, but who knows?"

The slide was a nylon tube that wound in rows back and forth at the rear of the building from the roof past an entrance at each floor

and deposits you in the parking lot on the south side of the building near the front sidewalk on Naito. It was constructed to handle a building full of people sliding to safety, but now?

“Well, we can’t jump from here, that’s for sure.” Worthy said. “Don’t see how else we’ll get there. I’ll go first. See what happens. If it holds up, have them follow one at a time.”

“Nah,” Moody said, pushing past him. “I’ll go. You got a family.” And he disappeared into the chute, shouting as he slid away. The slide was faster than he expected, maybe tilted more than intended, but he slid out the end and landed on his butt on the ground. He was looking at a pair of legs protruding from below a marble pillar that had crushed the body beneath it when it fell. The shoes were alligator Maglis, the kind Bolton wore.

He walked around to the back where Worthy was looking for him, gave him the thumbs up and nodded, walked back to the bottom of the chute, and caught his colleagues as they came sliding out, one by one, Primus, then Weller, the other programmers, and finally Worthy.

They saw Boldon where he lay, their eyes tearing, throats tightening. Worthy noticed his Rolex was missing. Someone already removed it from his corpse. That’s how it was going to be from here out. He needed to get home.

“I wish I had something meaningful to say,” he said to the rest of them. “This is all too much. We all have to find our own way for now. I don’t know where to start except to head home. Find my family. See what’s left of our home. I know you have to do the same. Please be careful. Be safe.” He paused, choked up.

“Dam, Holly, stick with me,” Primus said. Moody turned and looked at him curiously. “You’ll never make it to your place tonight,” Primus told him. “You can stay with me.” Then to Holly, “We only live about a few blocks apart. We’ll be safer together. I’m betting my apartment is still in one piece. Let’s see how yours is, how the kids are doing. If we need to, we can all stay at my place tonight. In the morning, we can see what’s what.”

✦

David Worthy began the trek home. It was fucking incredible. The city is literally in ruin. All the stuff that made it function was

destroyed. What is this place we live in but an elaborate series of interconnected constructions: where we sleep, where we work, where we buy our groceries, park our cars, get a drink, go to a game, catch a film or a play, a concert, a dance recital, or get our teeth cleaned, our rectum probed, our back massaged, our mortgage refinanced, our loans paid off? Where we make images of all those places on our computers and think about what will happen when they all get obliterated. Like this. All of it from what he could see was trashed. Gone. Maybe, maybe not, to be continued.

One building after another was severely damaged. He passed them with no more than a glance, just as he charged past all the damaged people in the streets, the traumatized, the deranged, the injured, the dead. It was simply too overwhelming to stop even for a minute and consider what there was to see. His focus was home. It allowed him to stay in motion, keep walking, persist where even a moment's hesitation would be disastrous, like settling into a bog of tar or quicksand or some miasmic interlude from which he would not emerge.

Still, he was totally unprepared for what he found on Lovejoy. The Met was demolished. It literally was sagging into 11th Avenue, one floor sunk into another, a house of cards captured like a snapshot at the moment of collapse. The tension was almost unbearable, as though he was standing there looking at his home in an extended instant of suspense just before it fell into rubble.

The magnificent lobby was shattered, all the glass that surrounded it left in neat piles of finely rounded granules on the floor. All that area of the grand entry was now an open patio, wind-swept and covered in debris. The front doors, those elegant brass doors, 10 feet tall side by side, were crushed, a gnarled mass of metal through which no one was going to pass, ever again.

Panic swept over him as he looked skyward toward the 19th floor. Was anyone in there left alive? Gracie, could she be trapped there, injured, calling for help? Or worse, could she be there soundless? Gone?

Something near paralysis seized him then, a sense of total helplessness. Could he find a way into the building, make his way to

the top, wend his way from floor to floor, 19 of them in all. To find what? His child….

He literally jumped when someone touched his shoulder. Who? Christ, the homeless man. The bum. What? “Come with me,” he said. “Your daughter. She’s all right. She’s safe.”

✦

Primus, Dam, and Holly. Walking hard, faces straight ahead, trauma all over their peripheral vision. Holly in her business shoes, thick three-inch heels, should have grabbed her gym bag with her tennies but, yeah, right.

She is setting the pace. Damian is keeping up in some oxfords that walk pretty well. Primus, as always, is in hiking shoes. He’s good. They say nothing to each other, just walk, march really, breathing hard, moving with purpose, each of them thinking fast but feeling slow, careful, letting a mere sensation at a time past the gates, into the place where their feelings were held.

Very weird to be thinking about your feet in the midst of this overwhelming dread. After even the first mile or two of a very difficult walk, feet grabbed your attention. They hurt a little, getting sore, and you had a way to go, a way not getting any easier as you went. You wondered just how hard it would get and knew it would get *much* harder. You had to start getting harder, too.

They reached Holly’s place, which was pretty broken up but not destroyed. No sign of the kids, Holly feeling a surge of panic, the others wondering with her if the kids were in the building, if they were injured, if they were alive.

There was a pile of debris blocking the front door. They went around back. Ailey shouted at them, “Holly!” and came running, crying, grabbing, hugging them. The kids were huddled under a carport, which was a little cockeyed but standing. “Mommy,” they yelled and came running, too.

“I’m going up there,” Primus said, pointing to the back stairs. “You’re 5, right?” He disappeared into the stairwell. A minute or two later, they saw him moving slowly past the window a few floors higher. A few minutes more, pretty dusty, he was back.

“Holly, come with me. We need to pack for you and the kids. You can’t stay here, but most of your stuff looks okay. Get what you need for a night or two. Let’s get to my place. We’ll figure out what’s next in the morning.”

Chapter Fourteen

Ellen finally made it back to the Met. It must be early morning. Moon is mostly gone, dawn not quite breaking, the light faint, eerie. The building was shattered, badly damaged. Piles of rubbish, here like everywhere else, lay in the streets. All the glass from the widows was gone. Huge chunks of the building had torn loose. You could see into the rooms on the upper floors, where walls had collapsed and gaping holes rent the structure, where fires burned until the sprinklers extinguished them, and the water still oozed from the building. My god! There was a body hanging from a hole in the wall a few floors up, a crow sitting on it, flapping its wings and cawing. Here and there, feral dogs were wandering the street, sniffing at bodies.

It was unimaginable. Her home, her building, her neighborhood, like a drawing on paper a child’s tantrum had crumbled in her hands and dropped there with distaste. She was stunned, speechless. A wave of nausea swept over her. She felt faint, vaporous, like she was floating.

“Mrs. Worthy?”

It was a tall man, older, someone she may have seen before. Or not? Yes, she’d seen him. Where? He was holding her by the arm, looking closely at her, an expression of concern on his face.

“Mrs. Worthy. It’s Captain Sink, building security. You need help.”

Sink? Captain Sink? She didn’t know the name, but he was familiar. She’d seen him somewhere, perhaps, in the lobby? Behind the desk? In the offices. Somewhere. Yes. Building security.

“I need to get to my home,” she said. “Can you help?”

“Mrs. Worthy, you can’t. Your home is gone. Destroyed. The building is unsafe. There’s no way to get above the first floor. You need to rest, clear your head. Let me help. Come with me. I have a place for you.”

He led her through the broken lobby, across the floor covered with debris, tiles from the roof, pieces of cement, clumps of dirt. Wind blew the dust across the floor. Her building. Gateway to her home. It was unreal.

They came to a door, a metal door that, unlike everything else, seemed normal. In its place. Upright. Functioning. He opened it with a key, led her in, lit a few candles before closing the door, bolting it, shutting out the shattered world and also the light. Only the candles flickered.

Still holding her arm, he walked her to a sofa. “Sit down. Please. You can rest here. Let me get you some water.”

He returned with a small plastic bottle, unscrewed the cap, handed it to her. “Suddenly the most valuable commodity in this upside-down world.”

She wanted to speak, to say something, to explain her desperation. Instead, she drank the water, all of it. The taste was incredible. She’d had none, no water, no food, since this all happened. When? Last night? Yesterday?

“I need…I want…I have to find my daughter. My husband. I don’t know where they are. I need to go…find them.” She tried to stand but couldn’t move. Her legs failed her. Her head lolled. She was dizzy. It felt so good just to sit. To lie back. Lie down. He covered her with a blanket, and she slept.

✦

Ellen Worthy awoke with a start. She had been in a dreamless place of warmth and deep peace. Something though began to irritate her, an itch of discomfort that grew from a small dark corner of her mind and quickly became a sense of panic. She was, where? What? She couldn’t move. Her arms and legs were bound, each to a corner of the bed where she lay.

A torrent of thoughts flooded her mind. Help! She should scream. She did. No sound emerged. She was gagged, something tightly stuffed in her mouth. She was thrashing now, but her cuffs held tight.

A door opened and a light appeared. Who? Sink? Sink! Yes, holding a plate of candles. Framed by the doorway, he looked very large. The shadows danced. She stopped moving.

“Ah, she’s awake. Feeling better, I hope. You were exhausted, hardly stirred for the entire morning. I’m sorry about the restraints. Didn’t want you to hurt yourself, go running off somewhere. It’s very dangerous out there right now. Especially after dark. But any time really. Beautiful woman like you. Who knows what could happen? Better you stay here where I can protect you.”

He walked into the room, looked around for a place to put the candles, set them on a cabinet where the dancing light reflected in the mirror. From the complete darkness when she woke, they seemed bright by comparison.

“Nice, isn’t it? The apartment, I mean. Humble by your standards, of course, but then, it’s still standing. Funny how things happen, isn’t it? All these years I’ve worked here, since the day it opened, providing security for a place to stay. Get it? But I was comfortable here. Watching out for all you people and your very valuable digs. Watching all the stuff that needed protecting.

“Watch, I did. More closely than most of you ever would guess. I know who lives where, what time they come and go, who’s married, who’s shacking, who has kids. Even know what they like to eat and drink. Know a lot of other things about them, too. Things they think are private. Just part of the job.

“But some of you I took a special interest in. Kept a closer eye on you. Thought you were worth it. You I know a lot about. The private things most of all. I’ve seen you, heard you, thought about you more than you could know.”

He was standing near her, pulled a chair up to the edge of the bed and looked at her spread-eagled there before sitting down at her side. She felt exposed beneath the blanket, although she could tell she was still clothed. There was nothing she could make sense of, no frame of reference for this bizarre situation where she found herself, except that he was very scary with his calm demeanor. Everything he said came to seem more threatening than the last.

“My job was to watch and yours was to be watched, I guess. The very pricey home, fine furnishings, beautiful clothes, the art on the walls and the Beemers in the garage, private school for your daughter, all the catered parties. It was very impressive, something to see. Something to look at. And look at it now.”

He reached toward her, and she flinched. He smiled, chuckled softly to himself, slowly shaking his head from side to side, and almost delicately grasped the hem of the blanket, pulling it from her, uncovering her head to toe.

“And look at it now. We all desire beautiful things, don’t we? But only some of us get them. The rest of us just watch them go by, always out of our reach. So close we can almost touch them, feel them, smell them. Taste them. We can almost sense what it’s like. But it’s only a dream. Never going to happen.

“Then something unimaginable comes along, turns the world upside down. The earth itself is coming apart. Not much of anything is beautiful anymore. What is, what still is beautiful despite it all? Well, it’s up for grabs, isn’t it?

“Just like your dress. Cashmere, isn’t it?” He rubbed the hem between his fingers. “Very beautiful indeed. But look! It’s torn. You ripped it there,” he said, pointing at a tear in the fabric high on her thigh. He ran his hand gently, slowly, up her leg, inserting a finger through the rip to touch her bare leg. “So soft and very beautiful,” he said, and pulled his hand away.

“This isn’t right. I’m doing all the talking. But I don’t know if I can trust you if I take that gag away. It must be hard to breathe, and I really want you to be comfortable. I do, Ellen. Believe me. Can I trust you, Ellen?”

She was wide-eyed with fear, begun to sweat, feeling chilled. Nodded yes.

“Let me explain a few things to you before I do. There are people in the streets, everywhere in the city. They’re dazed. Panicked. Don’t know what to do. Some of them are predators. Just beginning to emerge. The first to adapt and go hunting. They’re roaming the streets, alone, in gangs. You listen close, they’re nearby, sometimes you hear them in the lobby, scurrying around like rats, even banging on the door just now. Incredible.

“If I take away the gag and you start yelling, chances are no one will hear you. Even if they do, you might wish they hadn’t. Not everyone’s a boy scout, do you understand? Not everyone wants to help you.

“One thing in our favor, if anyone comes looking for trouble, we are pretty secure.” He reached under a pillow of the futon she was tied to and removed a very large gun. “This is a .45 mag with hollow point shells. It will put a small hole in the front where it enters and a crater in the back where it exits. And one thing you can be sure of: I know how to use it.”

With that, he ran the barrel very lightly over her lips, touching them almost unperceptively. “So don’t be doing any screaming, understand?” And he removed the gag from her mouth.

Her heart was thumping wildly in her chest. She swallowed very hard, several times, and stopped herself just as she started to speak. She looked at Sink with a deep curiosity mingled with her fear, looking for something to speak to, anything that might make sense, a foothold in the floating pool of his insanity.

“Why,” she said, her voice raw, croaking. She swallowed hard again, took a breath, looked at him directly, said again, “Why are you doing this?”

He merely smiled at her, as though amused, that she thought there was an answer. “Would you like some water,” he said. “Perhaps even some tea? I can boil some water on the stove. Have a pretty good supply of wood pellets. Keep us warm, boil some water. At least for now, we’re pretty well provisioned. May as well enjoy it while we can.”

“You’re a police officer. Captain Sink, you said. What about the law?”

“Ellen,” he said, shaking his head again with a rueful smile on his face, “Ellen, there is no law now. Don’t you get it? Things have changed. Your days of privilege and comfort are done. My days as an officer of the law? Done. Reading punks their Miranda rights so they can bond out before I’ve even finished the paperwork. Done. Body cameras so we don’t put a dent in anyone’s face while he’s in the act of committing a crime. Done. The rules don’t apply anymore.

“There’re no streets out there to police anymore, Ellen. No police station to gather the troops. No jail, no courts. No nothing. It’s anarchy, plain and simple. Law? Get over your bad self, Ellen. This,” he said, lifting the gun and holding it next to his head, then off at

arm's length and sighting down the barrel, "this is the law. All the rest is fantasy. And that bubble has finally, fatally burst."

✦

"I understand how hard it must be for you, Ellen. Things so dramatically altered from what you've always known. Your family gone, your home destroyed, all your lovely things in tatters.

"You aren't the only one, you know. Everyone is cast adrift. Everything is chaos. We've never seen anything like it. The entire Northwest is gone, do you know? That's the likely scenario. Destroyed.

"There's nothing out there now but madness. Some of us can't help but chuckle. It's a shame, of course, don't misunderstand me. So many people suffering. So many dead and gone. Nowhere, no way, for even a decent burial or a brief memorial service. Just rotting where they lie.

"But I do chuckle when I think about it. I can't help but laugh.

"Do you know why, Ellen? Because I spent my entire career dealing with chaos. Trying to keep a lid on it. Keep the animals in their cages. The murderers and rapists and gangbangers. Every day for 20 years, Ellen. That was my life.

"And who do you think I did it for? Myself? No, I can deal with these thugs myself. Don't need the police to protect me, the courts to put them away. I'd be more than happy to settle up with them my own way.

"No, Ellen. I did it for *you*. For you and all the other beautiful people living up there above the ugliness. I kept them at bay, put them away, so you, your family, you and all the swells, you didn't have to breathe the same air they did, smell the squalor and the stench, see the depravity, and feel the pain.

"And now, suddenly, it's everywhere! It's the same for all of us! We're all living on the same floor. Ain't that something? Did you ever imagine it would come to this?

"I just have to laugh about it because some of us are better prepared than others now to deal with the shit. Excuse my crude language. But it is shit. We've been wading in it all these years while you got to stay above it. Been mopping it up for you so it didn't get on

your shoes, so you didn't track it into that beautiful place where you lived, get it all over those plush Persian carpets that cushion your every step. Ah! The life! The life! And now it's gone. Gone."

✦

"You have to pee? Aha! Another point in fact. The toilets don't work. Nothing works. Nothing except the primitive ways. People will be digging outhouses soon enough; meanwhile, they're going behind bushes.

"But we're fortunate here, at least for a while. The Met has a huge cistern that used to feed the sprinkler system. As far as I can tell, it's undamaged. The cistern, I mean, not the sprinkler system, it's broken all to hell. Can you imagine? The cistern seems to have escaped unscathed. Anyhow, it's still pretty full of water, non-potable, but we can use it for baths and showers and flushing the toilet. Rigged it myself. Makes for a rather luxurious place, don't you think, considering the situation?

"We will want to move you to the bedroom anyhow. You'll be more comfortable there. Much more private. And that bathroom has the shower. This other is just a commode and a sink. But we'll have to uncuff you, won't we? So, do we remember our discussion about trust?" He reached for the pistol, held it beside his head, a questioning look on his face. "We do remember, don't we?"

The same key unlocked all four pairs of cuffs. Her body was thankful to be able to move. He held her by the elbow when she stood and led her down the hallway to the bedroom and the adjoining bathroom.

"Could I have some privacy, please?" she said, when they reached the doorway. "At least in here?"

He smiled at her in a kindly way. "Privacy?" he said, and he laughed. "There's no privacy anymore, Ellen. We gave all that away a long time ago. We're all completely exposed in the digital world unless we're very careful to avoid it. And who is? Not you. There's nothing you need to keep from me, Ellen. Nothing that I haven't heard and seen before."

"What? What do you mean?" Suddenly she was furious. She nearly hit him, thought better of it. "You've seen and heard what? Where?"

“Why, In your home, Ellen. Where else? I told you that I’ve been watching you very carefully. Microphones, cameras, tools of my trade. They’re pretty easy to install. Now that everything is wireless, there’s really nothing to it. All you need is access, and I’ve always had that.”

“You’ve been in our home?”

“Just two or three times. One of the cameras was out of focus. Had to replace it. Otherwise, I would have bothered you less.”

“Cameras? Where?”

“Your bedroom. The master bath. That’s all. The microphones, though, are everywhere.”

She was shaking. Her legs felt weak. The idea was unfathomable.

“And you’ve seen…what?”

“Oh, most everything, I suppose. I’ve tried to be discrete. I haven’t shared them. People need their privacy, as you say. The toilet doesn’t interest me. That’s rather sick, I think. But showers, umm! They can be lovely, a beauty like you. You’re a gift of nature, Ellen. I couldn’t help watching.”

“My god. You’ve seen me…what else? What else!”

“Well, the bedroom is a place that tells us a lot, doesn’t it? The place we do things that we do nowhere else. The place in some ways where we’re most truly ourselves. You can learn a lot by watching.”

She felt the shame rising into her face. The idea of being exposed to this animal, this sick, shameless, predatory animal. It shook her in a way that was beyond unnerving. Because it suddenly cleared away the fog, the bizarre hope she had vaguely maintained that her situation was a momentary, a transitory aberration. That things soon would return to normal. That the world wasn’t broken, that she wasn’t really a captive. That the past few hours were a twisted dream from which she’d wake.

“It was difficult to understand why your husband paid so little attention to you. In the bedroom, I mean. Of course, he’s busy, stressed, so many things on his plate. And familiarity can blind us to what we have in hand. For a man like me, though, looking at a woman like you, it seemed a tragedy. We don’t stay young forever, do we? Beauty like yours may be nearly timeless, but the ripeness of our passion, that moist and verdant sexuality, lasts only so long.

“I did so enjoy your passion, Ellen. Those times when you were alone, the look on your face, your body writhing and trembling. It was extraordinary. Sublime! I can’t tell you what it did to me. But your modesty! It drove me crazy in the midst of all that passion that you were always covered up, always under the sheets and the blankets. God, how I wanted to see all of you in that way. To see you really let go.

“Sometimes I wondered if I’d ever have the chance…well, enough of that. Let me give you a moment to relieve yourself. Take these candles so you can see. Clean yourself up. There are towels and things there in the cabinet. Have a shower if you’d like. I’ve rigged it to the water. You’re a bit of a mess. We all are. It’s been a trying time.”

✦

She was shaking so violently she could barely pee. It took a focused stretch of deep breathing to calm down even enough to let her bladder go. There was a torrent then and she was aware he could hear it. What matter? He said he’d seen and heard it all. The thought disgusted her, but somehow it calmed her, too. The sense that nothing mattered. Not at this moment. Not until she could regain familiar ground. A place of equilibrium. Until then, she was at his mercy, unable to fend for herself, unable to free herself. Unable.

She sat on the toilet and looked at the bathroom. A smaller version of the ones in her home. Clean, well-appointed, granite and glass, windowless except a thick plate of glass or maybe plastic high on the wall. A little natural light came through. The door was unlocked. She clicked the lock and listened, but there was no reaction she could hear. What difference would it make to him if she locked herself in? Hunger eventually would drive her out, even if he didn’t have a key. No doubt he did. The thought of a shower suddenly seemed very desirable. She was filthy but undressing seemed to be extraordinarily dangerous.

She weighed the options and the consequences in her mind. As though she had a choice. As though she could protect herself from him. As though he couldn’t have whatever it was he wanted, whenever he wanted it.

He had her trussed like an animal, like some medieval prisoner, and hadn't touched her as far as she could tell. He could have stripped her naked and he hadn't. He could have done anything he wanted, and he hadn't assaulted her. Not yet. Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he *was* trying to protect her in his bizarre and misguided way. Maybe, who knows?

She turned on the shower, stripped away her dress, her slip, her bra and underpants, stepped into to the granite and glass enclosure and for a few minutes felt nothing but the rush of cool water. It was heavenly, to wash away the scum, the filth, the film of a shattered city that had settled on her body, shampoo her hair, feel her skin pucker against the cold and her nipples jut firmly from the flesh of her breasts, to be clean again as though the world itself having sunk so far could be renewed.

She stepped from the shower and dried herself quickly, the fear returning, the sense of her vulnerability rushing back into her mind. She began to dress and was repulsed by the thought of putting on these dirty clothes again. There was a robe in the closet, and she considered it. The thought of being nearly naked in his company was more repulsive still.

He knocked sharply on the door. "What?" she said, jumping back with her arms crossed over her breasts.

"Excuse me," he said. "I have some clothes here you might want to wear. They're clean. Like new."

She was wary, afraid to open the door, to be naked so near him. But, why? What could she do if he wanted to barge in? If he wanted to rip the towel from her hands, or her tattered clothes from her body?

She unlocked the door. He opened it very slightly, stayed out of sight, slid a box sideways through the door. She took it and he closed the door before she could. But she locked it.

The box had a dress, a slip, bra and underpants, a pair of heels, a garter belt and hose. Her size. Her taste, too. Most of it. Very familiar, in fact. Oh, my god! They were hers.

"Where did you get these," she shrieked at him. "These are mine."

"Please!" he said quietly, barely audible through the door. "Please forgive me. I took them a long time ago. I'm ashamed. It was so hard not to. I was there, you had so many things, I knew you wouldn't miss

them. The dress was at the very back of your closet. Your underthings, too. And the shoes. So many to choose from. I just wanted to have some things of yours. Don't think badly of me. I really meant no harm. I know it was wrong, but I couldn't help it. And now, see. It's good that we have them. Isn't it?"

She began shaking again, as much with anger as fear. To know he'd been in her home. To know he'd gone through her things, been in her closet, in her drawers of underwear. She shivered, shamed, cold. Began dressing.

"These nylons aren't mine," she said, surprised and speaking before she had meant to.

"No, I know that," he said, sounding almost sheepish. "I bought them. The garter belt, too. When I had those clothes of yours, had them laid out on the bed so many times, thinking about you. I thought you would look so good in them. Panty hose are so unattractive. So antiseptic, don't you think? I'm of an age when women wore nylons. I imagined you in them. The outfit was complete then. It seemed perfect to me."

✦

His name was Clay, the homeless guy. Clayton Embry. Like the earth, Worthy thought for some reason. Pretty savvy guy. Well spoken, thoughtful, normal in a lot of ways. But wary, too. Not open but very gradually accessible. Coming around little by little.

Worthy was beyond thrilled to see Gracie, the sense of relief he felt so profound, it took some brief time to snap him back to the reality of where they were, what was happening. Where was his wife, her mother? Was she alive, hurt, looking for them, waiting for them? Where to begin? What to do?

"You need to rest. Both of you. I'll keep watch. If she can, she'll come home. If she does, I'll wake you."

The room was half full of furniture, old train depot stuff stored there, some of it actually quite nice, old leather benches, some overstuffed air chairs, that sort of thing. Long forgotten. Dusty, dirty, some of it, but they found a place to settle together, father and daughter. She asked a few questions. He answered the best he could. He wrapped his arms around her. They slept.

✦

“Seen that cop, the security guy, darting here and there. Don’t know what he’s up to, but he must live there somewhere. Or else he’s just holed up in the wreckage, trying to protect it. That seems far-fetched.”

He looked at Gracie, who was studying the room, the furniture, the piles of other stuff stored there, said to Worthy more quietly, “Haven’t seen your wife. Can’t be sure I’d recognize her, but I saw nobody that seemed likely.”

“You’ve seen her with me. More than once, I’m sure.”

“Maybe so. I don’t remember.”

“I should talk to Sink, that cop,” Worthy said. “Maybe he knows something, seen something. I don’t know. He’s probably as stunned as the rest of us.”

Worthy thought twice about how to handle this, take Gracie with him, leave her with Clay? One look out the window, the carnage, the horror, made the decision for him. “Stay with her, will you? I’ll be right back.”

To Gracie, he said, “Gracie, I want you to stay here with Mr. Embry while I run an errand. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Will that be okay?” She looked from him to Clay, back at him with searching eyes, then nodded yes, went back to exploring.

✦

Worthy stopped just outside the doorway, took a deep breath, looked up and down the street at the decimated neighborhood, the remains of his home, the scene seemingly unchanged from a few hours earlier when he’d first gotten back here, before Clay, before Gracie, before sleeping on a leather bench in an abandoned building with his daughter in his arms, his ten-year-old child acting so composed. She has to be traumatized by all this. Hell, I am. She must be.

Another breath, another look around, then head on into it, moving straight ahead. Down the street to the Met, past the crushed garage doors, around to the front, the huge windows shattered, and the lobby exposed, now a large plane of debris and dust plumes. He looked for a long time, trying to remember what it looked like before all this, what

little he'd noted about it beyond the big brass doors swinging open for him, the walk past the concierge, the large desk angling away from the lobby entrance, the desk clerk, the room, the rooms, behind that desk. Down the hall the elevators. What was there to remember?

He was aware of all the ugliness at his periphery, but he forced himself to ignore it. All of this was so overwhelming, so like living in a science fiction movie. You have to contend with it a small, distinct piece at a time. He stared straight ahead, tried to focus on … what?

What is there to see? A place to begin. He looked at the room that once was the lobby. Sees what? The horror. Yes. What else? The skeleton of a place he once knew, not as well as he thought. What else? The debris. The dust. The footprints in the dust. A few different sets of footprints. Large prints, but maybe a couple of different sizes. Some paths that look purposeful. A couple that wander.

One set of prints comes and goes in direct lines. Large feet. Sink? Maybe. He follows them into the space, a very large area, then an opening in what once may have been a wall, then a dead end at another, more substantial wall. With a small alcove. And a door.

Worthy steps back, looks at the door, solid metal appears to be, with all the prints scuffed away to nothing but seeming to come and go. And maybe he imagines it but there are very vaguely the remains of what appears to be a small, rounded triangle set a short distance ahead of a sharp point. A high heel shoe?

He knocked on the steel door. Twice. Three times. As loud as he could. Listened closely. Heard nothing.

✦

When it came, and she knew it would, he was tentative, tender, almost shy. She tried to resist, to plead, to discourage him. But it kept coming, a little at a time, slowly, persistently.

He touched her hair, her face, caressed her neck, speaking to her softly, monotonously, murmuring indistinctly sometimes, saying, "how soft, how smooth, how beautiful." He began to kiss her neck, her ears, her face. His touch was gentle, his breath surprisingly fresh. It was terrifying to be so helplessly available to him, so completely at his mercy, yet less threatening, less crude and menacing than she expected.

She was cuffed to the bed, at first by one wrist, then when she curled away from his touch, he firmly cuffed her other wrist to the opposite post. She was stretched out on her back, her arms above her head, clothed but horribly exposed to his gaze, his hands, his lips, his tongue.

He unbuttoned her dress, very slowly, savoring her body as it came into view, leaning down from where he sat next to her to kiss and lick her skin, to rub his face between her breasts, then returning to her buttons until the dress was completely undone. He opened it, spreading it to either side of her, and sat back to look at her, his breath catching in his throat.

“Ellen, you can’t know, can’t imagine what this means to me. What a gift you are. A blessing. Something I’ve wished for and never thought I would have.”

He ran his hand very slowly up the inside of her thigh until he reached the flesh above her nylons, his hands softer than she expected, his touch light, easy, tender. He stopped very near her pussy and softly squeezed her flesh there several times, before standing up and moving a little way away from her, where he stood just staring at her and breathing deeply.

She was trembling, her breath shallow, her skin puckered with goose bumps. Random thoughts raced through her head, of her childhood, her first kiss, her first time. The times in her life she’d been frightened. Times of panic. There was no reference point. Nothing even remotely familiar. She’d never felt like this.

An image of herself came to mind and stayed there, seeing herself as if from a place above the bed, her legs squeezed together now, her pubic hair prominent in the sheer white panties, the pubic bone pronounced, the lips of her vulva puffy and full, her bare belly long and slim, the French bra pushing her breasts into large, firm mounds, the V of her collarbones framing her head, her face twisting from side to side between her upraised arms.

She saw herself as he saw her, lush, beautiful, exposed. Excited, too! It shocked her when the thought occurred. Oh, god. She twisted her face as far to the side as she could, trying to hide, the thought, the image, the realization. The rush of shame washing over her.

“Please don’t do this,” she said to him, turning her face suddenly and looking directly at him “It’s too horrible. It’s not right. I’m married. I have a child. There’s nothing I’ve done to deserve this. Just let me go. Now. I’ll walk away. I won’t tell anyone. I promise. Not a soul. Let’s just let it all go. Please!”

She stared at him, pleading with every fiber of her being, her face twisted by fear, her generous lips pursed with humbleness and pain, reaching for some glimmer of hope, searching for mercy and compassion. He was unmoved. His countenance changed not at all.

He smiled ruefully, licked his lips, took a deep breath, and shook his head. “None of us deserve this, Ellen. Things just happen. It’s good for some of us and not so good for others. Some of us suddenly have the power to do as we will. Some of us are like fallow land about to be exploited. It’s like I was just elected president and you are my beloved country I’m about to have my way with…”

He came nearer her, walking very slowly, speaking deliberately in very measured tones. “Think for a moment, Ellen, of someone besides yourself, of all those others out there. Their lives wrecked, loved ones lost, homes in shambles, everything they had to their name is destroyed, vanished, gone. Did they deserve it? There is nothing, NOTHING! Do you understand? Nothing they’ve done to deserve it. Nothing for them to hope for, to cling to, to believe in. And yet, some of them, many of them in fact, somehow will find a way to keep going. To begin again. To start over in the face of this new reality. They’ll refuse to give up, to be defeated. And so it is for you, Ellen. A new reality is beginning. Right now.”

Now he was very near her, seeming for a moment longer to be agitated, as if it all angered him, that they should be so bereft and unappreciated for the courage they would show in the face of this, of every calamity their lives brought them. Then he said, very calmly and with ironic humor, an unpleasant smile crossing his face, “And what is saddest about all of that is there are others, certain others, who already are maneuvering to profit from their suffering. There are always others among us who feast on the suffering and the sorrow.”

“So, lovely Ellen, let me say this.” He sat beside her, lightly brushed the hair from her face, looked at her wistfully and shook his head. “You *don’t* deserve this. That is so true, so absolutely and

completely true. But you didn't deserve the life you lived before this either. Do you understand me? It just happens.

"One day you're on the 19th floor, living the life, and the next day, you're here, fearful this stranger has you spread-eagled on his bed in your underwear, wondering what he's going to do to you.

"These things happen, Ellen. Sometimes it's good for one of us and sometimes it's good for the other. The first ones now shall later be last, the good book says. And guess what? It's later now, and you're last."

Her face crumbled into a grimace of fear and tears welled in her eyes. She looked at the watery image of him and barely shook her head from side to side, as though she no longer had the energy or any reason to believe that what he said wasn't true, that she wasn't here merely because things happen, and this is what now is happening to her.

"It's a shock. A long way to fall. None of us can hope to be prepared for this unequivocal trauma. My god, the entire city, maybe the entire Northwest is in ruins. And we worry about ourselves, our fate, our vulnerability, our – let's say it, Ellen, because that's what you really fear – our nakedness and what it might incite the madman among us to do. That's it, isn't it?

"Well, let me tell you so you don't need to worry about it anymore. I am going to have you, Ellen, in every way there is to have you, in all the ways I've imagined for so many nights when I was here by myself and you were up there, high above me. I'm going to remove your clothes and cover your naked body with kisses. I'm going to lick and suck and bite your flesh and probe every orifice of your body. With my fingers and my tongue and my penis."

The tears were running down her face and she was making odd, muted, whimpering sounds deep in her throat, but she was looking directly at him. He took her chin in the cup of one hand and softly stroked her face with the other as he leaned close.

"Understand this, Ellen, that you are helpless, and you are fearful, and everything you fear is going to happen to you just like you are afraid it would. But there will be one difference. Something you wouldn't expect."

He leaned in and kissed her very gently but firmly and for more than a few seconds before he stopped. “It’s going to be very good for me. You can be sure of it. Very good, indeed. I’m going to enjoy it tremendously, every fine, delicious, salacious, lascivious moment of it.

“And, for you? It will be especially shameful, Ellen. To be completely at my mercy. Scary, humiliating, debasing, something you think you don’t deserve, something you never could fathom would ever happen to you. And do you know what will be the worst of it? What will be most unimaginable of all? Here’s the truth of it, Ellen, the terrible, punishing truth. You are going to enjoy it, too.”

Chapter Fifteen

The Cobra helicopter swept in low over the countryside. The scene was unimaginable destruction, the landscape completely shattered, jagged scars rent the surface of the earth everywhere, huge up-thrusts of dirt and rock on either side of cavernous gaps. Trees were felled or pitched at odd angles to the sky. Where the highway was visible, it was a broken ribbon, chunks of disconnected pavement tilted at random to the left, right, up, down, here and there a stretch remaining whole and level in stark contrast to the chaos around it.

“Governor,” the co-pilot radioed, “I’m north of Ukiah on 101. It’s very bad. Like nothing I’ve ever seen, even in Iraq. This is worse, far worse, hard to even imagine.” He tried to steady his voice, but it was wavering. “There’re fires burning, but not big, not bad. Mostly smoldering, really. Houses that burned, it looks like. Lucky it’s still pretty wet up here. I can see a few people, not many. Must be hunkered down. Some homes look okay from here. Some slid down the hillsides. Cars and trucks everywhere. Upside down. Buried. Lots of landslides. Some of them really big. It’s…” his voiced choked, he swallowed, said, “it’s incredible.”

“Rafert, you and Higgins proceed to Eureka and back to Redding,” the Governor said. “Do not, repeat, do *not* set down. I want you back here as soon as possible with those videos. I’m mobilizing the Guard immediately, but we need those images so we can be smart how we deploy them. Hopefully, the feds will be on the scene soon, but we

aren't waiting for them to get started. From what you're telling me, it's going to be a very long recovery."

"Roger that, Governor. I don't think a nuclear bomb could do this much damage, not even a dozen of them. What I'm seeing down there, sir. It's, well, it's obliterated."

✦

Garrett Braun had governed California for 12 years, winning reelection twice by wide margins and riding herd on a legislature that is blue through and through with some mean red streaks, was instinctively unruly, ego-driven, self-righteous, and back-stabbing. Braun was nominally the leader of the party when he was first elected and over time through sheer hard work, smarts, and a deft touch when he laid the wood to people who crossed him, he became leader in fact, as well.

He was nobody's fool, emerging relatively unscathed from some ferocious battles with his colleagues, Rs and Ds alike. The statehouse was not for the faint of heart, but neither was it easy on one's most cherished goals and beliefs. Braun was a very successful politician who had that nearly extinct characteristic of having maintained a modicum of integrity and fealty to his vision in the midst of the blood sport called politics.

Like the rest of the nation, California had suffered through the recession of 2008, watched housing prices collapse, foreclosures leave families homeless, banks gin up their efforts to profit from every transaction. Wins or losses matter not to them, for what the average person understood of the dynamics of profit and loss was chimera in the financial industry. Like medicine and insurance, the banking industry couldn't lose. It was too big to fail and so the people took it on the chin, lost a lifetime of savings and equity, *and* faced higher taxes, too, to pay for federal subsidies to all the speculators while the bankers raked in the money.

It was one time where the demarcations of political affiliation mattered not. This time, just about everybody got screwed. The Ds are urban, the Rs are rural, and the money people own them both. You can, as the saying goes, take it to the bank. If nothing else was proven by the downturn of 2008, it was that neither party crosses the

bankers, regardless of what it costs its voters. Much as Braun admired Obama for much of what he brought to the White House, it was the investment bankers Jamie Dimon and Lloyd Blankfein the President lunched with, their man who was his treasury secretary, their cards that he dealt.

Braun and the people of his state, all 40 millions of them, weathered that crisis and came back strong. Prices were up, employment was up, they'd even had a respite from a punishing drought. The governor's steady leadership during the darkest moments of that crisis had earned the respect of even his critics, and like any powerful person, he had many. But you don't argue with success. Now that California was back in business, leading the country into the future, he was a tested entity at the helm of the nation's single mightiest economic engine.

The nation changed, too, though, lurching to the right in an unanticipated spasm of rural and working class dominance, Populism, the press called it, a polite way of saying white backlash, electing to the presidency a charismatic and thoroughly self-referential man of such mental instability and unprecedented, virtually boundless immorality that all of his 44 predecessors in a line that had dented the din of respectability over 240 years of the office of president, nearly each and every one of them now appeared in contrast as a towering example of statesmanship and equanimity.

Quite simply, terrifyingly so, there's never before been anyone in the Oval Office like Ronald Gherkin. The Little Pickle he is called by friend and enemy alike, referencing his self-proclaimed image as a cocksman, suggesting too that it like everything else about him is inflated from small stuff. He is foppish, smug, overweight, round, and soft except for the hard scowl that lacquers his face, with an absurd comb-over of orange hair, tiny little crab-like hands, and feet so small they look like hooves, cloven, no doubt, at the end of his chunky legs.

He is an absolute genius at only one thing and that is command of modern media. Social networkers, bloggers who bleat, twitters who tweet, and all manner of the digital stew that passes for media these days was made for him. He is a master of the ethers.

Attention span being what it is now, which is virtually none, Gherkin has realized the ultimate utilization of the medium is

persistent sensationalism, constant upheaval, perpetual chaos, a blizzard of invective and insult, abrasion as communication, distaste as orientation, hate and anger expressed vituperatively as the currency of his realm, widely scattered, and broadly aimed. He was a one-man shit storm, right for the times.

And now the upper half of the West Coast was demolished by absolutely unimaginable forces, and 15 or 20 million people were counting on this president, this buffoon of a leader, to save them, to guide them back to some semblance of normalcy. Assuming that he cared. A faulty assumption, that.

Braun shook his head in disbelief that it had come to this. The single greatest natural disaster maybe in the history of the civilized world, and the United States federal government, whose first and foremost responsibility was the stewardship of its peoples' safety and well-being, was under the erratic command of a serial incompetent, the inconceivable, catastrophic, proudly loutish President Gherkin. One who cared not.

✦

Braun clicked his intercom and barked, "Where are we with FEMA? What the hell is going on?"

"We've gotten through to them several times now, Governor. They say, well, they say they're assessing the situation, sir."

"Tell them we need an immediate disaster declaration. We need federal troops to help us move triage units into place. We need helicopters and ATVs, whole fleets of them, to get people to safety. We need docs, nurses, medics, medical supplies. Hell, we need food and water. We need housing, shelter. Tell them to assess *that* and get off their ass! These people are suffering. God only knows what the hell Oregon and Washington look like. They took the brunt of it."

"Yes, sir. I explained all that to them, sir. Nobody's seen video yet. No live coverage yet. The networks are after it, but it'll be a while. All the systems, everything is down. As far as we can tell, there's no power of any kind that's operable. We're trying to contact the governors of Washington and Oregon by short wave radio. Looks like it's our best bet right now.

“The National Earthquake Center recorded a 9.5 - 9.6 quake. They’re double checking that, because, well, if that’s accurate, it’s the largest one in recorded history. FEMA knows that. They know what we know. They say, well, Deputy Undersecretary Lane when I finally reached him just now, said: “sit tight.”

“Sit tight, my ass,” Braun said, and disconnected. Ten years ago, even eight years ago, he would have gone ballistic at this bureaucratic bullshit. But he’d learned. This was not incompetence. It was orders from on high. What it meant, short-term, long-term, TBD. The politics were being calculated.

Meanwhile, he clicked his COS. “Bess, get me General Daley. Have him meet me here immediately. We’re calling out the Guard. All of them. Want them ready to deploy when we get the video in hand. Tell Daley to give the order and then get his butt up here quick. Higgins and Rafert should be back in an hour, maybe 90 minutes. Let’s get ready to start giving orders.”

“Roger that, Governor. Can you take a call? The Prime Minister of Canada is calling. Mr. Aly wants to share what he knows about B.C., see how we can work together.”

Braun muttered to himself while he waited for the call to patch through, “Top man in Canada is calling while that son of a bitch Gherkin can’t be bothered. Not even mere pretense of concern.”

“Governor, Justin Aly. A terrible crisis we have on our hands. I want to work with you to help our people. Can you share your plans to get this recovery underway?”

“I appreciate your call, Mr. Prime Minister. We are going to need all the help we can get. And I’ll gladly share our plans, even as we’re just beginning to formulate them. Most of my state is undamaged, the lower two-thirds of it. The northern part is the least populated, but it’s very badly hurt. Near total collapse of everything. But I assume your country has been hit, too?”

“Vancouver and Victoria have been pretty badly damaged. From what our disaster modeling has predicted, though, I’m guessing that Washington and Oregon took the worst of it. I’ve just looked at video our pilots shot of B.C. and it’s bad. If it’s even worse to the south of us, I expect we have a huge crisis on our hands.”

“No doubt about that. My pilot described our state from Mendocino north to the Oregon border as ‘obliterated.’ Mostly west of Interstate 5, it seems, especially along the coast where the tsunami hit. East of the interstate sounds bad but manageable. I’m waiting for the tapes now, should have them shortly. It’s going to be ugly, I’m afraid, and I’m heartbroken for the people up there.”

“We have our own disaster to address, but the people of my country want to do all we can to help *everyone* who’s suffering, as much as we are able. This is a regional calamity. It transcends our borders. Frankly, though, I must share this, Governor, the protocols are a challenge.”

“I was going to ask, sir, if you’d reached out to the White House?”

“That’s precisely what I’m sharing. My office placed a call immediately.”

“And?”

“Nothing. The call has not been returned. It may be, of course, that the President has his hands full in mobilizing your government’s response. That would be perfectly understandable.”

“Let’s hope that’s the case, Mr. Prime Minister. But I’ve had no better luck than you in getting a response. That’s obviously a matter of concern, one that grows with every passing hour.”

“But is it a surprise?”

“Unfortunately, no. In our current political climate, the unbelievable is what we’ve come to expect. Frankly, I have no idea what our federal government will do, how it will go about the relief effort, but I can’t wait for them.

“We’re going to act immediately, Mr. Prime Minister, to help the people of our state, and then do what we can to support the governors of Oregon and Washington. Most of my people, Californians, will stand with us. This isn’t about borders. It’s about need. Critical need. A catastrophe, maybe the worst one ever. And, so, sir, protocols be damned, we welcome whatever help you can give us. Let’s get started.”

Chapter Sixteen

They were a tight little group moving with determination through a city and countryside that had been obliterated. Dirk, Dam, Holly, Ailey, the kids, a big guy named Tio Fausto, who was Dirk's neighbor. They headed out from their places by mid-morning. Ate power bars for breakfast. Loaded a few more backpacks, started walking south from SW Meade to Corbett, then on down under the freeway to Macadam. Where it become Highway 43, the further south they made it, the more the people thinned out. Live and dead both.

The streets were a jumble of broken pavement, but still a path through the wreckage of the city and the metro area. It was slow going. Exhausting. Warm in the sun. Hard to breath where small fires burned, or the smell of gas filled the air.

"I'm tired of walking, Mama," one of the girls said.

"Me, too," said the other.

"We're all tired," Holly said. "But we have to keep going. We'll be there soon." She looked hopefully at Dirk for confirmation.

"We can rest a while," he said. "It's cool here in the woods. Just a few minutes," he said to the girls. "Then we push on. Okay?"

Where the trees had fallen, they could see some of the big old estates above the river had crumbled. Others looked less damaged. In two places when they were walking again large chunks of the hillside had fallen into the waterway below. Whatever houses on them gone, too.

Lake Oswego when they finally reached it seemed to have fared better. Town looked damaged but not destroyed. The commercial area was hard hit but many of the homes near the shore were standing. Pretty well built, mostly sprawling one story ranches, set on gentle slopes. The lake itself was empty. Ducks here and there picking through the mud.

After an interminable walk, all of them sunburned and leg weary, they made it to the farm below Stafford Road where the animals were pastured. Two women who lived there joined them. They had a small string of horses and a few mules, too.

"Slept in the barn last night." The taller one said. "House is pretty much unstable, but the barn is doing fine. Imagine that?"

“More flexible,” Dirk said. “These old farmhouses are really solid. Stand up to nearly anything. Until they don’t. Then they crumble. My place in town held together pretty well. But it ain’t much more than a barn itself, come to think of it.”

They laughed. The first time since the quake, it occurred to many of them. It was late afternoon, less than 24 hours since the world turned upside down. The adrenalin was wearing off. They were tired. Bone tired.

“Think it will hold up another night? We can get the animals rigged up and head out first thing tomorrow.”

“Let’s do that,” the tall women, Bella, said. She was handsome, maybe 40 or 50, had a presence about her. Her partner nodded yes, said, “We have plenty of food.” Her name was Tamrika. She had deep brown, almond shaped eyes, a beautiful smile, warm, inviting, and callused hands raised toward them. “Cook what we can before it spoils. Well still works. Water’s kind of murky but we can filter it. Firewood. Cooking pit. Grass fed steaks. Some hot dogs for the kids. We can have ourselves a feast.”

Bella looked at this rag tag bunch, dead on their feet, saw them perk up just a bit at the thought of food and drink. “Believe we have a few bottles of a very good Pinot that we can serve up, too.”

✦

Worthy waited until Gracie was sleeping. Said to Clay, “Something is wrong. I can feel it. Ellen would be back here by now. Nothing could keep her from her daughter.”

“She may not have made it. Hard to think about. Might be true.”

“No!” He calmed himself, lowered his voice, said, “No, that’s not it. I can tell. She’s alive. I can feel her. I can tell she’s alive.”

Embry shrugged, looked out the window.

“Last night, I thought I heard her calling me. Whispering. ‘David,’ she kept saying. ‘David.’ Maybe I was dreaming.”

“If she’s alive, the question is: where is she?”

“You’re sure you didn’t see her after the quake? All that night?”

“I was awake all night. Watching for you. Still might have missed her. She might have come up Lovejoy from the river. Where I couldn’t

see her. Maybe saw the building, shock was too much. She left for somewhere else. Don't know.

"There was lots of movement for the first few hours. By morning, all that moved was little packs of men. Gleaning. Helping themselves to what was at hand. Saw that cop a few times, not in uniform but packing. Carrying stuff into the building, looked like. Toward it anyhow when I lost sight of him. Don't remember any women."

Worthy sat with his hands clasped between his knees, staring at the floor. Embry watched him. "There's no way Ellen would abandon us. Shock or no shock. She's somewhere nearby. Has to be. There's a reason why we haven't seen her."

"Maybe she's still working her way back here?"

"Maybe," Worthy said. "Or maybe something got in her way. Keeping her from getting back to us. I think we need to talk to that cop. Sink. Seems like he's got the best lay of the land."

✦

Sink's head jerked when Worthy cornered him, caught him rounding the corner of the Met property early the next morning, said, "Captain Sink! A word with you, please?" But he recovered quickly. Wary, shrewd, no longer deferential or subservient. Calculating, his head tilted to the side slightly, sizing things up.

"Worthy. You surprised me. Good to see you're okay. Helluva shock, isn't it? Each of us dealing with it in our own way. What do you want?"

"My wife. Ellen. She hasn't returned. Do you know her? Oh, of course you do. Of course. Have you seen her? Did she make it back here?"

Sink smiled slightly, almost a smirk. "The building is full of bodies. She may have gotten back here before the quake. A shame and we hope not but a possibility to consider. It may be a long time before we know who's up there."

"I think she's alive. Nearby. I don't know where, why she's not here, but I need to find her."

"Of course, you have to feel that way. I understand. Hope you're right. But I can't help you. Things have changed, true that, and we change with them. Got to go. Best of luck." And he moved to go.

Worthy grabbed his arm, felt the muscles clench, let go quickly but had his attention now, for a minute longer. “Captain, sorry, I just want to say: if you know anything at all, tell me. Please. We need to move this along.”

✦

“This is certain,” Worthy said. “We don’t know much but *this* is certain: Sink is in and out of that room of his and doesn’t want any of us nearby.”

“Might make sense,” Embry said. “Smart people are holing up. Got a safe place to stay. Gathering what they need and sealing off the access to wherever it is they are. We’ve done the same.”

“Hell, Clay, you took us in. Gracie, then me. Saved us. Gave us a place to gather ourselves. Sink looks like a dog at the gate, keeping everybody out. I don’t get it. What’s he got to fear from us…a…me?”

Embry allowed himself a wry smile. He knew the look in Sink’s eyes. Seen it up close. Been hassled by him, more than once. Smelled that hint of death on his breath. Killer’s odor. Smart enough to play ball when the law’s a factor and his career’s on the line. Still, he made his feelings known loud and clear, without saying a word. “Time will come,” his look suggested. “Soon enough.”

Now it’s here. Nothing to hold him back. That big, smart, mean-spirited, cold-blooded, savvy officer of the law. Free of that very law to do as he wishes. But then, too, it works both ways. “Time *will* come,” Embry thought to himself, “And now, perhaps it’s here.”

✦

“Here’s what I know. In my heart I know it. Ellen would have made it back here by now. This is home. Crushed, destroyed, it’s still our home. The place we gather. I *know* she would have made it back here on her own. Nothing would have kept her from her daughter and me. Unless somebody stopped her.”

“Or…” Embry started to say, but Worthy cut him off.

“She’s not dead! I can *feel* her presence. She’s alive. Something’s keeping her away from us. Something or someone. We have to figure out what is going on and where she is. We need to find her.”

His whisper, spoken while his daughter slept, had grown louder. Gracie stirred, made a noise, rolled over, pulled the blanket around her shoulders.

Embry looked directly at him, slowly nodding his assent. He knew there might be truth in what Worthy suspected. The way that cop came and went was tactical. He's working an agenda that includes a lot more than just surviving. He has something going on. *Possibly* something that involves Worthy's wife. Maybe so, maybe no. Need to find out.

"What are we going to do about it?" he said. Worthy leaned toward him, began speaking very quietly.

They stood outside the Met on the 10th Avenue side, walked a long way down the block, stopped now to look at the series of window screens along a stretch of the wall about 15 feet above the sidewalk. What was left of it. Gracie said nothing. Just looked. None of them knew what to say. They walked on. Back once more around the block, then back to the railway room.

"It looks to me like ventilation from the outside to the building," Embry said. "Probably a row of utility pods. Heat and air. A matching set up on the roof somewhere. Heat up, air down."

"And the screens above it might be for windows to the rooms where Sink is living?"

"Might be. For the lobby, too. A little natural light."

Worthy took a slow breath, looked at Clay and said, "So, maybe access? Could we at least get a look?"

✦

Embry held the ladder while Worthy climbed up, boosted himself onto a ledge, and looked at the screens. He had a few tools in a belt to work with. Everything you might need was freely available. Every store already had been looted, but only lightly. Most folks were still trying to figure out where the hell they were and what to do about it. Not yet zeroed in on the basic pieces of survival. When the mass of people finally did come to their senses, these stores all would be stripped bare. But if you focused on what you needed right now to get by, it was there for the taking inside one broken building or another,

window frame wide open and welcoming, tens of thousands of them. All the shelves, counters, display cases, merchandise, piled in a heap on the floor with the rest of the trash and debris. The city's inventory to be had.

Worthy hadn't needed to worry about unscrewing the screens. The seating in the wall was fractured. The screws popped out, followed by the screen. It was about three by four feet, light but awkward to move. He put it inside the frame on the ledge, looked into the building, saw another wide shelf inside with thick steel screening on either side of it, above what appeared to be large machinery in a long row. On the other side of the shelf, about 10 feet inside, was a row of windows. Thick glass that didn't appear to open. Probably too noisy when the machines were running. Just a little natural light for this side of the first floor. Where the lobby was. Sink's apartment, too.

He eased his way through the opening, across the shelf, to the windows, looked inside, saw a dimly lit room, fireplace, mirror, some furniture, a sofa or maybe a futon in seating position, something tied to one arm, the reflection of metal or something shiny. He cupped his hands to either side of his face, tried to cut the glare on the glass from the outside light. Couldn't quite make out what it was. Piece of jewelry, maybe? Suddenly, the room was lighted, the door opened, Sink entered. Just as quickly the light was gone.

He pushed back from the window, lay stock still on the cold steel shelf, head turned away toward the street, face pressed tight to the metal. Thinking while his heart pounded about what the brief illumination showed him. Trying to focus. What did he see?

He closed his eyes, let them quiet, felt the image reforming from some place in his brain, clearing from the fog and popping into view like a photograph. Click. He saw the room, shadow of the man coming through the door, daylight running in a line from the door to the far wall, and in the middle, the sofa, arm of wood encircled with a metal bracelet, from which a short chain was suspended, and maybe another bracelet hanging from it near the floor. It looked like, what? Hmm? What? His head jerked, lifted away from the shelf. Handcuffs!

✦

“Well,” said Embry, “He *is* a cop. Not like seeing them with a civilian.”

“Yeah. Maybe it’s where he keeps his monster chained up at night. You think?”

Embry ignored the sarcasm, said, “I think the cuffs are notable. Maybe not surprising. Could be where he hangs them when he isn’t carrying them.”

“Or a place where someone’s been restrained.” Worthy looked around the room, Gracie reading old magazines covered in dust until she got hold of them. She was saying very little but seemed to be holding together. As much as he was if not more. He was very rattled by his fear for Ellen. Gracie hadn’t mentioned her mother yet. Maybe afraid to ask.

Embry, on the other hand, was exceedingly calm. Stoic, thoughtful, quiet. Worthy long since realized the guy’s presence was far from that of a bum. “Who are you?” he wondered. Wherever he came from, it wasn’t the streets. Where he lived, yes, but not who he was. Had a way of moving through the shattered scene outside, smooth, athletic, alert, bit of a limp but otherwise seeming powerful. Big juxtaposition from how he appeared to Worthy when he first saw him. Funny, too, how everyone is looking more like Embry, and he is looking more like normal.

A smart guy. With some odd blind spots. Places in the discussion where he doesn’t seem to compute. Like whom Ellen is. Doesn’t seem to remember, even though he’s seen them together, and with Gracie, plenty in the past.

He’s got a story. If he ever tells it. How he got here, where he comes from, who his people are. Or were. What is keeping them apart, him here. He’s not a drunk or a drug addict, that’s clear. Has a helluva scarred up face. Head, too. Something traumatic. Multiple wounds. Deep, serious injury.

So, who is this guy? Thinks strategically. Well spoken. Well-mannered even. What’s he doing here? Whatever it is, Worthy thought, thank god for us he’s with us.

“I want to go in,” he said to Embry. “Right now. Can you watch Gracie?”

“How you going to get in?”

“Find a way. Maybe punch out one of the windows. Maybe pull it toward me. I noticed some of them were cracked. Maybe I can get an opening.”

“I need to come with you. Your daughter will stay here if you tell her to.”

“No. I’m afraid to leave her alone. It’s getting dark. I’ll go. It might be just another look from the windows. But if I can get in, I want to see what’s there.”

“Sink is there. You can know that for sure. And he’s armed.”

“I’ll find a way in, then I’ll wait out front somewhere until I see him leave. In and out. Window to front door. Quick as can be.”

“Long odds. For what?”

“I’ve got to know. It’s been two nights. Ellen’s somewhere. Nearby it feels like to me. If I learned she was there, and I didn’t do anything. You know? I have to find out. Maybe it’s crazy.” He paused, wide-eyed. “What else can I do?”

✦

No luck with the windows. Couple of them cracked but made of some kind of high tensile plastic. Couldn’t budge them in or out. One looked down into the bathroom. Pitch dark in there but he could tell what it was. Seemed connected to another room, bedroom probably, that he couldn’t see. Saw past the last window a vent of some sort. Ventilation from the bathroom? Must be. Steam, stench, whatever, piped it right into this shaft. Thing is, it’s a three by four-foot rectangle, just like the windows. Adapt a need to a design. Something Worthy knew about.

He unscrewed the plate from the wall, quietly as he could, moved it aside. Paused for a long time, listening. Nothing? Nothing. Breathed a bit easier. Felt the tin shaft that fitted to the sleeve of the opening. Moved it just a bit. Made more noise than he intended. Waited for a long time. Listening. Nothing? Yes? Nothing. Held his hands flat against the side of the shaft on either side and pushed. Gently. Firmly. A little more noise. Moved it off the sleeve.

He could see into a dark space. Waited a long time. Eyes adjusted. It was a utility closet. Water heater. Sink. Mops. Brooms. A shelf immediately below him reaching half the length of the wall. He could

lower himself to it easily. Just move the tin shaft to one side and slide over the edge. He would be inside.

Worthy worked his way back to the ladder, thankful it was still there, climbed down to the sidewalk, folded it up, carried it a way down the block to the indentation off the street where the building trash receptacles were kept, stored it there, took several deep breaths, bent at the waist, and stood up again.

He waited in the deep shadows of the Lovejoy Bakery, helped himself to a bagel from a broken case while he waited. Stale. Tossed it aside. The waning moon rose and cast a weak light in the streets. He waited and watched. Finally, Sink appeared across the street, emerging from the shell of the lobby, looking around very carefully, hand inside the lapel of his jacket. Satisfied with what he saw, he moved across the rail lines in the intersection between them and walking briskly headed south on 11th.

Worthy was back to the ladder, to the window, up the ladder, across the metal shelf to the vent, moved it with a loud creak to one side, and lowering himself over the edge before he began to give way to doubts. What would he find? What if it was nothing? How would he get out? Can he open the front door from inside? Is the deadbolt keyed on both sides, or just the outside? Their place was knob inside, key outside. Assume this will be the same. If not, can he get back up to this opening from inside? Maybe. Maybe not.

His mind was trying to protect himself. What if all this was mistaken? From the get-go. He had no good reason to think Sink had anything to do with Ellen's absence. Really just grasping for something, anything to hold on to. The guy is acting weird. Yeah, the world is weird. He should be different? Worthy himself is acting weird. Breaking into a guy's apartment, an armed guy's apartment. A cop!

He was thinking this jumble of thoughts, sitting lightly on a shelf in a dark room in a cop's apartment, his feet on the rim of the concrete utility sink, afraid to make the next move. The thought he was avoiding froze him in place. What if Ellen *is* here? What would that mean? And, what if she *isn't* here. Where would he be then? Where would he look next? Where in the hell could she possibly be?

He eased his way onto the sink, then the floor. The door opened into a dark hallway. A long way down it to the left, it opened on to the living room and the front door, where some kind of a dim light, a candle or maybe a lantern, was burning. To the right, the hallway ended at a doorway. He opened it slowly. The laundry room, washer and dryer. Common wall with the room he just left. Closer down the hall on the left was another doorway. He moved slowly, quietly, one hand held slightly against the wall. The door was open, but the light barely reached it. It looked into a walk-in closet, lots of clothes barely visible, bathroom to the left of it and a bedroom to the right. He could make out a bureau, a chair, the very foot of a bed. What looked to be feet covered by a blanket.

✦

He paused, took a breath, actually gasped. Many disconnected thoughts rushed through his mind. He felt a bit dizzy. Wobbly. Breathe again. And again. Walk toward the bed, a wall keeping his view foreshortened. Until he could see growing more fully formed as he approached the shape of a body, a woman, his wife? Ellen! Was it really?

The room was dark and indistinct, but hope against hope, he knew it was her. “Ellen,” he said, and she turned slightly from her side, lifted her head, the covers shifted, sheet and blanket fell away from her shoulder. A look of pain and shock seemed to cover her face. “David?” she said. “Oh, god, David.”

He was nearly to the bed now, just about to reach her, to hold her. About to touch her, make that familiar contact, confirm it was her and begin to unravel this terrible moment. Walk it back step by step to what they always before had known together, reestablish a semblance of normalcy in this badly twisted time.

A bright light came over them from behind him. In that instant, he saw Ellen clearly, the trauma pasted to her face, head resting on her arm, one raised wrist handcuffed to the headboard of the bed where she lay, the part of her body that was exposed showing an unwilling sheen.

“Worthy!” said the voice from behind him. “I hoped it wouldn’t come to this. But now you’re here.”

It was Sink, of course, shining a powerful flashlight that nearly blinded him when he turned to look. Shielding his eyes, he saw the cruel look on the man's face. Saw, too, a very large gun held in his opposite hand.

"I am amazed," Sink said, "at how quickly everything suddenly is seeking resolution. The entire world we know is come undone. I am here with your wife, and you are here in my apartment. Uninvited. Breaking and entering, you know?

"In the best of times, this would be a, how shall we say it? This would be an *awkward* situation. Each of us might be embarrassed. Each in our own way. Convention may in fact be the fulcrum on which all our endeavors are balanced. So, we might say, 'Dear god, this man has broken into my apartment!' And he might say, 'I've come to rescue my wife.' And even though the law quite clearly gives me the right to defend my property and shoot you dead, some might say a prior kidnapping is a mitigating circumstance."

Worthy finally found a place where his hands shielded his face enough to see Sink clearly. There was a look of concentration about him, a maniacal gleam, and a posture of complete control.

"But this is not the best of times, Worthy. Not for the common order. This is not a time where all your privilege and your rank can serve you. It's not a time where mitigating circumstances mean a damn. This world has returned to the primordial, where every encounter is a matter of life and death. I have the upper hand in this encounter. This," he said, lifting the gun and sighting down the long barrel at Worthy's face, "this is the only circumstance that matters right now."

Ellen was moaning softly, muttering, "David. No, David. No, please." She was behind him now as he faced Sink, his shadow looming over her as Sink's gun loomed over him. "Why are you doing this, Sink? This is insane."

Sink allowed himself a small smile, almost a chuckle was the sound he made. "Insane?" he said, shaking his head slightly from side to side. "Insane? Perhaps it is. Perhaps it is crazy that all of this is happening. But it isn't as though we never imagined it, is it? Tell me true.

“Did you ever imagine a threat to your well-being? A threat to you and this lovely wife of yours? Was it a fear you ever entertained? When you were living up there in the highest reaches of this building? When you laid awake at night, worried about your business, the social ills, the world itself? Did you sometimes worry that the boogie man might come?”

Sink came a few steps nearer. He shined the flashlight from a different angle, shined it for a moment at Ellen, then back at Worthy. “Well,” he said, “now I’m here.”

“You bastard! What have you done to my wife? You’ll pay for this.”

“Pay? I already have. I paid it forward, don’t you see? I’ve been ready for this for a long time.”

He was smiling now, a look of pleasure coming over his face. “What have I done to the beautiful Ellen? I’ve protected her. Kept her here where she is safe. Far more than you could do for her, I can assure you. This alone,” he said, waving the pistol, “makes me better able to take care of her. This is *not* your world anymore, Worthy. But it works just fine for me.”

His look became less pleasurable, more cruel. “But, yes, I’ve done more for her than that. Much more. You guessed? I’ve had her, Worthy! Several times already, and I’ll have her much more in days to come. She’s mine now, don’t you see? To keep. A swan in my pond. That exquisite innocence ready to undo.”

He shone the light on him, on her. Back and forth for a moment. A sound something like clearing his throat. A humming, a murmur, then a more guttural noise. He stepped back, leaned against the wall where the hallway ended, and the bedroom began. “The only question is what to do with you.”

Madness is disarming. Worthy stared at Sink, the light alternately blinding him and leaving him in the dark. The man is a psychopath. Maybe always has been. Worthy didn’t know. But certainly, he’s mad now. Completely unhinged. How does one deal with him? Overcome him? Or end up dead.

“Forgive me if I seem smug. I really didn’t want it to be like this. Your wife in my bed, still wet from the last orgasm. From *my* last orgasm. Terrible thing for a man to see. Believe it or not, I’d rather

that it happened privately. Rather that you never knew. I never waved it in your face. But you forced my hand here."

Ellen was quietly moaning, making an animal sound, part terror, part fear of surrender, part cellular memory of the safety and security she always had felt in David's presence being siphoned from her soul. The pain of it. The disgust. The shame.

"Sink, let's make a deal" Worthy said desperately, struggling for calm. Simply to breathe. "We can set this straight. We can! Ellen. Her family needs her. Her daughter needs her. I need her. You've had your fun. It's over. Let it go and we can go our separate ways. It's not too late."

He looked through the blinding beam of light into the eyes of the man with the gun. The kidnapper. Rapist. Was he a murderer, too?

The man's face looked skeptical, then doubtful, finally relaxed, and then fully amused. "A deal? A *deal!* Oh, Worthy, my man. The deal has been made. It's done. I don't expect you to understand. Ellen didn't either when I first took her in. I wasn't some sort of animal. We talked for quite a while. I explained myself. The new situation. Some of what used to be and what it has become.

"The deal is this. The truth. The rather grim reality. Grim for you, that is. You broke into my home. I thought I heard you. Heard something move that shouldn't. Not a simple thing, hearing that. This building is still settling. Sounds it sometimes makes of late you can't imagine.

"I was going to say 'unearthly,' but when I think about it it's precisely the opposite. The sound of a one-hundred-foot I-beam bending, the deep metallic groan it makes is in fact very earthly. The place being bent to its will. The whole building is listing into the intersection out front. It may have more to go. I hope not. If so, the lady and I may have to leave.

"What I heard though was something different. I nearly missed it because of the noise I was making. Ellen and I were making, that is. Oh, Worthy, I am *so* sorry to taunt you with this. But you came here desperate to be some sort of hero to your wife. So now you have to hear it all. I heard you approaching. There I was, fucking your wife, and you intruded.

“It was just the slightest interruption. Not enough to take away the passion, not enough to keep me from coming, to keep *us* from coming, eh, Ellen?” He shined the light on her and said, “Ah, my dear, I think you did. This time.”

Worthy leaned toward him, Sink raised the gun, returned the light in his face. “Don’t do it, Worthy. I am going to kill you. That’s the truth. The only way this can end. I didn’t want you to have to see your wife in my bed. But now you have. And I wouldn’t want her to have to see me shoot you dead. If we do it here, your brains will be splattered all over her beautiful body, and I’ll have to remake the bed. Let’s spare her that horror, shall we?

“Here’s the way it is. I heard you when you moved that vent, then I sensed that you left. Ah! You were waiting for me to leave, right? So you could ride to the rescue. I left, circled the block, saw you down 10th climbing a ladder, the vent already open. Beat you back here and waited until you came to me. And here you are. Now you know everything there is to know.

“Except this. I’ve never killed a man in cold blood. All my years on the force and I’ve only fired my weapon once. In self-defense. Me and the boys, well, of course, we roughed up plenty of the scum we run across. Beat the hell out of ‘em, truth be told. All the dregs of society. People of color? Them especially. So, when I had to use my gun, I shot the bastard dead. Colored guy reached for a knife. Got him right between the eyes. That’s back when things were governed by the rule of law. Justifiable homicide. Now things aren’t lawful anymore.”

“I don’t relish the idea of killing you. I really don’t. But I can. And I don’t know what other choice I have. Ellen is mine. We’ll make a life together in this new world. I know you would never leave us in peace as long as you’re alive.

“So, I have to do something distasteful. It will be so easy, though. That part is comforting. Just dump your body in the street and who will ever know the difference? Just another corpse. The only issue I can see is how to deal with the mess. So, I think the shower is where we need to place you. Easier to clean up there. And Ellen will never need to see it. Can we do that for her? Hmm?”

David looked at Ellen. She was trembling violently. “David,” she said in a voice that seemed someone else’s. She said his name again

and made a sound deep and pained. He looked at Sink, who was backing away slowly, signaling with the gun. “This way. Let’s go.”

Worthy’s mind was racing, his pulse pounding in his head, what can he do? Maybe slam the bathroom door before Sink can enter. The cannon he’s carrying would carve up the room through the door. Maybe try to overpower him in that close space. Maybe? Maybe anything but walk meekly to the shower and be shot to death. Anything but that.

But he could think of nothing better than the choice between being gunned down in front of Ellen, the grotesque picture Sink described, or dying out of her sight. He walked slowly back down the passageway, past the door where Sink let him pass, and just before the bathroom door he turned slowly, said, “Please.”

Sink raised the gun, indicating he should move deeper into the bathroom, followed him in, said, “This is the end, Worthy. There’s no other way. We’re done.” He lifted the gun, holding it steady, aimed at Worthy’s head. He was about to say something more when his head jerked back, and blood gushed from his throat where Embry cut it ear to ear with one silent, savage slash of a very large knife. Sink collapsed in a heap at his feet.

✦

Worthy stood with his mouth hanging open, trying to stop shaking, before coming to his senses. Embry already had Sink’s gun in hand, the flashlight tucked in his belt, was searching his pockets. He stood, raised an arm to Worthy, keys rattling for his attention.

Worthy rushed into the bedroom to Ellen, brushed back her hair and kissed her cheek. “I’m all right. We’re all right. It’s over now. It’s over.” He found the right key, unlocked the handcuffs, and helped her to her feet. She was naked. He wrapped the blanket around her, helped her sit. She was trembling, less so than before, more exhausted, looking at him, disbelief on her face, the entirety of this experience yet to fully dawn on her. “I’ll get your clothes,” he told her.

Embry was waiting by the door to the closet. “When she’s ready, bring the bedclothes with you, too.”

“The bedclothes?”

“DNA. Fingerprints. We want to leave as little as possible. If this world ever rights itself, they may look into his disappearance. His pals don’t take it lightly when one of the boys in blue gets killed. Even a scumbag like this one. Hopefully, they’ll never find him. If they do, they’ll be looking for who did it. Lots of candidates who might have, I’d bet. Better if we’re not found to be among them.

“Step around the blood, too. Use this towel to wipe down that room, anywhere she might have touched. Front room, too, where you saw those other handcuffs. Take her out the front door, wipe it, and lock it behind you.

“I’m going out the way we came. Try to put things back the way they were. Wipe it down. Get the screen replaced. Lose that ladder. We’ll dump the keys somewhere far away from here. All the bedclothes somewhere else. Probably won’t matter, one way or the other.

“This may become a mausoleum, sealed up tight if the building finally falls. Or maybe they’ll just pull it down someday without looking for all the bodies. It may not make any difference. But we should try.”

Chapter Seventeen

They ate well, slept well, rose early, and ate well again. Bella and Rika got their string ready, the mules loaded up, the horse saddled. Dirk, Holly, Fausto did the same with Dirk’s animals. It took a little longer to get them settled down. Dirk was familiar but not a regular part of their routine. Calming them took some time. Once they were comfortable, it went quickly. They were ready to move out.

Ailey and Dam made sandwiches while the kids ran around the farmyard, reenergized and rambunctious. Ailey called them. “Time to go.” She and he carried large sacks of food to the riders, packed them in the saddle bags. They each took one of the kids, lifted them into the saddle, and mounted behind them.

The sun was low in the east, the morning clear and still cool, the contrast of bright color and shadow made everything in view profound.

“I wish we could close it up better,” Rika said. She looked for a long moment at the broken house and the shadow it cast into the grove of trees to the west before they headed out. “It looks so vulnerable.”

“We’ve done what we could,” Bella said to her. “It’ll still be here when we come back.”

“Yes,” Rika said and reined the horse away from the scene. “Looking like what, I wonder.”

✦

They were making very good time, but they had a long way to go. After the long walk through the mayhem yesterday, the ride was a pleasure for all of them, even Dam and the kids, who weren’t used to horses. It was easy going through beautiful country, not too badly damaged if not anywhere near undisturbed. First stop was the river just south of the farm. Then a long, rural stretch of farmland, ranches, a few small towns, and wilderness, where they were headed. They got to the river quickly.

Dirk said there were two ways across, already arranged in principle if not actuality. His friend, Jonah, would be there as always plying his ferry trade if all was well; or, if not, the ferry would be docked on their side of the river, gassed up, ready for them to cross. He had the combination to the starter. They would have to steer it through the channel to the other side.

Jonah was nowhere to be seen when they got there but the ferry was docked and waiting. It wasn’t a big boat, large enough to transport maybe a couple of trucks and a dozen people. Getting all the animals aboard, tied in place, and kept there by the people who would calm them, would be a feat. Piloting all of them across to the dock on the other side would be another. Dirk was confident they could do it.

They dismounted, gathered in a group while he explained the plan, who needed to do what, and assured them it was all well calculated long ago. They were gaining confidence and ready to get it done when four men walked out of the woods nearby.

“Hey, hello there! You planning to cross?” said the one who came closest. The others spread out a little each to the side. The first guy had a pistol strapped to his hip; another had an axe. The other two

had chains wrapped around their right hands, a three-foot length dangling below.

“Why’s that?” Dirk said, stepping forward. “You want to join us?”

“Not us,” said the first guy. “We’re staying right here.” “Then we’ll go on ahead. Unless you have a problem with that?”

“No problem. No. But first we might want to take a look at what you’re

taking with you. Appears like some of it might be useful to us.”

He started to step forward as though he didn’t expect any resistance, pretty cocky and self-assured, when Fausto came from somewhere behind Dirk with a very lethal looking rifle, an AK-47 maybe, one of those semi-automatic guns that sprays bullets in bunches very rapidly. “Don’t!” was all he said and had them lower their weapons.

He backed them down to the river away from the boat. When they got there, he said, “Let’s see how far you can throw them.” They looked at him, not sure what he meant. “That pistol, them axes, chains, want to see them out there a ways in the river.” When they hesitated, looked at each other, he raised the rifle, aimed it right between the leader’s eyes. “Now,” he said, and they did.

“Pretty good. All right, not great but good enough. Woulda thought you could throw ‘em further than that. But it’s okay. We’re good. Now sit yourselves down and we’ll just wait here until everything is loaded up. Maybe then we can see how well you swim. Or you can just walk away and find yourselves some new tools. Okay?”

✦

Compared to that episode, the rest of the crossing seemed like a breeze. Loading the animals, getting them steadied up, keeping them calm and assured was a challenge. Getting the boat fired up and across the river, hitting a little high above the alcove on the other side where the dock was and drifting to it at low throttle, then reversing the engine at the last moment exactly as Joshua had carefully described to Dirk on more than one occasion seemed a little bit like a sure thing until it came time to do it; and when they nailed it, it came about a little more like a miracle. But they got it done.

After that, the ride was mostly a pleasure. The pace was set by the mules once the party all settled into a rhythm. The horses carried them more or less comfortably, but it only seemed right that the animals who carried most of the weight should decide what the pace of the passage would be. By noon, they were well south of the suburban clusters and into farmland, then ranch land, and eventually the fringe of the wilderness. The damage here was noticeably less than in town, but still bad.

The last town of any size was Molalla, about 10,000 people near the river, the eastern edge of the Willamette Valley, and close by the Confederated Tribes reservation to the east. They rode right through the center of town. People were about, most all of them focused on a particular bit of repair. The buildings and homes looked pretty good for the most part, at least compared to what they'd left behind. There was damage, some pretty severe, some not so much. The roads were broken up, power was out, trees and light poles fallen in the streets, but most of it looked manageable. The people of Molalla were set about managing.

Dirk pulled up at a feed store just off Main, the windows broken, a crack in the front wall. Bentley Feed, the sign said. It was hanging crooked, one upper corner pulled away from the wall. Next door was a sushi takeout place. Looked to be locked up tight for now. "Nothing fishy there," Holly said to herself. Humor.

A stocky man with a handkerchief wrapped around his neck and a sweat stained cowboy hat was sweeping debris into a large dustpan, the broken glass glittering in among the dust, the chips of plaster, pieces of shingle.

"Primus" he said, looking up at the rider and briefly at the rest of the group. "Glad to see you made it. Hear it's pretty bad down in town."

"It is. Awful. Be glad you're here and not there."

"Always have been. Especially now, I guess. We had some damage, you can see. No power. No phones. No water or sewer here in town, although some folks have wells they're sharing. Roads are pretty busted up. Lotta work ahead of us." He looked off in the distance, sighed deeply, straitened his shoulders, looked back at Dirk. "Nothing

we can’t handle, but it’s still a shock. A helluva shaking. More than a few people banged up, too. Two or three dead is what I’m hearing.”

“There will be a lot of burials ahead of us. Portland had a lot of death. Lot of destruction. Time for all of us to retrench and see what’s what. There’s never been anything like this before.”

The guy shook his head, walked away to the dumpster to empty the dust bin, took a deep breath, came back directly, looked at Dirk.

“We’ve come all this way today and have a hard slog ahead. Wondering if we could use your barn tonight? We’d be gone first thing tomorrow.”

“That’d be fine. Make yourselves at home. I’d offer to put you up at the house but it ain’t that big.”

“Barn would be just fine. We’d be grateful. We need to purchase some feed for the animals, too. Much as we can carry. I’ve got a good amount of hay at the place but need to get this outfit fed tonight.”

“No need to carry it. Everything you might need is in the barn or the sheds at home. Plenty of good hay there and some oats and molasses, too, if you want to puff ‘em up for the trip. Well’s working fine and the stock tanks should be full. Get ‘em fed and watered. Help yourself to what you need, and you can pay me before you head out. Or a marker is fine if you don’t have cash.”

“We have cash, thank you. If it’s okay, we can settle up now.”

“What about food? You got enough to eat?”

“We do, but we’d like to stock up a little. The Safeway open?”

“Don’t know, but the Real Deal is. Know that for certain. Was visiting with Eric just this morning. Said he’ll be camped out there ‘til they get the windows boarded up and the place is secured. I’m sure he’d appreciate the business. ‘Specially if you have cash.”

Dirk dismounted, moved around the corner of the store with Bentley, said, “12 animals, I figure maybe 8 bales will do it. Plus, some oats and syrup. What do I owe you?”

“Say $75 should cover it. That okay?”

“Let’s make it an even $100 in case they eat more. I want you to know how much I appreciate all the courtesy you’ve showed me these past few years.”

“Hell, Dirk. We’re glad to have you around here. That ranch of yours might a gone south when the Walkers had to sell. Sure wore

them out by the time they were done with it. Not many folks up to running a place like that these days. Least ways not out here. Too far afield for most."

"Perfect place for a loner like me. Just doing my best to keep it up. Now it looks like it's gonna be the place to hole up until we get this mess sorted out."

"Yeah, you're gonna be sitting pretty. From the looks of the party you're traveling with, though, it don't look like you'll be alone."

✦

The next morning early, they headed due East from Bentley's place, well provisioned, the animals fed, rested, and loaded up for the last two legs to his place just this side of Ripplebrook. That's how he described it the few times he mentioned it. "Up by Ripplebrook." Or maybe "Out past Molalla." Nothing more specific. And he rarely mentioned it at all. So really none of the rest of them knew exactly where they were going. Some of them didn't know anything at all.

The road was broken up in places but pretty easy passage on horseback. Dirk wondered if a truck could make it by going overland in places. He had a couple of 4X4s, one with oversized tires.

They were a curious group in unprecedented circumstances. Had they ever imagined they would find themselves becoming something of an embryotic family? Not likely. Just connected to each other in a variety of circumstantial ways. Nothing to suggest a time would come when they would band together, depend on each other, be collectively each individual's best chance for survival.

Although they didn't speak much, just followed Dirk's lead, the group already had segmented somewhat into pairs or three who rode together, Bella, and Holly with Dirk leading, others paired up, Dam and Ailey with the kids, Rika and Fausto, watching out for each other, occasionally saying something. Another of them occasionally answering. "Yeah, me too." "Not so much." "Careful there." "Butt's sore but not so bad." "I've got it." "We'll get there." "We will."

Lots of time to think on this ride. Each of them sooner or later beginning to remember what they'd been through the past few days, some of what they'd seen with soft eyes starting to become vivid. The devastation. Discontinuation. Dissolution. Thinking too about all

they'd left behind. Curious but afraid to think too much about what was to become.

What were the two children thinking? Maybe the rest were afraid to ask, at least not yet. What would they find out? Maybe the girls were terrified. Or maybe they were more composed, better adapted already than the adults, less adamant about what was expected. Less conflicted about gain and loss. No expectations.

Ailey and Dam rode with them still, doubled up on comfortable mounts and often riding side by side. If not, then usually front and back of each other, single file and watching for each other. Watching out for the kids. Holly joined them regularly to ask about each of them, check on the girls, hear their excitement about this or that they just had seen, or quiet complaints about being tired and hungry. Mostly, she rode up front with Dirk. When she asked him, he agreed they should stop for a while, rest, and eat.

They long since had passed south of Cedardale and Colton, moving steadily along county roads through farmland at the eastern edge of the bountiful Willamette Valley. The mountains were directly ahead. As the riders approached, they rose above them, changing shapes and colors as the sun arced from high in the sky eventually to a point lower in the west.

Dirk had the combination for the lock on the gate of the very last field they passed through to a large barn and cluster of sheds at the foot of the mountains, where he advised they would spend the night. "It's a short ride tomorrow, but a tough one, so we need to rest up. There's plenty of room in the barn for us and it's pretty comfortable. Not the first time I've spent the night here. Let's get the animals fed and watered, some food set up for us. Then we can get some sleep."

All of them were bone tired, their butts sore and their legs aching from the ride. They smiled at each other, wan and wistful, as though by stopping, looking around, settling in for another night, a routine already becoming familiar, each of them at that moment became aware of their frailty, the loss they had suffered, the uncertainty of what was ahead.

Loading and unloading the mules and brushing down the horses after the saddles and bridals were removed, hobbles attached, was the toughest part of the work. Fausto and Bella took it as their chore

and did it well. The others did whatever needed doing, getting the food prepared, the bedding arranged, the seating for dinner, all of it laid out on bales of hay.

The two kids seemed to be the most resilient, padding around the barn, climbing the ladder to the loft, poking in dark corners, exploring the dimensions of tonight's abode. The adults were bucking up, of course, each of them outwardly enthusiastic about plunging into whatever tasks needed doing, being exceedingly polite and courteous, making the best of it all.

But there was a mood emerging. It was marked by the realization dawning on them that this wasn't a trip they were on, not some camp out in the hills, an adventure to talk about the next time they gathered for drinks with friends. This was their life. Their new, uncertain, unimaginable life that was unfolding a day at a time in this newly defined world.

"If I have to be the life of the party," Dirk said, "we know we've been dealt a rough hand." He looked at each of them, one by one, as they sat for dinner. "Maybe this is a good time to talk about where we're going. This place of mine you all seem to have heard about. Many a tall tale, right? I'll give you a virtual tour and you can ask me anything you want to know."

His lean face, the bags under his eyes, the light cast by the lanterns made him look more morose than ever. But he was smiling. "After you hear what you're in for, if it doesn't sound like something you're willing to tackle, this would be a good place to turn back. The city's still there, what's left of it anyhow, and if that seems like an easier place to make your way, now's your chance to leave."

He shrugged, took a bite of his sandwich, tussled the hair of one of the kids who was sitting next to him, looked at the others one at a time, said, "Once we get up there, I hope we can agree it's a place that's kept for us alone. Not a location we want to share. Lots of people will be looking for resources like what we have. We want to be thoughtful about how we make alliances. We can build something special from there. It won't be easy, but it's a pretty damn good place to be – sorry, kids.

"So, this is the time to hear me out, ask your questions, head back home tomorrow morning if that turns out to be your choice. Once I

show you where it’s at, what it’s like, how it can be, we need to keep it to ourselves for now. Agreed?”

✦

There were lots of questions. Some he couldn’t answer, the ones that asked for prognostication or spiritual guidance. Those he could answer, he spoke to plainly, and they could tell he was sincere in what he told them.

“I bought this ranch about 10 years ago. Folks who owned it, the Walkers, had to sell. They were too old to run it anymore, and the kids, I think two of them, were living in the city somewhere, maybe L.A. or San Diego. Phoenix? I don’t know. Anyhow, they didn’t want anything to do with ranching. So, they sold it to me for a very fair price, probably better than I deserved. But maybe they thought it was better than they had hopes for. Whatever. It worked out for all of us.

“Three sections of land. Gorgeous land. Timber, elk meadows, streams, ponds, hot springs, a couple of freshwater springs right near the house, and really good wells. The ranch house, bunk house, cabins, a half dozen big barns in different parts of the spread, plus maybe 30 or 40 outbuildings of various types and uses here and there, and a few large hay meadows. Plus, a farm. This one right here. It’s all pretty fine.

“Every sort of creature that is native to the Oregon Cascades either lives up there or comes by regularly to visit. Except people. They are scarce and that’s one reason that I liked it. These days, especially, that’s the way we want to keep it for a while.

“Once we get our bearings, decide what we want to do, face up to what we *can* do, how we want to make things be, then we can begin to make some good connections happen.

“There are two couples and their families, extended families it seems like, that run the place for me. They are Molalla and this all used to be their land. Up there, down here, all Molalla. Named Yelkis. Descendants of the last chiefs. They were big traders, businesspeople, wheeler dealers. Ranged all the way down to the Umpqua River, somewhere down there, along these mountains. Big piece of the Eastern Willamette farmlands, too. They were a force.

“Now that time’s passed away. But I’ve been fortunate these folks want to run the ranch, keep it healthy, make it whole, share it with us. I own it, but they pretty much make the rules. The boundaries are listed on the deed, but the parameters of the place, the way it’s meant to work, the spirit keeper that they are, is purely theirs. And they’re our connection to the Grand Ronde Res, our eastern flank. Really good people. Very proud of the place. You’ll like them.”

✦

The questions came from all of them. Basic stuff like food and shelter, sleeping quarters. “It has showers?” Ailey said, when she asked about cleaning up. “Solar powered, big tanks, you can stand in the spray for 10 or 15 minutes and it’s still warm,” he told her, obviously proud of what he has built. “Same system drives the power to the lights and heat. It’s really pretty nice.”

He went on. “Yeah, natural salt licks. Several dozen cow and calf pairs, and herds of deer and elk that were damn near domesticated. We take a few each year for meat. Chickens, yes. Ducks, yes. Goats, yes. Even a few llamas to keep the coyotes at bay. A dozen head of horses, a few more mules, and a litter of pigs. A few of them got loose. Now they’re running wild. The rest stayed in the pen. Got to keep the garden gates closed or a couple of those renegade sows will eat all the vegetables in a heartbeat. It’s all raised beds, but they’ll stand up on their hind legs like patrons at the bar, gobbling up everything they can reach.

“Yeah,” he said, “there’s some big hay fields we irrigate, and a dozen meadows tall with grass and flowers. Mostly it’s wild, but there’s enough we manage to keep us fed and plenty to barter with others. There’s a couple of modest sized lakes, rain and snow fed, and ponds everywhere up there. And there’s a series of pools fed by a hot spring that will take all your cares and melt them away. More than one of ‘em, in fact. It’s pretty nice, all in all.”

He was definitely proud of the place, maybe a little buzzed to finally get to talk about it. His audience seemed good with the answers.

✦

After a longer than expected session, at which everyone had their say, asked for an image they could visualize, get a grip on, make possible, all of them said their goodnights and one by one they shuffled off to sleep. Ailey and Dam bedded down next to each other. The kids were sleeping with Holly. “You ready for all this?” she asked him.

Dam was thoughtful, many things he could have said. “Truth. I always felt like a man in the wilderness, black man in high tech. Felt alone a lot of the time. Never imagined I’d actually be living in the forest on some mountain. Not in my wildest dreams.” They were quiet for a minute, each of them lost in thought. She reached out finally and touched his arm. “At least you won’t be alone.”

She rolled away from him onto her side. Could tell he was smiling. So was she. They slept well, rose to coffee, eggs, and bacon. The mules were loaded up, lighter this time, the horses saddled, made ready to head out. Dirk closed up the barn, locked it, turned to them. “We all going up the hill?” he asked them.

And then they were in the mountains. Foothills, really. Long, steep ridges and wide, glaciated valleys. It was heavily forested with big conifers, fir and hemlock mostly with red cedar among them, cut through everywhere with creeks, streams, here and there a waterfall, a spring, even one of the hot springs feeding a series of pools. Steam rose from them, even though the air was warm. “This is ancient volcanic earth,” he told them. “The Old Cascades. More than 30 million years old, I’m told. About ten times older than Sisters and those other peaks up ahead on the high ridge.”

The footfall of the animals seemed not to greatly disturb the creatures living there. They quieted for a moment, sized them up, went back to chirping, chattering, singing, whatever it was they do. Birds, chipmunks, squirrels, otters, beaver, other water creatures went about their business, getting along up here.

Eventually, after a steep climb, the riders stopped in a grove of trees along a creek at the edge of a long, narrow, undulating meadow carpeted with wildflowers. They dismounted their horses comically, taking the first few steps when they reached the ground with a spasmodic gait before they gained their equilibrium. Even the children when they were lifted from the saddle and set on the ground

wobbled quite a bit at first when they walked. Soon everyone had paced long enough, groaned long and loud enough, to work out the kinks and hunger overtook them. Three days of riding was catching up with them.

Dirk, Holly, Bella, and Rika broke out the food from a pack on the back of one of the mules. Fausto led the string to the creek and watered them. Ailey, Dam, the girls, each of the others helped themselves to generous portions of the provisions they brought with them all the way from Stafford Road and the last of what they'd purchased in Molalla. It was a bit of a feast.

"We have a ways to go," Dirk said. "But we're close. If we get after it, I'm pretty sure we can get to the place before dark. I'd like to get us settled in before the nightfall. If not, though, we can light the place up pretty well."

"No power, remember?" Holly said to him.

"Oh," he said with a smile, looking at her and then with purpose at each of the rest of them, "we have lights. Heat, too. Plenty of power. We make our own. The Walkers knew what they were doing. Had 120 years to do it. They did it well. I've made a lot of improvements to the infrastructure, myself. Even a marketing director might be impressed." He smiled again, and she realized he'd done more of that the last few days than in all the years before that she knew him. "Easier to get around in the daylight," he said, "but either way, we'll be good."

✦

And they were. They made their way across the meadow, up through the trees, winding along paths that were obvious and others that were more obscure, mere game trails that climbed upward into impossibly beautiful land. The sky was clear, blue, a few puffy clouds drifting overhead, the forest less dense than it appeared as they approached. Most of the trees were large, old growth, with few small ones in clumps here and there. The shrubs and brush grew in clusters, too, with wide swatches of grassy turf between them.

"The Yelkis manicure it Indian style," he told Holly. "Burn it every Autumn so the small stuff, all the underbrush, the dead fall gets cleared out. Big trees aren't harmed at all. Germinates a lot of new

growth the next Spring and keeps the forest healthy. If we did all the forests this way, we'd see a lot less of those big fires. 100 years of fire suppression created a lot of fuel. In 2020 on the West Coast alone, more than 5 million acres burned. Air was the worst in the entire world for weeks. In the forests, they're so hot they burn crown to crown, from the top of the trees down. Sucks the oxygen out of the air."

"Didn't all that area down around Molalla burn pretty bad a couple of years ago?" she asked.

"Yep. Same year. Burned the fields pretty badly. Homes and businesses were lost, and it could have been a lot worse. They're just beginning to recover, and now this. The crops, though, were better the following year. All that carbon in the soil was good fertilizer. Helluva crop of mushrooms on the hillside, too.

"The forest we went through this morning just above the farm burned a little but not bad. We graze the cattle there on a leasehold, which keeps the underbrush beaten down some and most of the grass clipped. Not the best way to thin the forest, but every bit helps. If a fire makes it up here, the work the guys have done on the ranch will be a pretty good fire break. You never know for sure, but I think we have a good chance to come out unharmed. Hope we don't put it to the test, though."

They came around the foot of a mountain and into a swath of land that dropped in broad shelves toward a valley below. "Fish Creek down there," Dirk said. "One border of the ranch. That peak behind us is Wanderers, near 5,000 feet at the summit. We're in the twos and threes down here. South-southeast facing. Where our power comes from."

"Mama are we there yet?" one of the girls yelled from behind her. "I have to pee!" Everybody laughed, more relief than humor, but like the child in need, sensing that accommodations were near and dear.

Chapter Eighteen

After short-wave radio communication was finally established between the three governors, and following the thorough debriefing

they were provided, it was clear to them at least near term that the USG had no intention of doing more than it was currently doing, which so far is next to nothing. FEMA was still “assessing the situation.” Congress was fiercely debating the shape and scale of emergency funding. The White House was assuring the rest of the nation that everything possible was being done. First order of business was to make certain no fraud or corruption took place with a recovery effort of this scale. The President “wants to be sure the money gets to the people who really need it.”

The governors had between them some 15 or 20 million constituents, many of whom were essentially homeless. There were uncounted dead and injured, numbering no doubt in the tens or hundreds of thousands. They were buried in landslides, killed in their homes, stores and offices, drowned at sea. They were rotting where they lay. Survivors suffered injuries from minor to profound. Everyone was weak, dazed, traumatized. Nobody official was helping. Just the homeless, the injured, helping each other to get through another day.

All the normal systems that tied a society together were broken. There was no power, heat or light, no water or sewer, no communications, no roads or bridges, no airports that could land a plane or send one winging, not many stores left standing that could function, no banks to process the flow of money and nowhere to spend it anyhow.

Healthcare was tragically unavailable, the hospitals badly damaged, doctors, nurses, first responders, all saddled with their personal crises to deal with, as well as their professional emergency. There were a few triage centers, field hospitals here and there, a few more all the time, many of them Canadian. That nation already was on the ground with emergency response in Vancouver and the near parts of British Columbia, where the damage in their own country was great. Incredibly, they were already moving responders into the States, first in Washington and moving south, bringing shelter, medical supplies, triage centers and other basic services. They came in successive waves of large helicopters, uninvited, unannounced, but wholly welcomed, taking the initiative to meet overwhelming need that otherwise was going unmet.

The California National Guard had mobilized immediately and was already moving north into Oregon, bringing some semblance of relief, doing what it could to help the injured. The national guard units of Oregon and Washington so far had been unable to assemble. There was no way at present to communicate with the troops and nowhere to gather. Some of their equipment was destroyed and much of the rest was inaccessible. There was little fuel to power them and few pilots if they could reach them to fly the helicopters, which were the only vehicles that could move to where their help was needed. The federal government so far was nowhere to be found.

This was not damage that would begin to get repaired in days or weeks or months. West of I-5, the destruction was nearly absolute. The eastern two-thirds of those states were hurt less severely. Recovery there would resemble what we saw in Katrina and Sandy. It was awesome but comprehensible. The western side of their states was a disaster of unprecedented scale.

They, these three, two men and a woman, elected leaders of their states and whatever resources they could muster, were finding they were on their own to begin the mind-boggling process of getting them fixed. Only Braun had basic resources, including functioning communication systems, to work with.

Most of his citizens were unaffected, their lives unchanged. The damage north of Mendocino, the least populated area, was staggering, but the rest of the state was untouched. The other two governors were barely better situated than the mass of citizens they sought to serve. Western Oregon and Washington, where the state capitols lay in ruins, were decimated.

“Let’s be clear,” said Governor Sally. “The President has seized on this moment to attack us again. Gherkin has declared war on the Dems. That’s exactly what’s happening here. He turned the Justice Department against us over the Sanctuary Cities. He’s prosecuting voter fraud as an excuse to suppress minority activism. He’s touted this goddamn stupid wall as a means of riling up minorities. And he’s labeled us the marijuana states, the drug-addled folks out West. All the flames he fanned to get his sorry self reelected. Four years ago, it was the virus, made us grovel for masks, ventilators, the basics of emergency healthcare provisions. And the fires. Called them the

result of our mismanaged states. Now, he's got this tragedy on his hands, this vast humanitarian crisis, and to him it's another opportunity to lay waste to us."

Chapter Nineteen

Gracie leaped up from the back of the room where she was reading and ran to her mother. "I wondered where you've been. It took you a long time to get here." She started to say more, taken aback by her mother's appearance, but hugged her instead. "I really missed you. Daddy and Mr. Clay took good care of me. But we really missed you."

Ellen had tried to compose herself, prepare to rejoin her daughter, but it dissolved the moment they embraced. She began to cry, deep sobs, kneeling in the dust in this strange place, gasping for air, shuddering, and crying more.

"Gracie, Gracie," she said over and over, and held her fiercely. It was a little scary, but Gracie held on, looking at her father with wide eyes from over Ellen's shoulder. He let her work through it, and Ellen pulled herself together.

"We're a mess, aren't we," she said to her daughter, smiling a bit and holding her at arm's length. "We both could use a bath, some clean clothes."

Gracie nodded yes, said before she could stop herself, "You smell funny." She was sorry she did, and the tears came again, quieter this time, but still scary.

It was a while before Embry returned. He carried a large duffle bag. In it was food, three backpacks, and a couple of changes of clothes for each of them. "I had to guess the sizes," he said to Ellen and Gracie as he handed them pants, shirts, hiking shoes and socks. "Grabbed a couple of belts, too, just in case they're a little large."

"This is Clayton Embry," Worthy said. "That homeless guy I tried to run off. Good thing I failed. He's saved our butts more than once already."

"Mr. Clay is really nice," Gracie added. "He took care of me before Daddy got here. He told me some things I wanted to know.

About ‘homeless’. It’s not easy. He has a place to sleep, but it’s not his. He has this place, too, where he let us stay. But it could be somewhere else tomorrow. That’s what it means.”

“Now we’re all homeless,” Worthy said, and wondered if those words were too harsh a statement for his daughter to hear just yet.

She nodded at him, looked at her mother, smiled at Embry, said, “Mr. Clay can show us how to do it. He knows what to do.”

✦

Worthy and Embry sat talking halfway through the night. Gracie slept soundly, Ellen less so. After a while she got up and stood by them. “David, I want to be included. What are we planning to do?”

