

**AMENDMENT 25, SECTION 4**

**By**

**Vorana**

## Austin Vandevire

On Austin Vandevire's first day as a statistical analyst for First Consolidated Bank of Maryland the sharp-eyed bank manager beheld the height of the polite quick-smiling Black man and informed him where the company gymnasium was. Vandevire, suddenly wearing the Company insignia, would be the center of the Company basketball team, Sue Wilson decided. To which Vandevire replied, in a Midwest farmer's voice, that he did not partake of basketball. Sue Wilson, a woman of authority not afraid to show it, reaffirmed the next morning by tying a pair of sneakers to Vandevire's desk lamp. Extra-large, of course.

Born and bred in Missoula, Montana Vandevire, coffee skin and all, had rarely experienced Blackness. Missoula was best described as a color blind town, with any residual White racism drowned out by the self-proclaimed enlightenment of the University of Montana. Any ethnic animosity emanating from local bubbas was directed at their version of the racial slur of the West; that is, people with sole ancestral claim over the Region. The only a-ha looks Vandevire ever received was from people who heard his name first without seeing him----and then he shows up----oh!

An image not to be dispelled by Vandevire's gregarious telephone voice: A little resonant, but distinctly weaned of dialect; the envy of any Madison Avenue huckster seeking a voiceover for commercials.

Ron Vandevire, distinguishing Professor of Geography at U. of Montana., had instilled in son Austin at an early age a love for statistics, demographics. For Austin Vandevire the purest art form was the interplay between land and the people. With the fanaticism of a young pony leaguer tracking the batting averages of his hardball heroes, Vandevire became the walking encyclopedia of cultures, races, incomes, occupations, population trends, ecosystems. Armed as he was with the weapons of computers, surveys, census tracts, maps, atlases. Ask him how many disabled Asian female doctors over 40 who voted Democratic and who prefer brown tinted glasses lived in X election district of Cincinnati, Ohio – and he'd have the answer before you could get up to leave.

Austin's lily-white childhood buddies – who remained his closest friends through college – had developed natural-terrainial proclivities for fishing, hunting, climbing, and camping, in addition to your typically All-American sports, and they were forever trying to crowbar Vandevire away from his beloved gadgets. With some success too, since Austin saw physical activities as a neat little pendulum swing to gather strength for his return to the universe of standard deviations. There were the spontaneous adventures with his living and breathing empathets, whose every quirk in their swarthy personalities provoked in Vandevire a sense of virginal wonderment. Not surprisingly, Vandevire was usually the last up the trail, all thumbs around the campfire, and keeping the frostbitten bench warm during football games. But he'd be the one to keep some of these hardy young white kids from flunking a chemistry test or requiring a translator after writing a composition paper.

Understanding frailty as explainable, totally reflecting one's own personal experiences, was the most valuable lesson Austin Vandevire learned from his father. Because it made all of creation seem so benign. Austin Vandevire saw no demons. Conflict was compartmentalized, dusty aberrations in a world that, if not positive and engaging, was at least explainable. And if not, his world of demographic extractions provided him with the perfect escape.

Enter Mercedes. A gentle child/woman whose yearning to teach young children derailed her flirtation with a seminary. To Vandevire, she was a soulmate, a perfect embodiment of his father's strong faith and a benign view of humanity. They began dating when Austin was 18, at the University of Montana. With Mercedes's graceful encouragement, young Vandevire soared through his studies, picking up a Master's Degree with Honors, in only four years.

As graduation loomed, Mercedes was diagnosed with advanced leukemia. Destined for a better place and living proof of the axiom that death is often harder for the living loved ones than for the person dying.

Exit Mercedes. And exit the free ride for Austin Vandevire.

## Washington

A bank way up in Maryland saw Vandevire's brain and saw nothing of the gray matter. Only green. \$120,000 per annum was ample incentive for Vandevire to leave his lifelong comfort zone and pursue an adventure into the Eastern unknown. His last normal day was spent out in an abandoned ranch, with dear friends and family members. Hugs and trepidation.

The most ill-advised move of Vandevire's life. The immediate, intense, and overwhelming homesickness put him on a negative road immediately; the foreshadowing of a dark moon. His new home in the tall, shiny (and expensive) highrise on the Maryland/D.C. line had a vacuous sterility. Full of strangers who barely said hello and couldn't care less if he dropped dead in the hall. Hurried people at work who spoke in clipped tones only about work (which was mainly about money), and who shied away from his down-home demeanor. The ultimate insult, though, was to behold his gift being demeaned as a marketing tool. To him, desecration of art. But there was an old Rocky mountain expression, a subtle axiom to the Vandevires of the world about loyalty and responsibility: if they kick your teeth in, you get up and give them a crooked smile.