“Are you sure you’re up to it? You need your rest. We’re going to need our strength.”

“Don’t patronize me, David. I’ve been chained to a bed by a madman for the past three days. I’m rattled. But I’ll be alright. I’ll get past it. I can still think. You don’t need to coddle me.”

He hung his head for a moment, rethinking what he might say. Before he could say anything, she turned to Embry.

“You keep staring at me. What? It’s making me very uncomfortable.”

“Please forgive me,” he said, softly. “I didn’t mean to bother you. It’s just, you remind me of someone.”

“Who?”

“I, I,” he stammered, squinting, looking at her closely, then at Worthy, said, “I don’t remember.” He got up and walked away. Worthy looked after him, then at Ellen. Touched his index finger to his head and shrugged.

Embry said no more about it but returned to the discussion. “I dumped the bedclothes and the towels behind the Outdoor Store. Some of my clothes, too. Nice shop. Had everything we needed. For now. If the shoes don’t fit, we can grab more. Less than a mile from here. Let’s remember to lose those keys, too.

“Still not many people around. Less than I expected. The ones who are we don’t want to deal with. Seems the rough ones show up first when things go bad. This gun will keep them at bay if we need it.

Only six shells though so it won't be good for long. Think we should get away from town as soon as you feel up to it."

He looked at Ellen. "I walked about 10 miles in heels and barefoot," she said. "With these hiking shoes I can cover a lot more ground."

"Where are you thinking we should go?" Worthy asked him.

"Further we can get from here, the better off we'll be, I'd bet. Don't know which way the damage extends, but…" Worthy interrupted him. "We want to head east, southeast. Damage is worse from here to the Coast."

"And, you know this how?"

"My company has been modeling it. West of I-5 all the way to the ocean is the worst. No doubt about it. The further inland we get, the better off we'll be."

"That works for me," said Embry. "Fellow I know has a place up in the Cascades, about 50 miles from here. Never been there but I think we can find it. Think he'd welcome us if we can. Guy named Primus."

"Primus?" said Worthy. "Dirk Primus?"

"Sounds right, yeah."

"Scruffy guy? Kind of unkempt."

"Well, not so much I wouldn't say. Has a job and all.

"How can you possibly know Dirk Primus?"

"Met him on the street. Gave me money a couple of times. We talked. Joined him for drinks. Had a few beers once or twice. Why? You know him?"

"He works for me. Has for years. Wow! I can't believe it. And you know about his place?"

"Told me the last time I saw him if I wanted to get off the streets, he'd put me to work on his place. Been thinking about it, actually. Sounded pretty nice."

Worthy looked at him, unmasked astonishment on his face. Who is this guy? he asked himself again.

"And he told you how to get there?"

"Yeah, pretty much. Said to talk to Bobby Yelkis. He'd be expecting me."

"David," Ellen said, "you knew about his place, right?"

“Well, sure, we all did. Sort of. He never said much about it. I asked him point blank once where it was. ‘Out past Molalla a ways’. That’s all he said.”

“Do you think that’s where he went?”

“I have no way of knowing. Last I saw him, he, Holly, and Dam were heading for his place in town.”

“But it only makes sense that’s where he’d go. Maybe took them along. Her kids, too. It’s a refuge, right? That’s where he’d go.”

“Probably right. Long way from here, though.” He looked at Embry. “You really think you can find it.”

“Southeast slope of Wanderers Peak, between the two forks of the creek, what he told me. I grabbed a couple of topo maps while I was getting the clothes. It’s pretty clear what we’d be looking for.”

✦

Worthy needed shoes at least a size smaller, Gracie pants that were a couple of sizes larger. Embry shrugged, said, “Never been much of a shopper.”

The hike through the Pearl back to the Outdoor Store was surreal. Some of the bodies had been dragged off the streets and sidewalks, pulled to alleys, dumped in the craters and gaping cracks in the ground, some still lay where they had fallen. All of them were bloating with decay. Animals had gnawed at them. The flies were swarming.

Ellen was stoic, trying her best to keep her daughter’s focus on the destination rather than the journey. She kept up a dialogue with Gracie, but she could see the tears running down the little girl’s face as they walked. What was there to say? It was horror, graphic, unabated. All of them were shaken.

At the shop, the front of the building had crumbled across the walk and into the street. One of the interior walls had collapsed where a corner post gave way and the cross beam above it fell to the floor. There was a gaping hole they climbed through, spider walking over the chunks of stone and into the interior. Clothes, shoes, all manner of inventory was heaped in piles amid fallen plaster and ceiling tiles. They found several shirts and pants in Gracie’s size, a pair of boots that fit Worthy. Some pants that were a better fit for Ellen. Each of

them picked up a sleeping bag to tie on top of their backpacks. They got dressed.

“This doesn’t feel right,” Worthy said as they got ready to leave. “Looting this place. It seems like we should pay for all this.”

Embry looked at him for just a moment, said, “Pay who?” They stared at each other, then around the room, the cash register lying on its side on the floor, the drawer sprung open and long since emptied, the clothes strewn where earlier gleaners had tossed them, then at each other. “Whom?” Ellen said, managing a brief smile. They left.

✦

Hiking south on Broadway, they noticed far fewer bodies than what they’d left behind. The Pearl was many hundreds of residences, as well as shops and other businesses. Downtown was largely just commercial. People worked there but only the homeless, the panhandlers, the truly down and out, spent the night.

The buildings were severely damaged as far as they could see in every direction, the road they walked over and through was as badly broken, but there were far fewer people about, alive or dead. Cars littered the streets, cocked at odd angles, some on their sides or their roofs. Glass glinted everywhere the sun struck it, crunching where they stepped on it, the gravel scraping beneath their feet, the plaster, insulation, and roofing cushioning their footfall.

It was a relief to be on the move, even if their destination was still vague in their collective mind. Despite the nearly absolute wreckage they hiked through, it was a relief, too, to see so much less human carnage. The scene in the Pearl District was so horrific, it made this commercial stretch of downtown Portland seem almost pleasant by comparison.

Gracie noticeably perked up. She carried her backpack and the sleeping bag on top of it, leaning forward slightly from the waist, marching up the long, slow slope as they climbed out of the center of town, down into the ravine where 405 was badly broken, then up the other side and into the clusters of residential neighborhoods. She kept pace with the adults, three strides of hers to every two of theirs, and showed a determination that made her mother buck up in order to keep up.

Most of the homes they passed were shaken loose from their foundations, partially or wholly collapsed, some fallen down the slopes into piles of debris. The people they saw mostly seemed to be residents picking through the wreckage, salvaging what they could, patching up where it might help, shoring up wherever some support might make a difference, often, too, merely standing, hands deep in pockets, shaking their heads in disbelief, hopelessness, despair.

No one paid them notice. Everyone it appeared was sunken into solitude, each of them suffering a degree of hurt that couldn't yet be shared. Sometime soon, hopefully, they would begin to come together again as a community, one gathering, one block, one neighborhood at a time. But not yet. For now, the loss, the reckoning, was personal. It couldn't be communicated.

Ironically, the day was exquisite, the weather warm, the sky bright blue, large, fluffy clouds floating west to east over the Willamette Valley, the air clear now that the dust had settled, graying the moss, the ivy, blackberry bushes and various shrubs that covered the ground. Birds chirped tentatively, settled here and there awkwardly on branches reaching out at odd angles in the many large trees that had toppled. Songbirds that they are, they sang fitfully, cautiously, then more forcefully, calling to each other, reestablishing relationships among flocks widely scattered only a few days past.

At the top of the long climb up Barbur Boulevard, they reached the Fred Myers, which was fallen on three sides and propped up by the remains of the concrete parking lot at the south end. A few people climbed out over the chunks of broken cement, groceries slung over their shoulders in bags or backpacks.

"Wait here," Embry said to the others and started to enter the store. He immediately bumped into a woman who had just exited and was righting herself after the climb. "I'm sorry," he said to her. "I didn't see you." She turned with her bag of groceries and hurried away.

He came back in a few minutes with a plastic bag of food, mostly fruit, and some canned goods. "Glad to have this flashlight. Pitch black in there. Be getting dark out here before long, too.

Ellen said, "Maybe we should head down toward the college and find a place to camp there tonight. It's not much farther." They did.

Those big stone buildings mostly had crumbled, some a little and many a lot. They wandered through the grassy slopes between them, around crevices that had opened in the ground, around fallen trees, and no one was anywhere to be seen.

They surveyed one building, the arts center it looked like from all the drawings and sculpture there, that was still pretty much intact. The door was either locked or jammed, hard to tell, but the large pane of glass next to it was shattered, a pile of partially intact plaster casts broken on the floor of the window display, and they simply walked in. “Busted busts,” Embry said, as they stepped through them. He looked around, sweeping the flashlight through the room, which was dark enough to merit it compared to the dimming daylight outside, said, “This looks like as good a place as any. We can sleep here tonight, figure out what’s next in the morning.”

In one corner, there was a large tub of water, still intact, with some sort of sculpted lilies and brightly colored wooden frogs floating in it, a few of them splashed over onto the floor. Ellen stared at it, looked around the room. “I need to clean up,” she said to the others. “Please give me some privacy. Hopefully, the artist will forgive me.” She moved a paper screen between them, undressed, and sunk into the chilly water.

They ignored the splashing, what sounded like her hands scrubbing her body, and set up their bedding. There was a large stash of corrugated cardboard they found, sheets 4 by 8 feet, which made for comfortable mattresses. Better anyhow than lying on the cement floor. In one corner was a bathroom. Plumbing not working, the sink hanging loose from the wall, the toilet cracked at the base and still damp from where the water drained from the reservoir, but there was a canister fallen from the wall that still contained some soap.

“Mama,” Gracie said, cradling it in both hands as she carried it to her mother, “Look!” Ellen covered herself, arms wrapped across her breasts, but Gracie just reached with one hand around the screen. “Soap!” she said, proudly. “Bless you,” her mother said quietly, taking it and quickly resuming the scrubbing. It sounded, too, a little bit like she was crying. When she finally emerged, dressed and clean, Gracie said, “You look nice, mama.” And hugged her. “You smell good, too.”

They were exhausted from the hike. Tired, too, from the thought of how many more miles they had to cover. Weary of wondering what they would find if and when they got to their destination.

They ate without saying much. Beans and franks from pull top cans, apples and bananas, shared a chocolate bar. The room gradually grew very dark, and they turned in. Slept fitfully at first and then pretty deeply for long stretches of the night.

✦

"Hey! Hey, mister," someone said, shaking Worthy awake. The room was less dark, morning light filtering in, a tall guy with a baseball bat standing over him. "What are you doing here? This is private property."

Before he could respond, just beginning to sit up, a bright light lit up the man, a young man, Worthy saw, as he turned toward the light. "Put the bat down," Embry said to him, shining the flashlight at the man's feet. "We don't want any trouble. But you need to put that down." He shined the light back in his face.

"Okay, wow," he said. Put the bat on the floor beside him, flinched when Worthy reached over and took it in hand. Ellen was sitting up now, Gracie stirring, Embry walking toward the intruder. "You guys aren't supposed to be here," he said, shielding his face, looking from Embry, a big pistol in his waistband, to Worthy and back.

"What are *you* doing here?" Embry said, lowering the light and coming closer. Worthy stood up next to the fellow but set the bat aside. He looked at them, then at Ellen and the bag where Gracie was waking, shook his head, said, "My job. Building maintenance. You guys aren't supposed to be here. Nobody is. School's closed 'til further notice. Everybody's gone." He looked at each of them again, Gracie sitting up now, looking at him with curiosity, the others without a particular expression, no hostility, no friendliness either. His composure was slipping away. His shoulders slumped. He looked like he might cry.

"Take it easy," Embry said to him, smiled. "We won't hurt you. Nothing to be afraid of." Worthy said, "We just needed a place to sleep."

“Yeah, okay,” the kid said. “I get it. I mean, that’s why I’m here, too.” They looked at him curiously. He said, “I mean, I’m a student here. We’re in between sessions. Just a few of us here working when the shit happened.” He looked quickly at Gracie, grimaced. “Sorry. Everything fell apart. Even the security guys baled. I didn’t have anywhere to go.”

“Where’s home?” Ellen asked him.

He looked down, shrugged, said, “It’s hard to explain. My dad’s Army. Out of Ft. Bragg. Or whatever they call it now. He’s a Ranger. A full Colonel. He’s in Afghanistan. Or was, anyhow. Maybe Africa now. Haven’t seen him much these last few years.”

Something clicked in Embry’s head. Like a small pop. He said nothing.

“Your mother?” Ellen said.

“Um. I’m not sure. She…she’s not anywhere very long anymore. They split up, I guess. She just left him. Like that. With some guy or another. I mean, she has problems. Drugs, you know? I…” he stammered a bit, collected himself, said, “I haven’t heard from her in a while.”

“So, you’re stuck here?”

“Well, I mean, I guess so. I don’t have much money. But my room’s okay, though. In the basement of the dorm. It held up pretty well. Not much more of a mess than usual.” He smiled at them, swallowed it, got serious again. “There’s lots of food in the commissary. I could hold out for a long time, I guess.” He looked at each of them, then at the floor. “I don’t know where else I would go?”

✦

They offered him some food. Mick was his name. He said, “Nah, come with me. There’s a ton of food where I eat. Bottled water, too. Might as well get set up before you go.” They packed up quickly, made ready to follow him.

He led them out through the window, up the hill a short distance, and in through a place where the wall was broken away at the side of a building that was, he said, the cafeteria, student center, bookstore, and the storehouse where all the provisions were kept. It was dark in there, no windows to be seen, but he had candles set up in places here

and there, and now they had the flashlight, too, which showed shelves with massive amounts of supplies in one-gallon cans and cases of water, soda pop, orange juice, lemonade, and beer.

“Beer?” Ellen said.

“Yeah.” He looked a little sheepish. “For the older guys. Maybe the faculty, or something.”

There were banks of freezers, too, with so much frozen food stacked inside that even after several days without power, most of it had barely begun to thaw. The thing that got Worthy’s attention, though, was big sacks of Starbuck’s French Roast whole bean coffee, one stack of which was labeled Organic.

“Oh, man. What I’d give for an Americano right now. Make it a double.”

“Sorry, David,” Ellen said. “No way to grind it, remember?”

“There’s bottles of iced coffee around here somewhere,” Mick said, looking around and pointing to a stack of cases five high. “It’s not cold, but…”

“It’ll do,” Worthy said, and pried one from the case, another for Embry, and one for Ellen when she nodded yes to his offer. Mick produced a Red Bull from another shelf, looked at Gracie and said, “Um…”

“Gracie,” she said. “Grace Worthy. Can I have a Snapple, please?”

He disappeared down an aisle, returned with her drink. They all stood in a loose circle, looked at each other, raised their bottles in toast, and drank.

“Wow,” said Worthy. “We sure picked the right place to check in for the night. Now if we just had a truck, we could really suit up.”

“There’s some trucks,” Mick said. “Cars, too. I guess you could have one. Why not?”

“I was just kidding,” Worthy said. “The truth is it makes me uncomfortable to just help ourselves to things. I know it sounds stupid, but all this belongs to somebody. Somebody owns this stuff we’re taking.”

“I look at it differently,” said Embry. “But no matter. Nowhere we could go in a truck even if we wanted.”

“That bad?” said Mick. “I haven’t been off campus since it happened.”

“That bad,” said Embry. “Everywhere looks pretty much like it does here. Couldn’t get a few hundred yards down the road before you’re stuck. Wish we had a few horses. That’d be the best way to travel.”

“What about motorcycles?” Mick said.

“Motorcycles?”

“Yeah, dirt bikes. Really good ones. Knobby tires, Cheriani forks, the whole deal.”

Worthy and Embry looked at each other.

“We have a club here. There’s at least six of them running. A couple more that need repairs.”

“What do you think?” Worthy said to Embry. They both thought back over the terrain they’d walked yesterday. Likely it would be the same ahead. Possibly even a little better if the models were correct. “Could we make it?”

“Got to be better than walking. And we’ve got a long way to go.” To Mick he said, “Can we take a look at them?”

The two of them went across the campus a short distance to a small garage, a metal frame building which was in remarkably good shape compared to the stone structures around it. They entered through a side door, shined Embry’s flashlight, looked at 6 very clean, well-maintained Husqvarna 350s.

“What would you want for three of these?” Embry asked him.

“Well, they’re not mine to begin with. Belong to the college. But it doesn’t look to me like anybody’s coming back to good ol’ L&C any time soon. If things are as bad as you say out there, it’s just a matter of time before people start showing up here and taking whatever they want. I’m sure as hell not going to be able to stop them by myself. Not my job anyhow. I mean, why don’t you just take them? If you have a few bucks you could leave me with, that’d be good, too.”

“Got a better idea, why don’t you come with us?”

“What do you mean? Come where?”

“We’re heading to a place up in the mountains. Quite a ways from here. Friend owns it and we’re pretty sure he’ll put us up. These are the end days here in the city, but we should be a lot better off up there.

“Look at it this way. People *are* going to be coming your way. Soon. You can count on it. The shock is starting to wear off and the hunger is beginning. There’s plenty of bad guys already looking around. Even good folks cross over the line sometimes when they’re desperate. You’re going to be in a world of hurt here all by yourself. If you don’t like it when we get where we’re going, you can come back anytime you want. But the time for leaving here is getting short.”

✦

They headed down Highway 43, slow going, winding here and there through all the broken pavement, around the fissures, every once in a while reaching a place where they couldn’t go forward, had to back track and find another way. But they did, riding four of the bikes, Gracie and her father together on one, the other three carrying between them the back packs, sleeping bags, and some additional supplies. Mick led the way. Best rider by far.

“This really makes me uncomfortable,” Worthy had said again as they packed up the bags. “It’s just not my nature.”

“Oh, David,” Ellen said, “get over your bad self. If you’re really worried about it, you can come back when things are settled down and magnanimously endow a scholarship for bikers, or whatever. Don’t look a gift horse, that is, a gift motorcycle in the mouth. Let alone four of them.”

As they neared West Linn, she said, “Have we thought about how we’re going to get across the river?”

Worthy said, “The freeway crosses it on the Abernethy Bridge and the old bridge is still there – or was – on Willamette Avenue last time I was down this way. Let’s hope at least one of them is still standing.”

The town like everywhere else along the road was pretty badly damaged, most of the commercial strip in shambles, the octagonal roof of the Lutheran Church collapsed into the shape of an inverted umbrella, the Post Office complex a pile of bricks, lots of signage lying in the road and the adjacent parking lots.

“Every single Starbucks we’ve passed so far is closed,” Mick said. “That’s when you know you’ve got a real disaster on your hands.” Nobody laughed, but Worthy nodded. True that.

As they neared the southern end of town, two guys in sport coats and ties were standing in front of a building that was partially standing. One of them had a clipboard and was jotting notes on a pad of paper. They pulled up alongside them, said hello.

“We’re need to cross the river,” Worthy said. “Do you know if the 205-bridge survived?”

The two men looked them over, a bit askance at Embry, noted the pistol tucked in his belt, then one said, “You’re asking the right people. This is Mike Gates, the local State Farm agent. He’s a bit stunned, he is. You might imagine. Needed to consult an attorney. That’s me. Figure out his personal liability when people learn his company isn’t going to pay their damages. Not any time soon. Maybe never. That right, Mike?”

“Thinks he’s funny. Not much to laugh about around here. But he finds a way. Where you all coming from?”

“Downtown.”

“Amazed you made it this far. About the only people moving around other than on foot are a few people horseback.” He looked around at the debris and said, “Pretty overwhelming, all this. I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Begin right here by writing me a check for my building,” the other guy said to him. “Good a place to start as any.” And he laughed again.

Embry looked at Mick, said quietly, “You know what Shakespeare said about the lawyers.”

“I heard that,” the attorney said. “Don’t worry. I don’t take offense.”

Embry looked him over, hardly smiled, said, “I don’t worry.”

“About the bridge,” Worthy said. “Do you know?”

“I haven’t hiked down there yet. Hear it fell. That span is 2,727 feet, end to end. Fellow told me he saw it for himself. Says the 727’s in the water. He walked here from Oregon City yesterday. Says a big chunk of the Arch Bridge fell, too. North bound lane is gone, and part of the south bound out in the center. But there was enough left to walk across. You might be able to make it on those bikes.”

“Thank you. Appreciate your help. We’ll give it a try.”

“If you need an attorney, here’s my card,” the lawyer said, reaching toward them. “That’s all right,” he called after them as they

rode away. “Phone’s not working anyhow. You know where to find me.”

Chapter Twenty

They rode single file down the last low slope through the tall conical trees beneath a rock face that arched way out from the mountain. Dirk had led, but he pulled aside, let the others pass, Holly, then Bella, Dam and one of the girls, then Ailey with the girl who had to pee, Rika after them, Fausto bringing up the rear. He followed.

Suddenly, there were buildings, a home, several cabins, a bunkhouse, barns, corrals, pens, long, neatly placed rows of vegetable beds with chicken wire frames mounted on them. Everything was incredibly neat, clean, orderly. It took them a moment to realize it looked to be undamaged.

“My god, Dirk!” Holly said, “It’s like a movie set. Gary Cooper should be stepping out to greet us.”

Bella laughed, said, “Don’t know if he could afford the place!”

Primus could barely suppress the surge of pride he felt. All of this had been virtually a secret for years now. The fine ranch it was to begin with, all the work and all the cash he’d put into it, the very sophisticated infrastructure they’d installed to support it, and nobody but he and the Yelkis family, and a few guys who installed the solar system, had ever seen it. Not since the Walkers sold it to him and cleared out the last of their personal stuff. He was surprised now to find how pleased he was to show it off.

“Mama,” said one of the girls, “I *really* have to pee!”

“So do I,” her sister said.

“I could use a rest stop myself,” Bella said, and they all laughed, dismounted, looked at Dirk.

“Right this way,” he said, “everything works.” Showed them where to find the shower room, the toilets, the sauna. All of it, they would learn, sat above the pool the solar panels fed with warmth. The grey water drained to a septic tank lower on the side hill. It was fenced, the grass long and green. “Where we gas ‘em up,” Booby Yelkis later

would tell them as he turned out some horses there. “It’s pretty high-octane feed.”

Everyone was just getting settled when the Worthys arrived with a guy who got everyone’s attention and a kid who seemed to be leading the pack. They rolled in on motorcycles, making low, growling sounds as they came nearer, up from below in zigzag paths, breaking trail it sounded like all the way from Fish Creek up the hillside. No one was expecting them and in wilder circumstances you might say they were lucky they weren’t shot.

Things weren’t that paranoiac at Dirk’s place. Not that they weren’t alert, a little edgy. Well-armed, too, for that matter. Of course they were. The world they knew had been pealed raw. They were adapting. Settling into a new place. New ways. Not sure that any strangers should be welcome. They were prepared. These, however, weren’t strangers. Just friends unexpected.

Dirk met them in the center of the compound. Worthy prepared to explain themselves but Dirk spoke first, and not to him. “Clayton Embry. How about that? I always wondered whether I’d see you again.”

Then he turned to Worthy, walked to where he sat on an overheated dirt bike, smiled, grasped him by the forearms. Looked at him closely. Felt maybe sheepish. A little bit emotional. They embraced for an enthusiastic moment or two, much hurrah, “Very glad you’re here,” he said. “Very glad. Come with me if you’re ready. Let’s get you settled. Then have something to eat.”

✦

Bobby Yelkis came around a few days later. Skinny guy with a leathery face, callused hands, baseball cap, a t-shirt with a picture of a basketball on it and bold script that said: Shirts or ‘Skins?

“Wanted to say hello. Make sure everything’s working for you. You need anything at all, me and the missus stay in the cabin down below. ‘Bout a klick the other side a that meadow,” he said, pointing off to the south. “Let me know.” He smiled, nodded, wandered off to the barn, and wasn’t seen again that day.

“Pretty nonplussed for a guy whose world just got a lot more crowded,” Worthy said to Bella, who was helping him weed one of the

vegetable troughs. She, Rika, and Dam were taking charge of the cooking for this motley crew just assembled. David became CEO of the vegetables. Nobody discussed who'd do what. They just fell into a rhythm of each doing what needed to be done, natural selection leading them to what they could do best, or, in David's case, Holly's, Ellen's, too, whatever was left.

Fausto took Mick under his wing. Asked about the bikes. "They ran great. Hardly ever got out of second gear, though. I was worried about overheating, but they were okay. Burned through a lot of gas at those speeds. Had to siphon some to get here, but there was plenty to choose from. Cars abandoned everywhere. Nowhere to drive 'em. There was barely a hundred yards of good pavement at a stretch the whole way here. It did get a lot better this side of the river."

"Yeah, same with the way we came. Hard to imagine how they'll ever get it all fixed up again. Not any time soon. That's for sure."

"You suppose we'll be here for a long time?"

"Don't know anywhere better we could be right now. Hard to know what's going to happen in town. Maybe folks will come to their senses. Maybe all hell will break loose. Probably a little of that before everybody pulls together. I think we're in a pretty good place, all things considered."

"Mr. Primus be okay with it, you think?"

"He'll be fine. Truth is, I think Dirk's proud that all of us need him and he can deliver. Some of these same folks had their doubts about him. I know that for sure. Maybe I was one of them. Good guy, but a little more passionate about things than was comfortable sometimes. A lotta times, as a matter of fact. Give him the chance, he was always prone to rant, you know. Made people wonder."

"Yeah, he seems like he has a vision about how things ought to be."

"Well, at least the way things shouldn't be. He's seen a lot in his time. More than enough to make him gun shy."

"Gun shy?"

"I mean the big guns. All these tech guys that have gotten so powerful. He's seen it up close. Told me once the reason he bought this place was to get as far away from them as possible. Either put his

bucks into being another pig or get some distance from them. This is what he chose."

"I guess," Mick said. "Me, I'd like to make some money someday. Buy a nice car, some cool threads, stuff like that. Maybe a nice home where I can raise a family. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"Nothing at all. You got time. One thing that sure ain't gonna happen up here. Find yourself a wife. Not! Not any time soon."

"Word! Yeah, slim pickings. Ha!" He shook his head, laughed. "Hadn't thought of that yet. Making me miss college now. Got used to all those fine possibilities. Guess that's gone." Shrugged. Didn't laugh now.

"Tell you one thing," Fausto said, leaning in toward him, speaking quieter now. "That Ellen Worthy is a piece. Know what I mean?"

"She's a nice woman," Mick said, pulling back some, looking at Fausto a little differently. "Smart, too. Showed her how to ride that bike just once. She rode all the way here without missing a beat."

"That right? Well, whatever. Sure was a nice surprise when she showed up. Something to look at besides these damn trees."

"What about Rika? I heard you guys spent a lot of the ride together."

"Rika? She's great. Good looking, too. If she wasn't the way she is, I'd be all over her."

"The way she is?"

"Duh! She and Bella are together."

"Oh. Guess I haven't paid attention."

"Geez, man. You gotta notice stuff like that."

"Yeah, I guess. All the girls at L&C tell you they're gay. But they still fuck you a lot of the time. It's more like a negotiating position, you know?"

"I don't think that applies in this case."

✦

Dirk was philosophical about it. He seemed a little miffed now that all of them had gathered in his place. Now that it was going to become *their* place. Not that he wasn't happy to have them here. Well, truth is, he usually seemed a little miffed. Pissed off at the world. "Not the world," he'd correct them. "The injustice."

He was glad they were safe, his friends, colleagues anyhow. Very glad he could provide a temporary home for them. Not the way he planned it back when, but right and just for these circumstances. This obliterated earth they are heir to. This place without a center. That cannot hold. He accepted his role as host. But he felt more comfortable than ever pontificating.

“You guys all came up here because you think it’s safe. I’ve got it wired, right? Punji sticks and dynamite, all that bullshit. That’s what you all used to say about me, my place. Not! That’s just your imaginary survivalist you’re channeling.

“This isn’t that. This is a historic ranch I was lucky enough to stumble on. Working ranch. Just far enough away to serve my purpose. Which is what? I’ll tell you what, plain and simple. To have a place where I have a chance to be myself. Not what I get paid to be, not what any of you want me to be. Space to stretch out. Just be myself. And I’ll be glad to grant you the same opportunity. Be who you want up here. Let’s see if we can do that and still get along.

“This isn’t what survivalists do, this place here. At least not the few I know. They’re holed up way back in the woods. Remote as you can get. Ready to fight for that little piece of land where they live. Fight who? I can’t say. Whoever the devil may be. But they will fight. No quarter asked or given.

“I don’t have a clue what the rest of those guys are up to about now. Way back up in the hills, up at the crest of the ridge. Hard to guess what they make of all this. But I suspect they’re doing all right. Better than all those folks in town.

“You know why? They never for a minute thought the USG was gonna save ‘em. More afraid, in fact, of what the government was going to take it away from them. Their freedom. Their way of life. Saw it as a threat rather than a solution. So, they’re not waiting for big government to come to the rescue. They’re not disappointed that it isn’t coming. Curious maybe, but relieved, too. Maybe we should give that some thought for a moment.”

Bella spoke up. Jumped into the pause he took to breathe, catch a breath, orient his next sentences. Before he could, she said,” How do we know no help is coming, Drew? Is that for sure, or just your speculation?” She didn’t say, “just wondering if you know what the

hell you're talking about or is this another rant?" but that's clearly what she meant.

He looked at her for a moment, a little surprised to be interrupted, his monologue in danger of losing its rhythm. He'd been talking to himself about these matters so much for so long, he had to stop and remember the courtesies that were required for a civil conversation. The others in the room were more attentive, now the question has been asked. Maybe also because it had suddenly become a discussion, rather than a lecture. Maybe he should make a note of that for future confabs.

"We've been on the ham radio. Me, Bobby, and Clay. Just about the only medium that's working. Heard from folks over on the coast. Really ugly there. Worse than here in town. Portland, I mean. We know how terrible that is. Some of the people in the rest of the country, though? The USA. They haven't got a clue.

"And that's just the short wavers, the guys we're actually talking to. They can't believe it. What they see and hear on TV is all good, big earthquake out here but everything's in the works, people being taken care of. The President is on it, right? So he says. Claims he's been on the ground here. Propping us up."

"Do we know he hasn't?" Ellen said. "It's chaos out there. How do we know what's been happening? What's true and what isn't?"

Primus gave her a big smile. "That's the rub, isn't it? How do we separate the facts from the 'alternative facts?' How does anybody? Man's truly a genius in that regard." He lifted his shoulders, lowered his head, laughed a little to himself.

"Norman Mailer said many years ago about another notorious liar, Richard Nixon, that lying came as naturally to his mouth as chewing meat. Always liked that quote. In this case, the old saw 'you know he's lying because his mouth is moving' is probably good enough. Nothing 'alternative' about that fact."

He smiled again at Ellen. "I don't mean to be dismissive. We do, *in fact*, have substantiation about what is and isn't going on.

"Just yesterday, we happened to tap into a radio conversation between Governor Turner and the governors of Washington and California. They made it clear. Despite their pleas, the requests for emergency medical assistance, basic disaster relief, water, food,

clothing, shelter, anything at all, they're getting back nothing but talk. The Feds are doing nothing. FEMA is "studying" the situation.

"It's easy to say 'incompetence' but that isn't it. The Feds know exactly what they're doing. It's a calculated move by this administration. Another step toward total consolidation of control. That's the governors' conclusion. I agree."

"Dirk, we've known each other a long time," Dam said. "You and I have had some pretty intense conversations about these matters. I think you know I have a lot of respect for you. So, I hope you'll forgive me if I say I can't see what advantage there is for any president, no matter who he is, to write off the West Coast. California is the 7th largest economy in the world. Why give that up? Why walk away from three of the most prosperous, innovative states in the country? It doesn't make sense to me."

"Why?" Dirk said. "Control. Period. I know you guys think I'm paranoid, some kind of conspiracy-driven malcontent. The last part is true. I'm a very long way from content with what I've seen going on, especially the past few years. The rest of that stuff not so much, though.

"Most conspiracy theories don't interest me. Who shot Kennedy? Aliens in Area 141. I don't know, don't much care. What I do care about is the direction of this great American experiment in freedom and democracy. I think it's being stolen right out from under us. Right now. If that makes me paranoid, I'll cop to it. But that doesn't make me wrong. If you're paying any attention, give me a better explanation for what's going on with the USG. I don't think you can."

"Here's why. That slate's wiped clean. This Administration has no intention of doing anything to help. Everything they say is just pretense. The same old con. That's what I think. That's what the governors think, too. Gherkin and his buddies the kleptocrats are just fine letting us wallow in the slop. They think we're pigs.

"What a blessing it is for them to have the whole Northwest in shambles. All those goddamn Ds in a world of hurt. Like that song about Puerto Rico: 'Let it sink back in the ocean.' Saw how quick they were to help out those poor folks after the hurricane leveled the island. And all those people who suffered through the virus or died

from it. These things attack the poor, not those fat fucks in Washington, D.C., and the guys they work for.

“Same goes for all us lefties in Cascadia. Not people they care about very much. They see it as just desserts, what we have coming. That’s the easy way to rationalize it. Not quite the Rapture, no, but tribulation for sure.”

“That’s pretty harsh, Dirk.” Worthy spoke quietly, but he still carried a lot of credibility with the people in the room. They paid attention when he spoke. “It’s hard to believe the U.S. Government will just abandon us. Politics is ugly stuff, sure. But this is a disaster. This is when we pull together as a country.”

“Think so, David? Really? That’s the way we’d like to think it ought to be. But I think we need to start thinking about what really is, rather than all the old fairy tales we’ve been sold.

“Ask yourself. Where’s all that detailed information we’ve been sending them? That very high-resolution picture of the entire Northwest we’ve worked up for the last two years. What are they doing with it? They’re not using it to help us, that’s for certain. Maybe they’re using it to calculate the new actuary tables. What’s gained, what’s lost. How they deal with us. They’re looking at the West Coast like an insurance agent looks at a wrecked car. How much will it cost to fix it? Should we just total it and move on?

“And I’m telling you.” He looked around the room, then back at Worthy. “I’ve been listening to three very desperate governors who have no doubts about what’s happening. And what isn’t happening.

“They are overwhelmed. Absolutely drinking from the fire hose and all the help they need, all the help *we* need, things that this entire part of the country is crying for, are NOT happening. Nothing is happening. Nothing but talk. These guys know. They’re on the front lines of maybe the biggest disaster ever. Ever! There is not one scintilla of evidence that any help is coming. None. Not from the Feds. It’s all talk. But they are sending us a very clear message.”

He stared at Worthy. David looked a little shaken, the thought registering, but he said nothing in response. Nobody else seemed inclined to say anything either. Most of them were looking at the floor. Thinking about what it might mean.

“For us, maybe it’s a blessing, too. Think about it. We’re at ground zero. Scary, maybe, but we’ve already faced the worst of it. We know what we’ve got. What’s ahead can be something new and beautiful, maybe. The New Northwest.

“Ask yourself this: if you could make the world what you always wanted it to be, starting from scratch, what would it look like? How would it work? Where would your place in it be? What would you be trying to accomplish?

“This might sound crazy to you, but the pure neglect the USG is going to shower us with, all the obfuscation this clown of a president has so perfected, what he’s going to employ to let us suffer and plead while the government, our government, does absolutely nothing to mitigate this disaster: all this just might be a blessing, if we seize it and put it to use. Let ‘em ignore us. It’ll give us a head start. Crazy, huh?

“Why don’t we think about what the New Northwest could be? A place of our own. Built from scratch. The way we want it. Not to rebuild the same place it was but to build something fresh and clean. Something that embodies all the things we claim to believe in. Sustainable, equitable, organic, natural. And free! Whatever works for you. What’s your motivation? This is the time to bring it.

“Think for a minute about the coherence of the West Coast, what it looks like as a symbiotic organism. The lifestyle, the economy, the creativity and the talent, the assets, the resources, the natural environment, the potential.”

They looked at each other, searching maybe for a clue about whether to take this seriously or whether it was the ranting of the loony they’d suspected him to be. This guy is truly something else. But the times are something else now, too. Everything they knew before is gone, which makes what is left a clearer priority to think about: what means the most to you of what is left to choose.

“Hell,” he said, with more than a little contempt, “we all talk about freedom. America, freedom, that’s what it’s all about, right? Well, look around you. Far as you can see. You’ll never be freer than this.

✦

They gathered again, almost like a council meeting, except not formally. Still, there was a sense of organization about it, a protocol that was developing, a system of, if not governance yet, at least a forum for policy making.

“First the virus,” David Worthy said. “Then the fires. Now this monumental earthquake.”

“And the tsunami it generated,” Bella Dawson said. “How many tens of thousands did that waterworks kill.”

“Age of Aquarius, right?” Ailey said.”

“I was thinking of the Four Horsemen,” Worthy said. “Wondering when that next calamity will visit us.”

“I think it was the first one to arrive.” Everyone looked at Dirk Primus. He’d been a little grouchier than usual, touchy about things. They all were well aware, even though he never said a word about it, that this was his place, these lands were his doing, a foresighted investment he made when those like Worthy, Holly, Dam who’d known him longest scoffed at him, labeled him a wacko, never to his face, of course, never intending to be mean about it, but still…? Did they ever take him seriously back then? And how then did they make up for that skepticism now that he was literally their savior?

“It was when the goddamn Rs stole the election. 2016 was an aberration, a terrible blunder but maybe understandable as a marker. Something for us to really think about. How did this happen and what does it say about us? Gherkin is an absurdity. Someone so impossible to ignore we have to assume he has a lot to teach us.

“And teach us, he did. One thing he taught me is that elections are as real as someone says they are. Just wonder who that someone is. Yeah, in 2020, he lost the popular vote again, but won the electoral college. He did? Just like last time. Right? Says fucking who? Excuse my language but it was fraud, pure and simple. Who certifies these things? No way he won again. But someone says he did. Right? The Supreme Court. Just the way he stacked it. And here we are.

He was the first of the Four Horsemen. The first of all of them to arrive. Conquest is first. 2016 was a warning shot. His time is a truism that will haunt this country forever. This guy flat out stole the election and he ain’t going away. He conquered the system. Made the sacred profane. Brought a 250-year-old commitment to its knees. Bent the

country to his crooked purposes. The American Dream? Democracy is history."

Some of them, Dam at least, Holly too occasionally, had heard his rants before. Now, for him, for all of them perhaps, they made more sense. Rang a lot truer. Seemed less far-fetched, much closer to the reality they all were coming to know. *This,* they were coming to know, was the first half of the third decade of the second millennium of the current era. That kinda stuff. Scary as shit.

✦

For the kids, it became a great adventure in a place of wonder. The two girls, Bonnie and Francis, "call me Frankie, I like that better," and Gracie became fast friends. They called themselves "the Eees." The Eees come together. They get their bearings. They check things out. The cabins. Bathhouse. Bunkhouse. The barn. The corral for the horses and the three mules. Plus, two mules that already live here, and some other horses, too, in another corral. The pigsty, which is really muddy. The place the llamas stay when they're not working. They go out at night to keep the coyotes away. There was so much to explore.

They range a little farther afield each day. Once they hiked up to the cliff where the rocks stick way out into the sky. Just below the edge of the rocks, there is a bank of mirrors, big shiny rectangular frames with dark cells in the middle.

"Those are solar collectors," Gracie said. "They get power from the sun."

Underneath them they discovered a trench covered by a thick cover of pine needles and stuff. In it there were a cluster of thin pipes that run all the way down to a pool, and from there to another pool covered by a big tarp that was also thickly layered with needles and leaves. When they peeked under the covering, they saw the pool had metal sides and looked like it was very deep.

"Maybe we shouldn't touch it," Bonnie said.

"Why not?" said Frankie.

"My daddy says those mirrors are where the power comes from, for the lights and stuff," said Gracie. "He said it is 'state of the art.' That somebody really knew what they were doing."

“What does that mean?” said Frankie.

“It means we shouldn’t touch it,” Bonnie said.

✦

“David, can we talk?” said Clay. “The weirdest thing has been happening to me, over and over, ever since we’ve been here. It’s making me crazy. Well, crazier…”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“There are five women here in the compound with us, right?”

“Yes, plus the three girls.”

“Them, I know. They’re not the problem.”

“You have a problem with the women?”

“Not like that. It’s something hard to describe, but it only happens with the women. I see each of them almost every day now. But I don’t, um, how to say this? I don’t seem to recognize them.”

Worthy stared at him, trying to understand what Embry was saying. He didn’t get it, but he sensed it was tapping into something he had noticed about him. That piece that didn’t compute. “Tell me more.”

“Your wife asked me when we were still in Portland why I looked at her ‘like that.’ Said it made her uncomfortable. I couldn’t explain it. She reminded me of someone, but I couldn’t remember who. Been thinking about it a lot. Because it isn’t just her.”

“One of the others say something?”

“No. Not yet. But I stare at them, too, and they notice. I don’t want to bother them, but I can’t stop staring. Every time I see them, it’s like the first time. Does that make sense? I see them, I know that I know them. I do know who they are. But I don’t recognize them. It’s like I’ve never seen their faces before.”

“Not the guys, right? Just the women? What about the kids?”

“Not them either. I know all three of them, just like I know you guys. If I saw any of you, anywhere now, even years later, I’d recognize you. Right away. But the women. Even when I think of them, something’s missing. If I think about Holly, Rika, any of them. I can see them, what they look like, but it’s a body, a form, without a face. Every time I see them, it’s a face I never saw before. But it reminds me of someone.”

“Wow. That’s very strange. I don’t know what to say. I’ve never heard of anything like it. When we were first trying to find Ellen, I couldn’t understand how you could say you didn’t remember her. I thought maybe you were being cool about it. I mean, everybody remembers her. She’s gorgeous. See her once, you don’t forget. But you didn’t remember her. You really didn’t.”

“Yeah, that’s when I first realized something was wrong. With me. Well, it was before that, really. Being on the street, you know. The whole thing sounds bizarre. I don’t know how to explain it. But I, uh, I really couldn’t quite remember how I got there.”

“Seriously. You mean from, like, drinking, drugs? Like that?”

“I don’t think so. It’s like, one day I woke up and I was on the streets. I had a little cash, some papers. A passport, discharge papers from the Army. A bank book with some money in it and monthly deposits that were made to it. Military pension, I guess. Name on them is me, that much I know for sure. But the rest is very vague, familiar like something you almost remember but can’t bring it in.

“I was in the service, I think. Not the Army but a different kind of service, know what I mean? Not supposed to talk about it. Maybe Intel stuff, I guess. Something like that. That much I remember. Does that sound crazy?”

“It’s pretty strange,” Worthy said. He reached out to him, put a hand on his shoulder, in solidarity, for comfort. “But it’s good that you’re talking about it. There’s always an answer to stuff that seems strange, once you get after it. My business taught me that if nothing else. Once you start digging and get deep enough, a lot of questions get answered pretty quickly.

“If you’d be comfortable, I think we should sit down with Bella. I don’t know her very well, but she’s a very well-regarded psychologist. Taught at Portland State, has a thriving practice. I’m sure she’d give you better insight than anything I can offer. Do you want to do that?”

Embry sat in a chair, looking agitated, as though the answer might involve more than he was able to say. He twisted his hands together, pressed them hard between his knees, looked at the floor, then at Worthy, then the floor again. He stood up, walked to the window, took a deep breath with his back to the room, seemed to shrink back into

himself, standing there, struggling to say more. He turned back to Worthy, straightened up, looked him directly in the eye.

“Thing is, I have this feeling that’s where it all started. With doctors. Some of it’s this stuff,” he said, pointing to the scars on his head, “but something more, too. Can’t put my finger on it exactly, but there’s this dark place and a man in a white coat.” He smiled. “Cliché, maybe? But still kind of creepy, isn’t it?”

✦

Bella smiled at him with genuine warmth. Probably professional demeanor but either way she was good. Still, he was cautious. Not certain what if anything he wanted to say to her. To a stranger, professional or not.

“I’ve been wondering when we might get to have a conversation,” she said. “Hoping that we would. You’re an interesting guy, just observing from a distance. When you rode up with the Worthys on that motorcycle, I thought to myself, ‘there’s somebody I’d like to know more about.’ It was like Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson in Easy Rider. More than a bit of a juxtaposition between the two of you. But you both seemed very comfortable with each other. Must be a story there, I thought.”

Her raised eyebrows made it a question, like: would you like to tell me? She *is* pretty good at this.

“I used to panhandle outside his building in the Pearl. We got to know each other some.”

“He gave you money?”

“No, not much. Just once. To go away.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Not for long.”

“Why?”

“It wasn’t much money.”

They looked at each other quietly, sizing each other up, volunteering nothing yet except the basics.

“How long have you been homeless?”

“I’m not sure. That’s what I wanted to talk about.”

“Well, are we talking months, years?”

“I remember a few months. At least a few months. One morning I woke up and I was on the streets. Maybe it went on before that and I don’t remember. Seemed like it just happened one day and there I was.”

“Do you drink?”

“Not much. A few beers sometimes. Very rarely.”

“Drugs?”

“I don’t think so. Not that I remember.”

“Interesting. Spontaneous homelessness. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Not at all. I’m intrigued. It *is* something I’ve never encountered. People become homeless for all sorts of reasons, everything you can imagine. But they can tell you why, at least what they think the reason was, and they can tell you when. There are cases of amnesia, of course, where people wake up from a long period of not knowing who they are, which sounds like what we’re dealing with here.”

She paused, took a long drink from her glass of water, “this is really delicious,” she said, almost to herself.

“You have some scars that indicate serious wounds. That would be a logical place to look for causes of amnesia if that’s what it is. Are you okay talking about it?”

“That’s not exactly right.”

“What.”

“What you said about amnesia, this being likely what we’re talking about.”

“Oh?”

“I know who I am. At least some of who I am. I remember some things clearly, others not so much.”

“Let’s start with what you remember.”

“I remember my name. My birthday. My family. At least, I remember my father very clearly. Can see his face, know he’s a banker, in Connecticut. My mother, my sisters, I remember…I remember them, but…”

“But?”

“That’s part of what’s confusing. Why I talked to David about it. I didn’t tell him this, but it’s related to what we did talk about. It’s the same thing, really, why he suggested I talk to you.”

“Go ahead.”

“I know I have a mother, two sisters. I remember that very clearly. I can remember feelings I have for them, even things we did together. I remember the home we lived in, the neighborhood, all that. But I can’t remember what they look like. I can’t remember their names. I can feel their presence, but I can’t see their faces. What’s strangest of all is that I only realized all this a little at a time.

“I didn’t think of them at all for a while, the fact they existed, until I started to wonder why I can’t see any women when I look at them. I mean, I see them, but the next time I see them, it’s like I’d never seen their faces before. Until I noticed that, I didn’t even think about what I was doing on the streets, how I got there, when it first happened. It’s all a fog.”

“Maybe it’s starting to lift.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“My god,” Braun said. “You’ve got to be kidding! This guy has absolutely no lower to stoop. We are waiting for disaster response, and he sends us more disaster.”

Governor Turner of Oregon was on the radio with him. Her voice was shaking. “Federal troops arrived last night. Helicoptered in. In riot gear. Armed to the teeth and no visible identification. Probably Prince’s contractors. They’re moving through the streets like an assault force. Nobody’s been in touch with me. No idea what they want, but it’s not medical triage they’re bringing. That’s certain. More like political triage. Or military.”

“Do we know if they’re in Seattle, too? I haven’t been able to raise the governor.”

“Yes, I heard from him earlier. Same thing there. Sally says they appear to be assessing the physical state of their federal resources. Also helicoptering out some of the people – the wealthy ones -- from the islands.

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Braun called in his Washington lobbyist, the guy who represented the State's interests to the White House and Congress.

"Here's the thing you have to understand, Governor. Once he got them to bend the Constitution to his liking, it was all over. When the law was made to serve the power, rather than power serving the law, it all became possible."

Morton Waverly had represented California as lobbyist and Washington point person for nearly three decades. He began when Bill Clinton was President, Tip O'Neill was Speaker. Saw the House fall to Newt Gingrich and the Tea Party. The Promise to America, all that nonsense. Was there when the Millennium birthed the Twenty-First century. Saw a lot of change, a lot of compromise, a lot of duplicity in the name of political machination. Saw the slow, determined, partisan progression to now.

"Never until Gherkin did I see a path to Strongman rule in this country," he said. "We saw a taste of it when Bush was handed Florida by the Court. That, my friend, was a moment worth noting. There was every opportunity to fairly interpret it that way. W wins. Which means it as easily could have been in Gore's favor. Wasn't gonna happen in 1999 because the Supremes were singing from a newly partisan songbook. That's when the crack in the wall happened."

"And now the Constitution is moot?" Braun said. "Is that what you're telling me? That's staggering to think and even more outrageous to say."

"Yes, sir. Especially when it's true."

"Where do we go from here?" the Governor asked. "What's your sense? Is this an aberration that will be corrected in time?"

"Will the Ship of State right itself? I'd like to think that everyone who loves this country wants that. I must tell you, Governor. Based on what I've seen in this century so far, I believe the odds are better that it won't.

"We talk about late-stage capitalism. This may be late-stage democracy. For the same reason. Power now is so thoroughly concentrated and controlled, the algorithms so finely tuned, it has

corroded this nation of laws and warped it to its will. Capitalism is not competitive. Democracy is not freely elected."

"Are you telling me the average American citizen doesn't care? I can't believe that. We view all this, perhaps, with jaundiced eyes. We're too close to the mayhem of governance. I still believe in the basic decency of the common man, though. Maybe that citizen doesn't see what we see, but I don't accept that they can watch this suffering, this devastation, and shrug it off. Regardless of their politics."

Waverly took note of the desperation that drove the Governor's response. He admired the man, acknowledged his principles, knew with certainty he spoke from the heart. But he knew, too, that this was a shrewd and savvy politician. To see him grasping for something to hang onto in these perilous times was dispiriting. He spoke softly, gently, respectfully in answering.

"Governor, you know as well as I do it's always been a challenge to resist the temptations of power, in this business especially. Most people seek office with good intentions, but money in politics is so corrosive. History says it always has been, but it's only gotten worse. That's no secret. What's different now is that we've lost the Fourth Estate. Everyone in media has an agenda, it seems, and, so, nobody any longer can tell what's true."

"Alternative facts," Braun said. "I guess that says it all."

"Yes, sir. I've come to believe the great mass of Americans, woke or not, are doing the best they can with the information they have to work with. When you wonder why the country isn't up in arms, raising absolute hell, because their government is intentionally letting people out here suffer. It's simply because they don't know whether it's true. Gherkin tells them everything's fine. All those video clips of all the destruction? Fake news. Don't you believe it. Just those poorly managed Democratic states after your tax dollars. Who knows what's true?"

Very quickly over time, as the suffering of their constituents worsened and the full dimension of the political fratricide they were being subjected to became unavoidably apparent, their reality became Shakespearian. Thoughts that were previously unthinkable began to

cross their minds. When Braun first mumbled the idea aloud, he was struck by the immediate response of his colleagues.

"Secession? Why not?" Sally said. "We've effectively been severed from the nation. Abandoned to fend for ourselves. Maybe it will get the attention we need. Not like it could ever happen, I suppose. Constitutionally impossible. But maybe it would send a message about just how desperate this situation really is."

"Well," Braun said, "according to my guy in Washington, the Constitution's not what it once was, so maybe it's more possible than we think."

Turner said, "Canada is organizing food shipments. The Canadian Red Cross has been setting up triage centers. They helicoptered them in. They are our allies here. Been here for weeks already. The Mexicans are sending help, too. Food and medical supplies. Food drops from Mexican airplanes. Can you imagine? Thank god for them.

"Our government could give a shit. Mexicans? Surprised the Air Force didn't shoot them down. All we've seen from USG so far is private enterprise at work, all the rich and famous being helicoptered out. Everybody else can eat cake. It pains me to say it, because it sums up just how bad the situation has become, but we have far more in common with Canada than we do with the USA. Far more to thank them for, too."

Braun, of course, and California had been the primary lifeline. Most of his state was functioning normally. He'd marshaled resources, the national guard especially, who brought food, water, medical care, funereal services, some basic banking services, and he was prodding a very reluctant insurance industry to start paying people what they needed to rebuild. It cost a lot of money. Not all his constituents were particularly happy about it. But he had the clout to make it happen, and he cared enough to do what's right.

He coordinated with the Canadians, once it was apparent they were ready to help. Like him, only a small part of the Prime Minister's charge was affected. The destruction of Victoria and to a lesser but still serious degree Vancouver was very much like what Washington and Oregon were facing. The difference was the effort Canada, with the full force and power of the entire national government,

immediately focused on the area of impact in British Columbia. Their far less fortunate neighbors to the south, a much larger and more populous geographic region, largely were left to fend for themselves.

Braun and Aly brought support and critical assistance from both ends of the tragedy, moving respectively from the south and north through staggering destruction toward the epicenter in Oregon, where the damage was most profound and last to be reached. Initially, basic life support was what was needed: water, food, shelter, medical attention, funereal functions, all the elements essential to minimally sustaining life and respectfully disposing of the dead demanded their attention. The scale was overwhelming.

Seattle had suffered huge losses of life and property. The entire length of Puget Sound, all the way from Anacortes and Port Townsend to Olympia, had liquefied, the shoreline deep into the interior turned to muck, the buildings, docks, warehouses, petroleum and chemical storage tanks all were broken apart by the earthquake and sunk into the water. Homes and commercial buildings throughout the city had collapsed, shaken from their foundations, sliding down hillsides, sinking in the landfill on which they were built, which now was nearer to water.

To the west, little towns along the shoreline like Neah, La Push, Oil City, Queets, Native American settlements since ancient times, were totally obliterated and washed away by the tsunami. In the stories of the elders, this had happened before. This time, though, they hosted many hundreds of tourists. Few if any of their bodies, natives or visitors vacationing there, ever would be found.

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Braun could only imagine. Some of his northernmost constituents had been killed and many more badly hurt. The damage to life, property, hope was severe. And, north of them, especially in Oregon, the destruction was even more profound and breathtaking.

Every day so far, he found himself simply trying to absorb the full scope of what had happened. This was likely the greatest natural disaster that had ever happened to people on this earth. So many people. He struggled just to come to terms with it, to see and hear and feel the pain and suffering of so many people, and to find within

that very raw wound a place where he could see the future and what was needed to get there.

✦

"Why don't we think really big?" He looked around the group gathered by the fire, some of them staring into the flames, a vacant countenance about them, others looking back at him with curiosity, maybe even hope.

It was a different time now, only a few weeks from the earthquake and yet ions had passed, the world seen anew. They were providing for themselves in the most fundamental ways, absent help from anywhere else. Very gradually, alliances with neighbors were being formed. What do you need? What can you provide? How can this advance our situation? It started to come together.

"The federal government is doing exactly nothing for us. Nothing. This administration could give a shit. That's the simple truth. Beneath all the bullshit, all the obfuscation, the fake news, peel that away and the truth is: they think it's great. God's Will laying waste to all the heathen Lefties. While they spread their thick layers of disinformation about the work that FEMA is accomplishing, how well the recovery is proceeding, they are doing absolutely nothing but laughing at us. Laughing at us. While people are dead and dying.

"All over the country, people think the streets here are being graded and repaved, the bridges being rebuilt, homes, office buildings, stores and hospital and clinics being reconstructed, and *nothing* is happening. Nothing! We're not much better off than the day after Cascadia, and almost no one knows it but us. The ones who do know don't care. They're the reason federal aid is just a fairy tale. They don't have any intention of helping us. They're gonna let us rot.

"We always believed the government is there to help us, right? Differences aside, when disaster strikes, we're all Americans, we're in this together. True? Well, guess what? That time is dead and gone. It's bullshit. You can kiss your ass goodbye, because the good ol' USG ain't doing nothing *for* us. In fact, they're thinking about what else they can do *to* us. We're the enemy! Understand it!

"Who's helped us so far? California. And Canada. Think about that. A neighboring state and a neighboring country have brought us

supplies, provided triage, what little we've had in the way of emergency services. You know why? Because we have far more in common with Canada than we do with most of this country of ours. There's a bit of decency left up there. They care if you hurt.

"You know what I really think? I think this earthquake is just a metaphor for what has happened in the United States. We've been ripped apart. Torn asunder. Split in two. Cleaved like Satan's hooves. Well. Just sayin'," he said with a quick smile and a wink. "Forgive the analogies run amuck, but, hey, we need to face up to it. We're not one country anymore. We may not be ever again."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"You'll never believe this, Mr. President. The West Coast, all three states, just issued a joint statement. You're going to love this. Are you ready for a good laugh? They are threatening to secede from the Union. Secede! They say the Union has failed its constitutional obligation to them as member states. They're threatening to sue for secession. Can you believe it? Of all the stupid political stunts…"

"Let 'em," the President said.

"What? Pardon me. What do you mean, sir?"

"Let them secede. Smartest thing we could possibly do."

"But, but Mr. President. The Constitution specifically forbids it. The Civil War proved it can't be done."

"Change the Constitution," Gherkin said emphatically, waving his tiny hands dismissively. "This shit isn't carved in stone. Let's make it happen. They want to leave. Let 'em go. Stop and think about it. What're we talking about? We'd get rid of the three bluest states in the country. Fifty million Dems say goodbye. We hit a home run. It will be the end of the Democratic Party in America. We'll dominate the elections for the rest of time.

"I must tell you. I want you to take this message to Congress. Tell them: this is something never seen before, ever. That I can tell you. But we can't let that stop us. We need a 2/3rds vote to change things, right? The West Coast Dems will go with their governors. That's 6 votes in the Senate and a shitload in the House that go with us. If the

Rs hold fast and we make this happen, we can consolidate our hold on the country like a vice! For all time! I'm doing very well with it. Believe me. Let 'em secede. The West Coast already's a disaster area. Why would we want it now? Fuck 'em."

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"Mr. President. I, um, I don't know what to say. You've led us to uncharted territory. Breaking up the Union. It's, well, sir, I think inconceivable is the word for it. That secession would be supported, encouraged, enacted by legislation at the direction of the Executive Branch. Unfathomable. Yes, but, ah, here it is."

"Mr. Chief Justice. John. Are we off the record here? Cause I want to give it to you straight. We're Christian men. Capitalists. Freedom and Democracy, first and foremost. Am I right? We're about big-league people. Fabulous, incredible, outstanding people. The special, the strong, the successful. It's unbelievable how outstanding they are. Just beautiful. That's America. The real Americans. That's who we're talking about. Red-blooded, straight-shooting, no bullshit men. That I can tell you.

"What we're talking about when we say California is Blacks, Mexicans, and a bunch of Orientals, Asians, whatever; illegal aliens probably, many of 'em, with all their gangbangers and drug dealers, con men, shysters, criminals of every kind; their faggots, lesbians, and transvestites; their theater people, tree-huggers, campus radicals, whacked out feminists, politically correct assholes of every stripe; every sort of undesirable our country ever suffered is what they are. Completely, totally out of control. It's disgusting. Pathetic. Politically correct. Identity politics that has absolutely run a-fucking-muck. They don't respect us. They don't believe in our country. They don't care about the American Dream. Zippo. They're socialists, communists, libertines. They're the Apocalypse, knocking on our door. Scary. Terrible. Sad.

"That's California, Mr. Chief Justice. The other two north of 'em are just the same, but wetter and paler. That's the only difference.

"What we're giving up here when we talk about secession: atheists. drug addicts. flag burners. Do they still do that? I don't

know. Homosexuals, lesbians, transvestites. Bruce Jenner, for Christ's sake, is a girl now!

"Fifty million undesirables and most all of them vote against our interests. They don't share our principles. Spit on what we believe in. Long since kissed off the American way. You tell me, Mr. Chief Justice, sir, with your Ivy League education, your extensive knowledge of jurisprudence, and your love of country: why should we give a shit about sending these people packing?"

"President Gherkin, I hear you, sir. You make strong points. Your position is clear. It's just, Mr. President, it's just – like most everything else about your presidency, sir, that it's unprecedented. There're no reference points."

"John, hear me! Once and for all, understand this. In the great history of our republic, there are times that are ripe and there are leaders who are chosen. I am that leader, and this is my time.

"It's *the* time, Mr. Chief Justice, and we need to be equal to it. We have reached a moment in the history of our country where this tree of State, this great and sturdy American oak, needs some radical pruning. It needs some damaged, diseased branches lopped off and tossed in the scrap heap or it might die. We have to have the courage to do it, sir.

"That's why I'm here and that's why you're here and, by God, don't give me a load of judicial claptrap so you can duck your responsibility. Get to pruning, sir! Let's be done with the decay. This is going to be my legacy. America made sane and whole. A Republican sanctuary for the rest of time. We'll be a good Christian nation once again, Mr. Chief Justice, open for business, and no one can say it won't be a vast improvement over this mongrel country we've become."

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"The man's a lunatic," the Chief Justice said to the Speaker.

"Yes," the Speaker replied. "But that doesn't mean he's wrong."

"You can't be serious, Ross!"

"But I am, John. I am."

He poured the Chief Justice a double, handed it to him, and reached for the humidor where he kept his best cigars. They were seated then, each to a side of the fireplace in fat leather chairs at one

of the private alcoves off the main office. Between them was a large coffee table embossed with the emblem of the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the United States of America. They lit their cigars, sipped their brandy.

“The history of these rooms, this office, doesn’t rest lightly on me, John. Two Hundred Twenty-four years this fall we will have held sessions of Congress in this building, sessions directed by my predecessors. And through better and worse times, their actions somehow ensured the Union would persevere.

“Now I stand before you, the current office holder, talking about letting a part of the Union leave us. I take that thought, the implications, very seriously. For the first time ever, though, the benefits look very attractive to me and that is something I never thought I could say. But I’m saying it to you, privately, and I’m very near to saying it publicly as a policy proposal in support of the President.

“Ideology is more important to the nation today than geography, John. That has always been the force that drove this nation, and forging a consensus, that grand agreement among all men – or at least the ones with any sense – was the work of politicians. We kept this land together as one nation.

“We have held it together through many great debates, and god knows the travails we’ve weathered. But the differences today are too great to resolve as one people. There’s simply no consensus possible any longer that I would deem acceptable. That’s what I’ve come to believe. We need to cut bait.”

Logs were crackling quietly in the small fireplace. John Taylor’s face was quite warm on that side and like ice on the other. He stared at Ross Freemont from what seemed like a great distance, as though a chasm was opening and each of them on opposite sides was falling away from the other.

“The *benefits* of secession?” he said, finally. “Of our Nation dividing?” He looked at Freemont with a doubt that wasn’t to be undone. “With all due respect, Ross. I’m dumbfounded that you could support such a thing. Think of the cost.”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking about, John, as a matter of fact, a perfect place to focus this discussion. What is the benefit of hanging

together, as Ben Franklin advised us back in the dim recesses of time? And what is the benefit of going our separate ways? What does it cost to choose one or the other? What's gained and what's lost?

"To begin with," the Speaker said, leaning in from his chair toward the listener, rolling his brandy snifter back and forth in his hands where they rested between his knees, "in simplest terms, we're talking about an asset that has just been devalued by tens of trillions of dollars. Tens of trillions! That's what has been lost. Gone. Vanished! And it is in need of a few trillion or more in immediate aid, just to stabilize the situation at its margins.

"We are looking at a large piece of the country, this land, that has sunk. Cratered. Fallen. Understand this, Mr. Chief Justice. It is a *disaster* area. I'm not sure we want it.

"Recovery will require a massive investment of federal time and money for ten years or more before anything like normalcy is established. That's the reality. So that's a place to begin our calculations. Add climate change, which is playing hell with coastal areas and waterways. And the fires. Hell, they're still rebuilding from 2020. Near term, that's very likely to get worse. An eroding asset, if you will. Let's think a moment about whether we can afford it. I don't think we can. I don't think we want to.

"There are 15 million people who have lost everything. A terrible tragedy. They need *everything*, every component of civilization needs to be replaced for them. It is as though the entire Northwest Coast is an alien place now, hostile and foreboding, and its people want … what? Want *in*? Back *in?* Why does it seem like that to me? When I think of them like that, they're like *immigrants* and they're no more appealing than all those other needy people out there.

"We can't help everybody," the Speaker said after a moment, "I remind myself of that. And, John, let me ask you, you know as well as I do that's true, so I have to ask if that's the case and we have to make choices, shouldn't we help our own? The same people whose values we're working so hard to support. The people who believe like we do this country has a future that's founded in its past. Who believe in the American traditions. The ones who vote for us. That's who I think we have to choose to help. And there's very damned few of them in California, let alone those other places."

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“The man’s a genius,” said Frederick Paine, president of the Federalist Society. “An absolute genius. To think we opposed him in 2015.”

“For good reason,” said Winston Reich, lobbyist for the Alliance of Healthcare and Pharmaceutical Providers. “He had no conservative credentials.”

“Still doesn’t,” said Paine. “But it doesn’t matter. He’s a populist rabble rouser. A bona fide shot from out of the blue, er, well, the red in this case, that is clearing the way for everything we care about. And his timing couldn’t be better.”

“One very good thing about a rebel without a cause,” Reich said. “He is clear in what he wants and very clear in what he’s willing to do to get it. He wants adoration. As long as we give it to him, he’s glad to give us anything we want. Never even crosses his mind that it might matter, one way or the other.”

“I suppose it takes a massive ego to thrive on the chaos he creates. No shortage of egos in this town, by god. But his is something else, I have to say.”

“Well, Fred, the man sucks up flattery like life blood. Like he can’t go a minute without it. Never seen anything like it. But the beauty of it is, as long as you feed it, you win him over. He’ll give you anything you want in return.”

“Only because he doesn’t care about it. About anything, as far as I can tell. Except being in the center of the room at all times. Curtain open, lights on, center stage, crowd hanging on his every word.”

“It’s like he vaporizes when the lights go out.”

“Winny, you and I have seen a lot of strange things come and go in our time in this town. Fought a lot of battles and won our share. Maybe more than our share. It now suddenly seems like the tide is finally turning in our favor.

“But liberalism is still an existential threat to our way of life, maybe now more than ever. All the issues that drive them lead to regulations. It’s that simple. Government regulation of free enterprise. A chokehold on our ability to grow and prosper.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Fred. Healthcare policy is a growing threat. Talk of Single Payer. Climate is a growing threat. All this woke stuff about diversity, equality, what your pronouns are, who gets to use what restroom, all of it a growing threat. And Gherkin, god bless him, is just the man to shout it down. He absolutely thrives on it.”

“And the people love him for it.”

“And it keeps them busy.”

They both smiled, privately, thinking about just how lucky they have been to find this character of a president at a time of crisis. “Late-stage capitalism?” That people could even entertain such a thought, let alone seed a growing movement of popular economic theory, was unthinkable only a few years ago. Just airheaded socialists making noise, easily put in their place, and forgotten. Now it was on the lips of respected scholars and pundits. People making the case for *replacing* capitalism. *That* is an existential threat that *can’t* be ignored. It is something each of them instinctively will fight with every fiber of their being.

“His genius,” Paine said, wanting to elaborate, “is rooted in all that narcissism and hubris, no doubt, but the cause is of less interest than the effect. Here we’ve spent our careers protecting this country from the rabble, tried everything to keep a lid on it, and this character from out of nowhere hands us the simple solution: cut them loose.

“We’re stacking the courts, the legislatures, local government, feeding the Born Agains, the Survivalists, the White Power types, all the America First types we have to cultivate, all the media we’ve bought and paid for, strategizing voter suppression, all those laborious, incremental efforts to preserve the pie for the best among us. And here comes this guy from out of nowhere who says, “Screw the Constitution. Cut ‘em loose.”

Paine smiled wistfully, a distant, dreamy look on his face. “So simple. Quick, clean, and permanent. How can you argue with a guy like that?”

“So,” Winston said, looking up from his private thoughts as he’d listened to zero in now on Reich, fixing him eye to eye, “the Society will support secession?”

“In my wildest dreams, I never imagined such a thing. Until now, that is. Now I can imagine it very clearly. Call it a vision we want to realize sooner rather than later. This is the time to act. We can make it happen. Yes, we will support it, and urge every conservative in the country to do so. And I assume your Alliance will do the same.”

“We are meeting with the Chamber tomorrow. Our group, the oil & gas guys, the corn lobby, a few others. We’re going to insist they go with us on this full throttle. And they will. You bet your ass they will.”

“These are historic times, Win,” said Paine. “And we are the people making it happen. We’ll be a smaller country for a while, it’s true. But we’ll be growing again, robust, unrestrained, growing like we’re meant to do, and those others? All those new world order types. Who knows what will become of them? Frankly, I don’t care.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“So, what’s your story?” Ailey said to Embry.

“Why? Am I bothering you?”

“Not really. But you’ve got that thousand-yard stare sometimes. Like you’re seeing something that isn’t there. Or trying to.”

“I’m trying not to bother anybody,” he said.

“I’m not trying to bother you,” she said. “Just thought you might like to talk to someone. I’ve been on the streets myself. Several years. I know it isn’t easy.”

He could see the signs. Cleaned up good, as they say, but the telltale lines don’t go away. “Yeah. How come?”

“Life in the pipe. Crack. Couldn’t put it down. Did a lot of stuff I’m not proud of, just to keep the bowl full.”

“How’d you get it straightened out?”

“Hypnotherapy. Lots of it. Finally took hold. You know Bella? She refused to give up on me. Quite a few relapses. ‘Many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip,’ you know? She never flinched. Wasn’t going to let me go down for the count, was what she told me. Finally, *finally*, it got through to me.”

“How’s it going now? You seem like you’re doing fine.”

“Been clean for a few years now. Working for Holly gave me something to focus on, a place to be well, to matter to someone. I love her, those kids. They can’t begin to know how important they are to me.”

“You must be doing well. All the 12 Steppers tell you years, months, days, hours. To the minute.” They both laughed. She said nothing, waited for him.

“They say drugs are just the symptom. There’s a reason people go there.”

“Yeah, well that’s another story. One I’m not ready to tell just yet. Bella knows about it. Holly, too. I got past the drugs but I’m still getting right with the rest of it.”

“You should be proud of what you’ve done. Once you’re out, it’s really hard to get back in.”

“What about you? You coming back in?”

“I’m just now looking for the reason I’m out here.” She looked at him curiously. “Didn’t notice it at first. Now I’m trying to remember when I left.”

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“I’m no blanket head,” Bobby Yelkis said. “Understand that. I’ve been around some. Was in Nam, two tours. Been to college. Lane C.C. for three semesters. Coulda graduated if I’d been drinking less.”

He was medium height and thin. Weathered skin. Wearing a baseball hat, t-shirt that said Bad Guys Bail Bonds, Inc. Looking comfortable.

He looked at the others, all these white folks. Well, one of ‘em was black, one was Asian, maybe Japanese or something. Her and the big woman named Bella looked to be a couple. The young one, Ailey, had some wear on her. Hard to figure. Time was White man used to mean everybody else. Now there’s a lot of different kinds mixed in there.

Still, he and his family were the only Indians. What is called Indigenous these days. First Nations. Whatever. He’s Molalla. They are Molalla. There are very few of us left, less than 150 maybe. We’re still here. Barely.

“This isn’t the drunken Indian story. I learned to tone it down a long time ago. Had to. We keep our tradition close. Try our best to live

in this modern world that you leave us. So, when we run the ranch for Primus here, it's for us a version of the way we lived on this land for hundreds of years. Just a lot smaller.

"Used to be we ranged all the way from the Columbia to the Umpqua River, even the Rogue. Mostly though, this was the center of our world. Right here. Until the settlers came. Lots of them, and soldiers to back 'em up. Just like then, in a different way, we are fighting the same government. Trying to hang on to what we can. The little bit that's left.

"They told me in college that language defines the culture. The first order of how folks communicate with each other. I thought about that a lot. Nobody speaks Molalla anymore. Dead language, they call it. What's that say about us?

"We have culture that is stronger than language. That's what I think. We talk about it a lot over on the Res, Grand Ronde, but only with our own. Most of them tribes are Salish. Some of 'em Hokaltecan. Confederated Salish, they call it now, and they try to make it so it includes us. So, altogether it's the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. But all it is, really, is that they put us all in the same place when they made the reservation. Kind of a catch-all for Indians.

"So, we don't talk about our culture with the rest of them. But among ourselves, the few of us there are, we talk about it all the time. We are Penutian. That's where our language came from. When we still had it. Penutian speakers. A bunch of tribes that have been here a long time. Penutian. Tribes from up here all the way to Southern California and then way down into Mexico and Central America. Was a lot of us once. Same language kind as the Mayan, we learned. When we talk about our culture, we say, 'We go way back.' Then we talk about what we have left."

He looked at each of them, something he didn't do when he spoke. Then he looked down at his feet or off into the distance. When he paused, he looked at them. Maybe to see if they were still listening. Maybe to see if they understood.

"My Great Aunt Kate was pretty well known around these parts in her time. Was a weaver, beaded stuff, did all sorts of crafts she would sell. But she was a medicine woman, too. A keeper of our ways. And she could tell you why things were the way they were."

He looked around the campfire at these folks who paid him attention, as if they expected this was the way it was supposed to be, some Indian from a line of local folks that stretched back to ancient times was here to tell them what was what, according to Indigenous lore. Lo! The poor Indian, some poet called it.

“Kate told us everything we see around us is alive, just like we are alive. The people, the animals, the trees and the shrubs, all that. Sure. But also, the ground, the rocks, the dirt, the water. All of it was alive because this earth is alive and all of them, all of us, that live on the earth, are a part of that life.

“We breath, we eat, we sleep, we move around, and the earth does the same. I think Aunt Kate would tell us when this big shake up comes that the earth was restless. She was tired of sitting the way she sat. She wanted to move around a little. She wanted to stretch her limbs and bend her back. She wanted to stand up, to reach up high, maybe shake her butt a little. Just move a little, you know. And when she did, all the skin that wraps around her split into pieces that were no longer connected in the same way they used to be.

“It happened once before. Our people told in stories from the real old days. Scientists say now it was the year 1700, but in our stories, it was just a long time ago. Way before the White Man came. When the earth stood up and shook all the people off her back.

“Some tribes say the earth is a Mother Turtle in a big lake with all us little turtles riding on her back. Over by the coast, the land dropped, and the water came way up into the shore. And all them people over there disappeared. Little turtles swam off somewhere, I guess. They was never seen again.

“Maybe people are the most fragile. All them trees out there. They’re a family. A bunch of families. But they are connected. All them firs, if you dig down to their roots, you see they are connected underground. Those roots reach out from the tree and when they touch the roots of another tree, they grab on to each other. They form a knot, like they’re holding hands forever.

“When the earth shakes, some of them fall, sure, but most of them hang on. They are still standing. The ones that fall become a nest where new trees grow. The river maybe changes course a little, but it

keeps running. The rocks get tossed around a little, but they're still there. All the rips and tears get healed up. Life goes on.

"The earth is very old. She is patient. She doesn't move much, just a little at a time, until she is restless and needs to move a lot. Then she does and this is what we get. All the rips in her skin will heal over. The rains will melt the edges of them crevices until they will fill the holes. The moss and the grass and the bushes and trees will become a carpet of green again that covers all the earth. That's how all the holes in the earth will repair the damage. And we have to heal over, too. That's what my Aunt Kate would say."

They sat there for a while, the fire crackling, the night warm, gentle, the sense of antiquity and currency blending together, the first leanings of this odd, haphazard collection of individuals in gaining a sense of themselves as a group.

Worthy said, "That will work for the natural earth, but I'd say it will take a concerted effort by a lot of people to heal all the buildings, the homes, the shops, the offices, all that. It's going to take a lot of time and a helluva lot of money."

"If rebuild it all is what we want to do," Holly said. "Maybe we could do better."

Worthy was surprised that she, of all people, would have that thought. Holly, the marketer. The one who paved the way for sales, for development, for all the big bluster of the thundering capitalist herd.

"Here's what I'd say," Dirk said. "This, what's happening right here, right now, is the way communities come together. Little tribes come together, gather in a place. See what we have in common. What we can do for each other. There's this huge place, desolation everywhere, in every direction. And there's this place here we have that is a beginning. A new place to start, to start anew. However you want to say it.

"It would be a tragedy if all we do is the same stuff all over again. Try to rebuild what we had, what was lost, rather than rethink what we're after. What we're capable of doing.

"The old guys, senior engineers from the days of yore," he laughed, looked at Bobby to see if he got it, amused himself, loved the archaic language, "the old guys called it 'blank slate engineering.' No

preconceived notions. No baggage brought to the design. No expectations.

“Just think about what you want if everything’s the same. Nothing’s for certain. What if everything was on the table? What if to begin with, nothing was thought to be impossible? What would you build? If you could have it any way you wanted it, what would it be?”

“I’d make it a lot cleaner, whatever else we did,” Yelkis said. “Less smoke and more blue in the sky. Less stuff in the water, none of them dams that kill the fish, and all that fertilizer, that weed killer, that tears up the land. That’s where I’d start.”

No one else said anything for a while. Thinking what to say in response that wouldn’t be insulting. Like sure, man, if we all want to be Indians. Maybe we like electricity. Plumbing. Transportation. Harvests of plenty. Modern stuff that smokes things up a little.

Yelkis stared straight ahead, didn’t look at any of them, as if maybe he could read their thoughts. “This isn’t my culture we’d be remaking. Me, the rest of us, we’re just trying to live with you guys.

“But here’s what I see when I watch what you do. Everybody’s building stuff. All the time. More and more stuff. People buy it. Then they buy more. A lot of it gets tossed away. Don’t last.” He looked at Primus, just a glance, said, “Planned obsolescence. Ain’t that what them engineers from the days of yore call it?

“You got this culture of ‘more.’ People with jobs to build more, make more, serve more, and everybody needs money to buy more. Pretty soon you need a bigger place to keep more. ‘Til you throw it out and start over.”

A few people chuckled at this, but not because it was funny. Just how he said it. A different way of looking at the way all of them lived.

“Capitalism assumes growth,” Worthy said. “If you’re not growing, you’re dying. I guess I always assumed that’s true. Come to think of it, though, I’m not sure why.”

“’S’what we’re taught,” Dirk said. “What about post-growth? As a concept.”

“Meaning what? What’s the objective?”

“Instead of a focus on growing,” Dirk said, turning over the thought in his mind, thinking of the best way to express it, “what if we focused on building quality into what we do. To the greatest degree

possible. What if that was the primary objective? A quality experience, I mean."

"Like what?" Worthy said, "every car a Beemer? Is that what you mean?"

"What I mean," Dirk said with some annoyance, "is quality *of life*. How what we do, what we grow, build, invest in, what we aspire to, is what makes a quality presence in the community. Not just for an individual, but for what elevates the whole community."

"Lofty goal, Dirk, but is it practical?" Worthy wanted to engage this discussion, but he was aware of how quick Dirk was to bristle at "conventional" thinking, anything that called the established order into play. "I like your idea, but what about the old adage of enlightened self-interest? Isn't that a motivation that's been well established? How does that get unwound?"

"Maybe it's in our self-interest to rethink what's enlightened. Know what I mean?"

"Here's the way I see that idea," said Holly. The group looked at her, almost with relief, that someone else was weighing in on what was a slightly edgy exchange. "From a marketing perspective, what could we do to make my job obsolete? Bobby talked about planned obsolescence and, yeah, let's agree, stuff that lasts.

"But what if we only created things that sold themselves. Stuff so good that everybody wanted it, and everybody heard about it. Word of mouth stuff. Nobody needed to market it, no need to glam it up. Water for ducks kind of stuff. Like that."

"Sold themselves to who?" Worthy said.

"Whom?" Ellen said.

"The community, Holly said. "The community is whom."

She and Ellen smiled at each other. Dirk smirked. Worthy rolled his eyes.

"Maybe we're talking different things," he said. "I'm not sure I get it. If I'm a businessman, uh, person, and I employ 30 people in good-paying jobs, so they can feed their families, pay the mortgage, buy a car to get around, that sort of thing. All that money circulates. Doesn't that add quality to the community?"

"Depends on what you're selling," Dirk said. "What those 30 people are building."

“So, you’re saying that jobs for the sake of jobs is not acceptable. I get that. Jobs. Yeah. That’s always been the excuse for every venture we ever get involved in at good ol’ enterprise USA.”

Bella spoke up, said, “There was a time when I was policy director for the State of Colorado. We were cleaning up Rocky Flats and Rocky Mountain Arsenal. The Flats is where we built the plutonium triggers for bombs. Site of the most expensive fire in the history of the world, among other things accomplished there. Someone else handled that study. Mine was the Arsenal, where vast quantities of nerve gas were stored. When we did the calculations, the cost of cleaning up that place, which sits right on the edge of Denver, nerve gas canisters sitting out in the open, corroding right before your eyes. The clean-up cost was greater than all the wages, contracts, and sales ever generated there. By a factor of two or three times.”

“That’s exactly it, Bella,” Dirk said emphatically. “Exactly. If we want to rethink the way we do things, what we should hold dear, it begins with looking at the value of things in terms of the total cost, end to end. What does it cost our community to entertain this *thing*? How much value does it bring us? How many of us benefit versus how much harm does it do?”

“Would pretty much put an end to war, huh?” said Bobby. “Them kinds of jobs.”

“Well,” Dirk said, looking right at Clay, “with all due respect to those who serve, the military is our biggest jobs program. By far the biggest part of USG, and that’s a lot of jobs.”

Clay said nothing. Looked straight ahead.

Fausto spoke up for the first time. “I’ve been there. Did my tour. Two of ‘em. Thought a lot about what value my service did or didn’t have. Some of it is probably necessary. Some of it. But most of it seems to be in service of business interests. Big money that benefits from most of what we do in the armed forces. All those wars, those ‘police actions.’ That’s what I decided.”

Clay said nothing still, and nobody looked at him now, even though he was in everyone’s thoughts. The elephant in the room. Battle-scarred but not forthcoming about it. Listening, saying nothing, venturing no opinion.

Worthy said, “This is interesting stuff, Dirk. Well worth talking about. But I need to think it over before I can say any more. Get past the obvious responses I’d have to get a different perspective. What do the rest of you think? Should we continue this again soon? After we’ve had time to consider it a while? Fire’s about done for the night and so am I. Personally, I’m ready to turn in.”

They drifted away then, each toward where they bunk, seeming thoughtful and maybe wistful, too. New things to think about and old ones to let go.

Chapter Twenty-Four

She watched him from the window of the small cabin where they were living now. The view was spectacular. Bright blue sky, fat white clouds drifting past, tall trees reaching from the earth into the heavens, birds of all shapes, sizes, colors, perched in branches high and low, calling to each other. Her husband. In this new place. What a remarkable creature.

Ellen smiled softly at the thought of him, then frowned a bit. Watched some more. The way he moved. Purposeful. Strong. Athletic. So fully engaged. Enjoying every moment.

What a unique person he is. A leader only by example. Not a visionary, maybe, but a person who recognized what made sense, what was worthy (well, duh!), was valuable, what could be made to matter. By the way he grabbed onto each task that came his way, made the most of the experience, what it brought him, what it yielded. He had great taste in what interested him. Once he focused in on it, he made it his. He made others notice, follow him, just by believing and by acting so forcefully on that belief.

The CEO. Now, with like focus, he was harvesting vegetables, something or another from the long, tall troughs, raised beds so cleverly designed and built that even here in what was really wilderness they’d partially settled, those that came before them here and made it work, that even the many, varied, rapacious forces of nature that lived here with them were rarely able to get hold of it,

hungry as they might be, tempting as it was, exotic additions to the smells that enticed them. They couldn't get at it.

Each of these rows of vegetation, growing in just the right combination of sun and shade, were covered with wire cages, hinged at one side so they could be lifted and freed to work, plant, weed, harvest, and then recovered so neatly that none of the creatures who came snooping around for easy pickings were rewarded. None of their noses fit through the grid, none of their mouths tasted the produce. It was a very neatly built system and David, the engineer, admired it instinctively, the simplicity, elegance, robust build out, he was only too happy to fit himself into the process of growing and harvesting food.

Ellen loved so many things about him. How pleased, how content he was to be engaged, whatever the project, as long as it somehow intrigued him and he could make a difference in bringing it to fruition, he was completely happy. The leadership he provided, the role he found himself so often playing, came from the respect he generated in others simply by doing whatever he did so completely and so well. He was deferential to Primus, the Yelkis family, because this was their place, and he was merely a grateful member of the newly formed team. But everyone sensed the gravitas he carried with him, whatever the task.

✦

He brought a bushel in from outside. Dumped it in the sink for washing. Headed back for more. "David," Ellen said, grabbing his sleeve as he turned to leave. "We need to talk."

"Can it wait, honey? I need to get the vegetables cleaned up for dinner."

"The vegetables can wait. We need to talk. Now!"

He stopped, looked at her, surprised that she was so forceful, unsure what it could be about. "Of course, we can. What about?"

"We've been here nearly a month. You haven't touched me once in all that time."

"Oh," he said, a tone of apology about it, and moved to hug her.

She pulled away. "No, not that. You know what I mean."

He took a breath, collected himself, calculated what response might be appropriate, what to say that might say enough, not too much.

“We’ve been so busy. So much to do. So many people around. I’m sorry. All this newness. I guess I’m just slow to get adjusted to everything.”

Her look was severe, penetrating. She wasn’t buying it. He started to say more, but she raised a hand, cut him off. “I mean really talk, David. About what’s happened to us. This, this *tragedy*. It’s time to own up to what it’s done to us. What it’s doing to us. What we’re going to do about it.”

“Wow, I don’t know where to start, I …”

“Start with the fact that I was raped. Several times. That a maniac raped me, threatened to murder you, and was killed right before your eyes. And you haven’t said a word about it in all this time. Not one word. Start with that.”

He looked at her with hurt, sympathy, confusion. What to say now? Where to begin? How do you talk about something so bizarre, so unbelievable, that even having seen it, heard it, lived it, you can’t yet believe it was real? You don’t want to believe it. But there it is. Peering out at you from the dark place you try to keep it hidden. Another reality that somehow collided with your own.

“You seemed to be doing so well,” he said. “So strong. Like yourself, far as I could tell. I didn’t know what to say. Whether you’d even want to bring it up. Maybe just forget about it.”

“Forget about it?” She said it quietly but with a grimace between gritted teeth. “I can assure you I’ll never forget about it, David. Not until the day I die. It’s not something to ‘put out of your mind.’ Not something you ‘get over.’ Move on? Yes! But I won’t forget about it. Not ever.”

She fought off the tears that were welling, shook her head, then said very forcefully, “And I don’t think you can forget about it either, David. Not any part of it. Not even if you try. The question is whether *you* can move on? Whether *we* can move on? Together. I think we really need to confront this. Get it out in the open. Tell each other what it meant to us, how it left us, where we’re damaged, what we

can do about it. We can't forget about it, David. I'm pretty damned sure of that. But maybe we can heal."

He turned away from her, walked away, stood looking out a window at the trees and the meadow, came back to her. His eyes were wet. "I was terrified. That's how I felt. From the minute I saw our home, that building. Terrified. That you might be dead. That you were hurt. That you might be alive somewhere and I couldn't find you. And when I did," his voice choked, "when I did, it was unreal.

"I didn't begin to know; I couldn't know how to feel. I couldn't think straight. So sorry for you, so angry, so shocked, relieved, terrified. Finally, I was terrified. For you, for me, for us. I thought I might die. And what scared me most, if I did, was what would happen to you. With that monster."

She looked at him keenly, said, "I'm sorry you had to see me that way. It was bad enough that it happened. Better if you hadn't been there. I keep thinking that. But you saved me, David. When I saw you standing there, I was stunned. Couldn't believe it was real. Prayers don't get answered, I thought. I don't pray. But I found myself saying your name, over and over, when I couldn't allow myself to think of anything else. You were my touchstone. Then, there you were. Like a dream. A nightmare became a dream.

"Then he was there, and it was a nightmare again. For both of us now. I was so ashamed. Scared, nauseated, hateful. But mostly I was ashamed. For you to see me like that. To hear what he said. To have you suffer with me. Oh, god! David, I'm so sorry. But I can't undo it. And neither can you."

They both were crying now, tears falling freely, quietly, and they came into each other's arms. Held each other gently, both of them fragile, knowing there was more to come. But they had started.

✦

"The truth is: Clay saved us both. I asked him to stay with Gracie while I went to find you. When I went to check out that place. He saw Sink leave, but he saw him double back, too. Or figured that he had, anyhow. Knew I was in trouble, long before I did. If he hadn't followed me …"

”I don’t want to go there. What’s done is done. Thank god it worked out the way it did.”

“I’ll tell you. I don’t know that I believe in fate, but Clayton Embry is some kind of miracle. If it weren’t for Gracie, I’d never have met him. If we’d never met him, he might not have saved Gracie. And you. And me. The guy is kismet.”

“There’s a lot of truth in that. But what *is* the deal with him? Who the hell is he? He’s no street person, that’s for certain. He’s educated. Smart as a whip. Moves like a guy who’s very self-assured. And, well, he killed that man like he knew what he was doing, like it wasn’t the first time. Am I right? You saw it. So why is he dressed up like he is, living like a hobo? We really need to get straight with him. And I think he needs the help. Something clearly isn’t right here.”

“He’s trying to get a handle on it. Talking to Bella, who’s supposed to be very good. She helped Ailey get off the streets, break a very serious habit, get a grip on the deeper stuff that’s haunting her. Holly told me that in private, when I asked about whether she’d be the right person for Clay. Got to start somewhere.”

“I hope he gets what he needs. It seems to me like he’s wearing a very elaborate costume, this whole homeless person routine. It’s like if I designed a home for someone. One of my commissions. It’s a careful construct. There’s the practicality, the comfort, the glamour, then there’s the ruse. I don’t mean to be cruel. It isn’t like that. Just that it doesn’t suit him. Do you know what I mean?”

“Absolutely. Everything about him is contrary to what he shows us. The little time I spent in grad school, my Ivy dive I call it, was full of guys who remind me a lot of him, if you can believe it. The same presence, self-assurance, never flinch, never back down. The upper crust backstory that plays out over many generations. It’s like some genetic manifestation of the inevitable. You look at him, he’s wretched, but you see him in action, and it all seems like an act. But I *don’t* think he’s acting. Not at all. Something very strange has a grip on him.”

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“At least we’re talking,” she said. “Like we’re a couple again, and not two people living this existence, just by chance.”

“Ellen, I want to be what you need me to be. I just don’t know what that is. You know? There’s this trauma we’re trying to deal with; the two of us, three with Gracie, have been severely traumatized. And it’s all happened within this larger and unprecedented trauma, this total, absolute upheaval, global scale. How do we get our bearings? I just…really don’t know.”

She looked at him openly, waiting for more. What really was on his mind? Foremost, of all the things to consider, work his way through, come to terms with, make a decision, a plan, some sense of how to go forward, and where they were going? What was the sorting process in a time like this? How do the two of them shuffle through all the issues that need to be addressed, without allowing either of them an easy out of any of them, a place to hide from the other things perhaps too painful to easily volunteer?

Everything had changed. Every aspect of their lives together was different and unresolved. Where they live, where they work, their financial status, how they school their child, this newly forming society they inhabit, what they set out each day to accomplish, and why.

What matters most to her of all the inventory of their lives disrupted is: what has changed between us, this pledge of partnership, this marriage, and has it changed, can it change, for the better? We’ve been wounded, very seriously. How will we come out of it? Strengthened? Weakened? Whenever, however they manage to work their way through all those points of tenderness, soreness, pain, sorrow, defeat, hope, aspiration, elation, whatever it takes to do that, to cover all that ground in a vast, sere, frightening landscape, she wants an answer to that question before she’ll rest.

“You said I haven’t talked about what happened yet. The place you said we should begin. I feel like a child trying to walk. Take that first step. Fall flat on my face. That’s how I feel.”

“We’ve gotten started,” she said. “It’s painful. We know that. It hurts. But we have to get said whatever there is to say, David. We have to hear from each other. Hear each other. This is too big to let it stand between us unmentioned, unidentified, like some hideous creature hiding under the bed. It will keep us apart if we let it. If

we’re afraid to face it, head on. I want to believe we’re stronger than that. Our marriage is stronger than that.”

“I love you, Ellen. I always have and always will. Nothing can change that. Nothing. Not even this.”

“Then let’s do the work to make it good again. Make us whole again. Take that step, and then the next one. Get up if you fall down. I’ll help you. You can help me. We need to do it, David. For Gracie, of course. But first and foremost, for ourselves. If we don’t, we’ll never be as good for her as we ought to be. And we won’t be any good for ourselves, as a couple. Because something very terrible happened, it came between us, and we’re not whole now.”

✦

“It feels almost selfish to talk about myself, how I felt going through all this. Compared to what you’ve been though, Ellen, I have trouble putting my issues, the experience, into any kind of perspective. I mean, everyone out there has suffered loss, probably suffered far more than I have. And you, who I care about more than anyone, were hurt much worse than me.”

“Whom,” she said, smiled. He looked at her oddly. “Whom I care about. Thank you for saying so. But I need to hear how you feel, have felt, through all of this. You need to tell me. We need to discuss it. Not just me, what I went through. What all of this has done to you. Don’t minimize it. I have to know.”

They were seated, facing each other. He looked past her, out the cabin window, the trees rustling in the breeze, the sky a brilliant blue, a few clouds drifting past in the distance, a blue jay in the foreground on a branch, screeching very adamantly about something. He took a deep breath, actually shuddered very slightly, looked directly at her, began.

“The threat to you and Gracie, that was my greatest fear. Not knowing if you survived, where you were, what worst case might be, what it would mean.” The words began to tumble out of him once he started. “Seeing our home in ruins, that was the first shock. Not the loss, I mean, yes, the loss, too, but more than that. What it meant to see it and realize the possibility that everything was lost. My wife, my daughter, our home, our businesses, our life together.

“This is just the personal things. All the suffering, the death, destruction. Of course, that affected me. Deeply. But it was the selfish concerns, the people I love, our family, the place we made a home together, all the work we had done to make our lives secure, comfortable. That was my first reaction.

“Hell, I even worried about that damned Mary Minette, and she abandoned our daughter to someone she didn’t know. The shock, and all, I get it. But, Christ, she was Gracie’s caregiver and she just caved.”

He looked at Helen, wondering how she was reacting. She was following his every word, appreciative, not judgmental, a little bit astonished, if anything, that he was finally opening up to her.

“Lots of things crossed my mind. Worried about my team, what would happen to them, how would I even know? Pained to see Brian that way, killed by the building we worked in, by the very same project we were working on. His watch stolen. Probably his wallet, too. I didn’t check that. Before the ground had barely stopped shaking. It was like …” He stopped before he said the word. Cleared his throat, pushed on. “Wondering about his body. Was it still there? Crushed on the sidewalk. Who would do something about it? See to his corpse. Oh, god! So many things kept running through my thoughts.”

She reached out and touched his face, held her cool hand gently against his cheek, her eyes saddened, compassionate. He was slumped forward in his chair, hands clasped between his knees, taking slow, deep breaths. He reached up and placed his hand over hers.

“Mostly though, it was you. I was panicked. Couldn’t even remember where you were that night. You told me and I had forgotten. Maybe I didn’t pay attention.” He looked at her intently. “I wondered if that was a fatal mistake I’d made. All the guilt that wells up about not doing better, the everyday things that suddenly matter so much.

“I stood there in the street, looking at the Met, trying to come to my senses, think about what to do. Where to start. It was all surreal. And then Clay was there, telling me Gracie was okay. That was so

bizarre, it really didn't even register until I was with her, saw she was safe. He saved her, took care of her.

"I tried to be calm for her, give her something comforting to hang on to. But who am I kidding? She was there, just like we were. She knew as well as I did there was nothing to say. Neither one of us mentioned you. We both were waiting to know … what? Where you were? When we'd be together again? If you were even alive? All unsaid. Both of us afraid of what the answer might be."

"And now Clayton's in the picture, right?" she said. "You talked with him about what to do?"

"Exactly. He was amazing. Very calm, astute, too. Sized up the street scene very quickly. Helped me see what was what."

"You mean Sink?" she said, and both of them drew in a breath, knew the moment was coming.

He nodded yes. "He'd been watching for me, then just watching what was going on. Saw the guy coming and going. Carrying things into the building, like that. Seemed purposeful, he said. Like he had something going on. An agenda. I kept wondering what? I went looking for him. Found that door inside the lobby. Pounded on it. Was pretty delirious, I think, but even so I saw his footprints back and forth. And I thought maybe I saw the print of a high heel shoe.

"Then I was really curious. Hopeful, I guess. And scared. When I think back on it, I really can't say how all that became my focus. I had no reason to suspect him. Didn't know a thing about him, for that matter, except he was a cop. Building security, too. The easy answer might be he was the likeliest person to know about the building, who'd been there, who'd escaped, who he might have seen, that sort of thing.

"So, I cornered him and asked. Surprised him out front later that morning. The way he reacted got my suspicions buzzing. He was like a caged animal, very wary of me, really clear he didn't want me anywhere nearby."

He was starting to tremble a little, anger seeping into his memory, too much clarity about what was coming, but also aware how easily it could have gone differently. She was looking troubled, too, now that all of it was coming up again, so fresh and raw the recollection. He asked, "Is this enough for now?"

She shook her head, no. “Tell me, David. Don’t stop now. I’m going to cry; I’m going to fall apart a little. But I want you to tell me. Maybe just this once and we’ll be done with it. Maybe not. I don’t know. But we have to do it. Please.”

“There was more than just that, too. The stuff about him. Why he made me suspicious. Something even stronger. It seemed maybe delusional at the time. I know Clay thought so when I continued to push it. The thing was, I was sure you were alive. I really thought I could feel you nearby. Actually thought I heard you calling me, saying my name. Maybe I was dreaming. But I heard you.”

He got up from the chair, walked away, to the window, around the room, trying to compose himself. He was shaking, with anger, with recollection of the fear, with recognition of how close it all came to going very wrong.

“I guess it could have been worse,” he said, almost to himself, feeling foolish as soon as he said it, wishing he hadn’t. He waited for her reaction, turned to look at her, but she simply watched him, waiting for him to continue.

He poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the counter. “Would you like some water?” he asked her.

She looked at him wistfully, then with conviction, bringing the conversation very sharply back into focus. “That’s the first thing he said to me when he led me into his place that first morning. ‘Let me get you some water. Suddenly the most valuable commodity in this upside-down world.’ I guess that’s how he drugged me. I woke up in the morning, chained to that futon with a gag in my mouth.”

David looked like he’d been slapped. She was ruthless about cutting off his evasiveness, sent him another clear message about the need to get these things said. “It’s monstrous to say these things, David, to remember how horrible it was. But we’re talking about a monster, a man who raped your wife, who nearly killed you. I want to know how it made you feel. How you still feel about it. Please do this for me. For us.”