To Vandevire's surprise, some folks in the office gradually opened up to him, confiding in him little tidbits about the office or their private lives. As Ron Vandevire had said often in erstwhile Sunday School classes, shed warm sunshine on ice long enough and it's bound to melt. A couple of the more Afrocentric Black coworkers at the bank started dropping Frederick Douglass and Langston Hughes literature on Vandevire's desk. A subtle little hint. Karl, one such colleague, blurted to Vandevire in a contrivedly-exaggerated inner-city jargon, "girl got a thang about brothers." Vandevire needed translation. The comment was directed to Sue Wilson, marketing director and Vandevire's oft-absent supervisor. Sue was this tall, gaunt woman given to waistlength hair and short skirts often accompanied by tights. Although rumored to be a whiz with numbers, she shared precious little of her own work activities. Vandevire found her detached and unfriendly, speaking hurriedly in arch syllables often laden with unsmiling sarcasm directed toward the human anatomy. Sue was an enigma to the point that even management people were overheard mumbling about "her problem." The rampant rumor mill: she'd been dating both Black and White guys. Karl put in more succinctly: "When with her White consorts, she sees the big mansion. When with her Black consorts, she sees the exercise club." Karl challenged Vandevire to share his indignance about Sue's offhand comments about the Black physique. Yes, Vandevire had heard them. No, he wasn't about to jump in the middle of that, not in a million years. In a loveable way Karl considered Vandevire hopeless.

Vandevire took to a friendly, outgoing computer specialist in Personnel named Audrey. The clincher was her insatiable queries about his demographics world. The ultimate compliment, Audrey was a Black woman with skin so pale that she was frequency mistaken for White. A perfect match, Vandevire's Black colleagues razed. Audrey was a budding jazz singer, and during occasional evenings she'd take Vandevire along on her auditions-style gigs in the hole-in-the-wall clubs. Karl noted with wry satisfaction Audrey's "good influences" in cultivating in Vandevire an interest in the urban music scene

In predominantly White neighborhoods, an innocent stop together in a drugstore on Wisconsin Avenue brought some mumbling comments from the longhaired youths hiding behind the soda canister. This was the first Vandevire had ever been the object, at least directly, of a racial slur. In one snooty restaurant out in Maryland exurbia the service came just a tad later than usual. Still going on, decades after passage of the Civil Rights Act of '64.

Ron Vandevire had long ago tutored his son not to let the evil of a few drown out the prevalence of normal, positive human interactions of the well-intended. To Austin Vandevire the perpetrators of his crash course on acute race relations were nothing. He had no time for them. If he was going to go running home to Montana, it wouldn't be because of a handful of petty losers.

On Vandevire's two-month anniversary on the job, Jacki Carrera barged into his office with eyes burning, closed the door, and invited him out for an after-hours drink. Before he could even respond, a grip was on his sleeve. For this was not a request, but an urgent command.

Jacki, a slim, handsome, middle-aged Filipino woman, had been the first to befriend Vandevire, doing everything to make him feel at home in his new work—which was the same as her work. She volunteered much about her personal life, her family, her culture, and more than anyone else made him feel relaxed in an otherwise-intimidating environment. She brought him to a couple parties at her house in McLean, treating him to the gregariousness and good food common at Filipino parties.

They found a quiet corner in an upscale Italian restaurant. It was her treat. But he never took more than a few bites. Not after what she had to tell him. She began with the most oppressive of compliments: that he was the one person at work she trusted above all.

The bank was keeping two sets of books. They thought they'd been slick about it. Only they never factored in Jacki's voyeurism for numbers. A constant experimentation.

Jacki didn't fool around. She took her discovery straight to bank President E. Maxwell Smith with whom Jacki was on a first name basis. He tried to blow her off. A trade secret, beyond her level of inquiry, he said. But Jacki didn't fool around, he found out.

"I'm not stupid, contrary to what your friends may think about my race and gender," is what Jacki said.

His knees buckled a little. A following hour of evasive explanations sounded stupid, and he knew it. Finally, she nailed it head on; drug laundering. Cocaine. Trained perfectly in class hegemony, he asked her how much she valued her job. Not to mention her career in banking. Jacki wasn't easy prey, so the Esteemed Mister E. Maxwell Smith moved on to Plan 2: How about a \$50,000 raise? \$25,000 for a "resume enhancement" and \$25,000 off the books, in cold-hard green. That's how it was arranged with the four other bank employees involved—including Sue Wilson, whose \$130,000 salary couldn't bankroll a \$200/day heroin habit.

That's about the time Vandevire got lockjaw over his meal.

“Of course, you didn’t take the money,” he said to Jacki.

“Are you crazy? Of course, I took the money. At least until I figure out what to do,” answered Jacki. “On top of that I squeezed him for an extra 20K. Just to let him believe I’m serious. I’ll put the money in escrow and give a trusted friend the key. Do I feel bad about it? Heck yes, why do you think I feel the need to talk to you?”

“Just report it, Jacki,” said Vandevire. Exactly what Ron Vandevire would have said.

“This is bigger than you can imagine, Austin. Middlemen calling in favors to the bank President. Enormous profit-sharing scheme. These middlemen are close confidants of John Dickerson—that is, Speaker of the House John Dickerson. The last person on Earth anyone would want to mess with. How can you talk about taking it to someone else—if arguably the most powerful in America is involved? Corruption in these high places is almost the norm now.”

Vandevire had read some sleazy accounts on him. Columnists dubbed him the “J. Edgar Hoover of Congress.”

Jacki and Vandevire sat in silence for several minutes. Finally, Jacki leaned over and gave him an appreciative kiss on the cheek. “What are you going to do?” Vandevire asked. She simply shook her head and walked away, concealing tears.

Vandevire would never see Jacki Carrera again.