✦

“Clay and I saw a row of screens up high along the 10th Street side of the building. Ventilation for the heat and air conditioning, we

figured. Wondered if it might give us a look inside that apartment, maybe even access if we needed it."

She smiled to herself. How an engineer tells a story. All the parts of the process. She was careful to keep it to herself. Just listened. Let him do it his way.

"We found a ladder, I got inside. There was a row of windows on the other side of the utility pod. I looked into the living room, pretty dark, very hard to see, but the door opened, and Sink came in. The light was very brief, but I saw a pair of handcuffs on the arm of the futon. No one else in the room, but still…

"Now I'm really amped. I got back to the room, told Clay what I saw. He tried to talk me down. Everything he said was reasonable, but I knew. Or, maybe, I wanted to know. To believe. Where else could you be? Well, anywhere, really. I guess I knew that. But somehow, I knew from the beginning I had to get inside that place, to see for myself, in case you actually were there.

"So, I went back. And when I got inside, you *were* there. It was stunning. I felt… I don't know. I felt like the world exploded and in the middle of all this stuff flying past me, all this noise and debris and chaos, there was this clear place in the center of everything and there you were."

He was pacing again. Walking back and forth with nervous excitement and pent-up energy that was erupting. He stopped suddenly. Shook his head as if to clear it, looked around the room, then at Ellen.

"This sounds silly. Maybe a little pretentious." He glanced at her quickly, gathered himself, pushed ahead. "But it's exactly how I felt. When I think back on it. I saw you there, in that place, and it wasn't the terror and the horror and all the terrible things that I saw. Not at first. What I saw was you as the center of my life. The way I'm oriented now, I guess you could say. There was this total mayhem outside and this unbelievable madness in this room. But what I saw when I stood there looking at you was how absolutely essential you have become to me."

She stood up, walked very slowly past where he was standing, looked out the window for a while, said, "There's a raccoon digging up something below that tree. That's what the blue jay is yelling about."

She turned back toward him, said, “What you said is very beautiful, David. Very touching. I think maybe every little girl dreams about growing up to be the center of a man’s attention. A husband who wants nothing more than her. It’s a nice, soft, fuzzy place where we can take a deep breath in this conversation. But it’s what comes next that needs to be addressed.”

“Jesus, Ellen, what do you want me to say? It was terrible. More awful than anything I could imagine. Except you being dead. So, here you were, alive, I’d found you. Alive, chained to a bed, and before I could even think of what to do, this maniac shoved a gun in my face and told me that you were his. His! My wife, it didn’t matter. He had the gun, he had you, there was nothing I could do about it. In fact, he was going to kill me. The only question was: where?”

He was shaking now, angry, frustrated, wanting not to be unkind, not to say everything the memory provoked in him. But what to say? “Is this what you want from me, Ellen? Is this what we need to talk about? This terrible, painful, excruciating shit?”

“Yes, David. This is exactly it. There I was. Raped. Not once. Several times. And he told you all about it. Right? He told you what it was like. To fuck your wife. To make me his, he said. To tell you about his orgasms. With me.”

“And yours,” he said, before he could stop himself. “With him,” he added weakly, ashamed of himself.

“Yes,” she said, shaking her head sadly, smiling though tears that were welling in her eyes, “my orgasm with him. That’s what he said, isn’t it? Maybe it’s true.

“Somewhere in all of this is the deep, dark truth of what this means to us. What it’s done to us. What we need to fix, to come to terms with, if we’re going to move on. Maybe this is it, David. The deepest point of our despair. Did your wife have an orgasm with another man? A rapist, no less! Is that the ugliest part of this entire experience?”

He looked at her with complete astonishment, like a little boy, looking for the words, the way, to express himself. “I guess,” he said, stammering, trying to speak clearly, “I mean, I just…I just can’t understand how you could?”

She began laughing. He was stunned; a look of bewilderment came over him, then anger. He moved to turn away from her, but she reached out, grabbed his arm, pulled him back to face her.

“Oh, David, forgive me. Forgive me for laughing. I’m so relieved. I’m so grateful to you for your honesty.” She continued laughing, shaking his arm as she did, and laughing harder. Tears were running down her face, but her eyes were alive, dancing, a broad smile crossing her face.

“David, this is what we needed, to reach this point. I’m laughing because it’s so simple. All this horror, all this pain, all the terrible things that happen when the world falls apart. What do we dwell on? What is it that eats away at us so deeply we can’t even talk about it? Something as simple as adolescent fears. Rivalry for the maiden’s affections. Jealousy. My virgin deflowered.

“Jesus, David. Is that all? You want me to help you understand how I could come with a rapist? I could tell you about all the exquisite torture I suffered, every fearful, painful, shameful moment of the experience. Two days and nights of the most unimaginable debasement and squalor. All of that I could tell you about and it is absolutely true. Most of all I could tell you about the shame.

“I was deeply ashamed. To be there. To be used that way. To be a victim. And, you know what was funny, David? Not funny, ha, ha, but something very odd in the midst of all that? I was ashamed to have mocked you for fearing for our safety. For warning us this earthquake could devastate our home. Our security. It happened and I was ashamed I didn’t listen. You were right and I refused to hear you. Isn’t it weird that kept running through my mind? As though I was being punished for my high-handedness, my arrogance, my privilege.

“I was ashamed to find myself suffering at the hands of this madman in a place I thought of as my sanctuary. The place I told you I felt safer than I ever had in my life. That I had told you your fears just weren’t worth my time to worry about. And now all that is gone. Our home. Our investment. That sense of safety.

“Shame is what it all was about for me, David. This oh-so-beautiful, hip, glib, glamorous, smart, successful, have-it-all woman of yours was deeply, terribly ashamed of herself. I was, David, believe me. For so

many good reasons. But not because I was raped. And certainly not because he made me come."

They stared at each other across a wide chasm of their differences, each maybe standing at the edge of the cliff, wondering if the ground would give out below them, or whether it would hold. There was a stillness that seemed absolute and terribly fragile, as though moving, speaking, even breathing might shatter it.

"Look at me, David. Look. At. Me!" She reached for his face, held his chin in her hand, his eyes finally coming back into focus, meeting hers.

"Look me in the eye and hear this. There are so many things we are facing now. An entire world to be remade. And the very least of our problems is this stupid thing sitting right in the middle of our way. I am so glad that you are able to be honest with me. Because what is eating away at you, at us, is a trifle. Nothing. Meaningless. It doesn't matter enough to give it any more of our time."

His eyes showed the hurt and more than hurt, his annoyance that she was treating him so cavalierly. "It hurts. It's not nothing. Maybe you can't understand."

"Oh, David. I do understand. That's why I'm happy. Because we can be done with it so easily."

He started to turn away from her, but she gripped his face fiercely, said, "You want to say, 'How could you?' Maybe even "How dare you?' I understand, David. I do. And I have to say to you, get over it!

"You want to know 'how dare I?' The same way you would if the situation was reversed. If some crazy woman held you captive and had her way with you. I guarantee you if she had any wits at all, she could make you come. Am I right? If sex was her thing. With her hand, her mouth, her vagina. Tell me that isn't so.

"So, let's get down to it. We've come this far. Being with that man was hideous. It was frightening, disgusting, absolutely debasing. But he knew what he wanted. He wasn't in a hurry to have it. He made it work for him. And after a few times, the revulsion I felt was deadened. The fear wasn't the same. I didn't have the strength anymore to resist him.

"If we're honest with ourselves, David, we both know how weird sex is. All sorts of things we feel, we know, we wonder about, we fear,

they’re all wrapped up in it. We think about the physical act, but it’s mental, too, so much of it, and emotional, fantastical, and probably deeply primitive at the cellular level. At some point, it becomes divorced from all of that. It operates on some sort of ethereal level in a crazy chemical stew of sensations. Just weird, any way you look at it.

“I came. With another man. That’s what we’re talking about. Well, we’ve both had that experience in our past, the coming part. You and your girlfriends, me and my boyfriends. Makes us a little jealous to think about, maybe, but we’re more mature than that. We don’t let it bother us. Maybe we don’t want to hear about it, but it happened, right? So, we don’t talk about it. And we sure don’t want to see it. To have it rubbed in our face. But that happened too. Because this time it wasn’t having sex. It was rape. And, lucky you, you got to be a part of it.

“So, David, if you can’t feel desire for me anymore because I was raped, because my body’s been used, my vagina ‘soiled,’ I’ll be terribly disappointed, very saddened, but I guess I can accept it. I’ve never been raped before, so I don’t know what to expect.

“But if you can’t ever have sex with me again, if you can’t love me, just because I had an orgasm in hell, then all I can say is grow up! Get over your teenage insecurities. This isn’t about who’s better in bed, whose dick is bigger, that nonsense. It’s about our marriage, David. Our partnership. It’s about having the strength and the courage to overcome these terrible things that have happened, and continue making a life together, for ourselves and for Gracie.

“So, I laugh because this thing is so easy to get past. Be the man, the gentleman, the enlightened person, the sweet, loving guy I know you to be. That’s all it will take. That’s all you have to do to solve this little problem. And we really should save our strength. The rest of it is going to take some work.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“I gotta say,” Mick said, “It’s really boring here. I mean. I don’t want to sound ungrateful. It’s good to be here, safe and all. I’m really lucky you guys found me. Let me stay here. I mean, who knows what

it must be like back in town. Horrible, I bet. And this isn't bad if you look at it like, maybe, a summer job or something. Chief of Motorcycle Maintenance, or whatever, up here at Camp Wherethefuckarewe. But to be here forever. Wow! It's hard to imagine."

"We won't be here forever," Fausto said. "Things are going to open up a little at a time. We're already starting to make contact with other people. Little groups like ours. That's the way it will go for a while. Then, well, we'll see."

"Any girls in those little groups we're talking to? Been thinking about that a lot since you brought it up last week."

"I'll bet you have. Horny teenager like you. Just have to find a sock you like to keep you company for now."

"Yeah, ha ha, that's funny. Not! Old guy like you, probably doesn't matter. But this is like the prime of my life, you know? It's not normal for guys like me to do without."

"Well, sonny boy," Fausto said with an exaggerated croak in his voice, "I can kinda dimly remember what it's like. Pussy, they call it, right?" They both laughed. "Look, Mick, I'm 61. Might seem ancient to you, but you better believe I can still get it up."

"Good on you. Now all we need is some girls to get it up for."

"Either that or hit on one of those fine young does come prancing through the yard at night. When the bucks aren't looking."

Mick went back to sweeping the bunk house floor. He was smiling a bit but looking a little wistful, too. A month in and it was getting to be pretty lonesome.

✦

"What about Ailey?" Fausto said one night. It was crisp outside, very clean, the smell of conifers scenting the air, the stars looking like one of those old-time kaleidoscopes where you twisted the tube in front of your eyeball and all things became possible. It was dazzling.

The thought of Ailey that way was not.

"She's really cool. I like her a lot. But she's old. Not like you but maybe 30. I won't be 20 for a while still. I mean, that's a lot."

Fausto shrugged, said nothing, went back to whittling a piece of wood twice the thickness of his arm. He was pretty good. Made them

a chillum that worked like a champ and some kind of napkin ring that, well, who knows? This appeared to be a bigger project.

"She's tough, too. Been around, I think. Really quick. Fast on her feet. Street smart, I guess they used to call it. Very invested in those two girls, though. And Gracie, now. The three of them would drive me crazy, but she seems to love it. She's good for them. Treats them with a lot of kindness, but pushes them, too. They love her."

"You sound pretty fond of her yourself," Fausto said, and struck a long, smooth, lengthwise slice from the piece of wood with his knife, which curled and fell to the floor. "This is gonna be very pretty when I'm done with it."

✦

"What's your story?" Ailey said. Mick told her.

"My folks are from, well, Ohio, kind of. My father is. My mother went to school there. That's where they met. Settled in Wyoming, where I was raised. He taught art at the local college. She was a photographer, ran the little museum in our hometown. Powell. You know it?" She shook her head, no.

"It was an okay place to grow up, I guess, but pretty small. Lots of sports and a little of everything else. I got a scholarship to L&C. Baseball. But I went there to study art. Sculpting. Really good program. Baseball not so much. Two different coaches my first two years. Kinda sucks, actually. But the art was great.

"Season ended, semester ended, got a job with maintenance for the summer. Pretty much me and a couple of old guys, the only ones around. Then this happened and they disappeared. Taking care of their families, I guess.

"Third or fourth morning after the quake, can't remember, I met Clay and David. Ellen and Gracie, too. They were crashing for the night in the art studio. We talked, things worked out, here I am."

She listened, nodded, smiled a time or two, said nothing.

"What's your story?" he asked her.

"None of your business," she said. "I work for Holly. Au pair. That's all you need to know."

That shut him up. Slammed the door on the conversation. Made him wonder if he should get up and leave? Or not? Ailey wondered if he would.

They sat on a couple of hammocks strung between trees in a grove at the edge of the meadow. Swung back and forth a bit, almost standing, facing each other, but Mick was looking elsewhere. Ailey was looking at him.

The quiet they imagined if they had thought in the past about a place in the mountains was not. Cicadas chirped, owls trilled, late working woodpeckers tapped the trees. Small animals of some kind deeper in the trees made clicking noises. The breeze made a hushing sound blowing through the fat clusters of pine needles that reached out like fingers on the branches of the trees. There were other, brief, individual noises, unidentifiable to them, maybe not to folks who'd been around here longer. Anyhow, it was full of sound.

"How do you like it here?" Ailey said, after a long pause.

"Um. It's pretty. Pretty nice. It's a nice place. Not a whole lot going on."

He thought about what he just said. How it sounded. Maybe this was supposed to be a romantic interlude in the discussion? Where he was this gentle, soulful guy and she thought he was great. Or maybe she thought he was a jerk, a kid. Just somebody she was talking to because she had nothing better to do out here in the woods. Either way, here they were.

They sat there in silence a while longer, gently rocking back and forth, thinking their own thoughts, not sharing them. He probably should ask her how she likes it, too, but he doesn't feel like it. Hasn't got the steam right now. Doesn't see the point. She might tell him to mind his own business. She wonders what he's expecting from her. Maybe nothing. Maybe more. It is pretty lonely up here. Horny kid. Very cute. Maybe she's kidding herself.

✦

"Mick, yeah, he's a cute kid," Rika said. "Kinda young, though, don't you think? Anyhow, I got the idea you and Dam were pairing up."

“Dam’s my pal.” Ailey said. “I love him. But I’m talking about sex, you know? Not a long-term relationship or anything.”

“Yeah, and?”

“Yeah, and, Dam’s gay. You didn’t know that?”

“How am I supposed to know? I barely know the guy. You think all us gay folks have some secret sign or something? I mean, really!”

They sized each other up, saw no reason for anger or animosity, both began to chuckle a little, then laugh, maybe for different reasons.

“Wow,” Rika said finally. “Black and gay in white-bread Portland. He must be made of strong stuff.”

✦

“This place of yours has really been a godsend, Dirk,” Holly said to him. “The girls love it here. They’re having a great time. And a new friend, too. I think they may have forgotten the quake. At least they’re not showing any signs it’s bothering them. I really can’t thank you enough for bringing us here.”

He smiled slightly, shrugged, started to move away.

“When I think of all the talk I heard about “your place” over the past few years. Almost like it was a joke, or something. Darth Vader’s dark palace in the hills. That sort of stuff. If I was part of it, I’m sorry.”

“You were always a straight shooter with me, Holly. I never had any problems with you.”

“Everybody respected you, Dirk. I don’t know if it matters to you, or not, but they all did. You’re just more serious about things than a lot of us were. Now, here we are, having to think about a lot of these things you’ve always called out. What’s going on in this country. Especially now.”

“And what we can do about it. That’s the key. I never felt very hopeful in the past. But this thing that’s happened. This disaster. It’s made things clear in a way people can’t help but see. All the distractions are gone. Just the basics to deal with now. Get a look at what really matters.

“What I really hope they’ll see is what a great opportunity we’ve been given to change things. The fundamental things. Stuff I always knew was wrong but never thought it could be stopped.”

He looked down at the ground, hands in his pockets, said quietly, “Here I go again with the rants. No wonder they always thought I was crazy. Can’t seem to stop myself.”

“You’re a smart guy, Dirk, and you care. A lot of smart people these days. But you’ve got a soul, too. You pay attention. I think you just want the rest of us to pay attention, too.”

She was nothing less than stunned and more than a little flattered when he turned and hugged her.

✦

She cornered him while he was working on one of the motorcycles, maybe polishing it or something. “So, I hear the story you told me is bullshit,“ she said. She wasn’t smiling.

“What?” he said.

“Your story. I asked you, you told me.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t true. That’s a problem. We shared our stories. Yours was bullshit. No point in talking if you don’t tell the truth.”

“You didn’t tell me anything.”

“At least I didn’t lie to you.”

“Yeah, you just told me it was none of my business.”

“That’s the truth.”

He shrugged. His body language said, what do you want from me? She just looked at him, waiting for more. He grew increasingly uncomfortable under her harsh gaze.

“What?”

“Why did you lie to me? I just asked you what your story was. Not what kind of a story you could make up to entertain me. I thought you liked me.”

“I do like you, Ailey. I do. That’s, well, that’s maybe the problem. I didn’t want you to think I’m some kind of jerk. You know? Can you understand that?”

“No, I don’t understand that. Not at all. Why would I think you’re a jerk? What I think is, now, I think you’re a liar. But I don’t know why.”

He leaned back against the bike, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders slumped, looking at the ground.

“My friend, John, grew up in Powell, played baseball, did his art. Met him at college, got to know him, wanted his story to be mine. It seemed so easy and normal, the way he came up. The way I wished it could be. Mine wasn’t that way. I didn’t want to tell you that. I wanted something you could admire, I guess. To be that. Something that made me more regular. Not to feel sorry for me”

“Regular? You’re a regular character, I can tell you that, for sure, if that works for you. Anything more, I can’t say until you tell me who you really are.”

He scuffed his boots back and forth in the dirt, like he was trying to erase something there. He shrugged again, took a deep breath, sighed, looked really hopeless and forlorn. Young and distraught. Wounded, even.

“I’m not making fun of you, Mick. Don’t think that. But I’m really angry. We barely know each other, stuck up here in the middle of all this craziness, and it was nice, I thought, that we could talk a little. Make the effort to connect, you know? I was surprised and, yeah, hurt, when I found out what you told me wasn’t true. That’s all. It’s as simple as that. I didn’t think I deserved it.”

“You didn’t!” he said, straightening up, suddenly animated. “You didn’t deserve it. It was…I was stupid. Nervous, I guess. I wanted you to like me and I sort of gave you the version I wish was the truth instead of what it really is, which isn’t, uh, it isn’t very pretty, attractive, whatever. Maybe just boring.”

“Why don’t you just try me and let’s see where it goes. The truth, though, this time. Nothing but. Don’t try to con a con man. Understand?”

✦

“So, your mother’s a drug addict? That’s something I know all about. Been there, done that.”

“You didn’t have a kid though.”

“How do you know?”

“Did you?”

“No. It could have happened, I guess. Never wanted a child, though. Not me. Maybe your mother did. Before she got hooked.”

“Maybe it just happened, right? Like she and my dad didn’t have anything better to do. Hey, let’s have a kid! Sure, why not? She probably thought a baby would cement the deal. Truth is I think they both got married just to move their fates somewhere other than what they were born to, blue collar squalor, call it.”

“That’s pretty harsh.”

“Maybe. I don’t think so. Better than saying ‘white trash.’ They were two kids from poor families, wanted nothing but to get away, got together, she got knocked up. Bingo. Here I am. Simple as that.”

“They took care of you, didn’t they? You weren’t homeless or anything. Right?”

“Yeah, I think they did their best. For a while. My dad had a few different jobs, trying to find something that worked. We lived in the same neighborhood, couple of different houses, until I was five or six. Then he joined the Army. His chance to be a hero, instead of a minimum wage yahoo back home.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with that. Lots of poor folks get squared away in the military. G.I. Bill, college tuition, healthcare, stuff like that.”

“He did it to get away from home. That’s what I think. To get away from her, too. I know that’s what she thinks. Army Ranger. He went off to Afghanistan, Iraq, some deal in Africa, one tour after another. Big adventure. She got to stay home with me. Went down the drain pretty quickly.”

“How did you get to college?”

“Studied, worked to keep my grades up, student loans, half scholarship. Last thing I want to do is end up like them. It kept me focused.”

“You hear from your folks much these days?”

“Not much. My dad sometimes. He called me once last year. A few emails now and then. Guess that won’t happen for a while. I’m pretty sure he’s been back in the states a couple of times without telling me. Not sure why, but I suppose he’s got other things going on.”

“Looking for your mom, maybe?”

“I doubt it. Probably has another girl by now. R&R, you know?”

She looked at him sharply but softened when she saw how guileless he was about it. Just the way guys think about those things.

Maybe forgive the young ones. His loneliness was palpable. Another kid unmoored, emotionally adrift. Not even looking for love, but just connection. Maybe a little sex, too.

✦

"We've been talking about your amnesia," Bella said, "if that's what it is. Clinically speaking, I mean. The more we've had a chance to get to know each other, the more a term occurs to me that might better describe your condition."

"And that would be?" Embry said.

"I keep thinking 'induced amnesia.' That's how it strikes me."

"What does that mean in terms I can understand? In layman's…" he hesitated, smiled, "in layperson's terms."

"The common term is 'brainwashing.' Does that make any sense?"

He looked at the light in the window above the desk behind her, began to nod slowly to himself, saying quietly, "Brainwashing?" His mouth repeated the movement of making the word several times without saying it aloud.

"That's interesting," he finally said, looking at her again. "I guess the question would be why?"

"Why do I think that or why was it done to you, if in fact it was?"

"Why would someone brainwash me?" he said, adding, "If in fact they did."

"I can think of a lot of possibilities, but all of them would be because there is something someone wanted you to forget."

"Such as?"

"Possibly because you were badly injured, and the trauma was such that your best path for getting beyond it was by forgetting. That would be a logical explanation, if not, I wouldn't think, a legitimate therapeutic solution."

"You're saying that brainwashing, induced amnesia, whatever you want to call it, is not an ethical approach to therapy?"

"It's highly unethical, in my opinion. I think the entire medical community would agree with me."

"Why then do you think that's what we're dealing with in my case?"

“We’ve spoken at length about your situation, and I simply can’t think of any other explanation.”

“If we don’t know why, and maybe it was my injuries, maybe something else I don’t remember, I guess the next question is: who would prescribe that sort of treatment and who would conduct it?”

Bella sat back in her chair and looked at Embry with a gaze that seemed to be both confrontational and empathetic simultaneously. He felt her probing his mental acuity, his stability, his equilibrium. They had covered a lot of unsettling ground in their several sessions together, but cautiously, her probing, his receptivity. Slowly they had made progress. Building trust if not, so far, in shining light in his dark places. Now she seemed to be assessing his readiness to take the plunge. Wondering how deep it would be. What options might be better than head-on. None occurred to her.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about exactly that question. If we can find out who, we might see why. Then perhaps we can begin to undo it.”

His eyes met hers with a clarity she’d never seen from him before. There was a radiance, brief but distinct, a glimpse into an intelligence and strength that was fighting to maintain a hold on sanity in a miasma of confusion. He nodded an affirmation. “Let’s do it.”

“Alright,” she said, and took a deep breath, exhaled, said “have you ever been a part of the so-called Black Ops world? Intel? CIA? Military Intelligence? Any of that sort of thing?”

His chair lifted from the ground, began to swirl with a strong breeze that blew him into the air and held him, slapping his hair and beard, tearing his eyes, loud in his ears. The room without walls. Familiar but frightening, frothy, blustery, without bearings, unbound from comprehension, known but unknowable.

The wind was a dust storm, a hurricane, a whirling, thundering circumstance in which he was suspended, tossed about, shaken, thrashed, but this time he was not alone. There was a presence felt at first as something ominous and scary for never having been noticed. His eyes scanned the mayhem, seeing all the debris and pieces of memory swirling past him. Then, suddenly, there! In the doorway behind him was a guy in a lab coat, a pen and tablet in hand, nodding, making notes, making a clicking sound with the side of his mouth, untouched by the chaos, unmoved by Embry’s confusion.

✦

“What’s up, boss man?”

Worthy laughed, said, “You’re the boss man here, Dirk. I’m just a freeloader living off your generosity.”

“Wanted to have a talk. You got time?”

“Nothing but. What’s on your mind.”

“I’d like to suggest we put together a council. Sort of a roundtable, really. All the people here talk through where we’re at, what we’re thinking about doing. That sort of thing.”

“Tell me more.”

“Everybody’s gotten pretty well settled in, which is great. Finding their place, getting a routine in play, coming to terms with what’s happened and how everything’s changed.”

“Yeah. I’m one of them. Getting my bearings. Really grateful to you for putting us up. Giving us all a place to regroup.”

Primus interrupted, waved him off, said, “Not about that. I’m glad you’re here. Everybody. Really happy this place came to so much good for all of us. But it’s not that.”

He got that look, a little obstinate, a little sheepish, took a breath, started again. “You’ve all heard me rant. I suppose by now I’m famous for it. Notorious maybe is a better word. I guess I can’t help it. When I get going, it just has its own momentum. I don’t want to fall into that routine.

“But I do want to know what we all think we’re going to do about all this. This, uh, new life we’ve been handed. You said, ‘regroup.’ That’s what we’re doing but for what purpose? What I wanted to ask is if you would take the lead on getting a conversation going? Among all of us.

“I mean, I don’t think we can just sit here in the hills for the rest of time. I’d really like to know how people see the future. What does it look like to them? How do we think we ought to proceed? Where do we want to go? What are the first steps we should take? That sort of thing. I think you’re the guy to do it. Being the strategic thinker I know you to be. Lead the discussion, I mean.”

“I’d be happy to do what I can. But let me ask. What do you hope we might accomplish?”

“Focus in on seizing this opportunity. Our entire world’s been undone. It has to be rebuilt from scratch. So, what do we want to make the New Northwest? A replica of what it was. Or do we want to look at all the problems we had then and take a different approach?

“Scary, I guess, but also really exciting. How often do you get the chance to reinvent a society? Here I go ranting again. Let me say it plain and simple. I’d like to have a conversation about what we’d like our world to be. All of us. Can we do that?”

“Well,” Worthy said, searching for something to say that wasn’t dismissive, didn’t react with disrespect to the man’s passion for dreaming big dreams, “it’s good to get that conversation started. I mean, I think we’re all getting over the shock, the first wave of it anyhow. We need to come to terms with where we’re at and what comes next. I guess I don’t want to disappoint you, though. Know what I mean? It may nothing but baby steps.”

Primus laughed, appreciated Worthy’s efforts to sidestep the obvious. “Yeah, I get it, David. We might find out I’m the only philosopher in town, right? But I’ll tell you what. I’ll bet I’m not the only one with a vision. Some of us might surprise you. Sometimes you just have to ask.”

He looked around the room, although they were alone, as if he wanted to be sure he wasn’t overheard, finally said, “I should let you know, too, we’ve made contact with the governors.”

“The governors? You mean, ours?”

“Yeah, Clay, Bobby, and I ran across them on the ham radio a couple of times. Like I told you a few weeks back. Turner, Braun, and the guy from Washington. We finally broke into the conversation. Just the other day. Surprised them a bit, I think, but they were cool. Asked us more than a few questions, then put us on to one of Governor Braun’s staff. He’s to be our point person. Wants the sort of information that I’m asking you to talk about with the group.”

“Did they say why?”

“Nope. But earlier we heard them talking about different ideas for starting from scratch. Like they’re maybe considering big stuff. Thinking long range, along with just trying to get their basic shit together. Could be very interesting.”

✦

Ellen Worthy was in bed. The light was low. Gracie was staying the night with the girls. David was reading at the desk. She sat up against the headboard, removed her t-shirt, stretched her long arms languorously above her head, lifting her breasts and tightening her stomach. She was gorgeous and knew it.

“David,” she said quietly. He glanced at her, smiled, nodded, went back to reading. “David!” she said more forcefully, and he looked at her again, turning in his chair, a questioning expression on his face.

“It’s time,” she said, crooking a finger, gesturing: come here. “Now.”

He stood up, walked toward her slowly, smiling weakly, his body language not what she was hoping for. She got up, completely naked, radiant, took him in her arms, kissed him lovingly, passionately, began to undress him. He was less responsive than she hoped, but slowly he began to return her passion.

They were awkward, he came quickly, she cried a little in frustration. He was sheepish, apologetic, “It’s been a long time,” he said. “Yes, it has” she said.

✦

Damian Moody had been perhaps the most low-key of anyone at Dirk’s place. He was very helpful, with food preparation, with the kids, with any of the chores that needed doing. But he was reserved, too. A little uncomfortable, perhaps, or just withdrawn. Ailey finally asked him.

“Ah, I don’t know, Ailey. It’s great here. I like all you guys just fine.” He thought about it for a moment, added, “maybe I feel a little bit like a fish out of water, you know?”

She just looked at him, waited for him to say more.

“Kinda like Kareem in Milwaukee, I guess is how I feel.”

“Kareem in Milwaukee?” she said. “Am I supposed to know what that means? If so, I plead ‘huh’?”

“Ah, my father was a huge fan of a kid named Lew Alcindor. Said he was the greatest basketball player he ever saw. This was way before Michael and LeBron. He like won 70 some straight games in

high school, went to UCLA, won three straight NCAA championships, was the number one draft choice, which took him to the Milwaukee Bucks. He led a mediocre team to the championship in maybe 1970 or 71, somewhere in there, and became a Black Muslim, took the name Kareem Abdul Jabbar.

"That shook people up a little, but this was the time of Muhammad Ali, so it went on. He played a few more seasons for the Bucks and then "asked for," which is the way Negroes in those days demanded, a trade. He said very quietly, 'No offense, everyone here's been very nice, but this just isn't my kind of town.'

"He was a big enough star that he got his way. They traded him to the Los Angeles Lakers, where he won another 4 or 5 championships. Had a career as an actor, writer, even a diplomat."

He shrugged, smiled a little wistfully, looked at her, said, "I guess that's kind of how I feel."

"So, you want us to trade you to Los Angeles? Is that what you're saying?"

They both laughed. He said, "I just feel kind of disengaged up here, you know? Being the only black guy in the group is nothing new. I got beyond it a little because I always loved solving problems. Puzzles. Challenges. Things you dig into and figure out. What I did for David. That's what makes me hum.

"Up here, I mean, nice place and all. Really lucky to have it available to us. But I feel like we're all just playing for time, maybe. Something like that. I don't feel like I have a role here that makes any difference."

Ailey reached out, touched his shoulder, put her arms around him, held him close, said, "I think we all feel that way. It's been a shock and we haven't recovered yet. It's like we're just beginning to clear our heads, shake the dust off, get ready to have a life again."

"True that. I mean, the biggest problem we've had so far is getting more clothes for everybody. Bobby Yelkis and his wife – god, I still don't know her name, that's embarrassing – they took care of that. Good stores up there on the Res. Everything else up here pretty much runs like clockwork. I keep wondering what I could be doing more than cooking steaks and chasing the kids around."

“I haven’t accomplished anything either, looking at it like that. I mean, I’ve felt pretty good in some ways. This is the cleanest place I’ve ever been. Lived in, you know. All this nature. Sort of a long way from where I used to be. The care and feeding of Ailey has been such a gift, like what Holly has done for me is golden. But it’s not like my life is defined by being an au pair, any more than by being a tramp on the streets. Do you know what I mean?”

“Sure. This is a beautiful place to enjoy the respite. Right? But not the end game. Not the future rolling out before us, clear to see.”

“Yeah, there’s not much of anything that’s clear to me right now. Except how lucky we are to be here. How much worse all this could be.”

“True that. I get it. But I can’t help feeling impatient. Like I want to get after it. Whatever ‘it’ is. Sometimes this feels too much to me like suspended animation. Like everything just stopped. Waiting for the next reel in the movie to start.”

“Well, the movies are probably rolling in L.A. But even if we traded you there,” she said, smiled at him, and put a hand on his shoulder, “it would be a helluva long ride, even if Bobby lent you one of the horses.”

“Ha!” he said. “I was hoping they’d send the limo.”

✦

“You’re probably wondering why I called you here,” Worthy said. He looked at the group. They looked back at him. Dumb thing to say, he thought when nobody laughed. “So, I’ll get right to it.”

“Is Dirk kicking us out?” Mick said. Then everybody laughed.

“Not so far, although we may have to start paying rent one of these days. But he did ask me, and I agreed, to have a conversation among ourselves about where we’re at. Not here in this place, I don’t mean, but personally. How are we doing? What are we thinking about? Where do we see the future, and how are we going to get there? What does it look like? All that kind of stuff.”

“That sounds like Dirk,” Holly said, and everybody laughed again. Dirk was sitting back in a corner. They couldn’t tell if he laughed or not.

“Seriously, David,” Bella said. “I think it’s a great idea. We’re settled in. Had a couple of weeks to process the shock of it all. And it’s a helluva shock. Nice as it is, though, we know we can’t just hole up here forever. My two cents, it’s time to have this discussion. I’d really like to hear what all of you are thinking.”

“I agree,” Holly said. “I spend time thinking about what’s been lost, but some time too thinking about what might lie ahead of us. I have kids. What’s the future going to be for them? What do I have to do to make ready? This entire experience has been traumatic, totally disorienting, but it’s been a strange kind of meditation, too.” She looked around the room, said, “Do you know what I mean?”

“The kind we never had time for before,” Dam said. “Work was always my meditation. It kept me balanced. Been very different not having that reference point the past few weeks. But, yeah, I know what you mean. Whole lot of time to think big thoughts.”

Worthy waited for the next comment, when none came, he said, “I’ve been surprised about my reaction to this change. I miss the work, too, the routine. The excitement of making things happen together like we did. The teamwork. But something about the experience has made me very thankful.

“Just to know my family is safe, that we’re here among friends. Old and new both,” and here he nodded at Clay, Bella, Rika, Mick. “Having this place, too, has been a godsend.”

Clay looked unlike the person they had met on the streets, traveled with, and gotten to know briefly in their time here in the mountains. Rika had cut his hair. He’d been shaving. Looked very different, and strangely, his scars were more apparent but less disturbing. He had a clarity about him that was new to most of them. Only David had seen that side of him to any degree and only in brief glimpses confounded by the opacity that surrounded him like fog. Now things about him were becoming clearer.

“Some of us are worse off than we were,” he said. “Our lives disrupted. Homes lost. All that. But some of us are better off now. More to sort through, more to glean. And for some of us it’s not all that different. To each his own.

“A point of meditation might be whether this experience has given us any better understanding of those people. The ones who are no

worse off today and maybe even better off than they were before the earthquake. They were already living a disaster before nature had her way with the rest of us.

“Thanks to Dirk we have a place to stay. Shelter, food, safety even. But most all the people out there are closer now to my world than they are to yours. The one you used to know.”

Fausto leaned forward in his chair, looked at Embry, then the floor, said, “I know exactly what you mean.” Looked at Holly for a minute, then back at the floor. “I’ve never been a meditator. Hmm! But I’ve thought about all these people I’ve seen on the streets; how close they are to me. Me to them. You know? I’ve been a metal bender all my life, making hinges and fences and security gates out of iron. Proud of what I do. But it’s about this close,” and he held up his hand, thumb and forefinger an inch apart, “from the streets. I’ve just been lucky. Lucky somebody gave me a skill when I was starting out. Lucky people keep pumping money into their homes. Otherwise, I got no education, no degree, or credentials. Don’t know anybody either, ‘cept Dirk.” Everybody laughed. “How far’s that gonna get me?”

“Got you here,” Mick said. Looked around, got a little wide-eyed, said, “Hell, I’m the lucky one. You guys took me in. Gave me a place when everything went south. I’m in the same situation as you,” he said to Fausto, “except I owe about $25 grand for college so far and I’ve got nothing to show for it. Nowhere close to a degree. No skills either, for that matter. Not I can think of. Wasn’t for you guys, I’d probably be on the streets by now, hustling for food and stuff.”

“Those motorcycles made us like you right away,” said Ellen. “One day on the road, I was already tired of walking.” She smiled at him, shined that beauty on him, which embarrassed him a little. “But we got to like you for yourself, after a while.” Smiled again, more kindly this time, and laughing a little.

Ailey stood up, walked toward the front of the space where David was standing, looked at him, at the group, then spoke directly to Embry. “I’ve been on the streets. For a couple of years, like I told you. I guess all of us were there for our own reasons. But it’s different than what’s happening out there right now.

“Everybody’s out there now for one reason, the same reason. Not many of them are in a position to look down on anyone else. That’s what’s different to me. This time. Everybody’s in the same boat.”

“And it’s sinking,” Embry mumbled. “Now they know how it feels.”

“But the thing I think about is: can they see it now?”

“See what?” David said.

“How close we all are to being in that situation?” she said. “I mean, something really big like this, something huge, maybe that’s the kind of shock it takes to get us to step back and look at how we live – how we used to live – and see it in a different way. See maybe what else might be possible. If we want things to be better.”

“Sounds like you’ve been talking to Dirk again,” Holly said, and everybody laughed. “But I hear what you’re saying.

“When we were working, things going really well, you know?” And she glanced quickly at Embry before going on, “Interesting work, good pay, liked my co-workers. All of that was good. But sometimes it seemed to me like it had its own momentum that just carried us along.

“Work, family, chores, exercise, a little entertainment, just a routine that kept rolling out like a carpet we’re walking on and it’s all okay, but you don’t feel like you can stop. You know? Kind of check out sometimes and look at things from a different angle. Because the carpet keeps rolling.

“It isn’t like you don’t see the people who are hurting,” and here she was looking at Embry, speaking directly to him. “It’s just that you don’t know what to do about it and don’t really have the time to figure it out even if you want to. Things move too fast and, at least for me, you’re afraid to stop moving with them. You start to think that’s just the way things are. All of it.”

“Yeah,” Dam said, “And one reason we don’t stop is ‘cause we can kind of sense how close we are to being in that place, too. We’re well-armed, we think. Got our degrees, training, skills, all the tools. We know we’re lucky that we’re not in that place, but we don’t know why we’re lucky. And we know luck can change.”

Nobody said anything then. It was as if they expected Embry to respond but he seemed content with the conversation. Finally, Worthy said, “That’s all true and it’s understood by the people in charge. When I did my MBA sabbatical, they teach management to cultivate

that uncertainty. Use it to keep people pushing, don't let your team get comfortable. No tenure for the business world. Everybody needs to sweat."

"You don't do that, David," Ellen said.

"Not egregiously. But the system makes it implicit. We do our job. We worry about doing it well. Pride, self-respect? Sure. But at its core, we don't want to screw up because we all fear losing our job. That's the motivation.

"Look up and it's all hosanna and Gabriel's trumpet, stuff of dreams. But look down and its scary. A long way to fall."

He looked at Embry. "I think all of us see these people on the streets and we wish we didn't have to see them. Everywhere we look, we see reminders of what *isn't* working in our society. All these people, panhandling, pouring through trash barrels looking for cans and bottles, sleeping in doorways, on benches and sidewalks. It's pretty damn clear this system we're all supporting, and that's supporting us, isn't working for everybody. And we're reminded, too, that's where you end up when it doesn't work for you. Maybe it could be us if things went wrong."

Rika spoke up then, said, "The closer we are to those desperate situations the more we look kindly on our social contract. Not so much, maybe, when we're all doing well and having fun. We Americans are selfish that way.

"My ancestors in Japan have a much different relationship with family and community. They are above the individual, more important than any one person's needs or desires. What matters most is the well-being of the family and the larger community. And that extends to the entire nation. It's a different way of valuing prosperity. I am rich if my family is healthy and happy, if my community is content and no one is wanting."

"How does that work in our society?" Dam said. "True that we all might be driven by a fear of failure. But it's also a basic tenet that we are competing. Competing to get ahead, yes, but also to get ahead of each other. Ego driven."

"Yeah," Mick said. "They always tell us competition brings out the best in us, but sometimes it seems like it brings out the worst. At least

how we react to winning. Like, aren't jocks everywhere the biggest assholes?"

"CEOs, too," Dam said. "But not you, David."

"I'll cop to it," David said with a laugh. "I mean, we all get pretty full of ourselves when things are going well."

"I made a business out of feeding those egos," said Ellen. She wasn't laughing. "'Show 'em you can afford it' was the message. 'Show 'em *you're* making it.'"

"And those others aren't," said Embry. "That's the other part of the experience when you're on the streets. People wish you'd just go away," and he looked directly at Worthy, "so all these dirty people don't clutter up your picture of prosperity. They know they're better than you. That's a given. They don't need to actually see you to remember it. Something like that."

"It seems like we've all made our apologies to Clay," said Bella. "Thanks to him for being our resident homeless person for the purposes of this discussion." She smiled his direction, a hint of the intimacy they'd developed in her brash way of putting it. "Although we're all homeless now. So, there's that.

"And all those comments are germane to the issue, too, which is as I understand it not just what we see was wrong with where we were before this huge disruption in our lives, but what we might do about it going forward. Is that right, Dirk?"

"I'm mainly here to listen," he said, and then with a smile, "just to keep you all off guard. But, yes, to answer your question. They go hand in hand. What did we see that bothered us, got our attention, maybe made us want to look the other way? And what might we do differently now that we're sort of starting over?"

"For me," Bella said, "it's a chance to look at our lives in a very big picture. Bring a fresh perspective and some critical thinking skills to the question. What question? Simple? How could we do better than we were doing? As individuals looking at the entire society we need to rebuild."

"Let me frame this in a marketing perspective." Holly said, looking around at all of them as she stood up and moved to the front of the group. "We are going forward with the same set of values and beliefs that our free enterprise system was founded on, all those years

ago. We act as though certain aspects of what we do are immutable. If we changed them, the system would collapse. This is a zero-sum game we're playing here. The way we know we're winning is because other people are losing.

"We believe that fear of failure is essential to motivate the mass of people. How else do we get them off their butt? Show them hunger, show them homelessness, give them a healthy dose of humiliation to consider if they might lose their job, their home, their way. Make certain we all see the price of failure. See it vividly. How else are we going to get them to take all these shitty jobs and bust their ass from puberty to death just to keep the wolf from the door?

"We preach the dignity of having a job, the sense of self-worth it brings you, your place in the community of achievers. All of that is true for most everybody only to the degree that it elevates you above destitution and failure.

"Real dignity would come with having work you're proud of for what it is, not what it buys you. For the sense of pride and fulfillment you gain by doing it, not for what you get paid to do it. And certainly, not because it's simply a step up from destitution.

"We keep selling the belief you're lucky to have a job, whatever the hell it entails. How else are we going to get people to do all the mind-numbing, soul-crushing labor that industry requires anymore? How else can we get people, the lucky ones, to spend fifty or sixty hours a week sitting in their cubicles, building models of the world we're just too damn busy to live in? No offense, David. I love my job. It's great, it's glamorous, it pays very damn well. But do I love it that much? So much that I spend more time there than with my own children? Is that really what makes me a success?"

Dirk finally spoke up. "Gonna have my say now," he said, looking around and raising his hands, palms out, "but for once I'm gonna make it brief.

"We've talked about being motivated by fear, about feeling guilt, about having the sense we can't get off the treadmill. What strikes me about where we are right now, what this catastrophe has presented us with, is the chance to do just that: get off the treadmill long enough to take a hard look at ourselves and what we do, day in and day out. We serve the system. That's what we do"

He looked around the room again, at everybody there.

“I said I’d make it brief, so here’s the thought I want to insert into this discussion. It’s the system. That’s what’s at the heart of everything we’re talking about. And right now, at least for a little while, the system is broken. Question for me is: what will it look like when we rebuild it?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Bella tells me you’re ready to get back in touch with your family,” David said to Clay. The two of them and Dirk were standing near the big corral where the horses were kept when they weren’t out grazing in the pasture.

“Yeah,” Clay said. “I think I’m finally clear enough to make sense when I talk to them. Don’t know what they’ll make of the whole thing, but I’ve kept them waiting long enough and I’d like to get started making amends. Just don’t know how to get in touch yet. Maybe a carrier pigeon?”

“We can make that happen,” Dirk said.

The other two looked at him, waiting.

“You know something we don’t know?” David finally said. “Cell service coming back sometime soon?”

“Doubt that,” Dirk said. “I’ve got a satellite phone at the house. That’ll get you through.”

“Wasn’t expecting that. Now I have to give some serious thought to what I have to say. Hard to understand it myself, let alone explain it to my folks. They’re going to have some questions I can’t answer.”

“I expect they’ll be plenty glad to hear from you,” David said. “Whether or not it makes sense to them is another matter.”

“Well, being staunch New England Yankees, I know they think this is wilderness out here even in the best of times. Not sure they can begin to imagine what it’s like right now.”

“Not to mention how you ever ended up here,” Dirk said. “Not sure any of us can.”

“We’re working on it. Bella has really helped me clear away the fog, at least a lot of it. She’s convinced the thing with women is the

key. All the effort to figure out that weird glitch in my memory keeps stumbling over the same tripwire. Soon as I remember people, women that is, my mind seems to be determined to forget them again."

"Tripwire, Dirk said. "Interesting choice of words."

"How so?"

"Forgive me if I'm too blunt here, but it's obvious somebody's been fucking with your mind. Who does that kind of thing? Government!" He turned to David, held up a hand. "Not conspiracy theory. Just logic. Who else does this shit?"

"Not disagreeing with you," David said, looking from Dirk to Clay and back, sizing up both. "Just wondering where you're going with it."

"You good with this?" Dirk said to Clay.

"I'm interested. What else?"

"Military seems most likely. Those scars you're carrying are fresh, and they don't look domestic to me."

Clay interrupted him. "Tell me something I don't know. I have a military pension. Discharge papers. Plenty of evidence that's where I came from, what I was doing. Seems obvious I got clobbered by some kind of explosives."

He looked back and forth from one to the other. The most talking he'd done about it with anyone other than Bella. Considering how far he wanted to go if he decided to continue. David and Dirk said nothing. Just waited.

"Thing is, I don't believe I ever enlisted in the Army, which is where the pension comes from. I'm certain I didn't. I do remember conversations with my family about something I was going to do, but I can't pin down what it was."

"Well, that's something you can learn from them, right?" David said. "That might clear up a lot of this."

"That's my concern right now. What I'm going to learn and how I handle it."

"You said, 'tell me something I don't know,'" Dirk said. "This all smells like Black Ops. The only thing that makes sense."

"That's what Bella asked about, too," Clay said. He seemed to wobble a little, took a minute to compose himself. "It does seem to make sense, and every time we go down that path, it feels a little

closer to the truth. So, maybe that's what I'm going to learn when the smoke clears."

He looked at them with that mixture of questioning and confrontation they'd seen in him more frequently of late. "That would answer: what? The question still is: why? Not sure who can tell me that."

✦

"Didn't seem like the right time to talk about the other stuff," David said to Dirk, after Clay had wandered away, looking a little shaky. They had agreed he'd make the call soon, after he'd had some time to think his way through what he wanted to say and what he was ready to handle.

"Yeah, too much to pile on the guy right now. He's been living in the dark and getting ready to step through a door into the blinding sun. Can't blame him for wanting to get prepared. Gotta be a little scary wondering what you'll find out."

"He's opened up a lot since he's been seeing Bella. Told me the other day what he remembered about his family. New England blue bloods, it turns out. Father is an investment banker. Got the impression he meant the family owns the bank. Mother is one of the Byrds of Virginia. Daughters of the Revolution, that. Sisters are New York debutants. All of that's come back to him with Bella's help. He remembers lots of details, names, phone numbers, that stuff but he's still trying to make sense of it. Not the sort of background to end up on the streets."

"Got a lot to figure out there. Hope we can learn something about what the rest of the country knows. What they think's happening here. Don't want to get you started on my paranoia, but there appears to be some sort of lockdown on media coverage. There's been a few reporters and cameras on the ground, helicoptered in and out, but from what we can tell, there's not much in the news except the official story. A minor catastrophe we have here by all accounts. The infrastructure's down, no communications, of course, but otherwise all's well, you know. Recovery underway. Proceeding apace."

"You know that how?"

“What we’ve heard from eavesdropping on the governors. Surprised them when I finally jumped into the conversation, but they heard me out. Wanted to know what I knew, what we were dealing with, what we’ve seen. Told them then exactly what I thought, that we were discussing as a group where we want to see things go when the recovery is really underway. Maybe lost them a little when I started in on opportunity.”

David tried not to laugh, but when Dirk smiled and shrugged, they both laughed.

“They put me onto a guy named Wong, works for Governor Braun. He’s my contact now. Isn’t saying much so far, but he hasn’t denied it either. And here’s something for you to chew on: within the first couple of days after we got here, shortwave radio doesn’t reach outside the immediate area anymore. Figure that out.”

“What do you make of that. Your radio on the blink?”

“It works just fine. The few others we’ve been in touch with are having the same issue. Somebody is interfering with the signal.”

“They can do that?”

“Seems to be. No other explanation I can think of.”

“Any idea why they would?”

“Cage us in. Keep us quiet to the outside world and make it easier to monitor what’s being said here.”

“May as well ask you, then, since you mentioned the phone, I’ve been wondering.”

“Why haven’t I used it?”

“Well?”

“Have a very strong suspicion any satellite calls from this area are going to be monitored. Once they get a bead on ‘em.”

“Why now, then?”

“First one may slide by. At least it will be a while before it shows up on their scans. This call is worth the risk. I’d do it for him anyway because it’s the right thing to do. But something about this guy struck me from the beginning as being pivotal. Finding out now that his family are investment bankers. I mean, how important is that going to be to the recovery? And how that recovery is focused. It’s like he’s part of this scene for a reason none of us understands yet. Sounds crazy, I know, but…”

“But there’s something about him. Believe me, I know exactly what you mean. He’s already been pivotal in my world. And the sense of it, this mojo the guy has about him, just keeps getting stronger. Maybe that’s why somebody’s been messing with him.”

Dirk laughed a little, looked away, then back at David. “You’re starting to sound like one of *my* peeps now.”

✦

Daniel Wong spoke to the governor with due respect. He’d been made Policy Director, a significant role, and an honor for someone like him who came from outside the governor’s orbit. He was smart, thoughtful, cautious, always looking at decisions for how they’d read “above the fold” in the Bee, the Times, the Chronicle. He gave good advice and made few mistakes. “You earned it,” the governor told him when he made the appointment.

Since Cascadia, though, the long hours, the stress, the scope of the devastation, and the unprecedented task at hand, all of it was beginning to put a few wrinkles in his very smooth demeanor.

“Mr. Wong,” Braun said to him, “I’ve advised the gentlemen in Oregon that you will be their liaison. I don’t know how it is they ran across our shortwave radio signal, which I had thought was encrypted. No matter, though, we want to keep in touch with them and you’ll be point person.”

“Sir, I’m sorry that we didn’t know the line was open. We all thought it was secure. This guy Dirk is quite a character. It’s been a while since I’ve heard a spiel like that. I’ll do my best to keep him out of your way, sir.”

“On the contrary, Darren, you mistake my intent.”

“Sir?”

“I want you to stay in close contact with Mr. Primus. We don’t know who he is exactly, but he raised some issues that are of interest to me. Find out who he is and hear him out.”

“Sir, yes, sir, but I’m not clear what you want me to do with him. I assumed it was to ride herd on him. I’m sensing that’s mistaken.”

“You’re my principal policy advisor, Daniel. I wouldn’t ask you to babysit a constituent, let alone a guy from a neighboring state. Consider this: we are about to make policy in uncharted territory. We

have a disaster on our hands. And there is a disaster unfolding at the federal level if I read my tea leaves properly."

Wong looked at the governor sharply, sensed he had no clue what racial connotations might be gleaned from his statement, let it pass.

"It's an intimidating prospect. It's also an opportunity to try new things. What we propose going forward from here will rally people to us in this time of unprecedented need, or it will drive them further into despair and dissolution. I mean to propose a way forward that will inspire people. Snap them out of this fog, this depression. And it will probably scare the hell out of some of our biggest supporters. I'm good with that.

"I'm glad you're the astute fellow that you are, Mr. Policy Director. I count on your very discerning judgment. We are going to need it more than ever. But I need to caution you, too, that this is a time none of us were prepared for – not on this scale – and it is going to test our mettle. It's going to challenge us to reach beyond our usual bag of tricks and find solutions we may not have considered before. We may have to go *way* outside the box to get done what we need to do.

"Mr. Primus said things we *need* to consider. I want you to be my liaison to him for this purpose: consider what he has to say as part of the policies you will propose to me. Reach out to him as a representative of all those people out there who not only have lost everything, or nearly everything. But also, as a possible representative of the future we want to build together. We will need champions out there. On the ground. During that rant of his, he said some things that resonate with me. Things we might consider, radical as they are. These are radical times by anybody's definition. I want to hear more from him and his ideas. I'm counting on you to gather them for me."

✦

David felt her eyes boring into the back of his head. Odd how couples at some point reach this place of clairvoyance in their interactions. He ignored it as long as he could, then toyed with it a while, trying to send back a message of acknowledgement by psychic wavelength without turning to look at her. He failed.

“What?” he said as finally rose from his desk, stretched casually, looked at her curiously. “What?” he asked again.

“That fellow Fausto. How well do you know him?”

“Fausto? Not well. Not at all before we got here. Friend of Dirk’s. Neighbor anyhow. He seems okay, I guess. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious what he’s about. Sometimes he makes me uncomfortable.”

“How so?”

“Nothing specific. A feeling is all. Something in the way he looks at me.”

David took a deep breath, thought carefully about where he wanted to enter this discussion and within what parameters. The landscape they always had shared was changed in ways he hadn’t yet mastered. Maybe try flattery?

“You’re pretty special to look at. I think most people, especially most males, would agree with me. Anything more than looking that’s bothered you?”

“I’ve been looked at all my life, David. At least since I sprouted boobs. You’re trying to be kind – and cautious – and I get the enhanced sensitivity that comes with my recent trauma. Believe me, I get that. It’s not like every time some guy checks me out now, I’m freaking over it. I just get a funny vibe from him and wondered what you might know about the guy.”

“I really don’t know anything about him at all. Just what I’ve observed since we’ve been here. Seems okay from that small sample. Pretty regular in the way he handles himself. Does his share around here. Friendly enough. Always ready to help. That’s my experience with him. I mean, he’s getting up there in years and he’s single, whatever that might say about him. Maybe like a lot of folks, especially now, feeling a little lonely.”

He reached out to her, put his arms around her, held her close.

“Does that help at all?”

“I don’t know. Not much, I guess, but thank you.”

She began to move her hips against him, not too subtly. “Want to fool around?” she asked. Felt his body stiffen. Not where she wanted him to respond, and not how. But he smiled wanly at her, said, “sure.”

They did. It was worse than last time.

✦

“We haven’t really met,” Ellen said, extending her hand. “Ellen Worthy.”

“Fausto Castile,” he said.

“I mean, I know we know who each other are, but I wanted to talk to you for a moment.”

“About?”

“About maybe it’s just a coincidence, but we seem to cross paths a lot. Almost like you’re following me. I see you looking at me all the time it seems, like you want my attention or something. I’ve noticed so many times when I’m leaving the shower house, for instance, you somehow seem to be nearby. It feels like you’re checking me out. Pretty blatantly.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. And I don’t like to have questions about people I’m living with. These are close quarters. And I don’t know you, not at all. I don’t know what your intentions are. So, I’m telling you how I feel. Don’t like to be uncomfortable, don’t like wondering if I’m imagining things or if I should be concerned. So, I thought I’d talk to you about it. See what’s up.”

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I guess, well, maybe I do pay you more attention than I should. You’re pretty noticeable, you know?”

“Yes, I know. I’m a beautiful woman and I’ve been told that all my life. I’m also a married woman and the mother of a child. The whole package doesn’t make for somebody to ogle if you know what I mean.”

“Let me say again, I’m sorry. You’re very attractive and I’m a single man without much else to look at around here. I would *not* harass you in any way, I want you to know that. You have my word! I do cop to looking. Always look forward to seeing you, in fact. My bad. I’ll make a point of staying away from you if that will help.”

“That’s not necessary, Fausto. We both live here, at least for now. We have to work together, keep this little community running smoothly. I just want to make sure we understand each other. Looking isn’t a problem if that’s all it is. I’ll take you at your word unless you give me reason to doubt you.”

“Thanks for talking to me, Ellen. I’m glad to know how you feel. I really wouldn’t want to offend you. That’s the truth.”

“Well, maybe we’re good now. It is close quarters here and it’s better if we’re friends. Deal?”

“Deal.”

He started to hug her, thought better of it, just smiled sheepishly, held his arms in front of himself, palms up, and shrugged slightly, his head cocked to one side. She smiled briefly, lifted her chin, and walked away.

✦

Dirk and Clay rode single file down through the trees from the compound to Fish creek at the low border of the ranch, then up a long stretch of forest to a logging road where they rode side by side for miles without saying anything. The day was soft and warm, the country quiet except for the hoofbeats, the calls of birds, the occasional deer they spooked, the sense of unseen things scurrying in the underbrush.

Where they neared meadows, Dirk led them off the road and through the trees again until the open stretch of land and sky was passed by, and they rejoined the road again.

“A few folks live up this way,” Dirk said. “Know most of them but best if we keep to ourselves this trip.”

Eventually, they neared the Highway and Indian Henry Campground, where they dismounted, stretched, walked the horses a little, and Dirk scouted the area to make certain they were alone. When he returned, he said, “This looks like a good spot. I’ll water the horses, give you some privacy. You know how this works?”

“I do. Zero-zero and the country code, right?”

“You got it. Good luck. No doubt there’s a lot to say, but I think we ought to keep it kind of quick. Half hour tops. That good?”

Clay nodded yes, took the phone, let Dirk wander away with the horses, raised and dropped his shoulders, took a breath, repeated the movement and the breath, got a signal, and dialed.

“Mother,” he said. “It’s Clayton.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Dirk Primus had carefully and systematically developed a small network of support, tentative though it may be at present, among others like himself who had homesteads in functioning order and many of whom like him were housing refugees among their friends from the city. They were a casual community before the earthquake; now he gathered them with a sense of purpose and resolve.

He met personally with several of those in the vicinity in the first few weeks after the disaster, contacted others he knew by ham radio, and through all of them networked with others of *their* contacts. Before long, they numbered in the hundreds.

Bobby Yelkis did his own work among the people at Warm Springs. The ones he and his family trusted were a large and serious contingent. They had their own ideas about how things could work, ways of doing things that were recalled from the early days when the Res was just another hunting grounds and each of them was free to choose how they wanted to live. Much of what their traditions taught them about freedom, dignity, and social order was surprisingly sympatico with the orientation of the folks Dirk gravitated toward.

Together, this loose collection of somewhat like-minded people had the makings of a formidable grassroots alliance if it could be rallied to a common purpose. Whatever chimera might eventually trouble their aspirations, they had in common for now the assurance that profound change is underway, that the traditional power structure at least for now is reeling, and they are presented with an unprecedented opportunity to have a hand in shaping the outcome.

Once Dirk connected with the governors, made a sweeping statement about what his community wanted from them, received a designated contact in Daniel Wong, the buzz among them became palpable. This *thing* they discussed, what they imagined, was amorphous, not yet fully defined, but that was okay. It was work, yes, work that before had seemed to be little more than talk. Hoping against hope. Finally, it felt like there might be the possibility of change.

They were digging for the angel in the marble, chipping away each day at the relentless layers of opposition to revisions of the social

contract, a persistent, unreasonable resistance anchored in nothing except habit, an impulse to stick with the familiar ways of doing things that were now intrinsic in the culture and rigid as a block of stone, while they debated how to shape it, what it might look like, how it might resonate when it came to be. The vision was clear to them; the steps to get there, the way to make it happen, was the struggle.

“Go big,” Dirk urged them repeatedly. “Where do we want to be? Answer that and we’ll figure out how to get there. It’ll get easier when the goal is clear.”

The argument pivoted on, guess what? Money. The role of economics in the community. The old debate about capitalism and socialism. “It’s neither of them. It’s not: the how,” Dirk said to them. “It’s the: for what? What’s the purpose of the economy? Why do we do what we do? That’s where we need to focus.”

They were conferencing by ham radio, little groups gathered around radios here and there throughout Cascadia, nearly all of them in Oregon with outposts north and south. Oregon still was farthest from recovery, being most distant physically from the edges of the disaster, where it was bordered by relative normalcy. The hurt was widespread, but here it was deepest and the determination of the people who gathered to drive the recovery was passionate.

“We don’t want to rebuild all this and end up with what we had before.” Dirk told the governors. “We want something better. This is our chance to do it right. Not for the bankers, sirs, madame. Not for the Chamber of Commerce. With all due respect. We want to petition you to do it for *all* your constituents this time. Let’s build something we all have a stake in. Build from the bottom up.”

They asked his *bona fides*, said little in response except to ask what his plan, what their plan was, this community he claimed to represent. Who exactly are they and what exactly did they want?

“We are landowners, businesspeople, professionals, craftspeople, tradespeople, laborers, homemakers, students, children, and more than a few poor folks, too. The 99 percent. The rest of ‘em. That’s who we are. Our plan is something we can paint in broad stokes for you right now, and in greater detail going forward. We’re still sounding out our people. They have a lot to say.”

“Let *me* say this,” Braun said, “on behalf of my fellow governors, and Governor Turner, this gentleman is your constituent, so forgive me if I speak out of turn.”

“Please go ahead, Governor Braun,” she said. “You clearly have the lead in this effort and we’re relying on you. Mr. Primus, Governor Braun speaks for all of us. You can be certain that his word is mine in these matters.”

“I want to put my policy director in touch with you,” Braun said. “Daniel Wong will be helping us formulate a recovery plan. I’d like you to give him your best guidance in what will work for your community. We are going to need help from people on the ground, sir. With your permission, Mr. Primus, I’ll have him contact you by radio. Shall we say 9 a.m. tomorrow morning?”

So, it began as a formal discussion. “I can’t make promises,” Wong said, “or give you any false sense of what to expect from us. At the most elemental level, your community is valuable because you are a collection of people with radios and generators spread through the most severely damaged area. That alone is very valuable for communication purposes.”

“We want to help.” Primus assured him, “but it has to be reciprocal.”

“Meaning?” Wong said.

“Meaning two-way communication. We’re pleased to carry your message far and wide. But we want you to hear our message, as well. And hopefully act on it.”

“Again, no promises. But I can tell you, Mr. Primus, that the governor is interested in what you have to say. He of course wants to be certain it represents an expression of the constituency.”

“Rather than just my opinions.”

“Precisely. If we can operate from that basis, I’m at your disposal.”

✦

“Emily! It’s Doris Embry. Can you hear me, dear? Yes, oh my god, he called. Clayton called! Yes, he did. I spoke to him. Yes, yes, he sounds well. A little somber, but it was Clayton. Father spoke to him most. They seemed to be talking quietly. Oh, I don’t know but it was glorious. Just glorious to hear his voice. I’ve been calling the family to

let them know. Yes, dear, yes. No, we didn't mention you. It was so brief. But Emily, you should be here if you can. He's calling again next week. Yes, Saturday, 5 p.m. Can you get a flight? It's time he knows about your situation. Of course. Yes, of course, we do. You're family, Emily. He needs to know. We'll all be family again."

✦

Clay said little on the long ride home. Deep in thought, squinting a little at the areas where the conversation had opened new insight, shrugging off that which still was to be clarified, figuring it would come sooner or later.

"My father said he only knew I was joining some friends in an operation overseas. Guess I told him nothing more than that. Don't know what it was but I do know what it wasn't. I didn't join the army and I was gone barely a year before they heard from the government I'd been injured. Who exactly in the government, what branch, was never made clear to them. Just that it was 'a matter of national security.' So how that merits a pension, and why the U.S. Army, is still a mystery. Disability, sure, but the Army had nothing to do with it."

"Maybe it was Army doctors who worked on you? Could be." Other than that, Dirk said little. Let him talk when he wanted and left him in peace when he was quiet. He wanted to ask about Clay's father, his business, if anything was learned. Did the man show interest? Was there even a recognition about what was happening out here in the hinterlands? The Left Coast, dimly imagined at its best and now an unimaginable wasteland. Probably never came up. They had so much ground to cover just to get him back in their life. But he wondered.

As if he sensed the question, Clay said, "We agreed to speak again next week. Hope that's all right. I know you want to be careful. Keep it to a minimum. But there was too much to say. Told him there's business we need to discuss."

"Good. That's good. I wondered if that came up. Going to see if I can find another phone we can use for that call. Err on the side of caution, I think. Either way, though, it's a call that needs to be made."

✦

Emily walked a long way down the beach, the baby in a sling at her swollen breast. The baby girl was strong, healthy, happy, contented, and Emily was grateful. The sun was low in the sky, the air fresh and clean, the scent of the sea lending a salty tang to her every breath, the waves rolling in gently across the cay and tugging at the sand near her feet. Clay was back!

She had thought so often about this day, whether it would be one of joy, of despair, of confusion, what she would do. What was the next confounding step in this unexpected journey she had been on this past year? This time of sand and surf and motherhood in the Bahamas. Would there be a father for this child, this baby girl of such strong genes and great possibilities, or would she be reared as the product of an unwed mother?

It seemed so petty to dwell on such things when Clayton was missing and feared dead, and then finally known to be alive but damaged in some undefined way, his mind muddled, and his body torn. But she was now a mother who had her child's interest foremost in her thoughts, her maternal instincts keen, and her long held passion for this mysterious warrior of her past more forceful than ever.

As a girl she had carried a passion for him, a dream that often felt abstract and barely out of reach. But this child of theirs changed that rubric in ways that seemed complicit, a foundation beginning to firm up the ethereal.

They were meant to be, she, he, and this child. A family ordained and made whole after all that might have been so wrong, so incomplete, so absent the means for which they were made, well born that they were. So too the child, she had to believe. Now the time was here and the moment of clarity to be had. Who was this person, Clayton, now that the die was cast, and his rightful role proffered? Gestation and birth had been accomplished; would marriage follow?

✦

Dirk rode one of the dirt bikes into Molalla, looking for Howard Bentley. The store was closed. "Back at 9" the sign said, so he wandered down to The Humble Pig café and sure enough there was

Bentley, stirring the cream in his coffee and contemplating another forkful of his pancakes that were wallowing in a pool of syrup.

“Seem to be well on the way to recovery, Howard.”

“Primus. Good to see you. Have a seat.”

They took the measure of each other, perfectly friendly but curious, too, each wondering about the other. Bentley nodded then, smiled slightly, seemed to finally acknowledge the question inherent in Dirk’s greeting.

“Been a struggle. Things are cleaning up pretty well, but what supplies we had on hand are running very low. Food, thank god, is the exception. Enough preserves and deer meat in this town to hold out for a year or two. That and all the garden vegetables, we’re still eating good. Gasoline, too, strange enough. Nobody driving anywhere except a little here and there around town, so the gas is holding up. Water from the river’s good. Just boil it. Plenty of firewood for cooking. Sewage has been the biggest problem. Pretty much everybody’s digging themselves a honey bucket. We’re getting by.”

“Plenty of coffee, seems to be.”

“That, too. Hell, you can’t find coffee in Oregon, you know the world’s come to an end.”

“Well, it tried. Came pretty damned near. We’re getting by just fine at the ranch, but what I hear from the short-wave crowd, it’s still very bad west of here. People in a world of hurt.”

Bentley looked away, thought about what he wanted to say, looked back at Dirk, said, “No sign of the government, either, what I hear. What the hell is that about?”

Dirk didn’t take the bait. “Can’t say. Just got to keep pulling our own weight, I guess, until they get around to us.”

The waiter, guy who owned the place, brought Dirk a cup of coffee without being asked. “Anything else?” he asked. “No thanks.” He let them be.

“I have a question,” Dirk said, “I need to ask in confidence. You good with that?” Bentley nodded yes. “A few years ago, I bought a satellite phone from you. Like to buy another one, if you still have them in stock.”

“I do. I have one left.”

“But I want to keep it off the books, at least for now.”

“Don’t suppose I should ask: why’s that?”

Dirk just looked at him. Bentley didn’t smile, held his gaze.

“There was a fella came by the shop last week. Looking for you. Name was Jonah. Like the whale. Said you knew him.”

“I do indeed. What did he want?”

“To know where to find you. Told him I didn’t know.”

Dirk nodded, “Appreciate that. Anything else?”

“Said he’d be back again soon. Case I ran across you.”

“If he comes back, and he’s alone, you can send him my way. I’ll be grateful.”

“I’ll do that. He was on a dirt bike. Guess that’ll get to your place.”

“That’s how I got down here. Pretty sure I can make it back up the hill.”

“About that phone. They come with three months free on a two-year contract, so the signal is live. Supposed to get all your billing information before you leave with it. Not like I could verify the information that you give me. Not these days. Guess I’d likely just file it away without looking too close until them communications are up and running again. Whenever that might be.”

“That would be very helpful.”

✦

Bobby Yelkins sat his horse attentively, cradled the rifle across his lap, asked the guy on the bike what he wanted.

“Here to see Dirk Primus. This is his place, right? Name’s Jonah. I believe he’s expecting me.”

“News to me. But we’ll find out. Head on up that trail there, very slow like so I don’t have to shoot you. Don’t wanna spook the horse, you know? Gunshot’s hard on his ears.”

Jonah laughed a little to himself. Just the kind of greeting you’d expect at Dirk’s place. He rode absolutely as slow as he could and still keep the bike upright. It was still a mile or more to the compound. At this pace, they used up the better part of a half-hour getting there.

Dirk was on the porch when they came into the yard. He did something of a double take before pushing his hat back on his head and smiling broadly. “Damn, Jonah,” he shouted toward the two of

them, “you don’t let moss grow. Just heard from Bentley yesterday that you were looking for me. Didn’t expect you for a while, anyhow.”

They shook hands, Bobby eased away, the rifle back in the scabbard, Jonah pausing as he watched him move out of earshot, looked back at Dirk and said, “Checked in with him again this morning. Told me he’d just seen you. Gave me directions this time so I came on up. Had some information I thought you’d want to know.”

They looked at each other for a moment, Jonah waiting for a sign to go on. He looked about the yard, a few people working in the garden, a young guy nearby working on a dirt bike, checking out Jonah’s and appearing not especially impressed, three little girls chasing some sheep around the corral. Not quite the privacy he was hoping for.

“Let’s go inside,” Dirk said to him, clapping him on the shoulder. “Get you something to drink. A place to sit a spell. Then we can talk.”

✦

Dirk’s place was nice, not especially large but roomy, nicely appointed, pretty classy, truth be told. There was a river rock fireplace that anchored one wall, another that was covered with wooden bookshelves, madrone planks it appeared and full of books both finely bound and ragged. The furniture was leather and oak, the floors wide-planed fir, covered with hand-knotted carpets.

Jonah looked around, his eyes adjusted to the change of light, and he couldn’t help saying, “Figured you were toughing it out up here but glad it hasn’t been too painful.”

“Iced tea okay?” Dirk asked him, handing him a large glass frosted with condensed moisture from the refrigerator. Jonah held it in his hand, soaked up the experience. “Been a while,“ he said, “since I’ve felt a cold drink. Thank you.”

“I haven’t had the chance to thank *you* for the ferry,” Dirk said, “Saved our butts and worked just like you said it would. Not sure we could have gotten here without your help. Not without swimming.”

“Fact is,” said Jonah, “that’s why I needed to see you. Two things that happened you need to know about. First one doesn’t matter much but I wanted you to know.

“I wasn’t at the ferry when you got there ‘cause these three guys showed up right after the quake and kind of took over. Truth is they took me prisoner for a couple of days. Like highwaymen or something. Robbed a few of my passengers, folks who showed up hoping to cross. Took their money, watches, rings and stuff. Really bad guys.”

“I believe we met them. Tried to run a game on us when we showed up at the boat. Fausto showed them some artillery, though, that changed their minds. Bad characters until they had a big gun in their face. Calmed right down after that and went away with their tail between their legs.”

“Interesting. That makes sense. Real assholes they were but once they were gone, I was able to get back to business. Amazing how many people were going back and forth. More business by far than I ever had before. Good people, too, most of them. A lot of ‘em couldn’t pay though, so I made plenty of courtesy runs. People paid with food, some cash, lots of crazy stuff, but it doesn’t matter. That’s not what I came here to tell you.”

He stopped talking, held the glass of tea up and looked at it again with a bit of amazement, as though it might not be real, this simple thing that now was so precious, so remarkable because it was so normal in absolutely unnormal times. He drank.

“This is really good. Always liked iced tea. Guess I took it for granted that it was there whenever I wanted it. Now it’s like a gift from the gods. First cold drink I’ve had in weeks.”

“No gods here, my friend, except the god of solar power, which gives us all this bounty. I had no idea how valuable it would be, although I always thought it was important to be self-sufficient, sure. But that was like some grand illusion compared to what we’re dealing with now. So, yeah, we’re toughing it out and doing pretty damn well, all things considered. What I’d like to do is figure out how we can help put everyone else in this position somehow.”

“Yeah, well, good luck with that. I mean, great aspiration but I don’t see how. It’s not something any of us can make happen. You know? It’s like all this crap people put on us to solve these problems. Like I’m supposed to do it? Bullshit. Feed the hungry, heal the sick, clean up the oceans? These things are systemic. It’s the system that needs to change. The people who profit from it are the ones we need

to turn around. Put them right. Makes me crazy when they try to put it on us. What's my carbon footprint, right? What bullshit."

Dirk laughed out loud. Held up a hand, palm forward, saying wait.

"You're preaching to the choir here, my friend. There's not a thing you've said I haven't said myself. There's this huge world of hurt out there right now, and I don't mean to be dismissive in any way whatsoever when I say it's the single best opportunity for change we've ever had. What we do in the next few months, in the next few years, *can* change the system. For good! I know it. I can feel it."

They were quiet for a minute, each of them waiting for what might come next. Jonah fidgeted a bit, as though something kept coming up that he wasn't sure he wanted to say. He took a deep drink of his tea, looked at it, still amazed by how good something so simple could be when you've been without it a while, leaned forward from the waist in his chair until his elbows rested on his knees, and hung his head for a moment. Then he straightened up and looked directly at Primus with a surprising intensity.

"Believe I mentioned to you once I was in Iraq. Two tours when it was hot. Came home with a lot of baggage. Nightmares, jumpy, headaches, a lot of anger, all the usual PTSD stuff."

He looked harder at Dirk, who merely nodded and said nothing, waiting.

"It was bad enough for a while that I buried my guns in a trunk in the yard, too afraid of what I might do if they were handy. That ferry was the best move I made for myself though. The kind of business I could handle. Something about living along the river, watching it roll past, ferrying people back and forth, the whole thing just worked for me. Really calmed me down, steadied me in a way I hadn't felt since I'd been back.

"Funny thing: I thought the quake would set me off again, but I was fine. Felt good helping people those first few days. Then those guys showed up. Don't think I ever saw them before, but they seemed to know me. Slapped me around some, wanted to know where I kept my guns. Truth is I hadn't thought about that hardware for a long time. Furthest thing from my mind. Until now. Told 'em there were no guns, but they didn't believe me.

“They knew where I lived. Came across on my dinghy, me with my hands tied, bound me to a chair and ransacked the place. Threw my stuff all over the room, found some cash, my watch, the good one, but no guns. Finally left, me still tied up, said they’d be back, liked my place was so convenient to the ferry.”

He smiled, shrugged, sank down a bit in his seat. Had a faraway look about him for a moment, held up his drink like he’d just remembered it was in his hands, took another long drink, then focused on Dirk again.

“Was just thinking about how dumb they were. Never thought to ask me for the combination to the starter. Probably knew that big boat was more than they could handle.”

“That must have been about the time we ran into them,” Dirk said. “Damn, I don’t like thinking about going on our merry way with you in trouble. Wish we’d known. Would have treated them a lot rougher than we did.”

Jonah looked at him for a long time without saying anything, just nodding his head slightly, rhythmically, searching Dirk’s face. He got up from his chair, walked to the window, watched the people tending the garden, the kids still chasing around the corral.

Without turning, still facing the window, he said, “Easy to forget what’s going on elsewhere, you look at this place of yours. It’s really fine what you’ve done here. Very good for all the folks you’re helping here, too.”

He turned back to face Dirk, his face dark with the light of the window framing his head, said, “I didn’t come here to burden you with this. Actually have something else entirely to tell you about. Just taking me a while to get there, I guess. I wasn’t expecting to go down this path.”

“Seems like you had something you wanted to get off your chest first.”

“True that. I guess I did.” He took a deep breath, walked slowly back to his seat, stood beside it. “Might as well tell you the rest of it.

“I worked my way free of the ropes they used. Didn’t take long but it was dark when I got loose.”

“And you started digging.”

“Yes. Indeed. Dug up that chest. Took the kit, cleaned and oiled those guns, a Browning 9MM and an AR-15, loaded ‘em up, and waited. They showed up at sunrise, looking pretty ragged, but the big one had a pistol with him. It got their attention real fast when they saw I wasn’t where they left me, but I got the drop on them just outside my front door when they came back out.”

“And?”

“And I can stop right now if you’d rather not hear it. Like I said, it wasn’t my intention coming here to put this on you. Just blurted it out for some reason.”

“Maybe it didn’t want to stay bottled up. Whatever it is, the world is so upside down now it’s hard to know what any of us might do that’s out of bounds. Not sure where the boundary is these days. Would another glass of iced tea make this easier?”

Jonah laughed despite himself, shook his head, took his seat, and settled in. “He took a shot at me, the big guy. Close range, too, but he missed. I didn’t. Second guy came at me with a knife. He went down, too.”

He stopped talking, looked at Dirk to see how he was taking it.

Dirk nodded, asked, “And the third guy?”

Jonah swallowed hard, said, “That’s the one I feel bad about.”

“You bury them?”

“Put them in the river. The fast channel. Hard to say how far they’ll carry but it seemed like the best way to be done with them.”

“Self-defense in anybody’s book, you ask me. I wouldn’t lose any sleep over it, I was you.”

They both sat quietly then, thinking their thoughts, mulling over what was said, what was heard, imagining the permutations. Finally, Jonah spoke.

“I’ll take another glass of this tea now, if I could.”

Dirk poured him another tall glass of tea, wandered back from the kitchen, said, “That’s a helluva story, and it’s one I will promptly forget in case anyone asks. Don’t know a thing and never did.”

Jonah nodded, smiled, then turned serious again.

“Here’s another strange story. The one I came here to tell you. Come to think of it, the two are related in a way.

“About a week after that event we just agreed to forget, I got a helluva scare. Two guys showed up at the boat, helicoptered in, landed in that field on the north side of the river. One of ‘em was FBI, the other one never showed me any credentials. Thing was, though, he was clearly in charge.

“They asked me about my passengers, did I know ‘em by name, if I kept a log, like that. I just laughed. But I thought I was cooked. Couldn’t believe how fast they found me. I could hear my heartbeat in my ear, was trying not to seem nervous but I was rattled. Probably obvious, them being cops and all.

“Anyhow, they said they wanted to scan my boat for fingerprints, some guy they were looking for, lost track of him and thought he might of crossed after the quake. Said I might remember him. About my size, scarred-up face.

“I told ‘em, no, a bunch of people crossed but not one like that I could recall. They scanned the entire boat. Had this wand-like thing, infrared or some kind of scanner hooked up to a little computer. It was pretty amazing, kept showing all these prints from every surface on that little screen, thousands of ‘em it seemed like. ‘Wow, how you gonna sort through all those,’ I asked. They said it reads them all, but it knows the ones it’s looking for.

“So, they went over the boat, some parts more than once. Took a long time but by then I was calmed down. Didn’t seem to have anything to do with me. Finally wrapped it up, talked a bit among themselves, then gave me a card and told me to call immediately if the guy came along. Card has a phone number. No name, no ID. Nothing.”

“They mention the guy’s name?” Dirk said.

“Yeah. Same guy you told me about a few months back. You said he might come looking for you. Street guy named Clay Embry.”

“Wow,” Dirk said.

“Yeah, wow! Quite a coincidence. I couldn’t believe it. That’s why I thought you’d want to know.”

“You’re right about that. I will *definitely* give that some thought. Meanwhile, I can put you up if you’d like. Spend a night or two. Stay as long as you want. We’ve still got a little room. And more iced tea.”

“Thank you kindly, Dirk, but I’m gonna push on. See if I can make it back tonight. Feel like I’ve hung up some folks, having the ferry

down. Want to get back to work. But I thought this might be important."

"It is and I sure appreciate you taking time to get it to me. Now I owe you twice. Those markers are good any time you want to redeem them. You know where to find me."

"I'll keep that in mind, friend. Thanks to you, too, for hearing me out on *my* story."

"What story's that?"

✦

Dirk told Clay and David what he'd learned from Jonah. "Government," he added in wrapping up. "The only thing that makes sense."

"Yeah, but what government?" David said. He and Clay looked at each other, the same thought going through their minds. "Local or…?"

"USG," Dirk said. "Came by copter. One of 'em was FBI. The other guy unidentified. Who else could it be? Who else has reason to be looking for Clay?"

"Could be something else," Clay said. Worthy caught his eye, barely shaking his head, no! "Do you think it's related to the phone call?"

"Definitely," Dirk said. "First thing that came to mind. I don't know what this whole thing is with you, but Black Ops is first in my thinking. If so, and if they want to keep tabs on you, you gotta believe they tap your family's phone. Among other things."

"Like tracing the phone I used?"

"Makes sense. They know the call came from this area. Know you had to cross the Willamette to get here. We don't know for certain how many ways you might have done it, but they do, and they'd be hitting them. They can narrow it down pretty quick. Ferry was a logical place to check."

"Anybody likely to notice you where you did cross? Oregon City, was it?"

David thought immediately of the smart-ass lawyer and the insurance guy, remembered the exchange between Clay and the loudmouth. Remembered, too, that Clay was packing the pistol in his belt.

“Possibility. We asked a couple of guys in West Linn about whether either of the bridges was standing. One of them sent us on Willamette Drive. They might remember if somebody asked them.”

“Let’s hope they don’t,” Dirk said. “What are the odds in a town that size?”

Clay said, “We need to think about next steps. This call Saturday is vital if we’re going to sell the governors on going with us. My father’s always expected me to take over the bank. It’s going to take some doing, but we should be able to book a huge source of investment capital. Hopefully on *our* terms.”

“Let’s each give this some thought before we act,” David said. “Think it through separately, then parlay tomorrow. This is critical. We don’t want to screw it up.”

✦

David cornered Clay a few minutes later, asked him quietly, “You think there’s any chance this has to do with Sink?”

“First thing that came to mind, but it seems illogical. There are so many corpses out there, probably more than a few that have been murdered, and for all we know your building has fallen since we were there. Either way, it’s full of bodies that will have to be extracted and sorted out or just left where they are until the building is finally cleared away.”

“So, you think it’s something along the lines of what Dirk suggested?”

“All of that is still pretty much a blank for me. Can’t really comprehend what any of it’s about, but given that, this seems to fit the mold.”

“Frying pan or fire, I guess. Not sure which is the better scenario. I was thinking about those guys in West Linn. They got a good look at you and that pistol. That’s something to think about.”

“Wasn’t very smart of me. Always had a problem with discretion. Chances are not great that whoever showed up at the ferry is going to run across those guys. If they do, they still have a lot of ground to search on this side of the river.”

“Assuming they have nothing to do with Sink. And I agree it makes more sense to be your other problem.”

“The one that doesn’t involve you,” Clay said, more caustically than he intended.

“Yes, sorry, but it *is* a consideration for me. In one case, I’m a gracious friend sticking his neck out to help you. In the other, I’m trying to save my own butt. And yours. That said, I have to ask: what did you do with the gun?”

“Tossed it in the river when we were crossing. Threw it as far as I could out there in the middle. After I wiped it clean of my prints. Best case, it’s there for good. Never see the light of day again.”

“Let’s hope so. I’m trying to decide what to tell Ellen about all this. She’s involved, too.”

“Asking my opinion, or just thinking out loud?”

“Both I suppose.”

“Crime and Punishment, you know. We become our own prosecutors if we’re not careful. I’d let it lie. Better to react when we know what’s really there.”

“Good advice. Meanwhile, we *do* know somebody is trying very hard to locate you. Does *not* seem to be for friendly purposes. Which really complicates our plans for working with your family.”

“I’ve got some ideas about that. Want to give it some more thought for when we talk about it with Dirk tomorrow. I remembered something the other day that may be very valuable.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

That evening, the air was especially soft and warm, the sky clear, just a few clouds easing across the patches of open space between the trees. All the nighttime creatures seemed to be contented, making gentle sounds in the dark.

The moon was about to rise, the first full moon since the quake, and just now its light was reaching the sky. Ailey and Mick walked side by side, then single file where the path narrowed, then side by side again as they made their way toward the hot springs. The near one was barely a mile from the compound, and they were in no hurry, so their footfalls were slow and easy, startling none of the birds in the trees or the unseen critters in the forest clutter.

“I’m really beginning to love it here,” Ailey said to him. “Peaceful never has been a part of my life until now. I’m finding it feels very good to me.”

Mick was cautious with her, still trying to find his way to a place where he felt comfortable to be himself. She was so quick to rail at him for things he didn’t understand, stuff that set her off when he was just trying to make conversation. She was fully capable of being very warm and inviting, and just as capable of snapping at him like an animal poked with a stick. He was physically attracted to her and psychically very intimidated. Tonight, so far, she was nothing but warm and inviting.

When they reached the springs, they stood there for a while, watching the moon rise over the peaks to the east, the sudden illumination of all the dark, still, secret places that are the forest at night. The water danced in rhythms of silver and shadow, the surface lightly undulating with the upsurge of water from below and the slightest breeze easing in from west to east.

“It’s magic, isn’t it?” she said to him, walked to the edge of the pool, stripped off her clothes, and dived in. He was stunned by that brief image of her naked body silhouetted against the shimmering light of the water, the magic she mentioned, what it meant to a boy in the woods on his own.

She surfaced, shook her head free of the water, smiled at him, waved, and said, “C’mon!” He walked to the edge of the spring, felt the slight warmth of the water rising into the moonlit air, slowly, shyly took off his clothes, the last moment delayed as only his underwear remained and she continued to stare at him with a look of joy and some anticipation on her face.

“I’m game,” he said to himself, removed his boxers and stood there in the moonlight just long enough to give her some attitude and a good look before he dove in. When he surfaced, she was laughing and applauding.

“I hope you didn’t bring me out here to take advantage of me,” he said.

“You bet your ass I did,” she said.

In fact, they both bet it all that night. Three times without hurry, without restraint, without any games. Just screaming good sex

between two people who'd been dancing around the edges of getting together for a couple of weeks and finally met in perfect circumstances. There was a granite shelf at the edge of the pool, covered with a thin layer of moss, not much of a cushion but better than the pine needles covering the dirt. Sex on the rocks they called it afterwards, their elbows, knees, butts scraped a little raw, their passion only temporarily sated. It at least got them through the night.

✦

"Mr. Clay, I want to talk to you."

"Hello, Gracie. I'd love to talk. With all the running around the 'Eees' have going on, I wondered if you had time for me anymore."

"You will *always* be my friend. You helped me when I was really scared. And you told me some things about being homeless, how you did it. That made me feel better. I didn't know that I would never get to see my stuff again, but when I looked at our building, I knew things were not going to be the same."

"How are you getting along up here? Do you like it?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. I like my new friends a lot. They're fun! Ailey is great, too. She teaches us a lot. And the animals. And exploring. Do you know we saw a bear? It ran away when it saw us. That was exciting!

"I miss my other friends though. I keep wondering if they're all right, you know, after the earthquake. I wonder where they are. Maybe a place like this, do you think?

"I miss my teachers, too. Most of them. Miss Gilroy wasn't very nice. She's my piano teacher. I like to play but she was kind of mean sometimes."

"You probably will get to see them again, Gracie. Not very soon. But after things get fixed up. That's going to take some time. A long time."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to ask if you think things will ever be the same again? Like they were before? Because some of this is very nice. I like it here. It's fun, and it's pretty to look at. And quiet sometimes. But everything is different. We live in this new place, we don't go to school, we don't ride in cars or go anywhere.

“It’s very different. Like you don’t look like a homeless person anymore. And I liked you then, but this is better. I don’t worry about you anymore. Is it because you live here now you look so different?”

“That’s part of the reason. And having all these friends here. They help me feel better. But it’s other things, too. I was confused about a lot of things, some things I couldn’t remember. Being here where it’s quiet and I have friends gives me the chance to think things through. Get them clear in my mind. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. I know what you mean about that. I’ve been thinking a lot, too. When it’s sunny and warm and I can go find a shady place to sit by myself, it’s so easy to think of things you wonder about. Like I wonder about how different everything is now and whether that’s good or bad. Will it always be different? Or will it change back? Or will it be some of both someday? Do you think things like that?”

“Yes, I do. Things exactly like that. And I think it will be some of both someday soon. Not real soon, but when we rebuild all the damage, I think it will be some that’s the same and some that’s new and different. And I think we’ll like it that way. If we do it right, we’ll probably like it better.”

“I like how you think. I knew I would. When things are different than they used to be, sometimes it’s exciting, like something new that you never have seen before. Like that bear. But sometimes things are just different, and you can’t tell why. Like what does it mean?”

She looked at him closely, then lowered her head, looked up at him from beneath hooded eyes, and said, “My mother and father are different now. I’m not sure why that is or even how, but I can feel it. They still love me. That’s not the problem. But they are not the same as they used to be. Not with each other. And I don’t know why. Maybe because we live here now. Maybe they don’t have their jobs anymore. Maybe they miss their friends. But I wonder whether they will be the same again someday, the way they used to be, or whether they always will be different now?”

He bent from the waist, held her then in a warm embrace and she hugged him back. There was nothing to say but a lot to feel.

✦

“Talking to my father the other day brought up a lot of memories, stuff I hadn’t thought of in years, but also some things that seemed to come out of that fog I’ve been in. A lifelong friend, kind of a girlfriend you could say, came to mind all of a sudden. Not just her name, Emily, but her phone number, too.”

Dirk and David just looked at him, wondering what the point might be. They’re happy for his progress, obviously, but how it might relate to their current problem is unclear.

“You’re wondering: so what? Am I right? Here’s the thing. That’s her cell phone. Assuming it’s still good, we can route our conversations through her.”

“She’s going to be good with something like that. And your folks, too?” Dirk said. “Do we know she’d want to get involved in this sort of thing?”

“We’re very close. She and her family are going to be a big part of what I hope we can accomplish with my father. Thick as thieves might be an abrasive way to describe two investment banking families, but we’re long-time business partners and friends. Close friends. Actually, fourth or fifth cousins, I believe.”

David said, “This stuff is really coming back for you now, isn’t it? That’s great it’s clearing up so quickly.” He clapped him on the shoulder, smiled, trying to look on the bright side at a difficult moment.

Clay looked from one to the other, his friends now, co-conspirators. “A lot of it is becoming clear. Like Emily. The minute she came to mind, I could recall her very clearly. Our friendship, things we’ve done together over the years, those kinds of things that make relationships so special, and her birth date, address, phone number, it all just popped into mind. The strange thing is though, despite all that, I can’t picture what she looks like. That part hasn’t changed at all.”

✦

Clay and Dirk were horseback again, leading a pack mule that was loaded with provisions. They avoided the path they’d taken previously to Indian Henry and instead headed south on the ranch road to the junction of Wandering Creek and Fish Creek, the southeastern border of the property where the main gate was located. They followed a

game trail that paralleled the creek, then forded it at Silk Creek and continued east from there, climbing toward the headwaters, where they crossed a forest road and a little further on another one.

“This road makes a long loop north,” Dirk said, “and then back south to where we’ll catch it again straight ahead. This is a little harder going here but it will save us a couple of miles.”

“Sore as my butt is already,” Clay said, “any savings is appreciated.”

“Steel yourself. The last two miles or so is a bitch, but that’s why I bought the place. Unless you’ve got a chopper, the only way in and out is overland, and the land is the side of a pretty steep mountain.”

Remembering what they were dealing with, he added, “And if a chopper’s coming, you’ll hear it first and then see it long before it can get to you. Plenty of time to take cover.”

Clay laughed a bit, shook his head, said, “How many places like this you have in your inventory? Can I choose something else if I don’t like this one?”

“Well, I can probably spot you a tent and a sleeping bag if this one isn’t to your taste. This place is it. This, the ranch, that little farm outside Molalla, and that shack in town. Bought the farm and ranch as a package from the Walkers. This place I bought from a guy I knew who really liked his privacy. Ended up in a sanitarium, unfortunately. But he was well on his way before he moved up here, so I wouldn’t worry about yourself.”

“Considering my state of mind these past few months, that might not be too far beyond the stretch of possibility.”

“Let’s hope not. Then, too, I don’t expect you’ll be here all that long. He lived here for thirty years before he went over the edge. Figuratively, I mean. He *really* cared about his privacy.”

“I know you tech guys make some serious money, but this is a pretty impressive bunch of properties you have.”

“Well, there was a time when I made a lot and pissed it away. This time around, I wised up. The long game, you know, instead of that notorious instant gratification we’re all so fond of. I bought these places instead of Ferraris and cocaine. More to my personal taste now that I’ve matured.”

They both laughed, rode on a way without talking, Dirk keeping the mule's head up when she wanted to munch the wildflowers, Clay trying to get settled more comfortably in the saddle. Finally, he said:

"Damned fortunate for the rest of us that you did. I've been thinking about what a world of hurt we'd all be in if it wasn't for your generosity. And foresight."

"Foresight? Yeah, to a degree. Never saw this coming, even after we started modeling it. But I did believe that having a refuge might come in handy someday. Day just arrived sooner and a lot more dramatically than I imagined."

They came to the logging road again and the ride became easier. A slow, steady climb through thick forest with patches here and there of grassy meadows full of flowers, birds flitting stalk to stalk of pussywillow where it was boggy and rooting in the bunch grass where the drier stands were, and once a herd of elk with a 12-point bull reigning over several lesser bulls and two dozen cows. They watched the riders pass only briefly before returning to graze.

"No logging here anymore, at least not since I've had the place. Very few people at all up this way. Just ahead we'll turn northeast and then due north. At the point where we come to the creek, we'll leave the road and follow the game trail to the southeast pretty much straight uphill.

"I'm telling you this so you can find your way back out if you need to. Due east you come up pretty quick on a logging road, then a long stretch of flat land until another one. If you took it due north, you'd reach the campground where you made that call the other day. Just past that road going east is the highway we checked out on the way back last week and the Clackamas River, the little settlement of Ripplebrook, then another long valley that leads to Warm Springs. The Res takes up a pretty big chunk of land, so you'd be hard pressed to miss it.

"Coming back the way we came is the best choice if you can remember it. But the simple proposition is this: head west and whatever water you come to eventually, follow it downhill until you come to Fish Creek, which is bigger than any of the others and you'll know it right away. Just follow it back north and you'll get to the

ranch. Truth is, if you get to the creek and turn north, the horse will bring you on home. She knows where the hay and the herd are."

After a long slog straight uphill, they crested a ridge at 5,000 feet and sat for a while on a log overlooking their destination some 500 feet below them. The horses were glad to graze, and the mule especially needed a rest. Dirk worried the packs a bit and then returned to where they were sitting.

"That dazzling refraction in the sunlight below is the appropriately named High Lake. I own it and the section of land surrounding it. A few old mining claims that my predecessor grabbed and worked a bit, he told me, at least enough to keep the property. The cabin is built back into the ridge, well under the overhang. Guy told me not even the Martians could see it. He may be right because I had a pilot fly me over the area before I bought it and I couldn't see any sign of it at all. There's a corral in the trees, too, not visible from the air. Far as any aircraft passing by, it's just wilderness."

"They can pick up the signal from the phone, though."

"Yes, but I'm betting we'll have some time before they home in on this signal. Data mining gets you there eventually, but there are a lot of signals to process and sort through. This one's new to the inventory, and I suspect it's one of many coming online since the quake. We should be good for a while."

✦

The two of them and David spoke this morning before they set out. They agreed it was best to get Clay to a safe house, their very own version that the ever-prepared, perpetually surprising Dirk had for the asking. Bobby set about preparing the provisions and packing them on the mule while Clay briefed his partners on his game plan.

"If I can reach Emily, I'll have her meet with my parents and take the call on her phone. That will give us a clear channel to discuss these things. I know my folks won't know what to make of all this super spook stuff, but my father understands industrial espionage, so he'll get it when I tell him how we need to proceed. They've wanted me to take over for a long time, so he'll cut me slack."

"And what is it you'll tell him?" David asked him.

“I *finally* have found a business opportunity I think is worth our time. One that is unprecedented and not likely to ever happen again. Not on this scale and not of this need. It’s a challenge that has gotten my attention. It appeals to me. It’s something to get excited about. *Everything* needs to be financed. And we are directly connected to the policy makers who will support us. We, meaning Embry Bank and Anton Financial, which is Emily’s family, are going to be lead brokers in underwriting the entire thing. With guaranteed government bonds.”

“How are you going to handle the ‘unique’ aspects of what we anticipate doing?” Dirk said. “I’ve never met a banker yet that would agree to what we’re proposing.”

“You’ve met me. My job will be to bring the others along. You just have to speak the language. I’ve heard it all my life.”

Dirk and David looked at each other for a moment, each maybe thinking a version of the same thing.

“And what about your situation?” David said. “These people that seem to be after you? Is the family going to be willing to entrust something of this scale to you when you’re under, well, assault is what comes to mind? Psychological assault at least and maybe physical, as well. Are they going to be comfortable backing you in those circumstances?”

“Simple love might be reason enough,” Clay said. “But they’re very quickly going to have so much capital at stake, and such a huge profit to make, they will have every good reason to care for my safety and well-being.”

He smiled at them, stood differently than just before he spoke, showing in his posture without meaning to, or maybe he did, the self-confidence of the well born and entitled. It wasn’t arrogance but something more like assurance. Being without doubt for no reason other than he hadn’t any experience with it, no time when he wanted something and had reason to have it that it didn’t come to be.

✦

Now he and Dirk sat on a fallen log at a high elevation in bright sunshine and they were warm enough but not so much they didn’t sense the chill that might attend the night. “So, this is home,” Clay said, looking from the lake below to the unimpeded view in every

direction that surrounded them. “Agoraphobia, I believe they call it. The fearful sense of too much open space.”

“You find this fearful?” Dirk said.

“Not hardly, but I can empathize.”

“We need to get down there, get you settled. Why don’t you make that call now? If you reach her, make it quick as you can. I may be wrong, but my sense of these phones has been there’s some lag time between when you connect and when the billing kicks in. Maybe two minutes or so. See if you can keep it in that time frame. No sense giving the boogie man a head start.”