For the next week Vandevire stayed away from Jacki’s office. A supreme act of denial. Then came the cold wind blowing down the corridors. Jacki was AWOL from work. Quiet, whispers, arched eyebrows. Vandevire drove by her house a couple of times in the early evening: The grass was high, the windows were dark, the car was gone. Finally, Karl relayed the word from his supervisor that Jacki had suddenly returned to be with extended family in the Philippines. Acute family illness. Vandevire started spending 14 hours per day on his demographics, just to ward off encroaching thoughts of isolation and fear. Yet they kept pounding on his consciousness, like dangerous intruders.

The next day, it happened. So fast as to be like a mirage; a numbing one. At 7:00, as the offices of the temple of doom were beginning to clear, a squat man with flashing-silver suit and Hitler moustache invaded his cubicle. E. Maxwell Smith, he introduced, with pinched smile, pinched expression, pinched everything.

“Do you enjoy your duties and status here with our bank?” Came the deep, dignified voice.

“Yes sir.”

“Any complaints?”

“No sir.”

“Many employees pay attention to stupid rumors and it adversely affects their job performances. We regard loyalty here most of all. But anyone who’s a malcontent here will be guaranteed, unsuitable for work elsewhere, because of our very tolerant and liberal atmosphere.” Encroaching footsteps. Old dominion breath. A squeeze to the shoulder. “Son, if there’s ever anything you need to tell me, you just feel free to knock on my door. Hear?” Eyes straight ahead.

“Absolutely, sir.”

That night, thoughts swirled around his head, mainly about who he should talk to. He decided to check his mailbox for the first time in a week. Next to a couple of letters from Montana buddies was a red key and access code number, with directions to a storage locker.

The locker contained a package. As soon as he ripped it open, he saw a note from Jacki. The most prolific apology he had ever seen. But then he didn’t read more than two paragraphs, and certainly didn’t regard the accompanying stack of documents. The next morning, after a sick call into work, Vandevire deposited the bombshell in pulp in a safety deposit box.

The specter of John Dickerson was suddenly everywhere. Vandevire caught him on C-SPAN, this paunchy little man with smallish eyes, thick eyebrows constantly furrowed, mossy black hair seemingly glued to his head, \$500 pin-striped suit with white pocket handkerchief set at a perfect angle. A tenor, whiny voice using unabridged words with the supreme confidence that only the pampered offspring of a fifth-generation banking family could fathom. Stringing sentences together in legal hyperbole, such that a few could understand, except for people like himself. Pinpoint platitudes and understated doubletalk, so that special interests could recognize a few bones thrown their way but cast in a manner that the words would offend nobody.

Austin Vandevire became the ardent student with Speaker of the House Dickerson as his dissertation topic. Drawn as he was to the Washington Library after his banking hours, to pour over new accounts of Dickerson’s activities. Vandevire thought that pursuing this sinister enigma would ward off the headaches, the tightness in his stomach. But the more he read, the more the physical agonies intensified.

Dickerson, the California patrician, had had a brilliant academic career, graduating second in his class from Harvard Law. Within five years he was chief lobbyist of an agribusiness concern sprinkled with water carriers, for the Dickerson cartel. Thus, the insider, with critical cross-connections to both the corporate bureaucracies and Party machinery, rode into the House by pushing the right buttons: Hooray for education. Hooray for economic liberty. Boo to too much government. And let’s hang a few terrorists and drug pushers. Ultimate mouthpiece of the Harris poll.

To Vandevire’s amazement, Dickerson had won his House seat as a reformer, a change agent. For one thing, he was new. Yet his actual legislative record, according to media analyst, consisted of watered-down reform packages and midnight loop-holes. Additionally, he was working behind the scenes to spike more sweeping reforms, and to quietly ostracize reformers intent on shaking the system in meaningful ways.

The sobriquet “J. Edgar Hoover of Capitol Hill” stuck after he had ascended to the Speaker’s position – in 8 short years. Dickerson’s hegemony was born of political voyeurism. By use of powerful contacts, handpicked investigators and abuse of technology (he sat on the House Intelligence Committee), he was able to dig up skeletons on countless Congressmen. In the greatest backroom deal tradition, he would never publicize such misdeeds. The leverage was sufficient to maintain ironfisted control over Congressional agendas. It explained why several corruption scandals, swirling through major news stories, never landed Dickerson so much as a reprimand. There were stories of coerced campaign contributions from company executives. International business deals presenting a conflict with his public duties. Investments in China-based enterprises where forced labor was used.

The only good news Vandevire could see was that the barrage of exposes was finally wearing on Dickerson’s popularity. His House seat was, for the first time, “vulnerable.” And then came the chilling words of the reminder from Ron Vandevire: “A cornered rat is the most dangerous.”

Vandevire was constantly beset by indigestion after dinner. Restlessness at 3:00-4:00 in the morning, with terrible semi-hallucinogenic flashes while in a state of semi-sleep.

Until the sudden realization: He was letting John Dickerson run his life. In fact, Dickerson owned him. Vandevire was no different from Sue Wilson, or those sleazy Congressmen. All because of his silence.

One morning when Vandevire came to work, his mind was focused totally on the next hour. Not on tomorrow, which carried a riveting uncertainty. Coincidentally, his resignation was timed with the terrible announcement that Sue Wilson had been found dead from a heroin overdose. Vandevire’s letter was low-keyed, giving the bank a week’s notice, citing “other plans” and containing a personal note of thanks to E. Maxwell Smith.

Vandevire was destined to revisit Jacki’s memoirs. But not before memorizing the address of the U.S. Dept. of Justice. And the shortest way to get there.



## Patson

The small-city cop slowed his cruiser to a crawl, regarding with suspicion a man leaning back against this bug-of-a-car. The steely-eyed officer beheld a James Dean facsimile, only projected into middle-age. Deep lines in a devilishly-handsome face. Off-coloring grey streaks through the sloppy blonde hair. And a matching leather jacket with more cracks than a windshield after a rock assault.

The young, beefy officer stopped, got out, and approached with a gait which insisted you take notice. Patson pretended not to. "Need to see some identification, Mister."

"Nice day, hain't it, officer?" Came the response in a crisp drawl not akin to the South. "Was a nice day, officer."

The officer repeated himself. Patson pointed to the crosswalk in the nearby intersection. "How could you have missed it, officer? Five times within the last half hour drivers have cut right in front of pedestrians legally entitled to the crosswalk. Tell me, officer, the kind of predatorial human mind which would endanger a human life just to save two seconds of traffic time. Behind a wheel of a car, you hold pedestrians in virtual bondage because you got the power. And you use that power benevolently. Or in my eyes you lose it. Kind of like America, hain't it, officer?"

Patson braced himself for an aggressive physical response but received only a final warning. Then the officer took an unconscious step back. It was the eyes. Large and brown, changing contortions with each syncopated syllable. Eyebrows arching after every sentence. Hegemonous eyes.

"Just why am I being stopped, officer?"

"A citizen phoned in a complaint. Somebody matching your description was shouting at people, harassing passersby." Actually, Patson had been handing out leaflets critical of the government. Some government lackey took exception to it and engaged Patson in a heated political debate. And then some. Yes, there were a few Americans, didn't like what you said, would try to tamper with your First Amendment rights. This Patson could have explained calmly to the officer, and likely received dispensation. But no law said Patson had to cower, especially given that capitulation to a bully with a badge would only encourage such behavior, usually against the meek and disadvantaged.

Moreover, it was about power of the mind, recognizing a deep-seeded fear and facing it head on, every hour, every minute. A fear stemming from a searing secret from the past. It would devour him if he blinked. So many people depending on him, his strength.

And they expected nothing less than a salvo: "We've nothing to discuss, officer. You need probable cause. And you hain't got any."

"Fine, Mister, we can continue this discussion downtown if you like."

"Who called you, officer?"

"The caller was anonymous."

“Ho, I got the right to confront my accuser.”

“You will. At a trial, if you don’t produce some ID and account for yourself. Now.”

Patson strategically deescalated the situation by fumbling through his back pocket. And felt the officer reaching into his jacket like some clumsy mugger. “Hmmm,” Patson mumbled. Then drilled the officer with his eyes.

“Seems I hann’t got any ID. No law says I have to carry it. Fact, there’s some scribble by a guy named George pictured on a dollar, says I can’t be randomly picked off the street, without evidence linking me to a crime. And the only crime I’ve witnessed today is the one you’re committing.”

Patson felt his body arching back from leaning contact. Pungent mint breath in his face. And a cat-like hand snatching a wallet in his back pocket.

Wearing a smile of triumph, the Indiana cop ripped a Virginia’s driver’s license out of the wallet, scattering three more ID’s on the ground.

“Mom forget to give you a first name, lamebrain?”

“An accurate name,” said Patson. “But only if you put you and me together.”

Patson felt his body twirling. His hands raising was more than instinct. It was a measured response of militant nonviolence. It helped cushion the body slam against the hood of the car.

The officer’s mouth was in Patson’s ear. “You’re under arrest. The charges are disorderly conduct and resisting arrest.”

“What about conspiracy to jaywalk?”

A small crowd of townfolk had begun to gather around. One in particular was a gentle elderly woman, creeping closer, as with trepidation.

Patson caught her eye. “Look closely, ma’am. Next time it could be you.”

The small police station was gripped with a tense silence. The precinct sergeant seemed to be overcome with hyperventilation. Patson’s arresting officer was relegated to a wooden chair normally reserved for charging parties. Eyes pressed down toward a wrestling magazine, not daring to meet his boss’s primal gaze.

Against the tapping of a sole typewriter, a short, smartly-dressed, black haired woman approached the sergeant with card saying Emma Gonzalez, Esq. A very accommodating greeting and smile from the boss. A gentle hand on her shoulder as he directed her toward the waiting room – “No, Mr. Gonzalez, not that door. That’s the officer’s lounge. Next door please.” No way Emma was going to see the blown-up photo of Elmer Tyner, the whistleblower, who’d publicly exposed corruption in the police chief’s office. Tyner’s portrait was the dartboard of choice, both on and off duty. Tyner’s open mouth was the bullseye. The cop who’d gotten the loudest cheers was the one who downed a chaser,

then pulled down a .22 pistol and shot out four of Tyner's teeth. The majority of decent, honest cops didn't like this activity. But they said nothing, and vacuums have a way of sucking up evil.