✦

“Emily, it’s Clay. Forgive this call, I know it’s a shock, but I need to speak to you very quickly and clearly. Please just hear what I have to say.”

“Oh, Clay, I’m so thrilled to hear your voice. I can’t tell…I’m sorry, let me compose myself. Tell me what you have to say, and I promise I’ll listen. I’m just so excited.”

“Thank you, Emily. Tell me quickly. Are you in touch with my parents?”

“Yes, your mother called me to tell me she’d heard from you. She was so thrilled. She wanted me to join them for your call this Saturday. I’m flying in day after tomorrow.”

“Flying in?”

“From the Bahamas. I’ve been, uh, working here for a while.”

“I’m guessing there’s a story there, but it opens up an opportunity I hadn’t considered until now. Here’s what I need you to hear. Please. There are things I’m planning to do that involve all of us. I need your help to make it work. Can you help me?”

“Of course, Clayton. Always. Tell me what you need from me.”

“Some of this will sound bizarre. I’ll explain it when we have time to talk. Right now, I need you to meet with my parents. In person. Not over the phone. Tell them my call is going to happen earlier. 2 p.m. ET, instead of five. It’s going to come to your phone, not to theirs. It’ll will come from this same number, not the one before. Take the call in the dining room and close the doors. Tell them to leave their cell

phones elsewhere. Do not, I repeat, *do not,* discuss any of this on *their* phones. Cells or landline, none of them. Do you follow me?"

"Yes. I understand."

"Based on what you just told me, I wonder can you get a family plan sort of cell service in the Bahamas that will work in the States?"

"What do you want?"

"Four phones on a "quiet" account. One each for you, my folks, and your father. Brand new numbers, no links to any of us otherwise."

"I will make it happen before my flight."

"Thank you, Emily. Talk again Saturday."

He disconnected the phone. Dirk was tending the animals off a way in the distance. Clay had time to gather himself, note the deep swell of feelings stirring inside him, and that curious sensation, something very much like nausea, in his effort to recapture the image of this woman he knew so well, one who moved him so dramatically into that familiar struggle between the insistent fog in his mind and clear recollections of his emotions.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

They rode down the steep slope to the cabin, which Clay never saw until they literally were right in front of it. The place was built of rock and large logs of unstripped timber set back into a deep crevice beneath a stone outcropping. The windows were generous but so deeply recessed into the thick walls they gave no reflection and were indistinguishable from the shadows that were everywhere in the woods.

The side walls were abbreviated versions that sat in shadow where they were exposed and continued into the natural enclosure of the crevice. The roof appeared to be built flush with the stone above it so neatly that one suspected the cave itself had been altered to accommodate it. Architecturally, at least from the outside, it was a marvel.

"Your friend must have been a helluva builder," Clay said.

“He had a lot of time to work on it. Kept at it ‘til he got it the way he wanted it. I haven’t done much to it myself. Just a few things, like this lock, I’ll show you.”

The door was large, thick, and solid. The lock was massive.

“Think Fibonacci,” Dirk said. “One, two, three, five, eight, thirteen.” He turned the dial back and forth, starting at one, then counterclockwise to two, back to three and so forth until the bolt clicked, and the door opened. “Had that custom built. Old Roy just had a shotgun rigged up to a trip wire that would shoot you dead if you were an intruder. This seemed like an upgrade. Maybe not.”

The room they entered was large, functional, lit once they found the matches and fired them up by generous kerosene lanterns. There was a very capable looking Ashley wood burning stove in one corner at the back and, in the kitchen, a small, two-burner, wood-fired cook stove.

“Doesn’t the smoke give you away?” Clay said.

“It would if you could see it,” Dirk said, and smiled to himself. “This cave is a natural chimney. There are a series of fissures above us that vent everything. It funnels the smoke a long way through them and really thins it out by the time it comes out up by the ridge line.

“This place is very efficiently ventilated by some screens at the base of the cabin. You can rotate them for more or less intake, but it all drafts right up the fissures. Fresh air takes the smoke, fumes from the lanterns, whatever you might be cooking, even the sewage from the outhouse in back, all of it ventilates up those shafts and dissipates almost entirely before it escapes to the atmosphere. You can have both these ovens fired up and not see so much as a wisp of smoke from the outside. Roy was pretty crazy, but he was damned clever.”

Clay was amazed by what he saw. Plump pieces of furniture, including a very comfortable looking bed, all of it when he tried them found to be inflatable, rubberized canvas.

“About the only thing useful I did after I bought the place. Brought in those pieces of furniture and a hand pump to inflate them. That and a small battery pack fed by a solar panel that I installed. Getting that up here was more than I bargained for and cured me of any thoughts I had about bringing in a panel of them to power up the place. As it is, this is a two-foot square panel that feeds the batteries and gives you

enough juice to keep your devices charged. It'll keep that phone running and a laptop, too, if you had one. Other than that, pretty much everything here is the way Roy built it.

"The water from that pump at the sink is pure as the driven snow. Literally. Comes from a spring about 30 feet below us. You can drink it right out of the tap. The john and the storage room are both out that back door. Take a lantern with you 'cause it's pitch black in there. There's a couple of hooks if you need to free up your hands while you go about your business. The commode is over another fissure that must be really deep because there's not a whiff of odor I can detect. Like I said, it seems the way the air vents through here takes care of it.

"Last thing to show you before we unpack, and I'll be on my way." They headed out the door and very slightly downhill into a thick stand of trees about 50 yards from the cabin.

"Of all the things that Roy built up here, this may be the most amazing." He looked at Clay, who looked around and saw nothing but trees. "I don't get it," he said. Dirk chuckled a little with satisfaction, slid a small tree trunk to the side, lifted another one slightly that crossed it and pushed it aside, held his left arm forward in welcome, and said, "The corral."

They entered through the opening Dirk created, walked into what was a wall of trees, mostly alive and standing, with a carefully woven fence of what looked like deadfall laced through it. Not thirty feet into the woods, it opened on a small meadow. The grass was three feet high, and wildflowers carpeted the deep undergrowth. Birds darted through the greensward chasing insects.

"It's like this all the way around. Encloses about five or six acres. And you can't even tell it's here. That spring I mentioned is right over there. Plenty of grass until it's covered with snow late November or so. This corral will support a couple of horses for weeks at a time for most of the year. And when you need to saddle up, take the lid off that plastic tub just inside the gate and rattle those oats a little. The horses will come to you. Like I said, Roy thought of most everything."

"Looks like a guy could hole up here for a long time."

"Let's hope you won't have to."

✦

“You’re thinking about Clay,” Rika said to Bella. It wasn’t a question.

“Is it that obvious?”

“The only time I’ve seen that look on your face is when you’re working with him. It’s like when you’d come home from a difficult day of counseling, except the furrow in your brow is deeper.”

Bella laughed. “He *has* been a very challenging case. Like nothing I’ve ever encountered before. Very mysterious – I’d even say devious – pathways have been layered into his consciousness. We’re starting to figure out what it is. Why it is? Still the question to be answered.”

“I know you can’t talk particulars, but I’m interested in what has you so concerned. He seems like a pretty stable guy.”

“Very much so. Underneath all this confusion he’s been subject to, he’s very solid. Landed gentry, you know. Connecticut Yankee born and bred.”

“So, what’s to worry?”

“As you said, I can’t discuss the details. But I can say this: the fact that he is so essentially stable indicates to me that whatever was done to him took a very skillful practitioner a lot of work to inculcate. I think a lot about what that might have entailed, partly from simple curiosity and mostly in hopes of being better able to help him. They’ve taken him somewhere else. Did you know that?”

“Where?”

“Somewhere safe. Apparently, there’ve been some people asking around about him.”

“People? Do you mean the police?”

“Government people. That’s all I know. There’s obvious concern it may be the same people who did this to him.”

“And yet we don’t really know what “this” is, true?”

“We know what it *isn’t* and that’s reputable, ethical psychiatric care. But somebody very skilled has been toying with his mind. I don’t know why. I doubt I ever will. But I know as a professional I’ll do everything I can to keep him out of their hands. As a friend, I’d do the same.”

“These are bad people, I take it. Should I be worried for you?”

Bella laughed, held her closer. Her laugh wasn't joyful, more a release.

"We have made a lot of progress together, Clay and I. He's come a long way. And he's very strong, very resolute. Stoic almost. But he's still fragile, too. This stuff is unravelling for him out of a tightly wound ball. All these memories, this recognition both of what had been obscured and the fact that someone for some reason has made it obscure.

"Now he's off by himself somewhere, completely alone Dirk tells me. They asked me what I thought about it before they took him. I told them my concerns. I actually thought about going with him."

"Bella! You're not serious. That could be dangerous."

"That's how worried I was. I am. But I knew it wasn't viable. For him or for me. I just worry that he has a lot of time to think and no one to reach out to if it takes a bad turn. I'm sorry if I've been obsessive."

"Do I sound jealous?"

"Sweetheart, you *know* you have nothing to worry about there. He, any he, just ain't my type."

They laughed a bit, hugged, separated enough to look into each other's eyes and note the hint of a tear in Rika's. "What?" Bella said. "Something more's bothering you."

She looked away, started to pull away. Bella held her. "Tell me."

"It's nothing. Really," she said, looking down, shrugging, swallowing, biting her lip, looking up from under hooded eyes. "it's just, it's just, everything, oh hell! Dammit! I hate being a wuss." She was laughing but her eyes were tearing.

Bella held her tighter, and Rika rested her forehead against her chest. She sighed, breathed deeply several times, lightly pushed Bella's arms away and met her eyes with regained composure.

"I always try to respect the needs of your work. I know how important it is to you and I love your professionalism. You do it so well and I'm always so proud of you. You know that don't you? You must."

"I do and I'm thankful, and?"

"And sometimes I need your counsel, too. Can you understand?"

"Oh, Rika, have I been neglecting you? My very favorite person in the world. Tell me true. Have I?"

“Now you’re making fun of me.”

“I’m not. Tell me. Is this serious?”

“No. Not serious. It’s silly really. It’s just…silly. You have so many demands on you, and it’s not like all this hasn’t affected you, too. It’s just that I feel so unsettled. Adrift, you know? And it seems like there’s never the right time to talk to you about it.”

“Now’s the time. Tell me.”

Rika searched her partner’s face, found the assurance she was looking for, the honest openness to hearing what she had to say, that familiar place she visited too seldom of late.

“I miss our home. I wonder what’s happening to it. The rain pouring in on our things, our furniture, our bed. I know it’s silly. It’s just stuff. But it was *our* stuff. What we had together. Where we lived, ate, entertained our friends. Where we slept. Where we made love. God, I miss it, Bella. And I can’t see it anymore except as a wreck. Our memories. I think about them and what I see is broken. Not us. I don’t mean that. I mean what we used to have there. It’s all mixed up together.

“What we left behind. Abandoned, is what it was. And that’s how I see it when I think of it. I try not to dwell on it. Try not to think of it, really. But it’s there. This picture of our past, our time together, and it’s wet and soggy and crushed.”

Now she was crying, tears running down her face, her words beginning to garble between gulps of breath. “I’m so sorry, I don’t mean to be like this. I just can’t get it out of my mind though. Everything we’ve lost. So much. And it hurts.”

Bella let her break away, walk in a circle, shaking her head. “I try not to bother you with this. I know it’s silly. But I just haven’t been able to get clear of it. A month now and I still feel like our past is buried in that debris.”

“It’s not silly,” Bella said. Holding her again, but now at arm’s length. “What you feel is never something to discount. I’m sorry I’ve been so absorbed with my things that I didn’t notice you were suffering. I pride myself on being perceptive.”

She shook her head, a wan smile, refocused on Rika. “Rather than apologize, let me ask you what I can do to help you? This event has shaken (ahem!) all of us.” They laughed half-heartedly. “Even I seem

to be off my game." Rika looked at her. "Being unaware of what the love of my life was experiencing."

"Tradition is very important in my culture," Rika said to her, the doors she'd held closed beginning to open. "When so much is lost, I guess I fear the tradition may be lost along with it. These memories. I want them to be my link to the traditions you and I built together. But they're cluttered with those images of our home in shambles, with all the destruction we saw on our way here.

"Japanese people suffer these tragedies, but they immediately rebuild. They have a vision of what was, what was cherished, and they work to restore it. This earthquake was so enormous. It's not new to me, these quakes. I remember them as a girl in Japan. Some pretty big ones, too. But nothing like this.

"David Worthy told me what he saw in Portland. The city, he said, was literally destroyed. Dirk tells me it likely is even worse toward the coast. It scares me. I think about why I'm scared, what it is I'm so afraid of. I believe it's this: I wonder if it will be possible to rebuild and if so, what are the traditions that will guide us? What do we have that we all agree is worth restoring to its proper place? And when I think like that, I guess I become afraid that you and I may fall prey to that aimlessness, that wandering that is so much a part of the American way. That lack of tradition to anchor us in these times."

She shrugged and said, "I suspect you will tell me that I'm personalizing a social phenomenon." This time they both laughed generously.

Bella waited a moment to hear what else Rika might say, but she seemed to be waiting for a reply. "I have not thought about these things this way, the way you do. But I understand what you're saying, and I don't have a good answer about goals and traditions. Not this society's anyhow. About us I can say plenty."

She paused. Rika waited, so she continued to speak. "We are unsettled, literally and figuratively. Both of us and it's only natural we would be so. Both of us, everyone around us for that matter, are probably in shock. Some manifest it and for most of the rest it's hovering somewhere in the background.

"My god, nothing of this scale has ever happened before. Not to us personally. Maybe not to anyone. It's like a science fiction story, some

dystopian novel. I don't know how to quantify these things, these disasters, but they're devastating, physically, psychically, spiritually, too.

"We do need to build back. Just the act of doing *something* in response is important to our mental health. To remember we're *capable* of doing something. And to have goals, yes, I hear you. What will we build toward? I think that's what Dirk has continued to push us to consider. He wants something new, different than what was destroyed. But maybe his vision is something more traditional, as well. Jeffersonian rather than Gherkish. Values from an earlier time when we were more communal. More in touch with each other. Less divided.

"Be that as it may, I want to say this to you. I cherish what we've built together. And, yes, some of what we built was damaged, destroyed. Abandoned, too. But only the physical pieces. To me what is most important to *our* tradition is the spirit of what we are together." She moved toward Rika, took her in her arms, held her tightly, said, "And I believe that spirit is strengthened by what we do, what we are each day together. Especially in difficult times.

"You are my strength, Rika. What I've learned from you, what we've built together, is what carries me through the challenges of our times. All the little things, certainly, but even something unimaginable like this. I never thought about having to face a crisis of this magnitude. But I never expected to have a relationship like ours either.

"I've always been a little out of sync, you know. Kind of out of bounds. Gender challenged maybe, or just not hetero anyway. And then you came along. I really and truly believe our tradition, what we've built together, is equal to this challenge. Anything I can do to help you through it is what I'm here for. Just say the word."

They kissed. Passionately, for a very long moment. Bella looked at her breathlessly, a catch in her throat, and said quietly, "These kinds of signals are just fine, too."

✦

The silence was deafening. It had a voice and a presence that was startling. This was without question the most alone Clay had ever

been in his entire life and the sensation was mesmerizing. Not frightening, but not comforting either. This was the grain of sand on the beach or one of those stars overhead among the uncountable billions in the heavens. The micro and macrocosm. One solitary atom in an atomic universe.

Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the ambient light from the stars and his ears tuned in to the elements that composed the wall of silence, the din of a hundred thousand insects, shuffle of many hundreds of scurrying creatures, the soft impression of hooves in the moist earth, flap of wings of birds of prey moving big pockets of air as they passed, an indistinct and undifferentiated buzz of communal activity in the absence of distraction. Little by little his ears began to hear the various parts of it and his eyes to see if not the creatures themselves at least the shift of movement in the stillness, the contrast between what it felt like or seemed to be and what it actually was.

He sat on a log near the front of the cabin, a feature like everything else about this place that was unnoticeable unless you looked closely at the way it was settled in the landscape, perfectly natural at casual glance and yet purposely placed. One dim lantern slightly lit the deep window behind him. Inside the cabin, it gave sufficient light. Outside, it barely registered.

Before long the moon would rise, and the magic of this moment would be transformed into something more visual if no less private. How would the silence be altered, he wondered? Until then, the envelope of darkness was soporific. A narcotic peace about it, he couldn’t help noticing, paralleled the way he often felt when the struggle to comprehend his circumstances yielded to a persuasive urge of acceptance. Just to be and accept himself as what he found himself to be, inexplicable as it was and persistently disturbing as unsought memory made it.

Increasingly as the days passed, he remembered more of who he was, or at least who he had been and presumably would be again. Bella had eased him along a path toward clarity that continually was interrupted by the insinuated fog.

That blear in his consciousness was strangely comforting and contented. Examining it, moving in and around it, stirring it up, and especially leaving it was what was unsettling, provoking a nagging

sense of uncertainty and even fear. A thick layer of nausea had to be endured to exit that fog and leave in place some pillar of recollection that was reestablished.

Probing that place, measuring where he was against where he had been just a month ago, was something he was determined to continue doing, even as the sudden absence of Bella's counsel greatly concerned him. He recognized his natural bent toward toughing it out, whatever the challenge, and the instinctive confidence underlying his way of dealing with whatever came his way. More than ever, though, he knew his metal balance had been seriously tampered with, his vision obscured, and his footing was still uncertain.

Neither he nor Bella knew why it had been done, what purpose there was for removing a part of his memory, who it was intended to protect, how it had been accomplished, and what the consequences might be of trying to undo it. But he knew, and she encouraged him, to believe it needed to be done, despite the insistent inducement to surrender to it.

The fog was built to be accepted and left untouched where it had been inserted into his subliminal consciousness. And it was powerfully constructed. Something native to him, though, seemed to be even stronger, an impulse in his character to independence and self-direction, kept pulling him free of that latent stupor, drove in him an instinctive resentment of this carefully contrived means of controlling him.

It was passive control in the sense that whoever had done it turned him out into the streets, left him on his own with the trappings of a beggar and just enough financial support that he could have stumbled along the streets and alleyways of homelessness indefinitely, absent the absolute destitution and the usual addictions that drive most into insistently deeper despair. No, there was a temptation of comfort built into the construct, a design to keep him there of his own choosing, a bum with the illusion of free will.

At times recently he had wondered at what it was that started the awakening process, that long, slow, murky climb up through the haze that held him for, for how long? Months, he thought, but he didn't know. He worked the streets long enough to find his way, at least that is how it seemed. He couldn't remember how he found those places

where he slept, whether in fact he found them himself or was placed there, shown them, set up in his bare subsistence hovels and guided into his first forays on the streets.

What particularly confused him in trying to deduce the logic of this event that was visited on him was his family, how whomever was pulling these strings had expected to disappear him from his family, as though they simply would accept that he had vanished and there was no explanation to be had. None of this had occurred to him until he finally began to remember them, where he came from, what he once was. Although he may have been programmed to completely forget them, that clearly didn't take.

It was a while before they came to mind, his father first, and his mother, his sisters, Emily, too. Even while they were out of his mind, he clearly wasn't out of theirs. They would not have given up on him until they either found him alive in whatever shape or found him dead. Of that he was certain. Once he remembered them at all, the elements of that constructed fog began to wobble.

Until he spoke to his father, he knew nothing about what they might know. What he learned from that brief conversation filled in a lot of holes in the narrative and raised new questions for him to consider. Some of them he'd had a chance to discuss with Bella the one meeting they'd had before he left. Some he only now was beginning to consider.

He blinked, winced, physically reacted to the sudden rise of the moon above the high peaks of the Cascades to the east. The light snuck up on him and caught him unawares, so completely was he focused on his inner narrative. Now the land around him was illuminated with sunlight reflected from the moon, which although indirect was sufficient to pull various mysteries of the dark into a visible place where they played a distinctly different role in the perceptible makeup of the vista. It was something to see.

✦

The community gathered again. Holly said, "I want to start." Nobody objected. "We've all had a lot to say these past few weeks about what the future might look like. Lots of ideas about how to make our little world a better place in the aftermath."

Dirk was seated next to David. Bobby stood nearby. She turned and looked at Dirk directly, said, “You’ve always been very outspoken, Dirk, about what we could create, how it all could be, brave new world, thinking big, all that.” He looked at her curiously, wondering where this was going. “And, of course, thanks to you, we have this very comfortable place to think about it all.”

Here he waved her off, a “don’t mention it” gesture, but she wasn’t going to be deferential in what she had to say. “What I want to get across to you, and to you, David, is that all these big ideas aren’t going to change the world much if you keep perpetuating the patriarchy.”

Dirk grimaced a bit, David was taken aback a little, but they waited for her to elaborate. “Let me tell you what I mean. A month in, what I’ve seen evolve is three white men taking the leadership role.”

“Plus, one Injun,” Bobby said, “Tonto to his Kemo Sabe.” Several of them laughed a bit. Mick looked around, shrugged at Ailey, had no idea what Bobby was talking about. Chemo who? A cancer thing?

“You tell us you’ve been talking to the governors, that you have a contact there now that wants your input. None of the rest of us have any idea what’s being said. All that, and now, suddenly, Clay’s not here and we don’t know what that means. Where’s he gone, and why? Do you see what I mean? Yes, this is *your* place, but it’s *our* community. Maybe some of us, the women especially, don’t remember electing you guys to represent us.”

The room was very still. Nobody said anything, not even murmured their assent or disagreement. Dirk and David looked at each other, David nodded. Clearly it was Dirk’s place to respond.

“Observation noted,” he said with a very serious look on his face, then added with a gentle smile, “and appreciated. Anyone else have a comment?”

“I have to second Holly’s statement,” Bella said. “It’s been apparent to me, as well. And nothing in those comments suggests any distrust of either of you or your leadership. The male of the species tends toward aggression,” she said, with a wide smile, “even in peacemaking and rebuilding the future. Obviously, though, we’ve made some progress in these gender issues, some recognition of the

value a woman's perspective can add to leadership decisions. I think what Holly's saying is that going forward we need to walk that talk."

Ailey stood up, said, "I spent too many years under the thumb of people who weren't so nice. Male people, mostly." She paused for a minute, surprised by what she'd just said publicly, glanced quickly at Mick, cleared her throat, and continued, a little more quietly than before. "I'm embarrassed to say I guess I'm so used to men in control of things I really hadn't noticed until Holly spoke up. Now that she has, I have to say I agree. You all have been great to me and I'm very grateful. But that said, a little more transparency in what we're doing would work better for me."

Holly walked over to her, hugged her. Ailey looked around the room again, a little defiantly said, "And it's not just because I work for her either!" Everybody laughed, and Dirk said, "Never crossed my mind."

After a moment, Ellen stood up, walked toward David, turned back toward the group, and said, "My husband is a natural leader. He can't help it. It's like a duck to water and he's very good at it. Not in any way oppressive about it, either. But I think, David, it's fair to say it's so normal for you, so comfortable, that you may not notice how few women take charge in these circumstances. They hardly have time before the men just take over.

"I want to add this. Because of David, the support he gave me financially, and maybe more important, the confidence he always showed in me and my work, I was able to build a successful business. Could I have done it without him? Sure, maybe so. But not as quickly and certainly not as easily. And you never once have lorded it over me, which is such a measure of who you are.

"I say all this because it's so easy for women to defer. We're habituated to step back and let you guys run things. It's easier. The world's set up that way. Still. And even though things are beginning to change, old habits, you know?

"But you, and you too, Dirk, have to take a step back at this point and appreciate how much more we might accomplish with some, how shall we say," and here she looked at Bobby with a smile, "some more diversity at the decision-making level."

Dirk looked at David, turned back to the group and with arms widespread, said, “Okay, I hear you. I don’t disagree. I guess I’m hearing, too, that we should be more proactive in recruiting your help. I plead duh! I’m guilty. David, too, I’m guessing, right?” David nodded the affirmative.

“Let’s start now. Holly, can we kindly request your help? Puh - lease,” he said, dramatically adding a stage slap to his left cheek. “Seriously, I appreciate you bringing this up. Can we ask, where to begin? What do we need to do?”

Ellen was still standing up front. Before Holly could respond, she said, “Awareness is a bitch, but it’s a great place to start. I know how much you always relied on Holly at the company, David. You know her work. What’s the problem? It seems like a no-brainer to add her to the executive suite.”

Holly stood up, looked directly at Dirk, said, “I’m going to continue to be very direct here, Dirk. You two are terrific at what you do. Nobody’s questioning that. But the transparency issue was raised and that’s all about communications. Forgive me for being blunt, but it’s not your strong suit.”

There was something like a collective inhale among the group. Dirk didn’t flinch. “Go on,” he said. “I’m listening.”

“Marketing is what I do. I’m good at it. A big part of that is knowing how to present things. Products, ideas, it doesn’t matter. It’s about the context, what your customer sees and hears depends on how well you communicate. You’re a brilliant guy, Dirk. We all know that. But you’re very frontal, too, in what you have to say. That’s not always the best way to get your message across.”

“I hear you. Tell me more.”

“You’re talking with the governor. If I understand correctly, he’s put his policy director in touch with you.”

“Yep. Guy named Wong. Weekly conference, er, radio call, that is.”

“And he wants to know, what?”

“What we have in mind. What will work. What those of us on the ground are thinking and doing. Not just what the needs are. That’s obvious to everybody. But what to do going forward. How to go about the rebuild. Who among us is going to support it?”

“Ah, right up your alley, eh? Let me suggest, Dirk. You have, we all have, a lot to say about that. And you’ve been very good to hear us out since we’ve been here. You pushed us to get it said and we thank you for it. You made us think about it and you heard what we had to say.

“Now it’s time to communicate those ideas to the Office of the Governor of California. And Oregon and Washington. A huge opportunity. And I want to tell you point blank: I can help you make the case to them much more effectively.”

There was a distinct murmur of support, a collective sigh of relief in the room, even more so as Dirk, after a thoughtful pause, began to nod his head in agreement.

“And let me add I can keep everybody in this room better informed, too. Not a criticism of you, Dirk, David. It’s just what I do and I’m good at it.”

“Holly,” David said. “As usual, you make a very compelling case. I know I speak for Dirk, too, when I say I’m sorry you had to bring this to our attention. We should have thought to include you from the beginning. Everything has been so dramatic, moving so fast. No excuse there but I guess it takes a squeaky wheel to get my attention sometimes. So, thanks for speaking up.”

“I second that, Holly,” Dirk said. “You know how important all this is to me and your help with the governor’s office would be invaluable. I might have figured that out eventually, that we needed your help, but maybe too late, so thanks for standing up like you always do. We’ll count on having you there with us Monday morning when we hook up with Dan Wong.”

“I’ll look forward to it. And now that we’re going down this road together, we’d all like to know what’s up with Clay?”

Dirk and David looked at each other, hoping one or the other might have a better answer. Dirk looked around the room at these people he cared so much about, whom he wanted so badly to inspire and encourage, shook his head from side to side and said, “That’s something I can’t share with you. I’m sorry.”

There was a stunned silence, but Bella quickly spoke up. “I think most of you know I’ve been working with Clay, and I can share with you that’s he’s doing very well. But I support Dirk in saying that this is Clay’s business and not ours. He fine, he’s safe, and he’s still very

much a part of our group. He just needed to get away for a while and we need to grant him his privacy."

"Maybe this is something that needs to be said," David said. "Although I'm not sure exactly how to say it. When we all came up here to Dirk's place, he asked us to keep this place to ourselves for now. To treat it as *our* place. Ours alone. There's a lot going on out there that needs to shake out and settle down before we can be comfortable opening up to whomever comes calling."

He looked at each of the people in the room, noted their attention, how engaged everyone seemed in the narrative arc of this meeting. He paused, took a deep breath, gathered himself, visibly searching for the right words.

"We've been in touch with other groups by radio. Bobby and his family are in touch with people at Warm Springs. And little by little, we'll be making personal contact with other groups like ours.

"But I want to stress this, and not to incite paranoia or anything, but simply to remind us. We need to keep this thing of ours, this group, private and closed to anyone we don't know. If anyone comes around asking questions, we don't know anything. We have nothing to say."

There was curiosity in the way people looked at him, pondering what exactly was meant, a suspicion among some of them whether Clay might be the subject of this statement, but nobody said anything in response.

Dirk finally spoke up and said, "I suggest we just let Holly do the talking."

He wasn't trying to be funny, but everybody had a good laugh and the tension evaporated out of the room.

Chapter Thirty

Clay thought of Grace Worthy. Little Gracie. Maybe she was the beginning of his rise out of the fog. The way she looked at him from the passenger seat of her father's car as they passed him on their way into the garage at the Met. Her look of innocent concern, the consistent response he felt from her each time they saw him, the

contrast between her active willingness to acknowledge him and her father's determination that he be ignored.

Thinking back on that time, that time before time, when it seemed that he stood vacantly in his place on the streets with a sign and accepted handouts from strangers passing by, when momentary eye contact and a muttered thanks, sometimes hearing "good luck" or "hang in there," was the extent of his contact with people, she met his eyes and held them until he was out of view.

It mattered. He began to look forward to seeing her. It was when the first wrinkle of perception came to him, the first motivation beyond eating, sleeping, begging. The first time he can remember when he began to regain a sense of himself as something other than this person with a sign on the streets. When he began to question.

Then her father, David, came into his life. Sent the cops. Showed up one afternoon. Had a conversation. Gave him money to go away. He did for a while, not long. Didn't know what else to do with his time. He came back and so did the father. Got him thinking, a new sensation. Met Dirk one night outside the Met. Joined him at a bar for a beer. A different experience and a brief connection with another human being, one who treated him like something other than another bum. Offered help which until that moment Clay didn't know he needed. Then the quake. Gracie again. Then David. Then Sink. Ellen Worthy. Then Mick and the motorcycles. Then the compound.

Like a balloon gathering heated air, filling slowly, then full enough to begin rising. Lifting above the place where he was nothing but a part of the streets, like the newsstands, the benches, the signs, the light posts. He rose only a little at a time, but each incremental gain of altitude brought him unexpected new insights, stirred familiar places that had been hidden, awakened something dormant for a while, although he couldn't yet guess how long he'd been impaired.

Much of his days tumbled through a series of predictable moves from where he slept, how he ate, when he carried his cardboard sign to the canopy above the doorway to the garage at the Met. He became each day a little more confident in what he was doing and how he knew to do it, but his perspective was increasingly troubled by a sense of distance from the particulars of the routine. He knew what to do,

how to do it, but he had no memory of learning it, no reference he could summon to arriving in this place nor where he came from.

How for instance did he find his place to sleep? The clothes he wore came from where? And where did he acquire the little Bunson burner and the pan he heated his food in? The spoon he ate it with? How did he know the soup kitchen where food could be had, the church where he could dry off, warm up, wash his face, brush his teeth, all for the price of a lecture on Jesus? Where did any of that come from?

He couldn't recall. He wondered too whose writing it was on the sign he carried. Hungry Anything Helps. He had no recollection of how it came to him or how he knew it was his job, his principal task for the day, to place his sign beside the walk and extend a hand into which people sometimes put money. Thinking on it now, it was very much like a role in a play he'd committed to and like everything else he'd done in his life, he quickly mastered it. Why he did it though, he had no idea, and it was only after an unknown period of time that he began to question it.

He just now realized these things, began to see them in perspective, such as his perspective is. Bella had helped him pry open the period before all this bizarre circumstance came to be. It was very disturbing to begin the process, but in many ways, it was simply an enhancement of the underlying disquiet that came upon him after a time on the streets. The cap on who he had been before was screwed on tightly. But little by little, vapors began to escape, coalesce, take form, become images vaguely familiar to him and yet lacking a reference point he could summon.

The innocence in Gracie's eyes stirred something when she looked at him, an urge to be more than what she saw, a faint sense that he had been more and wasn't now for some reason he couldn't recall. That *was* where it really began, he realized, that moment when he quit trying to repress the disquiet that was so troubling him and instead called it into question.

There was still a hole in the center of this entire experience that was undifferentiated space, a whirling rush of air in a dark room where no light had entered. In it, sensed if not seen, is a man in a white coat with a clip board, who is the only link to that darkness and

who accompanies the deep disturbance, the disorientation, the nausea he experiences each time he returns there, hoping without success so far to shine a light in that place. With Bella's guidance, though, he had filled in most of the area around it, the time before that room captured him and this slow, steady emergence of himself that has been happening since he first found the nerve to step out of the dark.

Having gained all this ground, that empty space, whoever ran it, and the place on the streets where it left him was even more mystifying. It was chilling to comprehend how thoroughly he had been invaded – mentally raped – by forces unknown for reasons unknown. The one thing that *was* known was that someone went to a lot of trouble to scramble his mind.

✦

Able Charlie and Victor Zulu were smoking cigars and drinking beer in the back room of a dive bar in Washington, DC. It was just across the river from Arlington, where their offices occupied the top four floors of a five-story building above a furniture store. The store kept erratic hours and didn't sell many sofas, which was as intended because the less traffic the better, right?

"This is what we got?" said AC, looking at a crisp printout from a scanning service that did data mining for the Agency. "He made a call to his folks at home in CT from bumfuck Oregon on a satellite phone? Where did he get the phone? How did he remember the number? Well, I guess that's not such a surprise. But how did he get out of Portland? Walk? Sorry to say: I don't get it."

He ashed his cigar, took a puff, then another, exhaling each time by grimacing his cheeks and mouth a bit and blowing a dark blue plume of smoke toward the ceiling. He looked through the haze, the wisps and whirl of gray and blue, hints of yellow, trailing skyward, as though he expected answers.

"How the fuck would I know?" VZ said after a few responsive puffs himself and an exhale of three perfect smoke rings that drifted past his partner's permed hair an inch or so above the uppermost curls. "The real question is where he's holed up? Who's supporting him? How is it that he's in play again after all the work we did on him? Those are the questions if you ask me."

“What did the phone log say?”

“Asked his father if he knew where he’d been. Old man didn’t have a clue. Said ‘you told me about working with some friends. Something overseas. Believe you said Special Services, Special Forces, something like that. I assumed it was Iraq, somewhere over there, but you never said.’ Also said he’s gonna call again Saturday, so we can get another bead on him. He doesn’t seem to remember much, and his family doesn’t know anything. So, at least that loop is still secure.”

They looked across the table at each other, two hard cases taking the measure of this moment for no reason other than that’s what they did, day in and day out. VZ with his military bearing, his close-cropped pate, his scowl perfected over years of posturing with a legion of guys not much different than AC, who was younger and stronger and cuter but less substantial when push came to shove. VZ was a Frogman, and nobody fucks with Seals. They are flat out killers. AC was an Ivy League policy guy with a background in psychological torture and a track record of some repute at the black sites where terrorists, wannabes, and whoever else fell into the net were interrogated.

AC has a style about him. That no one can deny. Has an aura of complete nonchalance in applying the most hideous techniques for sounding out suspects. Been at the torture chambers, all those ratholes on the Arabian Peninsula, the pens in Serbia, the pits in Poland and Romania, Guantanamo Bay, too, did the deeds no one wants to talk about in public but way back channel gets a very big thumbs-up. When you mess with the USA, he’s the guy you get to know.

Not that what he did produced anything that mattered. Just the bleating of camel jockeys after their nuts had been fried. Still, he made them suffer bad and some of them died. After what they did to us, what they were said to have done, anyhow, it felt good to bust their balls. Like that.

So, VZ doesn’t dismiss him out of hand. Still, he could hang this guy on a meat hook in a rendering plant and never break a sweat. Listening to him bitch and moan is just another day at the office. They don’t really have a lot to do that matters much these days. But they have an off-ledger budget and so they work out. Keep the coals

burning low until another war breaks their way. Then they can keep busy. Maybe be useful. For now, they're just turning tricks.

"What'd the guy do, I wonder?" VZ said, almost to himself.

"Heard he took out the Old Man's daughter, granddaughter, something like that. One of those disconnects between what it's supposed to be and what it is. Family's in an uproar and I can't think that matters very much to anybody, at least not on the face of it. Afghani crisis of the minute, you know."

"Gotta be some baggage attached to that. Something on our side would be my guess. He's Delta Plus and they're fucking with him? Putting a screw in his brain. The big boys must have something to hide. Otherwise, who gives a shit?"

"True that. Hard to believe they got nothing more important for us to do."

"All I know is we've got orders to find him."

"When we do, what then?"

"They didn't say."

✦

"Emily, it's Clay. Is everything as we discussed?"

"Yes, Clayton. We're gathered in the dining room. No phones except this one. Arrangements done in person. It's wonderful to hear your voice."

"And yours, as well, Emily. Before you put us on speaker, were you able to acquire the new phones?"

"Yes, four of them in a quiet name. I'll say more if you want me to."

"No, that's good. Please put my folks on the line."

"Clayton, it's Mother. Can you hear me."

"Loud and clear, Mother."

"Your father's here with me."

"Hello again, son. We've been looking forward to this call. So much to say and all this mystery, too. Espionage and what not. Are we free to talk now?"

"Only briefly right now, Father. Mother. Emily, please hear me out. I know you all have a lot of questions and I look forward to discussing everything with you very soon. But we need to keep this very brief for now.

“There are some tremendous opportunities for Embry that I’m looking at. Anton Financial, too, I’m hoping. I’m going to propose a joint venture to you and George Anton that’ll I’ll lead on behalf of our collaboration. The numbers are big, absolutely staggering. It’s literally a once in a lifetime project with huge upside. It has my full attention and commitment.

“This needs to be covered in person. I’d like to do so very discretely in a private setting. Somewhere away from home. Do we still have that cottage at Duxbury?”

“We do, Clayton. The girls were up there last month. Reunion with some sorority sisters. They had a grand time.”

“Then, Mother, I’d like to ask you to have it prepped for us to meet there a week from today. No mention of me at all, please. Not to anyone. We want to have Mr. Anton join us if at all possible. Emily, you and Father can agree on how to get that done but, again, only in person. Absolutely on the Q.T. I’m sorry to be so mysterious but please trust me. We need to keep this to just the four of us and George. When we’re all together, we can discuss this thoroughly.

“Now, last matter is this: Emily has some new cell phones that we’ll use for these purposes. Anything having to do with me, this new venture, anything else we’re doing together should use these phones instead of your old cell phones. Father, I’d ask you to look at this for now as you would an industrial espionage assault on one of your projects. We want perfect confidentiality going forward. I’d ask you for now to mention nothing about me to anyone outside the four of us. That includes the girls. Just for now. I’ll catch up with them very soon, I promise.”

“Is that all, son?”

“Yes. I have more to discuss with Emily for a moment. I really look forward to seeing you all and I’m very appreciative of your trust in this curious adventure. I’ll do my best to make sense of it for you when we see each other in person. Until then, please know I’m okay. I’m fine.”

He thought about adding, “I love you” but said instead, “I’d like to speak with Emily privately now. Can you take it off speaker? Thank you.”

After a moment, Emily said, “We’re alone now. What do you need from me, Clay?”

“Do you have a pen? Yes. Take down these coordinates. Are you ready? 45.10955 – 122.07423. Got it? Please read it back to me. Okay, good. Now, please, let’s keep this just between us. I want my father to have deniability.

“This is a lot to ask, Emily If you aren’t comfortable, please say so and I’ll completely understand. Can you convince your father to have his plane pick me up next Thursday? It will be a very tricky landing. Is Dexter still flying that old Falcon 20 for him?”

“Yes. He’s a Navy pilot. I’m told he can land a plane almost anywhere.”

“Here’s what he’ll need to do. Those coordinates are a campground called Indian Henry. Immediately east of it just beyond the river is Highway 224. The trees are pretty close on both sides of the highway but heading south from that point is a mile-long stretch that opens up a bit. Pavement is still in good shape. He’ll see it from the air. If he can land there next Thursday, say 4 in the afternoon local time, I’ll be waiting at the south end near where the trees close in again. We can fly out, stay somewhere overnight, and get to Duxbury for the meeting next Saturday. Is that something you’re willing to take on?”

“Of course, Clay. Let me say this again so you’ll hear me. I’ll do anything I possibly can to help you. Today, tomorrow, whenever. You can take that to the bank. So, let me get this scheduled. There’s no question whatsoever my father will agree. We’ve all been worried sick about you. Do I need to confirm?”

“I’ll call you this time Wednesday. If everything’s good to go, don’t answer. If there’s a glitch, let me know. I need to stress again, Emily, no phones, no talk, nobody but the four of us knows anything about this. And Dex knows where to land. Nothing more than he needs to know. Thank you for everything. I can’t wait to see you again.” And remember again what you look like, he thought to himself.

✦

“No call came through,” AC said. “I wonder if we spooked him?”

“Spooked him how?” VZ said.

“X-ray’s been canvassing the river area south of town with the local FBI. Trying to get a bead on where he crossed. Maybe word reached him.”

“What? By carrier pigeon? Unless we got that close, I can’t see how word gets around much. More likely the phone went dead.”

“Phone’s the only link we have. Tracked it to some tech guy in PDX but his place is abandoned, far as we can tell. Maybe he can’t get back to it. Or maybe he left it for greener pastures. Either way, looks to have been ransacked, I’m told. Chances are our guy stole the phone.”

“Wonder what else he stole? I keep wondering how he got so far from town. Helluva long way to walk, but from what I hear, there’s nothing motorized that can move through town.”

“Nothing but a chopper. Doubt he stole one of those.”

“Hell, even the helicopters are having trouble with range. Long way from town to where they can gas up. Bend is the closest place, I believe.”

“None of this is adding up for me. Hard to figure where he got to, let alone why. Now he’s on the phone to his folks once and disappears again. We’ve both been in war zones, but this one’s different. What I hear, there’s nobody in charge. Month out and it’s still unfolding. Hard to get a bead on how to proceed. X-ray tells me he had to drag this halfwit FBI guy out of a broken-down garage where he was sleeping. House was in a pile out front. Guy’s wife was still in it when he made it home. Dug her out and buried her in the yard. Fucking unbelievable.”

“Yeah, and USG’s letting them all rot where they fell. Looks like Gherkin decided to cut his losses out there. California and the Canadians are the only relief on the ground. Mexicans are flying in shipments of food and medicine. To us! Can you believe it? Those Ds are getting the finger from the good ol’ USA.”

✦

“Whatcha carving now?” Mick asked. He and Fausto had been bunking together for a month, and Mick had come to respect the guy’s work as a sculptor. Unschooled, of course, but he carved sleek, long lines and beautiful shapes in several different woods, and made

utilitarian objects like bowls, pipes, hat racks, handles that were very finely rendered.

“Bust. A woman’s head from the neck up. Finally found a piece of wood that’ll handle it. Chunk of madrone from the core of the tree just above the root ball. Been wanting to do this for a while now but the wood has to be right.”

“You’ve got a lot of talent. Did you ever study it? Sculpting, I mean.”

Fausto shook his head. He was sitting on a stool with the piece of wood held between his feet, bracing it with his lower legs while he whittled some pieces from the extremities with his hunting knife. It was a Bowie, large enough for the chunk of wood and yet delicate enough in his hands for detailed carving.

“I studied welding. Blacksmithing, too. Once you get the hang of shaping things, metal, wood, it’s all pretty much the same in some ways. Feeling the tensile strength, getting a sense of its pliancy. I’ve always had good hands.” He stopped for a minute, looked at them as though to confirm what he’d said, held one up in front of his face and flexed it. It was large and strong looking, but with the dexterity and flexibility of an artist. “Yeah, good hands,” he said, and returned to his work.

“Good eye, too.” Mick said. “I’ve been in art school long enough to know you either see it or you don’t. They can teach you about materials, technique, that sorta stuff, but if you can’t see it, they can’t show it to you. *You* see it.”

“Nice of you to say so,” the older man said, and then he chuckled a little, his head bent into his chest. When Mick looked at him, he laughed harder.

“What?”

“Just can’t help noticing how good your mood’s been the last few days. Standing up straighter, too. Cock of the walk kind of a thing.”

Mick reddened, looked away, gathered himself, said, “Nothing wrong with feeling good, is there. Keep a positive attitude when times are tough. Right?”

“Yes, indeed, and when pussy is available. Am I right? Noticed that young lady seems to be prancing a bit, as well. Maybe just a coincidence.”

“Never been one to kiss and tell. Let’s just leave it at that. And how about you? Guess there’s no point in asking.”

“Slim pickings around here, my boy. That’s no joke.”

He held the knife blade down against the chunk of wood, gripping the handle with one hand and leveraging the blade with the other pressed against the back, meat of his palm to the flat edge of the metal and fingers extended. With one deft push, he carved a long, graceful curve of the neck below where the ear will be. “Thing of great beauty, the female form,” he said, gently rubbing the fresh cut with his bare hand, stroking it, thoughtfully looking at nothing.

Seeing the image clearly. One he sees in his dreams. Not every night but more and more often. Been too long since he’s been with a woman. Couple of gals he got together with one or the other every once in a while, hooking up the kids call it, getting together just to get off. Then along comes this earthquake and another month passes, up here without a lot to do and very little to look at in the way of females.

Rika’s a honey, but she’s gay. Hell, her sweetie’s pretty good looking herself for a dyke. Gives off a bit of a masculine vibe, which isn’t a turn on for him but Bella’s all right. Good people, both of them. Ailey, too, really a sweet kid but Mick already bagged her or maybe vice versa and anyway he gets the sense she keeps her distance from men his age.

Holly’s a babe and he’d be all over her if she showed any interest, but he gets the distinct feeling she has zero interest. Her two kids and her penchant for being in charge seem to occupy her energy, but it’s more than that. She’s always friendly and open with him, but distant in a way, as well. Probably thinks him blue collar, which of course he is, and therefore outside her areas of interest.

He and Dam have the most in common of everybody up here when it comes to sex, even though their attention goes to different genders. Dirk, too, come to think of it. Funny how it never crosses his mind to wonder where their host is at when it comes to this stuff. Even though they’ve been neighbors for years, he can’t recall ever seeing him with a woman. Not in that way. Not with a guy either, for that matter. Maybe all his passion is spent in chasing dreams of a better world. Just, equitable, peace and love, all that stuff that occupies his time and energy. Asexual? I don’t know. Maybe.

Mick had wandered away. Fausto felt the curve of the wood just carved and then the other side still virgin. He thought of Ellen Worthy without restraint. Tall, proud, headstrong, gorgeous, and somehow, he sensed, more than a little on edge just now. Something disquieted about her caught his attention.

How anyone handles something like this calamity is impossible to guess, and he knows her not at all until their time here at the compound this past month. Maybe it's any of a thousand different things that logically might upset her about this situation. But something about her strikes him as restless, frustrated, maybe even wounded. Whatever it is, god help him stay away from a married woman, everything about her sets his pheromones surging and his lust is palpable. He knows she senses it and knows, too, that she only barely warned him off.

Chapter Thirty-One

"Dam," Holly said, "I've been looking all over for you. You're getting to be hard to find anymore."

He was sitting at the edge of the ridge overlooking the compound, staring at nothing, somnambulistic enough in the moment that her voice made him start, gather himself almost as though he was caught doing something he shouldn't, except that here there was nothing to do and probably not much he shouldn't do either. He settled back again, looked at her, calling the question: so what?

"I don't mean to bother you, Dam, and it may be just me, but you really seem to be scarce these days. Am I just imagining it?"

He smiled slightly, looked away for a moment, thinking about what to say.

"Do you mean distracted? Not with it? Sort of slacker-like behind this cool exterior? Define your terms, please."

She punched him lightly in the arm, sat down next to him, leaned forward from the waist, and rested her elbows on her knees. She looked off in the direction he'd been staring when she found him, noted the picturesque view of the compound set in the forested hillside below the mountains to the east. The sunlight was filtered

through the trees, casting a halo around her head. Her hair was short and spiked, a light brown with blond highlights, her face narrow with high cheekbones, a long, thin nose, and a wide mouth of dazzling white teeth when she smiled. She wasn't smiling now; rather, her lips were pursed, and her bright blue eyes were etched at the corners with signs of concern.

She's really a beautiful woman, Dam thought to himself, and reflected on the curiosity of how different she and the others that he worked with back in town looked to him in this setting. They all looked healthier for one thing. The radiance in their look was a natural one that rose from the basic chores they'd done daily for better than a month now in the great outdoors, rather than the aerobic flush most of them sported in the urban environment of office work and workouts. But he thought, too, it was seeing them in a different way than the usual encounters they shared over the years. Living together was a remarkable change.

Maybe she sensed his attention. Maybe it was just now a moment she'd delayed before saying what she came to say. "You seem a bit down to me, Dam. Are you doing all right?"

He glanced at her, met her eyes briefly, began to respond, but looked away. His dark eyes were prominent in a handsome face, his skin a dark coffee color with specks of light refracted where the sun hit it directly. He held himself like the stylish guy he'd always been but looked very different in the funky denim reservation western wear that Bobby and his family brought them from the store at Warm Springs.

"Cowboy life suiting you?" Holly said with a wry smile.

"Not much," he said with a shrug. After a moment, he added, "Of course, I appreciate it here. Can't imagine what it must be like in town. Hell on earth, and here we are in this beautiful place. So, yeah, we're lucky. No complaints."

"Except…?"

"Except? Yeah, except I totally feel lost here. At loose ends, you know. We've been here a month and what am I doing. Babysitting. Love those kids but, c'mon. I don't want to complain. Everybody's going through it here. It just seems that you guys are adapting better than I am."

“We’re all struggling, Dam, if that’s any consolation. Trying to get a grip on what comes next. I think that’s why everybody has been so deep into these sessions with Dirk. Trying to get some clarity about what our world is going to look like as it’s rebuilt. It’s kind of therapeutic. Although I’ve noticed you haven’t been joining us.”

“Mighty Dirk’s philosophy class and political action committee. Yeah, I’ve been truant. Hey, just kidding. I love Dirk, I do. Have a lot of respect for him, too.”

She was looking at him with an arched eyebrow and something just short of a scowl. Dam had always been a bit abrasive for a C-level executive, not the sort to suffer fools. Short, abrupt, even a touch rude sometimes. But she’d never known him to be unkind. His caustic response caught her off guard. It gave her a clearer sense, too, of how much he was hurting.

He was too good a man to let it pass. “I’m sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. Dirk worked for me for five years. One helluva coder. But the truth is, forgive me, sometimes I thought he was unhinged. He worked hung over more days than not and no shortage of attitude either. Hard to take sometimes.

“Now, here we are in his hideaway, talking about all the kinds of things he’s been ranting about for years, and they’re starting to sound like they make sense. Far as I can tell, he hasn’t even had a drink since we’ve been here, He’s in his element. It’s making me feel like maybe I’m the one who’s unhinged.

“That’s why I haven’t spoken up when you all are discussing this stuff. I don’t know what I’d say. I mean, look. I grew up in Northeast Portland when it was a very segregated town. Worked my butt off. Got a full ride to Stanford. Pity rides people called them. Let’s give this poor black kid a lift out of the ‘hood.

“Well, you know what. I did it. Did the work to do the work. And I’ve been doing it ever since. I love my job. Solving problems, building cool stuff out of nothing, making things happen, I love all that. And I’m pretty good with the world the way it was. I mean, yeah, problems, lots of them. But my world was getting better and better. Maybe that’s selfish, but I didn’t have much reason to tear it down. Now that it’s all been ripped apart, I guess I’d be good if we just put it back the way it was.”

Holly gave him a sympathetic hand to his shoulder, held him gently, then looked hard in his eyes and said, “All of it? The racism, the poverty, the inequity. Are we going to fold all of that back in, too? So, all the little black kids who don’t go to Stanford can just go hang in the ‘hood? That’s what we’re really talking about, Dam. Changing *those* things. Breaking *those* habits. And let me tell you something. I need your help in sorting through all these ideas we have. I want that perspective of yours when we put together a game plan for the governors.

“I know it sounds wild, but I talked with the Governor’s policy guy this morning. He’s tough, asks very sharp questions, but he’s really listening, too. He even encouraged me to get him details on a couple of things we discussed, flesh it out for reports he’s preparing for the governor. Wants it by next week.

“I don’t think he’s blowing smoke our way, Dam. I really don’t. Nobody has time or energy to waste right now. I want to give him proposals that make sense. Maybe it goes nowhere, I realize that. But I damn sure don’t want to look back and say: wow, they gave us a chance and we didn’t bother to take it. I’m going to take it. And I want your help.

“So how about you get over your bad self and give me a hand?”

He gave her a sharp look, but she smiled that dazzling smile of hers and put her arms around him, held him for just a minute and said, “I really hope you’ll say yes.” It got his pulse beating a bit. First time he’d felt a twinge of excitement in quite a while. He just nodded, yes, and joined her walk back to the compound, both feeling lighter, hopeful, maybe even a little optimistic.

✦

Dexter made one pass, circled briefly out of sight, and landed the plane like a guy who was used to touching down on a two-lane highway in a forest of pine trees without giving it much thought and even less concern. He taxied down to where Clay was waiting by the side of the road, swiveled 180 degrees to face back the way he’d come, and waited for his passenger to board.

He said hello and little more. After Clay was seated and buckled in, he gunned the engine, roared down the road, and lifted off quicker

than Clay thought possible, barely clearing the trees where they tightened up to the pavement. Just like that, they were airborne and headed east, climbing rapidly above the land as it sloped upward to the spires of the Cascades.

“Good to see you again,” the pilot said, and made no mention of how different he looked, the deep scars that crossed his face, and one evident just beneath his hairline. “We’ll gas up in Caspar and head on to Indianapolis. Emily’s waiting for us there. Got some rooms reserved for the night. Tomorrow we’ll head to Boston. That work for you?”

“It does. I’m grateful for the lift. Been a while since I’ve seen my family. Emily, too. Lots of catching up to do.”

“You bet,” Dex said, and a very broad smile spread across his face, but he said nothing more all the way to Wyoming.

“No need to keep me company,” he said after they’d landed, filled the tanks, and taken off again. “If you want to stretch out, those seats in the cabin will lay flat. Slept on them any number of times myself overnight. Pretty comfortable, considering.”

“Nah, I’m good. The walk to the road was easier than it might have been. Mostly downhill. Open country for the most part. I’m feeling good. Enjoying the ride. It’s…” He paused for just a moment, took a breath, continued, “it’s good to see things undamaged. The way they used to be. Been a while.”

“I hear the destruction where you’ve been is pretty bad. But there’s been no coverage. Nobody knows for sure what happened. It’s like that part of the country just *isn’t* anymore.”

Clay said nothing in response. Just stared at the countryside passing below, thinking about what comes next, the meeting with his family, George Anton, how to make the case for what he wanted to get done. Make certain that part of the country *is* again. *Is* even better.

Thinking, too of Emily. What that will be like, seeing her again. Having her see him again, the way he is now. Wishing that he could picture her, remember what she looks like. So odd to remember so much about someone without being able to call her face to mind, to connect the person to a visible recollection. He was getting used to that disconnect but no less discomforted by it.

There was the possibility, Bella reminded him, that this bizarre malfunction of his memory, the way his mind was processing now,

resulted from his injuries, damage to his body and to his brain that took away certain images from his ability to recall them. He thought not, though, and knew Bella thought not either.

Why this blank space had been worked into his consciousness was the unknown. That it had been done intentionally by outside forces was increasingly apparent, the more they pried open that barrier and the more the light entered a very dark space. Little by little, disturbing as it still was, physically nauseating as his reaction to probing there continued to be, he was gradually becoming clear not only that his disability had been intentionally created but also that he would eventually overcome it. What was uncertain was whether he ever would discover the purpose, why it had been done, what was being hidden behind this miasma.

He must have dozed off because suddenly they were landing, the plane taxiing to a stop, climbing down from the cabin, a woman – Emily? – coming toward them from the lounge, carrying something in her arms.

"Steady yourself, Clay," Dex said, resting a hand on his shoulder.

She embraced him with one arm, the bundle beneath her other arm held aside. "Oh, Clay, I'm so thrilled to see you again. It's been forever!" Holding him almost fiercely for a long moment, then relaxing, stepping back, looking at him with a shy smile on her face.

She ignored his scars, the changes to him that were written on his face, but he could not ignore the child she held. She turned slightly to the side, lifted the blanket away from the baby's face, said, "Clayton, this is Hope. I couldn't think of a more appropriate name."

He looked at the child, her beautiful face, her curious eyes as she looked back at him, looked again at Emily, his expression the question. She nodded, held the question for him in the expression she returned. He slowly nodded, too, the look of astonishment changing to recognition and acceptance.

"This is, um, a… a surprise," he said. He and Emily looked at each other for a moment, then at Dex, and simultaneously all three of them began laughing. The baby though was stoic, still looking at this man in front of her through very large blue eyes.

✦

They talked long into the night, the two of them filling in what the other wanted to know, she more effectively and he with difficulty because there was so much in the interim that was unclear, unknown, inexplicable. Still, he tried, and she listened. At least for now, he told her, for your ears only.

“You were a homeless person. On the streets. It’s hard to imagine.”

“What’s more difficult is not remembering how I got there. Not even remembering for quite a while that I didn’t belong there. It was a long time before I remembered I had a family. And friends. Before I could even think of their names… of your name.”

“That was one of the reports your family got from them, whoever “them” was. The people who told us you’d been hurt. You’d been badly hurt. You were being treated. You had some memory loss. They were very vague about the whole thing. Just that it was a nation security issue, so they couldn’t say much.”

“National security? They said that?”

“At first, they said it involved national security. Very important that we not discuss it outside the family. When your father followed up with them about it, they said your mother was mistaken. It was *your* security they were talking about. It all became very disingenuous. Then they pretty much disappeared. Suddenly, we didn’t hear from them much. One call saying, ‘don’t worry. Sit tight.’ Then nothing. Your father finally reached out to Senator Barnes. But, well, ‘he was looking into it’ was all we got from his office. We didn’t know where to turn.”

“And all this time you were in the Bahamas?”

“Big as a house, sweating terribly, scared to death.”

“I’m so sorry, Emily.”

“You didn’t know, Clay. I should have told you before you left. The one thing it taught me was to get over my fear of speaking up. What you get from keeping quiet can be a lot more fearful.”

She touched his face, finally touched the scars, ran her finger slowly over the length of one, then the next, and the last one. Felt the pain he must have suffered, shivered almost imperceptibly, then smiled at him, said, “Still handsome as a movie star.”

“Must have been a horror film,” he said, but she didn’t laugh. Just smiled at him so warmly, so genuinely that he felt a little chocked up.

It seemed a long while since anyone shared this kind of affection with him.

He held her in a very gentle embrace for several minutes, then held her at arm's length for a minute and looked at her closely. Her eyes sparkled with some combination of happiness and uncertainty, bright blue and large like the baby's, her face angular, clear, framed by the curls of her hair, her neck long, shoulders square, posture well-schooled, her body still lithe but fuller and more rounded than he recalled.

She was quite beautiful, and now that he was near her, holding her, noting her scent and the tactile response of her body to his touch, she was immediately familiar to him again, so much a part of his sensory reference, as though no time at all had come between them. She was family, friend, lover, a lifelong intimate, which made it all the more remarkable that he didn't at all remember her face.

✦

The meeting went well. Insistently part family reunion but he kept pushing it back to the business at hand, which was where he, his father, and George felt perfectly comfortable, his dear mother's distractions notwithstanding.

Emily thought to bring him clothes, so in chinos, a pullover shirt, and loafers, he looked very Dux. Doris couldn't help fawning over him, wanting to discuss plans, hear about his time away, trying so hard to mention nothing about those horrible scars to his handsome face, all the things she understandably wanted to know, and he couldn't or wouldn't answer.

After a lengthy round of those preliminaries, Emily thoughtfully led her away to discuss their future as a family. It gave the business discussion the required breathing space.

"Clayton, it's no secret your father and I both have hoped for many a year you'd take over the business for us. And, of course, I couldn't be happier that you and Emily have started a family together, although I would have supposed a wedding would come first."

He said it without malice and only a touch of irony. George Anton was old school to the nth degree, but he made a fortune by clearly understanding human impulse and the vagaries of decision-making as

people go about discovering the course of their life. The judgements he made were where the profit was to be had and rarely about the wisdom or the morality of those choices.

“So, here we are with this rather audacious proposal you’ve made, and I’m inclined to say,” and he looked quickly at Jacob Embry, “unless your very astute father persuades me otherwise, that Anton is all in. I couldn’t be happier about the prospect of seeing you take the reins and bring us this spectacular harvest.

“However, I think we need to consider the implications of your injury and whether all that is behind you. Am I misguided to suspect there’s more to all this secrecy than simply protecting our financial interests?”

“Full disclosure, George, Father, I’m not exactly sure what is going on. I’ve had a serious lapse in memory, a form of amnesia, we believe, and to address it I’ve been getting counseling from a psychotherapist. We don’t know the cause, but the disability has lessened considerably in the past month, and we believe it will continue to improve.

“A blow to the head will do that, they say. There’s nothing about this calamity out west that has affected it?”

“No, sir. If anything, it may have shaken me out of it. Brought me around. The rest of the story is a fair number of unknowns, along with the near certainty of the financial opportunity I’ve described.

“I’m excited about it and fully prepared to tackle it head on. But I don’t want to mislead you. There are things going on that are unsettling and I’m not sure what to make of them. Not even if or how they involve me personally. How they are affecting the Northwest we have a pretty good bead on. It *is* going to be declared an enterprise zone, with all the tax advantages and government backed bonds to support it. We’re going to be the anchor banker.

“I can absolutely assure you I’ll give this effort my very best. But I can’t say there won’t be complications that I’m not yet aware of.”

“Hell,” George said, leaning forward, slapping Jacob on the knee, laughing a bit, “that’s what makes it fun. The unexpected. Always an opportunity or two somewhere behind those things that do pop up.”

“Not to mention the uncertainty of the administration in Washington,” Jacob said. “None of us have ever seen anything like it.

The truth is, I've begun to question whether we're going to survive it. Our democracy, I mean."

"I thought at first it was incompetence," George said. "Then I thought it was just greed, a kleptocracy. But the more I see, it looks like wielding power to punish and provoke, for what purpose I can't imagine. Like a child acting out, but a very powerful child. It's tearing this country apart and I really fear for us. First time in my lifetime I've ever felt this way."

"If you saw what I've seen in Oregon, George, you'd question whether the country itself is going to survive it. We're banking on the governors to get us back on our feet. The President seems to have decided to ignore us. Forgotten at a time like this would be disturbing. Ignored is fearful."

✦

Dex circled High Lake twice, gauged the wind, gave Clay thumbs up, and out went two bundles with small chutes attached that opened on timers, followed by Clay himself with a big chute that opened shortly after he clear the plane and drifted slowly to earth. He landed in the corral, which scared the hell out of the horse but otherwise seemed to attract no attention from the neighbors, who after all were a good five or six miles distant and likely busy with their own issues.

He found one of the bundles right away, the one with clothes and a few supplies, which landed near the cabin. The other took a while to retrieve, after he homed in on its beeper with the locater and hiked a half-mile or so to where it landed higher up on the hillside.

In it were two carefully bubble-wrapped laptop computers and a host of other gear, flashlights, night goggles, a model 18 Glock 9mm, an AR-15 rifle with a 14-inch barrel, and ammunition for both firearms. All of it fit in a small duffle bag, which he carried back to the cabin with the parachute wrapped around it.

He felt like he could hold off an army, but he had no idea who or where the enemy was, why they were after him, what the consequence of being confronted or even captured might be. If they had wanted him dead, whomever *they* might be, one supposes they could have easily done that when they chose instead to fuck with his mind.

The cascade of events this past month, and just this last week, was tidal, a steady pounding of a churning sea slapping against him, testing his stability, his footing wobbly at times. Thankfully he seemed to be holding up.

The contrast between being in this place he came to 10 days ago, his journey East into the family maelstrom, loving concern but overwhelming, too, unexpected fatherhood like a bolt from the blue, a colossal enterprise he was undertaking, securing a partnership with his family and Emily's to bankroll the new Northwest, and like some heavily armed Army Ranger parachuting back to this remote place, for now his base of operations; all of it, he thought, spoke to an essential solidity of character in a chaotic situation of unprecedented severity.

Stability, indeed. There was a time when this sort of self-evaluation would have surprised him not at all. Standing tall in a world suddenly without foundation was another matter altogether. Weapons like these he held in his hands were not an uncommon choice to make when you're on your own in the middle of nowhere and uncertainty is the ground you stand on. This was of another degree.

The dangers he faces if ill-defined are nevertheless demonstrably present, lurking somewhere in the shadows nearby, ever a threat with uncertain intention to do him harm, perhaps to do him greater harm than already done, but certainly focused on something other than allowing him his freedom. What better reason to take up arms and defend what's rightly yours?

So, he is here, reasonably well-provisioned, decisively well-armed, with a suite of computers in Emily's name, one for Dirk, one for him, and one for her, with an encrypted account to a satellite provider that links the three of them. Emily does good work.

She'll get squared away in the Bahamas and set up a place somewhere on the river in Sacramento. If and when it's safe, he'll join her there. Until then, a visit whenever possible. Thinking about it as he slowly hikes the last stretch to the cabin, a place to share with his wife-to-be and daughter, it seems like a dim fantasy dancing on the farthest shelves of dawn.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Mr. President,” Mark Maloney said, sticking his head in the door after knocking, “the press is hounding us, sir. They want to know exactly what we’re doing to address the devastation in the Northwest.”

“Tell them I said, ‘We’re doing exactly what needs to be done. The rescue situation is well in hand.’ Then tell ‘em to fuck off!”

“They’re threatening to ignore the blackout, sir. We’re a month out and they say they’ll sue to break the embargo. They have video of the destruction. Their people on the ground say there’s no federal presence whatsoever, despite what we’ve said, that Canada and Mexico are supporting California. Not us.”

“Fake news! Get out a press release about the fake news these sick rumor mongers are spreading. Call our friends at Frog News to get the message out. Now! Radical Leftists are trying to undermine the most incredible rescue effort ever mounted. It’s a plot by the Dems against me, against my administration. That’s why we’ve had to suppress coverage. Radical communists exploiting a humanitarian crisis. Sad! Pathetic! C’mon Mark, you don’t need me to tell you how this works. Get the goddamn message out the door.”

✦

“Ronnie,” Batavia said, with a crack of the whip for emphasis, “come here. On your hands and knees. Now!”

He was putty in her hands, the programming of his brain not needed to conscript his complete submission to her wishes. They had worked so carefully to implant a command sequence in this fool of a subject, a partisan of the Soviet system cultivated over many years simply by fanning his vanity, pumping up his foolish image of himself as shrewd, cunning, brilliant, handsome, and hung.

None of it was true, of course, and the effort to construct his fantasy in manipulable form was not much of a stretch for the scientists who delve deep into the subconscious where the id resides, but still it was work. A very sizable investment in a project that would equalize the balance of power between her nation, humbled and humiliated but better at the long game, and this insufferable, infantile

nation that roared democracy and had no better sense than to elect a buffoon like Ronald Gherkin as its leader.

So, all the work they had done on him, beginning by luring him into their web, the offer of financial help, some loans of $hundreds of millions to cover his debt, which grew with every failed deal that he made; and then to entertain him by force-feeding his massive ego with every manner of flattery and indulgence in those ornate temples of the Russian tsars the oligarchs now maintained; and, finally, the cherry on top of that fabulous tart they served him, which was in fact her cherry, one carefully constructed to replace the original long since lost to other service, and offered him as the conclusion to a long run of debauchery, drunkenness, drugs, young girls, bestiality, golden showers, and then exquisite Batavia herself presented to him nude and floating in a bed-size bowl of warm, liquid chocolate into which he dove.

Ah, Batavia, tall, lithe, gracefully, sinewy, curvaceous, built as though in molded perfection of the female form, the Slavic ideal, and an absolute tigress in the sack, chocolate or otherwise. By the time they were done with poor Ronald Gherkin, he was her lapdog, she his dominatrix, and his overwhelmingly natural inclination in that direction was now firmly captured by menticide of a deviously sophisticated sort. There was a bug placed deep in his brain pan that she could activate on command.

“My shoes,” she said, “lick them,” and placed the sole of her Manolos in his face, the six-inch spike of her heel in the dimple of his chin. Who knows what sorts of bizarre behavior the President’s bedroom had seen in its time, but this scene that was playing out tonight in the southwest corner of the second floor of the White House was likely unprecedented, at least in previous administrations.

In the Gherkin White House, it was Batavia’s only amusement. Far from home, from her family and friends, from her superiors in the FSB, she was the assigned handler of this bloated, bizarre, despicable character from whom the only pleasure she could derive was his humiliation. Yet, the satisfaction was limited precisely because he privately loved being abused just as he publicly railed against any perceived slight. Sex for him was only satisfying if humiliation was

involved, whether as giver or receiver. She heaped it on him, and he thrived. The post-modern presidency, yes?

✦

“That data mining is a bitch, ain’t it?” Able Charlie said to Victor Zulu. “It just keeps churning numbers until it coughs up a hair ball worth your attention.”

“Such as?”

“Such as that satellite phone our man boosted, we thought.”

“Yeah. Ransacked some tech guy’s apartment in town.”

“The very one. Guess what we coughed up today? The tech guy who owns that phone also owns a big ranch south of Portland.”

“Lemme guess. Somewhere near where the call took place.”

“About 10 miles down the road. Through the woods. Whatever.”

“Hot lead sounds like.”

“Ya think? No wonder you make the big bucks.”

✦

“This is really nice,” Mick said. Ailey was lying next to him, naked as those jaybirds squawking in the trees nearby, her nipples still flushed with excitement, belly trembling slightly, and her face relaxed into a very beautiful repose.

“I want you to know something,” she said without opening her eyes. “Sex with you has been wonderful.”

“You too,” he said too quickly.

She rose onto one elbow, looked at him very seriously, said, “Listen to me. I’m not talking about good sex or bad sex. I mean having sex with someone I care about. Someone I can tell cares about me.”

“I do,” he said, again too quickly.

“Mick,” she said. “Shut up, already!”

He did.

“I want you to hear this. It’s not easy to say but I want you to know. I had a very ugly childhood. You don’t need to hear the details, but it gave me a twisted idea of sex. Twisted idea of myself, too. When alcohol and drugs came along, they found a ready market in this girl.

Numbed me out. Let me do stuff that was pretty sick, stuff I'm not proud of. Not ashamed either. It just was.

"And I got beyond it. Got straight with the booze and the dope. *That* I am proud of. Point of all this is, I thought sex was something left behind, too, with all the other bad things.

"But sex with you has been good, and I never had that before. So, I want you to know, and I want to thank you. That's all." She looked at him curiously, inquisitively, wondering if what she said had registered. Then she gave him a brief smile, lay back on the moss in the warmth of the rock beneath it heated by the summer sun and she too was radiant.

Now that he finally was welcome to say something he was speechless.

✦

Holly, Dam, and Dirk finished up another meeting with Daniel Wong. They looked at each other, none of them ready to say what each of them was thinking.

"Did we just hear what I think we heard?" Dam said. "The governor of the great state of California is preparing to put some of our ideas in play. This could be the beginning of a formal relationship. Is that what he said?"

"That's precisely what he said." Holly said. "But also, that securing the financial support for rebuilding is going to be critical. I sure hope we haven't overstated what Clay can bring to the table. Do we know any more about that?"

"I'm heading out tomorrow for a powwow," Dirk said. "I believe he's begun discussions with his family about our plans. That's the point of our get together."

"You must be ecstatic, Dirk," Dam said. "Some of your things seem like they may be coming to fruition."

"My brave new world, you mean. Timing is everything, my friend. It took a helluva blow to the status quo for any of this to be possible."

"Well," Holly said, "Desperate times, as they say… Doesn't get more desperate than this."

✦

Fausto answered the knock at the door of the bunk house and audibly gasped when he saw her. “I hope I’m not bothering you,” Ellen said with a smile that was somehow both wry and self-effacing. “If you have a moment, I have a favor to ask you.”

Moments imagined are often unsettling when they come to be. He had devoted inordinate hours of fantasy to welcoming her to his presence, inviting her in, luxuriating in the vision of her, the heat of her company, the many possibilities of what might come of it all.

In fact, he merely mumbled, “Of course, no, sure, would you like to come in?” Stumbled a bit as he backed away and opened the door, looked askance at the mess he and Mick lived in, the coffee cups unwashed, the beds unmade, the wood shavings in a small pile at the foot of the table where he worked. “The, uh, our place is a bit of a mess.”

She smiled courteously, said, “I’d be more comfortable outside if you have just a minute to talk.”

“Of course,” he said, stepping onto the porch, leaving the door ajar behind him. “What, uh, how can I help you?” he said, his eyes passing from her face to sweep the area, feeling for no specific reason relief that no one else was within view. He looked back at her with as much composure as he could muster.

“This may sound a little strange and I really don’t want to impose in any way,” she said, smiling a bit and squinting as she looked at him. “I’ve noticed that you and Mick have access to some pot, good pot judging by the smell, and I want to ask if you could get me some?”

“Marijuana? You want some reefer? Well, sure, I mean Bobby grows it here on the ranch. Perfectly legit, too. Four plants for every adult and even before we got here, between Dirk, Bobby, and his family, he’s got a helluva crop. Really excellent cannabis if I do say so. And free for the asking.”

“I’d like to have some. Just a little for David and me. And something to smoke it in, too.” She laughed. “I’m not very experienced. I mean, a long time ago at college, of course, but not since then. Probably the same for him.”

“That is not a problem. I’ll get you as much as you want. And a pipe, too. One I carved myself. My gift to you. The two of you, I mean. If you’re good with that. I’ll just put a little package together for you.”

She looked at him with something less than the reserve and poise he'd usually seen in her. A little embarrassed, maybe. Shy even. It was incredibly sexy. He had to warn himself to hold back, don't spook her.

"We don't usually do this. I mean, things are so different now. And I just thought maybe something to loosen us up would be helpful." She stopped for a moment to see how he was taking this, then plunged ahead, the words rushing from her as she began to open up. "David is so serious. Such a good man. So honorable, hard-working. I would love to see him slow down a little, you know? Just relax sometimes and let things be. He's so responsible and all this weighs on him. It just seems like maybe he could, you know, have a good time like you and Mick. Do you think that's silly?"

"No," he said, "no, not at all. I understand." He was flustered that she was confiding in him, that he was in her presence, and she was talking to him with a degree of trust and even intimacy. It was intoxicating, but he kept it together.

"I really do understand. All of us have been pretty shook up. I mean, yeah, shook up, right?" He looked at her with feigned innocence and fortunately she laughed, shook her head yes, smiled at him. His head was spinning. "David's the leader here, doing a lot of the heavy lifting. Got to be hard on him after a while. On both of you."

They both were quiet then, smiling at each other, neither of them knowing what to do next. Her blouse was open several buttons, her breasts swelling with each breath she took, daring him not to look and he resisted for a long while before noting the faint mole, a beauty mark really, on the side of her left breast, which held his attention as long as he dared. He could feel her energy, the scent of her drifting in the air, something molecular between them.

"Pot is great stuff," he said. "Very relaxing and usually a lot of fun. I have to ask you though, for the kind of stress we're talking about, have you ever tried mushrooms?"

"Psychedelics? Isn't that what they are?"

"Well, yes, but very gentle. Not like LSD or anything. Silly-psybin we call them. Take them and you laugh for hours. They really put life in perspective. All you want to do is run naked through the woods and soak up the sun."

He saw a hint of caution in her eyes, but then she relaxed again.

“Well, we all can use a dose of that, I guess, but I think maybe marijuana is the place for us to start. If you can help me, I’d be grateful.”

“Be my pleasure. Come by later and I’ll have a little care package for you.”

“Thank you, Fausto,” she said, nodded yes, and then said, “it’s good of you to help me out. I wasn’t sure if it was okay to ask.”

He just smiled, nodded affirmatively, and was caught off guard when she stepped toward him, hugged him for more than a moment, the feel of her body instantly imprinted in the place where it had only been imagined before, smiled again, turned, and walked away. He swallowed very hard, more than once.

✦

“Here’s my question to you, Lady and Gentlemen, and I ask this on behalf of the president himself.”

Mark Maloney spoke confidently, showing no intimidation before the august gathering he addressed. His eyes shifted quickly from one of them to the next, taking their temperature, reading their mood. In his rumpled suit, loud tie, and scuffed shoes, he was the worker among them, the Federalist recruited to drive an agenda unlike any they had been presented in their collective time in office. Alone among them, he knew the President was secretly observing the proceedings, ever alert to the slightest sign of disloyalty, which was anything whatsoever that veered even slightly from the course he set.

They sat at a large oval table in the East Wing of the White House over which loomed portraiture of the great presidents of the nation. The largest of them, in size if not stature, was Ronald Gherkin. It stood between two flags of the USA. The presidential seal dominated the center of the highly polished table.

To Maloney’s left was Ross Freemont, Speaker of the House, a master wheeler-dealer in the best tradition of political machinations. His eyes were piercing, face was puffy, complexion the color of putty, that of someone who spends all his time indoors, a roll of fat over the collar of his starched white shirt, his dark blue suit sporting a rep tie, an American flag pin in the lapel. Epitome of Washington, D.C. where power meant even more than money.

Next to him was Pauline Von Prentiss, the Attorney General, named to the Cabinet after her predecessor was forced to resign following an IG's look at his business dealings. He had forgotten that adage and yielded power to greed. One can have both but only in the proper order. Von Prentiss knew the drill. She was a corporate attorney, meaning a lobbyist for the merchants of grain in her home state of Iowa. Every hair was in place on her carefully contrived look of one who comes to play and takes no prisoners. Her tweed suit stretched comfortably taut over her ample bosom and broad back. Her makeup was barely noticeable.

To Maloney's right was Malcolm McNitch, Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate in his seventh term representing Ohio and an iconic fixture in the policy apparatus of Washington. He was senatorial as a polar bear is arctic, a full head of wavy grey hair, ruddy complexion, a wide, wry smile below wary eyes, broad shoulders, a lean build, a seventy-year-old man's bit of a belly bequeathed him by his nightly martini the bespoke charcoal grey suit couldn't quite hide.

Next to him was Cyrus Stamp, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, imperious and slightly frayed New England Yankee look about him that casually carried his family wealth, their Mayflower pedigree, and the presumptive support of the New York City investment bankers.

Directly opposite Maloney was John Taylor, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, groomed, proper, Ivy League, a strict constitutionalist and the only one among them with a lifetime appointment, which was of concern to the President and hence to Maloney, his Chief of Staff and hatchet man.

"The question is a simple one with profound implications." Maloney said and looked at each of them in turn. "What is sacrosanct about holding this nation together and what options exist for modifying the makeup of the United States?"

Chapter Thirty-Three

Dirk made the long trek to the cabin, leading a mule loaded with supplies. Clay was nowhere to be found at first but after calling for

him, he emerged from the cave behind with a flashlight in one hand and a pistol in the other.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt your morning constitution.”

Clay smiled, said, “Just doing a little exploring. That cave goes way back after you squeeze through a couple of tight spots. Little bit of a seep at one place. Seems like it might be coming down a shaft from the surface, but I couldn’t see any light. Be interesting to have some climbing gear, see where it goes.”

“Can’t help but notice you look a little different since I saw you last. Better armed, too.”

Clay looked at the pistol almost sheepishly, put it aside, said, “Yeah, I imagine so. Took a little trip last week to firm up our business prospects. It’s coming together nicely. I think it‘s going to be fine.”

“A little trip?”

“Well, a quick one anyhow. Thought I’d take a dip into civilization just to refresh my memory.”

Dirk stared after him while he put away some gear and pulled out some other from a duffle bag. One that came from where, he wondered, especially when Clay handed him a laptop. Caught a glimpse of what looked like the barrel of a rifle, too. This is one remarkable character. A quick trip? By horseback? He thought about asking but decided against it.

“So, where are we at?” he said, instead. “I brought some supplies to keep you going. Looks like you may have picked up some yourself.”

“I appreciate being resupplied. It looks like I might be here a while still. Need to keep clear of traffic for a time so we can firm up all the details of this banking venture. It promises to be very productive for us if I can stay out of harm’s way in the meanwhile. What do you think? Any news about those Feds?”

“One of the guys we talk to on the radio mentioned them knocking around Estacada, a little town north of us where the highways divide. Sounds like the same two Jonah dealt with. FBI and another guy who says not much. Asking about you but not by name.”

“How close is Estacada to the place we made that call?”

“Maybe a dozen miles. Maybe less.”

“Sounds like they’re closing in.”

“Bobby tells me they’ve been on the Res, too. Lotta dirt between those lightbulbs, but, yeah, it does seem like the campground is their dotsero.”

“Dotsero?”

“Zero point. On the map.”

“Got it. Learn something new every day up here.”

“Still no idea what they want?”

“No. Whatever it is, though, they’re sure spending some effort to find me.”

“I’d like to think they’d play hell to ever find this place. They’re moving around by helicopter, so I guess you haven’t seen or heard any signs of ‘em?”

“Been away for most of the time since I last saw you. But, no, no signs of any kind of machinery so far.”

“Want to tell me about the computer?”

He did. Explained the linkage among the three of them, what he wanted to use it for, the flow from Dirk and his team at the compound, they the intermediary between Wong, the governors and Clay, he to Emily, she to the bank.

“What do we have to tell them?” Dirk said.

“We are ready to do business. The particulars need to be laid out for us so we can respond. If we can structure the initiative properly, and by that, I mean fairly for both sides, capital will not be a problem.”

“No problem with the tax either?”

“It’s our advantage, at least initially. I know all those California banks are going to turn their backs on it when they hear the terms. Half off the top. Who’s he kidding? Call the damn governor’s bluff. That’ll be their response. And the governor knows that as well as I do.

“Meanwhile, we’ll be incorporated in California. Emily’s working on it now. By the time they realize we’ve grabbed the ring, they’ll have to come through us to get a piece of it. And they will. It’s just too big to pass. We’ll broker the bonds on behalf of the State of California and investors will be lined up to buy them.

Nickels, dimes, and quarters, that’s banker speak for maturity terms of five-, ten-, and twenty-five-years, and all of it backed by the full faith and credit of the 7th largest economy in the world. The

severance tax on the development revenues is something totally new and different. It's a unique deal and even my people might be gun shy if I wasn't the lead. By the time those niggling details are understood, though, we'll already be making money. They'll be much too busy counting their profits to object."

"And funneling half of it back into the kitty?"

"Exactly. Tax-free coming and going. Exemptions on the front end and deductions on the back. Pure capitalism in support of the new humanitarianism. Our goal is to demonstrate they can coexist successfully. That they in fact are symbiotic. Investing in people who invest in the community. Put money in the hands of people who need it and know they'll spend it on things. Get dollars circulating and keep them moving until everybody is doing well.

"Priming the pump is good business. It's good for people, too, because they *are* the pump. *They* are the need and helping them with the means to meet that need will build back this corner of the world faster and more successfully than any other way we might consider going about it. That's my operating theory. Excellent project for an idealist, eh?"

Dirk stared at him intently, wanting to believe. "I've had a lot of doubt to contend with in thinking my way through all these conversations," he said. "My experience with capitalism doesn't suggest this sort of opportunity is likely to last very long before the sharks get in the pool. Past being prologue, you know."

"That's why you've got me, Dirk. Listen, I never had the slightest interest in investment banking until now. No challenge to it. Like shooting ducks, as it were. This is different. There's never been a paradigm like this one to underwrite. Not ever. There's never been this kind of need. Not at this scale.

"We're gonna prove it can be done, we can meet that need, and that excites me. It *is* a challenge, a huge one with game-changing consequences, and we can do it. I absolutely believe we will prove it can be done. And I keep thinking what that says about the future. You ask what comes after late-stage capitalism? Maybe this is it."

✦

Ellen was absolutely oozing charm. Her eyes were bright and playful, her smile dazzling, her body language almost coquettish, those gorgeous curves of hers bouncing, undulating, weaving through the trees, her long, bare legs nearly skipping ahead of him, then slowing her pace, reaching back again for his hand.

“I can’t believe we haven’t done this before, David. Weeks in this beautiful place and we’ve never taken a walk in the woods together.”

She threw her arms in the air, her head back, shook herself with a laugh and an expression of pure happiness. “Isn’t it glorious?”

His smile was very slightly guarded, his curiosity wary. “It sure works for you,” he said. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you so happy.”

“And you? Does it work for you?” she said, smiling a little less broadly but playfully, wanting him to rise to her level of enthusiasm.

“It’s always great to be with you. It works for me wherever we are.”

“And it doesn’t get any better than being right here. Am I right?”

“It’s a beautiful day,” he said, making the effort she was seeking from him. “It’d be hard to ask for anything better.”

She looked at him with the most blatant flirtatiousness, leaning toward him from the waist, her bottom snug in her shorts jutting away from him, her breasts nearly brushing his chest, her entire body seeming to vibrate with excitement.

She batted her eyes at him, long dark lashes waving seductively across the sparkling blue that always overwhelmed him, that had dazzled him from the first time he saw her and drew him deep into those limpid pools of enticement, that glimpse of her beautiful soul that won his heart in an instant and never let up in all the years since whenever she shined that intimacy on him.

“Maybe we could ask,” she said, a mischievous grin spreading across her face as she moved even closer to him, standing tall now and pressing her body against him.

He stepped back a bit, a curious look on his face, uncertain what her words meant, even a little hesitant about the possible meaning of her physicality. He squinted slightly, leaning toward her, tilting his head to the side.

“Maybe we could ask,” she said, “for something better,” and drew from the pocket of her shorts a small wooden pipe, the bowl of which had tamped into it some very fragrant, neatly crushed pot, which she held up to him like an offering.

David looked at the bowl, looked at her somewhat incredulously, looked at the pipe again and laughed. “You want to smoke some pot together? Seriously?”

The light in her face lessened just a little, but she reignited it. “No. Exactly *not* ‘seriously.’ Just the opposite, David. I want to smoke pot for fun. Fun! Get it? Just you and me.”

“Like in college?”

“Like right now.”

He took the pipe from her, held it close to his face, looked at it for a minute, sniffed it once, then again, smiled sheepishly. “For real? Right now?”

“You got something better to do?” she said with mugging lilt in her voice.

“No, I mean, sure, why not. Just caught me off guard a bit. I mean I need to think about this for just a minute, you know. We’re right in the middle of this whole planning process, you know, and I don’t want to let anything slide.”

“It’ll keep.”

“Yeah, of course. But you know me. Hyper conscientious and all that.”

She looked at him with as much enthusiasm as she could muster, tried to resist the disappointment she felt, that she in nearly perfect circumstances with all her wiles, her charm, wits, humor, her dazzling beauty and all the seductive energy she could produce, that she possibly was no longer able to entice him.

She took the pipe from him, inhaled deeply with her nose nearly in the bowl, moved it to her other hand and withdrew a lighter from her pocket. She held them up, the pipe in one hand, the lighter in the other, each to one side of her radiant face and said, “David, our entire world has been pulled out from under us. There is nearly nothing at all the same in our world except maybe you and me and Gracie. Just the three of us now and this community we’re beginning to form. This new world we’re planning to build. It’s all so serious, so important, so

demanding. And you love it. It's a challenge and there's nothing you love better. I get it.

"But I want you to get this. This," and she waved her arm, the one that held the pipe, in a sweeping half-circle, "is our world now. What we have right now. And it's beautiful, too. It's free and unfettered and ours for the asking. And I'm *asking.* I want to get high and take off our clothes and hold hands and run naked through these woods. And I want to do it with you. I want to remember what it's like to be that way. Free that way. With you, David."

She looked at him with such clarity and so much unadulterated love that he was shamed. He looked at her with that very sense of shame on his face and turned it to tenderness, reaching one hand to gently touch her cheek, nodding his head slowly yes, yes, we can do that, I get it, I understand, I'm willing, said, "Yes, let's do it. Let's get high. All that stuff. Give me that lighter. I'll light you up," and he did. And just as she took her first hit, the bowl flaring under the flame and her lungs filling, he said, "But maybe we should keep our clothes on, you think?"

The pipe was smoking furiously as she exhaled, coughed a time or two, held it up to him and said with a radiant glow about her, a smile Cheshire-like and with watery eyes seeing him somehow from above, "Let's see what happens."

✦

Bella said to Rika, "Something truly remarkable is going on."

Rika said nothing, the look on her face the question.

"I've been keeping tabs on these conversations Holly and Dirk have been having with the governor's guy – Dan Wong's his name – and it's rather stunning for me to hear myself say this, it sounds so naïve, but I think some of what we're talking to them about is taking root."

"Meaning they're taking it seriously?"

"Meaning it sounds like they actually might try it out. Some of it anyway."

"You mean the menu at Dirk's Diner might get printed up someday?"

"I mean the hot plate special might be dinner some night soon."

They laughed and Rika said, “That’s certainly something to think about. Dirk is such an idealist, and yet he’s so darkly dismissive about the chances of that idealism ever taking hold. I mean, he has such a deeply negative opinion of the choices society makes and so much pessimism about human nature, and somewhere amid all that he holds out these very high ideals for what could be.”

“I think he has been a long way down the rabbit hole of capitalism and seen up close how easily greed corrupts good people. How quickly they can be lured away from those high ideals to embrace mendacity and selfishness. He’s probably been compromised a time or two himself. I mean, haven’t we all at some point. And there’s nothing that gives us a darker view of the human condition than our own susceptibility to it.”

Rika smiled and said, “Underneath it all, I’ve always found him to be a very sensitive and loving person. He just needs that hard shell for protection.”

“He’s all of that, and I admire him so much for holding onto those ideals of his through thick and thin. Whatever compromises he’s made in the past only steeled his resolve to be true to himself. Overly so, I guess, in many senses. He’s certainly a tormented soul or was anyhow. The change in him since all this,” and she waved toward the changed circumstances outside that had enveloped them all, “the change has been stunning. I must tell you how pleased I would be for him, and for all of us who love him, to see some of these grand ideas of his come to fruition. I can’t think of a more wonderful outcome for all of us.”

“And what about Clay Embry? How is he doing? Do you know?”

“Just what Dirk tells me. He’s seen him again and, on the surface at least, all appears to be well. He’s somehow arranged the financing to underwrite the enterprise zone initiative, which if I understand it correctly is some trillions of dollars over the next ten to twenty-five years. For me, it’s rather fantastical to even contemplate, let alone to make a statement like that to the governors. But, assuming he’s not delusional, everyone seems to be dead serious about all this.”

Rika looked off in the distance, shrugged, stood up and walked to the window. She gazed out at the meadow at the edge of the compound where clusters of wildflowers were in bloom, birds brightly

colored or dull and only distinguishable from their surroundings when they moved were industriously flitting from one clump to another, and the soft breeze tousled the stalks of grass.

“I really miss our home, Bella. I find myself thinking about it a lot these days, wondering what’s happening to it, whether anybody’s moved in and taken up where we left it. How would we even know if they had?”

She took a deep breath, exhaled audibly, turned from the window to look at her mate. “I know we have to move ahead, not be stuck in the past, all that, and I’m getting there little by little. It was a big loss, though, and it’s going to take me a while still to get over it.”

Bella walked to her, hugged her warmly, held her at arm’s length and said with a smile, “We may never get over it, not completely, but we can get past it. Then, too, the future doesn’t look nearly as bleak as it did six or seven weeks ago. It’s beginning to look pretty exciting. Whatever else we’ve been through, you have to admit this is an interesting story we’re creating here.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Rika said with a chuckle. “The world we know has been leveled by a world-class natural disaster. We’re living now in this very lovely mountain retreat in tribal circumstances. Our semi-alcoholic, rant-prone friend is setting policy with the governors to build the new Northwest and a homeless guy from the Pearl with a mysterious psychological disability is going to finance it. If that ain’t a story, I guess I’ve never heard one.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Governor Braun called his chief of staff. “What do we have so far about this guy Embry, Bess? Has he been vetted? Do we know if he’s legitimate?”

“He *is* the scion of that banking family. Old line New England Yankees. Their surety bond is in hand. Cascadia Holdings has been incorporated in California by Embry-Anton N.A. of Greenwich, Connecticut. They’re represented locally by Wilke Fleury as Counsel of Record for CWT in New York.”

“CWT? If I’m supposed to know them, I don’t.”

“Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft LLP. The whitest of white-shoe firms. Founded on Wall Street the day Wall Street was founded in 1792. You’ll love their letter of introduction. On the so subtle masthead the stationary says very quietly, ‘Our Third Century of Service.’ They are the true blue-blood law firm.”

“Call Bill Fleury and tell him we want to schedule some time. I want to walk him through some of what we want to do. He’s a former legislator. It will be fun to see which of these initiatives blows his gasket.”

“Maybe all of them. Who knows? It’s pretty radical stuff you’re proposing. This ain’t your grandfather’s Oldsmobile.”

“While we’re at it, let’s convene the rest of our team and Mason Randolph to walk through where we’re at. What we can tell Bill and Mason with Gen. Daley’s help can make a strong case for what we want to do going forward.

“Let me add, governor, that I’m going to do everything I can to support you with the business community. I suspect I’m not telling you anything you don’t know that it will not be an easy sale. In fact, there’s every chance it won’t sell at all. Just want to be forthcoming, sir.”

“Context is everything. These ideas are a radical departure from the norm but so is the situation they’re meant to address. We can’t suppose the same old process of lobbied legislation is going to get much of anything done. Meanwhile, there’re 15 million people just north of us hurting like no communities in this country have ever suffered, and they can’t accept piecemeal solutions to their problem. We need to act on this immediately and as boldly as we possibly can. That’s the context we need to operate in. I’m really excited about what we’re going to do. Unprecedented stuff, all of it. It’s going to be a doozy.”

✦

AC said to VZ, “Friend of mine in Israel, Shayetet 13 guy, you know, tells me an interesting story about our mark. Why the boys upstairs are so hot to find him again now he’s on the loose.”

“That so?”

“Yep.”

“Something you want to tell me or you just letting me know you know something that I don’t?”

“Just savoring it a little first. One of those stories that’s so fucking sweet it just makes you proud to be an American. You know the chill drill: eyes only, top secret, read and destroy, all that good stuff. This is one of them they don’t even write down. Too cool for school. Cannot be touched or told by anyone, right? And we gotta hear it from the Jews.”

“Because they’re smarter than us, right? Got better intel. Units are less hierarchical and better designed. Is that what you’re trying to *not* tell me?”

“Well, there is *that*. But this is even better. You see, the official story is our boy was playing with explosives that blew up in his face and took out some very prominent Afghani citizens, too.”

“And we know that’s bullshit.”

“But, of course, no need to even say it. First of all, those Afghanis are all scumbags and prominent is a relative term when we’re talking camel jockeys. But one of them, a woman, was a *very* big deal. Why can’t she be the bomber?”

“The Shah’s grandson’s wife or whatever, right? Like we heard before.”

“All that, French émigré, freedom fighter, tough chick, loves being bad in a place where women keep their mouth shut and their face covered. She’s having none of it. Runs with the big dogs. In fact, she’s the biggest dog and all those ass wipers know it, which grates on ‘em and gives her an even bigger buzz.”

“There a story worth hearing in here somewhere?”

“Well, you and me, we don’t know nothing, but we say to ourselves, why are we chasing down this poor guy? Why this guy gets hammered by our nastiest doctors after getting blown up by this chick? Serving his country and his country wants to stick it to him. They make him the bomber and not her. Why?”

“Because somebody big has got something to hide.”

“Ta-da! And they had to scramble this guy’s brains because he knows, or he might know, or if he doesn’t know, someday he might figure it out that it wasn’t him with the bomb. And that could shine a light in places that prefer the dark.”

“And you know what that *something* is?”

“Well, my friend does. At least, that’s what he tells me.”

“Which is what?”

“It’s important that we all believe the explosives are U.S. ordinance. And nobody thinks otherwise. You know why? Because they are.”

VZ looked at AC with a recognition that was quickly connecting the dots.

“The ordinance was ours,” he said, “but Al Qaeda was placing it.”

“To kill our troops. And that is optics of a problematic nature for a lot of reasons. But my guy gave me a look at why it was an international incident that had to be suppressed and it had nothing to do with the Shah’s grand daughter-in-law, whoever the fuck she be, except for the star power she brought to the story.”

“Somebody here in the USA is peddling bombs to the enemy.”

“And now, the final question for all the marbles: who?”

VZ narrowed his eyes, shook his head slightly at the thought, looked at AC with the smirk on his face and permed hair curled around his head, that intense expression of expectation about him as though their shared experience and deep participation in this unsavory business called black ops could lead his partner to the only obvious conclusion, outrageous as it is, and he shrugged to say, “Well?”

“Gherkin,” VZ said.

“Bingo,” said AC.

They stared at each other, AC smirking, threatening an ironic laugh, VZ feeling the anger rise in his gut and steam up his sternum until his head felt like it might explode.

“Fuckin’ incredible! We’re chasing this poor bastard all over godforsaken Oregon because he doesn’t have the good sense to stay on his corner begging for dimes when the entire Northwest gets obliterated, and the bug in his brain might be coming undone, and he regains his wits enough to say howdy to his parents, and that constitutes a threat to the United States of America because our president is selling weapons to the enemy under the table as just another of his businesses on the side and our mark might possibly remember that he had his ass blown to bits by ordinance

manufactured by Gherko Inc., and that is the sum total of the national security threat we are ordered to eliminate?”

“Well put,” AC said, as he reached into his pocket, withdrew a Cohiba and struck a wooden match with his thumb nail. He nipped a small circle from the few outer leaves at the butt of the cigar, drew the flame against the open end, puffed a half dozen times until the glow of burning tobacco radiated from the center of the perfectly rolled leaves and thick, fragrant smoke was exhaled from his mouth in tiny clouds of blue and orange-tinged white. “You got a way with words.”

VZ took a deep breath, then another, calmed himself, said, “Maybe I’m getting too old for this job. You ever wonder if any of this makes sense?”

“Only every day. But I’m not much of a thinker. Information is my thing, and this gig gets me plenty of that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah! Stuff that cooks up all those human sensations of pathos, ennui, what’s it all about, Alfie? I don’t think about it. Just kinda enjoy the drifty way it makes me feel.”

“You’re a sick fuck, AC. You know that?”

He took a deep drag on his cigar, held it out from his face, the hot ember pointed directly at VZ, said through a large cloud of smoke and narrowed eyes, “Who else they gonna get to do this job?”

✦

The Eees were playing wood nymphs, magical creatures who lived in the trees and only appeared when no one could see them. It was part exploring, part hide and seek, part tag, lots of fun.

This was their favorite part of the forest, the little sunken area where it was easy to be a nymph because the trees were big enough that you could crawl into the roomy burrows beneath the roots and have your very own home that no one knew about but you and maybe a few of your friends.

Unbeknownst to them the farrowing had happened recently and very close by. One of the feral pigs had birthed a new litter, mom was nervous, the girls came too close, paid not enough attention to their surroundings, too much to the sheer joy of romping in the woods.