The precinct sergeant tossed news clippings at the arresting officer. He'd received a "D" in his high school civics course, but even he recognized the name Lasa Light: the newly-evolved anti-Government movement after it met racial diversity. The corporations controlling the major media had been spiking populist ideas for years. But when 600,000 angry citizens celebrated the nation's birthday by angrily raising their fist at our nation's leaders, even the gold-plated editors were hard pressed to drown the citizens' revolt under the fluff of tributes to the rich and famous. Columnists of every ilk were compelled to publicize Lasa Light's ultimate threat: That protest march was just a warmup. Coming your way soon is The Big Bang. America's Day of Infamy. When the citizens decide to descend on Washington with sufficiently organized civil disobedience to totally paralyze the Federal Government. Until America's leaders yielded to the citizens' demands and broke the oppressive yoke of Big Government and Big Business over the citizens. No more bloated, hierarchical bureaucracies. No more complicated regulations. No more government corruption and abuse. No more undemocratic practices in Congress, where just a few elected officials have real power. No more corporate plunder and abuse. No more hierarchical workplaces, where citizens have no control over their work environments.

And now the riveting new slogan of Lasa Light:

"Smash the Oligarchy of Big Government and Big Business."

The precinct sergeant looked at Patson with respect and the arresting officer with contempt. Because there sat, under the sergeant's jurisdiction, the National Coordinator of Lasa Light. The embodiment of the evolved anti-establishment surge, carrying on his sleeve the rage of tens of millions of citizens. Now being detained on some frivolous charge.

Yes, the sergeant had to read the accounts. How Patson met Lasa Light as a graduate student at Kent State University, a surging mecca of organizational change in Patson's beloved Ohio:

Patson had a fascination with citizen rebel movements. Two of its leaders of the evolved populist rage—Black man Jim Panther and Latino woman Emma Gonzalez – kept Lasa independent from the domination of corrupt special interests, big money and both political parties.

The revelation had hit Patson like a brick: the same Oligarchy abuses that got Whites mad about bloated bureaucracy and impersonal bureaucracy, also got racial minorities mad because of cozy relations with big business hierarchies, locking out the citizens, and a sometimes – oppressive justice system. Patson strongly argued that both Business and Big Government were the problem. He chronicled the many decades of Big Government corruption--supporting Big Business' plunder and abuse. Big Government the servant of Big Business. Government leaders from corporate law firms. Big money buying political offices. Big money buying laws. The issue, Patson argued, was organizational oppression. And the fight for liberty from the powerful, unaccountable Oligarchy, was for conservative Whites, racial minorities, and the power-marginalized everywhere. The solution was citizen empowerment – for all races and incomes, against the oppressive, abusive and corrupt Big Business and

Big Government. Social injustices and economic inequalities were tied to unaccountable Big Business and Big Government practices, he argued. Patson effectively advocated for citizen/stakeholder review panel over both government bureaucracies and corporate boards.

Graduating from Kent State, Patson wrote a novel called Lasa. With the help of Pennsylvania Congressman Martin Exeter, Lasa became a best seller.

In Lasa, it was illegal to pass a law more than 10 pages long. Government regulations were banned. Earmarks were banned. Undemocratic practices in Congress such as the filibuster and all-powerful Committee Chairs were banned. Term limits gave more citizens the opportunity to seek elected positions. All large cabinet-level agencies were abolished and replaced by smaller, process-based agencies, accountable to citizens and internal stakeholders who worked there. There were no bureaucracies and hierarchies at these agencies; each agency had citizen review panel. Political dynasties were broken by two-term limit restriction for all elected offices. The power of political machines was broken by a prohibition of designating political party on an election ballot. Civil Rights laws, especially impacting racial and gender equality, and disability access, were vigorously enforced.

In the Lasa private sector, democratic stakeholder boards comprised of different occupations, races, and incomes help the balance of power in corporations, rather than a handful of millionaires making all the decisions. Economic units over a certain size had to incorporate power-sharing and profit-sharing plans. Economic liberty, or the right to start businesses, was enhanced via reform of banking rules. With citizens now empowered with organizational and monetary incentives, productivity exploded. Disputes were adjudicated by Citizen Arbitration Panels, which did not cost billions of dollars. They replaced the Court bureaucracy of lawsuits, lawyers, and procedures no one understood. Citizen engagement in various societal organs produced a more natural distribution of wealth and power and reduced the need for government RE-distribution. Poverty was managed by the responsibility of stakeholder run corporate boards, NGOs, and churches – with some government safety net.

Lasa's scenario was fiction. But these perceptions of possibility were becoming a reality of hope for countless millions of citizens.

Lasa was the buzzword at the Sixth Convention in Columbus, Ohio. The faithful appointed Patson as the movement's clear leader. This Convention had a strong faith-based underpinning: a belief that the citizens empowerment revolt could only succeed with a strong moral authority. A belief in an objective moral standard – from God – over moral anarchy. A South Carolina delegation floated a Conference theme: Lasa plus Jesus Light of the World. It caught on. The diverse, populist movement adopted an official name: Lasa Light.

Congressman Martin Exeter adopted Lasa Light rhetoric. Soon after, Patson eeked out a Congressional victory as an Independent in Virginia near Washington, D.C. They were dubbed the Radical Darlings of Congress. Getting lots of press – but the Democratic, Republican, Special Interest, Oligarchial Power Alignments remained unmoved.

There was enough citizen anger to propel Martin Exeter to the office of President in the last election.

By that time Exeter's Lasa Light rhetoric had moderated. The Industrial Age, Oligarchical political realities still existing well into Century 21 still had him captive.

One almost had to feel sympathy for this man: soft-spoken, managing a Quaker Philadelphia Main Line charity. This large, lumbering man with sloppy gray hair, glasses halfway down his nose, always kind words for people. But he carried a stigma slogan among the masses: "Rhetorical diarrhea, legislative constipation."

Complicating matters was the rift between Exeter and the powerful Speaker John Dickerson--hatched out of different wings of the same political party. It was entirely personal: Dickerson didn't like Exeter's phony populist rhetoric, and besides, the President stood in the way of Dickerson's ambitions.

By contrast, Patson resigned his Congressional seat. Renewed talk of the Lasa Light "Big Bang" coming to Washington. Media speculated on a falling-out between Patson and President Exeter.

Meanwhile, power centers quaked with consternation at the demographics of the Lasa Light Convention: over 40% minority. Patson had done the improbable: forged a coalition between conservative Whites and racial minorities under the banners of citizen empowerment against both government and corporate abuse—all with a strong faith, moral authority underpinning.

Patson had to face in Lasa Light a curse in the movement: a tiny undercurrent of racialism.

The Ethnicity Awareness Project was a small nonprofit training institute founded by a band of multicultural revisionists. Its most prominent spokesperson was Mal Syndirene, the White saxophonist in a semi-successful Black jazz band. Syndirene had been an abandoned Cajun child raised under the shadow of Bourbon Street by a white working-class single mother given to wild parties, alcohol, and petty theft. The neighborhood was Black, and was his family. Syndirene's upbringing was a first-hand chronology of injustices, disparities and economic struggle. The few benevolent gestures burned on the hot streets of despair. Shackled to the flashpoints of hatred, he poured his rage into his horn. No White person could fully understand the horrors of growing up Black in America, Syndirene would say – and then promptly certify himself as the sole exception.

Those who knew him during his ten years in the jazz band saw an impulsive, gregarious, often-generous man given to legendary temper explosions. At age 33, he looked more like 50. Leathery skin, black hair greased back and falling stiffly to the shoulders, jagged tattoos, worn plaid cowboy shirts, yellow teeth, and foggy green eyes constantly on edge. Pass him on the street and people'd make a wide berth. A harsh life had placed him on the political edge; his heart had been firmly with the Crips'n'Bloods when they burned LA back in '22, and it hadn't mellowed since. He saw an unshakably-malevolent power structure perpetuating the horrible racist stratifications in spite of biracial former President, and the main culprits in his eyes were the Asian Americans and Jewish people.

Syndirene's Ethnicity Awareness Project (EAP) was one of the first groups to hop the Lasa Light bandwagon. Their message that each ethnic group was to take responsibility for dispelling its own stereotypes: Vigorous self-analysis to preempt the destructive and divisive fingerpointing across racial lines. In other words, the Anglo-Americans would spearhead the campaign against elitism, Germans against militarism, Italians against organized crime, Blacks against street crime, Irish against drunk driving, Jewish against unsavory business practices, Asians against clannishness, etc. Their program was initially well-received as a "model for understanding."

Syndirene infected Patson's populism placed a special emphasis with the supposed racial/ethnic makeup of the power centers, creating a racialist flashpoint. A statistical over-representation of Jews in big money professions became to Syndirene the "Jewish money centers." The Jewish population began to bear a disproportionate responsibility for "self-analysis." This led to charges of anti-Semitism.

Syndirene emerged as EAP's No. 1 media crusader. EAP was the perfect vehicle for Syndirene's racial rage, which was manifest in his infamous predictions of a unique race war: Look at the demographic makeup of college students, Syndirene railed. Asians and Jews are everywhere, but Blacks and Hispanics are hard to find. Therefore, the next generation will be composed of Black and Hispanic workers with Jewish and Asian overlords. The mass of disaffected, alienated third world workers will ruse up to drive their Asians and Jewish masters into the ground. Thus, according to Syndirene, populist Lasa Light vision would triumph through "natural racial dynamic." The major news media, busting to highlight conflicts among minority races on behalf of the Oligarchy, while making loads of bucks at the same time, carried Syndirene on Page One. Syndirene took offense at those who called him a racist: "I do not advocate white supremacist, Nazi-style racism! My teachings are progressive, leading to the liberation of the economically and racially oppressed!"

EAP activists dotted the Lasa Light network like termites in a dream house. The ball landed squarely in Patson's court. He announced a press conference of the Lasa Light coordination center at K Street in Washington, extending an invitation to Mal Syndirene and select EAP academicians.

On the afternoon in question, there weren't enough chairs in the conference room to accommodate the press passes. Patson had set up a long, red-cloth covered table for the participants. Seated on either side of Patson were Ken Yester and Kent Polynara representing Jewish and Asians concerns on the Lasa Light Steering Committee. Maxine Crawford, a Black member of the Steering Committee, was included as a moderator. The EAP representatives sat at the left end of the table.

Patson issued a calm and flat denial, then produced a booklet about cultural diversity, highlighting positive traits about virtually every racial ethnic group, and attributing stereotypical and racist behavior to only a small percentage of each group. Maxine Crawford had personally prepared a profile of accomplishments for hundreds of prominent Jewish and Asian Americans. None met the common stereotypes.

Several of Patson's followers began distributing the booklet to members of the media, with an air of addressing children in a remedial math class. The Patson began reading from the book. Word for word.

Polynara and Yester exchanged looks. Patson was up to something. It began when he slammed the book shut, screeching the microphone in people's ears.