Gracie led the frolic. She and Frankie danced wildly, spinning and whirling as nymphs do when they are celebrating their surroundings. Bonnie the cautious one held back a little. She was just clear of the path when the girls encountered a shoat, recently pushed out of the burrow where a new litter of pigs was being nursed. The squeals she shouted while panicked, running in circles, crashing through shrubbery, made the girls laugh. They danced even wilder, jumping and twirling. But it seemed to set off maternal alarms for the lactating sow, who came from nowhere into the clearing where the girls were dancing and laughing, and the shoat was squealing, and the mother pig attacked.

Frankie did a complete somersault in the air and landed on her butt when the sow ran into her. Gracie was still, her mouth open like she was going to shout but no sound came from her until the pig turned and ran into her. She was surprisingly fast and very powerfully. Gracie hit the ground hard and couldn't breathe at first.

Frankie still was sitting when the pig ran over her. She hit her head and didn't move, except for crying, her chest heaving with each sob. The pig was pushing at her when Gracie got to her hands and knees, yelled at the pig, and started to stand. She didn't make it before the pig knocked her down.

Bonnie ran toward the compound, yelling and screaming, when Ailey grabbed her by the sleeve, nearly lifted her off her feet, said, "What? Tell me!" They began running back and suddenly Ailey could hear the noise, a thrashing and thumping, snorting, two girls sobbing. The pig spun around twice when Ailey came at her and dashed off into the underbrush.

Frankie was lying on her back, crying softly. Gracie was lying face down, making a moaning sound. Part of her shirt was ripped away, one sleeve missing.

Both girls were badly scared, but they got to their feet, walked with Ailey and Bonnie back to the compound, were attended to by their frantic parents, and ministered to by Mrs. Yelkins, whom Bobby gathered from home and brought to the compound on horseback at a gallop. She examined their bruises, felt the length of their arms and legs, held her ear against their chests, and pronounced them well enough, no broken bones but a knot on Bonnie's head and bites on

Gracie's arm. They put Bonnie to bed with an icepack and treated Gracie's arm with an herbal compress and a wrap.

"Keep an eye on this one while she sleeps," Mrs. Yelkins said to Holly. "That concussion is a problem, she'll throw up in an hour or two. Don't want her to choke or nothin'. Otherwise, no problem. If she don't throw up, she will be good as new."

To Ellen and David, she said, "Want to change them bandages every day until she heals. New dressing on them bites, too. Watch 'em for infection. Them herbs are good. I think she'll be okay."

Ailey made certain their parents were out of earshot, said to Bobby, "She had Gracie pinned when I got there. It looked like she was eating at her."

"We'll cull her when the piglets are weaned. Month or so. 'Til then best keep them girls from the hollow. There's more than one litter in there."

✦

The helicopter circled once at high altitude and literally dropped from the sky to the meadow next to the compound, where it landed. Dirk was just back from his ride to the cabin, unpacked but still wiping down the horse and the mule. Before the rotors slowed, he, Bobby, his brother Roy Yelkins, and Fausto had the chopper surrounded with rifles locked and loaded, each with a bead on the cockpit. A fellow emerged with a badge held high, waving it slightly back and forth, yelling, "FBI, FBI," with his other arm raised above his head, empty handed.

Another guy stepped down from the cockpit, moving slowly, hands held open palms forward on either side of his face. They hesitated, then slowly begin to move out from under the rotor blades, bending slightly at the waist but keeping their hands in sight.

"You guys willing to lower those rifles?" the FBI man said. No one did.

"What do you want?" Dirk said.

"Looking for Dirk Primus.'

"Why?"

"Want to ask him some questions. You know him?"

"I am him. Why?"

“This your place? Real nice.”

“I don’t recall inviting you. What do you want?”

“Looking for a guy. Wonder if you might have seen him.”

“Who’s that?”

“Homeless guy. About 6’2” maybe 180, scars on his face.”

“You mean Clay Embry?”

The two men looked at each other quickly, recalibrating. The quiet one lowered his hands.

“Keep your hands in the air. I asked you a question. What do you want with Clay Embry?”

“He here?” said the FBI agent.

“Nope. Was a while back. Stayed a few days. Moved on.”

“Know where he went?”

“Hard to say. Homeless, you know.”

“Mind if we look around?”

“You got a search warrant?”

“No, but we can get one if you want to be difficult. Not easy to get anything done right now. Be a lot easier if you guys would put down those guns and talk this thing through. I’m a federal agent and this is official government business. No need to make a struggle out of it.”

“Who’s he” Dirk said, pointing the rifle at the other guy.

The guy smirked, squinted, said, “Name’s X. Raymond. X for Xavier.”

“You FBI, too?”

He shook his head, said, “Just along for the ride.” The smirk widened and his eyebrows lifted dramatically. “Notice you’ve been riding, too.”

“That any business of yours?”

“Don’t know. Is it?”

“Those of us without government helicopters at our disposal mostly get around on horseback these days.”

“Makes sense,” X said. “Looks like rough going out there.” He smiled at Dirk and nodded, then squinted as he looked toward the corral. “You usually take a pack mule with you when you’re off riding?”

Dirk snorted very audibly through his nose, shrugging off the cat and mouse game. “Was hoping to knock down a deer or an elk. Got people to feed here. No luck today though.”

“Hunting out of season, are you?”

Dirk looked from him to the FBI agent, said, “Want to take that up, too, while you’re here? You boys seem to have a lot on your plate.”

The FBI agent waved his arms, shook his head, said, “Mr. Primus. Can we ratchet this down a few notches? We have a job to do that involves getting clear on Clay Embry and where he might be. I understand why you’re upset we came barging into your compound here from out of the blue…” and the rifles all moved up and down rhythmically as the gunmen nodded their head, “but it’s not like we could call ahead to ask permission.”

“I get that,” Dirk said, “but you need to understand, too, that we’re not kindly disposed to people come calling like this, government or no. There is a state of total anarchy hereabouts and we have no support to draw on. Mostly no.”

“How about we put the guns down,” the FBI man said. “I’ll tell you what we need to clear up here and we can be on our way? Can we do that? Be nice to get out of the sun, for starters.”

They eased toward the corrals then and the benches in the shade next to the barn, with the Feds and Dirk going forward and settling there, Bobby, Roy, and Fausto hanging back a little, guns lowered but held loosely in the crook of the arm at ready.

“Tell me if you will how Embry came to be here? That’s a place to start.” For a cop, the guy with the credentials struck Dirk as sincere, his partner not so much. Good cop, bad cop, maybe that’s always the drill with these guys.

“I met him panhandling in Portland when he was on the streets. Seemed okay to me. I gave him some money once or twice, told him I’d help him if he decided to get straight, that I had this place, and he was welcome if he wanted to get out of town. That was before everything blew up, but when it did, he showed up here one day.”

“Then what?”

“Then nothing. As you can see, lots of folks showed up. We’ve taken care of them as best we can. Him, too. He got some food, some clothes, cleaned up a bit, and before long he was gone.”

“What about the phone?”

“The phone?”

“Yeah,” the guy named X said, “the one he called home with that’s registered to you.”

“I let him use it to call his folks. Said he hadn’t been in touch in a long time. Told him I could help. Had this phone and let him use it. Guess he did.”

“Did he call from here?” the FBI man said.

“Don’t think so, but I didn’t pry. He went off somewhere and called. That was his business. Wasn’t long thereafter he left.”

“You know the penalties for lying to a federal officer?” he said.

“What makes you think I’m lying?”

“Don’t think one way or the other. Just asking.”

They sat in the shade of the barn, each of them looking at one thing or another, Dirk at the Feds, they at him, Fausto at the sun drifting off to the west, and the Molalla, Bobby and Roy both, looking closely at the Feds, guns at the ready.

“That’s a fine-looking animal,” the one called X. said, nodding toward Dirk’s stallion where it was tied to the corral post, waiting to be brushed down and put up.

“You know horses?” Dirk said to him.

“I know a Morgan stud like this is pretty damned fine horseflesh,” he said, rose from the bench and approached the horse.

Dirk was caught off guard, watched him closely, finally rose to join him.

X ran his hand along the throat from just below the animal’s ear to his withers, patted him several times at the base of his neck, ran his hand again along the spine, and patted him firmly at his haunches, which made the horse jump just a little.

“Doesn’t like to be handled by folks he don’t know,” Dirk said to him.

“I can see that,” X said and backed away. He leaned against the railing where Dirk’s saddle was resting, touched it, too, ran his hand over the pommel and along the seat, and said, “Nice saddle, too. You know your way around this cowboy kick. Damn sure that!” He was almost friendly.

“Not a cowboy by a long shot,” Dirk said. “Just trying to get by.”

They talked a while longer, not much of any substance exchanged, and finally the Feds left, remounting the helicopter, sat back while the pilot revved the engine, got the rotors up to speed, and lifted off. In a blink in the blue, they were gone. None too soon.

"Whadda you think?" FBI said to X-Ray. "He telling the truth?"

"We'll find out soon enough. I spiked the horse and the saddle both."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Governor Braun finally relaxed a little, settled back in the big chair at the conference table, thanked the assembled guests and staff. "It's nearly 6:00 p.m.," he said. "Although there are some in our fair state's business community that may disagree, I do my best to support our local industry. To that end, we'd like to offer you a Russian River Pinot Noir that I think is extraordinary. One of our very best. Can we pour you a glass?"

The governor's aide-de-camp, a state patrolman who was part butler and part bodyguard, opened two bottles, filed eight glasses, and passed them around the table. With the governor was Gen. George Daley, head of the state's National Guard; Bill Fleury, managing partner of the law firm Wilkes Fleury and a former president of the state senate; Bess Gannon, the governor's chief of staff on leave from her position as president of the California Chamber of Commerce; Mason Randolph, minority leader of the state House, a staunch political adversary of the governor and a life-long friend; Sam Waverly, the state's lobbyist in Washington, DC; Tom Cannon, head of the Department of Transportation and once a national leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee; and Dan Wong, the governor's policy director.

When everyone was settled, ties loosened, compliments showered on the vineyard that produced the wine, Governor Braun said, "I wanted to talk to all of you offline. This past two months has been the most incredibly demanding period of my entire life. Heartrending, exhausting, but also inspiring. I have hopefulness I've never felt before. An optimism about our future that is growing by the day."

He looked at each of them in turn, sipping from his wineglass and nodding in acknowledgement of their presence, the importance of having them to confide in, the value of their advice and counsel. His eyes were bagged with fatigue but bright with the charm and persuasiveness for which he was famous. He sat his glass down on the coaster and smiled broadly before resuming his talk.

“That is a very nice wine. A gift of nature. Nature of a different sort is what brings us together this evening. Ladies and gentlemen, to confirm what a lot of us suspected, the Cascadia earthquake was officially measured at 9.6, which is the largest ever recorded. There have been four that we know of in history which measured 9.5, including Fukushima in Japan a few years ago. As you know, the measurements are by powers of 10. Cascadia was ten times as strong as any before it. Ten times what Fukushima suffered.

“That measurement was recorded by the National Earthquake Center in Colorado and related to us immediately before the federal government cut off communications. So, not only have we experienced the largest natural disaster in modern times, perhaps the largest in history, but we’ve essentially been cut adrift by our own nation. One precedent following another.

“All of this has been staggering to contemplate. It’s so big, so devastating, so incomprehensible. Yet, it’s ours and we have to deal with it. We must make it right. And I must tell all of you, at this moment when we all have been shaken and tossed and knocked down, I have to say to you in all sincerity, we not only can make it right, we can make it better. And we will do it with your help.”

He looked at Mason directly, raised his glass, nodded.

“That’s why I asked you here tonight. Not just to help me drink this lovely Pinot, but to help me find the way to make the New Northwest better than it was. And make no mistake about it, we are going to take the lead. Oregon from I-5 to the coast is absolutely devastated. Washington is nearly as bad. The northern stretch of this great state has been very badly damaged. We alone among the three are anywhere near functional. We have to lead. It’s in our hands.”

“Governor,” Mason said, after a pause, “are you assuming this severance from the federal government is permanent? How do we

know it’s not a spasm of posturing that will sort itself out? It concerns me that we not act arbitrarily.”

“Mr. Minority Leader, I share your concern and want you to know that I have thought about that possibility consistently over the many weeks since this disaster occurred. As you might imagine, my willingness to entertain that thought, that hope, has waned progressively as time has passed and our needs have gone unmet. Have gone unacknowledged, to put a point on it.

“People are suffering. That’s the focus of what we’re here to address. Our constituents, and our fellow citizens to the north of us, are essentially homeless. Cut off from all the normal amenities of civilized life. They are living in the broken remnants of civilization, an especially cruel situation because everything they’ve lost is visible, underfoot, decaying.”

He looked around the table again, stopped at Randolph, looking directly at him, said, “One thing I know we agree on, Mason,” and he smiled broadly before continuing, “one place we find common ground is the essential goodness of our people, the way they will pull together for the common wellbeing, that spirit that drives the best of our community.

“I’m happy to report that’s exactly what we’ve seen. There’s been very little crime, not much violence, our people for the most part have responded heroically. It’s been very heartening.”

He lowered his head for a moment. What he had to say next was painful but needed to be said. “We have our customs and traditions, some very dearly held. Burial is one of them. Closure. The rite of passage. Witnessing the passing of people we love, those we care about, even people we know just well enough to pay our respects.

“That hasn’t been possible. For the most part, we haven’t even been able to collect the dead. There are too many and, in many cases, they are too hard to reach. It’s very difficult to say this, but mostly they have decayed where they fell.

“Of course, families have taken care of their own wherever they were able. Neighbors, too, worked to give people what burial they could arrange. But for the most part, it was nature itself that has brought about that closure.

“The image of all the dead left unattended has haunted me throughout these past weeks. But two things have come to me in struggling with that reality: one is that nature does resolve itself without our intervention. What we were unable to do, nature took care of in its own way. Not as we might prefer but effectively, nevertheless. The other is: the very vividness of this image, the scale of the death and destruction we are faced with, the immensity of this challenge we are tasked with meeting, demands a response from us that is bigger, bolder, and far more creative than anything we’ve produced before.

“There is a need for solutions that must come from an entirely different approach to governing – to leadership – than what our traditional systems can offer. We are going to go not just outside the box but we’re going to discard the box itself and think about all this in a completely new context.

“We are going to determine the solutions we want and design systems that supply them. We are not going to be limited as we usually are by all the infrastructure, the *in situ* apparatus, the status quo. Where the destruction has taken place, where the need is, all that has been swept away. It’s a completely unmoored environment we are working with and that, ladies and gentlemen, can be an opportunity if we have the courage and the ingenuity to respond to it.

“What I want to ask each of you is this: can we find our way to get the job done in a manner equal to the context we’ve been presented? Please tell me.”

✦

David, Holly, and Dam had worked out an engineering scheme they were rather proud of to support a game plan for the recovery. As the concepts took form, ideas were fleshed out, designs polished, missing pieces eventually fell into place, they would look at each other with something close to glee on their faces. It was a joyful project, one that mattered and that fit their respective skillsets. As it came together, each of them was proud of what was accomplished and each of them was beginning to feel a hopefulness that was contagious.

Dirk signed off with only a few suggestions about how they might tweak it. The groups he was communicating with by ham radio had

become a substantial grassroots connection throughout Cascadia, loosely organized but becoming increasingly cohesive as time passed and their perspective grew clearer about what they might accomplish. They, too, bought into the plan with little dissent and a few random suggestions for improvement.

Bobby Yelkins weighed in at various points as the plan developed and spoke informally on behalf of the Council at Grand Ronde, which was developing lines of communication and alliances with the various tribes of Indians throughout the region, many of whom had been directly in harm's way when the disaster struck. They were enthusiastic in support of the plan because of its organic and wholistic underpinnings, and the respect for their autonomy that it clearly stated in shaping how the plan affected them.

Most gratifying was the moment of truth when they laid it out for the governors, first during their weekly meetings with Daniel Wong, who suggested ways to make it more palatable politically and offered options for consideration without taking offense when they were rejected nor seeming especially pleased if they were accepted. Then came the conference with the three governors.

Wong made most of the presentation, they answered questions that the governors raised, argued a few points successfully and accepted the decisions that placed some of their priorities later in the initiative. The governors obviously had been thoroughly briefed and come to a consensus before this conference. When the presentation concluded, Governor Braun spoke on their behalf.

"Holly, gentlemen, we're very impressed with what you've done here. You've given us a plan that is thoughtful, comprehensive, and way outside the box, which is what we're looking for. And you've built the solid beginnings of an extensive network on the ground in the area of need. That support system is going to be critical to getting anything done. That's my political animal speaking.

"My fellow governors and I have concluded we are going put our careers on the line to do what we think is the right thing for our constituents in this terrible situation. It won't be easy, but we know it's possible if the people support it.

"Nature has forced our hand. And the isolation from federal resources we're enduring is all the more reason we must go ahead

with a commitment to our people that is unprecedented and, dare I say it, fearless.

“Sometimes,” he said with a slight chuckle that made them picture a twinkle in his eye, “the problem you’re facing is so damned immense, you just have to quit looking at all the difficulties and see the opportunity.

“That’s what my colleagues and I have decided to do. Cascadia is a major disaster we will turn into a grand experiment in governance that is laser focused on solutions. On putting systems in place that deliver those solutions.

“We find ourselves uniquely free of vested interests at the moment. All of the systems we rely on are destroyed. So, the question is not how we can rebuild those systems. The question is: what do our people need to reclaim their lives and prosper, and what systems will best meet those needs - whether or not they require us to sacrifice a few sacred cows to get it done.”

“It may be more than a few, Governor,” said Governor Turner. “But I want to join you in saying to my constituents here how proud I am of what you’ve done for your community, our state, this region. It’s wonderful and it gives us a strong policy position in making the case for a new start.

“I do want to add the banking relationship you’ve brought us is essential to getting this work underway. Putting gender considerations aside, the so-called “key man” designation that underwriters always want to indemnify is one we need to recognize here. Clayton Embry is a bit of a mystery to us so far, yet he clearly is essential to our plans. We need to be cognizant of protecting him.”

✦

David convened the group again. “Time for an update and one we’re really excited to bring you. We have briefed the governors directly on the ideas that this group and the some of the others that we’re working with have developed. Holly has done such an excellent job of communicating them, first with Daniel Wong and then during our call yesterday with the governors. I think she’s the one who ought to tell you about it.”

Holly stood up, nodded at David, walked to the front of the room, said, “As you can see, Dirk, David, and Bobby have been appropriately deferential since I bitched them out last month.”

Everybody laughed and David punched her lightly in the arm. “We know a shot across the bow when it creases our eyebrows,” he said.

“Yeah,” Bobby said from where he was seated near the back of the room, “She lets us do her laundry, too, if we’re careful when we fold it. We feel real lucky she treats us so good.”

Dirk said, “She’s done great work for us and we’re lucky she stepped up when she did. We could have screwed this up and instead it’s looking better than we ever hoped. At least, better than I hoped. I don’t know about you guys.”

“Here’s what’s happened,” Holly said. “We took all the different ideas that have been raised and grouped them by subject. Then we tried to find the ones with commonality, the ones that were maybe the same idea stated different ways. Or different ideas that reached the same conclusion. Then we prioritized them. Which ones would make the most difference the soonest? So immediate needs were the first group. Water, food, shelter, healthcare, income. The basics.

“A lot of that is already in play, thanks mostly to California National Guard, Canadian troops, healthcare workers from both places, food from Mexico, and so many thousands of tents that have been donated by businesses from all over and flown in through Canada.

“Basically, care comes from the north and south of us. Oregon is in the middle and the most difficult to get to, so it’s been slower going here. From the southern end of Puget Sound to maybe Eugene or thereabouts is where the greatest need still exists. Not to say it isn’t bad everywhere. It is. But California has made progress throughout its territory and well into the Rogue Valley. The Canadians, god bless ‘em, have cared for B.C. and down into Washington state.

“My point is, and I’ll get there eventually,” she said with a laugh. Bobby interrupted her, said, “She was better with the governors,” and they all laughed.

“My point is,” she said, “and yes, I was better with the governors because they already know all this. I just want you to know we

presented them a list of priorities and some of these basic things are well underway.

“But it sets the stage for what’s important that has been accomplished. We have agreed as a group, a collection of groups that Dirk has assembled, and the governors have accepted, some proposals about how to proceed in rebuilding Cascadia and what we want of it when something like normal live is restored.”

David said, “This is the Dirk part,” and everybody laughed.

“A lot of it is the Dirk part,” she said and smiled at him where he sat, “with some of the rough edges sanded down a little.”

Dirk rolled his eyes, smiled, held his hands up in front of his chest, palms forward, said, “It’s my fate to be thus compromised.”

“I think you’ll all be proud of this,” Holly said, when the group quieted down again. “I know that Dirk is. Here’s what the governors have agreed to take to their legislatures and, in their words, ‘bully pulpit the hell out of them until they agree.’

“Cascadia will be an enterprise zone. The entire area from Mendocino to the Canadian border and from I-5 to the coast is included. There are adjacent areas to the east, as well, but we’ll get to that later. Various initiatives will sunset in five years and others in 10 years. Renewable by a vote of the legislatures.

“Here’s what we intend to include: first, universal healthcare. Basically, the Canadian model. Prime Minister Aly has agreed to make Canadian healthcare facilities available to Cascadia citizens until we can get our own up and running sufficiently to care for our own people. An amazingly generous gift he’s given.

“Second, basic income. We’re getting rid of welfare, food stamps, aid to dependent children, all of those well-intended but demeaning programs. Instead, every qualifying adult aged 18 and up will be eligible for $1,000 per month with no strings attached. Spend it however you want. The important thing is that they will spend it. Each child is an additional $250 per month. Qualifying is this: net worth of less than $2 million.

“When you reach and exceed $2 million net worth, the *increase* above that level is taxed at fifty percent. The enterprise zone will tax wealth rather than income. The idea is, we as a community will help you get to that level of stability and encourage you to continue to

improve your station in life. As you do, you'll contribute half of whatever gains you make back to the community."

Rika raised her hand. "Let me ask this. You're talking about individuals, but what about corporations, businesses, how will they be taxed?"

"I'm glad you asked that, Rika," Holly said, "thank you. That's a very important part of this initiative. A big source of the resources to pay for it will come from business. They will be a big part of the rebuilding and they will be taxed in exactly the same way. They will be tax free until they achieve $2 million in net assets and pay fifty percent of the increase in those assets thereafter."

"That all sounds lovely," Bella said, without raising her hand. Rather, she waded directly into the moment of quiet that attended the group's thoughtful consideration. "I don't want to be dismissive. Just the opposite, in fact. I think this approach to managing assets is great. But there's an obvious problem.

"If I own a home worth $2 million that increases in value to $3 million, I owe the enterprise zone $500,000. How am I going to pay that without selling the house? Same with my business. If I'm Elon Musk and my Tesla stock increases by $50 or $75 billion last year, as his did, and he owes half that amount, he'll crash the company by unloading that much stock to pay his tax bill. Isn't that what makes taxing wealth prohibitive? From a purely economic perspective, I mean. Personally, I give a damn about Elon Musk, but really."

Dam stood up, said, "Holly. If I may?" She waved him with one arm to the imaginary lectern. "Bella, with all due respect, the answer is new ways of thinking about that problem. You are thinking about paying in cash, which is how taxes have always been paid.

"When we tax assets instead of income, we open up huge, untapped sources of revenue and that's all to the good. But how to settle up when your assets aren't liquid? That's always been the rub.

"The answer is to think of assets in the same way we think of cash. When we pay taxes on income, we pay with cash and the government becomes a partner in our cash assets. We pay that way, and it disburses payments that way.

"It's really no different with taxing assets. This is an area where maybe us code jockeys have an advantage. We learn early on about

getting past our habits and our preconceptions. That's how we create all this stuff that hasn't existed before. It's always existed but we figure out how to capture it and put it to work.

"Dirk talked about blank sheet engineering back when we all first began having these talks. That's the essence of what we do here. We look at this big opportunity and figure out how to make it work.

"In this case, we simply need to start thinking of the transactional element not as cash any longer but as assets. What we owe the government in taxes is a portion of our increased assets. It's up to each individual how to covey them. With a deed to a portion of the real estate, or to shares in a company, mineral assets, whatever it might be.

"Mr. Musk, bless his filthy rich soul, will likely never set foot in Cascadia. If he did and he wanted to do business here, he'd deed to the enterprise zone an amount of his shares equal to half their gain in worth from his local enterprises. So, last year, if his wealth increased by $70 billion, he would convey to the government shares worth $35 billion. People might say, 'That's obscene.' To which we can say, 'Only half as obscene as it is currently.' We should be so lucky to capture a share.

"The government instead of a cash broker becomes an asset broker with the same interests as the taxpayer in terms of maintaining the asset value. The beauty of this arrangement is the holder, the government, is a classic long-term investor. It becomes the holder of those unrealized assets and logically only liquidates them for optimum value."

There followed a lot of conversation, people talking among themselves, rolling this concept over in their mind, looking for flaws in the presentation, being unwilling merely to accept it without question because it affected each of them very directly, or would when the individual assets they had were reestablished and things like paying taxes became a reality again. For now, none of them had clarity even on what their remaining assets were, what their worth might be, or how to access them. Money in the bank? Maybe, but where's the bank?

Chapter Thirty-Six

Time was passing from the sheer terror of the earthquake, the tidal wave, and the massive destruction that upended their world. It was moving gradually into a rhythm where they began to find comfort. A simple routine that seemed life-like was coming to be, little by little as one day turned into the next, and for each their perspective grew into a vision of what was, where they were, and what they can do to begin the slow, steady work of restoration and rebuilding.

What was returning, ebbing and flowing but mostly incoming, was a surge in hopefulness and belief that a future awaits them that is worth working toward. They were beginning to develop a true and sincere enthusiasm for this future they imagined and were in the throes of creating.

It began as therapeutic exercise, a reason to gather, size up each other in the aftermath of the tragedy, determine who these people were and what sort of community they might constitute. They circulated around each other cautiously at first, relying mostly on instinct to evaluate these others who at least for the near-term were their family, the familiar and the previously unknown all in unfamiliar circumstances, so newly observed and noted.

As the trauma began to soften and the knife-edged emotions of tragedy rounded into a clearer response to their circumstances, one that recognized the loss and yet began to see signs of hope, optimism, even appreciation simply for being alive and capable where some many others were not, they rose.

Maybe it was because they were largely defenseless, stripped bare and vulnerable, that they were so open to suggestions of what might be. They had virtually nothing to return to, no solace in their former status or financial cushion, little if anything that they could even call theirs except their wits, their equanimity, their self-confidence.

There was the effect, too, of being without so much that was familiar and taken for granted. Now that it was gone, and time had slowly, steadily mitigated the shock of their loss, it was noticeable to many of them that they came to feel a growing sense of relief. Lightening the load is a notion that was applicable to a degree unimaginable in normal circumstances; yet it was a noticeably

consistent reorientation they experienced as a feeling of freedom came to replace a focus on what was missing in their routine, their possessions, their place in the world.

Each of them came to it individually, of course, and not all of them found in it the same degree of release from the past. Rika was very private in her way of letting her thoughts and feelings be known. Except for her intimate sharing with Bella, the rest of the group knew her to be steady and reliable but not especially emotive. Bella though knew her very well, knew the depth of her attachment to tradition and tangentially to physical evidence of its touchstones.

Bella for her part was personally shaken but professionally intrigued to witness the psychological effects of this massive upheaval, an exceedingly rare look at mass disruption of the common order and the variety of ways people adapted to it, if indeed they did so. Her community here at the compound was a complex group that fared far better than one might fear, though not without profound disturbances they were working through.

To be intimately privy to Rika's struggles personified both aspects of her own reaction to the disaster. She was troubled and touched by her partner's reaction to the upheaval and at the same time curious to observe how this person she knew so well and loved so deeply would come to terms with her anxieties. It was painful and yet fascinating to observe. Fortunately, she felt certain Rika was going to work her way through it and find her strength.

She was equally intrigued and intellectually engaged in the deep mystery of Clayton Embry. No one in her professional career had presented such a baffling and perhaps even frightful example of mind that had been purposefully disturbed. That he was making great progress in recovering his equilibrium was gratifying, and that he seemed of intellectual acuity and strength of character to possibly overcome mostly if not completely this psychological affliction was of great relief to her. Whether they might eventually uncover what that affliction was, why it was done to him, and find the means to undo it, she was unsure.

Dam, too, like Rika struggled to adapt. His moodiness was not unusual and in fact was less evident in the group dynamics at Dirk's compound. He was enough the professional in the way he approached

challenges that his demeanor since the quake had consciously lightened, at least on the surface. Subliminally, though, he was troubled by what he had lost of the past, the career he had built, the position he achieved, the work he did. It was only since Holly drew him into the planning of their construction for the governors that his spirits had begun to lift. Slowly, he was finding ground he could stand on with a familiar sense of self.

Holly was always Holly, solid, strong, even commanding in circumstances that required it. She was a communicator, a skill always valued and in times of desperation like those they were transiting, an especially valuable asset precisely because she had things of worth to communicate. Her professionalism was built on a foundation of pride, care, and concern for her community. She was an ace.

Ailey and Mick had found a place for their respective energy and merged it there with no small amount of enthusiasm. They had sex, which was a relief for both of them if for different reasons, and they had the makings of a relationship that was coming together nicely much to their mutual surprise.

Fausto, on the other hand, had neither sex nor a relationship to turn to. He was a single man of an age where more has gone by than what remains, and he struggled with the wistfulness of that clichéd sense of time slipping away.

But he had his art, his fantasies, and a strong inclination to believe that there just might be more to those images that persistently danced through his mind than merely a wish and a prayer. Time might still provide.

As was his wont, David was deeply emersed in the planning process with Holly, Dam, and Dirk. The abstraction that moved Dirk’s passion when all this possibility was first discussed seemed ever less vague to David as they worked through their plans, giving shape and solidity to what often began as vaporous and poorly defined, finding reservoirs of buoyancy to lift heavy concepts from the mire of philosophical conflict and political opposition. The further they went into this fantasy land of possibility and potential, the more real became the characters they encountered there that could make the place relatable. He was having fun.

Ellen, however, was for the first time in her adult life feeling unmoored and fighting the distinct sense that her marriage was unraveling. She and David had always seemed to be blessed. Fortunate. Lucky. Whatever the word, theirs was a life to be admired, or envied. They seemed to have so much. Success, wealth, style, meaningful work, beautiful home, dazzling friends and associates. Parents of an extraordinary child. All of it was gone now, or at least not currently in the picture. They now were stripped down to the three of them in unprecedented circumstance and of course they were victimized not only by the natural disaster but the trauma of a very ugly human encounter, too. Each was impacted by it.

Because of it, sex between the two of them had become an afterthought if it was thought of at all, a place in body, soul, and psyche better left alone, put aside, untouched, unmentioned, adrift, something that didn't take place unless she initiated it and then each time so far an awkward, embarrassing, unsatisfying venture into this newly desolate place between them, a vivid reminder of what once had been theirs that now seemed irredeemable.

She felt that trauma had affected him more than her, albeit something in that pantheon of fears every young woman faces that in actuality is more horrible than the darkest places of the imagination. She could never forget it. But it was something she knew how to get beyond, knew it was absolutely necessary to get beyond, to put it in a place that shrunk the horror to life size and made the rapist a dead man she endured and survived, which made her greatest challenge now to go on living. She was doing exactly that with determination and resolution.

David, however, was floundering. She had known him as the competent, highly focused, and innovative leader he'd shown himself to be in everything that came his way. Now, for the first time, she saw a side of him unrecognizable and concerning, as though someone she shared her life with for the past dozen years had suddenly revealed another aspect of his being completely foreign to her.

Her disappointment in the course of their relationship since that horrid person they'd suffered was growing more troubling as the days passed and she saw him turning ever deeper into the "job" at hand, this work that he and the others were doing to propose a new

northwest rising from the ashes, the caverns and craters, the flooded out shores. That part of his nature she knew well and had admired. Now she saw it was his clear preference, his desperation even, for anything other than intimacy with her. His passion now was elsewhere, a place less compromised, comforting in the avoidance it reliably provided.

What surprised her most, what was shocking to her beyond the struggle between them to find a place of reckoning, was her sense of the way her image of him was changing, the things that came to mind unbidden and unwelcome that began to reshape her memories and what the vision of their marriage had been. They were draped with the image held by their friends and associates, fatuous as such images are, as being the ideal couple: young, handsome, entrepreneurially successful in their individual businesses, partners, parents, perfection it seemed. What more could one ask, or need? They seemed to have it all.

Demure as she may have been in receiving those accolades, there was a part of her that accepted the image as rightfully theirs. They did have it all by any measure of what one might hope for and work to accomplish, they were there.

Now, the recollection of that time, so recent and yet so distant, was slowly coming undone. The picture began to reveal flaws, little areas unnoticed before that were not in focus with the rest of the image and blurry when you looked.

Ellen was looking now, more closely and with skepticism for what it once had meant to her, what she thought she knew about their relationship and all the nuances of their chemistry together. Was the great romance they believed in and portrayed so deftly to others as substantive as she always believed?

There was a time when it was. Of that she felt certain. But had it slowly and subtly ebbed, draining the substance if not the glow of the surface from their daily lives? Together they were so glamorous, so happening, and maybe a little too comfortable with a certainty that heat they once had generated was absent only because and could be easily regenerated if they weren’t so busy, so active, so committed to the stuff they did and were and seemed to be.

That physical passion, for instance, that was so undone by her assault and its horrible conclusion, appeared to be mortally wounded, too. Irredeemable and lost it seemed to her. Was that too harsh? Was she too impatient? That mere possibility troubled her less than what their physical awkwardness now brought to mind: that perhaps it was tenuous even before all this shock and sorrow came about, that maybe there was less manifested physically than what radiated in the ethers of their collective aura of perfection.

Perhaps for a long while now she had been fulfilled by that image they built together rather than the reality of what passion for each other they shared. Was success their sex, she wondered? Was their image the reality of their lives together? Was it the passion, and the source of passion, that they generated? Were the two of them willing partners in the fabrication of an illusion about themselves, their marriage. Was that in sum what they loved about each other?

Her daughter had been gnawed on by swine. Her last orgasm had been with a rapist. Merely determining what in her life is real, what hallucination, suddenly was loosening from her grip. That grand portrayal of life well lived as she examined it now was turning inside out, as though she somehow had passed through the mirror and found creatures bizarre, disgusting, and disgraceful were populating her world in direct opposition to what her life had always been.

Her sense of self and the world she dwelled in was swirling with such velocity that she had to sit, face in her hands, tears that wouldn’t come, and contemplate where she might find that assurance of her desirability and status, that place of wonder which always had been hers as the desired life she led, if not with her partner. Digging at that blurry place revealed a loose thread she pulled and kept pulling copiously as the fabric of her life with him unraveled.

The Yelkins had lived and worked at the ranch for years now, back even before Dirk bought it, and since he did they had run it with greater authority and hence a sense of ownership. They adapted to this onslaught of people into their lives with the same equanimity that native people in this country applied to life itself in the white man’s world. Some of these people they found interesting and even enjoyable, and all of them they knew needed shelter that they and Dirk were able and glad to provide.

Bobby was most directly involved where the others in his family mostly kept to themselves, running the ranch as they always had and now working around these changes in their circumstances with the alacrity learned from a lifetime of making do and making the best of it. Bobby was too much the realist to be moved far toward hope in the work they were doing for the governors. But he was a deeply spiritual person in his own rite and there was enough spirit rising up from all these efforts they were making and that which was elicited from the other tribes he was working with to make him notice and allow a little hope into his thinking. Hope, yes, but not yet belief.

Dirk himself of all of them appeared the best adapted to this circumstance. In some ways, he was like the kids, the Eees, how he as they had come together in a new way with people who immediately became their fellows in this new and unexpected venture. Dirk was unexpectedly in his element and thriving.

He, of course, in a sense had anticipated this eventuality, at least insofar as preparing for a calamity, a disaster, an event that needed refuge from town, from society, from government dominance, from that threatening unknown. What had occurred was intellectually conceivable – he and the others after all had modeled it – but it was practically, emotionally unimaginable. Until it happened. Then at the least it was somewhat satisfying to him to realize the value of what his preparations provided and that being settled made for new possibilities.

So engaged was he in this new reality, this evolution of possibilities, that he hadn’t noticed, it hadn’t occurred to him although certainly the others had taken note, that in more than two months he hadn’t tasted booze or drugs of any sort. What for years had been his daily dose was not now even on the radar.

When one is a believer, and Dirk is exactly that, a believer in a just and clean and healthy place where people can explore their possibilities and reach the highest place of interest to them; where people treat each other as brothers and sisters in the great struggle for respect and pride, dignity and the freedom to accomplish what one’s capable of doing; when one carries that burden through all the dark days of disappointment and disillusionment and even descends into despair, as Dirk has for so many years, it is nearly fantastical to

find oneself in a place where need is so great that whatever candle power you've been carrying with you can shine a light that shows a way to belief, as though the little kid in you stumbles out of bed one night and in the living room is Santa munching on the cookies and his reindeer make tapping sounds on the roof with their hooves.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"Wow," Able Charlie said, "is it just me or is this place pretty fucking bleak?"

Victor Zulu looked at him curiously, wondering where he was coming from. "We've seen worse, I believe."

"Yeah, but this is the US of A. America with a distinct Third World vibe. I mean, c'mon, this is definitely the end of the trail."

"Trail? Embry's?"

"Maybe that, too. Let's hope so. Nah, I'm talking about the Oregon Trail. Remember reading that shit in school? All those fucking lowlife pioneers, fighting Indians, getting bitten by rattlesnakes, freezing in blizzards, baking in the desert sun, all that crap. For what? To get here? Makes you wonder what they all were running from."

"It's not so bad," Zulu said, nodding off toward the distance from the motel porch where they were sitting. "Those mountains are kinda pretty."

"If that's your thing. You know what I see when I look at them? A big question mark. And you know what that question is? How the fuck do these folks hereabouts handle all this excitement?"

They arrived last night a week after word came from Xray their boy was somewhere nearby. Not just that but that some cowboy might lead them to him.

Charlie thought the trip was premature. A bit of a stretch. Obviously the guy was somewhere nearby, unless maybe Bill Gates loaned him his private jet to evacuate the area. That was unlikely, of course, since Bill had been long gone with the rest of the swells since the immediate aftermath of the quake. So, yeah, Embry's in the area, but it's a big piece of land and currently fucked all to hell.

“Here’s a fact,” he said. “If you drew a line down the east coast from Boston to NYC to DC, skip a bunch until maybe Hot Lanta, and down to Miami and the Keys, you’d touch every bit of this country I care about. Well, maybe Charleston, too, ‘cause I sure do like those she-crab sandwiches. The rest of it? Give it back to the Indians far as I’m concerned.”

“Spoken like a true patriot,” Zulu said. “That what you swore to serve and protect, or was the rest of this country not covered by the Constitution?”

“Just a place to grow the meat and wheat. That’s all we needed it for. Now we can get it cheaper from Argentina and Ukraine, what’s left of it anyhow. Can you believe those bastards beat the Russians?”

“That Zelensky’s one tough hombre. That’s for sure. That’s an example of love of country you might want to consider.”

“Maybe he just likes to fight. Besides, his country and this one are two completely different matters.”

“Am I supposed to say, ‘in what way’ or will you enlighten me anyhow?”

“You forget I’m a Harvard man.”

“Yeah, which leaves all those Yalies shaking in their loafers, but save it for somebody who gives a shit about your resumé.”

“All those post-Soviet countries are aspirational. At least the ones that haven’t been totally plundered by the kleptocrats like Russia. Ukraine? Those folks have hope. They think there’s something worth fighting for. They might be cynical, sure. That only makes sense. We all know how the world works, but they are still in that dawn of a new day and maybe it’ll shake out a little different for them. So they hope.

“It’s different here. We are post-cynical. Post-damn near everything. Past even pretending. A president like Gherkin the jerkin. What else I need to say?”

“Talk like that would get you hurt in Russia. Putin’d have your nuts in a mason jar on his desk. Post-whatever here you still get to run your mouth like a carnival barker. There’s that.”

“Calling a colleague a pig would be reprehensible and I’m just not that sort, so I’ll resist the comment that comes to mind about pearls before swine. But I will mention in the most dumbed-down lexicon I can muster for your ears that my freedom to act as I do will exist as

long as I am useful to the Administration and not a minute longer. I fill special needs. Once those needs are resolved they won't hesitate to cancel my ticket. Post-haste."

Zulu watched the sun setting over the Sisters and after a long moment of reflection said, "That's the most observant thing I've heard you say all day."

✦

Xavier Raymond and the FBI man were on the move in a Jeep truck with two horses in a trailer, headed down Highway 224 toward Ripplebrook, the only settlement anywhere near the Primus compound in the direction he was headed, determined to follow the beeper without spooking him. They'd waited 10 days since their encounter at the compound, wondering if or how soon he'd make a move, if he was in fact an active link to Embry, sitting tight in Estacada at the Red Fox Motel, dining morning, afternoon, evening at Granny's Drive-Thru, trying to weather the inactivity without coming to blows.

Xray was the epitome of everything the FBI man had come to detest about government service and what passed for law enforcement. He'd been at it too long to ignore the injustices, the duplicity, the contempt for those of less or no power, to paper over all that with platitudes about the meritorious service they rendered on behalf of civilization and their fellow man. The national interest. Ha! This callow and shameless man, and the people he worked with, the people he worked for, was completely and utterly disheartening. It shook FBI's faith in his country, his job, himself.

These people he'd come to know from direct exposure to their methods were beyond the reach of law, of justice, of any authority except that small cabal of deep state operatives whom no one knew or could identify, so thoroughly and determinedly opaque was their management structure and thick the layers of insulation between each step from operative to director. Alegal was maybe the word for them, amoral it goes without saying.

Finally the tracking devices indicated Primus had left the ranch horseback and was heading from his initial track south at an east-northeasterly direction. In a landmass their maps showed to be nearly unpopulated, his direction was an area notably without settlement or

any signs of humanity other than abandoned logging roads and very few of them. Whether Ripplebrook was his destination or not, they'd be in a position to intercept him en route or track him down if he settled somewhere in between.

Where was he going? Hunting, possibly, but game no doubt could be had nearer by. Hell, deer walked through the parking lot at the motel in town. It was a guessing game, of that they were well aware, but he was the best and in fact the only lead they had to Embry, and they were stuck here until they either found the guy or had better reason to look elsewhere. So, they headed out in the Jeep with the mounts FBI lined up for them. They had nothing better to do and, like them, AC and VZ were newly arrived and waiting in Bend with the chopper and the pilot, ready to head out at a moment's notice and already growing impatient.

✦

Clay had been in touch with Emily nearly daily by computer. The satellite system delivered text with no trouble, documents that were slowly uploaded and quickly downloaded, and once with some effort a photograph of Hope. He had no way to print it but ran the battery on his computer many days for more hours than he should have, looking at their beautiful child.

The banking enterprise was shaping up quickly. The namesakes of the Embry-Anton collaboration had legions of connections that regarded them as eminently reliable. George Anton had long been regarded by savvy investors as someone who should never be allowed to enter any venture without accepting as much of your money as you could lay hands on when the time to pony up arrived.

That reputation was invaluable for the Cascadia venture. Its structure was highly unusual, and the fewer questions asked up front the better. Once dollars began to flow, it would matter less, taking on the quality of curiosity these veteran investors granted money-making strategies that were new to them. This one when it was fully understood would be unprecedented in their experience and of a sort they probably would reject out of hand if the typical due diligence was followed. Profit mitigates all doubt, though, as quickly as the money is

in hand. This venture would be uniquely profitable well beyond even the investors.

Of all that had come together in this effort, Clay found himself immensely pleased and gratified by Emily, what she handled so professionally although this had been anything but her profession in the past. What surprised him wasn't her competence, or even her devotion to him. Rather, he was taken by the intense affection her felt for her as his partner and now as the mother of his child, both of which had come about or at least come to his awareness only in the last few weeks and both of which had captured his heart completely to the degree that he couldn't imagine himself now without them.

It was probably too soon but he thought frequently about his desire to see them, partner and child, and wondered about the wisdom of having her arrange a helicopter to ferry him to Sacramento for a brief visit. Before long the time would come when he could join her there and they could live together. How soon that could be was not yet possible to calculate.

These people pursuing him, whomever they were and whatever it was that they wanted, had to be resolved, dealt with once and for all. Knowing not what or why, it was difficult to speculate how and when. One new factor in the equation, he surmised, was the likely interest the governors now had in protecting him. Whether it was true, and if it was, whether it could be enough to access through them freedom and some semblance of a normal life was anyone's guess.

Dirk had sent a message yesterday even though encrypted like the rest said only, "mañana." Clay heard the click of shod hooves intermittently striking on stone as Dirk and the animals made their way down from the ridgeline. He was struck again not by the silence here, because it was noisy for most of the daylight hours when all the different creatures were doing their thing, but rather by the distinct sound that anything out of the norm made when the rare human intruded on this space.

✦

"Have to say, this is very dependable service you provide your guests," he said to Dirk when he arrived. "I haven't even come close to running low on my supplies and here you come again."

Dirk smiled broadly at him, but added, “It’s more than a supply run. Have some news you need to hear, too, and it’s not good, I’m sorry to say.”

They unpacked the mule, brushed it and his horse down, and turned them out in the corral with the one Clay had ridden here those weeks ago. “She looks kind of fat,” Dirk said.

“Yeah,” Clay said, “knee deep in clover and not a bit of exercise. Guess I’m not much of a rider left to my own devices.”

“She ain’t complaining,” Dirk said.

“Neither am I,” said Clay. “I’m kind of surprised to say so, but this isn’t a bad place to be. Not like anything I’ve done before by a long shot, but I’m getting to like it.”

“Well, it’s serving its purpose so far, and I hope it continues to be a safe haven, but I came to tell you the feds are closing in.”

He told him about the visit from the guys in the chopper and the sense he has that they’re hanging back in the shadows and watching. “I waited ten days before I came up here. Wanted to be certain there were no eyes on me. Bobby and Roy kept a close watch on the perimeter until we felt it was safe to come by.”

Clay listened quietly, nodded, looked off to the distance, said, “They have a lot of different ways to keep watch. Surveillance is their specialty. One of them anyhow. Spy craft has more ways of watching than we can imagine.”

He looked back at Dirk, smiled, shrugged, said, “I don’t know how I know that, but I do.”

They discussed different aspects of how this pursuit might play out and could see no end in sight other than continuing to safely hide or be captured for whatever fate awaits. Neither was particularly comforting.

“What spooks me,” Dirk said, “is the other guy. The FBI, yeah, I can see that, but the guy with him is a creep. Kinda guy you’d like to smack In the mouth just to wipe the smirk off his face. Who is he? I sure don’t think he’s a cop.”

“Wanted man,” Clay said with a wan smile. “And I can’t imagine what for. That makes it difficult to imagine a satisfactory resolution. This must be one of those situations that just has to play out with one

of the players not knowing the rules. Or the opposition. Not exactly the level playing field a guy would hope for."

"The question once again is fight or flight," Dirk said. "This place always seemed safe to me. Not anymore. I'm wondering if we should figure out a way to move you somewhere else."

"I've been thinking the same thing, although this new development may be accelerating my departure. There's some news on my side I need to share with you. I think it should be treated as strictly confidential. We don't want to endanger any more folks than I already have."

He looked at Dirk with something like regret and apology for being one of those he had endangered. "Don't worry about me," Dirk said. "Every person you get involved with is a mixed bag at best. You're bringing a lot more good stuff to my life, my future, hell, what all of us have to look forward to, than this mysterious little problem we're wrapped up in. I don't mean to make light of it. I'm sorry for you that this is happening. For my part, though, I have to say it's become a rather fascinating adventure. Kind of like augmented reality in some noir thriller."

Clay told him about Emily, the baby, his hope of joining her sooner rather than later in Sacramento, but only if it would be safe for her and Hope, wondering too about what value he might have to the governors in this new venture, what protection they might offer in the face of this assault on him by persons unknown but clearly seeming to be government agents.

"I can assure you they value you big time. They said so the last time we spoke with them. They are betting the store on this enterprise zone and you're the key to financing it. So, yeah, they want to protect you. You can count on it. And maybe that needs to be our next play. Maybe it's time they get briefed on your situation. Your need for protection. But from whom? Which government is the question," Dirk said. "Or is it uber-government? And what exactly did you do to piss them off? That is something they'll want to know."

"And something we can't answer." Clay said. "Even if we want to."

"Something else to consider is the separation that seems to be happening. Cascadia from the rest of the country. There's serious talk about secession. Going it alone. Reading between the lines, it looks to

me like the governors see it as a real possibility. Which means they think Gherkin is actually considering whether and how to cut them loose."

"Hard to imagine that could happen."

"This whole thing is hard to imagine. But a lot of it is happening right before our eyes. I bring it up because it might affect your status and what the government of Cascadia could do to protect you from foreign agents. That's what these characters would be then if they aren't already. The governors have every good reason to give you cover. Guess the question still is: from whom?"

"Wish I knew. Even if I did, if we figured it out, would it matter? Can we make it right? Or do these guys want me back on the streets for some reason? Maybe even that outcome is past. Maybe they want me dead."

"No evidence of that yet, is there?"

"Not that I know of. That doesn't mean it isn't a possibility. And that being the case, it seems to me like the assumption I should make if I run into them."

"If you do. Let's think about how we can avoid that."

"That would be my preference. Self-defense is reason enough in most cases. Not sure how it applies to killing federal agents."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Xray was hurting. He and FBI had made it less than ten miles down the road in the jeep before it became impassable. Smooth going for much of it and some places that were tough, but with a little ingenuity and some nifty offroad maneuvering they got by, although the horse trailer made it a challenge. Finally they reached a severe break in the surface there was no way to get around.

They saddled up the horses and headed on south along the road toward the beeper, which now was south and west of them another dozen miles or more. After the first few, Xray was getting saddle sore, and his groin muscles ached.

"We got any good reason to think this ride is worth the effort?" he said. "Maybe the guy just likes to ride his horse. Maybe he's off

camping. Maybe he's a weirdo and has to go off by himself for a while every so often to do whatever. It is not a mere figure of speech when I say this is busting my balls."

FBI had been riding most of his life. Xray had ridden seldom and not in a long while. His suffering was just beginning and already was bringing FBI a taste of pure pleasure. He could gladly anticipate how much rougher the ride will get.

"He's settled in somewhere southwest of here. We're getting a very slight difference in the reads from the homing devices. Suggests to me he's unsaddled the horse and turned it out to pasture."

"No way to tell if he has that mule with him, right?"

"That would be very nice to know. If he's carrying supplies, this little jaunt of his has all the makings of a visit to our mark. We have no way of knowing that, of course, since you spiked his horse instead of the mule."

It was one of those curiosities of nature, human nature, how the upper hand shifted in these liaisons between colleagues who detested each other. In the chopper, at the motel, dining together daily at Granny's, Xray dripped with sarcasm and condescension for FBI. He barely could contain his hubris, disdain he felt, and the malevolence it inspired in his regard for the man.

He was a font of anger and hostility toward FBI, which he failed to conceal beneath a veneer of smugness and sarcasm. It was as if his capabilities were compromised by the lesser man's inadequacies, when, in fact, FBI suspected, it was the confrontation he represented to Xray that unsettled the man's carefully contrived denial of the ethical and moral sewer in which he conducted his affairs.

On horseback, here in the fractured wilderness, alone on this mission ordered by people who cared for neither of them, FBI held sway and the other man's arrogance was quickly dissolving into whining, the bleating of a creature out of his element whose ass was talking to him and not saying nice things.

At Cripple Creek they crossed over onto the Sandstone Road, a dirt trail that was once a logging road of some utility and now mostly carried the occasional camper heading down to Indian Henry campground. As they passed it, FBI said, "This is where he made the call from according to the coordinates."

“He rode all the way from that ranch to this nothing place just to call his folks. Why would that be? Can’t help but wonder if he wasn’t covering for his pal, Primus. Unless maybe he just needed to work up a sore ass like the rest of us.”

“Your butt bothering you?”

“Not at all. My rear end and all the rest of the apparatus loves to chaff against this goddamn saddle leather while this nag I’m riding shuffles on down the road. I couldn’t be happier.”

“That’s good to hear. I’m pretty sure our boy is holed up somewhere up ahead and I mention it because the ride up there is going to get a little rougher. Very satisfying to know you’re enjoying it so far. Tends to stress the legs and backside just a little more heading uphill but it sounds like you can handle it.”

“Fuck you,” Xray said just loud enough to hear.

“I can think of any number of reasons why Primus might be settled in such a remote spot. Maybe wants to get away from the crowd at his ranch. Maybe has a cabin he likes to visit. Maybe just camping out. Who knows?”

“But we both know it seems likely that our boy is hiding out up there and Primus is paying a visit.”

“That thought has crossed my mind, as well. Question now is how soon do we flag your colleagues in Bend?”

“How far ahead is the beeper?”

“Maybe five miles. Close to that.”

“I’m gonna ping them now. Worst that can happen is they’ll motor around bumfuck here a while. Best is that we’ll nail this SOB. Can’t happen soon enough to suit me. I would love to get out of this godforsaken country. Like now.”

“Suspect the horse will miss you dearly. And all the folks in town you’ve managed to insult. Not easy to replace the kind of excitement a presence like you makes in a little town like that. Granny I’m sure will miss your smiling face.”

“Fuck ‘em. And the horse. too. No offense, sweetie,” he said, patting her neck and shifting his butt one way, then the other, which lessened his pain not a bit. He dragged the satellite phone from the saddlebags and made the call.

✦

“Back East is not an option, then. Can I ask why?” Dirk said.

“Back East is a big place and sure, I could probably hide out there as well as anywhere else. My thinking is that the farther I stay from family and friends, the better. Not to mention that most of the pool of investors the bank’s courting is there. It seems smart to keep my distance until this matter is settled, one way or the other.”

“All things being equal, I would much prefer to have you nearby. We’re just getting this Cascadia venture underway. We need your input, obviously, and it’s just a matter of time before the governors are going to wonder what we’re hiding by keeping you out of sight.”

“That *is* a factor we need to address, I agree. Sooner rather than later. It makes me think that relocation should be somewhere closer to them so we can start to build a strong working relationship. That would make sense in normal circumstances. In this one, speaking selfishly, it might be even more important for the protection it might provide.”

“You thinking Sacramento?”

“It’s very tempting to think about living there. Too much so in fact because of Emily and Hope. Not sure how long I could go without looking them up and that could be dangerous for them. My guess is the guys chasing me are well aware of my parents, sisters, maybe some of my friends. But I don’t think they’re aware of Emily and the baby. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I get it. Here’s an idea and maybe not as crazy as it sounds. How about Reno? Or better yet, Las Vegas. Easy enough to lose yourself in either place. Lots of traffic coming and going. Everybody’s a stranger. At least for a while. It might be a good place to hole up. And flying, or even driving for that matter, back and forth to Sacramento would be easy.”

“Worth thinking about. Never been to either place. That could be good.”

✦

“Tell the pilot to keep maximum elevation,” Zulu said to Charlie, leaning forward to yell in his ear from the back seat. “Don’t want anybody on the ground to hear us coming until we make our move.”

“We should be so lucky the guy is actually here,” Charlie said, twisting in his seat to answer Zulu, “Believe it when I see it. Ain’t like Xray is the brightest bulb in the chandelier. Guess I don’t have to tell you that.”

“Well, if nothing else, we know this cowboy’s there. Might be all there is to it. If so, no reason to let him know we’re tracking him. If we happen to get lucky, no reason to give them time to take a shot at us, assuming they’re armed.”

“Frogmen assume everybody’s armed. Am I right?” he said with a smirk.

“For once you are. One reason why so many of us are still around to hold your hand when things get hairy.”

“Huh! Remind me to make a contribution to the Widow’s Fund.”

Zulu settled back in his seat as the chopper rose. “Asshole,” he said to the back of Charlie’s head and thought about how it would look mounted on a stake.

✦

FBI pulled up, waited for Xray who was trailing behind. He dismounted, tied his horse to a tree in the shade, waited for the straggler.

“Think we should walk from here. Signal is maybe a half mile ahead. Don’t want them to hear us coming.”

Xray took a long time dismounting, nearly fell from the saddle and winced noticeably when he got his legs under him.

“Them or him?” he said. “Still to be determined isn’t it?”

He looked up what was a fairly steep hill in front of them, seemed to be sizing up whether the hike or more time horseback would be more painful, didn’t find one option any better than the other.

“Horseshoes make a lot of noise in a place this quiet. Be a lot less likely they hear us coming on foot.”

“Still with the *they*. You sound pretty sure of yourself.”

“It’s the boy scout in me. Be prepared, you know? Better safe than sorry.”

You’re sorry all right, Xray said to himself. “What we need to carry?”

“Scanner, phone, guns. Leave the rest.”

“What if someone steals our horses?’

FBI just looked at him, thought to himself, you’re sorry all right, gathered his gear and headed up hill, Xray once again trailing.

The city boy’s legs were killing him, his groin muscles shooting pain with every step, his breath a little ragged not from exertion because he was fit but from the rubbery state of each step as he struggled to keep up with FBI. His butt felt like one large callus that cracked a little with every movement. Little by little, though, he began to loosen up a bit and was thankful at least to be rid of the nag.

✦

“I need to tell you, Dirk,” Clay said. “A lot has changed for me very quickly and when I think back over it, you made a big impact on that situation just by talking to me, taking me for a beer that time. It’s hard to explain what a difference that sort of contact makes to dragging you out of the fog when you’re as lost as I was. Nobody ever spoke to me that I can remember, except the cops. Then you came along. Then Worthy. Then all the rest. Like little bits of light shining in.”

He was sitting in one of the inflatable chairs, looking wistful if remarkably astute compared to the time he was referencing, and showing some evidence of the pain he still felt about this unresolved, inexplicable situation he found himself in, one that he now was acutely aware of and struggling to overcome whereas before he was too muddled even to question it let alone begin the process of trying to understand.

“I feel like I’m pretty close to making a breakthrough. Like all that stuff that’s just out of reach, all the confusion is wrapping into a ball I can get my hands on, grip it, make sense of it. Having a family, I mean Emily and Hope, is such a shock, but a good one. It’s pushing me to feel things, to do things, share them, to want to make an effort greater than maybe what I’d do on my own.

“All of you have made such an impression on me, and now in the midst of these changes, I’m a family man and an investment banker who’s financing the New Northwest.” He laughed a little ironically. “And I love it. But wow!”

He looked out the window from where he sat at the view he'd become so familiar with; a spectacular vista made more extraordinary still by the absence of any human creatures within view except himself and Dirk. A small flock of birds stirred into the air off in the distance, the furious beat of their wings visually cuing sounds unheard but imaginable; otherwise, all was still, undisturbed, content.

"I'd really like to consult with Bella again. The other evening, I was sitting outside, completely at peace, mind drifting, maybe even nodding off, I'm not sure. Something came to mind I don't remember ever thinking before. In fact, it was in a setting I barely remember.

"I was in a room, a hospital I think, and a doctor was telling me about the piece of metal that nearly put out my eye." He reached unconsciously to touch the thick scar tissue next to his right eye. "He was showing me the metal, this jagged thing a few inches long, shrapnel I guess, and there was something on it, a picture or a drawing, something right there in front of me but I couldn't make out what it was. Or, maybe, I couldn't remember what it was I was looking at.

"This may sound weird, but it gave me the same sensation I have when I try to remember the face of women I know, the way they won't come into focus. Like a smudge across the image.

"Bella and I talked a lot about that thing, that blank spot, because there was a lot that was fogged over for me, but that issue of women's faces kept occurring." He looked at Dirk, hesitated just a bit, said, "I can't even remember Emily's face. Right now, thinking about her, just saw her very recently, and the image simply will not come to mind, no matter how hard I try."

He was quiet then, thinking, reflecting on how these things tumbled together, staring off into the distance as he assembled his thoughts, considered what he wanted to say. The sun was hot enough to ripple the air with waves of heat. A small herd of deer bolted across the field below him just at the edge of his view and headed up hill. Maybe the cougar again, unusual to be hunting this time of day but hunger sets that clock. He saw that cat one evening very close. It was big and well fed.

"But here's something that Bella would find interesting. A series of things that connect somehow. Since I've been up here by myself, I

figured this out. The first female face I could recall when I thought about her was Gracie. Her Dad used to drive past me where I panhandled outside their building – the same place we met that time, remember? – and it occurred to me that when she would look at me, just driving past in the car, we'd make eye contact and that connection – I'd say now it was the empathy I saw in her eyes but then I wasn't thinking that – later that feeling would come to me, and I could see her face. Clearly.

"I just thought of that, just realized it recently. Then I realized the other kids, the Eees, I can see their faces, too. I mean, I barely know them, but I can see them clearly. Bella, Rika, Holly, the rest of them, I can tell you a lot about them, but I can't call up an image of their faces. And my own, well, the mother of my child, I can't see her face, either.

"What might be another piece of this puzzle, though, and what Bella might help me with, is that I can see Hope's face perfectly. I have a picture of her on the laptop and when I think of her, my image of her is exactly the same as the photograph. And, when I see her face, something else is there, too. It's like a sensation of Emily's face even though I can't quite see it."

"Sounds to me like you're getting close," Dirk said. "Like all of this is about to break and all that stored up stuff is going to flood back into your life."

"I think so, too. Just hope we're all ready for what I find."

✦

"What are you seeing?" Charlie said into the phone.

"Nothing." Xray said. "Just grass and boulders, the hillside, a line of rocks below the ridgeline. A lot of trees."

"Where's the damn beeper?"

"That's the thing. They're both close by. One of them's within a hundred yards of us. I'm scoping the entire area and I can't see any sign of life."

"No cabin? A tent?"

"Nothing. Not a damn thing. I'm lying here on my belly and the only thing we've seen move is a herd of deer we spooked."

“We got a bead on your phone so keep it lit. We’re gonna come in high and quiet as possible, see what we can spot from up here. Unless he found the spikes and dumped them, he’s gotta be nearby. Don’t you and your sidekick get too comfy lying around down there, you hear?”

“Fuck you. You hear?”

“Ah, Xman, sure is nice to be working with you again. Even if I’m the only one working. Figures me and the Frog will have to get this done ourselves.”

“Hey asshole, my butt is one fucking blister, and I don’t need your shit.”

“Knowing your proclivities, I don’t want to think about what blistered your butt, or ask who’s been riding whom, but I know you have a thing for those FBI cuties. Meanwhile, make yourself useful ‘til we get there. That’s an order, boy!”

✦

“Let’s agree to this,” Dirk said. “We’re going to scout a couple of new places to get you settled. Maybe Emily can get that done. I like Reno. Close, good cover, not so neighborly that you have to say much to anybody. Place where people keep their own counsel, being mostly gamblers or the folks whose job it is to take their money. You could hole up there for as long as need be.”

“Which hopefully will not be long.”

“No disagreement there. I really believe there’s a very bright future straight ahead and plenty of exciting work to be done. It’s only right that you should be free to do what you want to do. Good for you and good for everyone else, too.”

“That day can’t come soon enough to suit me.”

✦

Xray nudged FBI. “See that crevice runs right to left down the face of that rock wall. Scope that big shadow at the base of it. What do you see?”

FBI looked through the scope of the .223 he carried with him on duty and off. He’s come to know it like his own arm, had sighted game both two and four-legged through this scope over the years, and could

knock down whatever was in his sights with this flat-shooting rifle from a quarter mile away. He scanned the entire shadow carefully, then again. “Nothing,” he said. “Don’t see a thing. But I get why you’re looking at it.”

“The only place possible that beeper could be that we can’t see. I keep wondering if it might be a cave just buried in the shadow.”

“Or a mine shaft. Maybe. Can’t from this angle to tell either way.”

“Keep scoping it. I’m gonna try to see it from a different angle.” He rose to all fours, groaning as he did, and began to crawl slowly to his right. He hadn’t gone far when a pheasant exploded out of a clump of brush and flew uphill.

FBI couldn’t be sure, beneath the furious beating of the big bird’s wings, that he didn’t see in that shadow something move. Maybe a leaf, a vine, a small critter on the rock face deep in that dark place rustled. Maybe just a trick of the light wrinkled by the flight of the pheasant. Maybe nothing at all.

✦

“I think we have visitors,” Clay said to Dirk. “Third time this hour I’ve seen critters spook. Each of them closer than the last. That has never happened in the daylight since I’ve been here”

He moved farther into the room, away from the windows, crouched low, began gathering a few things into the duffle bag, said, “If they tracked you here, they still don’t know for certain whether I’m here. No point in both of us trying to hide. I’m back in the cave. Do what you can to steer them away.” He opened the back door, stopped, looked back at Dirk, said, “Whatever happens, do *not* put yourself in danger. Agreed?” He closed the door and disappeared into the cave.

✦

“Xray,” said Charlie, “what have you got?”

“Think we might be zeroing in. I’m moving to a new angle, scoping out the only place these guys can possibly be holed up.”

“How close are you?”

“Maybe a hundred yards.”

“We’re at max altitude coming over the last ridge east of you. I’m betting they can hear us coming soon. You guys’ figure out whether Embry’s with him?”

“Nothing yet. Can’t think of anything else that makes more sense though. I’m betting the over.”

“I’m with you there, Xman. You’re smarter than you look. Hang tight. Be ready to fight. Here we come.”

The chopper broke the ridgeline far to the east, taking a wide, high loop over the target area and readying to decrease the circumference of each pass. Before the first loop was complete, and as they were first audible to Xray, the phone spoke.

“Bingo, brother, we can cash our ticket at the paramutual window. Two horses and a mule in a field just north of you. We’re coming down. You and FBI go in. Tell him to wave his badge. Primus has seen you both before. Unlikely he’ll shoot you before you have a chance to tell him why you’re here.”

“You think so, wise man, what about Embry?”

“Well, that is another matter, isn’t it? Let’s hope he shoots your boyfriend first so you can return fire. Hey, get going. We’re right on your blistered ass.”

✦

They rose from the field and headed at the shadow, walking deliberately, Xray with his gun ready to snap shoot at the slightest provocation, FBI with his gun at his side in his right hand barrel pointed skyward, his left hand waving his credentials in the air, yelling “FBI. FBI. Primus, you know me. Primus! Listen up. We’re coming to talk.”

The first fifty yards made the shadow no clearer, and it occurred to both of them they might be talking to a wall. Then the light shifted very subtly and the outline of a cave or a mineshaft very gradually became visible. They were within twenty yards before they could tell there was a wall, a manmade wall with deep-set windows, a door, and a large combination lockbox. Primus was seen standing in one window, his arms crossed, no sign of a weapon. No sign of Embry either.

They reached the door. FBI knocked. “Primus, open up. We need to talk. Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you.”

“Open the door.”

“Say what you have to say.”

Xray stepped forward, said, “Here’s what I have to say, Primus. Open the door or I’ll start firing into that fancy lock of yours until the whole damn thing is shredded. Door, too. And if you get hit by all the lead that’s flying, I won’t feel bad because sad as it may be we gave you a chance and you didn’t take it, so I have to conclude that you asked for it. Am I making myself clear?”

The door opened slightly, Primus wedged into the opening. “What do you want from me? This is my property and once again you come calling uninvited.”

“We want to search the premises,” FBI said. “We have reason to believe a fugitive is here. We have a scanner with us that I believe will show Clay Embry’s fingerprints all over the room. So please stand aside and let us in.”

“Asked you last time and I’ll ask again. You have a search warrant?”

Xray moved FBI aside with the nudge of his left arm, the right one still holding the rifle at ready. “Let me explain something to you, Mr. Primus. If FBI was leading this sortie, he would respect your rights and go get a judge to issue a warrant. That is because he represents the law, and he conducts himself within the guidance of that law, which as you know grants you broad protection against unreasonable entry of your private domain.

“What you may not know is that I’m leading this raid and I do *not* give a good goddamn about your rights, search warrants, unlawful entry. None of that means shit to me. I am here to capture Clayton Embry, whom we both know is hiding here with your support, and so, Mr. Primus, because I know you to be a reasonably intelligent fellow, I am going to put it to you in plain English. You can either stand aside and let us enter or I will blow a hole in your head that will splatter your brains all over the room, and then we will come in anyway.”

With that, he lowered the barrel of his rifle until it touched Dirk’s forehead and behind him, accompanied by a near deafening noise, the

chopper landed, and two men Dirk had never seen before came running toward them, each of them armed and not looking friendly.

The four of them, Xray first, then the other two, and finally FBI, came through the door with guns drawn and no small measure of anxiousness, pros clearly but still hyper alert and jacked for action. The room was empty.

“Where’s Embry?” Xray said.

“I’m saying nothing more until I have a lawyer,” Dirk said.

“If you live that long. Where’s that door lead?”

Dirk said nothing. Xray cracked it very slowly, peeked around the edge of the door, saw nothing but deep darkness, felt a cool breeze.

“You got a flashlight?”

Dirk said nothing.

Charlie said, “Frogman always has a light. Am I right Zulu?”

Zulu handed him the flashlight from his hip pocket, a Fenix PD35 that will light up an alleyway and blind anybody it shines on. “You going in?” he said with a smile.

Xray looked at the light, looked at Charlie and Zulu. “Your play,” Charlie said to him.

Xray grabbed Primus by the back of his neck, pulled him to the door, said, “You open it. Wide.” He pushed Dirk forward, the door opened, and from behind the man’s back with the flashlight held wide of the shield he provided, he clicked on the light.

Three shots nearly simultaneously roared from the Glock 18, the light shattered, Xray screamed, rolled away from the door, yelling, “Shit, shit, he shot me,” and in that brief moment of confusion, Dirk rolled through the door to the floor and scrambled into the dark.

“You’re not hurt, you fucking clown,” Charlie said to him, looking him over with something like disgust.

“Sure shot my flashlight all to hell,” Zulu said, looking at the shattered plastic pieces littering the floor.

“I’m bleeding,” Xray said, holding out his hand.

“Looks like Xray has an owie,” Charlie said to Zulu. “Little piece of plastic might have cut his little hand. Maybe Mr. FBI can make it better. Can you, sir? Meanwhile, you let Primus loose. Now we’ve got him to consider, too.”

“He ain’t armed,” Xray said, licking at the nicks in his hand.

“Well, he wasn’t when he got away from you. Who knows what they’ve got stashed back there in the way of firepower? Meanwhile, though, in your own feeble way, you accomplished one important thing. We know somebody’s back there who knows how to shoot, and we have every good reason to think it’s our boy Embry.”

“And I guess you. being the smart son of a bitch that you are, have a plan to smoke him out of there.”

“Mister Raymond, let me remind you that I outrank you here, and that I am a Harvard man whereas you are a lowlife motherfucker who isn’t worth spit. Being of superior intelligence, I won’t take umbrage at your language because, as a matter of fact, I *am* a smart son of a bitch, whereas you, sir, are dumb as a stump and nearly as attractive.

“Getting him out of there was never a problem. You can, as they say, leave it to me. What is a problem that you created is what to do about Mr. Primus. Because if he starts shooting when I bring Embry out of there, I might have to kill him and that would be a shame. Worse yet, he might hit one of us and that would *really* be a shame, unless the one he hit was you and then I’d be ambivalent. I would hate to kill a man with such a keen sense of who deserves a bullet, but I might have to anyway, much as I’d admire him.”

“Cut the crap, Charlie,” said Zulu. “Let’s get this done and get out of here.”

“Frogman is right, Xray. I’m gonna ask you and the FBI man to stand back while my partner and I show you how the big boys get things done. I was thinking you should start heading back now, but just for the sheer thrill of blowing your mind, maybe it’s better if you see this unfold. Then you can put your blistered ass back on your horse or your donkey or whatever you rode here and stay the fuck out of my sight.”

They stood in a group that was already dissolving, FBI backing away toward the front door, Xray snarling to himself, provoked now less by the insults he suffered than by the pain of the ride he imagined before him, having assumed he’d fly out of this place with his boss in the helicopter.

Charlie shook his head dismissively from side to side, looked at Xray and shrugged, turned to Zulu and said something quietly to which the Frogman nodded. He walked to the door, stood clear of it as

he pushed it open, waited a moment for a reaction. When none came, he said:

"Za Beemar Yem," the one with the curly hair said, like a command. Embry recoiled, curled to his knees. White walls descended all around him, doors slammed shut, wind howled through the room, pure tumult, a gale without an exit, swirling, narrowing, gathering around him, then slowly diminishing until it was a rustling and a dull hum. There in the room was the man in the white coat, tablet in hand, pen poised to make notes. The doctor, his doctor, saying, "Za beemar yem, Embry. Remember? I am sick."

Dirk was stunned, his mouth literally hanging open, breath caught in his throat when Clay rose from where he was crouching in cover and began walking toward the doorway, his gait somnambulistic, pistol slack in his hand at his side. "Clay," he said in a whisper, then again, "Clay!" louder, nearly a hiss. Embry didn't acknowledge him, moving past as though he hadn't heard him. As he was passing, Dirk saw the marksman's bead glowing red on Clay's forehead.

He reached out to grab him, both of them now exposed, the feel clearly imagined if not in fact of another bead finding him, and when his hand grasped Clay's sleeve, Embrey stopped for a moment, turned his head toward him almost mechanically, looked at Dirk with vacant eyes, shrugged free of Dirk's grasp and moved on through the doorway into the rear of the cabin.

"Best join us, Primus," a voice said from the other side of the doorway. "Rather not have to shoot you dead." When he too passed through the doorway, into the barest flicker of light from the last throes of sunset turned nearly to night outside, an unseen hand grabbed his rifle, another clapped a hand to the side of his neck, and he felt the prick of a needle just before everything in this place and the world around it became completely dark again.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Part Two

Chapter One

The vote, when it finally came, after all the hue and cry, the debates, the fights, the battles, the taking it to the wall by every interest group imaginable, was quick and clear. Congress by a super majority vote of both houses and the Bill signed into law by the President, said simply: Secession granted: California, Oregon, and Washington are withdrawn from the United States of America.

Terms were spelled out somewhat coherently. There was to be a period of relocation, where people who wished to retain their U.S. citizenship, could move to one of the remaining United States. Conversely, those whose personal preferences hewed to the breakaway states were given priority consideration for citizenship. It all evolved over time, the people coming and going, but the big picture was instantaneous. Call the Question. Vote. Gone.

The corona virus, COVID-19, was still devastating parts of America, the economic hangover keenly felt where the healthcare issues were pretty much subsided. Keeping the country afloat through that crisis had exhausted its vast reserves of credit.

The massive infusion of cash support to individuals and businesses let them limp through the first two years of the pandemic but many were hanging by a thread now that the support was exhausted. The tax base was insufficient to sustain it any longer and inflation now was taking its toll.

Those too damaged by the downturn to survive were let go. Small business as always was sacrificed to the blunt force of capitalism that says only those too big to fail would continue to receive a hand.

Congress would broach no more. The debt it had taken on would need at least a decade to repay, if in fact it ever did repay it, or, rather, simply learned to function with a much larger deficit. Then, too, inflation had the benefit of making the debt smaller in inverse

proportion to its growth. Perhaps that suggests a plan rather than an incident. Behind the scenes, few things in capitalism accidentally occur; still, though, a $multi-trillion catastrophe gave Congress pause.

Secession seemed like a savings. Strange as it seemed, America was unable, or at least unwilling, to pay the price of hanging together. A dollars and cents assessment of the Union was made. Money firmly and finally became the determinant. The decision to retrench as 47 states was the conclusion.

Yes, California was a powerhouse, the seventh largest economy in the world, a $3 trillion annual GDP, and growing rapidly. Even with its staggering problems, cutting it adrift was purely a calculation of cost to benefits. Whatever was lost in parting ways, it was decided, could be recaptured as trading partners. The truth was global capitalism is a far more powerful and important force than nationalism.

So, the three Pacific Rim states formed a new alliance. Cascadia! That was what they came to be called. They didn't say so specifically, but it was understood worldwide that it was a new and powerful nation. Canada quietly proposed that this new entity join it as an independent province.

The orderly exit of the west coast Dems was becoming a conflagration. The United States was sewing new flags with just 47 stars when Hawaii sued to join the secession. The entire eastern shore of the Pacific Rim seemed like it might be in play, an Asiamerican alliance, but Alaska was having none of it. Instead, the debate there was between rock-ribbed support of the USA and another spasm that called for independence, but as a sole entity and not joined with the breakaway states.

That argument was barely underway when Colorado and New Mexico broke away. Rumors surged that Mexico was considering an alliance with them, and all of them with Cascadia. New York, New England part or all, and even New Jersey were said to be in various stages of preparing to exit, too. Gherkin came up short. The blue states were leaving en masse. This wasn't in the plan.

It's very hard to stop a good idea whose time has come, especially once it gains momentum. Once the Constitution was breeched, anything was possible. The unthinkable became practical, ideology trumped geography, partisanship was too deeply instilled to resist the

separation of a deeply divided nation. The Democrats and the Republicans went their separate ways. The point of it all, after all, was power.

✦

The United States of America was a shrunken nation. Widely if not officially known now as the Unified States, a place once more steeped in a tradition that was vividly imagined, even though in actuality it never may have been. The power structure was reestablished as a clearly delineated, male, Anglo-Saxon, nominally Christian, rampantly capitalist, winner-take-all system in which every citizen could quickly and easily find a place. And know their place.

How does one know? Just count the syllables. The fewer the better. That was one way to find your rung on the ladder, but there were other measures, too. Note the color. It got lighter as it rose. The gender was male, clearly so, and not a "they" among them. One needn’t be confused about what was possible any longer. It was very clearly proscribed and etched so neatly between the lines only the blind could miss it. The disabled, of course, were placed at the lower rungs.

The country, as President Gherkin had boldly proclaimed it would be, was thoroughly Republican and a bastion of unbridled free enterprise. Regulations were moot. Business was all and everything. The judges were conservative, the society temperate, and people who strayed from the judicious path had the decency to do so under cover of night. They could arise the next morning, pray for redemption, and go about their business unfettered.

✦

It was a different world from that delineated in the history books, the one the United States of America dominated for nearly a century and played the role of charming prince in waiting for nearly another century prior. There was a long period past where democracy was an ideal that resonated widely, and a period later where it seemed to prove its mettle as an idea but also as a practice, one smooth working, functioning system of governance that, for all its faults, its shortcomings, its failure to match its ideals, was still and all a banner

carried proudly, a clarion call heard by millions the world over, a stance righteous men and women adopted and carried forward into a purposeful future.

Concepts like the peaceful transfer of power, the ascension of the freely elected to the seat of authority, the balance of power and authority distributed in equal measure among three branches of government, and ensured by a system of fair, equitable, just laws derived from and supporting a constitution that defined first principles of what this nation wanted and declared itself to be.

That was then. That was the ideal which for several centuries the nation strived to be. Greed undid it in the end. Sheer avarice was its undoing. Success in that clever game called capitalism was so effectively, so totally achieved by just a few that the rest fell by the wayside and eventually they were merely flotsam and jetsam in the tides that washed America's shores.

Riches are something everyone can believe they want. Every sip of that elixir is intoxicating. The truly rich, those who always have profited and always will profit from the economic system, allow the great unwashed, the best of them, at least, the occasional dip in that private pool.

It is enough, just imagining it, let alone when one has been there among them, the privileged, gilded, iconic humans who have made it, who want not, who are seemingly and almost casually invincible, to inspire insatiable want. The craven desire to belong, to be one of them, if only newly admitted and not really accepted. That radiant golden carrot they hold out. It is almost within reach!

✦

Cascadia was another matter. Embryotic, gestated in crisis, what it would become was still to be determined. The separation from the United States was traumatic. There was no precedent, nothing to put it in context except the events as they unfolded. The debate in every deliberative body and everywhere among the public was contentious, passionate, exhausting. Not everyone, especially in California and especially not at first, was supportive. Severing the cord took a sort of courage that few had imagined of themselves.

Were it not the years of drama preceding it, the blatant, unconscionable, inexcusable actions of an administration hell bent on demeaning and then destroying every principle, all that was reasonable and good, not only in the Democratic Party but in his own party, as well; were it not for the manifestation of all the disdain of the elite for the rest of humanity, the casually cruel use of power by those few who have it against those many who don't, the obliquely dismissive regard for the suffering it caused, maybe it never could have happened.

But it did. The degree of contempt for the governed by this petty, deceitful, manipulative, ultimately larcenous President and his minions could not be missed, avoided, explained away. He became and gladly so the personification of absolute power as the perfection of capitalism, and unbridled capitalism as the price of American democracy. The best of both of them that money could buy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, secession when it finally was accomplished set in motion a series of extraordinarily adventurous experiments in governance and public policy formation. Need met opportunity in the aftermath of reorientation.

When the completely unimaginable comes to be, everything and anything suddenly seems possible. Things you might otherwise never have contemplated no longer are incomprehensible. Compared to dissolution of the United States and the formation of a new nation, new ventures in ways to order society are a lot less intimidating to consider and act on. Courage once found is a powerful ally.

California always had been in the forefront of policy initiatives, Oregon and Washington each in its own way dipping their toes in those waters, as well. This, however, was different in fundamental ways.

The first order of business was what to do about the severely damaged areas of the new nation. The need was so extreme that anything could be considered. Wisely, the political leadership and grassroots activism came to the same conclusion. This was an unprecedented opportunity to experiment with new ways to govern, new systems to put in place, new ways of orienting life and livelihoods in a new nation, large parts of which were to be created from scratch.

The goal would be public well-being. At its core was a disarmingly simple but profound focus on solutions rather than systems. In the past, those systems themselves became the focus. They provided jobs, services, modes of doing business. They were necessary, then essential, then too big to fail. Whatever furthered the system was what was important. Those who were served less so.

What if, it was wondered, instead of that approach to delivering services, we thought about what we hoped to achieve? What was the solution to a problem of creating and sustaining a healthy, happy, prosperous population of the nation's citizens? What would that look like?

Of the many systems that are used to tie together a society, structure them in ways that truly serve the needs of the end-user, the people of Cascadia. If public health is the goal, build a system that provides a healthy environment and health care in whatever way best serves the goal, not the provider. Not the investor. Not the "jobs creation" rationale that had prevailed in the past.

This was a radical way to think. How could you build infrastructure without putting the investor first? Who could conceive of a system that put the customer ahead of the many forces marshaled to serve him and her and them? Who paid?

Fortunately for all those folks that had to make these choices, who were faced with moving in a direction that appeared to be naïve at best and radical in the harsh light of traditionalism, so much that was sacrosanct about 'systems" in a capitalist society could now be viewed in the full bloom of the United States under Gherkin père et fille. Late-stage capitalism led to late-stage democracy. The money, the profits, the deluge of wealth was too much for the beneficiaries to hide any longer. The one-tenth of one percent raked it in. Everyone else lost.

No amount of spin could any longer hide the decay and dissolution of these institutions, fond illusions established and consecrated for so long now were shedding all pretense of being the stuff of the American Dream; rather it was pure and simply a mad rush to even greater hordes of money and power. There was no point in pretending any more, no way to posit that these systems served anyone except the kleptocrats who bought and paid for them. Even the sturdiest and most elastic concepts can be stretched only so far.

Radical changes were easier to consider when the egregious appetite for plunder was playing out next door. The United States like so many other nations honed a vision of prosperity that was deeply anchored in credit. The evolution of credit widely distributed to the masses shored up consumerism to a degree almost unimaginable in the days when one actually had to pay for something to purchase it. Have now, pay later became the norm. It was the new indentured servitude.

The decline of the middle class it initiated came to full flower over the next few decades. By the beginning of the 21st century, the majority of Americans were one paycheck from poverty. It was learned that less than half the citizenry could produce $400 for an emergency without borrowing it. The banks were fully in control.

When their schemes went wrong, as they did periodically, they were deemed too big to fail. The government reimbursed them their losses. The consumers were left holding the bag. They took the loss, each of them to the degree they were indebted to now deeply depreciated assets. They as debtors were "underwater" as the phrase so aptly described it. The banks floated comfortably in the surf. Then, as taxpayers, they paid higher rates to restock the government money sent to the banks to keep them afloat. Take that, suckers!

It became a time of cynicism, of anger, of a nation enraged by a reality that left them powerless, except to spite each other. Divide and conquer. The United States was divided. And soon to be conquered.

That was the setting nationally when the Big Quake came.

✦

This wasn’t to be the choice between capitalism and communism, or socialism, as an economic philosophy. All that was set aside. This new nation of Cascadia, it was decided, was going to delve deeply into pragmatism, “what works for our citizens, beginning with the least of them” as a governing principal. “Let’s look at the solutions we want,” Governor Braun said to his legislature, “and design systems to provide them.”

They started at the beginning. They needed to get cash into the hands of all those people left in desperate circumstances by the disaster, and they needed a way to produce the cash. Rather than go

the traditional route of food vouchers and welfare, they made a radical choice by keeping it simple.

Governor Braun explained the solution he proposed and how a system would be created to serve it. He posited it as an experiment in new ways to order the society in Cascadia, a social contract to compare to the existing order. Selling it wasn't easy, but it got done.

✦

"We want to provide basic income to all the people in Cascadia north of Point Mendocino in the amount of $2,000 monthly per adult. A married couple will get $4,000 and $500 monthly per child up to a total of $5,000 monthly per family. That support continues until the recipients achieve financial stability. At present, that is deemed to be $200,000 net worth. The bill is scheduled to sunset in five years unless it meets certain objectives. That area of Cascadia is hereby deemed an Enterprise Zone.

"In order to pay for it, we're creating a simple tax code based on the belief that capitalism can continue to be a very effective economic system as long as we all pay a fair share of the cost of maintaining our social contract. We no longer are taxing only income as a basis, but rather are marrying it with a tax on increase in wealth.

"The greater your success in our system, the greater the share you will pay. But nobody pays more than half their increased wealth each year, no matter how successful they are. Half you keep and half you give back to the society that allowed you to produce that wealth.

"Each adult is guaranteed $2,000 monthly to spend however they see fit. That income and anything else they earn up to $50,000 annually is tax free. That is the baseline below which we will not allow people to fall. It is the safety net we provide our citizens.

"The next $50,000 is taxed at twenty percent. The next $100,000 is taxed at thirty-five percent. Every dollar beyond that is a fifty-fifty split. Understand what I'm saying here. When we define income, we mean all increases in wealth. Unrealized capital gains, increases in the value of real estate, anything that increases worth is shared with the community.

"Those of us who have avoided taxes while seeing vast increase in net worth will henceforth pay a sum equal to one-half the annual

increase in their net worth. We are devising a system for accepting stocks, bonds, shares in property, and other assets in payment of taxes due."

Braun paused while the grumbling, the gasping, the guffawing rattled around the legislature. The press corps was writing furiously. Everyone was animate, some actually leaning back in their chair with a smile on their face. Many more were scowling.

"One more thing: there are no deductions of any sort. No mortgage interest, business expenses, none of that any longer. No capital gains rates, no depletion allowances, no depreciation schedules. None of that.

"The principal is this: we as the elected government of newly formed Cascadia are facing a dire situation by providing comprehensive stimulus to the economy. But this time we're doing it differently. We are going to put cash in the hands of all our citizens, including especially the poor and the middle class. And they will spend it. That's what we want to happen, for the money to circulate. This time, however, we want it to circulate upward from the broadest base rather than hope it will trickle down from the summit.

"Our objective is to create a society driven by aspiration rather than fear. We want to honor the observation that a society is measured by how it treats the least of its citizens. That's how Cascadia can go forward, that's who we can be."

All the expected arguments were raised. If you give people money, you take away their incentive to work. Welfare queens will exploit the system. Who will do the dirty work if everyone has enough to get by? Competition brings out the best in us. Free enterprise drives innovation. Taxes stifle innovation, growth and employment. Worst of all, these egregious sorts of burdens on the business world will drive companies offshore, to the United States, or elsewhere to capture a more profitable environment where they can do business unimpeded and reap the profits. Every canard imaginable was raised in opposition.

"My fellow elected officials," said Braun, "hear me out. This system I'm proposing is pure capitalism. It puts money in the hands of people who will spend it on necessities. Circulate the money! Pay your rent,

buy your groceries, get the car running again so you can get to work. That's capitalism at its best.

"There's nothing we will do that impedes capitalism in the least. We are just starting everyone off from a place of basic security. We are stimulating the economy from the bottom up. Instead of a minimum wage, people will have a minimum income. Most all of them will want more than that, and work to get it.

"And we're removing all those hundreds and thousands of ginned up deductions and exceptions to paying taxes we've created over the years in response to very clever and persistent lobbying. It's fair, straight forward and transparent. A system of taxation that treats everyone equally. Finally!

"Don't worry about your rich friends. They'll be okay. They'll end up with most of the money eventually anyhow. It's just going to take a little different path to get to them. The only real change is, they'll put half of it back into the kitty to fund the next round. They can only horde half of what they take in."

The muttering continued to circulate around the legislature from chair to chair, row to row, across aisles, but the tone was different. There was a lighter air to it, more engagement, some earnest discussions breaking out, even laughter.

"If you think it through, my friends," said Braun, "we have the chance to do something remarkable in reshaping governance. We can take the lessons of the last decades of the United States, what we learned from the greed, the naked hunger for power, the duplicity and deception and the disgraceful condition it left that country in, a democracy high-jacked by kleptocrats…we can learn from the dissolution of a once mighty nation. Let's reorient our thinking to what will make this new nation of Cascadia a model for democracy, freedom, and the new form of capitalism that puts the well-being of our people at the center of our system of government. That's the solution we want to establish and we can be the system that delivers it."

Chapter Two

Braun was slumped in a chair behind his desk, rubbing his face, kneading his hands, chuckling to himself, laughing nervously. Bess Gannon knocked, entered without waiting for a response, looked at the boss, and smiled broadly. "Well?" she said.

He looked up, straightened up a bit, shook his head from side to side, said, "That was the speech I never thought I'd have the guts to make."

"Or the opportunity," she said.

"I'm shaking, sweating. I feel like a kid at my first public presentation. Wow! I mean, wow! That was *fucking* incredible!" He smiled sheepishly. "Excuse the language."

She laughed. "Ha! Let me just say. That *was* fucking incredible! No shit, Sherlock. Er, Governor. I think you just blew the dome off the capitol."

"This will probably go down in history as the day the governor finally flipped out and showed himself to be the looney tune he truly is."

"I think it *will* go down in history, Governor, for exactly what it is, which is a heroic episode in the history of our country. Our newly minted country. You made a statement today that is as important to our time as the Constitution was to its time. I only hope it wears as well and lasts as long."

"What are you hearing from the business community?"

"They're floored. Like a bomb went off and they're just trying to regain their hearing. Let's say that it is putting them through changes. To put it mildly."

"Do you think many of them will bail?"

"To the Unified States, you mean? Yes, some will. Some of the Orange County crowd. They probably would have anyhow. I think though that most of them will realize we're holding a pretty strong hand."

"Thanks to our bankers."

"Embry-Anton already has guaranteed the entire placement. In the terms you outlined, no less, which places a very high floor under the project. I think a lot of our people are getting past the shock of the

new conditions pretty fast because they can't stop thinking about just how high the ceiling might be."

"And what they might miss out on, even at fifty percent of the take."

"Exactly. Nobody wants to go first in a new deal like this. But somebody already ponied up. Now all the rest of them are focused on getting a piece of it."

"These guys back East must have a serious pile of money."

"Oh, they do, Governor. They do. Access to it, anyhow. We spend so much time dealing with budgets and legislation, it’s easy to forget the private sector has a whole lot more money available to it than the government does. They just need the right incentive to cough it up."

"And our mystery man gave it to them. Just who the hell is this guy Clay Embry anyway and why's he so reclusive? I think it's past time we meet him. What's that all about?"

"We've checked him out coming and going. The people he has in his corner are as close to unimpeachable as you can get in this world of finance. Rock solid in every aspect of the deal. Not one of them hesitates to vouch for him. His family and the Antons are bedrock New England bankers. Generations of them without a single blemish to their reputations. We have done the most thorough due diligence imaginable and there is not a single iota of concern to be found. Blue as blood gets everywhere you look."

"Except?"

"Um, yes. Except! Clayton Embry essentially has been off the record for nearly two years. No evidence of where he's been or what he's been doing."

"What do we make of that? I assume he's not in an asylum somewhere or being treated for drug addiction. Nothing like that, we think?"

"What little we've been able to gather suggests something overseas. Probably military intelligence, CIA, something like that. Whatever it is, he seems to be reemerging."

"Yeah, I thought we were expecting to meet him soon. Isn't that what Primus suggested to Dan? My thinking was that it was being arranged."

"That's correct. Now, rather suddenly, it seems to be on hold. Bill Fleury has advised he wants to schedule a meeting with Emily Anton, who's one of the principals. Apparently, she, Embry, and Primus and his team are in close touch."

"So, how is it they can reach him, and we can't? I don't get it."

"TBD, Governor. For now we have to play the hand we're dealt."

"I don't want to overdo that analogy, but this is a very high stakes game, Bess. I think we need to get to know the guy that's dealing. Absolutely ASAP."

✦

Clayton Embry, in fact, *was* in an asylum as Governor Braun and his Chief of Staff were talking. He was lightly sedated and suffering the practicum of none other than Able Charlie himself, the very man in the lab coat with clipboard and pen that Clay so often had glimpsed in those moments when the bug in his brain was approached. The man in the whirlwind.

AC absolutely loved this stuff. Nothing was more fascinating to him than probing deep into the brainpan of the wounded. The healthy brain was resilient, and though it could be worked in that state, there was a fundamental reason to prefer the injured.

Trauma created a set of circumstances to which the neural circuitry responded differently than its normal functioning. In a wounded posture, fight was less emphatic and flight the inclination. Remove the ability to flee and the subject was prone to cower. That was the ideal working condition.

Inflict pain of just the right amount in exactly the right place and the subject will accept virtually anything you offer that isn't more pain. Want to place a bug deep in the brainpan? Just make its insertion less painful than what has been the norm and the subject soaks it up like a sponge.

The setup here in Boise is different than what he had to work with in Portland. A nice place, that one, with lots of interesting machinery. Now it's in shambles, lying beneath the twisted remains of the gondola on the side of the hill stretching all the way to the river and somehow still standing if at an odd angle where the building is nothing but rubble.

This one is a padded cell. A functional facility meant to cushion those rare sensibilities and reactions that are exposed by certain methods perhaps no longer in vogue. Soundproof because who knows what might have been done here and what manner of noise emitted? There are degrees of pain that can elicit rather shrill and penetrating responses. It could unsettle some of the innocent patients when only one of them is meant to be disturbed.

So, yes, it's primitive here, not the sophisticated place of practice that the Oregon Health Sciences Center provided him those months ago. That job was putty. Trauma firmly in place. Helluva suite of injuries, in fact. Made his pathway very nearly without barriers. Casual stroll through the synapses.

This time he senses a little more solidity. Nothing he can't overcome, but it's more of a challenge. And this place is awkward, a sort of community hospital with a few rooms for the psychotic and there apparently are damned few of them. But he's done the torture chambers overseas many a time, so by comparison this isn't bad. At least here he can hit Popeye's for dinner after a day at the office.

Then, too, a lot of this structure in the brain already has been put in place and seems to be functioning as intended, so he really just needs to fine-tune it a bit. Get the timing reset, the alignment rebalanced after the subject has been off track for a while. The command he inserted back then got exactly the response he wanted: complete submission. Near catatonia. He felt good about his work.

✦

Clay is lying on his back in the dark, his wrists cuffed to the sides of the bed, a drip of some sort of mild sedative leaking into his arm. This is the resting position, the posture between sessions with the man in the lab coat.

He is like a person simultaneously on two sides of a fence, his mind repeatedly canvassing both places for a sense of where it is. Of whom he is. Of how much he controls that self-determination and how much is other directed.

What is different is this sense of self, of his true self, lying side by side with this fabricated creature of his contaminated mind. There is still the maelstrom, that place of disorientation he has experienced so

often. But there is now another place, a centered place, where things if troubled are comprehensible as being of him, of who he is, and what is so troubling is specifically that he is aware of being disturbed, of being tampered with and manipulated.

He is conscious of it even as his mind wanders to a place that seems more welcoming, more sedate, and artificially staged for his comfort, a peaceful place as long as it is not resisted. He recognizes it now as the center of what was meant to be his orientation, a delimited and restful space he can occupy with little effort and less stimulation. It is an absence where he was placed and meant to stay for a lengthy period, free of any sense of a broader possibility.

This is not a minor thing to overcome, this struggle that is taking place now. He has made significant progress since this warden first imprisoned his mind. The work he did with Bella has earned a place at least equal to the insert in his brain that expects to control him. It's as though his conscious mind floats above his body and observes the manipulation being inflicted on him.

When the command to submit was voiced back at Dirk's cabin, all the chaos of the work they'd done on him to disable his resistance was triggered as they expected; but something too stood apart in his mind. Even as the very walls descended around him and the wind howled, a part of him stepped aside far enough from the maelstrom to assess the situation, weigh his choices, realize that he in fact had options and that he could exercise them.

In the deep darkness of the moment in the cavern behind the cabin, in that split second after shooting out the flashlight and immediately upping the ante, it came to him clearly in the midst of that pull on his mind and his being he was anticipating that there were decisions he could freely make, the bug in his brain notwithstanding. He was in a position to make a play for his freedom from this contamination they visited on him, whatever their reasons, whomever they were.

Primus through no fault of his own was now severely endangered. That was one decision point. He, Embry, might only find a way free of this interference these agents had foisted on him by following them back into their den, letting them make their next moves while knowing what they didn't know: that their bug had loosened its hold

on his ability to think and act. Those were considerations that occurred to him. He had a role to play now and purposes for playing it.

So, he yielded to them when their command clutched at him, but he did so consciously to spare the bloodshed that was so near and to advance his chances of getting free of them. "I am sick," the voice said to him. The sere command. The trigger. The control. It pulled at him, and he chose to let it be rather than resist. Yes he is sick, it's true, but he is getting better.

✦

Able Charlie was standing beside him, holding his clipboard, making notes with his pen, walking Embry through the parameters of the building where his consciousness was intended to reside. It was the second day or perhaps the third since they began, he wasn't certain.

They walked in their imagination through the doorway, into the hall, past the sitting room, the library, toward the stairway. They were about to climb it, up the stairs to the room where the wind howled and the chaos ensued, when a door opened in the hospital room and none other than Xavier Raymond appeared.

Charlie started despite himself, quickly regained control, said, "My dear Mister Raymond, may I ask, what in the hell are you doing here?"

"Surprised to see me, are you, AC?"

"Quite. I'm wondering, in fact, how you knew where to find me?"

"I have my ways. Indeed, I do. And just happened to suspect it might be good to know exactly where you were, after our encounter the other day."

"Why is that, may I ask?" X-Ray looked at Embry standing there, docile, unblinking, back at Charlie, who shrugged as if to say, "don't worry about it."

"Just a feeling. Clouds on the horizon. Gathering storm. A sense that something was coming. Something I can't abide. So I spiked our friend here back at the cabin in the hills. Splendid head of hair he has. One of them is mine."

"Very clever of you, I suppose. Although what exactly your purpose might be, I really can't imagine."

"You've been, shall we say, dismissive of me. Not collegial in my opinion. Like: very not! Really distasteful the way you've treated me. It caused me to wonder what deprecation might come next. So I thought ahead. A head. Get it?"

Able Charlie rolled his eyes, snorted dismissively. "What that has to do with me, I can't imagine. And I can't abide your presence here, X-Ray. You are interfering in something that has absolutely nothing to do with you."

"Ah, but it does, AC. It does." Saying this, he drew from his pocket a gun and held it at his side. "I'm being decommissioned. Decommissioned! Do you understand? Well, I suspect you already know it, being the brilliant Harvard man you are. In fact, I can't help but believe you had a hand in that decision."

"Those choices are made by higher-ups. Not my call, X-Ray."

"But your recommendation? Tell me true, boss man."

"I think you should put that gun away, Raymond. I don't like the tone of this encounter. You really should have better sense than to threaten me."

"Better sense? What I sense is that you threw me under the bus, AC. What did you tell them?"

"That you had been useful. When they asked."

"Had been? Not anymore."

"Not my decision. You know the way this job works. Either they can use you or they can't. When that day comes, well..."

"Oh, I know it well. I know that when we part ways with the agency, we are disengaged. Permanently."

"There's no retirement from this position. That is true. You know too much. We all know too much. That's the reality of the job. You knew it going in."

"I'm forty-five *fucking* years old! Forty-five! That's not the career arc I was looking at, Charlie. Dammit to hell! I'm not ready to go."

"It's the end game for all of us," AC said, and casually handed the pen in his hand to Embry, who was standing at his side. "When it comes. We all get there sooner or later, Xavier. Your time just came up a little shorter than most."

He tucked the clipboard with his left hand tight against the ribs below his chest and reached very slowly with his right hand toward the gun in his back pocket.

"All the abuse you heaped on me, Charlie. Your superior attitude. What a fucking joke. You know why? Because, if I'm going down, I get to take you with me. Right here, right now. I'm going to blow your highbrow Harvard horseshit out your ass."

They fired simultaneously, Charlie a kill shot between the eyes and X-ray a shot to the heart, which ricocheted off the clipboard and shattered Charlie's left elbow. It sent a searing *pain* through his nervous system just before he felt the blow to his head when Embry drove the pen through his right eyeball and deep into his brain.

✦

That was that. Quickly and rather neatly resolved. He managed with some effort to drag the one of them on top of the other, gripping Raymond's left hand around the pen embedded in Charlie's brain. It might pass a sloppy inspection.

The clipboard lay at AC's side, a magnetic tablet severely dented by the bullet. Recorded where, he wondered? A quick look around the room uncovered an iPad, likely the file where the notes were stored.

Password! What? How the phrase was spelled. Pashto. Hmm. Zay bemer yam. No! Za beymar yem. No! Za beemar yem. No! Zabeemaryem. Yes! He was in. Clayton Anton Embry. Delta Plus. The story he's been seeking.

✦

The dead men had between them nearly a grand in cash. He took most of it from each of them, found his jacket and shoes in the closet, pocketed the iPad in the waistband of his pants under the jacket, and strolled down the hall, past a guard who was flirting with a candy striper, and out the door into the night.

No one heard the gunshots. The beauty of padded cells. No one thought to question this character easing his way into the night. It was early evening, the center of Boise just above the river, a place he'd never been before and found to be charming, a nice spot for walking away from a double homicide.

He was good with that. Certainly not what he would have chosen, and not what he anticipated as a resolution, but it worked. Fate is always the end game, no matter how you plan.

He didn't know for certain whether he was free of them, whether Charlie was exclusively the one who pulled the string in his brain. But at least he was alive and some of them, and the key one anyhow, were dead and gone.

These people definitely brought the war home with them. And brought him with them, leaving him no choice. They both were decommissioned now, and he, at least for the moment, was free.

Chapter Three

When Dirk Primus awoke in the cabin a few days ago, rising with first light that morning after a night drugged unconscious on the floor, he was alone, the intruders gone and Clay Embry with them. The memory of the vacant look in his eyes when Clay walked past him into the arms of the FBI and whomever else these thugs were, was the first thought that came to him. The crick in his neck and a dull headache from sleeping face down on the cabin floor was the next.

His own things, the saddle and his duffle bag, which appeared to have been quickly searched, were lying on the floor. He wondered about Embry's gear. Somewhere in the cavern in the dark. He'd hidden it quickly, one supposed. Would they have found it? Not likely without the flashlight, which was lying in pieces still where Clay shot it near the doorway.

He entered through the back door into the dark, blindly found the familiar lantern and a box of matches he'd used so many times on the way to the latrine, lit it and began to search. It took a few minutes, but there it was in a niche behind a break in the wall, Embry's bag, the rifle, the computer, a cell phone, some few clothes, military ID and his passport. They'd captured him but missed this trove of secrets. It seemed the link he and Primus shared with Emily was inviolate. At least for now. That was invaluable to the cause, if not for the captive.

By the time he'd made the long ride back to the ranch, leading the two other animals and mulling all the possible outcomes of this

sudden intervention in their plans, how this would affect the grand initiative with the governors, whether the group at home would transcend such a fearful invasion of their security, the capture and kidnapping of one of their own, wondering what fate awaited their colleague, what suffering he was enduring, what he, Primus, might do to rally their spirit in the face of such depressing news, he was on arrival as morose as he'd been in months. It was the last thing he wanted to carry back with him, yet his mood was bleak, his perspective damaged, his spirit crushed.

They were so close! So near the sort of project he previously had held out only as a wish and prayer. Now, this recently, it had felt within their grasp. It was absolutely devastating to imagine it suddenly escaping them at this moment.

✦

The executive council met. Bella was deeply concerned about Embry's capture, what sort of torture his captors might inflict on him.

"It's especially fragile right now, his state of mind. He's gaining clarity, a distance from what they've done to him, and any regression they might inflict on him could be his undoing. Once more into the fire, that sort of thing. I don't think so, I don't *want* to think so, but it's a distinct possibility."

"It seems that's what they wanted," Dirk said, looking at the ground where he sat, his posture glum, "to work on him again. Definitely. If they wanted him dead, he gave them the chance. They wanted him alive, all things being equal. And they took him. Just like that!" He snapped his fingers, shook his head, slumped a little where he sat.

"It's interesting to me," Dam said, looking at each of the others in turn, then at Primus, "they didn't want you. Accessory to whatever, hiding a fugitive, aid and comfort, all that stuff. They had no interest in putting your feet to the fire. At the very least, you'd think they'd take you in as a witness. Pump you for information. None of that seems to have mattered. Makes this capture extra-legal to me. This wasn't law enforcement, at least not the way most of us know it."

"Let's think for a minute about our own situation," Holly said. "There's nothing we know of we can do for Clay, nothing that can

make a difference right now. Hopefully, we'll find a way to help him soon. Meanwhile..."

She looked at each of her colleagues, shined that clarity of mind on them that she was able to generate at will, that executive instinct of hers to bring focus where it might advance the situation, even where the mass of what there was to consider was a bog.

"We have something powerful in play with the governors. It has every chance of success, and this is a major impediment. We've delayed as long as possible in meeting with them - I mean Clay meeting with them - and I don't think they're going to be put off much longer. Let's give some serious thought to how we can handle this problem. We need a game plan for our Monday conference. Something we all are ready to sell."

"And hope," Dam said, "they're ready to buy."

"Normally," Bella said, "I'd say that honesty is the best policy. Normally."

"But this situation is far from normal," Holly said.

"Not even in the ballpark. I don't know how we'd begin to explain it. I've been in psychology for thirty years and I've never encountered anything like it. We're talking about things that stretch the imagination happening right before our eyes. I don't think until you meet him that Clay's even a believable character. His story is that bizarre. And yet, here it is."

"Or was," Dirk said, and immediately regretted it.

David looked at him, was floored by the depth of his despondency. But then he'd been there. Seen it happen. Must have felt the terror. The loss.

"Here's my take," he said, looking at the others and then back at Dirk, stared, caught his eye. "Can we talk about Emily?"

Dirk shrugged, nodded "yes" and waited to see what Worthy had to say.

"Emily Anton is the daughter of one of the two bankers who are backing this venture. A very powerful guy and she speaks for him. For Clay, too. They're very close." He glanced at Primus quickly, got no reaction, pushed ahead. "In fact, she's vice president of Embry-Anton Financial. And she's local. She's in California, carrying the load for Clay until he's freed up."

He hesitated, swallowed hard when he sensed the reaction to that last phrase. "And we've got to keep believing that he will be. We've got to act like it's just a matter of time."

He knew this was thin ice he had skated on to and doubled down. "This is shattering news we've been handed. But I know Clay and you know him, too. He's an amazing guy and I've got to believe he's going to find a way through this, just like he did the last time."

They wanted to buy it, he could feel them leaning into the idea, the hope, the chance it could be real where everything else they could consider felt like it was doomed.

"I've gotten off track here, but I want to say this. We need to buck up. This is a very tough thing to swallow. Very disheartening. We need to face that reality and find the courage to do what's right. We have an opportunity in hand, a huge opportunity - no less so than before this happened - and we all know that Clay would want us to find a way to get it done. To keep pushing, to do what's needed.

"So here's what I propose. Let's play up Emily, her importance, her role in all that we are going to do in getting this enterprise financed. Clay is detained, so to speak, he'll be back in touch soon. Meanwhile, Emily and the lawyers would like to meet with Governor Braun. Introductions. Assurances. All the formalities. Give them as much comfort as we can until Clay's back."

He paused, took a breath, looked at every one of them individually, made direct eye contact and held it, beginning and ending with Dirk, and said, "And he will be back. I know it, you know it, and we want them to sense that we know it."

Holly stepped into the breech, said, "What do we think? Is that the message I can carry on Monday? On behalf of all of us?"

They all nodded "yes," and the meeting broke up.

Bella tugged at David's sleeve after the others had wandered away, gave him a bit of a bump with her arm, smiled and said, "No wonder you're the CEO!"

✦

"Governor," Bess said, "Emily Anton. Emily, Governor Braun."

"A pleasure, Ms. Anton." He offered his hand, which she shook firmly. "And I see you're in good hands with my old friend, Bill. Counselor, always good to see you.'

"Pleasure is mine, Governor. As always. And thank you for taking from time from your very busy schedule to meet with us. I thought it was past time that we met with you."

"I couldn't agree more, and I'm very appreciative that you've come by, Ms. Anton. This is a huge and very critical venture were putting together. It goes without saying that your company is possibly going to be crucial to its success."

"Thank you, Governor Braun. Embry-Anton is absolutely committed to this venture's success. We see it as an unprecedented opportunity to put capital to work in addressing a terrible tragedy and making people's lives whole again."

"It's an unprecedented scale, that is certain. If I may, Ms. Anton, I'd like to address areas of concern. As I believe you know, we've been in touch with Dirk Primus and Holly Weller, who have been our connection to Clayton Embry. They have been extraordinarily helpful throughout this process in relaying to my fellow governors and me this proposal to underwrite the Cascadia Enterprise Zone."

He paused, looked at her a moment longer, then at Bill Fleury, as if he was considering how direct he might be.

"They claim to speak for Mr. Embry in these matters and I know you are a principal in the venture, but we've yet to hear from, let alone meet, Mr. Embry himself. I'd like to ask you directly if I may: is there any reason we should be concerned about that?"

"First, Governor, you can be assured that Dirk, Holly and I are in regular contact with Clayton Embry. Anything you may have heard from either of them about Embry-Anton and our intentions here, we're aware of and have vetted."

Braun started to speak, but she held up a hand and continued.

"Regarding Clay's absence, he is very aware of the need to meet with you and, in fact, had hoped to do so this week. Those plans were interrupted, and he has been detained. But, that unexpected delay is in no way *whatsoever* a sign of ambivalence on his part. He is firmly committed to leading this venture and has every intention to do so

successfully. Clay and I have known each other since we were children and I can give you my word that he will deliver."

"Thank you for those assurances, Ms. Anton. I have no reason to believe otherwise but hearing it from you is very helpful. My fellow governors and I have a tremendous amount at stake here. It goes without saying that our constituents desperately need help.

"And beyond that obvious need is what we hope to accomplish in the way we address it. This enterprise zone can be an entirely new scheme for serving our people in ways we honestly believe will be a game changer. Our intention is to literally reformulate the relationship between governance, commerce, and the social contract."

He paused, looked at her, at Fleury, and began laughing.

"Forgive me, Ms. Anton. We've just met and I'm already on my soapbox. In fact, I need the practice. I'm scheduled to give a major policy address to the legislature about the enterprise zone.

"In the political arena, this is a huge undertaking, not for the faint of heart, and the first question I expect to get in response is how we're going to pay for it. I'm very anxious to know when the first round of financing is in place."

"Governor Braun," Emily said, leaning forward slightly from where she sat and looking at him intently, "Clayton hoped to deliver this news to you himself, but I bring it to you with the same authority. Under the terms that we've discussed with your staff, as Mr. Fleury and his team have verified, it's my very great pleasure to advise that Embry-Anton Financial hereby guarantees the entire enterprise zone underwriting."

"All of it?" the governor said, looking from her to Fleury, and back. "The entire financing package?"

She merely smiled, nodded "yes."

"We've executed all the documents," Fleury said. "Notarized copies are being made as we speak. You'll have them in the morning, Governor. As they say on the streets: it's a done deal."

Braun sat for a moment, looking far afield, taking it all in, what it meant, said, "I'm absolutely flabbergasted." And a wide smile crossed his face. "There're so many things I could say, but let me just say this: that speech I mentioned? It's going to be a doozy! The Capitol building may never be the same."

✦

Emily was so shaken when she received the news from Dirk that she felt the stirrings of a panic attack coming over her. Clayton captured! Oh my god! She got no further than that part of the long, encrypted message before she began shaking, her composure crumbling, fears sweeping over her she'd never until now contemplated and understood for the horror that they were.

Her partner, the father of her child, their child, grabbed at his hiding place, taken away to who knows where, subjected once again to who knows what, just disappeared from this earth and vanished from her life. Like that!

In an instant, everything changed. As quickly as he'd reentered her life, become her partner, expressed not just an affection - they'd always had that - but the beginnings of a passion and a commitment, the very stuff of her dreams. And no sooner had they come to her, they were taken away.

She could simply fall apart. Except now she is a mother, and the default position of self-indulgence is no longer available to her as it was when she was privileged, and life was no more complicated than that. Her child, his child, adds a dimension that demands more of her than she might otherwise feel she is able to give, than she is capable of mustering when there was not much more than herself to consider, to weigh on those scales of what's it all about, and decide.

It's about Hope. Purely. Simply. Unavoidably. It's about their child and that aspiration she represents. It's about being more than all your blessings and the very generous training you've been provided might allow you to decline to apply when they might actually be germane to a greater good than buttering your own toast and cutting away the crust because you can before you deign to nibble.

Emily feels the edge of hysteria and then as quickly pulls herself back. She sees in her mind's eye the scars of the lacerated face of the beautiful man she loves, and she suffers that pain with him, and then she gathers the strength that pulled him through the nightmare that was inflicted on him, this horror with all its intentional confusion, that which he overcame to a large degree by the sheer strength of character he was able to reclaim, and that once more into the fire he's

been plunged. And somehow, shaken as she is by this horrific news, she knows that who he is will see him through and they will be together again.

She gathers herself, takes a very deep breath, then another, and another again, and reads the rest of Dirk's message. There is nothing in what he says she disagrees with, nor any better plan of action she can think of to proceed. She checks her daughter sleeping soundly in her crib, the deft and blissful rest of innocents, and dials Bill Fleury, tells him to book a meeting with Governor Braun.

Chapter Four

She was barely settled back in her apartment, the baby asleep, au pair out for the evening, when her cell phone rang. The private one. A number she didn't recognize. She didn't answer, let it go to voice mail. Instead, it immediately rang again. She accepted the call, said nothing, held it to her ear.

"Emily, it's Clay. Are you alone?"

"Oh, my god, Clay. Clay, yes, I'm alone. I'm so glad to hear your voice. Where are you? Can you tell me? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Perfectly okay now. I assume you heard from Dirk."

"Yes, he emailed me as soon as he was back at the ranch. God, we were so scared. All of us. Are you really all right?"

"I am. I'm so sorry about all this madness. These crazy people. Someday, Emily, I truly hope we can have a normal life together."

She smiled at the thought, her heart literally seemed to swell, but she said, "What we have right now is wonderful, as long as I know you're safe. The others will be so relieved to know you're okay. What? You escaped? They let you go?"

"Um, let's talk about that in person and, please, don't be in touch with the rest of them just yet. I want to be certain everything is at peace before we let them know I'm on the loose once again. It's hard, but it's for their protection. These are very bad people we're dealing with."

"I understand, but what about your parents? My father? They don't even know you were captured yet."

"Let's leave it that way. Please, say nothing to anyone for now. We'll get all these things squared away as soon as possible. Right now, I need your help to relocate. That's the first thing we need to address. Next is Governor Braun. He must think I'm some sort of fantasy character. He and I need to meet."

"I just met with him. Told him we were underwriting the entire project. He was thrilled, but of course, you came up. I told him you'd been detained."

"Ha! Detained is right. That's the exact word for it. But no matter. We can cover all this when I get resettled."

"Tell me what you need. I'll take care of it."

"Can you find me a quiet place, something furnished, in Reno, Nevada. I'll be on my way there tomorrow. I'll get a room for a night or two until you have a place I can settle for a while."

"I'll take care of it. How do I reach you, though?"

"This phone is a Cricket. I have two. Just bought them last night, but this is the first chance it was safe to call. This one goes in the river right after we speak. I'll use the other one to call you when I get to Reno."

"Clayton, would it be possible to join me here? It would be so great to be with you again."

"There's nothing I'd rather do, and I hope that can happen sometime soon. But for now, we have to be very careful. For all of us. Especially you and Hope. Let me get settled. Then we'll let the gang in Oregon know I'm safe. Once we're sure I am. Then we'll finally let the governor meet this mystery man."

"Once we're sure you are? Are these people still after you?"

"I don't know the answer to that, but we have to assume they are until we know otherwise. Right now, extreme caution is the order of the day. I really hope it will be different for all of us soon."

"I'm your partner, Clayton, whatever the circumstances. That's one thing you can be absolutely certain of, no matter what else is happening. But please take care of yourself. I'm being strong, but I miss you. And sometimes, I'm really afraid. I don't mean to add to your worries, but this is very challenging, to say the least."

He laughed out loud, said, "That's putting it mildly. I doubt that either one of us could ever imagine this in our most demented

dreams. Who thinks up this stuff, anyhow? But, we'll get through it, Emily. And I can't thank you enough for being here for me. It's such an unexpected comfort. Badly needed, too."

"Hope and I are your family now, Clayton. You must know that. Better or worse, sickness and health, all that."

He laughed again, gently, warmly, said, "Yes, all that. We're not married yet, Emily. But we will be. And I can't wait for that day to arrive."

She was nearly overcome. Swooning. Those dreams coming to be.

✦

Embry was in Salt Lake City, just off the bus from Boise, and so far, so good. A very clean town, this one. Broad streets, sparkling buildings, no debris, dome of the Tabernacle looming over it all.

He still had most of the cash but no identification, which made it difficult to book a room. He made his way past Pioneer Park and into downtown, where he picked up a duffle bag and a change of clothes from a men's shop, toiletries and an electric hair clipper at Woolworths, and made his way to the YMCA at the east edge of downtown.

He paid for a swim, sat in a stall in the men's room and shaved his head with the clippers, stalled the teeth for just an instant when he clipped the electric fiber X-ray had spiked in his skull, picked at the base where spider-like legs had anchored it and finally pried it free, gathered all the hair and the spike in a small plastic bag, stored his gear in a locker, and had a luxurious shower.

Freshly shorn, shaved, and showered, dressed in his new clothes, he took the duffle bag filled with the rest of his stuff and the bag of hair, found the nearby FedEx shipping shop a few blocks north and west, and with their very efficient help mailed the bag nicely boxed to a Goodwill store in Omaha, Nebraska.

From there he had a big lunch, tried a few low-end hotels until he found one where the guy at the counter just shrugged when he explained he'd lost his wallet, said, "$59 for the night, be out by ten tomorrow morning," took his cash, gave him the key and went back to his comic book. Embry slept until sunup, made his way back to the

bus station, bought breakfast and a ticket to Reno, and headed west with the sun at his back.

✦

He called Emily when he arrived. Again she didn't pick up, and he called back. This time she did, but wisely said nothing until he said, "It's me. I just arrived here and called sooner than I planned. I'm having some problems getting along without any ID. Left all of my things at the hideout and hopefully they're still there. But people aren't inclined to rent you a hotel room without identification."

"Yes, you're definitely a suspicious character," she said, and laughed. "But I was thinking about that, and about money, too. First thing is that Dirk found your things and has them at the ranch. So, you're good there, except of course there's no easy way to get them to you."

"Ah, at least he has them. I wasn't sure if those thugs found my stuff or not. Glad to hear not."

"Well, we have a solution in the meanwhile. I found you the perfect place to stay and you're going to love it." She started laughing before she could continue.

"What?" he said.

"Forgive me, but I love the image of all this. I think you'll see why I'm laughing."

"Do let me in on the joke."

"It's not a joke, but it is funny. It's amusing me that I'm so clever. When we hung up the other night, I remembered a friend from school. Haven't seen her since then but she happens to be in Reno of all places, and I called her up. One sure thing in today's world is cell numbers. Circumstances change but the phone number is forever."

"Emily, forgive me, but I'm sitting on a park bench near the bus station and it's getting a bit warm in the sun."

"Oh, Clay, I'm sorry. Of course, we need to move along. It's just so good to hear your voice. So, let me make this quick. Funny but quick.

"Are you anywhere near the River District?"

"I'm looking at the river as we speak. Very pretty little park here, although it would benefit from more shade."

"Find Kuenzli Street and head upriver."

"I'm sitting right in front of Kuenzli. Couldn't help but notice the name."

"Head upriver on Kuenzli until you come to St. Thomas Aquinas Cathedral. If this Google map is accurate, it should be six blocks west of you, maybe seven."

"Then what?"

"Ask in the rectory for Sister Loretto."

"She's your friend?"

"Delila Main was her name then. Who knew she'd end up a nun."

"Okay, Sister Loretto."

"Right. She has some cash for you and a very quiet place to stay."

"A nunnery at a church? You must be kidding."

"See why I was laughing? It's a separate residence, actually. For visiting bishops and such. But the nuns are right next door. And I want you to mind your manners around those sisters. All those male fantasies about nuns."

"You sure they allow Episcopalians?"

"Just this once. As a favor. Actually, they're very tolerant in Reno, I'm told. And Delila was a dear friend at the time. She assures me you'll have absolute privacy, and no one will bother you in the least. I'm wiring her $5,000 dollars for you. It might be nice to make a small donation while you're there."

"All kidding aside, it sounds perfect. Let me get settled there and get myself situated, clothes, toiletries, another fistful of these disposable phones. I may be paranoid, but just to be safe, I'll use a different phone each time I call."

"Let's follow the routine then. Call back immediately a second time and I'll pick up. And, Clayton, please, call as often as you can. We can buy as many Crickets as you need. I love hearing from you, even in these crazy situations."

"I'll call often as I can. We have a lot of things to work out, starting with the governor. And the gang at the ranch. Need to figure out how to get my papers back in hand. That laptop, too, and that good phone. So, you'll be hearing from me plenty. I do feel bad, though, about tossing all this plastic in the waterways all over the west."

"We'll survive it, Clayton. And before you hang up, I want you to know I love you."

"I love you, too, Emily. You and Hope are what have kept me focused. It's sometimes hard for me to imagine this path we've traveled to come together. But here we are. I can't tell you how much it has mattered to know you're there."

✦

The Eees were doing pretty well. They had recovered from their injuries, but they had not forgotten. Gracie sometimes dreamed of this sudden bit of terror that roared out of the brush in the forest and flipped her end over end. Then it knocked her down again. Rutted around her, its hooves making scuffling noise in the soft turf of the forest floor. There was the sound, too, of this deep, guttural huffing and panting that was the backdrop to a sense of this creature chewing on her arm, slobbering, snuffing, tearing at her.

It was a nightmare, but she knew it would go away if she just woke up. So, she did, and then the places outside the compound still were pretty when she looked at them, and still looked like nice places to play. But she knew better now, and she didn't go very far into those places anymore, and she didn't go near the pigpen anymore either. Those pigs were familiar, and they were like part of the place where we all live now, but when she saw them rooting in the mud for food, the way they chewed on everything and seemed like they were smiling when they did it, she felt ill and didn't want to see it anymore.

She wished she could talk to Mr. Clay about this thing that scares her when she is asleep. He was always so smart about how to do things and he would probably tell her how to forget about the pigs, so they didn't bother her anymore. But he has been gone for weeks it seems like and her father says we may not see him again for a long time. But he doesn't say why. He still treats her like a little girl that wouldn't understand.

✦

Ailey remembered that day, too. Not because it was her fault, because it wasn't. She wasn't officially working that day, as it happened. The moms were technically on duty and the kids were just out playing. She felt plenty of guilt about it anyhow, being who she was and knowing how painful it must have been, not the injuries,

although they were more than superficial, but the fear it instilled in innocent creatures like the kids.

None of them knew about the feral pigs. They'd been mentioned in passing but none of them really understood what it meant, the danger they posed, until the kids were attacked. Bobby assured them it was an isolated incident provoked by a certain combination of things that likely wouldn't happen again. Even if they did, it wasn't likely to see the same result.

Pain she knew and understood, the power it came to have over you, the way it shaped your thinking, your behavior, the choices you made. This sort of pain, what the kids suffered, you could say was inflicted by nature, that collision between two different species doing what they do and literally running into each other, neither of them intending to encounter the other or in encountering them to cause pain. But they did. It hurt. The kids will remember. Who knows what it meant to the pig, beyond the instinct to protect her brood?

For Ailey it long had been a struggle to separate the meaning of nature as a source of pain. Was it nature that caused a man to do what he did to her as a child? Was it nature that later drove her into the streets? Nature that made people use her for their purposes while she whored for drugs. What was natural and what was a perversion of nature? Do interspecies and intraspecies have different parameters for what is natural and what is not?

Until the kids suffered those injuries, this time at the compound had given her a view of the natural world that improved her outlook considerably from what she'd known before. Then it had been wariness, street smarts, a home with Holly and the girls, and daily doses of yoga that centered her and kept her safe. It was not hiding exactly, but it was carefully constrained.

For weeks now at Dirk's incredible hideaway in the hills, in the aftermath of a terrible tragedy and immense damage to the social fabric, she had undergone a transition as startling as it was unexpected. She experienced it as a sensory overload that was at first unsettling and then as she opened up to it extremely pleasurable and welcoming.

Oxygen, space, fragrances, colors that changed through the day with the transition of the sun and the delicious moonlit nights in their

stark, stately palette of blacks and whites. The sky, trees, flowers in the meadows, creeks and pools, thickets and brambles, pastures that stretched forever. All of these sensations of openness and exposure that brought her exhilaration instead of the persistent fear of her past. And most unexpected was the passion she found with Mick.

✦

Rika knew fear, too. Something about walking away from their beautiful home in Stafford, although it was now in ruins, shook her very badly. She was blessed with a stable and loving relationship, of course, and recognition of that gift was enough to embarrass her when feelings of loss and panic threatened to overwhelm her.

Bella was a godsend. But then, she was thoroughly American, too, and very much the Westerner in her perspective. Material things were important to her, their beauty, quality, the sense they represented of accomplishment, the achievement of success in this society sufficient to acquire and enjoy these things. In that was she was similar to Rika, but she was different, too.

It wasn't that she was superficial, but rather that she had that quality of detachment about her so common to the West, that expectation of abundance and its inclination toward disposability. There was an impermanence at the heart of the American soul that troubled Rika, much as she loved and adored her partner. They were of different cultures with perspectives that could be at odds, which mattered much when tragedy struck and its pressure was applied to one's equilibrium. Balance was unsettled and core values were where one went for stability. Rika's were not a part of the equation that was playing out.

✦

David, too, knew fear now, although no one would know it to watch him go about his days. Rather, it was his nights when he was tormented by recollection of the horror, of the quake and the destruction certainly, but only as preamble to what he experienced in those terrifying moments when he finally found Ellen and Sink found him and the homeless beggar at the garage door fatally found Sink.

In the light of day, he could think his way through all of it and find some sense of placation if not equilibrium. His dreams though were thrashing with images of degradation and unspeakable evil set in klieg lights of stark terror and shadows of the deepest darkness where unseen ungulates paced restlessly and serpents slithered among them.

Memory deceived him now, took on these enhancements that broadened and deepened the exquisite pain of that reality and made of it an encapsulated distillation of the beastly, the demonic. It was all of that, of course, but no longer of the momentary. Rather, now, for the realist that he was, the engineer, the by nature objective and steady hand, it permeated his imagination with a foreign and persistent sense of being undone, of being unable to right the ship in these newly discovered and terribly uncertain seas.

How to settle that disquiet with Ellen, to say what he experiences in those repetitive instances of image and distortion, seeing her, his love, the anguish in her countenance, her naked body glistening with sweat, the pungent odor of scared, resigned, exhausted sex forced on her repeatedly, the blinding light, the gun, the vile words echoing like laughter shouted down a stairway, the look in a madman's eye, and the blood gushing from his nearly severed throat as he collapses in a heap on the bathroom floor, the homeless man holding the knife.

He lies nearly without moving, in control of his body even as his sleep heaves and thrashes in his mind, the movie playing over and over, one scene sometimes follows another, sometimes precedes it, but always the light and the dark and the mocking words and the smell, the blood and the stain of it all.

And in the end, after all the sights and sounds and smells, the shock and the fear, the nausea, the blood, there is the scene that screams in his dreams, the most terrifying of all the ugliness that haunts his sleep, and it is the very visceral sensation of that twisted, vile, disgusting man, that perverted cop, Sink, the madman raping *him*.

✦

Ellen's fear was simple but powerful. She had overcome the sheer terror of her experience with Sink, being kidnapped, drugged,

psychologically tortured and repeatedly raped. No small accomplishment it was to move beyond the trauma, although it still troubled her sleep.

She actually was reaching a place where she gained confidence from the strength she was able to muster in righting her life, in putting an episode of unmitigated madness into some sort of perspective, a place where she saw both what it had taken from her but also what she had summoned from some deep place in her soul to neutralize its power over her.

All that was past, an external threat that had captured her for a time, used her, then was very graphically extinguished. The fear unsettling her now was internal, a part of her life that was so essential coming apart and unravelling like thread of a woven comforter snagged on a nail and pulling away from her, bit by bit, reducing in size and substance as it recedes. Her marriage was crumbling and she hadn't a clue what to do about it.

Chapter Five

The guy approached directly but somewhat cautiously. "Thank you," he said, turned sideways and began to walk away. Then he stopped, turned back toward Embry where he was seated in the booth at the diner, took a step closer and said, "For your service, I mean. Thank you for that." And nodded vigorously.

Embry looked up at him from under the bill of his baseball cap, eyes narrowing slightly, said nothing, the two men suspended, unmoving, a frozen moment in which neither of them was certain where this was going if indeed it was meant to go any farther. Could, would, or should.

The guy stepped closer, said, "I saw you here yesterday. Said to myself, 'that guy's been hurt. In service to his country.' I could tell. Kicked myself after I left. Knew I should have said something."

Embry continued to stare at the guy, finally nodded slightly, thought for a moment longer what he might or should say, swallowed, and said, "Thank you."

The guy smiled, looked left and right, then sat down in the booth across from him. "Man, I have to tell you, I was so glad when I saw you here again today. Second chance, you know. I had to speak up.

"I couldn't serve, myself, couldn't do it. I wanted to though. Tried to enlist, here and over the line in California. They wouldn't take me. Had a few problems when I was a kid. Juvenile stuff, but a record, you know? Guess that's all it takes to disqualify you. No consideration that you might have turned it around."

He looked for some sign of understanding, acceptance if not approval, but Embry just looked at him with an even countenance, thinking to himself about the dimension of the intrusion this fellow was visiting on him, doing nothing so far in reaction, just sitting and staring, his half-eaten sandwich lingering on the plate.

"A man has to come to terms with his limitations, own up to his mistakes. 'The past doesn't die,' like that writer said. When I saw you, though, I thought to myself, 'he did what I should have done. Did it for me, for all of us.' And I thought, maybe..." and he made a muted gesture, stopping himself before he pointed at Embry's scarred face, "maybe, he took one for me."

Embry shifted in his seat, thought about what to say, but the guy reached out, almost touching his arm, said, "Look, I'm sorry to interrupt your lunch. You must think I'm crazy. I just wanted to tell you I appreciate your service. What you did for us."

He looked sideways, off toward the rest of the room, shook his head, said, "Now, we're not even a country anymore." He looked directly at Embry, pained.

"I mean, how does that make you feel? After all you've done. I just feel empty. You know? Like all the things I thought we stood for just vanished. Gone.

"*United* States, right! Washed down the drain. Like that!" He snapped his fingers, then looked around the room again, sheepishly, wondering at the noise he'd made.

Neither of them said anything for a moment, Embry waiting him out, the guy sitting now with his shoulders slumped, looking down at the table where his hands rested. He quietly began to rub his palms together.

"People say this earthquake up north is mostly made up. Dems working the system for money. You believe that? That's why we dumped them, they say. Or they left. Whatever the hell it was. Other people tell me it's the president trying to put the screws to them. I don't know what to believe. I mean, all of a sudden, just up the road there's a whole other country. It doesn't seem real."

Embry nodded very subtly in the affirmative, which seemed to be all the guy required to conclude the exchange. "I just wanted you to know it mattered. What you did. However all the rest of this turned out." He stood and left.

✦

The conversation disturbed him enough that he gave it more thought than one might think it merited. What had he done, really, and why? Was "his service" a selfless act, as being thanked for it suggested? Who or what was served?

Patriotism is a revered blanket covering a wide variety of motives. Under its guise, he knew, for most the military was a job, a career, a dependable way to make a living. Do what you're told, don't make waves, you've got it made. It was a jobs program for the poor, a means to improve one's station in life, a pathway to a respectable status in the social framework. Better than serving burgers.

For some, it was a love of fighting, a taste for adventure, the pleasure of an identifiable enemy real or imagined, to subdue or kill. An arena of unfettered testosterone given expression and glorified by objectives and rationales spelled out in simple terms. A place to get your ya-yas out and be rewarded.

Others joined from a sense of duty, family tradition, perhaps even an actual belief in the cause for which the fight was engaged or prepared to be engaged. Where patriotism and "service" for most was a patina of righteousness gladly accepted if artificially applied, there were those few compelled to take up arms even knowing with clarity the true beneficiaries of their "service."

Politicians have the courage to send *you* to die for what they claim to believe in. But standing behind them are the captains of industry tallying the profits. Being from a long line of bankers, realists by

training, clear-eyed and unapologetic, Embry has no illusions about the reasons for war.

Money and markets. It's all about business. What about religion? people will ask. Embry laughs quietly to himself. As though religion isn't a business. The biggest of all. Tax exempt, too. Follow the money and answers will be found.

And his "service" then? What was his motivation? What drove him to join the black ops and wend his way through foreign villages slitting people's throats? Maybe nothing more than the self-righteousness of the WASP when all was said and done. Offended by these Muslims attacking the Satan of the West. Maybe it was that they actually succeeded. Brilliantly. Fatally. Beneath it all, was that what really provoked him? A class thing? The thought made him shudder.

Maybe it was that the Saudis were nominally our ally. There was that. The price to us for all that oil was support of the kingdom's bigoted, misogynistic, and messianic brand of Islamism, the Wahhabi zealotry it has tried to force on the rest of the Muslim world through the sheer might of its financial clout and the influence that wealth gave them.

Kissinger's Gift, it was called in diplomatic circles, the vast rumbling in the Middle East that has accelerated so dramatically since Nixon's Secretary of State worked out a deal to sell the Saudis a fleet of very sophisticated jet fighters in the early Seventies. Apparently Lockheed needed the cash.

"I'm not sure we can afford them," the Saudi he met with reportedly said.

"Raise the price of oil," Henry Kissinger replied.

The Saudi embargo that followed that simple suggestion drove the cost of a barrel of black gold to quadruple, caused a world-wide shortage that brought international commerce nearly to a halt, and daily life for most of a year became an exercise in waiting in line to gas up the buggy just to get around.

The kingdom got the jets and much more consequentially a taste for the power it could exert, which it has exercised with increasing force to the weary consternation of its neighbors in the Muslim world, particularly those that prefer their own sectarian version of Islam. The battles between them elevated.

Kissinger was way before Embry's time, but the legacy of his cold-blooded machinations reverberated through the years. When the socially well-connected, ruthless bin Laden family unleashed its scion and his upper-crust companions to vent their hatred of the West by what can only be called an inspired, beautifully executed, and classic act of terrorism that was from their perspective fabulously fatal, the impassively comfortable, still youthful Embry began to stir.

The boys from Exeter, Andover, Choate, Groton, the Yale, Princeton, Brown, and Crimson crowd aren't easily excited and certainly not often by military matters. When they are, though, and Embry finally was, they aim particularly high. Service of a different sort is how it's phrased. There were plenty of his crowd there before him and deeply dug in. A slight show of interest was all it took to be invited.

So he became a killer and although it wasn't mentioned in polite society, there was certainly a sense it was the appropriate thing to do and somebody, somebody special that is, had to do it. He was and he did, with the others.

It was an American brand of terrorism. Often enough, they shot the enemy at night with silencers threaded on rifles, but killing face to face, well, actually from behind with a sharp knife slicing the throat from ear to ear seemed to be more appropriate in this god-forsaken place. When in Rome, you know.

Most often, too, it was the really bad guys, the ones placing bombs to kill and wound servicemen driving by on patrols, or even to slaughter the Afghani citizens simply to keep the chaos unfolding, that his Delta forces killed. There were others that deserved it, but these terrorist operatives were the target.

It was especially satisfying to catch them in the act of setting up their ordinance, to leave them where they lay in a pool of blood, the bomb still in hand, unwired and impotent, at least for now. al-Qaeda, Taliban, who knew what they wanted. What they were capable of. We just wanted them dead.

He did it well for several months; then something happened he couldn't recall, wasn't allowed to recall, until finally he read about it in Able Charlie's files: him and his back story. And it all came back to him.

It was excruciating reading. To understand in graphic detail what had happened to him, what they'd done to him in response, how skillfully and intently in the name of healing and recovery, of course, they explored the opportunities to completely unhinge his damaged brain.

Most devastating was the reason all of this took place, from the explosion, the treatments, the days on the streets, their hunt for him after the quake, and this latest, thankfully brief episode that was fatal for them and freeing for him, so far at least. The cause of all what was, yet again, was commerce.

There was a piece of shrapnel from the bomb the woman detonated that was all that remained in evidence of the device that killed her, two others of his colleagues, and nearly took his life, as well. Because a well-intentioned doctor in his initial recovery showed him the piece of metal they removed from the corner of his eye and briefed him on the lofty status of the woman he'd encountered, an entire operation of disassociation was unleashed.

A force within the government, whomever these people from deep cover may be and whomever it is they serve, set in motion an enterprise that likely still is functioning, paused only until the bodies in Boise are discovered and he once again is found missing in action. Whom they served was the question.

Charlie's file repeated the report that came to his team surreptitiously from someone in I.I., whatever that might be, perhaps Israeli Intel, perhaps Irritating Introspection, who the hell knows? This someone said it was well-established the ordinance that shredded Embry's body and scorched his brain was made by none other than Gherkink.

Those wares were peddled to our Afghan "allies," who merely passed them on to the al-Qaeda and Taliban forces through conduits like the woman, a family member of the very highest rank of Afghan society among our allies who nevertheless detonated the bomb.

Gherkink, as in Gherkin, the president, real estate magnate, golf course maven, and two-bit arms dealer. Kinky himself, that is.

Because Embry at a time of severe trauma and pain had seen the little orange logo the little orange president egotistically affixed to the bomb that nearly killed him, all this drama had been unleashed on

him, just so he'd forget. Forget the entire incident, the logo, the face of the woman, of all women apparently, of who he was and where he came from, what he was about as a human being.

That's all. Just forget. Otherwise, they were pretty good to him. Respectful of his status as Delta Plus, right? I mean, they simply could have killed him.

The entire event, seen with this information in hand, seemed absolutely preposterous. Did these people really believe they could scour his brainpan clean of all memory, release him to the streets as a beggar, and he would never question how all this came to be? That his family never would seek him out, track down this path of duplicitousness and find their son.

What finally occurred to him in canvassing these files and filling in the huge swath of blank space that had been inserted in his consciousness, or lack of same, was indicative of the narrative arc these psych-op agents were captive of, a brief cycle of relevance before the next wave replaced it. Just do it for now! The collateral damage, the litter of all the unintended consequences, was traditional, unsought, perhaps, but unavoidable. It becomes and they move on.

Strangely, what came back to him as he read the file was the memory of what the doctor described to him explaining the undamaged parts of his body, which was most of it, after all. It was the woman's body that had protected his, even as the explosion shredded her, her colleagues, and his. Hers was a distinct outline scorched on his body and seemingly ever since on his soul. He hesitated, she didn't, and now she forever was inscribed on his face, his scalp, his hand, what was unprotected. And these operatives thought he needed to forget her.

Embry considered that maybe he should be flattered they expended so much time and effort on him. Maybe not, though. These quasi-official, psych-ops types have a lot of time on their hands and not a whole lot to do between wars and engagements. Their talents get put to use, one way or another. There always are issues and the president's operatives come calling. In one place or another war is raging, nearly always internally if nowhere else.

✦

"The meeting with Governor Braun was great," Holly said to Dirk. "Dan Wong tells me Emily hit it out of the park. I can't wait to tell the group about it."

"Emily told me by email things seemed to go very well. She added a kind of odd postscript, I thought."

Holly looked at him with a question mark looming between them, a clear inquisitive response to his teaser. "Well?" she finally said.

"She said, 'Don't be down. Things are better than they seem.' I can't help but wonder what the hell that's supposed to mean."

"You're intrigued?" Holly said, "or annoyed?"

"Ambiguity is *not* my favorite communication mode. Especially with what we're all going through. I guess I thought it was a little bit cute."

"Dirk, forgive me, but you've been really down since the incident at the cabin. I mean, it's understandable. A terrible thing. But these are very uncertain times for all of us, and it seems to me like we all have to really and truly buck up. Put our best energy in play and not get weighted down by these, um, these very stressful uncertainties. There's nothing we can do for Clay at the moment. All we can do is our best to keep pushing forward and trust it will work out. For all of us."

"Yeah, I get that. I really do. It's just that it was an ugly thing, the way they just blew us out of the water. Not a second thought about any of the stuff we'd like to take for granted, our rights, due process, little courtesies like that."

He snorted through his nose, an expression of frustration and disgust. "I can't stop thinking about that guy that was here that time, Raymond, if that was really his name. Told me when he showed up at the cabin, 'Let me in or I will blow your brains out and come in anyway.' Put his rifle right in my face."

Holly put her arms around him. He didn't resist but didn't lean into it either. "I'm so sorry," she said to him, pulled back a little and looked at him with genuine warmth and even love. "It must have been horrible. I don't mean in any way to discount that."

"He wasn't bluffing. That's what sticks with me. He would have done it without a second thought. And with a *fucking* FBI agent right there. Excuse the language, but who are these guys? And when I think

about that, I think about what they're willing and able to do to Clay. That's why I'm *down*, as you put it."

"I'm sorry, Dirk. I don't mean to be dismissive. It isn't like that. It's just that we all need to pull together now, despite how terrible this thing is for Clay. I don't mean to be patronizing when I say it's what he'd want us to do. We both know that. Whatever is happening with him. He wouldn't want us to be defeated."

"Defeated, too? Like he is now? I'm sorry, Holly. I hear what you say, and I know you're right. But the brutality these people showed me just stokes my worst fears. Not just for Clay but for all of us. Who these people are and what they represent is exactly what I've feared for so long.

"People think I'm crazy and a lot of the time I was kind of hoping they were right. Because who these people are is even worse than what I've always been afraid might be the truth, and now that I've seen it up close, it really scares me.

"And if somehow things are better than they seem, I sure as hell would like to know about it. Why be coy, Emily? You know what I mean?"

"If I was trying to puzzle it out and she had said that to me, I think I'd wonder if Clay might have gotten away somehow, escaped, maybe? Let's say escaped. If he did, he obviously would keep his distance from us, right?

"I mean, this would be the first place they come looking for him. They know there's a link between us. So maybe Clay got away and he's keeping his distance from us, but he got in touch with Emily and she's really wishing she could give you some comfort. But she can't. Does that make sense?"

Dirk just stared at her, not agreeing or disagreeing, just looking. They were still holding each other, loosely but with feeling. Finally he smiled a little, looked at her closely, said, "Old school, we'd say, 'you're an amazing chick!'"

Chapter Six

Over a month had passed, maybe six weeks or more since Clay was captured and Dirk returned to the ranch. So much happened so fast during that time it was hard to calculate what exactly was taking place, to keep tabs on the changes, to maintain a sense of where you were, where your world was. Mostly, though, it felt right. Things were different than before and lots of it was all right, except for Clay's absence, of course.

It the midst of mounting a rescue and recovery effort to deal with the most extreme natural disaster in history, the Pacific Coastal states suddenly and finally were no longer part of the United States. Just like that, they were Cascadia.

Significantly, the pace of recovery actually accelerated after secession. It had been conducted from the beginning largely at the direction of the governor of California in consultation with his fellow governors in Oregon and Washington, who like nearly all of their constituents were absolutely adrift in the aftermath of the devastation that virtually leveled the western half of their states.

Canada and Mexico had supplied extraordinarily generous medical care and supplies of food, respectively. Their support was immediate, continuous and critically important, especially in the first few weeks of the disaster. Everything was needed and those two allies provided essential relief simply from their sense of decency and compassion. The federal government of the mighty United States literally did nothing, except grease the skids for jettisoning the West Coast.

Once that separation occurred, people all over the former country, and the entire world, for that matter, found their own way of dealing with this brazen new geopolitical reality. In Cascadia, though, the shock of secession paled in scale to the badly fractured life they already were coming to terms with and learning to address. For them, this moment in time was purely, simply a matter of survival, far more important at very basic levels than the machinations of venal politicians.

Something as monumental as the breakup of the most powerful nation of earth seems like mere sophomoric philosophizing when you are burying so many dead, caring for the wounded, feeding and

sheltering the survivors. Priorities are obvious when everything is needed. What was of immediate concern was simply how to meet those needs and who could help you get it done as quickly as possible. The rest of the chaos was just noise.

This is not to minimize in any way the magnitude of what happened in this sequence of events. It was and they were literally and figuratively earth-shaking. It is to recognize the value of the return to basic elements and first principles in how the social order is re-established and why those critical choices are made.

If we accept there is a social contract, and why else would communities form if not to ensure each other's well-being, then can we prioritize the principles that matter most? What do we want our social systems to provide?

Is it that we want unfettered access to wealth and power, so that a few can succeed extraordinarily as an example to the rest of us of what is possible in this free enterprise system? Do we gather, then, so that the strong can exploit the weak for financial gain and personal satisfaction? Are we willing to accept that many will fail so that many others may succeed, although those successes are in somewhat pale imitation of the few who have truly mastered the game?

Or do we believe the strength of our economic system is that some of us can fare better than others in our enterprises, because that freedom to aspire is essential, but that all of us can be supported in reasonable comfort and security?

Can we accept that some of us will work harder and do more, and others will do less and take more than what they've earned, and that inequity is human nature? Is live and let live so terrible an idea? Can we look beyond annoyance and see the bigger picture? We want security for the slacker, just as we want freedom for your enterprise. We want a social contract that addresses all its constituents! Is that too benevolent and generous a request?

✦

"How is it going in there, Dan?" the Governor asked. "Are we getting anywhere with our earth-shaking proposal?"

"Better than I expected, Governor. Better than half a loaf, it looks like, although as your Policy Director, I feel compelled to caution you about using the term 'earth-shaking' in discussing current events."

"Good advice," Braun said with a chuckle, "but then again, that's what got us here. I'm so energized by the prospect of pulling this off. Even getting a good part of it will be a huge victory. What does the legislation look like, so far?"

"My guess is that we'll get at least 60% on the basic income piece, and that's huge. Maybe even a little better with some luck. It looks like the caps will be $1250 per adult and $300 per child to a max of $3100."

"And taxes?"

"A hellacious battle, but most of what we want survives. First $50K is tax free. That is assured. It looks like the biggest change in this new safety net we're creating is going to be the step from $50K up to $250K at a flat twenty percent. Keep $8 of every $10 you make above the minimum level of support up to a quarter-million dollar of net worth. After that, you're in the game. Everybody's tax is half of the increase in annual net worth if you want to do business in the Zone."

"That works. Actually surprised we got the twenty percent. I guess it's to give people a taste of what's in store for them if they start making real money. And what about the deductions?"

"The bankers and realtors are screaming bloody murder. They say it'll destroy the housing market."

Braun laughed quietly, smiled, said, "Sure. All these years we've been letting people pay them instead of paying taxes. Like they're some kind of a charity, right? My guess is that it will slow down the increase in housing prices and maybe put a dent in the banks' earnings. They'll recover from it.

"We're creating a new way to build wealth, or at least stability, that isn't the old model. Ha! Paying two and a half times the price of the house by the time it's paid for 25 years later, and all that interest goes to the bank. Not any longer.

"Einstein himself said the most powerful force in the universe is compound interest. All those money changers figured that out a long time ago. Why should it be tax-deductible? If we can pull off these changes, we'll be making compound investments in the community."

Braun looked a bit distracted for a minute, seeming to think his way to the long-term implications of this experiment they've engaged. Wong knew enough to let these interruptions in the conversation proceed to wherever the governor took them. It often led to startling moments of insight.

"Whatever we get is good for five years. We're betting it will be a success and getting it reauthorized will be a slam dunk. What I want to believe is ten years of the example we can establish will let us move the entire nation that way, to reform our social contract and the legislation that supports it to that model.

"That's what we'd like to accomplish, Daniel. That would be a legacy I'd be proud of. So, tell me now what other barriers are in the way."

"The businesspeople are concerned, of course," said Wong. "We keep reminding them this will strengthen their bottom line by doing what they're always asking us to do, which is simplify the process, get rid of the red tape, straighten out the tax code, treat everything and everyone the same.

"If it's truly an 'expense,' you don't need to 'deduct' it. At the end of the day, your business is worth either more or less than it was before. If it's more, you pay half that increase."

"The devil you know," Braun said, and shrugged. "We're all funny that way. No matter how convoluted things may be, they're better than the unknown."

"Well, sir, I have to say it's really remarkable we've been able to pull this off, any of it, let alone so much of it. I'm astonished."

"I think we're all astonished, Daniel, and none of us any more so than those legislators down the hall. If you had asked any of them a year ago whether these kinds of reforms were possible, they'd have run for the exits."

Braun smiled somewhat wistfully, shuffled some papers on his desk, looked up and said, "How I would love to think we're inspired by compassion, the excruciating need in our community, all the better angels."

Wong merely waited for what he knew was coming next. The governor was a true humanitarian, but he gained the power and influence he enjoys by being a realist. Also by being plain spoken.

"The truth is," he said, "greed is a powerful motivator. Getting these basic changes of policy is only made possible by a very big opportunity for profit. And we have it. Whatever credit we can take for all this enterprise zone legislation, we may have to take a back seat to Clayton Embry, whomever the hell he is. He's the one making this possible. Are we ever going to meet this guy, Daniel?"

"Now that you mention it, Governor, I met with Emily Anton this morning. She wants to arrange that very meeting."

"Terrific. Let's get it done."

"There are some, um, unusual requirements to make it happen."

"Why am I not surprised? Tell me about it."

"For reasons she says will become clear once we can speak together in person, she is requesting one of our Guard pilots to fly a mission for her, two of them, actually, which she's expecting to pay for, but security is the issue."

Wong paused, but the Governor just nodded, said, "Go on."

"She wants to assemble her team for the meeting, some of them anyhow, both so you can get to know them and because they have materials that Mr. Embry needs to conduct his business with them. Apparently, he's in Nevada and has no way to get back to the ranch where the rest of them are staying."

"The mystery deepens. So, Ms. Anton is requesting we fly up to Oregon to pick them up? And then what?"

"Bring them here to join Mr. Embry. And then, after we meet, fly some of them back. She's arranging transportation for Embry, although she's concerned about the borders. They haven't been shut down yet, of course, but she worries it could happen at any time. I should add, sir, my sense in talking to her was there's more to her concerns about his safety than what she's reporting."

"Until we get a better picture of what exactly is going on with Mr. Embry, I believe we should protect him at all costs. He's key man in this entire enterprise, so there's nothing to be gained by speculating about these, um, curiosities.

"There's obviously a backstory here that needs to be told and I don't know any better way to get that done than to meet him. The others, too, for that matter. Let's all get in one room and find out just what the hell each of us needs to know about the others.

"If Ms. Anton needs our help with getting Mr. Embry here, tell her we're at her service. And as for the folks in Oregon, tell Rafert to gas up."

✦

"Holly," Dirk said, and motioned toward his cabin, "we need to talk."

"Just heading for the showers, Dirk. Can it wait?"

"Absolutely have to talk right now. Dirty is okay for this discussion."

She looked at him with her head cocked to one side, her eyes squinted, playing with him a little, saying, "I'm going to assume you didn't mean that the way it sounds, Primus." Then she laughed. He didn't.

"This is important. Please."

She noticed he was pretty wound up, noticeably anxious, maybe excited. "What's up?" she asked and entered the cabin.

He paced away from the door, gestured with an arm toward a chair for her, sat in one opposite her, immediately stood up again and did a brief march away from her and then back.

"You were right."

She waited, he stared, his eyes more intense than usual, nostrils actually flaring a bit as he breathed.

"I often am, thank you, but what's the reference?"

"I don't know whether to be pissed or ecstatic."

"You're not making this easy."

"Emily! I just got her message!"

"Clay? He's okay?"

"Is. Has been for a while. Got away pretty fast. Lying low to protect all of us. Just like you ..." Before he completed the sentence, Holly had jumped up and hugged him, bouncing up and down, saying, "That's so great, so wonderful, so..."

"Holly, Holly, please!"

He tried to pull away, but she held him, laughing, mischievous now and joyous. She grimaced at him when he tried again to get free from her embrace, held him tighter for a moment, then kissed him on the

cheek and let him go. He stumbled a bit, sat down, tried to return to what he had to say.

"Just like you said a few weeks ago. Exactly so."

"Yep! That's why I'm an amazing chick, right?"

"There's a whole lot to say here, stuff we have to do, decisions. You have to carry the message to the group, but let's talk it through first.

"Big message is Clay is free. He's okay, doing fine Emily says. Next big message is we're going to meet with the Governor. Braun. In Sacramento. Clay and Emily, you, me, maybe Worthy, I dunno, maybe Bella. Emily thought that might be good. Dam might be good, too. Anyhow, we need to decide."

"We get to Sacramento how?"

"Corporate jet. Just funning ya. The governor is sending a National Guard helicopter to ferry us down and back. Those of us who come back. Clay wants to put a tiger team in place on site, to work with the governor and his staff. That's why I'm thinking Worthy. Maybe Moody, too. I don't know. Let's talk it through."

They did. Then they briefed Bella, Dam, David to get their thoughts, their willingness, before calling the group together and talking it through.

✦

Ellen wasn't happy about David's plan, but after thinking about it, she concluded it was probably for the best. Maybe a tipping point, one way or the other. Reality can be a bitch and hers of late has been in need of change.

In terms of the job, he was definitely the right person, someone who could act effectively and without undue deference in working with the governor and his people. He dealt with people at this level as peers, colleagues, his peeps.

Even though he put the venture to her as a question, looking for her approval, it was obvious he expected to go and would be disturbed if they disagreed about it. "Just for a couple of weeks," he said. "If it looks like any longer than that, we'll arrange for you and Gracie to join me there."

Gracie for her part was cool. "Tell Mr. Clay I miss him, and I hope to see him again sometime soon. I still like it here, but it was better

when he was here, too. Oh, of course I'll miss you, Daddy. I will." And gave him a kiss.

Holly was apologetic. "One of us had to stay there and I have the kids to think of. I know you'll miss him, and except for my girls, I'd jump at the chance. As it is, I get to pay my respects and fly back here, which may be a challenge after getting a taste of the city again. But we do what we have to do, right?"

Maybe some time apart would actually do them good. Things sure as hell weren't getting better as they are now. Being in his element, making decisions, getting things done, might help him move past this hang up between them that thus far was without any sign of improvement. If anything, it's regressing. They hadn't even mentioned it in weeks. Hadn't slept together either, not that way.

Separation. Isn't that what people do when their marriage is teetering? Call it what you will and see it as David sees it if you can, as just a business trip he needs to take, she knows it is a crucial moment in their future, be it together again eventually or permanently hereafter apart.

✦

Holly explained the situation, which was received with great relief and a surge of exhilaration by everyone in the group. Even those who barely knew him, and nearly none of them knew the graphic details of the event that he and Dirk had suffered, had been shaken by his capture. That he was free, safe, that their hopes for all this effort with the governors was even more assuredly in play, was a rush for all of them. Suddenly everything seemed real again in a very positive way, and all of them, even Ellen and Rika, sensed the opportunity.

Then the discussion about next steps ensued. What needed to be done, whom they thought should be designated to do it, how to go about it?

"The chopper comes day after tomorrow," Holly said. It can carry five of us plus the pilot. Dirk and I have talked about this, but we want to get your thoughts. Make sure we're all okay with the next steps. It's going to change our community here a little, but we'll be making a big step toward building that future up here we've all been talking about."

"Finally doing it," Dirk said, "instead of just talking."

The five to go, it was agreed, were Holly, Dirk, Dam, David, and Bella. Of them, it was expected David and Dam would remain as part of Clay's tiger team, at least for a while, working closely with the governor's staff on the ground in Sacramento, and the other three would return to the compound in a few days.

"Clay and Emily believe we can begin to make serious progress in moving this enterprise zone forward," Dirk said. "It'll take them working successfully with Governor Braun, and all of us up here coordinating all the networks we've been building. Getting them in place. This is where it's either going to get done or not."

He looked around the room, said, "I don't know about you, but I'm really jazzed to get after it."

Holly wrapped up by asking if there were any questions.

"Is Clay out of danger for good now," Ellen asked, "or is this an ongoing problem he's facing?" She looked at Bella, then at Dirk and Holly, and finally for a long moment at David. "I ask because we need to decide how much of all this to discuss with the governor's people."

Holly looked to Bella before speaking and was relieved when she spoke up. "These decisions have to include Clay's input, but knowing him as I do, it is very likely he'll want to make it known to the governor from the beginning.

"How he frames it is up to him, but speaking for all of us, I think we can agree that our partners in this effort need to know what we're dealing with, at least that there's a threat and Clay's safety needs to be of paramount concern."

"Especially now that this secession is happening." Fausto said, looking around at each of the people in the room. That he spoke so seldom at these events earned him close attention. "Whoever those people are who've been after him as of now are foreign agents. Now they're threatening an act of sabotage."

"Fausto's right," Ellen said. "Whatever it is Clay is facing is now a threat to all of us in a different way than before. It's nation against nation, it would seem."

"We don't know where Clay's at with all this," Dirk said, "just that he's safe. For now. We want to keep him that way, and hopefully the governor can help us. Clay Embry is an amazing guy. I think we all

can sense our future is somehow tied to him. It's almost like the New Northwest is his creation."

"This Clayton is a Nagual" Bobby said. He looked around the room to see if anyone knew the term, name of the spirit. "He is connected to the ancestors, and to all the animals, too. We Molala know them when we see them. They are shapeshifters. They can be dangerous if your heart is bad, but they are healers for the rest of us. That is who they are. Clayton Embry is one of them."

Chapter Seven

"I'm surprised you wanted to do this," Embry said, "but it's greatly appreciated. Would have been a very long walk.

"Uphill, too," Sister Loretto said to him, "at least the first half."

"True that. And Donner's Pass. I know my history. Always the danger of snow and we all know what can happen then. People get hungry."

"Kind of early in the season for that, although you never know out here. Weather, just like the people, can be very unpredictable."

"If you're talking about me, I'm notoriously well-behaved."

"So Emily assures me, but I wasn't talking about you. Just the general unpredictability of things anymore."

"Is that why we're taking this route instead of the Interstate?"

"Emily and I discussed it. She's very concerned for your safety, although she's never said why, and I'm well-bred enough not to ask. This is a convoluted way to get there but we weren't sure what was happening at the "border." Maybe nothing but for whatever reason this is our choice."

They took US 395 north from near the airport and crossed into California at Cold Springs, where nothing out of the ordinary appeared to be happening. From there they swung around on Highway 49 and followed its two-lane, looping path through the mountains to where it met I-80 east of Roseville.

It was a long, leisurely drive that afforded plenty of time for conversation in between long stretches of contemplation. It wasn't far into the trip, somewhere near Loyalton, where they saw the first of

many signs: USA! USAI USA! Impeach Braun! strung along the highway, some homemade and a few large ones that appeared to be manufactured, one with a sketch of a gallows and noose.

Somewhere near Camtonville, there was a large sign saying: Welcome to Cascadia. It was riddled with bullet holes and X-ed out in bright red paint. Finally at I-80 there was a billboard saying: Welcome to California. No bullet holes or any other defacement.

So, there was plenty to talk about, but Embry skillfully steered the palaver her way. "How does one become a Catholic nun?"

"Do you mean 'how' or 'why'?"

"Why, I suppose. What inspires a person in that direction?"

"I'm supposed to say, 'I had a calling,' but that's bullshit. That implies I was running toward it. Actually I was running away from other things. This seemed for a while like a very safe place."

"And now?"

"It's comfortable. Like an old sweatsuit. Otherwise, I don't think anywhere these days is particularly safe."

He let the conversation die, leaving it in her court, whether or not to discuss it further. She said nothing at all until they approached Sierraville, where she pulled into a gas station, told the attendant to "fill 'er up" and grabbed her duffle bag from the trunk.

"Quick pitstop," she said to Embry. "Need to use the restroom and freshen up. Will you pay the man?"

When she returned to the car, she was wearing a peasant blouse, short skirt, and sandals. "Delila Main?" he said. "Used to be," she said. And drove on.

✦

She was more talkative after the change of clothes. Maybe a change of attitude, too. Like a butterfly emerged from a chrysalis and a beauty at that. Who but a nun could know how nuns think? Embry sure didn't. But he was curious.

"You know Emily from school, she tells me."

"Claflin Hall at Wellesley. 'By the lake, furthest west,' and so forth. She was just down the hall junior and senior year. Really a sweetheart."

She drove. He waited.

"When she asked me about renting a car for you, said you'd lost your wallet, no ID, I thought maybe I'd drive you instead. This car is supposed to be for visiting bishops, but not many come calling in Reno. You've kind of been our resident bishop, anyhow. And Sister Loretto doesn't get out much. Haven't ever been to Sacramento, as a matter of fact. Thought: why not? It could be fun."

"Well, as I said, it's greatly appreciated. I'm so looking forward to seeing Emily. With everything that's going on, it's been a while since we've been able to get together. And you?"

"Me, what?"

"Forgive me. I don't mean to pry. Emily said you were friends in school. I guess I was wondering, was the last time you saw her when you graduated?"

"When *she* graduated. I didn't finish senior year. The last time we saw each other was just before I left school."

There was a long pause, then, and miles passed, the blacktop, the pine trees crowding the road, her efforts to compose herself. Embry said nothing.

She finally glanced sideways at him for a moment, a rather long time for looking anywhere other than the curving road, shrugged her shoulders, and now looking straight ahead, said emphatically, "When the shit hits the fan, it can seem like a blizzard. One unimaginable thing after another comes flying down on you out of the sky. I was twenty-one, still a baby, and it busted my chops."

She looked at him again to see how he was taking it, this nun in a short skirt with a foul mouth talking chaos. He just looked back at her with interest, gently, non-judgmentally, a casual curiosity to hear more or not. Her choice.

"Your sister Angela, Emily and I, all debuted at the same time. Class of 2007. Maybe it was a lean year in Connecticut. I don't know. Somehow I made the cut. A catholic girl, my mother long since deceased, my father successful but not old money, not nearly pedigreed in that way all you folks take generations to accomplish. But I was in, and he was so proud. 'Your mother would be so happy.'

"Here we are at this grandiose ceremony, this year's breeding stock being trotted out by the moneyed folks for all the studs to look over, maybe even get a taste of, take them out for a spin, size them up

for what social advancement they might offer, what shrewd mergers might enhance the family enterprise.

"And there I was, a rich kid with none of that to offer. My father was in real estate, mortgages, derivatives, I don't know what all, but he was proud of what he did, and he did it for me. For advancement. To improve our social standing. To let me move into those rarified strata where all the swells are found. All of *you* swells. He wanted me to be there, to belong there, to be accepted.

"Emily was so wonderful to me. All the parties leading up to our debut, she made me feel so welcome. She went way out of her way to lend me some of her family's unimpeachable credibility. She was so kind about it, and I was grateful, but I was so aware, too, of how necessary it was that she give me this cover, to make it okay that I was there, that I was included. Who'd argue with her?

"And that night in New York, where we all were swans. It was so glorious, mythical even, everything my father dreamed of for me. For me, though, it was obvious we were swans of entirely different ponds."

She spent some time driving quietly, reflecting on what she'd said, how much more she wanted to say. "You seem to have opened Pandora's Box. Being a recluse in a habit doesn't afford one many chances to speak of things like this. I hope I'm not boring you by talking your ear off."

"Anything but. I don't mean to be judgmental, but you clearly have a lot to say, and I find it very interesting. I've never spoken to a nun before. I asked about what leads a person to become a nun and this has been a powerful backstory. Thanks for sharing it with me. I mean that. I had no idea about all this but I'm more than happy to lend an ear for as long as you want to talk about it."

✦

She drove without responding for several miles. He watched the changes in her face as she ran through a gamut of memories and emotions. There clearly was a lot more to say and, because of the circuitous route they were taking to Sacramento, more than enough time to say it.

"This isn't pleasant. I haven't spoken of it in a very long time, although god knows I think about it a lot more than is healthy. A classic trauma, I suppose, that haunts our lives ever after."

She shrugged, looked at him for a moment, seeing how he'd take her clichéd expression, smiled at him wanly, and looked away, maybe fighting back tears, maybe just shaken to have reached this point in a discussion with a near stranger. They both recognized she was determined to finish the story, whatever her reason for sharing it. Both of them were a bit surprised to be in this place.

"One boy paid me a lot of attention. It caused a stir because everybody at the ball knew who he was except me. My father took me aside at one point, trying to contain his excitement but it was all over him, as though the ultimate outcome in this dream of his appeared out of nowhere and swept him up.

"'He's a Schadensohn,' he said to me as he handed me some punch. We'd just finished dancing a second or third time and my father couldn't wait to tell me just who it was squiring me around the dance floor. 'Shad who?' I said, wanting to tease him a little. Once I heard the name, I got it."

"Yeah, powerful family that one. Don't know them except by reputation."

"What reputation is that? What do people say about them?"

"Extremely wealthy. True power brokers in the City. Nobody you want to get crosswise with, I've been told. Never have encountered them personally."

"Count your blessings. You can take that from someone who encountered them very personally. He and his family. Way more personally than I'd prefer."

She became very quiet, dark, a pained look about her, and the tears came. She spoke through them, her voice strong if a bit shaky, but considering what she had to say, she was remarkably composed.

"He asked me to lunch a few days later. My father was ecstatic. Bradley Schadensohn was a prince beyond his wildest dreams for his daughter. It really for him was as if royalty had come calling. At lunch he was a perfect gentleman. Attentive, solicitous, self-effacing. It was a wonderful performance.

"He asked me to dinner a week later. Drugged me and raped me. Brutally. Slapped me repeatedly, blackened my eye, called me a cheap slut, and choked me until I was nearly unconscious, only to slap me again and again.

"When he was through with me, he shoved me in a cab and told the driver, 'Dump this bitch wherever she wants to go.' I had him take me to the hospital and told the admissions desk to call the police."

"I was bleeding from the vagina, my face was swollen, the bruises on my neck took weeks to heal. The police were pretty thoughtful with me. One of them was a woman whom I guess gets called to these kinds of assaults.

"She asked all the right questions, permission to take photographs as evidence, semen samples from the physician. It was very professional, very thorough, which gave me some comfort in trying to get my bearings. Dazed as I was, I was angry enough that I had some clarity about what I was doing and why.

"Because of my age, I was nineteen when it happened, they insisted on calling my father. He was stunned, absolutely shattered to see me like that, no doubt full of guilt for encouraging me to see the guy. Terrible as I was feeling right then, he made it worse. Not intentionally, of course, but it was awful."

The tears had stopped now, and unadulterated anger replaced them. Soon enough, a deep, pervasive sadness took its place.

"You can guess the next part of the story. The District Attorney right away making noises to us about 'whether it's worth it, to put yourself through this, relive the whole experience in open court, the vicious cross-examinations you'll face, having your sexual experience dragged out,' which in my case was practically zero but he didn't know that. So, the barriers began to be erected.

"Then we heard from the father's lawyers. A peace offering, a passionate plea for reasonableness, don't damage a young man's reputation, then a cash offer, a substantial one, and finally, after all that, came carefully worded threats.

"But my father was having none of it. 'He can't get away with this. He has to be stopped. Not just for my daughter. For all the other daughters he might victimize.' All that routine. So righteous, so valiant, so pathetic, really.

"Sorry to be crude, but he was determined to suffer more than me. That's how I felt. It became his crusade. So we saw it through. Right up until the D.A. informed us he was dropping charges. "Not enough evidence to win a conviction. People at the restaurant ready to testify I was drunk.' Drugged, drunk, what's the difference, right? Even the cabdriver they tracked down, ready to say, 'she kissed the guy goodnight,' which is bullshit but he works for tips, after all, and these folks apparently tip very well when they need your help."

"So, they let the guy go and that was that. Wow! A travesty money allows that kind of behavior to go unpunished. You must have been devastated."

"Devastated? Not really. Believe it or not, I wasn't all that surprised. From the beginning, I could sense the field tilting. Like how likely are we to see this ball roll uphill? When we got the word, father was crushed, devastated, to use your term, but I was just blank. Empty. After all that, I felt nothing.

"Like it or not, that was the reality. We each had our own reaction, but as you said, we just thought that was that. What are you going to do? Life's rude lessons. Suck it up and move on. Little did we know it was just beginning."

This is when the sadness began to replace the anger. Her voice became quieter, her words blurring just a little as she spoke them from deep in her throat.

"Father's business ran on credit. Banks, investment funds, mortgages, derivatives, all those people packaging all those deals, the lifeline for real estate and all that collateralized debt. Things changed. Very quickly, they began to dry up. All those dependable sources of funding. People he'd worked with for thirty years suddenly couldn't go the loan, the line of credit, purchase the paper.

"He hung in there as one door after another was closed, all the various and sundry reasons given until eventually no reasons at all. Nothing. He was a pariah and the business he'd built and maintained spotlessly for all those years was hanging by a thread. But he still was solvent and thought he could survive it.

"Then came 2009 and the big meltdown. Real estate cratered. Father by then was fried, beyond exhausted, everything he'd worked

for at stake, and he could see the proverbial writing on the outhouse wall.

"He called his best friend, said, 'this can't be happening, they can't do this.' Friend said, 'I'm Lehman Bros. and they took us down. Kiss your ass goodbye.'

"Father had a favorite place upstate, in a beautiful park above the river, next to Dia Beacon. You could see the Serras and some of the other sculptures on the rises of the lawn across the parking lot. We found him there, the hose from the exhaust to the window of the car. It was sunset, perfectly quiet, the last light of the day shining west to east over the river. He looked so peaceful.

"Now I *was* devastated. Just numb. The cops, the mortuary, arranging to ship him back to the city. What to do with the car. I sure wasn't going to drive it home. The undertaker told me he'd have someone take care of it. I guess he did. I've never seen it since.

"Caught the last train from Newburgh, finally got home around midnight, found a very strange message on my door. Beautiful vellum envelop, the old kind from animal membrane, with a note inside in plain block printing, no signature. It said, 'No hard feelings. Let me know when you're ready to get together again.'

"That's how I got to be a nun, Mr. Embry. I don't know how it is for the others, what drives them to the convent, but being a young girl, twenty-one, sheltered, used to money and privilege and all the sweet life that comes with it; when you're suddenly alone and penniless, and so thoroughly humiliated in the city you call home that you feel no longer able to show your face, the church in its mercy and benevolence reaches out to the humbled, the disgraced, the heartsick and homeless wandering in the wilderness. I was all of that and they took me in."

There were, as the saying goes, miles to go before they sleep and neither of them said another word the rest of the drive to Sacramento. The day was soft and warm, gentle after the triple-digit heat that bakes the Valley each summer, and the city when they finally reached it was settled in a way that the capital of California ought to be, one thought. The old town near the cathedral, where they were to meet Emily, was radiant in its Spanish colonial splendor, and nearby the golden dome of the capitol building cast its powerful gleam.

For each of them when they arrived there was a distinct sense of passage, moving through a portal where a new reality was beginning to unfold.

Chapter Eight

"What do you make of all this stuff that's going on all of a sudden?" Mick asked Fausto. "Seems like a lot of activity and yet, for me at least, it's the same ol' same ol'."

"Excuse me for laughing, but I know exactly what you mean. The entire world has flipped upside down and I'm still whittling on the same piece of wood."

"Are things any different in town, do you think? I mean, there has to be something going on, right?"

"The groups we've been talking to say a lot of good stuff has been put in place. Between the folks in California, and the Mexicans and the Canadians, things are supposed to be a helluva lot better. Took weeks to get the basics done..." he looked sideways at the kid, then continued, "burying the dead, fixing up all the people who were hurt.

"One of our guys said that 100,000 tents and sleeping bags had been distributed. No idea who counted 'em, but his point was that a massive amount of help came pouring in. Damn lucky when you think of it that all this happened in the summer. Now at least people who lost their homes can stay dry."

"Yeah, warm, too. I heard so many trees came down that there's plenty of wood for fires to cook and heat. What I'm wondering though is if there really is a network in place like Dirk talks about? I mean something that can communicate across all this destruction that happened."

"I believe there is. I mean a very rudimentary version of a network. We have a lot of people we're in touch with now, and all of them have people they're talking to, and it all adds up pretty quickly, you know. Kind of like going viral on social media when we used to have it."

"Ha! I remember, believe me. You can't imagine what withdrawals I went through when my phone went dead. It was like this crazy movie I saw one night on tv. The Man With the Golden Arm.

"This guy was completely flipping out. A famous singer, I guess, in real life. But in this movie he was totally in need of dope and couldn't get it. They had him strapped down in a bed while he was sweating, screaming, thrashing it out.

"That's sort of how it felt to me. No phone? What? Can't believe it! Have to say, though, there's a whole lot going on when you actually get your eyes off the screen. Stuff I never really noticed before."

"Good on you. Welcome to the real world. Or, hmm, maybe not. The real world is kinda fucked up at the moment. But I think there is some good that's going to come of all this. I don't know. I'm old enough to be pretty cynical about how anything is ever going to change. But I still want to believe, you know?"

"Well, I want to believe I'm going to get my phone back. That I can check in again, see what's happening. Be a part of the mix, you know? I know that. But meanwhile I'm good with getting this New Northwest thing down the road. What's my role, that's all I want to know. What do you need me to do? I'm good with it. Dirk tells me connectivity is going to be better than ever. I'm good with that."

"Yeah, Dirk thinks everything's going to be better, and you know what, I think he just might be right."

✦

Dam, Holly, and David were prepping for the pitch to the governor. They wanted to have broad outlines ready for Clay and Emily to review before the big meeting day after tomorrow.

"What are the basic principles we want to communicate?" Dam asked. "That's obviously where we need to focus. Let's get that much clear."

"For me," Holly said, "the discussion is how traditional commerce and the non-profit sectors can converge and flourish together. How is the profit motive sufficiently incented to attract the necessary capital and at what point can the needs be better served by a non-profit solution? Will commerce step back?

"That intersection seems like the crux of the matter. How does traditional growth-oriented commerce interact with post-growth solutions? Is there a point at which simply sustaining rather than

growing essential infrastructure is sufficient? Can that solution be provided, better provided, through non-profit enterprise?"

"That's a mouthful," David said. "Even for a skilled communicator like you. But I think you're right. That's what we want to find out. We need to understand where Clay's people can accept these ideas and where they start to pull back."

Dam said, "My take is that we're looking at attracting capital to build the basic systems but not to own them. Roads and bridges would be one example, except that in talking about utilities, healthcare, and telecom, for instance, it's not the government that would not "own" them. The community would. Private capital would construct them, but non-profits would operate them. Is that correct?"

"That's my understanding," David said. "And if we accept that example, the question is: what constitutes essential infrastructure? What qualifies?"

Holly said, "The governor's dictate was to determine the solutions we want and find the systems that will deliver them. Reading between the lines, my sense is that he wants to leave the free enterprise system untouched for discretionary spending. The post-growth solutions are for infrastructure, the non-discretionary things like, as Dam said, the roads and bridges of getting through your day.

"I think we have to restrict ourselves to the solutions that meet the basic needs of a healthy and secure constituency. So, as David just asked, what is the infrastructure that can provide those solutions?"

"We're considering a hybrid of for-and-non-profit providers," Dam said. "Basic income gets you food and shelter. Okay? Then you need water, sewer, power, these days you need telecom, what else? Maybe public transportation.

"I remember when we first got here Dirk was talking about blank sheet engineering, thinking about what you'd like your community to be if there were no preconceived notions. Maybe that's not a bad way to look at all these issues."

"But practicality, too," Holly said. "Dreams and reality. A little of both."

"Yeah, wow," David said, "This is a big bite. Like Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Keynes, all those guys didn't figure it out. But day after

tomorrow we'll deliver the answer to the governor. We can do that, right?"

Each of them laughed softly and each at the same time felt that surge of uncertainty. How much of what is will always be, despite our altruistic efforts and fond dreams? The narrative arc of humankind is thick with examples of every sort where the few exploit the many, where justice at best keeps a lid on the most egregious inequities, and where fate despite our most cherished beliefs forever trumps the illusionary spasms of free will and self-determination.

The sense among the three of them about the enormity of what they were attempting and the potential that one way or another it could become a fiasco was so strong it was nearly palpable. Each of them was feeling a flush of the fool and the pretender come over them. No one knew what to say.

Finally Holly shook her head, said, "I always wanted to take up flyfishing. Another of those many things I was too busy being successful to do. But I did read A River Runs Through It, which like all great books teaches you a lot about all sorts of things besides the 'subject.'

"There's this great scene on the Big Blackfoot River in Montana where Mr. McLean is trying to figure out how to cast to this big fish. One option has all sorts of problems that occur to him, and another option is very dicey, and a third one looks like certain failure. If he does one thing this might happen, and if he does another, this other thing might happen, and none of his choices look very good.

"And after he sizes all of them up and can't find a way to proceed and thinks about it for a long time, while the big fish keeps feeding in the pocket he's wanting to reach, and this swift, strong current is rocking him back and forth in the water where he stands, he finally comes to a decision.

"Norman McLean says to himself, 'When you're having a conversation with yourself between you might lose and you're sure to lose, you're probably thinking too much.' So he cast the fly and he caught the fish.

"I think that may be pertinent to our situation, gentlemen. So what do you say we cast this damn fly on the waters and see what happens?"

"It's an interesting thing to talk about," Bobby Yelkins said to Dirk. "Very interesting except they pretty much forgot about us, like usual. All of the Indians and all this reservation land. Held for us in trust by the U.S. Government. But now we are in Cascadia, which is not the U.S.A. How is that going to work?"

"I guess there was a lot of talk about stuff like that when they started to think about all the federal property, BLM land, the military bases in these three states. How to handle the exchange of property when the states seceded."

"Yeah, they talked about the jet planes and the prairie chickens, but nobody said nothin' about the Indians. We're federal property, too, you know. Wards of the government, right? All those assets of ours in them trust accounts. Some of us are wondering who we got handed off to and who's in charge of us now. Are we still incompetents or has that changed in Cascadia? Do you know?"

✦

Dirk was in touch with a half dozen different groups, with Bobby and his constituency among Indigenous people being among the most extensive, but others were growing into a significant size. He felt at times that communications were not too different than drums or smoke signals, a rumbling sound in the distance that reverberated back and forth, or wisps of content drifting in the air.

Still, there were ways that proved to be quite effective, beginning with the links between ham radio operators and their individual connections with people in their immediate communities, and the personal contacts he'd made with folks who lived nearby, many of whom were sheltering groups of people just like he was, and the connections those people maintained in one way or another with their own networks of contacts. Little by little, the network became formidable.

"We're meeting with the governor and his people this week. The message is local. This enterprise zone is all about bubbling up from the local level, and the most basic elements of the local level, to build our new communities.

"Our pitch is all this private sector money can build the essential systems we need, but non-profit organizations will operate them. We

can't get our arms around all of it, but between the guaranteed income and the basic services, we can put a strong economy of community-based services in place."

"I have a question," said one of the guys on the ham from Brookings, a place that was very hard hit. "We hear tell that one of your guys is the money behind this whole rebuild. Is that true?"

Dirk smiled to himself. He wondered when this question would be coming. "Clayton Embry is the guy who's assembled the money. His family is in banking. Investment banking. They're old New England money. They've taken the lead in getting financing in place for the enterprise zone."

"Can we ask what's in it for him?"

"For him personally," Dirk said, "I can't say. For his investors, I would guess what's in it is substantial profits. It's going to take big money to rebuild our communities and I expect the people who do it will make big profits. What's different about it in this case is they'll be paying half the profits in taxes. Money back in the kitty to support the entire effort.

"What Embry makes for himself, I don't know and the truth is, I don't much care. What I care about is putting these pieces in place that will make our lives a whole lot more equitable than they've ever been, and a whole lot more secure for all of us than I ever dreamed they could be.

"Clay Embry is the money that's making it possible. Whatever he makes from this enterprise he's welcome to, as far as I'm concerned, as long as we build it from the bottom up and as long as he throws half his take back into the kitty."

Brookings laughed, said, "Okay, I'm good with that. Just wanted to ask. We got a saying around the dock here that the guy who brings the fish can have the first bite. And we're in need of a whole helluva lot of fish."

✦

"The meeting is set, Governor," Wong said. "11 a.m. day after tomorrow. We're assured Mr. Embry will join us. Apparently he arrived in town within the past hour."

Braun smiled, looked from Dan to Bess and back, shook his head and said, "It feels like we're meeting Elvis. And knowing his track record, we probably should keep our powder dry until he's actually here."

"Yes, sir, although it seems very likely he actually will attend. Weller and Primus are here, as well, with a fellow named Damian Moody. I haven't had the pleasure yet, but I know he's been involved with them in strategizing. Reportedly a very sharp guy. Visualization technology and very high concept gaming.

"And David Worthy, of course, who was CEO of a first-rate tech company where the rest of them worked before the quake. His company was modeling the Northwest and the earthquake potential for nearly two years before it happened. They're all pretty knowledgeable."

"Interesting! I wonder if they have that digital model anywhere in hand."

"I asked that question of Primus. He tells me Worthy would know and what the options were would be his decision, but that it may be parked somewhere in the cloud. USG was the customer, so it seems highly unlikely they would share it with us."

"Ha! Truer words, Mr. Wong. The question then is, will Mr. Worthy?"

"He's said to be a highly ethical businessman, er..." he looked at Bess and smiled, "businessperson, of course I meant to say."

"And, of course," Bess said, smiling in response to Daniel Wong, "for any business, um, person, we are in an entirely new situation where those kinds of decisions are to be made. Situational ethics just might be a legitimate position to adopt in this instance."

"We can only hope," said Braun. "In any case, we need to agree on key points to be addressed when we meet. The business considerations are lawyerly matters, but the philosophical questions are what I want to nail down."

"And the practical ones," Bess said.

"Yes," Braun said. "The practical ones, beginning with 'Mr. Embry, exactly who the hell are you and where have you been?"

They all laughed, but Braun quickly added, "I'm only half kidding. We should get those questions answered so we know what's going on,

who we're dealing with. And also, what can we do to ensure that he is protected, if that's what he needs, or at least stabilized as an in-person part of our team."

"The key part," Bess said. "Absolutely amazing what Embry-Anton has pulled off here. We could have expected to start a riot with these proposals. I have to tell you, Governor, I choked on them more than a little myself when you laid them out. Pretty radical stuff by any measure ..."

"Well, actually, a lot of careful thought went into them," Dan said, but she cut him off before he could continue.

"From a policy perspective, yes. In fact, seen from there, it's brilliant stuff. But those, um, businesspersons were stunned. Like they'd been smacked in the head with a 2x4. From a business perspective, 'pretty radical' is a gentle way to phrase it."

"Thanks for being gentle with us, Bess."

"Whenever I can, Governor. You know that. My point is this could have been a fiasco and instead it's shaping up as one of the more remarkable things any government has ever attempted. And thanks largely to Mr. Embry and his cohorts, it may have a chance of succeeding, at least to some high degree."

✦

"Can you believe we're sitting in a restaurant having dinner?" Holly said.

Dam said, "Yeah, I'm almost hyperventilating."

"I was just thinking," David said, "it's been months since I've used a credit card. I wonder if it's still active?"

"Better be or we'll be washing dishes well into the night," Dirk said. "But just in case, I've got cash. Enjoy your meal."

They did. It was disorienting to a remarkable degree to be in a city in a restaurant with friends having dinner and nowhere was there any sense of what was happening a few hundred miles north of here.

Bella was meeting two colleagues elsewhere, likely consulting about her care of Clay. He and Emily, whom none of them had met, were joining them in the morning at their hotel to whiteboard their meeting the following day with Governor Braun. Tonight, though, they were letting go and it was nearly delirious.

"I suspected it before we got here," Holly said, "but now I know for sure it's going to be very difficult going back to the ranch - no offense intended, Dirk."

"None taken. I really like it up there but I know it's not for everyone."

"Well, you saved our butts, Dirk," Dam said, "and I'm very grateful to you. That's said by someone who was a doubter about that part of your life once upon a time. Of course, that's before I needed it." Dirk just shrugged. Everybody else at the table laughed. "But I have to admit I feel like I can settle back into city life a lot quicker than I got my bearings in the hills."

"You and David are going to be essential to this project," Dirk said. "I have to admit my original assumption was that we could aggregate the demand part quicker than the money could be found to meet it. Clay flipped that on its head. Holly, Bobby, and I really are going to have to hustle now to keep ahead of all the money he's sending our way. We're counting on you two to balance out the conversation down here."

"Are you worried about it?" David asked.

"Big money always makes me wary," Dirk said. "It has a momentum of its own, at least that's been my experience. If you don't keep it channeled where you want it to go, it can overflow the banks pretty quickly and soak anybody who gets in its way."

"I don't discount what you say by any means. But I think we have a good gameplan in hand, and if we don't run into any snags with Clay and Emily, we should have a good case to make to the governor."

"And don't discount the power of the governor," Holly said, "when it comes to riding herd on all the various forces that come into play. That's exactly his skill set. It's what he does. And, in this case, he's going to bring it because he has as much riding on this effort as anyone of us and then some. Helluva ally to have."

The looked at each other for a moment, agreed without speaking that enough had been said, looked then at the next platter that arrived.

"I submit for your collective consideration that we have given this subject more than enough attention for weeks now," David said with

an imperious voice, "whereas we have not enjoyed a fine meal at an excellent restaurant in a nice city in way too long. Let's eat."

Dirk had already started. "This unagi is excellent, and the hamachi handrolls, too," he said and passed the platter around. "I recommend them."

They ate. Everybody dug in. Disorienting, yes, but deliciously so.

Chapter Nine

In a restaurant nearby, Delila had joined Emily and Clay for dinner.

"I was so expecting to see you in your uniform, garments, whatever they're called. When you and Clay got out of the car, I had to laugh at myself. It was terrific to see you, of course, and you looked exactly like I remember."

"But you wanted to see the penguin suit, right?"

They both laughed. Clay just smiled and watched, interested to see two old friends interact in new circumstances.

"Well, much as I'm sorry to disappoint, I'm on vacation. And, girl, I don't have to tell you how nice it is to look like a normal person for a while. Those wool robes rub me the wrong way sometimes."

"Wearing the same thing must get old at times. I mean, basic black, yeah, but every day?"

"Tell me about it." She got that faraway look for a moment, turned from Emily to Clay and said to both of them, looking from one to another for their answer, "I hope you don't mind me talking about these things. It's so rare to get to speak with friends... about personal things, you know?"

Each of them just smiled softly, nodded, Emily a bit more expressively because the question, Clay knew, was really for her. Delila had already crossed that plateau with him.

He knew too that Emily was conflicted, Like him, she's anxious for time together, just the two of them, a gift that had been so thinly available to them these past two months and now, as seems so often to occur, the moment was complicated by this even rarer if less

significant encounter with an old friend, one she was beginning to sense was in need of attention.

"I always want to say that being a nun isn't easy," she said and laughed, shaking her head from side to side. "It occurs to be before I actually say it that it isn't meant to be easy. It's an act of devotion, of course, turning away from worldly pleasures, all that sort of thing ... but I have to confide that lacking devotion makes it much more difficult."

Neither of them said anything in response, Clay with that attentive but dispassionate air that she had experienced throughout their earlier conversation and Emily more obviously inquisitive but mannered enough to allow her friend whatever space she needed.

"I never was particularly religious growing up. I bent Clay's ear mercilessly all afternoon with the sad tale that drove me to the convent, and although you and I have never discussed it, I've always assumed you knew what happened."

Emily merely nodded her assent.

"So I had good reason to seek shelter from the storm, as Bob would say, but fear and despair aren't the same as devotion, and in my case they didn't drive me to that exalted state of being either. I've been devoted to being a good nun but not to the savior that is our raison d'être. It sometimes makes me feel like a fraud and it always makes me mindful of the ungraciousness it suggests for the shelter I've received."

"Have you thought about leaving?" Emily asked.

"Never more strongly than today. Being out feels so much more like being myself, who I really am. Makes me think about whom I'm paying penance for?

"And why?"

Delila just nodded, sank back in her seat, looked reflective and nodded again a little more vigorously, reached for her glass of wine and downed what was left. She raised the glass, catching the waiter's eye, said, "One more. Do you mind? I won't keep you much longer."

They found her frank discussion intriguing and wondered of course where it might lead. But too they were grateful for her acknowledgment that they looked forward with barely restrained passion for time alone.

✦

Bella was enjoying dinner with two colleagues, one of whom, John Fisher, she'd known since they were in graduate school together. The other was his friend, the well-known and highly regarded psychiatrist, Simon Thiel, of cable television fame, whom she'd just met this evening.

Theirs so far had been the easy pleasantries of conversation over a tasty meal, but the discussion was turning toward the focal point of this get-together, a curious case Bella was treating. She was certain her colleagues would find it professionally intriguing and hoped they could provide insight for its treatment.

"It's not an area of my expertise," Bella said, "but I strongly believe we're dealing with some sort of brainwashing. Indications are the subject suffered serious wounds in a military action overseas and that some part of the recovery involved mental coercion."

"For what purpose? Do we know?" Fisher asked.

"Not a clue, but there are some interesting aspects of the outcome he's suffered that may give us some direction to answering that question. This is quite a story, gentlemen, so let me order another bottle of wine we can enjoy while I give you the details."

The wine was nearly consumed by the time she finished speaking. "I would welcome any thoughts you have about what we're dealing with here. The subject himself is very resilient and quite bright, but someone has worked very hard to compromise him, and for all the progress he's made, I feel there's still a residual fragility that needs to be overcome."

"A fascinating story," Thiel said. "As you both know, our government and several others, the Soviet and Chinese most notably, have been very active in the field of mind manipulation since the very beginning of the Cold War. The so-called Manchurian Candidate efforts by the Sino-Soviets reputedly achieved the goal of placing a latent trigger in the mind that could be activated on command.

"MKUltra and its progeny used massive amounts of psychedelics and electro-shock on the subjects, and it was reported that the post-9/11 torture chambers were using a script taken from 1950s

Chinese brainwashing studies of interrogation and coercive persuasion.

"With a research effort that spans from Nazi Germany to contemporary Guantanamo Bay, there's no shortage of expertise in the field. It's just that it's classified, so we for the most part can only speculate."

Bella said, "I remember when we were in school, John, all the discussion about the DIMPAC study and cults. The APA refused to take a position because there wasn't enough information available for a valid scientific conclusion. Most of what we need to know is *sub rosa*."

"If we don't know the 'why' of our subject's treatment," Fisher said, "can we at least make an educated guess at the 'how' he was manipulated? My thinking is his injuries, as you've described them, Bella, must have presented a very malleable subject to work on. That sort of physical trauma disarms the brain of much of its natural defenses."

"An excellent point, John," Thiel said. "In normal circumstances, which is a gross misuse of that term, but *normally* the challenge begins with breaking down resistance. In this case, that barrier already was removed. The next step would be how and to what degree to inflict pain, but here it would seem the question was about the balance between pain relief and perhaps withdrawing the opiates strategically to utilize the *in situ* pain for developing receptivity to the intrusion."

"What has struck me about all this from the beginning," Bella said, "is the degree to which they wanted to manipulate him. The Manchurian Candidate model is focused on removing natural inhibitions against things like murder, assassination, and then inserting a response mechanism so the subject can be triggered on command.

"In this case, I believe menticide is closer to the reality. They took a bright, high achieving if badly injured young man and convinced him he was a homeless person. Set him loose on the streets and for many months he functioned very adequately without ever questioning who he was or what he was doing there."

"I agree," Fisher said, "It must have been nearly complete reprogramming of his mind. A thorough erasure of who he had been. It's really quite remarkable."

"That it is," Thiel said, "but notable too that it was only temporary, at least the most egregious effects of it. That he has recovered so far to the extent Bella describes is equally fascinating. I've never known these kinds of mind alterations to undo themselves like that," he said, smiling at her with a nod of recognition, "even granting the excellent care he's received in accomplishing it."

"Very kind of you to say, Dr. Thiel. And I'd be thrilled to take credit. It has been very confounding and exhilarating at the same time.

"The truth is, he has indicated to me that a couple of instances of human contact beyond what a beggar normally receives is when the fog first began to lift. The quake, too, of course. Like all of us, it had a big effect on him. Without sounding corny about it, his indomitable will is probably the biggest reason he's come so far so quickly."

"A measure, too, then of what lengths were extended to put him in that place to begin with," Thiel said. "Machiavellian things of this sort always summon images of bizarre government programs for whatever the reason of the season. It's like a James Bond movie."

"Exactly," said Fisher, "except Ian Fleming always tells you what the purpose is, why these madmen are out to take over the world. Governments tend to be a little more oblique about it."

Bella thanked them both for hearing her out, asked they reach out to her with their thoughts and then quickly corrected herself when she remembered she currently has no way to be reached "other than by mule or carrier pigeon."

"So, you're going back," Fisher said.

"Yes, in just a couple of days. But likely back and forth thereafter, at least the foreseeable future. Depending on access to transportation."

"Hopefully," Thiel said, "That situation will begin to make fast progress, now that we're no longer pretending FEMA is on the job. With everything you're enduring up there, and the physical hardships so many people are suffering, we're also very curious down here to observe the response to seeing one's country dissolved. I believe it's

traumatic at a very deep level of the sense of connectivity. God, family, country. It doesn't get much deeper."

"I think in some ways that dislocation will be more challenging here than it is for us in Cascadia. We have a very graphic manifestation of it that preceded secession. Here the effects are less tangible and harder to discern."

"Which, of course, can make them scarier," said Fisher. "The unknown."

"I have to thank you for a fascinating evening," Thiel said to Bella. "I'm very glad John has introduced us and I'm particularly interested in your subject. Obviously, I hope he recovers fully and would love to be kept informed. I'm at your service if you ever have need of my help."

"Thank you, Dr. Thiel."

"Simon, please. Titles are relinquished at the second glass of wine."

"Simon. I appreciate your interest and offer of help. I may well ask for further consultation. Without getting at all into revealing his identity, our subject has gone from the streets to a very responsible position in the Cascadia recovery effort. I suspect whatever fragility there might be that remains is going to be thoroughly tested."

✦

Coffee and pastries were served by a state patrolman at the large oval table in the conference room off the governor's main office. There were ten of them, the governor, flanked by Bess and Daniel at one end of the table, Clay and Emily at the other end, with David, Holly, Dam, Dirk and Bella seated on either side of them. Formalities concluded quickly and the business at hand convened.

"I was going to ask for starters, governor," said Clay, "If you saw any showstoppers. Then I realized they're all showstoppers."

There was polite laughter, but an anxiousness all around the table to get to specifics, what are we agreed on, what are non-starters, what comes next? The governor waited politely for Clay to continue.

"So, I'd like to start by getting your sense of where support is strongest for these initiatives and where we need to shore up support. Which is another way of asking where we can get started and is there

anything that we should steer away from in the near-term or for good? The sense on the investor side is one of enthusiasm. But we want to be sensitive to the receptivity of your constituents."

"Thank you, Mr. Embry. We appreciate that awareness on your part. Our entire business in this office is exactly that: gauging the receptivity out there, encouraging them to go with our initiatives where we can, and accepting the will of the people where we can't."

"Your leadership is critically important and I think all of us are astonished you've been able to get this agenda on the table without more blowback."

"Oh, there's been blowback. Am I right, Bess? The business community was apoplectic at first and still is struggling with the terms we've proposed. And the legislature, Daniel? I know we've made a lot of progress, but negotiations are still in play?"

"That's correct, sir. The sticking points get worked out and then as often as not they reemerge at a later stage of the process. Still, we are in a very strong position all things considered and expect to get a large portion of the proposal enacted into law."

"As we understand it, governor," Holly said, looking from him to Daniel Wong and back again, "the legislation sunsets in five years if certain basic goals aren't met and extends to a full ten years if they are."

The governor nodded his assent, said, "That's correct," and nodded with a smile at Daniel. They both realized the group wanted to hear him confirm what Wong had told them. Now that he had, Wong once again listed the goals that were to be met for an extension of the law.