Patson then related a brief parable about the timekeeper in the newsroom: "If, at 12:00 midnight, a Black person perpetrates some atrocity against a White person, then every Black leader in American would have to publicly denounce the act by 12:01. Or else by 12:02 many White leaders and the media would brand them as anti-White racists."

"I am a fervent democrat," Patson went on, "But at this moment I am a dictator. And I decree that Mal Syndirene and everyone else affiliated with EAP is permanently banned from every Lasa Light planning session, demonstration, and function. Racism will not be tolerated, against any group under any pretext. Any EAP member caught on our premises will be physically expelled by security. If you don't like my decision, tough turkey. Call a meeting and have me outvoted."

Patson looked at his watch. "It's 12:01," he announced. He rose and abruptly left the press conference.

Patson was born Corano Valeria in the post-industrial city of Lorain, Ohio. Where the demise of the unions and heavy industry helped make American safe for \$12/hour jobs. His upbringing amidst honest-but struggling families instilled in him an early identification with the underdog. There were strong nuclear families and a socially-conscious charismatic Catholic parish; they helped mold his firm sense of ethics and fairness, but also a stable orientation to loyalty. Corano never lost his faith in the Cleveland sports teams, as trying as it was at times. The cap on the populist fire in his young soul came from his mother, Patricia Cross, a full-blooded Native American of the Oneida tribe. Cory's experience with bully-driven racism gave him a graphic first-hand experience with the nature of predators.

Mark Valeria was a laid-off foundry worker who toiled away for years at two different menial jobs. He wasn't long for this world. Patricia had put into a clear perspective the lack of material expectation by harping away at character flaws in the rich and powerful. She was a walking encyclopedia on it. To her, money made out of consequence was a blessing. Money made out of obsession was an affliction. Her spirit embraced community activism, touting her traditional Indian roots as a message for respect for all cultures; ethnic awareness as catalyst for the mosaic called America. Patricia Valeria was recognizable in her traditional garbs while speaking fast and often, changing the subject in mid-sentence, and throwing out nice compliments, all within the blink of the same eye. With boulders of energy she spoke out incessantly about abuses of authority at every level. Corano's most vivid recollection of his mother was during that sizzling August weekend when the only Black family in the neighborhood discovered a burning cross on their lawn. Patricia had been one of the first to volunteer for the human shield to protect the victims.

Surprisingly, Cory had an unassuming adolescence. He was quiet and detached and brought home B's & C's on his report card. Yet this loner with no accolades and no status with the school's "in-crowds" marshaled great respect from fellow classmates; he would speak up at strategic moments in

defense of students perceived to be treated unfairly by teachers and administrators. Word got around about the shy Indian kid who would get in your face in a second, at a hint of unfairness.

Graduation approached. His grades were too low for scholarship and his parents hadn't a dime to fund his college education. He opted for an Air Force enlistment, seeing an opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds, travel to different countries, learn a skill and accrue benefits for college. Patson wasn't too thrilled about war – but there was something more low-keyed and necessary – about the long-term war on terrorism.

The first year and a half went by smoothly. He had had three duty stations, one as far away as Korea, and it was a great eye-opener in terms of human relations and book knowledge, both of which were self-derived. Soldiers sought him out for confidence and advice – this Airman First Class Corano Valeria, who never got upset, but who seemed to get along with everyone, Black, White, Asian, Native, Latino.

His fourth duty station, Oceana AFB in Virginia Beach, delivered the sucker punch of his life. On the first warm Saturday, as he loaded his VW for an ocean spin, a bull-of-a-senior officer veered toward him like a high-speed smart bomb. Cory straightened to attention at recognition of Base Commander Theodore Wiggins.

“I don't like your nonchalant attitude, boy. Your salute is wimpy, you wear your uniform like a hippie impersonator, and I've seen better posture in an anarchist.”

Very true. Airman Valeria drew occasional snickers with his slow-motion response to directives. Yet the ultimate Feared Leader was clearly overreacting, his voice rising with each choice of obscene metaphor. It reminded Cory of the antics of notoriously theatrical baseball managers in front of umpires. Perhaps Wiggins was putting on a show for someone.

Then he saw the look in the eye. The last time he had seen that, a chunk of his thigh disappeared during a mischievous wrong turn at a junkyard. Cory felt a simultaneous chill and limpness in his body. He began to hyperventilate. And when the ultimate sanction came – ten hours extra groundkeeper duty – it was a relief.

More harassing assignments came. Sergeant Walker was always the bearer of the bad news, but everyone knew the order had originated from Wiggins.

Cory was never the complainer. He nursed his building rage through daily meditation exercises. The visions of him standing up for former classmates under similar circumstances pressed on his consciousness and invaded his dreams. But this was the military. He overheard his Black soldier friends whispering that Wiggins was a member of the Klan. They couldn't prove it, they just knew it.

Cory recalled the deep faith roots of his mom and sought out the base Chaplain for advice. He met a very gracious, soft spoken and sympathetic man who'd introduce himself as Major Martin Exeter; that is, soon-to-be Congressman and President Martin Exeter.



“It’s a matter of self-respect,” Cory told him. “Besides, my silence could end up hurting other people. I want somebody to make him stop.”

Exeter responded, “Maybe it’s just a misunderstanding. Talk to him first, and if the problem doesn’t stop, come back and see me.”