They worked their way through a long list of topics, those the group had put together for Clay and Emily, which they had approved without exception, and sketched out the half-dozen priority initiatives that the bonds would finance. There was a remarkable agreement among them about where to start and what the essential investments would be.

"Can we ask, Governor Braun," Embry said, "What are your greatest concerns as we take this effort forward?"

"We've left a divided nation," Braun said as he looked at each of them, "but we haven't left all the divisions behind. My single greatest

concern is people here who are very unhappy with secession and are looking for ways to undo it."

"We've heard from some folks up our way," Primus said, glancing quickly at Holly for any sign of wariness. Seeing none, he continued, "There are some in the eastern part of the state who want to rejoin the U.S. They say it's just the liberals in the cities who wanted to leave. That we just should have severed west of the Cascades and left the rest of the states as they were."

"You can imagine then what many of my constituents think about all this, especially those who have no sense of what you all are going through. They think we wanted this separation from the U.S., that it was our plan all along. Of course, many of them are the same people who put Gherkin in office, so there's that. They don't believe this was his doing and not ours. My concern is what lengths they'll go to fight us."

"And what encouragement they'll get from him, I would add."

"My thought exactly, Mr. Primus."

✦

By agreement with the others, Clay and Emily asked to speak privately with Governor Braun and his Chief of Staff once the general meeting concluded.

"Governor," Embry said, once the four of them were along, "I take you to be a man of great patience. I must have put that patience to the test and, at the risk of imperiling our initiative, I wanted to explain what has been going on behind the scenes."

Braun and Bess heard him out without interruption or comment of any kind while he sketched the story in some detail, leaving only of the worst of it unsaid.

"We've very recently become privy to the backstory, which involves our former president and his machinations overseas with arms sales and allegiances with parties on both sides of the conflicts. I apparently made the grievous mistake of nearly getting killed by one of his weapons in the hands of one of his allies."

There was a long pause when he concluded, after which Braun finally said, "That is an excruciating and very scary episode you've suffered, Mr. Embry. Were it not for what we've experienced in

dealing with President Gherkin these past several years, it would be fantastical. Unfortunately, and you clearly have more direct experience than any of us, it is nauseatingly all too plausible.

"What I want to do is put as much protection as possible around you. It goes without saying at this point that you and Ms. Anton are absolutely critical to the success of this initiative. Bess, tell me if I'm mistaken, but I believe our new status as a de facto nation in waiting must give me the authority to appoint Mr. Embry as an ambassador with full diplomatic immunity. Am I right?"

"We don't have a playbook yet, Governor, but you're clearly the leader of Cascadia until more formal elections are held and a constitution is adopted. I would say at this point you can certainly make those kinds of appointments."

"Consider it done. Congratulations, Mr. Embry. It's only a start, of course, and no guarantee of protection. But it does send a message that any attack on you henceforth is an attack on Cascadia. Now, let's talk about what additional protection we can provide."

"I'm not certain how to answer that question, Governor. I got away over a month ago and there's been no sign whatsoever that they're looking for me. I'd like to think that's true, but I can't imagine why that would be. What's changed?"

"Perhaps all this commotion over the secession," Bess said. "I'm sure Dear Mister Gherkin has his presidential hands full at the moment."

"You may be right, Bess," Braun said, "but even so that may be only a delay in pursuing Mr. Embry. I think we should assume worst case and act accordingly."

"That's certainly my approach, sir," Embry said. "I plan to be as oblique as possible in my movements, but I do plan to settle in Sacramento and be present as President of Embry-Anton. We have a lot of work to do."

"Hear, hear," Braun said. "To that end, do you need assistance with accommodations? Even a bodyguard? Whatever we can do to facilitate your work, please let my staff know. You have my unequivocable support."

"Thank you, Governor Braun. Let's keep the bodyguard idea in abeyance for now. Thanks to Emily, I have a quiet place to stay near

the river, and not far from her home. We're officing at the law firm. I think we're good for now."

"I'm very pleased we had this meeting, um, Mr. Ambassador. We need to decide when and how to announce that appointment."

"Perhaps we can hold that in abeyance for now, as well. I want to get my bearings and a feel for what makes sense in terms of visibility. At all times, Emily is the face of Embry-Anton. I hope to join her in that role very soon."

"You have Bess's cell phone. Don't hesitate to reach out to us."

"We appreciate your confidence in us, Governor."

"The appreciation is mutual. Take *good* care of yourself. We're here for you when you need us."

✦

"Clayton," Emily said when they were briefly alone, "why did you ignore his offer of a bodyguard? Having a state patrolman around seems like a good idea."

"I don't want to frighten you, Emily. But please understand, if these people want to get to me, they are far more skilled in these "arts" than anybody at the state patrol. All we'd be doing is putting an officer in danger."

"All right. I need to ask though whether you believe you are still a target. It seems like things may have settled down. Is that possible?"

"I'd like to think so. It's more likely the parameters have changed. My first priority is keeping the three of us safe. We just have to play it by ear for a while. Until we're sure we're out of danger, we need to keep our public relationship one of business partners. The last thing we want is for you to become leverage they use to get to me."

"Okay. But I think we should sleep together again tonight."

"Twist my arm."

"My kind of leverage."

✦

Bella and Clay had dinner together that evening. He presented her a thumb drive with the complete files from Charlie's iPad. "This came into my possession. I think you'll find it interesting reading and it may give us a lot more ammunition to fight this battle."

She just looked at him, a barely repressed smile on her face. "I was going to say you're looking very fit for a guy who gets ambushed every few months, but instead I'll just get right to it. How are you and what is this?"

"I am fine. Doing quite well in fact. I've had more than a month of rest and it suits me. Ready to get back after it now, but the past few weeks have been restorative. Stress-free, relaxing, I've even gained a few pounds."

"All good to hear. And what of this?" she said, holding up the thumb drive.

"I managed to copy the files of the man in the white coat. Thanks to you and all the help you gave me at the ranch, I was able to maintain a bit of clarity in the midst of his ministrations. It was an extraordinary difference from what the earlier encounter must have been like. This time it was like I was watching it all."

"You're a lot stronger than you were when they worked on you before. That probably has a lot to do with it."

"No doubt. But the work we did together gave me some distance from him, too. This time, he was walking me through the process without realizing I was watching him do it, looking for the traps. It was an extraordinary experience."

"And you escaped."

"He and one of his colleagues had a little dustup."

"And?"

"And neither of them survived. I was able to leave because there was no one left to stop me."

"And the files?"

"He took notes with a stylus pen on a magnetic board. There was an iPad sitting on a table. Seemed logical, so I took it."

"And guessed the password."

"Indeed."

"You are a most remarkable fellow, Mr. Embry."

"Thank you, Doctor."

✦

David and Dam joined Emily and Clay at the attorneys' offices, where they had the use of a suite and support staff. They quickly fell

into an efficient routine, processing massive numbers of proposals that came in response to the RFPs. Energy and telecommunications were the priority projects, which would be closely followed by housing and transportation.

After a week or so, Emily took Clay aside. "I just had a call from Delila. Sister Loretto."

Clay nodded, said nothing, waited.

"She asked if we were hiring."

"Leaving the Order, is she? Or are they hiring out the nuns now?"

"Very funny. What do you think?"

"About hiring nuns?"

"About hiring her. Is it something we'd consider? She seems anxious to know and I told her we'd talk about it. Can we?"

"There's plenty to do here and she's obviously bright. Seemed to me at the nunnery that she ran a tight ship. That's about the extent of what I have to go on. You know her much better. What are your thoughts."

"Neither of us knows her well. I did at one time know her pretty well and liked her. She had a very traumatic experience and disappeared to a convent. Having no family to rely on, she did what she did.

"That was a long time ago and we've all changed. I felt terrible for her at the time and I certainly wouldn't judge her decisions because I haven't been in those circumstances. All that said, I don't know her at this point well enough to recommend her one way or the other."

"Is she leaving the Order based on our hiring her?"

"No. She said she's going either way. That the time has come for her next chapter. She'd like it to be here in Sacramento working on this 'very exciting' project with us, but either way, she's leaving her habit, so to speak."

"That makes me think we should give her a chance, unless you disagree?"

"I'm ambivalent. I like her, like to be helpful where I can, and I know her to be very capable. I always hope that people will try to do their best. If I have any reservation, it's that we might find that it doesn't work. I'd hate to have to undo something that maybe shouldn't have been done at all with as little as we know."

"Well said. On all counts. My response is that we should discuss it with her very directly. We're willing to give it a try. There's plenty to do. If it doesn't work for any reason, we'll part company. Amicably. Is she good with that? Let's ask."

✦

Delila, Del now to David and Dam, was not only good with it, she was a good addition, working seamlessly with the four of them, both enthusiastically and casually. Emily especially was relieved that her temperament was very level. For someone making a rather dramatic transition in lifestyle and profession, she was remarkably composed.

"A week in, I'm already wondering how we could have done this without her," Dam said at a meeting. "I'm thumbs up."

"She's been great," David said. "I'm really impressed by her, how quickly she's picked up everything we've handed her. Reminds me of Holly in that way and that's a big compliment. We're talking serious competency. That really resonates with me."

"Speaking of Holly," Clay said, "is there a chance to bring her down here? I know she has the kids to consider."

David said, "That was the plan, or maybe we should say the hope, that we could work it out. Still would like to, and I'm pretty sure she'd love to be here if we can make it good for her girls. I have to tell you, though, that having Del here has made it less critical. And Holly has value communicating to the network up there."

"Yeah. That piece Dirk is heading up is critical. And Holly definitely can round off the rough edges of the dialogue. Maybe we sit tight for now."

✦

"Another couple of weeks, I think," David said to Ellen. "I really miss you and Grace. So much. But it's very exciting what we're doing. Really believe we're going to make a big difference. Really appreciate your patience with me.

"And we'll get you down here as soon as it makes sense. Very different from what we had in Portland, but I think you'd like it. And we have to resettle somewhere, right?

"I talked to the bank, too, by the way. Our accounts are safe, and we're totally good down here, credit cards, all that. The insurance on the home is still being determined. We're going to take a beating, I suspect. How bad is the question. It will be all right, though. We're good. I wanted you to know that."

Ellen just listened, the bulky satellite phone to her ear. Said almost nothing. "Um. Yes. Good." Tears in her eyes. Distance. The ground between them opening up. Coming undone. Does he even sense it? The refuge away he's found. Does he know how badly he needed it?

His effort to mask the excitement he's feeling. The exhilaration. He went on about all the things to be accomplished, the great work to be done, all the people who will get the support they desperately need. Making something better than what they'd lost. That was what was so amazing. What's driving them. Nothing about what's driving us.

"Uh, huh," she said, and when he finally said, "I love you. Give my love to Gracie," she said, "Me too, okay. Um! Bye." Tears again briefly and resignation.

✦

"Mother, Ailey and Mick are going to take the girls with Mr. Yelkins down to town. Can I go with them please? We're going to get some supplies and even have dinner at a diner. Then we're going to spend the night at the farm and come back tomorrow late. Can I please?"

"Gracie, it's a long ride. Are you sure you can handle it?"

"We're going in the truck. That one with the big tires. Mr. Yelkins says he's made it down there twice already and it's not a problem."

"Let me talk to Ailey. I'm sure it will be all right but let me check with her."

"Really, mother. I always tell you the truth."

"Thank you, darling, for that. I trust you completely. But I need to check with her anyway, just so I know what to expect."

✦

When Ailey and the girls were gone, Bobby driving and Mick riding shotgun, the girls bouncing up and down on the mattress in back, Ellen stared down the road after them for a long while. She sensed

the stillness in the air like a halo around her vision, the quiet in the compound usually so alive with activity when the girls were around, and the faint breeze tipping the tops of the conifers in brief arcs of green barely sweeping back and forth in the bright blue sky.

Fall had not yet cooled the air much from the summer warmth, but the days were shorter, the sun a little lower in the sky to the south. Change was coming casually enough to be barely noticed yet still inexorably underway. To Ellen it felt like falling, the ground beneath her slipping away.

✦

Fausto was a regular guy. That's how he saw himself. His needs were few, his pleasures many for the simple life he led.

Tall, nearly laconic, handsome in a rugged sort of way that attracted the ladies, tough enough to be sure, ex-Marine that he was, but gentle, too, in that easy, understated manner which despite his advancing age as a dedicated bachelor still brought him several relationships that kept the testosterone churning and brought smiles all around. He liked women, and they, those who weren't put off by his obvious lack of ambition for the big time, liked him, too.

That was then, of course. Before the Quake. Now he'd been a lonesome polecat up here on the ranch for months, where opportunities for romance of any sort were severely constricted. He made the most of what else he was good at.

What he was more than anything was good with his hands. A metalworker by trade, he was an artist by some modest acclaim. He welded the basic fences and gates for clients that were his stock in trade, shaping and fusing metal into stout structures that did the job and paid the bills; but more often as his talents were recognized, he was commissioned to craft metal objects, many of them birds, animals, others freeform spheres and angles, large garden pieces or smaller indoor work that edged into the realm of art.

He worked wood, too. Thought of it as whittling those various utilitarian objects he created and what others called sculpture when he let his imagination roam, mostly to produce graceful abstract shapes that bore noticeable similarity to the curves and swells of women's bodies.

He was attracted to form, to well executed constructions of all types, but especially the genetic sort. His eye was quick to find beauty among the flotsam and jetsam of everyday experience. That attraction came to him in many forms, but chief among them was the female of the species. He was enthusiastically heterosexual, so the promise of physical interaction with that beauty that came his way differed in potential from all the others that caught and held his eye.

So of course he had noticed and was captured by Ellen's beauty. Would have been in any situation but especially here in this sere circumstance. He was not the type to be aggressive about approaching her even was she not another man's wife. He didn't hide his attention nor did he inflict it. It was just there, an attraction to be appreciated and enjoyed however fate decreed.

Fate in this case this day brought her to his door. When he answered the knock and saw her there, his breath caught and he quickly looked around at the mess that was his and Mick's room. She noticed his concern, laughed softly and he merely shrugged, a sheepish look and a crooked smile on his face that barely masked his surprise.

"Do you have a minute?"

He nodded, trying to keep his eyes on her face where the nearness of her body was an overwhelming distraction. He made a vague gesture of inviting her in, knowing it was unlikely she'd accept.

"Thanks, no, this will be quick. Sorry to have interrupted you."

"Yeah, um, I was just getting started cleaning up."

They looked at each other blankly for a moment, her eyes lit up and they both burst out laughing.

"Well, we do clean up occasionally. Honest."

"Fortunately," she said, "this isn't a housing inspection. And I am sorry for bothering you. But I don't know Bobby well enough to ask, so I'm hoping you can help me again."

"Mushrooms?"

She nodded, blushing slightly and wondering why.

"Sure. Enough for two?"

"Just me this time."

"Hold on. I have some here. Be right back."

He returned with a small paper bag, handed it to her, said, "Want some company?"

She looked at him intently, her expression hard to read.

"No hassles. I promise."

She looked at him even more intently, just this side of severe, then a gentle smile spread across her face, she glanced off toward her cabin, looked back at him and said, "In an hour or so, if you're free, I thought I'd head up to the hot springs."

"I'd love to join you."

"That would be nice. I'm still a 'shrooms rookie, you know. I can trust you to keep me out of trouble?"

He held up three fingers, said, "I'll do my best. Scout's honor."

✦

Saturday was the end of a long day at the end of a long week and the team was exhilarated. The bids had been chosen for three of the critical first steps in the enterprise zone. David was briefing Clay and Emily.

"Verizon and their subs are building out the telecom. Helicoptering in the towers a dozen at a time. They have a fleet booked for the next several months."

"Will it take that long to be operational?"

"Fully operational, yes, but the basic system for cell and internet should be lit in the next few weeks, at least up the corridor we're building. After that, they'll build them out east and west. That's the grid we'll put in place.

"Second step is to get the fiber in as the road and rail line is graded. Once the cable is fired up, we'll have the first layer of state of the art communications."

"What's the timeline for the road and rail?"

"Slow, but faster than you might imagine. There are some stretches of rail and pavement both that are intact. That makes a huge difference, both in pace and cost. The highway is several million dollars a mile each direction. Rail is less than half that. Whatever we can salvage saves a lot."

"But we're replacing the rails, right?"

"That and improvements to the rail bed, even where it's undamaged," Dam said. He looked at David, saw no objection to being interrupted. "The train will be the best in the world, super-fast and comfortable. And hydrogen powered. But it requires significant upgrade to the existing infrastructure.

"We're building from both ends toward the middle. If everything goes as planned, we should make the final link in Eugene in about two years at worst, maybe 18 months with luck."

"The Golden Spike, eh?"

"Exactly, and we think you and Emily should be there to hammer it home."

"We'll see about that. What do think, Em?"

"It's very picturesque to imagine. I'll have to practice my sledgehammer blows so I don't embarrass the company."

"It's interesting to me," Clay said, "that of all the cutting edge stuff we're putting in play, the rail system gets the most skepticism from the investors."

"Rail in this country opened up the West," Dam said, "and made those investors a fortune. Ever since, freight has been the cash cow. Passenger service has been a fiasco."

"So why are we any different?" Emily said.

"Two factors: first, the passenger service will be reasonably priced compared to any other form of travel; it will be dependable and run like clockwork; and it will be clean and comfortable. That's one part of the answer. The other part is that it will be subsidized by freight that's moving goods to the enterprise zone at high speed, too.

"We have to sacrifice some top end speed to accommodate the freight, but we can still get you from San Francisco to Seattle as fast as total travel time by plane, and we'll do it cheaper and in much greater comfort."

"The other piece of that equation," David said, "is how the train impacts reengineering the roadway. We wanted to dramatically cut down on truck traffic, which is a major polluter and damages the hell out of the road service. Do you want to take this piece, Del?"

"Sure. Moving freight by train is nothing new but moving it efficiently at high speed is. We're striking a balance between the premium it costs the industry and a "total cost" that shipping by semis

entails. The fastest way to achieve that balance is by barring diesel from the enterprise zone completely and subsidizing conversion to more efficient engines.

"We're building the infrastructure to support hydrogen and electric traffic, beginning with dedicated lanes for freight that have all the bells and whistles. Two lanes each direction that are exclusively commercial traffic, and two or nearer the cities three lanes for vehicle traffic only.

"We have a system in place to subsidize the move to environmentally friendly engines. They're toll lanes with electronic readers that charge less per mile for non-petroleum vehicles. Substantially less for smaller loads, too. Double and triple trailers will get priced out pretty quickly.

"The difference in those fees increase yearly by ten percent. Those tolls support the subsidies, which are available to anyone who drives. At the end of the enterprise zone designation, we hope to have all gas powered vehicles off the road and mostly single trailer semis hauling freight."

"This is major social engineering we're practicing," Clay said. "The sort of thing conservatives hold in serious question. What are we hearing from the business community?"

"Lots of grumbling behind the scenes," David said. "But up front they're falling all over themselves to get a piece of the action."

"Money has a way of desolving doubt," Del said. "Doesn't it though. Then, too, our partners up north seem to be a lot less concerned with those kinds of quibbles and much more focused on getting it done."

"True that," Dam said. "They didn't need an enterprise zone to get after it. They just plunged in to rebuilding Vancouver Island and the city. No hesitation on their part about what they should do. Of course, no Gherkin either."

"Apparently," Emily said, "they have better sense."

"Cool air up there must clear their heads," David said. "Premier Ails has been amazing. He worked out a partnership to run the train all the way to Vancouver. Going to hook up with the Trans Can, which isn't high speed but still a pretty nice ride. You'll go from San Francisco to Montreal and do it in style."

"Maybe even all the way from L.A. if they ever get that project built," Dam said. "But maybe that's wishful thinking - unless they fold the rest of California into the Zone."

"Then you'll really hear the business people scream," David said. "They'll think our neighbors up north are trying to annex Cascadia."

"The Canadians have been great to work with," Dam said. "They really understand trains. Kinda European in that way. They've had no problems with the way we're going about it.

"Our guys are a little more turfy. Kiewit is the primary, but they get the specs from our engineers, some very bright guys from the Valley. They're working up algorithms for an A.I. system that's going to make those trains hum, once the system's built."

"And the communities en route will own it, right?"

"Yes, own it but not manage it. There're metrics the licensee has to meet to get renewed. As long as they meet them, and they're very tight metrics, they get re-upped for another two years."

"And who manages the managers?"

"Embrey-Anton on behalf of the owners. The communities. We're building in a system for gathering their feedback."

"This transportation piece is Dam's baby," David said. "It's a complicated project and I can't think of a better person to ramrod it. Excuse my French, but he takes no shit from the business people and he and Wong are on the same page policy-wise. It's a great fit for you, Dam, after all these months lazing around the ranch."

"Del's got a big part of it, too," Dam added. "She's been a godsend."

"Hear, hear," David said. "True on my part of this work, too. I'm not big on blowing smoke your way, Delila, but you really have made a huge difference."

Del looked almost as though she might blush, but instead glanced at each of them in turn, Dam, David, Clay and finally Emily, said quietly, "Thank you all for giving me the chance. Lapsed nun isn't much of a resumé."

They chuckled. She smiled sweetly.

Well played, Emily thought to herself, noting the way David was beaming.

"And what about your piece, David?" Clay said. "Where are we at with the energy initiative?"

"That's a little more complicated. Can I suggest we talk about it over dinner? I'm famished and I'm buying."

"Em and I have to ask for a rain check. We have plans. It'll keep until Monday morning. Let's powwow 9 a.m. I'm really pleased with these other pieces coming together so quickly. It won't be long before we can point to Cascadia and say, 'This used to be the most devastated place in the country. Now it's the best place you can possibly live.' Just a different country, though. Ha! And there'll be plenty of credit to go around!"

✦

Rika was anxious when Bella returned to the compound. "I was worried about you. It's so strange to have no telephone to keep in touch. It makes me wonder if you're all right because I haven't heard from you. Then I realize there's no way that you can call me. Then I worry even more."

Bella hugged her warmly, kissed her gently, laughed just a little, friendly but quickly and almost dismissively. She said, "It was an excellent trip. I learned a lot, met John's friend, Dr. Thiel, Simon Thiel. He was a great help. They both were. It was a reality check for me in dealing with Clay Embry. And I have to admit it was lovely to have dinner at a restaurant with friends." She added quickly, "I only wish you could have joined us."

"I wish so, too." Rika said. "I do. But Clay is doing well, I take it."

"Remarkable well. It's astonishing actually. One would never recognize him as the same fellow who rode up here on a motorcycle a few months ago. I was thinking exactly that when we met with Governor Braun. He has named him an Ambassador - the first one representing Cascadia, I believe. It's an effort to protect him. The staff is clearly worried they'll be more attempts to capture him. Or worse. Unfortunately, I share that concern."

"But nothing more has happened to him since his escape?"

"No, and that's a reason to be hopeful. Nevertheless, we have to wonder what might have changed that they'd no longer be after him. The governor was very forthcoming about wanting him to be

protected. He's asked me to continue to treat him as long as Clay is willing, which he is. They're going to ferry me back and forth every month, it seems."

"Oh," Rika said, turning away slightly, unable to hide her disappointment.

"Darling Rika. You're concerned. I'm sorry. I don't mean to worry you. It's only a few days each month. I'll be fine. In fact, we'll make a point of taking you along next time. It would be so good to get you to the city."

Rika shrugged, said softly, "It's your work. I understand. It's not necessary to coddle me."

Bella held her by both shoulders, looked at her with concern. "This worries me, Rika. This mood of yours sometimes seems so dark, despite how well you keep it to yourself. Tell me how you're feeling."

"About this?"

"About everything. It's been a few weeks since we've talked about us. This situation. The future. How are you feeling about where we are right now?"

"For the most part everything is all right. I don't mean to cause you concern. You have so much to deal with yourself. The same challenges as I have. It's wrong of me to trouble you about these trifles."

"It's not trifles, Rika. Things are what they are. I'm asking you to share your feelings with me. There's no right or wrong. It's simply understanding what is. I always want to know what is...I was going to say on your mind. But it's what is in your heart I want to know."

Rika looked at her, this longtime love of hers, her partner these many years, and knew how honestly she spoke, how much she cared. She knew, too, that there was a distance opening up between them, something barely noticeable that gradually was widening the space between them in the world they shared. She knew in her heart, since Bella had asked, that it was her problem, her basic inability to move along with these changes that had come upon them, that were widening the distance.

"I feel a little lost. That's the best way I can say it. For the first time in my life, I feel like I have no purpose. Nothing I do that is me. Do you know?"

Bella said nothing, just held her gently until she continued.

"I used to care for our home, manage the place, buy the groceries, cook the dinners, lay in provisions, feed the animals, care for the horses, all those wonderful things I loved to do that filled my days. Those things that made your life more comfortable, too, while you went about your very successful work and provided the money we had to do all those things.

"Every day in little ways and big ways too seemed like a celebration of *us*, our life together, our place in the community we shared, the contribution we made to bettering the place we were and the life we led, the love we had for each other and our friends. Now it all seems to have vanished. That life that was ours. Those things that were me."

"We still have the love, Rika. That hasn't changed."

Rika folded herself into Bella's embrace, began very quietly to cry, tears welling in her eyes, to wonder anew who this person was that Bella loved, now that everything familiar was taken from her and she was drawing ever deeper into the private person she was at her core.

✦

Dinner was exquisite, the three of them still held warmly in the place of delight that these pleasures of the city could so casually and commonly offer. Dinner with friends, tonight Indonesian among the many choices they could have made, generous helpings of Rendang, Opor, Gulai, Ayam Bakar, and Nasi Goreng, all of it chased with an extraordinarily tasty Tipsy Toba, an infusion of vodka with Butterfly Pea Flower, Coconut Water, Dry Curacao, and Lemon Juice. That and two bottles of a very good Pinot made for an extraordinary evening.

"I'm embarrassed to say that I need to say goodnight," Dam said to Del and David. He looked slightly sheepish and just a little bit high. "It's been a while since I've been able to engage *my kind* of night life. I believe this is the night. Without further elaboration, let me thank you for an extraordinary week and for this wonderful meal."

With that he was gone and the two of them, Del and David, high as they were, began to take note of the change in the dynamic of the evening. Each of them considered things to say and thought better of it. Each of them squirmed a bit with the sudden intimacy of the other's

presence. Each of them felt the buzz, the sharp edge of the forbidden, and they made peace with it.

"Shall we finish the wine?" David said.

"Let's," said Del, a lazy smile on her face. She looked at him for a moment and said, "it's been a while since I've had so much to drink."

"Me, too," David said, shrugged, smiled, said, "I guess all we can do is go with it."

"My thought exactly," she said.

They drank the rest of the wine, laughed easily at each other's jokes, their observations of the week just passed, all the little curiosities that manifest in the midst of the very high pressure work they were doing, the satisfaction they were feeling at all they were accomplishing, and the pleasure of working together.

"It's a fine evening for a walk," David said as they left the restaurant, "and I have every intention of walking you home."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," she said, and took his arm.

They walked much further down the path that evening than either of them had intended or even imagined.

✦

For Emily and Clay, it was quiet time together with Hope at her place, a very comfortable condominium along the river. The evenings were becoming commonplace, what each of them preferred to many other things they might be doing, and the sense of the family they had become was made manifest.

"Is it possible we might make this arrangement permanent sometime soon, this little taste of cohabiting we enjoy I mean?"

"Sometime, of course. How soon I can't say. I can assure you there's nothing I'd like better and we *will* make it happen as soon as we're certain it's safe.

"It really is a constant source of wonder what exactly has happened to those people, why they're no longer after me if that's the case, or what's delaying them if it isn't."

"I try to make the best of it when you're not here, when we say goodnight and you leave. But I have the same fear I have to choke down every time we part company that I might not see you again."

"I understand. How could I not wonder the same thing. The truth is I'm torn between being thankful they seem to be leaving me alone and a wish that the uncertainty could be resolved once and for all, which of course would likely involve another confrontation."

"Uncertainty is so uncertain. Isn't that the saying? I wish it could be over, too, but I hope you don't have to encounter them again. I suppose my fantasy is that this secession may have changed the equation somehow. That you're not the same threat to them any longer. Is that possible?"

"Definitely possible, even probable we might say. Certainly whatever threat I was thought to be is residing in an altogether different setting now. How threatened Gherkin might be by a citizen's accusations is likely very different than those same accusations by a foreigner, which I guess is what I am now."

"That and also he's pretty impervious to accusations generally, as far as I can tell. He's definitely the most shameless public figure in my experience and that is really saying something."

"You took the words out of my mouth. I wonder if it's a measure of the country's decline that a person of his ilk is president? It's like Nero fiddling or Tiberius and Caligula's decadence that is the only precedent that comes to mind. In that sense, he's truly historic."

"Well. I was raised never to wish one ill, but in his case I gladly make exception. Especially if it will get those goons off your case."

Eventually, as they always must, they said goodnight and he headed to his place alone. He wasn't alone for long.

✦

Dam hit three places in quick succession. Sidetrax had great drinks, and Faces was pretty hot, but the Depot is where he settled in, danced his ass off, and got to know a few of the locals. One of them in particular, a cowboy type, returned his attention and it wasn't long before they paired off together.

He was a bright guy, handsome, named Sam, rugged in that country sort of way, and it was in fact who he was, Dam learned over several drinks, an authentic working cowboy from a family ranch outside of town. "And what about you?" he asked. "What's a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?"

Dam told him a little about his work before the Quake, the destruction of Portland that he saw, the trek to a secure compound in the hills, "close as I've come to ranching myself."

"Yeah," he said, "you don't look much like a ranch hand."

"Why's that? Don't tell me it's because I'm black?"

"Don't be a bore, Damian. Really! There are plenty of black cowpokes here abouts. I know a few myself. This isn't in any way about race."

"Well, I look around this room, a few hundred people I'd guess. Maybe three besides me of color. Excuse me if I can't help but notice stuff like that."

"Don't kid yourself, my friend. There're plenty of black folks here. You'd better believe it. Just that they're being lionized in those private rooms out back."

"Black stallions, eh? All us celebrated sex symbols, well-endowed of course and always willing but not a ranch hand among them, huh? At least not me. And why is that, Sam? Because I don't look rough enough?"

"More like because you've got hands like a girl," he said, and took Dam's hand in his. "Soft, like someone with an office job. Must not be working you too hard up there, I guess, you being a city boy and all."

"And of course I don't mean to be too sensitive about it, but 'boy' isn't something I like being called, either. Especially not twice."

"Better than 'girl' isn't it? Oh, hell, Dam, I'm just funning you. What are you so prickly about? You get subjected to much discrimination up on the ranch?"

Dam laughed, said, "Letting down my hair, I guess. It's been a while since I've been with my peeps. And I don't mean black peeps, you know?"

"Oh, you mean us queer peeps. Is that it? Let me ask what else you black gentlemen from the great Northwest don't like? Just so I don't offend you any further, I mean, before we even get to know each other."

Thereafter, they got along much better. Got to know each other about as well as you can get by with in a semi-public place, and later that much better in a private room in back. It had been a long time

since Dam had sex with anyone and he was insatiable. It was nearly dawn before they parted company that night.

✦

Clay sensed the presence immediately before the light illuminated the room. He was barely inside the door, the screen closed behind him, the man in the seat across the room was armed.

"Mr. Embry," he said, "we meet again."

"Frogman, isn't it."

"Indeed. I'm the one you owe a flashlight."

"If not more, no doubt."

"Let's not quibble. Let me begin by introducing myself formally. Victor Zulu is my name. Frogman is just my former profession."

"And your current profession?"

"Ah! Since you ask, my current occupation is tracker, as in, one who tracks you down."

"Apparently you have."

"Yes, after some lengthy and unproductive detours. You really should have picked up that receiver off Raymond when you frisked the two of them. Too busy grabbing Charlie's iPad, I suspect. But it was an oversight. Could have saved us both a lot of time and trouble.

"Remind me to tell you some time about my days and nights in Omaha, chasing down a signal that finally took me to a homeless camp at the edge of town. I thought perhaps you had reverted to your former ways, the lifestyle we originally intended for you. But, no! It was a toothless old man and his rather aggressive dog with a close hold on a bag of clothes that must have once belonged to you."

"Hopefully he wore them well."

"He probably soiled the pants he was wearing when I jumped him that night. I could see pretty quickly he wasn't you. Not even a vague resemblance except for the clothes.

"And the dog?"

"Um, yes, the dog. I felt bad about that. Shot him dead. Purely a reaction to being attacked."

"Imagine how the old guy felt. When you attacked him."

"I guess we can share the blame, you being the one who sent him the clothes. Gifted him with your karma, we might say."

"Now that you mention it, what exactly is my karma anyway? What did I do to deserve this persistent helping of shit you guys are laying on me?"

"Most recently, you killed AC. That's a factor."

"Did I? You know that how?"

"Deductive logic. That and knowing both the other players well. No way Raymond pulled that off. He might have gotten the drop on C, but he didn't shoot and stab him both in the time Charlie got off a single shot."

"That's a theory and you're welcome to it. I was there. A bystander - an *innocent* bystander I might remind you - who was there only because you and your colleagues wanted it that way."

"Somebody wanted it that way. We were just running the traps."

"And now you're sitting here in the living room of my humble pad with a Glock in your lap and no invitation from me that I can recall."

"I would have called first but I didn't have your number. Those burners are hard to track. Didn't suppose you would invite me in anyway, so I let myself get situated before you got here. The Glock is simply because I thought you might be armed and what's the saying? 'Better safe than ... otherwise.'"

"And what? You're here to *arrest* me, or whatever you call these extralegal kidnappings you specialize in."

"Not especially, no. Not this time. I'm actually here to talk. I hope we can discuss our mutual interests in these times that have so dramatically changed since you and I first got together. Precipitous turns these past few weeks.

"So, if you will very carefully remove that pistol from your ankle holster and put it aside, I'll do the same with this Glock. Then, perhaps, we can ignore the fact that I've broken into your home and instead have a detailed conversation about how we might be useful to each other. We can do that, or we can shoot it out. Your choice."

They had a very productive talk.

✦

Holly and Dirk were deep in the weeds, trying to sort through the various constituencies they wanted to reach and develop a message

that would resonate with their respective needs, much of which were the same but with significant differences, too.

"I have to admit," Dirk said, "I didn't always get exactly what it was that you did until now. Trying to craft a message for so many different interests out there. It's like saying the same thing in a dozen different languages."

"There's some truth in that. But it always boils down to the essentials. Figure out what's most important to communicate, where you absolutely have to get buy-in to move the project forward, focus the discussion there and set aside the peripheral issues for later."

"Big picture, huh?"

"Exactly. I always come at these things with the belief that people have more in common than they recognize, that their needs are more alike than not, and if you can bring them things that meet those needs, it's just a matter of speaking a language they'll hear."

"Getting the telecom up and running should work for everybody. Then we can all get back to talking to each other, for better and worse."

"Yes, talking, texting, social media, and resumption of the barrage of misinformation, no doubt."

"That's been on my mind, now that you mention it. All this work we're doing to build lines of communication. Seems like it could get undone pretty quickly by the trolls."

"All we can do is reach for the better angels. My hope is that the need is so great, people will be less receptive to the bullshit. It's not something we can control when all is said and done."

"I learned long ago that control is an illusion. Hard to accept sometimes, but it's the truth, like it or not."

"I like to think the best we can do is bring a clear message. People either get it or they don't."

"Funny to find ourselves offering Utopia and having to craft a message to sell it."

"Not Utopia, Dirk. This is something new and beautiful, but Utopia is too much like perfection: unattainable and destined to fail."

"Maybe Utopia lite? I could accept that. Better just call it Cascadia, huh?"

✦

It was intensely sensual between them that afternoon. Not sexual but filled with those extraordinary sensory experiences that mushrooms seem to bring our way or at least bring fully to our attention in the moment they occur.

For a while they were merely walking in the woods, noticing details that escaped them on a normal day. At one point they were laughing so hard they couldn't walk, finally falling in a heap on the ground and rolling about, holding their sides and laughing even harder when one of them would gain some control, try on a somber face, and after a moment send them into hysterics again.

They lay side by side in the grass for a while, Fausto hyperaware of her body next to his, her chest rising and falling, her eyes eventually meeting his, their faces mere inches apart. They looked at each other for what seemed like an eternity, suspended in some ethereal place neither of them chose to disturb.

Not kissing her then was the better part of valor, though he knew she'd accept it, maybe even return it, because somehow he sensed it would preempt the possibility of a deeper passion to be theirs if he waited. Still it took self-control that nearly left him shaking when she drew close enough that he could taste her breath and see himself in the dark pools of her dilated eyes, smiled at him so warmly he nearly melted and said to him intimately: thank you.

They were almost unconsciously holding hands by the time they reached the hot springs, both of them very deeply into the innocence of psychedelia and the intensity of this new experience they were exploring together. She barely hesitated before stripping to her bra and panties and wading into the pools. That did register his attention very keenly, something he'd imagined, actually dreamed of, and now saw clearly as even more extraordinary than he'd supposed.

He took off his shirt, shorts, and hat, down to his briefs and joined her in the water. At first it was very relaxed, peaceful, quiet, and gradually more playful, modestly physical, and when they finally left the water to dry themselves in the sun on the mossy shelf, their wet clothing clung to their nearly naked bodies leaving virtually nothing to their imagination.

Each of them was aware of their attraction to the other and somehow felt deeply intimate in their abstention from acting on it any further. Each of them, too, especially Fausto, realized it could be an isolated incident that they would lament forever passively surrendering. They were psychically attuned, though, thanks to the mushrooms, the pheromones, the shared sense of inevitability their cautious exploration today made likely that this experience was an initiation.

✦

Bella felt an unusual stirring inside her. A sense of accomplishment. Recognition. Pride. Modest but still - it was pride.

That session with John and Simon came back to her persistently in bits and pieces of the conversation, discussion, analysis, the deep collegiality that colored the manner in which it proceeded and the way it concluded. There was a respect they paid her that made her proud.

Not that she wasn't already respected in her field. So much so in fact that a waiting list of clients wanting to see her had long since been in place, a practice that was very lucrative by the standards of the profession had supported her very comfortably for many years now, and locally at least in the Portland area she was a sought-after speaker at conferences and symposia.

This was of another level, however, this peer group of John, the highest achiever in her class of aspiring PsyDocs at school, now a very well regarded and oft published research psychologist, and his dear friend, Dr. Thiel, who was international known and highly respected in the field of psychiatry. Simon, he was now to her, a colleague and peer, one who asked to be kept apprised of her work, which he praised, and offered his support.

This was an unusual sensation for her, this feeling of being impressed with herself because colleagues she admired were impressed with her, her work, the importance of the task and the skill she brought to it, the finesse with which she negotiated unknown and perhaps unknowable areas of her patient's mind where it had been skillfully and very professionally manipulated. And brought him back from a very deep rupture in his psyche.

She felt rather good about it to tell the truth. Not that she had ever lacked for confidence in her work. She was good and she knew it. But her work was not usually of such consequence, except to the individual she treated, that person's family, their immediate surroundings. To them her help was very important, and that mattered, but what she was doing with Clay was of a different order.

A street person who was actually the scion of a prominent New England banking family, wandering the streets and alleys of downtown Portland in a haze that was carefully, purposely inflicted for reasons unknown until very recently, long after he and Bella had began working together, wending their way through a sequence of labyrinths and dead ends that very slowly and frustratingly began to open up pathways back from the abyss. Now he was the principal player in an outlandish scheme to create the New Northwest.

She was his doctor. His advisor. His touchstone between that mysterious, unhinged past and the promise of a spectacular future. He was the prospect that was this grand plan called Cascadia, and she was in very fundamental ways the facilitator of that possibility. It was intoxicating when she thought of it that way.

Maybe this is the book. The one every professional dreams about writing. The case that wows everybody, that establishes bona fides beyond question. The one that lifts you out of the pack.

She laughed at herself. This so wasn't like her. But maybe it was. You never know how it goes down until you take a swallow. That dinner the other night was a mouthful and she liked the taste. She had a sense of herself rising. Things were in flux, the world changing, and she perhaps was changing with it.

✦

"I'm very interested to know where the energy piece stands," Clay said. "Can we get something in place before the winter settles in?"

"Happy to tell you there's very good news. Also some complications. But the exciting thing is - let me say this: it's amazing what surfaces when the vested interests are neutralized."

"Such as?"

"Would you believe mini-fusion reactors? Distributed energy sources that provide endless supplies of energy and generate

absolutely no pollution. In fact, done the way we plan, the byproduct is H2O. Pure water."

"This comes from where?"

"Right here in California. Another source in Washington, although they are offline for the time being. Apparently this stuff has been on the shelf for a while."

"Somebody's sitting on it?"

"Yeah, guess who. The power companies. Those 'public' utilities with the best interests of the public always foremost in mind. They have options to buy the technology and have been sitting on it for nearly a year. Our lawyers tell us we can blow past them like the Road Runner."

"And the complications?"

"This is a little dicey. They require a trigger for each unit. These systems can scale up or down, from an individual home, store front, whatever, up to office buildings, apartments houses, public arenas, all the way to community size generators that can power small towns. They are virtually perpetual, once they're ignited, and will provide energy as long as they get the fuel, of which the most immediately accessible is hydrogen. There are others that are even better."

"And I'm waiting for the show to fall. The problem is...?

"The triggers are plutonium chips."

"Plutonium?"

"Chips the size and thickness of half your little fingernail. Maybe even a little smaller. Encased in a tiny lead cube."

"But still plutonium. As in radioactive."

"As in."

"What do the governor's people think?"

"TBD. Still working through it. The optics problem."

"Staunch environmentalists distributing plutonium. That's front page above the fold."

"Indeed. And that's the hold up."

"Meaning that absent their objection this would be your choice?"

"The team's choice. Dam and Del agree with me that this is the way to go. The options are much weaker in every respect. Fossil fuels - no way. Renewable energy - the build out is far too slow, the costs of wind are soaring and anyway it's insufficient to meet the need.

Unreliable and only works if you piggyback on oil and gas or, god forbid, coal. Solar has minimal applicability in the Northwest, especially in winter, and nobody wants to build nuclear reactors. Fusion is it!"

"Except for the triggers."

"That may be mostly a problem of perception. The reality is a lot less daunting than people suspect. The engineers we're working with tell us they ran models that show the housing for the triggers would have survived the Quake with 0.00001 fail rate, virtually destruction proof."

"What other downside?"

"None to speak of. They tell us they can generate these units by the hundreds a day at current capacity, but its scalable to many thousands a day if the demand is there."

"Demand is not a problem. We have plenty. Millions of units needed. What about the triggers?"

"Plutonium is available in ample supply. A couple of pounds of the stuff will power Cascadia for 50,000 years if the models are correct. And, unlike nuclear reactors, no disposal of it is required in the interim."

"It sounds like a nearly perfect solution if the governor can weather the heat. What's your sense of the thinking over there?"

"Dam tells me that Wong was very concerned about how it would play. We haven't heard from the governor yet. As I said: TBD."

"Wong is a smart guy. He'll always cover the governor's butt in making these decisions. My guess is that he'll recommend against it, but the governor is coming from a different place, it appears to me. Politics is in his blood, and in some ways those political instincts are probably more important than ever. But Cascadia in every way so far is traditional policy turned inside out."

"Nobody can argue that. What's he's done already is pretty incredible."

"Balls to the wall, as they say around the locker room. So I don't see him ducking this solution if we tell him it's the best option. He seems to be wedded to a vision of what Cascadia can be and that's going to be his decision point."

✦

"The obvious question is: why should I trust you?"

"Things have changed."

"Just like that?"

"Wasn't my doing, but that's about it."

"You're willing to sell out your country to hang out with me?"

That punch landed. Zulu didn't flinch, but his eyes narrowed and his gaze became more focused.

"I'm trained to keep my composure, but let me say this to you, Mr. Embry. Nobody who knows me would ever make an accusation like that about me. Not if they wanted to continue breathing. My country has had my service for 30 years and it was very good service. I spent two days in a wetsuit in 40 degree water to show I could take it. More than once. Just getting up to speed. I did the hard stuff. The very hard stuff. Stuff that makes nine out of ten drop out. Stuff that when you survive it makes you Delta. Or at least made me Delta.

"You and your elite pals got to skip that part of the training, right? Kinda helicoptered your pampered asses in to the fight. Even put you in charge, being officers and all. That's okay. We're trained to take orders and carry them out, regardless of what we think of the guy giving them.

"We're both Delta, friend, but only one of us is a Frogman. Nobody has ever had reason to question my loyalty. Nor my ability to get the job done."

"Touché! Let me rephrase the question then. How would you convincingly explain your interest in changing sides?"

"It's the sides that changed. My country is unwinding. Or being unwound says it better. The country I served and served very faithfully no longer exists. That's the simplest answer. You can't sell out a country that's no longer there.

"It's two countries now and rumor has it that it's going to be three before long. This idiot president opened up Pandora's Box and he can't control it. And I at age 50 and having been a functionary at the very deepest levels of operation am wondering who exactly it is I'm expected to salute. Does that explain it, sir?"

"It's a start. Let me respond that you and your cohorts have fucked with me at the most basic level of being. You literally tried to take my life away and replace it with a shambolic version of existence at the very fringes of survival.

"You put me on the streets. And for what? Maybe I didn't measure up to your he-man version of service to the cause. But I got my skeleton fried by a bomber in a theater of war and you guys rewarded me by fucking me up even further. Should I say, well, what the hell? Let's be friends!"

"Touché yourself. No argument here. I've been ordered to do a lot of very distasteful things. And I've done them. Yours was not my favorite assignment."

"You think I killed your friend Charlie. How do we square that?"

"My *colleague* Charlie, that is. He was an asshole. Pure and simple. A sadist. The difference between him and me is that he found ways to enjoy your dilemma, even though we both knew what was being done to you was bullshit. He could overlook it for the pleasure it gave him to mess with your mind."

"Some people are better off dead, if you don't mind my saying so. May he rest in piss. Whoever did us the favor has my thanks."

"Spoken like a warrior. Good on you. But what about us?"

"You are tracking me to Omaha, false lead that one, and then here to California, still I imagine in the employ of these nefarious people in the very deep state USG, and sitting here in my apartment, which you very casually broke into, you've come to tell me that you want to join our team. Cascadia, right? This nuevo nation with nothing certain to offer. But it's enough for you to throw away your job, your pension - I assume you get one - your citizenship, all that stuff that makes you - you, and for what? Can you make sense of that for me?"

"What if I told you I'm a California boy? Born and bred. San Diego! True that. Even made the La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club a time of two when I was young and she was willing. Why that matters is it means I'm inclined by nature to go with what's happening. Does that make sense. Cascadia is what's happening. The USA, what's left of it, is toast."

"Still a danger though."

"A very big danger. Another reason why my value to your team should overcome any doubts you might harbor. Gherkin is a fool, but he's a petulant fool. Now that this secession has blown up in his face, he plans to make it right by force. Now that you're no longer part of his empire, he's going to conquer you."

"And you know that how?"

"Intuition. Experience. Gut. Native drumbeats in the bush."

"Nothing specific, though?"

"The rumble of my many associates, all of whom have tenacles deep in the body politic, and all of whom would confirm what I'm saying as obvious, that is if they had reason to curry your favor."

"Like you do."

"Like I do. Yes."

"This is all very interesting, Mr. Zulu. All the more so because you don't show any signs of coming here to kidnap me once again. For which I'm very thankful because I have to tell you I would do my best to kill you rather than let that happen again.

"But I still have no way of confirming that you are someone I suddenly should *trust*, rather than *fear* as has been the case to date. How do I know you're not merely a mole tunneling into Cascadia on behalf of your boss?"

"Gherkin is not my boss. Not any longer. Take me into your team or not, I'm done with him and that entire fiasco he's created. The man has destroyed a country I loved and served the best I could. And that was very damned good. Me and the country both. He's taken the country away from me. I'm done with him."

"And we can test that how?"

"Traditionally, there would be a test of loyalty. You'd ask something very extreme of me, something that would make me culpable for doing your bidding in a way that protected you from any blowback. You'd ask me to do something that served your purposes and in doing so made me the one at risk if something went wrong or there were any consequences. Is there something like that we could entertain?"

"And I'd somehow know you weren't wired when I asked?"

"There is that. I suppose I could strip naked but by now you know how sophisticated that technology is, how versatile the applications

and varied the devices we can access. A recording device taped to the small of my back is so old school we won't even pretend."

"A fiber in my hair. The one that's now in Omaha. Rudimentary part of your stock in trade, I would guess, seeing that you still managed to find me."

"Once I got the coordinates for Charlie's iPad, Sacramento was my next stop, although I note it's now moved back to the ranch. Stolen government property is not an interest of mine, however. It's served my purpose in leading me here. What you do with it is up to you."

"So you may be wired or not and I'd have no way of knowing. I'm told in fact that USG can bounce a satellite signal off that window and record our conversation, should they choose to. '*O day and night*,' says Horatio."

"Classified. Can't say one way or the other. I can say '*there are more things in heaven and earth ...*' For our purposes, there are any number of paces in that march toward trust. You have to decide what is or isn't a misstep. I'm at your mercy."

"That's quite a change of roles."

"Isn't it though. But it is what it is. And it's your choice to act on or not."

Embry sized him up for a very long time before he responded. Puzzles, riddles, enigmas, layers of the onion, Russian dolls, all of them came to mind in trying to accept this person, see him in a place of trust. To imagine it as real, and after a time, somehow he could.

"There is something. Someone. A very powerful and very ugly person in New York. It would be appropriate if he left this mortal coil."

"Quickly?"

"Painfully. He's earned it. And the message sent by the way he dies matters. Greatly."

"I'm not fond of hurting people. As many as I've had to kill, I make it fast and clean."

"This person is a serial rapist. He beats women as he rapes them. Takes pleasure in exercising his extreme wealth and power to do whatever he wants. What he wants is to humiliate them by the pain he inflicts and the ease with which he gets away with it. Why does he

do it? Like a dog licks his balls. Because he can. That's what he's about and he's been at it for a long time."

"We have a saying: when legal can't to it, extra-legal may have to get it done. He sounds like a deserving candidate for my special attention."

"He'll no doubt be well-protected."

"So was Bin Laden."

✦

The ship was anchored a few hundred meters off shore at the mouth of Lewis Bay, the view of the Cape no doubt impressive from the Master Suite on the main deck of the Westport 130 Tri-Deck. That was his preferred quarters when he was sleeping alone, as he was tonight. Two bodyguards stalked the foyer and the salon. Zulu neutralized them first, then moved on to the pilothouse.

The crew of seven but one were asleep, including the captain, a long-time employee who'd seen and heard plenty in his time with the boss and kept his mouth firmly shut, his opinions to himself. His most trusted crewman, a mute, cleaned up the worst of the messes, gathered the bloody sheets and pillow cases into a duffle bag that he weighted and tossed overboard, and doctored the women at least enough to get them back to shore.

The first mate was at the helm tonight, leaning back in the captain's chair, reading another Patrick O'Brian tale and barely keeping his eyes open. The hand that covered his mouth and one with the needle that injected the propofol caught him simultaneously and he was unconscious within seconds.

Zulu gagged him, duct taped his mouth shut, and wrapped him firmly to the chair. That made three so disabled and the others asleep were two decks below and forward. The target was one deck immediately below him.

He eased his way through the foyer, slipped the lock to the suite, eased his way toward the sleeping bulk, and hit him with just enough drug to knock him out for a few minutes. He quickly gagged him and bound him spread-eagled to the plush mattress. Then he waited for him to revive. It was in fact a very nice view of the Cape from here, the window generous, the evening clear.

"Ah, Mr. Schadensohn," Zulu said to him gently when the man awoke. "I bring you greetings from a long line of women you've mistreated horribly. Were it not for the vicious things you've done to them, I personally would not be able to do what I'm going do to you.

"I am their avenging angel, though, and you, sir, are going to suffer terribly." With that, he stripped away the man's pajama bottoms and began to cut.

✦

David Worthy was ethical in his behavior, some would say to an extreme that bordered on neurosis, but he had never before faced unfaithfulness as an issue. Moral, dutiful, he wasn't sure where these aspects of the deliberation fit in the big picture of his position as a married man. What he was sure of is that he had just enjoyed the best sex he could remember, at least since the days when he and Ellen were courting. Maybe even better and great either way.

Delila Main was a phenomenon who had touched him physically, mentally, emotionally, even psychically with that unplanned, unexpected, and thoroughly overwhelming night they spent together. It engaged him to the point that, as he tried to mull over the obligations he had in the matter to his spouse, the memory of sheer pleasure, excitement, and relief that sex with another woman brought him repeatedly erased his focus and replaced it with sensations of pure bliss.

One quality he mastered as a business executive that carried over easily into his private life, he found, was the ability to compartmentalize his reactions to separate events and the requirements they demanded to function successfully. So it was with her apparently.

When she and he came face to face at the office Monday morning, her smile as always was warm and friendly without any hint whatsoever of intimacy. His relief was palpable and he was able to respond in kind. Whatever the effect of their dalliance, wherever it might go or not, business as usual continued.

Dam, too, had recovered from his somewhat feverish weekend and with little distraction was able to zero in on the challenges at hand. While David briefed Clay and Emily on the fusion energy opportunity,

he and Del began to tackle the quandary of getting sufficient housing in place to shelter how many hundreds of thousands in need as winter came ever closer.

They had no accurate count of how many in Cascadia were homeless, how many partly but unsafely housed, how many needed what degree of support to repair their adequate housing to make it whole and sound again. That was part of what Dirk, Holly, and Bobby were trying to assess through their informal polls of the network they were building.

Del had suggested they develop links to the churches, which as irreligious types they hadn't previously thought to do and in doing as she suggested quickly made inroads into communities new to them, particularly among those of color in the urban areas of Portland and Salem. The needs there were no greater or lesser than elsewhere in Cascadia, but the financial resources were sparser than in the general population and the solutions to be effective required more specific, focused levels of support.

"Classic examples where basic income will make substantial difference in the ability those folks will have to fend for themselves," Del said as they looked at reports that were coming in. "Seed corn is what's needed."

"Been there," Dam said, looking at her with an interest tempered by his instinctive skepticism of white empathy for black people. "I live - well, I *lived* in the best section of Northeast. Places that once had been formidable family homes and now are mostly - *were* mostly - generous condos and apartments. The levels of poverty radiated out from there in increasing degrees of fucked all the way to the airport. Not much seed corn to be had. What there was folks had for dinner."

She shrugged off his attitude, took no offense, said, "That's what we intend to change, right?" And bumped him with her shoulder, made him smile.

"We need to keep looking at this as sequential layers of infrastructure," he said. "I understand that. But it moves housing down the list of priorities when in actuality, next to food, nothing is more important. Especially with winter coming."

"I hear you, and it's frustrating to realize so much has to be built before we can begin to get housing in place. Need communications, need transportation..."

"Energy, too. Just because you're dry doesn't mean you won't freeze your buns anyway, and freeze 'em in the dark, no less."

"I keep reminding myself how lucky we are, how lucky I am" she said. "To be in this position where we can make a difference. Where I can work with you folks who are so smart and capable. I really can't believe my good fortune. Does that sound selfish? With all those people hurting."

"Speaking of selfish, I have to confess. The past few months at the ranch were extremely frustrating for me. That seemed self-referential to a shameful degree when everywhere around us people were struggling just to exist.

"There I was living in luxury, literally in this luxurious place Dirk provided us and I was feeling sorry for myself. I was craving something like this. A city scene, a big problem, something that would challenge my skills. I told Holly about how I was feeling. I actually thought about walking here I was so stir-crazy.

"Understand, Del, there's absolutely nothing that gets me off more than puzzling out solutions to problems. Nothing."

He looked at her sideways, smiled a wry smile, said, "Well this weekend was pretty great, but still. Big challenges are my jam. Always have been. And boom, here we are.

"Fell in my lap and this is, like, really big, right? None bigger. Fell right in my lap, like so often in my life these things happen. I mean, I work for it, don't get me wrong. I have the credentials.

"And I love it but I wonder, too, sometimes if how I feel is the ultimate selfish expression of an angry young man once again getting his way because other people are suffering."

"You have the skills to alleviate that suffering," she said, "Enjoy doing it, Dam. It's good stuff and you're the man for it.

"Hell, all this fell in *my* lap and unlike you I had no training for it. No reason to think anyone should pay me any mind whatsoever. But here I am. I don't know why. But it feels right. It feels good. Things are coming at me in a huge rush and all I feel is this elation. And

maybe I should feel selfish, too, but I'm having a great time. I really believe the smart thing to do is make the most of it."

✦

"Have you given any thought to maybe moving on" Mick asked her.

"Moving? From here? You mean without the kids?" Ailey said.

"Well, I just wondered. It seems like things up here are changing. Dam and David have been gone a while, and I get the sense that Bella is looking around. Maybe not, but she's been to Sacramento twice now. I might just be a little antsy myself but it feels to me like the group here is beginning to break up."

"Sounds to me like you're the one looking to go. Getting tired of me, are you? Maybe I'm getting old, huh?"

"It's not like that. I mean, yeah, I am hoping to move it along one of these days. Can't stay here forever, can we? But I hope we can figure out a way to go someplace together, you know? Like that."

"That's sweet, Mick. I'm glad you feel that way. And I hope we can stay together, too. But I have a job. The kids, Holly. The only support I have."

"And I don't, right? I get what you're saying. But I can get a job. At least if we can get to where things are still normal. I could support us."

"And blow off college? You're half way to graduation, right? Why would you kiss that off. So you can work at a gas station for the rest of your life?"

"I'd do better than that. I have some skills and I'm a pretty smart guy."

"If you're smart you'll go back to school. Get your degree. Do your art, or tech, whatever. Why would you give all that up just to shack with me?"

"I really think I love you, Ailey. I don't want to be without you in my life. Do you understand?"

"I love you, too, Mick. You're a great guy and you've made such a huge difference in my life. More than you can know. But let's be real, too, huh. This has been really nice for both of us, finding each other here. Something very special. But it's a big world out there beyond

this magic ranch of ours and we might feel different in different circumstances. It might be like that. You know what I mean?"

"I know how I feel. It's not circumstantial. This is just the age thing again, isn't it? You think I'm too young to know what I'm doing."

"Mick, here's what I think: we should be here now. Enjoy what we've got."

"Yeah, I get that. Carpe diem, right? That trip to town the other day got me thinking about what's next. It was really nice, being with you in a restaurant, even with the kids there. Reminded me there's a life out there, even that little taste of it in Molalla. I was thinking how much I'd like to have that kind of life with you."

"It *was* nice. Being there with you. I just remind myself everyday not to get ahead of things. Right now there's us, this place here, and my work with Holly. What comes next is impossible to guess, so I don't try. I'm just thankful to have this time with you."

"Me, too. And, yeah, who knows what's next? Maybe Holly will hire me, too. Get a taste for motorcycles and need a maintenance man."

✦

Holly, in fact, did need a motorcycle, some basic maintenance instruction and someone to teach her how to ride it. She cornered Mick later that same day, asked if he could show her what she needs to know.

"You're kidding, right?" he said to her.

"Not at all. Why would you think that?"

He just laughed. "No reason, just a surprise. Wondered if Ailey put you up to it. Be glad to show you the ropes. We'll have you race qualified in no time."

"Just competent is all I'm looking for. I'm going to be spending some time on the road and need to know what I'm doing."

She and Dirk were going to be meeting in person with the first series of groups in their network, putting the pieces in play that will become the initiatives of the Enterprise Zone. Bikes were still the best way to get around if you needed something faster than horses.

The first order of business is to firm up connections between the groups they'd been in touch with. That means meeting face to face. Look them in the eye, hear the nuance in their voice, read the body

language, build the next level of those relationships. That means transportation to get there. Biker chick she's going to be, it seems.

"Can you teach me? I can pay you, of course. And it would make things so much better than riding doubled up with Dirk."

Mick always found her a little intimidating, partly because she was so smart and self-assured but mostly because of Ailey. She was very protective of her and without ever having said so made Mick aware that she was watching for the slightest hint of mistreatment or unkindness. Now that he and Ailey had been paired up for a while, Holly treated him with a noticeably gentler hand.

Up close now, he the teacher and she the student, it was a different vibe but still intimidating, nonetheless. For one thing, she was beautiful, tight and firm for as old as she was, maybe mid-thirties he'd bet. She smelled great, too, some kind of spicy scent that was new to him. This was pretty cool work.

Being in such proximity with her was for a healthy young man more stimulating than he'd prefer. Riding behind him, her arms around his waist, hands clasped at his belly just above his crotch and stroking him with the bouncing of the bike on the bumpy trails brought on a substantial erection, which made for a slow dismount. It wasn't something he thought she'd want to see or appreciate if she did but it was happening pretty regularly when they rode.

Holly didn't seem to notice. If so, she ignored it. She was very focused, anxious for her turn to be driving, him behind her, which they got to soon enough. They began in that position with him still driving, her in front with her hands and feet on his to sense the accelerator, the clutch, the gears, him with his chin on her right shoulder and his arms under hers, snug against her breasts, his erection now pressed tightly against her butt.

This time when they stopped, he dismounted first and walked away from her, saying "'scuse me, got to pee." It was all he could do once he was out of site to stroke himself only a few times before calming everything down and getting back to work.

Whatever else she might have noticed, Holly learned how to ride in short order and soon enough they were riding together on separate bikes, her getting better with every session. Much as he enjoyed the stimulation of their time in the saddle together, it was a relief to both

of them when she was finally on her own and he could return his attention to Ailey.

Sic transit gloria, a pleasure that he'd likely never have again. It was a feeling that stuck with him for a long time, though, and every time he saw her for months thereafter, the memory had to be forced from his mind before the same old physical reaction occurred. The great thing about youth is the body responds.

✦

"The governor says it's a go," Dam said. "Get the fusion systems in place as fast as possible, but full transparency with the communities first. That's the message to Holly and Dirk. This will put her communications skills to the test. "Wong says the governor advises we install them on the path of least resistance. If some people don't want them, or want to think it over, they'll self-select for our later attention. Get done as much as we can as fast as we can. Get back to the others *when* we can and figure out something that works for them."

"Greatest good for the greatest number," Del said. "Makes perfect sense."

"That guy earns more of my respect every time he speaks," David said. "For a politician, his cojones are in evidence in all the right ways."

"At all the right times," Del said. "And this is the crucial time."

"He's definitely the right leader." Clay said. "I can't imagine there are many like him out there in the public arena. I sure haven't met them. In my limited experience with government leadership, the closer you get to them the harder it is to take them seriously.

"This guy is something altogether different. Really seems to be operating on vision and personal conviction. As Del says, he's the absolutely right man for the times. We're fortunate to have him calling the shots."

David said, "History tells us the great challenges produce great leaders. This is definitely a helluva challenge and so far he's met it head on. The fact we even have a chance to pull this off is pretty incredible. If we get it done - even most of it done - it will be historic. There's never been anything like this even attempted before, as far as

I know. I've got to believe historians will have a lot of good to say about Governor Braun."

"If we do this right, they will," Clay said. "And if not they'll cite it as textbook fiasco. Let's make it the former, shall we?"

✦

Dirk and Bobby were hashing out their options. Bobby in particular was trying to make the case.

"I'm not saying they won't. But I am saying there's probably gonna be a lot of 'maybe' to overcome. Like maybe this is a good idea and maybe it isn't. That sort of thing."

"Understandable. I had the same debate with myself before I got to where I'm at with it now. Our team at David's shop was mostly systems engineers. Gear jockeys, yes, but whatever else they were doing it was systems we were building. All of us look for the bugs every step of the way. It's a lot better to find 'em and fix 'em on the front end than to reengineer the system after it's up and running."

"I know you know those things, Dirk. I'm inclined to go with it on your say so. But a lot of folks up my way are going to wonder if it's the right thing."

"I get it, Bobby. I do. It's not like all us settlers have earned their trust."

"That is a factor. But that's not to say they can't accept it if it makes sense to them. You tell me it is a whole lot less dangerous than what we've been doing, the coal, oil and gas, even burning wood. That's an argument that can make a lot of sense up there. Make the case it won't smoke up the tent."

"That stuff, all those petrochemicals, burning coal and wood, fills our lungs with poison all day every day. That's the truth. Maybe the good outweighed the bad. Keeping warm, cooking meat, light to see by at night, all good. That doesn't mean it isn't poison though. These systems we're going to put in place are clean energy. Do the same things, the good ones, without the poison."

"Yes, 'cept for that little piece of fire that burns forever. Am I right?"

"Big poison if it ever gets out of the box. Thing is to keep it in there."

"Like I say, these folks can decide if it's the right thing. Just need to make the case that they understand."

"What about if we fly you down to Sacramento next time we go? You can see the system in operation for yourself. Maybe that would help the discussion."

"Last time I got out of a chopper, I swore I'd never set foot in one again. Have to say, 'no thank you' to that idea."

Dirk waited for the rest of the story, figured finally he was going to have to ask if he was ever to hear it, and he did. "When was that?"

"October 4, 1993, getting the hell out of Mogadishu after two days fighting those bastards. Killed 18 of us Rangers, dragged two through the streets maybe before one of 'em was even dead. Whole lot of us got our ass shot just trying to stay alive, get our guys out of there.

"I thought I was gonna die right there in the dust and the dirt. Didn't want to die, no, but didn't want to get dragged through the town even worse. Flying out of there, we was praying 'don't shoot us down.' Got hit by rifle fire plenty but that bird flew. Every one of us guys was saying, 'please don't let us go down again.'

"When we landed at the U.N. base, they dug a bullet out of my butt. Didn't even feel it I was so glad to be out of there. Said to myself, Bobby, you got lucky this time but the next time those birds might not treat you so good."

"Helluva story. Black Hawk Down, huh?"

"That's what they call it. Made it a movie, people tell me, but I wouldn't go. Saw it the first time and that was enough."

✦

Holly Weller was a self-made woman. Her two childhood aspirations vacillated between a father who urged her toward the traditional role of a woman as he saw it, one that emulated her mother who was beautiful, charming, clever, vivacious, and adept at using those qualities to charm her husband's colleagues, host their frequent parties, and further his career.

Her mother, though, pushed her toward the opportunities opening up for women that she herself had missed, those that potentially made equal or at least more equal the roles played by partners in a

relationship, one that made Holly prepared to fend for herself if that partnership faltered and she was on her own.

Prescient that, although it took her a while and two children before she came to own that choice. Her mother fell ill and died suddenly while Holly was in college. The trauma of that loss unsettled her in ways that brought her father's guidance to the fore where previously she was gaining a growing confidence in her own abilities. Absent her mother, security fully captured her perspective.

Enter Aaron Weller, star of the business faculty and a full professor at barely thirty, handsome, witty, flirtatious, and some said tenured at his tender professional age because his family had endowed a chair at the university. He came from money, was facile at inheritance and all it provided someone of his capabilities, which included a keen sense of what he could demand in a spouse.

Holly fit the bill. She was young, attractive, bright, funny if a bit sardonic, and very appealing too was her virginity. Rare was the college sophomore who could make such a claim and she didn't have to. He could sense it and confirmed it the first time they slept together.

With her father's enthusiastic approval, they married. He came with nearly everything a father could want for his daughter, plus a pre-nup, which anticipated their eventual parting soon after their second daughter was born. Finances were his strong suit, fidelity not so much.

It was nowhere near the first of his indiscretions, but inflagrante dilecto - while the crime is blazing - so perfectly characterized what became the final straw when she caught him bedding the babysitter one night. That the two of them briefly became an item gave Holly one small satisfaction when the new dean of the business school at his introductory faculty party innocently asked Aaron's arm candy, "And how did you two meet?"

A lot of throat-clearing rose up from the gathering and only the briefest glances Holly's way, where she was seated with a very gay and gracious escort who insisted she join him "at these horrid affairs." He meant faculty gatherings but the irony wasn't lost on either of them in urging her to give no quarter. So she attended and was rewarded with that wholly unintentional bon mot.

Holly was seven months pregnant at graduation and had been gestating one or the other of her kids for nearly the entirety of her junior and senior years. In exchange for modest trust funds to support them, she received as the divorce settlement tuition to the graduate school of communications and a small monthly alimony for two years, enough at least for rent, food, and child care while she finished her master’s degree. The only man she'd ever slept with managed to screw her good one last time.

One thing she gained from the experience was a renewed appreciation for her late mother's advice. Father already had remarried a much younger woman and was stupid with having his ashes hauled once again, apparently with great enthusiasm and expertise. She may have been planning to fuck him to death.

The woman, who was barely Holly's senior, made no pretenses of any affection, treated her coolly and with barely concealed hostility as a threat to the family's assets she was targeting for herself. Security, that fond illusion Holly so diligently pursued, was found and lost with astonishing clarity for the vaporous construct it really was.

She set about building her own support system. Within two months of earning her master's, she got on with a newly forming company led by one David Worthy. The organization was in its initial stages of developing a powerhouse tech company offering visualization software as a service rather than a physical product for purchase. Cloud computing was a revolution, a novel approach to marketing those types of tools for business.

It was an extraordinarily successful strategy, bringing along even the titans like Microsoft and Adobe, and nearly destroying others who were less nimble in making the change. Because their company was one of the very first to market SOS, Worthy was able to build a leader in the field by putting more money into capability and less into equipment, and then lease those capabilities to you in the cloud. CD ports went the way of floppy discs, which freed up a lot of space.

Holly had quickly become a key part of the management team as VP of Marketing Communications. Getting people to change horses mid-stream, and tech is always mid-stream, was a challenge made easier by the obvious benefits they were offering the customer. She mastered the message.

Something about the clarity of her explanation and the focused stoicism she shined on them, waiting for them to grok it and accept the obvious, that the candy store of stuff was closing and capability was now for lease, earned her an "ice queen" rep behind the scenes. Nobody would say it to her face, of course, that beautiful, calm, crystalline composure she brought to the table where these decisions got made and where she made the right choice virtually unavoidable.

Within three years, she was knocking down thirty grand a month plus bonuses and a growing fistful of options, making a big name for herself in the industry. David Worthy was her biggest fan and paid her what she was worth without quibbling. Talent is what the business is about and she was a rare one.

Even as success came to her, she was cautious with her personal life. She and the girls shared a very spacious apartment, the entire top floor of an elegant old building in the near Northeast. By now she easily could afford to buy, but security she knew from experience could be elusive. So she waited. Kept her own counsel, came by Ailey as an addition to the family, and together raised two rambunctious, wonderful girls.

Now her job was selling the Cascadia Enterprise Zone. Ten years into her career, nobody doubted that she was the one for the job. If that was security in this incredibly insecure world they were rebuilding, she had accomplished it.

What no one knew, what she shared with nobody, was the one insecurity that still held her in its sway: her fear of sex. Not a fear in her own mind; she saw it as a rejection of that rather squalid and disappointing activity she'd shared with a man once and never revisited when they parted ways. But it was an unnatural way to conduct what otherwise was a healthy and vigorous life. She knew that.

Women were many things to her, friends, colleagues, competitors, people mildly or vividly interesting, intellectually stimulating, figures of stunning physical beauty and grace, but not sexual interest. Sometimes she wished they were, that they could be a safer option, but it simply wasn't there.

Incredibly it had been past ten years since she'd had sex with anyone but herself, and that mostly as a furtive search for physical

release that rarely was satisfying. She was a healthy woman with all the normal urges and desires who was sublimated by an inability to transcend the equation where sex and a hunger for security, for someone to support and care for her, had led to humiliation.

✦

The unspoken truth was that she was very stimulated by her contact with Mick. He was young enough to represent no threat and she of course would never betray Ailey in the way she herself had been betrayed. The circumstances then were perfect for accepting that nearly innocent titillation of their motorcycle rides together.

She was casual in letting the palm of her hands rhythmically bump against his erection as they bounced down the ranch road, feeling the muscles of his stomach tighten and the bulge in his pants strain against the fabric of his jeans. She felt herself getting wet with excitement as his became more apparent.

There are many times when being a person of great self-control is critical in business. This was business of a different sort and that control was vitally important here. She was shocked and almost embarrassed to find how tempted she was to take hold of his penis, feel its firmness, stroke the length of it even just a few times, but of course she couldn't. Wouldn't. Didn't dare. Knew better than to set in motion that sort of thing.

Still, when he rode behind her with his arms threaded through hers, his biceps cradling the sides of her breasts, his very stiff erection rigid against the base of her spine, nearly nestled in the crack of her ass, the vibration of the bike where her clitoris was pressed against the seat, she finally came so quickly and completely that she soaked her underpants.

He was clumsy, almost comical in unsuccessfully trying to hide his erection when he dismounted the bike and stumbled away, claiming he had to pee. What he would have seen when she stood up for a minute and smoothed the front of her pants was the fold of material between her legs was visibly wet.

That sort of interplay came to an end, a relief and a disappointment both for both of them, when they began riding separate bikes, and neither was certain thereafter what the other may

or may not have noticed. For Holly, celibate for ten years, it was the single most erotic act since her failed marriage. Due to its sheer innocence and complete absence of expectation, it was quite possibly for her the most exciting sex ever.

✦

Rika said, "Holly, excuse me. Do you have a minute?"

"Of course, Rika. How are you? We haven't talked in forever."

"Oh, I am well. But yes if you have time I'd love to chat."

"That would be wonderful. The kids are with Ailey, so I'm all yours."

Rika blushed at the familiarity of these American sayings, intimate and casual both. Her upbringing was so different in the exactitude with which words were used, the care to choose just the right inflection, the degree of affection or distance that was appropriate. Hers was a much more formal culture. She'd had to learn by careful consideration just what value to give such comments.

"You and I spoke once when Bella was working with Ailey about being alone. I asked you whether it ever was lonely for you and you said with the girls you are not alone."

"I remember that conversation. And of course you meant being without a partner but were too polite to say when I didn't respond to that part of the query."

"I don't want to pry into your private affairs, but I am curious because you are unique in that way. Is it all right for me to ask it?"

"Sure. I know that it's unusual and that many people are curious about why that is. It may seem disingenuous but I rarely think about it to tell you the truth. Between raising the girls and doing my job well, my days are very full. It may be that adding a partner to the mix is more than I could handle right now. I'd have to short-change someone or something, which I'd never want to do."

"I understand. Bella and I sometimes have said that we don't know how we'd be able to fit children into our schedule, for the same reason."

"When I began working, my ambition was to support myself and the kids. I really wasn't focused on much more than that. But the work I did with David and the rest of the team was so exciting. It gave me

such a thrill when I discovered that I could do it very well. I guess my ambition then became to do it as well as I possibly could."

She hesitated, looked at Rika absently as though she was considering the truth of what she was about to say as something of a revelation to herself as well.

"I came to realize that I might be the best at it. Does that sound precious? I mean that my ambition grew. I wanted to be recognized in my field as one of the very best. Maybe that explains why I haven't found time to meet a partner. I might be too busy trying to be a rock star."

She laughed gently, shrugged her shoulders, wondered where this discussion was going to go.

"The reason I ask," Rika said, almost shy in her body language, "is that like all of us, your world has changed so dramatically. These very basic parts of who we are and what we do have been disrupted. You and the girls are together, of course, but your work has been interrupted, put on hold now for a long time. What I wanted to ask you, if you don't mind, and knowing how important your work has always been to you, have you felt unsettled by losing it?"

"That calls for a complicated answer. Yes, of course, I felt unsettled. But my first response to the earthquake was great relief when the kids were okay. It was shocking to see our home wrecked, but getting to this place, seeing what Dirk was providing us, was such a comfort. Just knowing that the girls, Ailey, and I would be safe and secure took away my biggest fear.

"By the time we were barely settled here, the first parts of the Enterprise Zone began to take shape, and that has been a god send - for all the people who will benefit from it, of course, but selfishly I have to admit it has been an exciting opportunity for me. Different from the work you ask about but it's another way to apply my skills and knowledge. So it's been very satisfying in that way.

"Actually, in many respects, I'm finding it more challenging and engaging than the work I used to do. It has so much more potential value - doing it not for commerce but for humanitarian reasons. That is huge. Does that answer your question, Rika? For a communications professional, I didn't mean to ramble so."

Rika smiled but her countenance was demure, somewhat withdrawn.

"Yes, that is what I wanted to know. Thank you for sharing with me. All of us have had to make these adjustments and you've handled it so well. I know that Bella, too, feels the loss of her practice, she misses her patients, but she has found so much engagement in working with Clayton.

"This Enterprise Zone is such a remarkable development. So good for so many people and you all are doing such important work." She looked at Holly with a warm smile that seemed to fade away to a wistfulness, and added quietly, almost under her breath, "I am still looking for where I can contribute."

✦

The weekend in Sacramento came around again. Dam bid goodbye and was off to meet Sam, the two of them having planned an evening of drinks, dinner, party, and who knows what all, but they had their hopes. It was so great to have cell service again, Dam couldn't help thinking to himself as that mid-week conversation got them together, made plans, and confirmed to each of them their continued interest for at least another encounter.

David and Del said goodnight to him, Clayton and Emily, and left the office separately half an hour apart, returned alone to their respective apartments, showered, dressed, and met for dinner at an Old Town restaurant, each of them hoping that the meal was actually the appetizer and merely a prelude to another night of feverish sex.

They had no discussions all week about anything other than business but once, when David said quietly, "Would you like to have dinner Saturday night?" and she nodded affirmatively with a brief Cheshire cat smile. He named the time and the restaurant. Neither of them said anything more.

Several hundred miles to the north, it was a beautiful evening, warm for October, clear, the stars sparkling storybook-like in a very dark sky. The Eees were doing their customary sleepover, Holly and Dirk supervising while they continued their freewheeling discussion about their plans for the upcoming road trip, what they should take,

how they'd supply their needs en route, who they'd meet with first and why.

Ailey and Mick were deep in the woods, doing what they liked to do when they had time to themselves. Bella and Rika were reading, talking, reading some more, and then off to bed for a little dalliance of their own.

Fausto and Ellen were walking quietly through the trees toward the hot springs, saying next to nothing, each of them doing their best to maintain their composure and contain their excitement. Each of them knowing what was about to occur and wanting it with a restrained anticipation that grew stronger over the nearly two weeks since they last and innocently ventured out together. This night they both knew was going to be anything but innocent.

✦

Schadensohn passed out shortly after Zulu began castrating him. The horror in his eyes, silent scream, writhing body, sheer intensity of the pain and the unraveling of his disbelief was excruciating. His executioner made it quick but painful in extremis, pausing briefly between each cut for emphasis.

The blade was surgical and passed easily up underneath the public bone and past the left testicle around to the rectum and then around the other testicle and back to the beginning of the cut. There was less blood than he expected but still it covered his surgical gloves and splattered his wetsuit.

When he completed that part of his work, he removed the gag, and for ease of access slit each of the corners of the man's mouth from where the lips joined to where the jawbone connected to the skull, lifted the genitals from the cavity and shoved them penis first deep into his throat. The autopsy later was unable to say with certainty whether Schadensohn bled to death or suffocated.

Zulu moved quickly and quietly away to the steps aft, collected his gear, donned his diving mask, turned on the oxygen, and slipped silently into the cool water, which thoroughly washed away the blood if not his sins. The ship security cameras would show only a dark figure in wetsuit and mask moving purposefully, efficiently, with

confidence; otherwise, no one on board had seen or heard him except the victim and he would tell no tales.

He swam nearly to shore where the appropriated Sunfish was anchored, sailed it to Yarmouth Cove and tied up at the dock, walked the short distance to DiPalma's, where the rental car was parked and no surveillance cameras were present. He stripped away the wetsuit, packed his gear neatly in the duffle, made the long drive back to Newark, and caught the late flight to San Francisco. No visa required, not yet at least, in the fictious name he traveled under or any other.

✦

Governor Braun had taken immediate steps to address security concerns and the likely conflicts secession would bring about in the relation of his nation-states with the former United States. The nature and degree of that conflict remained to be seen, but Braun was going to be prepared for whatever came his way.

Gherkin was predictable in his erratic behavior. Braun suspected he would quickly position his unraveling nation as another of his strategic maneuvers to give his conservative supporters a punitive upper hand in crushing the "woke," a term he applied liberally to everyone to the left of his own unhinged politics.

The question if he chooses to strike is where and how, given that several additional states now were following Cascadia in suing for secession. Braun's suspicion was Cascadia would be his choice. It was furthest from the tyrant's capital geographically, politically, and philosophically. And it was weakened.

Attacking the West Coast verbally had been his schtick for years. Doing so physically would come naturally enough that his followers might barely blink. Then, too, it was his nature as a blowhard and bully to prefer to fight the injured. He abandoned Cascadia in its time of severe need and now might well choose to exploit that damaged and disabled people as a convenient target for *his* needs.

So Braun moved quickly in designing a response. There was not only no way to build a traditional military presence immediately, but to Braun's thinking no need either. In this new and brazen approach to governance he was undertaking, defense was another sacred cow to be upended, examined, rethought.

Physical force encompasses a broader range of expression than the old constructs we instinctively call to mind: guns and tanks and planes and bombs. They destroy. All the strident corporate and political infrastructure that supports their continued deployment is absent in Cascadia. Rather than beginning to reestablish it, there are other layers of armaments that can be activated more easily and effectively. They disable. That is where Braun chose to cast his fate.

✦

Dirk and Holly settled on a ripples in the pond strategy for outreach. They would meet in person with the nearest circle of groups they'd been in touch with by radio and when those communities had agreed with the Implementation Plan, they in turn would reach out to the next circle of contacts. As issues were raised in that process, Holly and Dirk would do the follow up negotiations.

Now that she was a competent biker, Holly was surprised when Dirk advised more lessons were needed before they set out. He led her to a remote area of the ranch, where they dismounted and parked the bikes. He pointed to a series of targets at different distances from where they stood, withdrew a 9MM Sig Sauer pistol, and began to instruct her in the deadly uses of the weapon.

"Is this really necessary?" she said.

"Let's hope not," he said, and showed her how to release the safety.

"The very first rule is do not draw the weapon if you're not ready to use it. The second is if you use it, do it with deadly force. There's no half way with guns. If you can avoid them, do so. If you need them, do not hesitate for even a second to aim and fire. We'll practice your aim."

Like virtually everything else she did, Holly listened and learned, focused on getting it right, and within a few days she was a crack shot. They agreed to set out first thing tomorrow.

✦

It was slower going than they expected, lots of backtracking when they came to areas that were impassible, but they reached the ferry just before dark. Jonah was nowhere around, not at the boat, not at

home. They set up camp in one of his outbuildings and decided to call it a night.

By morning he was still nowhere to be found and Dirk was frustrated. He knew the combination to start the engine on the boat but lacked the confidence he could cross upstream, which was what was required from this side.

Holly was matter of fact about the whole thing, which calmed him down somewhat. The trek once they crossed the river was a long one to Lake Oswego. He hoped to get together with his contact there today and maybe get a powwow with the leaders of the community soon thereafter, even tonight with luck.

So far his luck was lagging. Hers, too, but Holly was nothing if not cool and composed. She had that sense that things would happen when they're meant to and not before. Pushing the noodle got you nowhere.

"I really want to get these first few pieces in place," he said to her. "This has been a dream for me. Not one I ever thought would come about this way."

"But even more important," she said, "because it means so much to all these folks now, I get it."

"Yeah, all these folks and not just me. Not just them either. I, me, mine, right? Like the Beatles said. Have to tell you though, I always believed if people could get a taste of it, just a sense of how it could be, they'd be all over it. Getting them to try it was the challenge. It's like people can't do it differently than they're used to, even if what they're used to sucks. I mean, come on people!"

"The devil you know, Dirk. That's the way it is. Uncertainty is scarier than what you know. It doesn't matter whether you like it or not. Just that you know what to expect."

"I guess that depends on how desperate you are. Don't you think? Right now, people need a hand up. I've got to believe that's where we start. They need help and we can give them something that will make a difference. Whether it's fusion or fission or coal or cow poop, I can't believe they'll give a shit, excuse my French, as long as it gets them heat and light, a way to charge their cell phones."

"We have something great to offer them. I'm not worried in the least about how it will be once we get it in place. It's just getting there that may be bumpy."

"That's why we called you, Ms. Weller. The message needs to be loud and clear, as in hey, you dumb fucks, this is Nirvana we are offering. It doesn't get any better than this and it took a world class disaster to make it possible."

"You'll excuse me if I take a different tone."

"I will defer to your expertise. Now that we're stuck here, I'm having doubts about whether the Portland crowd is where we should be starting."

"The Oswego group has a lot going for it. Their damage was less severe, they have resources, influence. Business incentive, too. I think we're wise to link with them and let them make the inroads to Portland and Vancouver."

"That's a big chunk of the population we need to reach, that's for certain."

"The most severe damage, too, at least in terms of what it's going to take to repair it. If we decide we still want to build urban centers all over again."

"Definitely something to consider. Does the New Northwest want to anchor its hopes for its future to big commerce and big cities? Or no? Call the question."

✦

They slept comfortably in their sleeping bags, the tent reasonably roomy, the evening cool and dry. If either of them was aware of sleeping with a member of the opposite sex, there was nothing to suggest it. She punched him in the arm when he started to snore. He rolled over on his side and that was that.

Dirk was awake and stretching out the kinks when Jonah arrived. He wasn't alone.

"Wow, what a surprise. Dirk, how are you? Is everything okay?"

"All is well, my friend. We're here to brief you on what's in the works and also hoping to get a lift to the other side if you can manage that. Got a couple of bikes out back."

He glanced at the young woman, nodded, said, "Morning."

"It's what I do," Jonah said. "That's the easy part. Briefing me might be more of a challenge. Will there be a test? I'm a little slow sometimes but Susan here is pretty smart. Susie, this is Dirk. Runs a ranch up near Molalla. At least that's what he's been doing of late. Days of yore he was one of those tech guys."

"Nice to meet you," she said.

"You as well."

"Did I hear you right," Jonah said, "did you say we?"

On cue, Holly emerged from the test, introduced herself, shook hands with the two of them, and yawned. "Excuse me. I'm still waking up."

Jonah looked her over briefly, trying not to be obvious, looked at Dirk and smiled broadly. "It's great to have you here. Both of you. Come on inside and let's have some coffee. Maybe something to eat. Are you hungry?"

After breakfast, Holly took up the offer of a shower. "We've got a good well. Always have. Generator's holding up. Hot water is a luxury these days around here, but you're welcome to it."

Susan cleaned up the dishes. Dirk and Jonah walked out back.

"She came looking for him," he said to Dirk when they were alone. "The guys I told you about. Her husband was one of them."

He hesitated; Dirk just nodded that he remembered.

"Has a kid, too. Man, I felt awful. Bad enough when it happened, let alone this. I was scared for a long time afterwards somebody would find me out. Last thing I ever imagined is when she came around looking for him. I didn't know what to say, except it was smart to say nothing at all."

"I assume she doesn't know, then."

"Oh god no. At first I was afraid she'd hate me if she found out. I didn't know what to do. The one thing was it seemed like my responsibility to help her out the best I could.

"She was scared, of course, left all alone and didn't know why. Funny though, as the time has passed she seems kind of relieved. Like she's accepted it, especially now that I'm helping out. I guess he wasn't very good to her."

"Ran with a bad crowd, too. That's an indication what he was made of."

"We actually get along real well, it turns out. She and her sister and the baby. It's kind of like we've become a family. We get real comfortable together, me and her especially, and the fact is, it feels good. But I can't shake the guilt I feel about what I know to be the truth. What it was that brought us together."

"He dealt the hand. You had to play it. I sure wouldn't beat myself up about it, I was you. Sounds like it's working out pretty well for all concerned."

"Thanks for saying so, Dirk. When I came by the ranch back when, I was pretty shook. You settled me down a lot with what you had to say. I still was rattled but not near as bad as before."

"Then she came along."

"Yeah, and I was really rattled again."

"Fate has a way of taking us where it wants us. You just might be the best thing that could have happened to her."

"That's a nice thought. She sure has made things more interesting for me. In spite of it all. And what about this Holly?"

"Strictly business."

"That so? She sure is a beauty, I noticed."

"We've worked together for a long time. I just focus on the business."

"Wow. That so? That's not work I'd want to be doing if you gotta wear blinders to do it. None of my business, of course, but just sayin'..."

✦

"Mr. Embry, Bess Gannon. Do you have a minute?"

"Yes, Ms. Gannon. And pardon me. I'm not certain of the proper way to address you. Madame Chief of Staff seems unwieldy but would that be correct?"

"I'm not certain, to tell you the truth. That's my role, but my actual title is Executive Assistant, so tradition has it. Just Bess would be perfectly fine. I'm calling to arrange a meeting at the governor's request."

"That would be excellent. As it happens, I was going to contact you about a matter myself. Now we can cover both at the governor's pleasure."

"Would 9 a.m. tomorrow be convenient?

"It would. And, reciprocally, please call me Clay. I'll see you then."

They met at the oval table in the governor's main office directly opposite the potbelly stove, which is said to date from the time of the great earthquake in 1906 San Francisco and still functions on a winter's day when the drafty office demands it, Braun explained.

"Accomplishes very damned little unless you sit right next to it; otherwise it's ceremonial. With these 20 foot ceilings, that's where the heat gathers in the rest of the room. Where we're sitting, you'd freeze if we didn't have the radiators."

"You're talking to a Connecticut Yankee, governor. I can't imagine freezing in Sacramento."

"It's rarely an issue here. In fact, the challenge mostly is cooling down in these blazing summers of ours. Cooling down this building is a problem in particular. There are no shortage of hotheads here. Plenty of heated words exchanged on a daily basis. Lots of hot air. But that's another issue.

"We're both busy, Mr. Embry, so let's get down to business if we may. I have a matter that requires your advice and consent, as the saying goes. Bess tells me you have a matter to discuss with me, as well. Shall we begin with mine or yours?"

"Governor, please. I'm at your service."

"Daniel Wong tells me that David Worthy's company was engaged in preparing a three-dimensional visualization map, the "fly through" type, of the Pacific Northwest for disaster mitigation. This is before the Quake, of course."

"That's news to me, sir."

"The customer was the U.S. Government, which is why I'm asking for your advice. I don't know the details of the contract, how much had been fulfilled, and so forth. Nor do I know Mr. Worthy, but I have no reason to believe he's anything other than an ethical businessman."

"That I can confirm. And I can intuit the issue, as well. That information would be invaluable in deploying the Enterprise Zone initiatives. Assuming that he still has access to it."

"We're told that he does."

"The question then is whether we can access it."

"And my question for you is, knowing that he hasn't volunteered it, am I putting you in an untenable position to ask him whether he would make it ours?"

"I'm happy to ask him, sir. I'm *not* willing to put pressure on him to agree. But I'm certainly interested in pursuing it and discovering what conditions, if any, would make it possible for us to obtain it."

"Thank you, Mr. Embry. Clay. Now, what can I do for you?"

✦

Clay and Emily finally were cohabiting like a normal married couple, which they soon enough would be, raising Hope together, watching her grow, working Embry-Anton at a rapid pace, their team doing the organization and implementation on a scale encountered only virtually before, seeing the pieces put in place faster than they thought possible, the New Northwest taking shape.

Cascadia still was hurting, the difficulties immense, but for the people who had suffered so egregiously the days were getting brighter, their lives better, their hopes and aspirations literally rising, day by day.

In Sacramento, Sam and Damian were an item weekly engaged and fully explored at least in its physical manifestations; Bella, John and often Simon were meeting regularly, once not successfully with Rika in tow; Delila and David still were covertly creating an enduring relationship that fomented in passion and gradually came to include a deep appreciation of their other attractive qualities.

David was entranced. His qualms about infidelity were swallowed whole by the passion he felt for Delila. Once he dove into those deep waters, he couldn't imagine swimming anywhere else. It was something unimaginable to him, so far outside the code that directed his normal behavior, but it had quickly become in his mind a passion he wouldn't be able to undo, a future that seemed inevitable.

He'd yet to confront the issue with Ellen, kept putting it off, losing himself each time he began in the imponderable details of how one unwinds a long term partnership that includes a child he dearly loves; yet somehow he suspected she knew, not that he and another woman were nearly if not quite a public item, but that their marriage had gone wrong and was irreparably damaged.

Bella was invited by Simon to co-author a paper on "Patient A" and to join him for a discussion of the subject on his weekly television show. He and John continued to meet with her when she was in town for her monthly sessions with Clay, made possible by the helicopter Captain Rafert flew and Embry paid for.

The one time Rika joined them was extraordinarily exciting for Bella when Simon made his proposal and equally intimidating for Rika, who wanted so badly to celebrate her partner's success but found herself sinking into despair of the space she sensed was opening between them.

Damian and his cowboy had moved beyond the initial splurge into sex together and began to develop the beginnings of a friendship. Sam seemed to be especially interested in the work Dam was doing for Embry-Anton, so inquisitive that after some of the physical passion found an equilibrium in their relationship, Dam at times sensed he was being interrogated and became more guarded in what he shared. He would learn eventually that Sam was not a fan of secession.

Emily and Clay decided the time was right to be publicly acknowledged as a couple. Several factors led to that decision. The Cascadia Enterprise Zone was generating a tremendous amount of interest not only in the business community but among the people of California and in parts of the Unified States, as well, particularly those additional states suing for secession.

Because Embry-Anton was the lead in that effort, it was naive to suppose the private link between them would go undiscovered for long. It became obvious to Clay at this stage that he was better able to protect his family by being with them than by keeping his distance. The fear of course had always been that she and the baby would be a tempting target for anyone seeking leverage over him. Any pretense that anonymity was any longer possible for their relationship was mere illusion.

Then, too, the security detail Zulu led for them was an added layer of protection of estimable value. The governor granted him a degree of extralegal authority to act as guardian of Cascadia's ambassador and his family, "not 007," Braun had said, "but as close to Bond as we can do in these uncharted waters."

Now that both of them were targets of Gherkin's deep state, the danger to them individually increased little but their vulnerability because there were two of them on guard was dramatically lessened.

Ironically, Zulu probably represented a bigger threat to them than Embry, given all he knew. His was a profession where nobody got out alive. Where so much had to be kept hidden, removing the carrier was the only sure containment. That made Zulu the bigger target and in that sense doubly protective of the boss. He literally was likely to take the first bullet.

"Charlie and I were the two best operatives they had, so there's that loss of capability in our favor. A bigger factor is the chaos Gherkin has unleashed. We have to assume they're still after us but my sense is that temporarily at least we're on the back burner."

Embry-Anton purchased a new five-story condominium building on the river and moved into the upper two floors, Clay, Emily, Hope and the au pair in the penthouse, Zulu and his three men in the four separate units a floor below. Company offices moved out of the law firm and took over the ground floor. They took their time selling the rest of the units, looking deeply into the background of the potential buyers before Zulu cleared them as being no threat.

The Enterprise Zone brokerage was settled in Sacramento and moving judiciously to rebuild the infrastructure of Cascadia. Change was underway.

✦

The people who would choose what changes are accepted in the rebuilding of their world were forming into decision-making bodies in Cascadia. Bobby Yelkins had built an extensive community among the Indigenous tribes from a base at the Grand Ronde reservation, which had suffered little damage and was functioning normally. From there, his people had reached out by short-wave radio to most of the tribes where the damage was extensive along the coast and the western third of the states. Call it the new Indian network.

He laughed to himself in connecting and parlaying with leaders of tribes so different in their cultures and yet similar now in their needs that as a descendent of chiefs of a tribe of traders, his heritage stood him well. There was a time when Molalla reach extended over much of

Cascadia and because of a disaster a time has come again where that ability to negotiate with all kinds of people is valuable.

One thing they had in common besides the disaster many of them had suffered was the uncertainty they shared as wards of a federal government that for them no longer existed. Their reservation lands and all their accounts were held in trust, supposedly on their behalf, by an agency of that government which had cut their geographic homes adrift. Call it the new Indian uncertainty.

Dirk had advised him that Governor Braun has people negotiating these matters with the leadership of the Unified States of America. These and many other matters, no doubt. Bobby had to believe, and he communicated this to the network of tribes, that their situation as uncertain as it was likely would be better in this Cascadia than it was in the United States. It could not be worse.

Dirk and Holly put in place something as impressive if less homogenous and attempting to reach far more people. What they'd set in motion eventually would reverberate throughout the enterprise zone if it went according to plan and would greatly accelerate when cell service was reestablished, which was said to be a matter of weeks in its supporting infrastructure.

Power was the other part of that equation. Phones had to be recharged before they can be used and that was a more detailed undertaking. The fusion energy systems were going to be communal initially and individual thereafter.

There were two benefits to that approach. Communications were critical. The cell towers weren't useful until the phones were powered up. Communal energy systems would kickstart that process and provide another critical asset: water. Collection points for power and water would be established at the town center, wherever that might be and whatever the size of the community.

They would be a gathering place, as an oasis is to a desert people, where the herculean task of establishing a dialogue and developing consensus could be engaged, and each of them would serve as a first drop in the pool of building out the systems for individual communication, power, and water.

Ironically, in this verdant part of the world where rain forests covered large swaths of the country and rivers were plentiful, water

was scarce. The labyrinth of pipes that carried potable water to homes and businesses from the treatment plants had been destroyed, as had the plants themselves. The oasis analogy is apropos; the people had to go to the water, it no longer came to them.

Many of the region's wells had failed, too, but many others still were operational and most of their owners were generous in sharing that precious resource. The larger part of the population was carrying the commodity home from rivers and streams, boiling it over wood-burning fires, and using it sparingly.

H2O, pure water, was a biproduct of fusion energy when Helium 3 is the fuel. That element was relatively rare on earth, where the atmosphere filtered out its accumulation, but the supply on hand that had been gathered by the fusion energy purveyors was sufficient for a few years.

Other fuel sources would power the system and produce no pollution in the process but they generate water only by burning more energy. Hydrogen was plentiful and the obvious fall back choice. Helium 3 is the ideal fuel with only one reservation and that is that it is found in large quantities only on the moon.

✦

The ranch was quiet these days, Bobby gone to Grand Ronde often, Dirk and Holly on the road, Bella frequently off to Sacramento leaving Rika alone, Ailey busy with the irrepressible Eees, Mick at hand to help, Ellen keeping mostly to herself and Fausto to himself, except when they were together.

Ellen was drawn along in the wake of this passion she was indulging, which was extraordinarily fulfilling after months without her husband's attention, what was closer really to rejection, his inability to get past the persistent trauma he associated with her and sex. She needed to rise above that trauma, too, not just intellectually as she had, but physically and emotionally. She needed to recapture what she was before she was so terribly violated. She needed finally to express the fullness of her feminine power and that took two to tango.

Fausto took her places physically she possibly never had been before. That was how it seemed, a titillation, excitement, and a satisfaction that was perhaps unprecedented in her sexual experience.

It left her with a craving for more, which he was happy to indulge. They were like teenagers sneaking off at every opportunity. Thus far they seemed to have drawn no attention but it was only a matter of time until they were noticed.

She thought as little as possible about what came next. Apparently, the heart and soul unravel first when a marriage goes south. Then you get to figure out how to untie the rest of it, all those connections that have bound you together with increasing intricacy over the years.

None of those ties was stronger, deeper, more insoluble and interrelated than Gracie. Their child. Fruit of their union. First and most profound of all the reasons man and woman are joined. Procreation. Sperm and egg merged in intimacy and yielding presumably, hopefully, an evolved manifestation of the procreators whereby the best of each of them is selected in some mysterious manner and the least is by some miracle of life transcended.

Maybe it was so. Maybe though Gracie was just another child, barer of our fond illusions, beast of burden carrying hope toward an unknowable place out beyond the farthest shelves of dawn, visible only as imagination, spawn she can only be of we two imperfect creatures doing what children of god do.

Aspire to birth more children, hoping they somehow will be a better version of their parents for whatever fabric of fantasy their existence might weave, whatever salvation this transformance of inconsequential souls by the heat of creation might allow.

Let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us. So says the Bible, a phrase that somehow comes to mind. They say that breaking up is hard to do. So says Neil Sedaka, another savant of the mysteries and the muddle. It somehow comes to mind, too.

What hasn't yet come to mind is next steps. Where do we go from here? How do she and David come to terms with these changes? Are she and Fausto any more than two sex starved players in the moment of frivolity, flailing in their capricious passion to sustain it against the tomorrow that inevitably will come?

✦

"David," Clay said, "Have a moment? Something I'd like to discuss."

Worthy was nothing if not calm under fire, had that never let them see you sweat mentality that CEOs adopt as essential armor, but Embry noted the flicker in his eyes as he riffed through possible subjects.

"Sure," he said. "What's up?" He was preparing himself for a talk about his relationship with Delila, one that he dreaded owning up to not only in light of its extra-marital nature but because his wife classically then might be last to know.

"I'm told your company was creating extensive digital visualization models of Cascadia before the Quake."

"That's true. Why?"

"I'm curious about whether and how we might access those models?"

"We built them under contract to the Federal government. The files, what we'd completed anyhow, are their property."

"I assume you never mentioned them because they're proprietary."

"Correct. The same as any other contract. It's between the customer and my company."

"I know you to be honorable," Clay said, and noted another flicker of the eyes, "but I have to ask, in view of the current circumstances - that customer now being a foreign government and possibly a hostile one - is there any flexibility in gaining access to those files?"

David broke eye contact, walked in a small circle, head down, a hand to his chin, settled finally by sitting on the edge of his desk, said, "It's not something I've thought about before now. Not something I've ever entertained because I've never been in a situation like this. I'd have to think about it carefully before I could answer that question."

There were times, and this is one of them, where he still was dumbstruck to remember this very sophisticated, savvy, and, yes, powerful fellow he worked with is the same guy he met panhandling outside his building in the Pearl. The same one, he tried unsuccessfully to put out of his mind but couldn't, that saved his life in that horrific event back in Portland.

Neither of them ever mentioned the question that haunted David's feverish dreams those nights when they came over him: what became of that body they left lying there in a pool of blood. A policeman, heinous as he was. What for that matter became of the building? Did it still stand or had it crumbled finally to the ground? And, if it still stood, had anyone explored it? Had the body been found? If so, by whom? What might be the consequences?

"You mentioned the files you'd completed. There were others unfinished?"

"The project was barely half done, but there were lots of partly completed pieces. These visualization tools are a series of overlays. A lot of the base work was in place but waiting on various components to be integrated."

"Can I assume then the project was only half paid for?"

"I can see where you're going with this," David said with a laugh. "I'll have to give that some careful thought, too. For the record, the project was *less* than half paid because payment lags delivery by months with USG. Without intending to encourage you, or discourage you either for that matter, I'll say in confidence that we were owed several hundred thousand dollars when the quake happened. It's been on my mind for months now whether we'll ever get paid."

"Have you come to a conclusion?"

"About that? Let's say I'm far less hopeful than I once was."

"Does that affect your decision about access?"

"I'll have to think about it. All of it. How soon do you need an answer?"

Embry merely shrugged, smiled, held out his hands, palms up, said, "How long it takes to solve a dilemma."

✦

"Not everyone's down with this Enterprise Zone of yours," Sam said, "which is why I ask how wedded you are to it?"

Dam looked at him closely, curious where this was leading, uncomfortable with the way his friend's intensity was making him feel.

"I don't know how to answer your question exactly. Or why you're asking it either. The Enterprise Zone is not *mine*. It's a project of the Cascadia government I'm working on with some colleagues from my

old company. Former company is maybe the way to describe it, although I hope it's just suspended operations for the time being. When things get back to normal, I think the company will be back.

"Anyhow, I'm *wedded to it* like any other job I take on. It's interesting work, has value, in this case critical value, and I give it the best I've got because that's who I am. That's the way I do things. Why are you asking?"

"Not everyone is supportive. That's all. I'm just wondering what you think of it all. Maybe you can enlighten me. As it is, I've got concerns about it."

"You told me your people opposed the secession. I think most everybody did. It wasn't like we took a vote and said, yeah, let's do it. My impression is that it pretty much was forced on us."

"Some people say that and you may be right. I don't know. Nobody does. All I know is we are faced with either selling the family ranch, a place that's been ours for more than 100 years, so we can move to the States, or we can sit tight and pay our taxes while the governor gives away the store."

"If we don't know who's responsible, how can we know what choices we had? Maybe Braun is making the best of a bad situation. Somebody has to take care of all that damage up north. And believe me, that damage is real. I was there and it's very bad. Like nothing you've ever seen."

"Some say Gherkin wanted to unload damaged property. Some say Braun forced his hand so he could put this crazy plan of his in place. Whatever the truth is, I still have plenty of issues with what Braun is doing. People say he's going to be giving folks up there free money. For nothing. Just put your hand out and its yours. While the rest of us have to work for ours. Does that seem right to you?"

"It's called Universal Basic Income. It goes to people who fall below a certain level of net worth. The idea is, instead of welfare, food stamps, aid to dependent children, Section 8 housing, all that stuff we call the safety net, let's put basic income in the hands of people who will spend it. For food, housing, transportation, whatever. Let them decide what they need to get their life in order.

"The point is, they *will* spend it and that is a fundamental part of a healthy economy. It gets rid the bureaucracy, cuts the red tape,

makes for smaller, more efficient government, some of those things you conservatives are always calling for. And it establishes a dependable level of support for the poorest and neediest people until they get stabilized. Then if they have any ambition, they can start making a better life for themselves."

"And what if they don't?"

"Don't what?"

"Have any ambition?"

"Then they can just cruise through life at the subsistence level. Hopefully, at least they won't be robbing convenience stores to get by. Look, Sam, there's always gonna be slackers, people who take advantage of the system. I say: so what? There aren't going to be many and they're not where we want to focus our efforts. We want to give good people a chance to lift themselves up. Do the best we can to benefit the most. And when they do, they start paying taxes, too."

Sam shifted in his chair, leaned away from the table, took a deep draw on his longneck Bud, said, "You're a smart guy, Dam. Good in bed, too," and clinked his bottle against Dam's. "There's a lot to like about you. But I'm not sure about this stuff you're messing around with and I damned sure have my doubts about Braun. He seems anxious to spend my tax money propping other people up."

Dam chuckled, swallowed the last of his Tecate, said, "We could look at corporate welfare, the agricultural subsidies, sweetheart grazing leases on public land, those very favorable taxes on "productive" properties, vineyards, you know the drill you ranchers and farmers and all the other tax dodgers have lined up to sweeten their pot. As I understand it, Governor Braun is trying something new to level the playing field so everybody gets a break. That's all."

"We're working people who are trying to hang on to more of what we make. You're talking about giving money to people who didn't do a damned thing to earn it. That's redistribution of wealth, pure and simple, and I'm against it."

"That's another canard we should put to bed. I'll tell you how wealth gets redistributed and it always has. It goes from the poor to the rich. That's where wealth comes from. That's how it's redistributed. It goes from the bottom up. We just want to circulate

some seed capital back there to where it's needed. And the truth is, the same people will end up with it anyhow.

"Maybe you're smarter, maybe you work harder, maybe you just want it more. The evidence suggests you just may be luckier when all is said and done. You tell me the ranch has been in your family for a hundred years. Gave you a nice place to get started, didn't it.

"There are people whose families have been in poverty for that long. All Braun wants to do is get them started. Give them something to grab onto. Pull themselves up by the bootstraps, right? We want to give them the bootstraps."

"You've got a great spiel; I'll give you that. But you confuse me, Damian. A black man has to work pretty damned hard to make it in this society. Isn't that still the truth? And you've done it. Made a success of yourself and proved it can be done with some smarts and hard work. After all that, you want to give away what you've earned to folks who for all you know who might be lying around all day smoking dope and knocking up the old lady."

"Yeah, we want to help them buy better dope. Birth control for the wife. Scotch off the top shelf instead of that rotgut whiskey. And that's exactly what some folks will do with the money.

"We're betting that nine out of ten will use it to improve their lives, though, and that's what it's about. Treat people like crooks and that's how they comport themselves; treat them with respect and I really believe most of them will show themselves to be pretty respectable people."

"Good thing you're cute," Sam said, shaking his head from side to side, raising an arm to call for another beer, "because sometimes I'm not so sure that you make a lot of sense."

"Well, be that as it may, I should remind you that all this tax money you're worried about is coming from money made in the Enterprise Zone. The folks who want to do business up there know going in what the deal is. If you and your family want to sell steaks or bacon up there, it'll tax you 50% of your profits. That's where the basic income money comes from. What you're doing down here gets treated just like it always did. No reason to concern yourself about all those welfare cheats spending your hard-earned money."

"Yeah," Sam said, taking a long pull on his bottle of beer, then belching obnoxiously loud and clear, "maybe not yet. Seems to me, though, like it will be just a matter of time."

✦

"You've done very well, Comrade. The United States is unraveling right before our eyes."

"Thank you, but the credit goes to our doctors. Gherkin seems inclined to do exactly what we want him to do. All I do is give him a little push."

The KGB man looked her up and down, said with sparling eyes in a dark face and no small amount of lascivious suggestion, "Yes, you push him a little, what for you is a little, but for him it is a lot. You are a dazzling creature, Batavia, for one who is so needy as the President."

"I do what our motherland requires and take pleasure only in what serves her needs. But, yes, he is very enthusiastic to do what we want."

"Ah, yes, but to do your work with such skill, such - how do the French say? - élan, one thinks that must bring you at least a little pleasure. Isn't it so?"

"He is vermin. To me no more than a cockroach. Does it please you to crush a roach, to step on a spider? It is no more to me. I do what I must to keep him coming back for more. He is a very sick man and I take no pleasure in it."

"No? Not in the least. To have the most powerful man in the world like a toy in your hands. To have him crawl at your feet. To obey your every command. Surely, Comrade, there is some sense of satisfaction, at least, if not pleasure."

"Perhaps I've become jaded. Here in America, it seems as though this is what people do. To be so rich one comes to feel humiliation is deserved."

✦

"Will the First Lady accompany you to Atlanta, Mr. President?"

"Unfortunately, no. An uncle from Latvia is visiting this week. A charming man if a bit of an oaf. We had dinner last night and he drank

his. An entire bottle of vodka and he barely missed a beat. Amazing! His capacity. Not a bad fellow for a drunkard. But, of course, we don't get to choose our relations."

"Of course. No doubt the FLOTUS has a handle on it. Now, with your permission, sir, I'd like to cover some of the things we'll likely face this trip."

"Such as?"

"Secession, sir. It's not going down easily. There'll be questions."

"Mark, this is the price of being ahead of the curve. People have yet to grasp the beauty of what we've done. The sheer brilliance. We've executed a marvel of political strategy that is unprecedented. Nobody ever thought of it before. We did and we got it done, too. Genius!

"Best thing that could happen to this country of ours is to pare it down to the essence. The real America. The red states. We're better off without those others. That's the point. That's what they need to understand."

"Of course, sir. Of course. Making that case though will take your skills to communicate. The West Coast shook people up but it felt like we smoothed that over pretty quickly. At least, we placed the blame squarely on Braun."

"That prick! Good to be rid of him. He'll get his. You better believe I have plans for him."

"Now, sir, with these other states suing to leave, well, it's unsettling to people. Even our staunchest allies are concerned. I mean, we're talking about losing New York and Chicago, our two largest cities. That worries people."

"Let 'em go! They're nine-tenths colored people anyhow. Who needs 'em? The ones there who are worth a shit, we can trade with. We still can do business. Don't your people get that? Mine do! They understand what I'm doing. Oh yeah! Our 'staunchest allies' are a bunch of foreigners. Don't forget that. They'll do what we want them to do when all is said and done. Nobody fucks with the U.S."

"Yes, sir. I'm sure you're right. It's just a lot of change to get used to."

"Mark, here's what you have to understand. I am the change agent. That's what I was elected to do. Drain the swamp! And by god

we are draining the holy hell out of it. This country will look a lot different when we're done. A lot better to my way of thinking. No more goddamn Ds. That's what I have to communicate."

✦

The U.S. Secretary of Defense, Frederick Fleed, was not a military man. In fact, he'd never served beyond his brief stint in ROTC at Oral Roberts U. Like many of Gherkin's appointees, he was a political hack who knew which way the wind blows and was facile at trimming his sails in the turbulence of any given moment. It had been a long while, though, maybe since Huey Long, that a breeze like this one blew down the political hallways. Maybe never, in fact.

The President wanted to withdraw from most foreign engagements. "Let the Russians have them. Who cares about these shithole countries? We have battles here at home to fight."

He wanted to mass troops along the southern border to stop the flow of immigrants fleeing the mayhem that is Central America. That might make sense. Political sense. That might sell.

Less obviously, he confided privately, he wanted to "project a presence" in political hotspots. Cities mostly. Antifa turf, he called it. A federal police presence staffed by the U.S. military troops. An occupying force of "peacekeepers" present in support of the local police to "put down the unacceptable levels of violence in America's cities. These cesspools of crime," he labeled them.

That had been a non-starter even with his most ardent supporters. Freed mustered the stuff to tell him so. "The Constitution. It's an issue. Murky waters, etc. etc."

"Screw the Constitution," Gherkin said. More than once, in fact. But he stood down, at least for now.

Maybe the National Guard could be mobilized, they discussed, but that required the consent of the governors, which was a dicey proposition even where Republicans held the statehouse and far less a projection of federal might and menace than he wanted. Optics were everything.

Contractors, the modern nom de plume of mercenaries, were considered, too. He actually deployed squadrons of them during the George Floyd riots in various municipalities, nominally to protect

federal assets from rioters, but mostly as agitators and wingmen for the militias who were storming the cities. Freed gave the orders, held his breath, waited for the blowback.

It was far less than he expected. The man was startling in his audacity. He moved the yardstick, recalibrated the instruments of public expectation. Dipping toes in the water, taking measure of the chill, pushing in a little further.

✦

"I've been doing some background, putting out serious feelers," Zulu said. "Hearing things you might want to take to the Governor."

"Hearing what from whom?" Clay said.

"I've been curious about my honeymoon. Yours, too, of course, but that's a little more oblique. Mine is a matter of tradition. Leave the service and it's lights out. No exceptions. So, I've been asking around, very quietly, of course."

"And you're hearing, what?"

"The reason that we've skated so far is that things are coming unfastened back there. A lot of dissension, systems disconnecting, the chain of command springing leaks here and there."

"Which is what we've assumed all along, am I right?"

"You are correct. What might interest the Governor though is the reason."

"Which is."

"This borders on seditious. Told stuff that could get people executed. Never would have been forthcoming if it wasn't for their complete disgust at what's come to be. And it was only parceled out in small pieces. Not one of them let more than a sliver slip through the conversations."

"So it's serious. I get it. Do you want to tell me now?"

"Gherkin is making battle prep. Guess who he plans to attack?"

✦

"What makes a man so depraved, do you imagine?" the Speaker asked the Chief Justice. "There's a long line of the very unsavory come calling in this town. Every type of contentious character, willing to do anything for the outcome they're after, the power they think they need

to acquire, or the simple pleasure of gaining the upper hand and inflicting that authority on the less able. We are used to that sort, hardly worth noting them they're so common."

"But this guy," the Chief Justice said, and let the thought hang in the air.

"Yes," said the Speaker. "This guy. This President, although I must tell you in confidence I regularly have to remind myself that he holds that office. Is that odd? I have trouble matching the person to the office.

"What he's unleashed in our party is like nothing I've ever seen. Like a virus, I'd say, is the best comparison, an organism that has replicated so quickly none of us has had time to gather ourselves and size up how we've gotten from where we were to here, how this sickness has taken us here, this place that literally is unrecognizable landscape, an unknown location in terrain that is only vaguely familiar, do you know? As though underfoot it's familiar but the winds in our face as we go forward come from somewhere new and especially tumultuous because we sense it is unknowable and meant to be that way."

John Taylor was a thoughtful man. He'd been that way since childhood. "Lives in his mind," people said of him. He was cerebral in his study of the law, in his interpretations of what he read of case law, the precedent, what it meant, how the deliberators came to those conclusions. It was a habit together with his keen mind that lifted him to become Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, key interpreter of the laws of the most powerful nation on earth.

"What strikes me underneath it all is the meanness," he said. "The naked ugliness of the man. There are sadists, of course, people who enjoy inflicting pain, that's nothing new in this town, really anywhere that power is exercised. But there is a cycle to their excitement and their satiation. A low point they reach in their emotions after the exhilaration of inflicting the pain, getting their vengeance, whatever it is. That point at which they feel the discomfort of their deviance.

"Gherkin amazes me precisely because his meanness never wavers. It's never sated. He never settles to a low point. Never suffers that moment of doubt, either. He just hums. Relentlessly. A frequency that buzzes in his brain."

Ross Fremont nodded, swirled his brandy snifter, took a long swallow, leaned back from the table that separated the two of them, and puffed away on his cigar in a pose that had the trappings of the regal about it.

Unlike the Chief Justice, he was less a deep thinker than a strategist, a man who maneuvered through the traps and the minefields with a seemingly effortless grace because he always played the long game, calculated the odds, sized up the individual motives, what moved men and what froze them in place, and waited until he knew precisely the lay of the land before he moved his first pawn forward and set in motion the play toward an expected outcome.

As though he suspected John perhaps was thinking just such a thing, he said, "I have to admit being caught off guard. We've gotten a lot of mileage out of the President, the - how to say it? - the passion he's incited in large parts of the voting public. The victimhood he so skillfully exploits. It's allowed us to reach for a permanent state of control of the Republic."

"What's left of it," said Taylor.

"Precisely, which is what I badly underestimated when we deliberated the unthinkable - letting the West Coast secede."

"Forced them out is closer to the truth, isn't it."

"There's a case to be made on either side, I suppose. What surprised me, frankly, is how quickly the unimaginable became aspirational."

"New York, New England, most of it anyhow, Illinois and Michigan, New Mexico and Colorado. If all of them are gone, and it looks like they will be, wow!"

"So much for unimaginable, eh? Secession from the Union. This time last year it was still widely considered to be something that never could happen."

"Until we opened the door. Then it became not just thinkable but doable."

"Indeed, and that was my miscalculation. The idea that the original colonies, those foundations of the Union, would sue to leave. I pride myself on big picture thinking, but that possibility escaped me. The map without the West Coast I was able to picture and given the

damaged state of that region, it was appealing. The shrunken country we are becoming is *not* a pretty picture."

"The image is a profound one, I must say. All those states as independent entities, whatever allegiances they might form, look like nothing so much on a map as a fist that has our country in its grasp."

Fremont shot the Chief Justice a quick look of distaste, even anger, before regaining his carefully cultivated, perpetually stolid expression, taking then a long, deep swallow of his cognac, and slumping just a little back in his seat, the ash in his cigar dimming in the ashtray.

"I had the feeling when you suggested this get together, John, it was for more than simply sampling this very fine cognac."

"You've been around longer than I have, Ross. Much more experienced in the game. There's not a man in this town any savvier than you are about the ins and outs of politics."

"Kind of you to say, John, even though I can tell when I'm being buttered up. Whatever their purpose, compliments are easier on the ears than criticism, and god knows I get my share of that. Then, too, Mr. Chief Justice, a man doesn't reach your exalted position without knowing how to run the traps."

Taylor sat back in his very plush chair, took a rather large swallow of his drink, leaned forward with an intensity that surprised Fremont. There was in the man's eyes a wariness he was struggling to overcome, something he had to say that had been a long time coming.

"It's not easy to raise this question, and I'd ask your absolute confidence in doing so, but it's been troubling me for months now." He looked Fremont directly in the eye. "What is our responsibility in all of this? What should we be doing?"

"You mean, as a co-facilitator of these unprecedented events in the history of our great country, you suddenly are having doubts?"

"Not suddenly, Ross. I've had doubts all along. He is the president, after all. He unleashed this massive wave that carried all of us along. I felt like I'd be one lonely person swimming against the tide.

"My great respect for this country starts with the man at the top. That has never raised more than a quibble in my support for the administrations, Rs and Ds both."

"Until now?"

"Yes, until now."

"It's rather late in the game to be having second thoughts. What could we do at this point, assuming we wanted to? The stud has left the barn, prancing mightily. It would be quite a challenge to corral him at this juncture."

"Mr. Speaker," John began with a shift back to the formal, "I said something earlier in this conversation that I'd like to revisit if I may. Again, I'd ask that we speak as friends and colleagues in complete confidence."

"And as two of the most powerful men in the country, which should temper our remarks. Do you agree?"

Taylor stared at Fremont, saying nothing, reevaluating whether this was a discussion he wanted to engage after all.

"You can count on my discretion," Fremont said. "If we breech my comfort zone, I'll say so."

"Thank you," Taylor said, and gathered himself for what had the makings of a very difficult conversation. Before he thought to finish the cognac in his snifter, Fremont refilled it.

"I mentioned that the president amazes me precisely because his meanness never wavers. He just hums. Relentlessly. A frequency that buzzes in his brain."

He stopped, sipped his cognac, measured his next statement.

"I've come to believe that literally, Ross. A frequency that buzzes in his brain. One that has been placed there. Perhaps that virus is digital."

Fremont stared at him for a long moment, very intently, sank back into his chair and then righted himself almost immediately, grabbed his snifter and had a deeper draught than he intended.

"That's quite a statement, John. I can't imagine what to say in response. I suppose the only reasonable thing to ask is why you believe that?"

They talked long into the night.

✦

Two men met in an office in the innermost ring of the Pentagon. One an Army General, the other a Navy Admiral. Both were four-stars.

"This makes me exceedingly nervous."

"That makes two of us. In my long history of service, I've never felt so consistently outside protocols. I'm not even sure what they are anymore."

"Every military man dreads facing a moment when his conscience may not allow him to follow orders. We may have reached that point."

"General, we've known each other since we were kids and I don't have a closer friend. That said, we're stepping into a mine field here. I think we each need to recognize the pressure we'd be subjected to ... to ..."

"To rat out the other one. Be part of shredding the life's work of a friend, a best friend, admired colleague, comrade in arms, literally."

"It's absolutely stunning to think we're driven to have such a discussion. But here we are. We both know what constitutes insubordination, and if we fail to carry out the orders of the commander-in-chief, case closed. But is considering such an act, or rather considering being confronted with such an act and what our trigger points might be, out of bounds? I don't know."

"Neither do I but it seems we are here to do just that. You might be interested to know that I started researching the matter years ago. When this president first came our way and presented us with a much more tepid version of the classic moral dilemma for a military man."

"Person, that is."

"Yes, person. I forget myself. All of us who swear allegiance and then are confronted with a crisis of conscience. Disobey an order is insubordination; carry it out is a crime against one's moral obligations."

"Such as turning us against our fellow citizens."

"A much more vivid example of that dilemma, yes, but one that suddenly is staring us in the face."

"And the proposed escape hatch is that they are no longer citizens. They have left or were driven out and attained the status of enemy. Politics carried to an unprecedented extreme."

"One might say so. It has the perceived advantage of sending a message to the others who are suing for secession. One reason we can suppose for the hurry in mobilizing."

"What do we know in fact and what do we suspect is happening?"

"The Joint Chiefs are debating strategies for an assault on Cascadia, presumably with orders from on high. The undertone as you might imagine is one of disbelief. There's no doubt among them that Gherkin is capable of anything. In fact, it's come to be thought with him the more unimaginable the more likely. Their assumption is that it's a show of force to get Braun's attention. For what purpose no one seems to know."

"So, we mount troops along the western border, and I have to remind myself 'the new western border,' and we park a flotilla of battleships on the Pacific Coast. Then what? They have no troops, right? Just the national guard and in Washington and Oregon they're still barely functional. What are we there to do? What's the end game?"

"The Chiefs are deliberating from an assumption that it's to send a message: that we can take you out. They are moving forward under cover of that belief. But it doesn't make much sense and they all know it. We can take you out but so what? What does that accomplish?"

"Maybe the bigger dick? That would fit the President's vision of superiority. It's said the little hands speculation drives him crazy. So we'll threaten all-out war for that?"

"The man's genius is complete unpredictability because nobody knows what he wants and everybody knows he's capable of anything. We've learned that nothing is beneath him, but in this case, we've raised a suite of possibilities that is truly frightening."

"The ones that present the moral dilemma on the very near horizon."

"With this guy, logic may be a foolhardy consideration, but we do know this: he watches Putin in Ukraine, Netanyahu in the West Bank, and he's envious. That's his peer group and he's envious.

"He resents their freedom to commit whatever atrocities they choose while he's supposed to be the most powerful leader in the world and he's constrained. The petulant child who can't do whatever he wants and they can. Insiders tell us that's exactly the way he thinks."

"I'm afraid to ask where you're going with this."

"As I said, logic may be faulty ground here, but one thinks about all these things and the questions that seem to have no obvious answers,

and then someone says something that chills you to the bone because there is a logic to it, a horrible logic. I had dinner with one of his people the other night and I've barely slept since."

"Because of what he said?"

"Um. He said in complete confidence and with very little drama, 'Gherkin wants to take out Sacramento.'"

✦

Holly and Dirk had a very successful first meeting with the Lake Oswego group. The town was in remarkably good shape compared to the neighborhoods down the hill from them toward Portland, and the people who assembled had been very active as the lead in efforts to care for the needy among them, address the damage that did occur, and prepare for the recovery.

"No lights, no heat, no modern conveniences of any kind," their leader, Tom Alford, said. He was a prominent local attorney, a senior partner at Stoel Rives, and a former councilman. "Astonishing how the old ways can suffice, at least for the time being. However, winter's coming and it's a different challenge."

"We're ready to address the first wave of all these needs," Kirk said. "We'd like to start here, in your community, with your full support, of course. If we can succeed here, and we will, we want to radiate the model outward in concentric circles, with your participation. Somebody has to stand up here, and all of us in business know that first step, that first partner, is the hardest to secure."

"This is a Herculean task," Holly said, looking at each of them very closely, searching for support and resistance among them. "In working up a game plan with the governors, we looked at the entire region and identified Lake Oswego as the ideal place to begin. The governor herself gave us your name, Tom. And here we are."

They laid out the plan and asked for questions. There were plenty of them, and some squishiness around the energy piece when the trigger was discussed. Holly was extraordinarily deft in walking them through the options and so subtle in suggesting that if the energy systems were unacceptable they would move on to the next community while other options for Oswego were explored that even Alford was a moment in registering the implication.

"I've never been in blanket opposition to nuclear fission. The issue always has been the waste material. This system you propose has so many beneficial outcomes and one very tiny component of concern. If I understand it correctly, though, it seems there's no waste material, which would remove my concern."

"You understand it exactly, Tom," Holly said. "It's contained within a lead housing that is virtually indestructible and has no negative impact whatsoever on the environment. In fact, this system creates a new source for housing existing material safely and usefully that otherwise represents the problem you describe."

The agreements they secured by the end of a long day and night of negotiations were as good as either of them had hoped. Tom agreed to take the message down the hill to the group that had formed around the McAdam neighborhood, where the damage had been extensive, and then to continue as lead in bringing the message to the Portland neighborhoods, among the worst hit in terms numbers of people affected. It was a critically important step.

✦

"That was awesome," Dirk said. "I feel a huge relief to have crossed this first hurdle. You were terrific, especially with Tom. As soon as the 'no waste' piece came to him, the argument was won."

"He's a very bright guy," Holly said.

"Yeah, you only had to give him a little nudge, right after the 'if we have to move on' possibility landed."

"The thing that's critical is to have someone of his clout and credibility working the urban communities. He said he has partners in the Pearl, whatever's left of it. If he can mobilize them effectively, that's a big piece of the population center in play."

"Yeah, and the place that's had the most difficulty settling down, we're told. It's always been a little dicey down there, but the looting and lawlessness seems to still be trying to take hold. It's been a challenge for the communities to keep a lid on it."

"I have to admit, Dirk, that I'm surprised all that chaos was brought under control, at least for the most part. If you had asked me what I thought would happen in a situation like this, I mean, no police, no infrastructure, very much living on the edge, I would have thought

all hell would break loose. It's really very heartening to know that the better angels seem to have gotten the upper hand."

"Not without a struggle, for sure, but, yeah, it's pretty impressive the way the neighborhoods became communities around this tragedy. It puts a little bit of a damper on my natural cynicism."

"Well, for that alone, we all can give thanks."

He punched her lightly in the arm. She took his hand and held it against her cheek for a long time. He was unable to move, even if he'd wanted to.

✦

"Take out Sacramento. Do you mean...you can't mean...?

"Do the Gaza. Says he wants a photograph of himself in the rubble of the Capitol Building giving Braun the finger."

"My God! I'm staggered. I want to say, 'you can't be serious,' but I know that phrase has no relevance any more. This is a whole new level of hideous."

"And there's more. My guy says the plan is to occupy the cities, martial law enforced 'to suppress runaway crime,' and - get this - he wants to move in all the undocumented aliens. A place to park all those unwanted people."

The Admiral stood up and walked to the far wall of the office, leaned his forehead against the cool concrete and after a very deep breath his shoulders sagged. He righted himself, regained some composure, returned to the table where they'd been sitting.

"Bill," he said, a look of pure anguish on his face, "we've known each other a very long time and I have to tell you, brother to brother, I've never felt such despair in my entire life as what I feel now. What in god's name is happening?

"We've spent nearly every day of our adult lives in service to our country. I find myself looking around and saying: for this? This country that I love, I look at it now and say: what is this place? I don't even recognize it.

"Sure, Iraq, the interrogations, it was terrible and I was ashamed. But it was a blip, a very evil moment in a regrettable war. It wasn't *us*. It wasn't who we are. It was a mistake, a wrong turn, bad guys in charge. I can live with that.

"This, though, I mean I thought when this guy was elected it was another aberration, one wild swing of the pendulum after Obama was elected. I mean, the night that this country elected a black man president, like him or not doesn't matter, to see Dick Gregory, Oprah, all those famous people bawling, just crying with the realization that the moment finally had come, that to me is what the United States is all about. So, when Gherkin was elected I thought to myself, okay, the assholes have to have their moment, too.

"But he never went away. He just became more and more grotesque, this man I'm sworn to serve, this commander-in-chief, the leader of the free world. And he's a buffoon! He's a mockery of everything I believe this country to be about. I don't understand it. I can't comprehend it. Despair seems to be the only response I can summon."

He sank back in his chair. Defeat was written in his posture. For several moments, neither of them said anything more.

"If it's any consolation, Henry, you're certainly not alone in what you feel. It seems at times we're trenching out the parameters of the contemporary Inferno. Buffoon is certainly one dimension of this character. But there's an evil about him that chills me. It absolutely stops me in my tracks. And all the considerations we might explore become meaningless in the face of that absolute darkness.

"I find myself speculating about this or that, how this came to be, what it might mean, and it all gets overwhelmed by the sheer ugliness of who he is and what he represents. What terrifies me about him is that he's the ultimate anti-hero in this celebrity mad world. Someone in this case without a shred of decency or compassion or any sense of fair play; in fact, he glories in mocking all of those things, as though any respect for our common humanity is strictly for losers.

"He, of course, is all about winners and it doesn't matter how you get it done. Whatever gets you to the winner's circle is all that matter in this race. The irony is that he's such a spectacular loser. Everything he touches turns to shit. It's made him master of at least one thing and that's bankruptcy."

The Admiral revived himself enough to say, "But then he made the one good deal, the deal with the devil. He became a brand and there's been no stopping him ever since."

The General said, "For me what is so disheartening, absent any orders we may or may not obey, any bearing it may have on our careers, is what his person says about *us*, the citizens of this country - what's left of it anyhow. Who do we have to be to call this person our leader?

"This truly misbegotten man who is like the culmination of all the mean and nasty aspects of the human soul has made himself into this heroic character whose great glory is compromised because we make him a victim, the everyman victim who knows he is so great except the world keeps trying to screw him."

"Yeah," the Admiral said with a wry smile, "He's tapped in to the lonely, the frustrated, the woebegone among us like Taylor Swift is tapped into the heart of teenage girls. The difference is that she's inspiring people where he's just urging them on to be the worst of themselves so they can be ever more like him. I'm doing this for you, he tells them, and they think he's Jesus."

The General reached across the table, hand on his friend's shoulder, an apologetic look on his face as he looked him in the face.

"Henry, thank you for this conversation, bleak as it's been. I had to talk to someone and your counsel has always stood me in good stead. I can't believe that either of us could have imagined we'd someday be having a talk like this one. But here we are."

"Yes, here we are. And having said all this, what's the take away?"

"I don't know what I can say about that. Not Yet. I reviewed the oath we took as officers, which by the way says nothing about obeying orders and rather says we will uphold the constitution ..."

"Whatever's left of it these days."

"Indeed, and I don't know what I intend to do when the moment arrives, if it does, but if it does, I do know this: whatever the cost to me, I have no intention whatsoever of capping my career by carrying out an order to bomb California."

✦

"David," she had said, "it's time."

He'd called as he regularly did, trying to keep things lighthearted and upbeat, hiding his confusion and uncertainty as well as he could.

She was having none of it, said, "We need to talk. Face to face. I'm coming down with the next flight." And she did.

Although her mood was very serious, she startled him with her radiance. She had a glow about her that unsettled him because he couldn't place it. She was as disarming and straightforward as always, kind and generous in the way she spoke, making her points without accusation or blame, but to the point like an arrow. He felt pinned in place.

Beneath all the things he said was the desire to tell her what he'd done, to confess his infidelity, to offer…what? An apology? Promise to do it no more? That wasn't it. He did want to do it again, but he was sorry he'd wronged her, sorrier still that he's kept her in the dark this long. So what to say? He stuttered and stammered, began, halted, began again and was making little if any sense. wanting a pathway to the entry point where he could own up.

"Let's talk about what's really going on," she said, and he began again with his blather, remarkable for the fluster he evidenced. She interrupted.

"David, I've been having an affair," she said.

"Yes, I did. I did. I meant to tell you. Honestly, I did. I didn't know what to say. It wasn't planned, it just happened, it..."

"David, I said *I've* been having an affair. Apparently, you have, too."

"You? You've been having an affair? With who?"

"Whom. Does it matter? If so, might I ask you the same question."

"I'm astonished. I never would have thought it of you. Not Dirk? It can't be. I thought he was gay."

"You have a much larger field at your disposal. That's true. So I won't start guessing. I'd need a phone book and I doubt we have the time."

"But Dirk? I really can't believe it."

"Don't. It isn't him. It does seem this conversation is going to have more balance and complications than what I expected. Are you ready to talk this through or do you need time to gather yourself?"

"I keep stuttering because I don't know what to say. I was trying to find a way to tell you, was really dreading this get together because I knew I couldn't pretend that things were the same, that you didn't

deserve to know, that I had to face it, and then, wow! You've blown my mind. I was totally unprepared."

"Assumed you had me tucked away up there in the hills while you were catting around in the city, huh?" She pursed her lips and then gradually she began to smile. "This is startling for both of us, David, I assure you, although I can't say I'm completely surprised. A little, I guess. I thought you were burying yourself in work and finding enough comfort there to distance yourself from me. I underestimated you. This didn't seem to be your way. Your honor is preeminent, at least that is the impression I've always had. This calls the question."

David told her everything, not who but why and how he felt. It poured out in torrents, the months of repression, nights of torment, dreams of vivid recall, images etched in his brain that emerged like grotesque creatures from the cellar whenever his mind sought rest.

Then there was that moment out of the blue, unexpected, unplanned, powerful, passionate. It swept over him with such force it inundated him, cleansed him, finally left him sated with the first calm he'd felt since, since the "event." He had peace, if only for a time, the scent of it clean, pristine.

"Then the guilt, of course. I felt horrible, I betrayed you, I compromised our union in a way I never imagined I am capable of doing. Honor *is* preeminent with me, and then this. How to square the two?

"To be honest with you, if it's still possible you can accept honesty from me, what surprised me: the guilt I felt was keeping you in the dark, but I felt no guilt for the act itself. The sex freed me, Ellen. It's hard to say that to you, but it freed me. It relieved me of a terror I carried all these months, an emptiness that hollowed me out and made me unworthy of you, of what you needed from me."

"Well, I was unprepared for this, David, this circumstance. I had no idea. But I understand what you're saying and if it brought you relief, I'm happy for you. I'm sad for us but happy that something positive is happening to you.

"The fact is our relationship changed when that horrible thing happened to us and no amount of trying to work around it, or in your case trying to forget it, put it aside and avoid me as your sexual

partner, could be an alternative to what we were before. It's clear our marriage is irreparable at this point."

"So clear you decided to have an affair?"

She smiled at him, a warm, wan look about her when she said, "Yes, I decided to have an affair. I hungered for the passion, the excitement, the pure abandon of those moments we used to have and haven't had since. It's that simple, David. Loneliness and lust drove me to another man's embrace. I'm not proud of it, but neither am I ashamed. Very much like your reaction if for different reasons, the act was exhilarating. I'm not sorry that I did it. I'm not hurt that you did it. More than anything, I'm sad to know our marriage is over."

"What about Gracie?"

A wry smile danced across her face. "Yes, what about Gracie? She's our daughter and the source of an ongoing partnership between you and me, David. That isn't going to change. I hope you agree with me."

✦

"We meet again, Ellen. It's good to see you."

"Thank you, Clay. It's good to see you, too, especially to see you looking so well after all you've been through."

"Yes, well, fortunately, things have calmed down of late. I must admit it's a welcome change of pace."

"Before I forget, Gracie asked me to send you her regards and to say she misses you. 'Tell Mr. Clay I want to talk to him the next time we can see each other.' She made me promise to tell you that verbatim."

"Gracie is dear to my heart. I mean that sincerely. She reached out to me at a time when I didn't know who or what I was. That gesture of hers began a process I'm still unraveling. Positively so. Please give her my love and tell her I look forward to that discussion."

"She'll be very pleased to hear that. She's very fond of you."

"The feeling is mutual. She's a remarkable child, which of course speaks well of you and David."

Her face shadowed for a moment and then her radiance returned.

"I'm surprised you asked to meet. I hope it isn't that I bummed a ride down here without permission."

"Not at all. I wanted to speak to you and was happy to learn you were coming our way. I have something I'd like to discuss if you have a moment?"

"Of course," she said. He noted a brief flicker of doubt in her eyes.

"I know that you were a successful designer before the quake disrupted all of us. Can you tell me about your business?"

"Certainly, although I must confess my feelings about it have changed considerably since our lives were upended."

"Why is that? Do you mind me asking?"

"I was successful at encouraging people to indulge themselves in luxury. We all were very full of ourselves and our success. We wanted to spend and show. I helped people do that, to strut their stuff and flaunt their success. All luxe all the time. That was the goal. Tastefully, of course."

"And now."

"Ostentation is one thing in times of plenty. Since the quake, knowing how many people are in desperate straits, it can seem in retrospect that what we were doing at the time was almost obscene."

"Well, we might say it was very much the American way, wasn't it? The expression of successfully capturing the American Dream."

"Of course. But what I've realized in retrospect is that part of what we were indulging was isolating ourselves from people who were suffering then, that it took something as dramatic as the destruction of our luxurious homes to notice all the people who already were suffering before the damn quake made us peers. Does that sound overly dramatic? Our perspective is different now, but I'm less enthused than I once was about the role I played in insulating us from reality."

"May I ask you then if your skills might transfer to designing small, secure, efficient, cost-effective housing for our enterprise zone? We want a design we can replicate in versions that are attractive and aesthetically pleasing, so we're not just building thousands of Quonset huts, but a model we can mass produce that meets basic needs. It's a function we need to fill near-term?"

"I'm not an architect, you understand. Interiors are what I've designed."

"Exactly, and what we want is interior habitat that's attractive, comfortable, appealing, functional. The rest is just roof, walls, and windows. That part will take care of itself. We want to build the designs from the inside out."

"Are you offering me a job?"

"Are you interested?"

"Let's talk," she said and turned on her mega-watt smile.

✦

Holly and Dirk were stoked. The reaction to their proposals, to four groups now, has been better than hoped. Basically the same questions and concerns were raised at each meeting and they were surprised at how quickly the issues about the power systems were disarmed. The response to the package they presented was "bring it on, the sooner the better." Several months of living at a primitive level of subsistence sharpened everybody's focus, it seemed.

So the two of them were stoked but they were road weary, too. The travel itself was exhausting, still nearly impassible in many places, requiring them to back track over and over again in getting from one destination to the next.

They traveled from Oswego to Tualatin, then to Tigard, and all the way to Beaverton. At each place, once agreement was reached, they laid out the areas of outreach they wanted from each group. Difficult as the terrain was, it got progressively worse going west, so for each of these groups and the ones they contacted, the difficulties would increase.

The ripples in the pond they were setting in motion would flow westward concentrically. The magnitude of what was needed to accomplish this essential first step overwhelmed them at times. Dirk the visionary, Holly the practitioner, each of them at times in the process had to support the other, to reinvigorate their partner in the face of exhaustion, to refocus on where they were and what there was to do immediately in front of them, rather than the scale of the problem they were addressing.

It created an unexpected intimacy. An argument got it started. They were a long way from the ranch and Dirk thought it wise to return the way they came, take the path they were at least somewhat

familiar with to get home, refresh, resupply, and set up the next tier of meetings.

Holly made the case to travel south to McMinnville and east to Woodburn along the way to Molalla and home. "Don't be a lazy visionary," she chided him. He didn't take it well.

"I'm tired, not lazy."

"I'm tired, too, but what sense does it make to cover all that way and accomplish nothing in getting there. My way might be more difficult, but we'll get something done for the effort."

"We've already gotten a lot done. A helluva lot. For starters. And we don't have anything scheduled with those folks. What? We just drop in, say 'got a minute to talk?' That's your idea of the professional approach?"

"I'm perfectly familiar with the professional approach, thank you. And since you ask, yes, that's exactly what I think we should do. We know who we're looking for and I can't believe it will be all that hard to find them. The one good thing that's come of all this is the communities are a lot tighter. Everybody is in touch with everybody else in town. All we'd have to do is show up and ask."

"And hope they aren't put off by it. Start off on an awkward note like that. I guess the professional in me wants to keep it systematic. That's my preferred approach to getting things done."

"Mine is to not waste time or opportunity. That's my preference. And now that you've raised the issue of professionalism twice, as though mine might be in question, I might remind you of our respective reputations in the business world."

"And?"

"And ask which of ours would be more likely called into question?"

"Ouch. That's a bit rude to say, for a communications specialist, I mean."

"Maybe you mean for a woman. When decisions are made, we genuflect to the male, right? Patriarchy has its druthers."

"Oh come on, Holly. Don't be a bitch."

"Wrong thing to say, Dirk. Ever, and especially in this context. The simple question is: who put you in charge? We're living at your place and that deserves deference. But out here? It's just you and me

carrying the governor's message to the people. What in that process gives you the upper hand?"

They were quiet then. Each of them on their back in the tent, their sleeping bags taking up all the space on the air mattress that covered the floor, lying side by side until first she and then he turned on their side away from each other.

It was very still. Near as they were to the city, there was no noise, traffic, power, just the dense quiet as the night descended.

"I'm sorry, Holly. You're right. It's a mutual decision, not mine. Let's talk about it in the morning. What do you say?"

"I'm cold."

"Me, too. We could zip these bags together if you'd be okay with that."

"I would. Let's do it."

They did. They held each other for warmth, whispered their apologies, back and forth, how much they cared for each other, respected each other, felt so close now, so thankful for each other.

She reached to kiss his cheek but he turned his face toward her and they actually kissed, pulled back in surprise, looked into each other's eyes for what seemed like a very long and profound moment, and then returned to kissing purposefully, gently at first and then with passion that overwhelmed them both.

Breathing heavily, Kirk said, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Unzip these damned bags so we can take off our clothes," Holly said.

"Yow, it's cold out here."

"Not for long."

What happened then amazed them both. They went places they never imagined with someone they never considered in this way and they loved it. Neither knew the other has been abstinent so long, but they were like kids in their enthusiasm and both of them came very quickly.

They rested afterward in each other's arms, their breath calming, bodies cooling, thoughts a jumble of pleasure and disorientation, recalibrating their relationship, what this meant, where it might be going.

"Wanna do it again?" she asked him.

"Right now?" he said.

"Here we are," she said.

They made love again, slower, deeper, without restraint. It was better than the first time. Deliriously good, they agreed.

"I say we head back the way you suggested," he said afterward. "I think it makes sense now to take our time getting home."

She was asleep before she could answer, her head on his chest and a leg across his. Soon enough, he was asleep, too. They awoke the next morning still in that position, and soon after freshening up a bit, teeth brushed, bladder relieved, they tried it once more in daylight, just to be sure. It was better still.

✦

By the time they made it back to the ranch, they had six communities in play, each of which was reaching out to that many more. Salem and a circle of towns in that region was next, where the governor herself joined the discussions.

She asked about the power system. "Can you explain to us how it works? It sounds very exciting, but I don't know that any of us are certain what exactly it is we're talking about. For instance, I understand Helium 3 is in relatively limited quantities. What are the alternatives if that fuel runs low? How does the power move from the generator to the individual homes and businesses? Answers to some of those basic questions would help my decision process.

"You're good to ask them, Governor," Dirk said. "Every constituent will want to know those answers before they can approve the installation in their community."

He explained the technology. "The generator will continue to produce power, massive amounts of it, as long as we feed it the fuel. Helium 3 is the preferred source. Once it's triggered, it generates both power and water, clean energy and pure H2O. There is no pollution whatsoever that results.

"It distributes the power wirelessly via electro-magnetic waves to the individual units in the community. Those units are receiver and transmitter both. Over longer distances, particularly in remote rural areas, lasers transmit most effectively with no loss of power over distance. These WET systems are a huge improvement over wired

transmission, those grids we relied on for way too long with all those ugly wires crossing our site lines that break in ice storms and, oops, fall down in disasters like the one we just had.

"The individual units are compact devices that simply plug into a standard outlet and send electric power throughout the building, assuming the wiring is functional. They also simultaneously transmit energy to the nearest units in other buildings, so that each of them is like a tiny transmission unit that links together the entire community, depending on the capacity of the generator itself, which can be scaled up or down They create a micro-grid of distributed energy.

"The generators we're delivering will comfortably serve twenty thousand average users, so Salem would need about ten of them strategically located throughout the community. The device itself is about the size of a tool shed, so space isn't much of a problem.

"Ironically, the bigger near-term issue is the amount of pure drinking water they generate. Once water lines and plumbing are rebuilt, it will be a wonderful problem to have, but until then, creating an oasis for people to access it and storage for the overflow is a bit of a challenge."

"And when the volume exceeds the storage capacity," one of the group asked, "what then? It seems to me that may be a problem because so much of our infrastructure is damaged and much of it's beyond repair."

Holly laughed gently and said, "All of us who've dealt with drought in recent years will find this difficult to accept, but once this system is in place, water will be so abundant that what can't be stored can simply be allowed to flow away to the streams and rivers. There actually will be that much on hand."

"If I understand it," the governor said, "that is with Helium 3 as a source material. Can you explain the alternatives?"

"Certainly, Governor," Dirk said. "At present, there is one very acceptable, if less efficient alternative: hydrogen. It works perfectly well in generating and transmitting power, but it does not produce water. It also takes considerable energy to ignite it. Since we have good supplies of Helium 3 at present, it's perfectly capable of providing that ignition if we switched to hydrogen."

"If that's the case, Helium 3 is the obvious choice. Is long term supply a problem?"

"Not any time soon, Governor. It exists in relatively finite quantities on earth and we have cornered those stocks. Where it is abundant and can literally supply all the energy we will ever need for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years is on the moon."

There was a collective inhalation of breath among the group. The implications were lost on none of them.

"Hence the renewed race to the moon that we're witnessing," Holly said. "The Embry-Anton Group that is spearheading this entire Cascadia Enterprise Zone initiative," and she nodded toward the governor as she spoke, "under the leadership of the governors, is very heavily invested in the effort to develop access to supplies of Helium 3 for our future needs."

"One more question occurs to me," said a woman in the group. "If the generator sends power to the receivers, and they also transmit that power to a network of similar devices, what happens when the generator exceeds the usage by those individual units?"

"A great question," Dirk said. "Part of each system is one or more reservoirs on the perimeter that collect whatever power exceeds capacity and store it like a battery until demand allows it to flow back into the network."

The meeting there covered many of the familiar concerns, which were discussed and resolved, and the successful outcome was the same. Everyone was ready to move forward.

These trips that Holly and Dirk made to meet face to face with the groups that represented these different communities were no less exhausting but given the success they had at every stop to date, they were very satisfying. Then, too, the unexpected, extraordinary passion for each other they were experiencing was satisfaction of an entirely different sort that was reshaping them both.

"Everything we dreamed of is in play," Dirk said to her. "It's unimaginable in so many ways and yet it's happening right before our eyes. And something I never dreamed of, never would have allowed myself to think possible, is here in my arms." And he smiled, kissed her, held her at arm's length, then very close. "All that time wrapped up in the madness, I never thought about being in love."

"Maybe you had to realize some of those aspirations of yours first before you could be open to it."

"Yeah, it took a helluva shaking to open me up, I guess. The truth is I never had any hope of something like this because the people I admired, people like you, thought I was too far gone to take seriously. I deserved it, I know, but I made assumptions, what I felt I had to give up to be that person I needed to be. One of the assumptions was that no woman I could ever want would have any reason to want me."

"But here we are. And I do."

"You're the communications whiz. I can't possibly tell you what all this means to me. I don't have the words to express what I feel."

"Well, the communications whiz says, how about you come here and show me?" He did very well.

✦

Fleets of helicopters were ferrying in cell towers and transmitters along the I-5 corridor. Fuel and the range it provided them were the biggest impediment. It was resolved by fleets of tankers that lined the Pacific Coast from Mendocino northward nearly to Vancouver. Refueling at sea was a piece of cake for these former military pilots. At least no one here was shooting at them.

Next were the power cells brought to the communities as quickly as they were briefed and agreed to the plan of action. Each community chose the site for its oasis, this center of power and water for the people of the town. The cities, Medford, Grants Pass, Roseburg, Eugene, Salem, and especially the Portland, Vancouver metropolis were divided by their oases into multiple neighborhood sites that functioned somewhat like town squares.

Water was abundant suddenly and everyone needed it. They had to come get it and it would be a while before plumbing could be rebuilt and water piped to their homes. Storing it was an immediate problem. A place accessible and free of contamination was needed. Many communities had treatment plants in various states of functionality. Other retrofitted community swimming pools. Some few had sizable cisterns. Inevitably water overflowed the storage and was wasted.

That wasn't an immediate problem because lots of power was put to use immediately and water was its byproduct. The first of many

ironies that came about in these new support systems is that communities suddenly had more water than they could efficiently use. Let it flow was the reality and they did.

Power distribution was more easily accomplished. Each individual power unit was fed by the central system through laser transmission where distances were greater or electro-magnetic transmission from one individual device to the next, something like a network of transmitters where each of them received a steady flow of power and fed the signal on to the next in line.

Fusion power generates an endless stream of perfectly clean energy as long as its fuel is provided. Unlike fission, if a problem occurs, the source for whatever reason is interrupted, the system simply shuts down.

Reigniting it requires a highly focused concentration of lasers at the ignition point. Once the distribution is reestablished, the plutonium chip at each individual location is the ignition point for that power source.

Like anything new, particularly anything as essential as power, there was initially lots of hesitancy, concern, apprehension, plain old worry about "this fusion thing." Will it work? Will we really have heat and lights and working appliances? Can we fire up our phones, our computers, our cable televisions?

Soon enough the answers were found to be yes! Yes! Yes! Word spread faster than the systems could be distributed. Holly and Dirk were both amazed and pleased by the receptivity. Just getting the lights back on, stoves working, phones recharged. It was an extraordinary thrill to once again accomplish this things that had been so common and then lost.

There was a long way to go, they had to ramp up distribution of radiant heaters for places that had used gas or wood previously, and so many other basic details, together with big ones like all the housing that was needed, the transportation systems to be rebuilt, the roads, bridges, runways, depots, ports and harbors, all of that and more was still to be done.

But they, the teams at the ranch, the communities they were in contact with, Bobby and his network of native tribes, Clay and the team in Sacramento, all of them were getting the clear sense that they

were going to pull this off. And to Dirk's special satisfaction, they had the ball back in Clay's court now. Demand across Cascadia was exceeding supply.

✦

"Troops are deploying, sir," General Daley said to the governor. "Looks like they're going to be massing along the Nevada border. An entire division from Fort Carson is moving west by train across Utah as we speak."

"No word yet what their purpose is?"

"No sir, but we're advised, too, that several destroyers and battleships of the Pacific Fleet are steaming this way, as well. And a dozen fighter jets from Holloman are on the ground in Reno. Played hell with commercial air traffic. Just arrived on very short notice."

"It appears that President Gherkin wants to send us a message. I'm just wondering what exactly it might be. Any ideas?"

"No official word yet, Governor. We're hearing an announcement is forthcoming. White House press corps has been told to stand by for a major press event. It may just be sabre rattling. It may be more."

"For what purpose, we have to wonder. We've long since learned that second-guessing the man's motives is foolhardy. Would he actually attack us, do you suppose? It's hard to imagine even he would stoop that low. And yet?"

"He knows we have no military. That would seem like his kind of a fight, bully that he is. But as you say, sir. For what purpose? What's the objective?"

"And how could he sell such a thing to the American people? He's made a political career out of brashness and going against the grain, but it seems to me at least in this case that the country would turn against him."

"I have to tell you, Governor, that I've come to believe there's absolutely nothing he won't do if he sees some advantage to himself. The vast majority of military people I know who've been anywhere near him will tell you privately they believe he's insane."

"The truth is, General, we've heard speculation that ranges even farther in to the bizarre. Unpredictable is probably the kindest thing we can say about him. For now though let's assume the worst. He

knows full well the damage we've suffered and he knows we have no military presence beyond your National Guard troops. What he doesn't know is that we do have a capable defense, that we're prepared. Let's hope it isn't needed, but if it is, we're ready."

✦

Secretary Fleed gave the orders. Establish "a presence - land, sea, and air" along the borders of California, with auxiliary troops further north to the Canadian border. Await further orders. He hung up the phone and broke into a cold sweat.

In the Oval Office across town, Gherkin was fairly bouncing in his seat, the grimace that passes for a smile pasted on his face. He hit the intercom. "Sally, get my people from Frog over here. On the double. Tell them it's a scoop. Need them to do some advance for my speech."

The Admiral took the call. "Henry, go to scramble." The General's voice and his in response were a series of pings, screeches, rumbles that typed out on both their screens coded and then decoded. "Orders just now. You?" "Yes. Your decision?" "Not yet. Establish presence only so far." "We'll see. Fingers crossed."

The evening news at Frog reports rumors of runaway crime in the place now known as Cascadia. Looting continues unabated. People accosted and imprisoned in their homes by savage gangs. Murder and rape plaguing the cities in daily waves of violence. The terrible cost to the people of those rogue states at their governors' insistence on secession. Political leadership, such as it is, trying to buy peace with socialist giveaway programs while anarchy rules the streets and plunder is laying waste to what's left of the economy. A tragedy unfolding.

✦

"My fellow Americans. A great tragedy is unfolding in that country called Cascadia. A true horror show is taking place in what was a cherished part of this great nation of ours. Three states sued for secession and we reluctantly let them go because the courts ruled in their favor. They left us. And look at them now.

"It's horrible, terrible. It's a bloodbath. We can't stand by and do nothing. These people were our fellow countrymen until their

governors led them astray. Many of them wanted to leave that place and rejoin us in this beautiful country of ours. But they couldn't. Some had farms, ranches, beautiful homes they couldn't sell. Nobody would buy them. Nobody wants to be there anymore.

"We're told that the authorities there even prevented them from leaving. They wouldn't let them join us and remain U.S. citizens despite the agreements we made to let people freely choose.

"It's a terrible situation. Just ugly. Crime there is completely out of control. We hear reports of murder and rape, gangs accosting people in their own homes, looting that has continued since that minor earthquake a few months back. We tried to help, to restore law and order, to bring accountability to that lawless land.

"But the governors wanted to leave the United States of America. And they did. They left us. And now their lands are lawless. Complete anarchy. And what is that bunch of losers they call leadership doing about it? They're trying to enact socialist programs, practically Communism. A "woke" agenda, they call it. They think they can bribe people to behave. It's a travesty. Abominable. Sick.

"As your president, I know we must act. This lawlessness is a threat to our country. Cascadia is the new Cuba, a rogue nation, Communism, at our border.

"I have ordered a full Division of our finest armed forces to the Nevada border. They are supported by a dozen of our best fighter pilots. A fleet of our battleships have blockaded the West Coast. My generals, my admirals know exactly what I want of them and they are ready to act at my command.

"We don't want trouble. We want an end to these troubles. Therefore, I am hereby calling on Governor Braun of California and those other two bumblers, governors Tweedledee and Dumb, to submit to occupation by our military. We will declare martial law and restore order immediately. I will be in charge.

"This is a non-negotiable demand that requires an immediate response. The deadline is 8:00 p.m. tomorrow EST, 24 hours from now.

"We are seeking a peaceful solution to this terrible problem and we expect Braun to respond in kind. We want to be perfectly clear. We are ready to act as custodians of their lands with minimum

disturbance to the well-being of those very sad people who are suffering so terribly under his failed leadership.

"Let me reiterate so there's no misunderstanding. This is a non-negotiable demand that requires acceptance within 24 hours. We will enforce it peacefully if that is their choice. But make no mistake. We are going to take control of those renegade lands called Cascadia one way or the other.

"We will do whatever is required to effect this change of command. Failure to accept this demand will be blood on the hands of Governor Braun and his two cohorts. We urge him to yield to our authority. God bless you all and goodnight."

✦

Governor Braun convened his cabinet. He asked Embry and Zulu to join them. They met over dinner in his conference room. Two state patrol officers and a team of four caterers served a simple, tasty meal.

"I thought we'd spare the wine," Braun said, "given the seriousness of the matter at hand. Very immediately at hand. The clock is ticking. I wanted to brief you on my intended response to this threat we've received and get your thoughts about the implications.

"Astonishing as this latest maneuver is, I can tell you we are fully prepared to deal with it from a position of strength. What are the repercussions is the ask?"

Bess and Daley led the description of the response Cascadia is ready and able to make. It was simple to explain but far reaching in possible consequences. It became apparent why Embrey and Zulu were included.

As the meeting concluded, the sense of apprehension they felt coming in was replaced by a quiet confidence at the defense they will mount and a resolve to address the problems it will raise with a determination to minimize harm to the very people who are threatening to attack them.

They agreed to reassemble at 7:00 a.m. and prepare to see it through. It promised to be an extraordinary moment in the entire history of military action.

✦

The General slept very little that night. The Division was in place outside Truckee, a mix of infantry, armored, and special forces led by a two-star, Buck Strangler. The general knew him to be a good man, capable, a little gung-ho but steady and cool under fire. He'd made his chops in Iraq and Afghanistan, career on the rise if slowed of late by peace time. That might be about to change.

This faceoff had escalated from establishing a presence to readying an invasion in the space of the President's ten minute speech. It was impossible to read the mood of the leadership let alone the troops. Each of them presumably was digesting the implications of attacking people who a few months past were your countrymen.

The General played out possible responses he might make to an order to attack. If he pulled rank on Strangler, countermanded the order, how would the man react? Probably arrest him on the spot, four-star or not. His men, troops that obeyed his orders, would be unlikely to treat the General as anything other than just an observer from the Pentagon, although a very high ranking one.

The job for all of them was salute and do what you're told. What to do when you're told two different things, two orders in opposition, who knows what they will do. He outranks everyone in this theater, but Gherkin outranks him.

What does a person of conscience do in a situation like this, an act of raw aggression ordered by a madman, a fit of spite and political one upmanship that threatens to rain terror down on innocent people, fellow citizens very recently?

He was up before dawn, guts grinding, a vague headache behind his eyes. Other than the sentries, everyone else was asleep.

He walked a piece into the desert, took a leak, saw the first rays of the sun on the horizon lighting up wafer thin clouds in the sky above the mountains. Donner Pass up that road, where we eat our colleagues to survive. How hungry do you have to be, he wondered? How hungry is this psychotic president for a taste of vengeance?

Back at the compound, he saw Strangler duck out from under the flap of his tent, arch his back, deep breath, hands above his head, long stretch until he lowered his arms, hands on his hips and looked around. Saw the General, saluted, and headed his way.

"Morning, General."

"General," he said and returned the salute.

Strangler nodded, looked at the horizon, back at the general, measuring the words he was about to speak. "Helluva deal, this one, sir. What do you make of it?"

"What I believed was a show of force became a whole lot more when the President addressed the public. Ultimatums don't leave much room to maneuver. The question now seems to be what Braun will do in response. Capitulate or if not, what?"

"I just received orders, sir. I have to say, I'm staggered."

"Sir?"

"The orders are: ready attack - repeat, attack - Sacramento on my orders. Elsewhere contain and control. POTUS."

The General felt his knees about to buckle, bile rise in his throat, his breath ragged in his chest. Strangler having stated his orders looked shaken by his own words, hearing them in the light of day.

"My god," the General said. "Have we really come to this?"

Strangler's jaw set like granite, a hard look on his face, but his eyes were wavering, looking from the General to the distance and back. His posture pure military, as if he summoned every bit of strength and training just to stand.

"Sir, I'm going to confide in you, something I never thought would cross my mind, let alone find voice." He paused, began again but stuttered, gathered himself and began yet again. "I'm not certain I can carry out those orders, Sir. My first thought this morning was to ask that I be relieved of command."

The General looked at him for a long moment, waiting for what else might be said. Then he reached out, put a hand on Strangler's shoulder, said, "I admire your courage in saying so, Buck. And I can assure you this: you're not to only one having those thoughts."

They agreed to regather after breakfast, choking down coffee and MREs, weighing their feelings in the light of day and the mood in the compound as the troops rose, sponged off, field dressed, ate, and assumed their respective roles.

Routine battle preparations were made and gradually it began to dawn on them, from the lowliest to those of rank, that they might cross the border soon and engage in hostile action. In California! Against what kind of resistance? Who would oppose them and how?

Like a pool of cold water rising up in the camp, awareness came to them, these men, these soldiers trained to fight the enemy, protect the interests of their country, go into battle at their officers' command and wage war until victory was won or cease fire declared. Wet now with a sense of what lay before them, the question rose too of precisely what would constitute victory in this engagement? How would they know?

✦

Governor Braun reassembled his team. Breakfast was served. Strong coffee, orange juice, bagels with lox, onions, capers. There was a certain tension in the air, yes, but confidence, too, as preparations were rolled out, functionaries introduced, their respective pieces put in place, the game plan manifested.

"War Room is yesterday," Braun said. "This is the Peace Room. We're going to wage peace abruptly, effectively, and perhaps finally, at least with our neighbors and their belligerent president. This will cut him off at the knees.

"There will be disruption for a time, a brief time we hope, and there will be some suffering. Barring accidents, there will be no bloodshed. That's the plan."

He and Embry spoke privately. They discussed the interruption that would hamper the Enterprise Zone efforts, which were less impacted than he feared.

"Not so much in the near term," Embry said. "I gave it a lot of thought last night after we met. Much of what we have in the works now is manufactured here in California, although not all. What is built elsewhere will get stuck in the supply chain. If I understand the briefing Bess gave us, that won't be disrupted for long.

"The bigger question is the underwriting. Money gets queasy about conflict. What is already committed will remain so. How future participation is affected is hard to guess right now.

"I suspect, Governor, and this is just speculation, that the outcome will be favorable in the long run in terms of your support. And by that I mean support for what you are putting in place here."

"Thank you, Clay. But I sense there's more to say."

Embry smiled, said, "Sir, my one concern is how the financial community will react to the fragility of the system that you're about to demonstrate in a very big way. It will give them a lot to think about that, even if they had suspicions in the past, they can no longer afford to ignore."

"That's precisely the danger, Clay. Thank you for confirming it. Once again, the president of our former republic is forcing our hand and we have no choice but to play it. When I first put this capability in place, I had imagined rolling out a piece or two of the effects, a warning shot so to speak, rather than the entire suite. The terms he laid out last night leaves us no choice."

"First things first, sir. Your foresight has saved us from a much worse fate. Once we take care of his threat, I'm certain we'll find a way to address whatever collateral damage is caused. In this case, I think the appropriate saying is, 'you can take it to the bank.'"

✦

"Sarge," the soldier said after saluting, "didn't you tell us you're from California?

The sergeant looked at him, said nothing, turned his head and spit, looked back at him for another long moment, said, "Long Beach. So what?"

"Couldn't help but wonder, sir."

"Save it, soldier."

"Yes, sir. But, sir, I have to tell you, I can't stop thinking about it."

"About what?"

"My relatives. Aunt and Uncle, they practically raised me."

"And?"

"They live in Sacramento."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, sir. I spent summers there most every year growing up."

"What do you want from me, soldier?"

"Well, sir, I mean… we wouldn't actually attack them, would we?"

The sergeant stared at him, thought different things to say, felt but didn't show empathy for what the kid and everyone one of them in this Division was coming to terms with as the day wore on and the deadline neared.

"We'll do what we're ordered to do, son. That's the business we're in."

He turned and walked away before the conversation went further. He didn't want to see the look on the kid's face when he heard what the sergeant had to say. He didn't want him to see his own doubt about what he will do if the orders come and he has to choose what's he's trained and sworn to do, or what his conscience tells him *not* to do, whatever the cost to him and his career.

✦

The three governors of Cascadia had been in contact by shortwave radio throughout the past dozen hours. The signal they used was scrambled and said to be coded, but they implied much and said little, caution being the better part of valor. Braun by now was in charge of the fledgling government with the clear, unhesitant support of the other two. He was bold but transparent with them in making decisions. Still, they knew when secrecy was needed and respected his judgement in when to proceed without notice. This was such a time.

"At noon, we're going to send our one and only response. 3:00 p.m. ET. It says, 'We have grounded all aircraft locally and advise you do the same.' Five hours before the deadline. Enough time to clear the skies. I hope he will."

"What time then will we activate our response, Governor?" Daley asked. "A little before five?"

"Two forty-five," Braun said. "I have no doubt that Gherkin will give orders to attack well before the deadline. Counting on the sucker punch, which is his style. It's important that we activate the system before his people can get their troops in action. It will just be getting dark back East, so the effect will be noted in a big way. It will get their attention.

"Our message will be read for what it is: prior notice we will not capitulate. I debated whether we should send it but better that than having civilian airline crashes on our conscience. I believe we can do this without loss of life."

✦

"That chopper brought a four-star aboard. Fuck you say? A four-star admiral. This must be the real shit we're getting after."

The Admiral was a deck above them, happened to hear the conversation, two swabbies swearing like sailors, but scared, too.

"Don't mean nothin', you ask me. Pentagon stuff, just a fucking observer, they call 'em. Watch us lowly fucks do the work. Prolly just checkin' out the Captain, see if the Boss can cut it when the shit hits the fan."

"Think so? I mean the shit? You think it's gonna go down."

"Those dumb fucks over there don't lay down it sure will. You heard Gherkin. He wasn't fuckin' around. Told 'em flat out. My way or die."

"Jesus, man. That's cold. Those are Americans we're talking about. You good with that?"

"Used to be Americans. Not no more and I'm not good with that. They walked and now they gonna pay."

"You telling me the word comes down, 'load a Tomahawk in the battery and let it fly,' you're okay with that?"

"Well, shit, I mean, I hope not. I hope it ain't like that. Wasn't my idea of what I signed up for. I mean, sure, wouldn't be no pleasure in shelling California. If you hafta know. I'm hoping it's a bluff. One side or the other gonna back off and that'll be it. I hope so."

"Yeah, that'd be good, turned out like that. Can't see any other way."

✦

The Screamin' Demons were a cocky group. Crack fighter pilots, F-22s, best of the best they thought themselves. Four of them were playing cards, smoking cigars, swapping lies, when the Colonel entered the tent. They didn't stand, didn't salute, just nodded at him, looked away.

"Hey, Colonel," one of them said, staring at the hand he held, pair of Jacks and some trash. "Got a question you don't mind."

"What's that?"

"What the holy hell are we doing here?"

"Waiting on orders. As you know."

"To do what? That's what I don't know. None of us sitting here can figure."

"General Strangler is theater command. He'll let us know when he's good and ready."

"Then we what? Go fly a few sorties over California. Maybe shoot down some pelicans. Unless they're going to send the Air National Guard to stop us. Weekend jet jockeys. You think?"

"Briggs, I frankly don't know what to think and fortunately I don't have to. Neither do you. Above your pay grade and mine. We just buckle up and fly when the word comes down. All that expensive training we pumped into your ass will acquit itself very nicely I expect and that's all we ask of you. Like the Nike man said, brother, Just Do It. You dig."

"Yes, sir, I dig. Just hoping they send me to strafe those beaches in Santa Monica, maybe, or Santa Barbara. Show those bikini babes who's boss, right?"

"Whatever's called for, Briggs, we know you're the man."

"Thank you, sir. I won't let you down."

"Gimme three," he said, drew a third Jack and pair of eights.

✦

Emily and Hope traveled with one of Zulu's men to St. Helena and booked two suites at the Meadowood for a week. "Is this really necessary?" Emily asked when Clay told her. "Let's hope not," he said, "but either way, you'll be safe."

Dam and Sam were holed up at the ranch. "You sure this is good information?" Sam asked. "Sounds crazy to me."

"Give some serious thought to the guy calling the shots over there. That leadership you're missing so bad. None of us know what he'll do, but his threat sounded pretty convincing to me."

"Yeah, I thought so, too. But I really can't imagine he'd actually attack us. I mean, a lot of us are still on his side."

Dam looked at him with something like curiosity distilled in a chemical mix of disgust and astonishment. "Except for that, my friend, I would say you're a pretty good guy. Reasonably intelligent, even. Except! Maybe this little tantrum of his will wise you up a bit."

Del and David were settled at the Cache Creek Casino Resort in Brooks, an hour west of town. It was David's thinking that the one thing a madman like Gherkin might spare is a combination casino and golf club.

"Would you believe I've never been in a casino, even after all my time in Reno? This is all pretty dazzling stuff for a former nun."

"We'll have to keep a close eye on you. Work up a passion for those roulette wheels and you end up embezzling funds to pay for your habit."

"The only habit I have is the one I threw in the trash when I left the convent. The passion I've worked up, on the other hand, is holding my hand as you speak. Hopefully you'll do better than that when we get to our room."

None of them knew what to expect. Clay assured them all that Governor Braun was well prepared to handle this crisis. He didn't say how and they were at a loss to imagine what defense Cascadia might mount. "Trust me," Clay said to each of them, "it's going to be all right."

✦

The General and Strangler took a walk in the noon day heat. Even this late in Autumn, the air was warm enough to slow their pace. Both of them were seething with nervous energy, fear of the moment that was fast arriving and anxious at the same time for it to be faced, relentless apprehension and the turning over of options that offered no redemption exhausting them both.

"At the risk of jeopardizing my career, General, I have to ask you as my superior officer what your response would be if I requested to be relieved of my command?"

"Is this an official request?"

Strangler's shoulders sagged; his posture deflated if only briefly before he regained his composure. He met the General's eyes, looked away, ashamed to answer as he did.

"No, sir. Not yet. But it feels like the only thing I can do. My entire career has been leading troops into battle and I've never had a scintilla of doubt about doing it."

"Until now?"

"Until now. This is no battle we're about to engage. More of a slaughter, it seems to me. One I can't in good conscience take part in, let alone lead. That's my honest assessment, sir, unimaginable as it is to hear myself saying so."

"Your question to me then is hypothetical I take it, even though you sound as though your mind is made up."

"That makes it seem cowardly, doesn't it? That's something I've never thought of myself. Yet here it is. I suppose I'm reaching for any sort of foothold, any kind of solution I haven't considered. That's the explanation, I guess. But it's probably nothing more than asking you to somehow solve this quandary I find myself in. That's unfair of me. I should withdraw the question."

"Let's say for now that we never had this discussion. But before we make that agreement, let me say this to you. I know you to be an excellent soldier, General Strangler, as do all of your colleagues. You have nothing to apologize for as a man who's done his duty honorably. Whatever you decide to do this afternoon I have no doubt will be honorable, too."

Strangler visibly was recharged by this testimonial, one that was so unexpected and effective in the calm he took from it. His posture regained the rank he represented. His dilemma took on a needed measure of perspective.

"That's good of you to say, sir. I can't tell you how much that means to me at any time, let alone at this particular moment. I'm honored and grateful."

"Let me add one more thing to this discussion we're going to forget. I'm the third ranking general in the United States Army. Next stop is supposed to be Joint Chiefs. It's been my career objective for as long as I can remember. I look at it now in the context where we find ourselves and I'm asking myself the same question you asked of me. 'Nuff said?"

✦

"Ground the aircraft? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Fleed confronted an edgy president with the single response they received to last night's demand of surrender. It was oblique and somehow threatening.

"Ground the aircraft! That's all it says? He's telling me what to do. This guy is something, Fleed. I have to say. Brass balls. Big brass balls. They're gonna make a great target when we cut 'em off. Ground the aircraft! We'll ground him into the dirt is what we'll ground. I'm liking this whole thing better and better, Fleed. We are going to put some big time hurt on that bastard he will never forget. If he survives it, that is."

"Sir, forgive me. At this time. I have to mention. There's been concern from some of our allies. They suggest a moratorium. Broker a deal. Avoid the possibility of bloodshed, sir. That's their message."

Gherkin looked at Fleed as though seeing him for the first time. He stared, scowled, shook his head, burst out laughing.

"Fleed, you amuse me. Really, you make me laugh. I remember when you were a two bit politician and I made you. I made you! Secretary of Defense. Who could have ever imagined? A flunky like you in charge of Defense.

"A moratorium? A deal? Avoid the bloodshed? You don't get it, Fleed. Fuck our allies. They don't run this country. I do! I do, and I'll run it the way I see fit. I don't give a good goddamn what the Limeys and the Frogs think. And Fleed, you better be damned sure you don't care either. We can replace you in a rat's heartbeat and nobody would even notice you were gone.

"Let me make this clear. If bloodshed is what it takes, that's the way it's gonna be. I want the state capitol of California in rubble. I want Braun by the balls. If they're bleeding, if he's toast, fuck him. That's how I do things."

✦

The Admiral sat down with Captain Nevins for lunch and an exploratory discussion. The food was excellent, the conversation hesitant, neither of them comfortable with the subject nor the degree of frankness that was acceptable.

"Thank you, Captain, for taking me aboard. These are unusual times and I thought it was important that the Pentagon be represented as the events unfold. I came here strictly as an observer - I want to make that perfectly clear - for what I believed would be some sort of standoff. Making our naval presence felt here on the

Pacific Coast. That assumption was undone by the President's speech."

The Captain nodded, passed the tureen of soup that the Admiral could help himself, blew breath across the spoonful he lifted to his lips, took a sip and returned his spoon to the bowl in front of him.

"Too hot, it is" he said, looked briefly at the Admiral, shrugged, and then looked away. "Like this situation. May I ask, sir, if you have any better idea than I do what our purpose here might be?"

"It's no comfort to assure you, Captain, that we're all in the dark about the mission here. The President's speech last night was far more incendiary than the mission we believed we were tasked."

"May I ask, sir, what that was?"

The Admiral laughed, shook his head, swallowed a sip of beer, said, "I laugh because the answer is: we were told to establish a presence. Orders from the Secretary of Defense. No further details. No clarification whatsoever was forthcoming. Establish a presence!

"What we weren't told is for what purpose. Then the ante was raised rather dramatically without any warning. To my knowledge, no one but the President himself knew what was coming. That's still the case we have to assume. So, I laugh sardonically, Captain, from frustration and from a deep concern about what may be happening here."

" As you know, sir," the Captain said, "there are a dozen of us stretched from Long Beach nearly to Seattle." He looked up from his soup, his eyes hooded, curious how much to say. "What you may not know, and this is just me reading between the lines, is that none of us knows why we're here. At least, that's my take from the communications between us.

"There's confusion about some of the most basic issues, sir. We don't even know whether we're violating territorial waters. I mean, until a few weeks ago, these were American waters. Now presumably they belong to California, Cascadia, whatever the hell it's called. We're sitting here on a destroyer with serious firepower anchored a mile off the coast."

He took a deep pull on his bottle of beer, set it down, began to taste his soup again, and paused, spoon in midair, said, "A mile off the coast of what I assume is now a foreign nation, or foreign state, or

whatever it is, it's foreign." Soup splashed from his spoon with each point he made. "If it's a 'presence' we've established, my interpretation is that it's a hostile one."

The admiral nodded affirmatively, said, "A hostile act against a nation with no defenses, no military, no ability to resist whatever it is we're threatening to do. That's the reality. Now we're advised that they either concede to being occupied by American troops or we will inflict that fate on them by force."

"Thank you, sir, for saying so. It's no secret that all of us, the entire fleet, are confused and, well, frankly, sir, we're concerned about what it looks like we may be asked to do. I'm military. I follow orders. Always have and firmly believed I always would. But I have a conscience, too, and I have to tell you, sir, I have not stopped debating what I will do if we're ordered to shell California."

He held the table with his hands on either said of his plate, sat erect in his chair, looked directly at the Admiral as if he expected the ceiling to open up above him and torrents of abuse and shame to rain down.

The Admiral said, "Admiral Thornberg is fleet command, as you know. I'm just an observer. Whatever orders are issued will come to him and he to us."

"Yes, sir. Understood. And if he has further orders at this point, I'm not privy to them." He let the statement hang in the air for a moment, a question in it the Admiral might answer if he chose. "All us captains are in touch, of course. We've been talking. General stuff, what we're seeing, that sort of thing."

"What are you seeing, Captain?"

"Lots of freighters leaving Long Beach and heading north. Tankers, too. They're lining up above us. Helicopters offloading big equipment, telecom it looks like, some kind of generators, too, and those birds are refueling at sea. A lot of activity and it looks like even more is coming."

"It appears they have their recovery effort underway. It's been a long time coming for those poor people in the Northwest."

"Exactly, sir. And, well, we can't help but wonder if we're here to interfere with that, or what exactly? We're sure not here to help as far as I can see and I have to question then if we're here to put more hurt

on those folks up there. Is that really what Gherkin, er, President Gherkin, is expecting us to do?"

The Admiral held his gaze, a wan smile on his face, said, "Captain, I wish I had an answer for you. I can only say you're not alone in your concerns. It's 1315 hours locally and the clock keeps ticking toward we know not what at 1700 hours. None of us has been in this position before and it's perfectly reasonable that we, and I mean *all* of us, are having serious doubts about where our duty lies."

✦

"Word is all over the ham network that Gherkin is threatening to attack us," Dirk said to Holly. "He gave a speech last night that called on us to 'submit to U.S. occupation.' By 5:00 o'clock tonight."

"I would be astonished if not for the nature of the guy and his penchant for threats. That man functions on some alternate, inhuman wave length."

"And that's it? That's all you have to say about it?"

"Not at all. There's a lot that comes to mind. First, he's sending a message to those other states that are suing for secession. That suggests he might well be willing to attack Cascadia not just for the pleasure it would give him to pick a fight where the odds are stacked in his favor but to let the others know they're up next in the Green Room."

"And second?"

"Second, the desperation he's exhibiting indicates the failed strategy he set in motion when he jettisoned the West Coast. The cost to benefits analysis misjudged the impact.

"The seventh largest economy in the world, for starters; paired with more than one-third of all the hydroelectric energy in North America, which resides in the Northwest, and the chip industry it powers; the lion's share of the computer industry that's reconcentrating in the Valley; and, the inflow of capital Clay Embry has brought *to* Cascadia *from* the U.S.

"All that is merely a hint of the direction things are headed, and they definitely aren't where the Orange One wanted them to go. No wonder he's desperate, grasping at anything to distract his constituents."

"True enough and always well-reasoned when that great brain of yours kicks into gear. Is that everything that comes to mind while the crisis unfolds?"

"Third, it's becoming increasingly apparent to me that there's a Wizard behind the curtain. Something is so far off about the guy that it appears to me not only is he not in his right mind but that somebody else may be."

"Wow, that is a staggering thought and already it makes sense to me. I never thought of that and yet it rings true. So, you once again have dazzled me with your powers of analysis and uber-cool. But aren't you scared?"

"At this point, I can't fathom an outcome where he wins. Partly because I think the man is incompetent. Partly because I don't believe the remains of his country would stand for such a travesty. And partly because we've made so much progress in establishing the New Northwest that I very practically believe momentum is on our side."

"The idea whose time has come, huh? Well, that's a powerful force to be sure. How it stands up against the U.S. military remains to be seen. Personally, I'm worried. For us, for all we've accomplished, for everything we still have to do."

"Come here, sweetie. Remember none of that negative stuff is allowed in our clubhouse. I like the new Dirk, the guy with the big smile and the stiff dick. We're not going to let anybody undo what you and I cooked up these past few weeks, especially not that little pickle in Washington, DC."

"You have a way with words, Ms. Weller. Maybe we ought to think about taking one for the team right now, just to refresh our memory of what's what."

"You, Mr. Primus, are a man after my own heart."

✦

"Fleed, front and center. I want to discuss the orders that you will send to my generals and admirals. To make certain you get them loud and clear. No mistakes here, hear?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

Gherkin smiled. What for most was a scowl for him was a smile, a private confirmation that his needs were being met by displays of subjugation.

"Now that I have your attention, Mr. Secretary, we have work to do. Despite your shortcomings, we are going to make history together, Fleed. You are going to launch an assault on a runaway part of the country and bring them to heel. To heel! It will be beautiful.

"This will be the greatest act of a courageous president and his secretary of War since Lincoln slapped down those rebel cotton farmers. This is the new Civil War, Fleed, but this time we are going to get it done in a few days. Maybe a week at the outside.

"Why? Because I'm in charge and I am not fucking around. We are going to lay waste to those bastards on the West Coast in short order and then we are going to make them lick our boots. They'll be begging to rejoin the Union. And guess what? The answer is 'no.' Not anytime soon. Not until I'm done with them. They'll be picking our cotton for a long time to come."

Gherkin unrolled a map on his desk. It was covered with Hi-Liter markings in different colors. He looked at it, looked at Fleed, said, "Stand here, man." He indicated the side of his desk. "This is what I want to do."

✦

"Will they really attack us, Bella?" Rika said. "It's so horrible that they could do such a thing. I'm so confused. First they don't want to help us when the earthquake came. Then they wanted us gone from our own country. Now they say they will attack us. Is it possible that such a thing could happen."

Bella was annoyed by this outburst, but she hid it well. "We don't know what to think, Rika. We don't even know for sure what President Gherkin said. It's second hand information and we'd do well to be calm until we know more."

"But they tell us that the deadline to act is 5:00 p.m. Just a few hours. Can that be true? Ailey says it's what Holly told her Dirk heard from the radio people."

"Rika, please be calm. We don't know for certain what all this means. It is very concerning, of course. But it seems likely it is

between Governor Braun and the President. What could Gherkin possibly want with us up here?"

"I'm sorry, Bella. But I'm scared. I've been trying so hard to be at peace, to find my way through all of this. You know I was upset before but I've tried, I really have, to keep my composure, to accept this change in my life. In our life together. And now we hear the United States might attack us. My god! It is unimaginable."

Bella took her in her arms, held her close, ran her hands gently across her back, hoped all the while Rika was comforted, that she didn't sense the sadness Bella felt, the displeasure she had for her partner and her persistent weakness in the face of these difficulties.

Distress and fear she understood. Professionally she dealt with them as a natural part of the human condition. But she believed too that sharing the burden was an essential part of healthy relationships and increasingly by this measure her respect if not her love for Rika was waning.

✦

Fleed was shaken. It was all he could do to maintain an appearance of calm while in actuality his breath caught in his chest and his body trembled.

"These orders, Mr. President," he said, barely able to speak the words, "unless Braun yields to your instructions before then, will be issued at precisely 8:00 p.m. Is that correct, sir?"

Gherkin looked up from his desk at the man who was visibly trembling, trying so hard to handle his moment of destiny and failing miserably to be up to it. He grimaced; his cheeks pushed outward by his cruel mouth attempting to smile in sympathy, but the moment passed. He spoke quietly, as to a child.

"Fleed, you still don't get me. You have your orders, and you know what I want you to do. What you don't know, don't suspect, can't seem to figure out for yourself no matter how hard I try to bring you along, Mr. Secretary, is what I will tell you now. We gave them until 8:00 p.m. Order the strike at 7:00."

✦

Helen lay in Fausto's arms, content, sated, after another extraordinary session together, exploring their bodies individually and what they are capable of doing together. "This is something special," she said, "and I wonder when it will become ordinary. But for me at least it keeps getting better."

He was happy to answer the unspoken question. "For both of us it gets better and better. I wanted you from the first time I saw you and assumed it would never happen. When it did, I felt like the luckiest man in the world. And I still do. Even luckier because it keeps happening and it keeps being great."

"We are so sappy together, aren't we? Two dopes enthralled with each other's bodies, the pleasure we make and take together."

"And I sense lately what we wonder is: what more is there? Is this it and if so what's wrong with that? But where is it going if it keeps going? Am I putting words in your mouth? I don't mean to. Just trying to find out if those things cross your mind, too. Or is it just me?"

"Fausto, I think about all those things. Of course I do. But it's almost like I'm afraid to hex this beautiful gift you're giving me. I want it to go on forever. Just you and me and this place we go together. It's like I don't want it to ever change, but I know it will."

"It will, and maybe it will get better still."

"When I think about change, I see divorce, all the entanglements that have to be unwrapped, the reality of rearranging a family where a child is involved, a beautiful child who will be heartbroken when her parents part. I see all that and it makes this time we have together seem like a dream, one I don't want to wake up from and find out it there's anything left for us when all that change is faced."

"I understand. For you there are so many complications. For me, it's a lot easier. I've led an unencumbered life, pretty open-ended and freewheeling, very much by choice if I'm honest, although I like to ascribe it to fate."

"That may present challenges of another sort. You make me deliriously happy when you fuck me and I know it works for you, too. But who's to say how that will hold up if we complicate it with real life adventures together?"

"If you're asking me, I have to say I don't know the answer. But I will add that I'd be thrilled to give it a try."

"That starts with Grace. You have to understand that. You barely know each other and so far I don't think she has a clue that you might have any part in her life. That's neither good nor bad, just not a factor for her. Not yet. And I don't mean to be abrupt but you could never work for me if it didn't work for her. too."

"And if it did? I mean, no kid wants a stepfather, but if she and I could accept each other, even love each other, where would that leave you?"

"It would be a starting place. A huge hurdle cleared. Then we could look at the rest of what we might have for each other and go from there."

She looked at him with curiosity, wondering as he likely did how they came to this point in the discussion. "Didn't we begin this conversation by talking about that madman who's going to be attacking us any minute now?

"Yep, and that led us to decide on another roll in the hay on the off chance it might be our last."

"Well, it was great and I sure hope it will prove to be the latest in a long procession of them going forward. We suddenly are talking about serious matters of a very personal nature, though. And we both know life is complicated, even when we aren't under attack."

She gave him one of her mega-watt smiles, took him by both arms and said, "One thing I know for sure is that as long as you can get it up, we'll always have one big thing going for us."

✦

"Batavia," the President said, "will you sit with me? Can we talk? We have a few hours until I have to take command."

"You think," she said, "that they will not capitulate?"

"We received one message. It told us they are grounding their aircraft and advised we do so, too. That sounded to me like they have plans to resist us."

"Then it will be war," she said with a smile. Her face lit up, eyes brightened and dimples appeared in her cheeks. He loved that look she showed when she was pleased. He saw it rarely but it moved him like nothing else.

"You've done well, Mr. President. As well as I could have hoped for you. The nation is bending to your will." And you to mine, she thought to herself, as he beamed like a child praised for his misbehavior. "You have shaped this country in the image you envisioned for it and history will note your achievement."

"When I gain your admiration, it excites me."

"Bad boys excite me, Ronald. That is the way to my sweet spot. The place we let you go when you are very bad and I am very pleased. Then you know we reach our own version of détente. East meets West, so they say."

"Why so seldom? Because I displease you so often? Is that the cause of the distance between us?"

"Because you bore me is the reason. Your little tantrums are predictable and mostly ineffective. That's why I punish you. You rant and rave and nothing is accomplished. Too often that is the way and so I must push you. I push you away so you will find the strength to do what is needed."

"But we have come so far already. So much has been achieved under my leadership. This is a different country."

"It is changing, yes, but you promised me to do it quickly. Like a samurai beheading barbarians, I said. I told you if you wanted me, that and more is what you must do. Time passes, change comes, but there is so much to do. This is an historic effort. We can't be satisfied until it's done. Until the country is ours."

"This move against Braun will be effective. It will send a message. The other states will think twice before leaving when they see what we'll do to the West Coast."

"Perhaps you are correct, Ronald. At least it is something. We'll see what comes of it. At least you'll have the satisfaction of shaming the Governor."

He placed his hand high on her thigh and she very slightly parted her legs. What a pathetic creature, she thought, and how stupid. We want to see those states leave. We want the country further weakened by the brainless bigots and religious nuts he attracts. He doesn't get it. He believes the things we have him saying publicly. We have control of his mind but there is so little to work with and such an ego to massage. She spread her legs a little more.

✦

The President's face was between her legs, his tongue like a hungry dog lapping a bowl of milk, deliriously happy, a little light-headed, when the lights in the room flickered, dimmed, went dark.

Batavia opened her eyes, Gherkin lifted his head, the big LED lights in the wall clock said 5:45 p.m., and the phone rang. The lights came back on.

"What the fuck is going on?" the President yelled into the phone.

"A complete power failure," his Chief of Staff said. "Backup generators are working but the power is out all over town. Checking the map now. Looks like a rolling brownout, sir, across the East Coast, and..." The phone went dead.

Gherkin tossed the phone across the room, grabbed his iPad. Dead, too. He paced in a circle, smoothing his mop of orange hair and nervously licking his lips, which were coated with the fragrant emulsions of Batavia's vagina.

"What's going on, Mr. President?" she asked, the sarcasm coloring the look on her face and the sound of her voice.

"This is not good. Very bad. The timing is terrible. We need to power up. I need to be in command. The hour is approaching. I ..."

"We're under attack, you idiot. Don't you understand? He beat you to the punch. Braun is shutting you down while you're eating pussy. He's disengaging you. Systems collapse. My god, you're a disaster. Put you up against a real man and like they say, you're the little pickle. You come up short."

"Impossible. Not possible. It can not be. We have redundancy. Firewalls. Robust capabilities. I've been briefed. He can't just shut us down. We're prepared for this stuff. It can't be done. It's not possible."

"You're blubbering, you pathetic oaf. Impossible? It's happening right now. You know from disinformation. This is disengagement. He's shutting down the infrastructure, power, communications, every digital link in every system that keeps the country functioning. The only things that keep working are the ones with generators. As long as the fuel lasts."

"Fleed has his orders. He'll put the hurt on them. He'll have Braun on ice as soon as we launch. They don't have a chance once we're underway."

"You really don't get it, do you? Launch how? Orders how? There is no way to communicate. Watch and see. This is a virus that is taking you out. All your weapons, all your positions, all your capabilities. Done. There is no way to tell them what to do and anyhow there's no way for them to do it. Stopped in their tracks. If it uses a chip, it just quit working. If they use a computer, they aren't worth a shit. You just got your butt handed to you, Mr. President. It's fat and flabby and it's all yours."

✦

All across the nation, a rolling brownout moved swiftly east to west and everything closed down. Connectivity was severed. Lights went out, phones went dead, computers powered up on battery and showed four bars only to shut down, traffic signals quit, cars stopped running, trains and buses ground to a halt, cabs were stalled in a cacophony of profanity, airplanes made emergency landings, people in elevators were stuck between floors, hydraulic doors failed, and cash registers crashed. Everything electric winked out and ceased working.

Before 6 p.m. ET the eastern seaboard was closing and within the next thirty minutes disruption encompassed the entire country. Most of the people took some time before they comprehended what was happening. Some of them were relieved, some fewer amused and thankful, and those few tended to be ones who saw the bigger picture, but most of the people were too distracted by the failure of the equipment that powered their life to consider anything deeper than what to do right now.

There was a brief period of stunned repose among the population as the effects of the disconnect reached them. Depending on the severity the impact had on them, their responses ranged from a comically absurd dance from one device to another, as if trying to reignite whatever function it offered or merely canvass them all until one finally regained its ability to respond, from that push for stasis by some of them to sheer panic and near riot reaction by many others,

especially in pockets where lots of people gathered and space was dear.

There was shared across the entire country a powerful sense of pandemic deja vu but in mirror image at a greatly increased pace. Unlike that previous one, this disconnection drove people away from their devices and toward each other, opposite the orientation brought on by the virus but at much faster speed and maskless. It took only minutes rather than months to spread and no vaccine was anticipated. The fear, isolation, and disorientation were the same.

Along the Nevada border, up and down the Pacific Coast, all the military communications systems simultaneously ceased to function. No orders could be received if they had been sent, which was unknown. The zero hour came and went in radio silence.

The commanders of each unit made attempts to reach headquarters, then each other, with various degrees of effort. Each of them was astonished to be thoroughly and completely isolated from the chain of command and operational capability, but none of them was especially disturbed to be inoperative. Not in this instance. No orders meant no attack. Not yet. Maybe not ever. To be spared the decision point that so many of them were dreading was a tremendous relief. It would be hours or even days before they reconsidered what the orders they had prepared to implement had confronted them with about the person calling the shots.

✦

Braun stood up from the table, walked to the window, looked out at a city going about its way, returned to the table and the people gathered there, said, "I'm greatly relieved and thankful." They applauded, which took him by surprise.

There was a rush of noise, mostly conversation but plenty of guffaws and laughter, too, as the entire room gave itself over to that same relief and thanks. Bess stood at the opposite end of the table, said, "If I had champagne in a glass, I'd raise it to you, Governor. That was remarkable."

As if on cue, two state patrol personnel entered the room with sparkling wine and glasses. "Not champagne, but Cascadia's own,"

one of them said as the glasses were distributed and filled. It was Schramsberg, but it would do.

"Hear, hear," Bess said, raising a glass and looking around the table. "I meant what I said. I raise a glass to Governor Braun and his leadership in facing this terrible threat and disarming it without bloodshed. None of us knows what Gherkin had planned, but I can't believe it was anything but ugly and I personally have to admit that I was very scared about where we were headed. Governor, you told me this would work and I only doubted you a little. But it did!"

Glasses were raised, the classic toast made, congratulations extended to the governor and his staff. "Speech!" someone said, and Braun surprised them by accepting.

"I do in fact want to say a few words. All of us were concerned, Bess, by this completely unprovoked and therefore characteristic threat President Gherkin presented us. His reputation precedes him and thankfully we were prepared.

"Our people told us this would work. And it did, perfectly. Not a shot was fired and no blood shed. There are so many reasons to be grateful.

"One irony is the underlying lesson it presented. We speak metaphorically about connectivity, how everything in the universe touches everything else, and it sounds like a remnant of Haight-Ashbury. What we see, though, in fact is that connectivity is literally demonstrable in the digital plane.

"Everything that uses chips is connected to every other thing. There is actually less than six degrees of separation between those linkages. Getting them to speak to each other is not very difficult. What we were able to do, once that connectivity was established, is remind them whatever can be turned on can be turned off."

Later, he took Embry aside, said, "Have we damaged our relationship with your people, Clay? I'm very hopeful the recovery can continue apace."

"We'll be all right, sir. I'm confident of that. Which isn't to say this event won't send shock waves through the financial community. I'm interested to see what the reaction will be once equilibrium is reestablished.

"Money is like water seeking its own level and always chasing a profit. This fragility that we exposed is going to shake them up. Uncertainty always is a concern. In this case, they're seeing a complete breakdown of the systems.

"In a business that cherishes predictability, that's unsettling. But it won't stop them from investing. And we happen to be the best investment there is at the moment. Your strength of leadership doesn't hurt, either. This was a pretty vivid example."

"Thank you, Clay. If this can help springboard the enterprise zone effort, well, I can't say it will have been worth it, but it would be a great way to respond."

✦

The President addressed the nation. It had been 72 hours of total shut down. Most of the systems, the power, communications, transportation, were running again. Braun had turned them back on. Disruptions continued in some locales but mostly the norm was reestablished. How to explain it all in Gherkin-speak was another matter.

"We tried to help those people," Gherkin said. "They responded with hostile actions. We absorbed it and thought seriously about laying them low, turning our firepower on them and teaching them a lesson they'd never forget.

"We choose not to respond in kind. Misguided as these people are, these Cascadians who are so adrift, they still are former citizens of our country. Lost, yes, but crushing them like vermin was not what we chose to do. We took pity of them and let them go their way.

Be assured, my fellow Americans, they know not to try it again.

"These people are suffering. Understand that truth, my fellow Americans. They are led by incompetent people who want to establish a socialist state, while their citizens are terrified by violence and gang warfare. They refused our offer of help and made their feeble attempts to attack us. We could have crushed them, but we decided to have mercy and let them go about their way, sad as it is, sick, tragic. That is their choice and we will let them have it.

"We have better things to do. We are making America great again while these poor people flounder. We are building the greatest

economy the world has ever known. A place where any of you can become as rich as me. Nothing can stop you if you believe in yourself. If you believe in me. We are the good people, the just and righteous people, and we deserve to prosper. We do and we will. Goodnight and god bless you all, especially those who purchased the Gherkin bible that we offer on our website. It is the book of my special people. Get yours if you haven't already because together we are unstoppable."

✦

"Great speech, Mr. President. That should reassure the country. It was a shocking time for all of us. That said, I'm sorry to bring some bad news. All of New England has joined New York and New Jersey in suing for secession."

✦

End of Part Two