Cory took four deep breaths as he stood outside Wiggins’ office. This wasn’t going through channels, but he’d decided on a symbolic gesture of indignance. The paper-filling noncom never saw him bolt through her outer office.

“Excuse me, sir. I’m sorry to come in like this, sir. But you have been riding me and I want to know why. I’ve never done anything against you. I may not be the perfect soldier. And I’ll try to do better, sir. But this just isn’t fair.”

Wiggins’ face was naturally freckled red, but now it was a fat tomato. A blowfish now. His pencil tapped endlessly against his mammoth desk.

“Not now boy,” he finally said. “Come to my house tonight – alone – and we’ll discuss it.”

Wiggins impatiently scribbled down the directions and ordered him out.

It was a ranch-style brick house on this lonely road near the Carolina border. A dim floodlight shined over an open porch. The front door was wide open. Cory knocked on the screen, hesitated, then invited himself in.

The den was cluttered with various masculine regalia of a proud warrior. A single desk lamp burned in the back. The place was quiet except for the sound of faint country music from another room.

Finally, the towering officer emerged from a corridor, his plaid shirt and pulsing pipe giving him the aura of a craftsman. The piercing eyes were steady, locking in Cory’s. A third eye was the luger in his right hand.

“How’d you get in here, Cochise? Jimmy the lock? Heh, on my base, I’ve got my own style of reservation. Seven feet by nine. You’re good for about a year, Cochise.”

Here, in front of Cory’s eyes, stood the very caricature of every straw dog his mother had conjured. Like simultaneous lightning bolts came the visions of suffering: Indians forced onto the nation’s most harsh lands, a la South Africa, then blamed for economic failures. Rampant alcoholism among the tribes while white bootleggers line their pockets. Majoritarian abuse of power against the Tribes. An entire civilization disposed. All instigated by Theodore Wiggins. The rage was so consuming that it left no room for fear. That would come later.

Wiggins indicated an open switchblade planted on the rug. “Take the knife, Cochise. That’s your only chance.”

Cory's only chance was to not touch the knife. He approached it, stooped down – but then collapsed on all fours, lowered his head, and pretended to weep.

Cory felt a searing in his veins, from his neck to tailbone, as the lumbering footsteps approached, then stopped above him.

Wiggins' final command was loud. Cory raised his head just enough to take in the periphery of his tormentor's bulk.

Suddenly the gun lurched to the side, and a warning shot rang out. Cory's timing was all instinct. The left hand went for the groin and squeezed. Like extracting lemon juice. The gun discharged wildly, but the sound was barely discernable over the wailing. The crumpling body came tumbling onto him, while flailing him--and Cory was able to grab the knife and plunge it into some soft spot. There came kind of a breathless "ooh" sound, suggesting an eerie finality rather than searing pain. Blind movements continued above so he kept on frantically jabbing and jabbing until all was still.

The country music seemed louder as he unpinned himself and stood up. He felt soaked but didn't dare look down. Every pore in his body was alert.

In a civilized society he would call the police, report the death, explain the circumstances and have the case closed due to justifiable self-defense. But all Cory could think about was the double standard of justice in America. Rich versus poor. Innocent minorities locked up, even on Death Row. Never before had he felt so much like Oneida Indian, with simultaneous feelings of pride and shame. And never before had the brutal power alignments in the United States been so evident.

His mind went crazy with thoughts of wiping prints, cleaning floors, hiding the body, explaining himself. Then it came to him as he was showering in the other room: the beach clothes in the trunk of his car. The perfect alibi for an Indian seeking solitude on a warm night.

Cory took one last look out into the black of the night and the woods beyond. The most liberal splashes of gasoline found his old clothes. Draped across the body.

The morning's paper carried headlines of the fire and the dead officer, including the assessment: foul play has not been ruled out. Among the turmoil on the base came rampant rumors. And more than a few quiet celebrations.

Corano kept a low-keyed approach. As always. But deep inside him an intense paranoia raged, depriving him of sleep. Every MP on the base within eyesight was looking for him. Every police officer cruising down the Virginia Beach boulevards made his hairs stand on edge. If he didn't talk to someone about it, he would explode.

His natural avenue was that friendly, articulate Chaplain who saw no faults in the human condition. Corano's first question to Major Martin Exeter was to reiterate his pledge of confidentiality.

“Corano, whatever you tell me will not only be buried in my casket, but my grandchildren’s as well.”

The confession came with all the catharsis of the cracking voice and borderline tears and provoked in Exeter expressions of indignation never seen in Corano Valeria’s 20 years of life. “Self-defense, but the system won’t understand,” Corano said repeatedly. Exeter’s empathy with Cory’s dilemma was total, if for no other reason than Exeter knew what a louse Wiggins was, capable of anything. Followup counseling sessions provided wellstones of good will and expressions of ultimate justice to overcome the debilitating fears. Then came a gradual easing of suspicions about involvement of base personnel in the fire and death.

As if to reaffirm the concept of Divine intervention, Exeter approached Cory one day and asked if he would be interested in early discharge under honorable circumstances. Exeter counseled Cory to dichotomize the situation: make a clean break with the superficial persona but keep the essence of your deep-seed principals and beliefs.

Cory’s first act as a civilian was to legally change his name. The key was to leave some nexus with his essence. And that was tribal, so he named himself Patson. Son of Pat. In honor of his ultimate hero.

His new life had to have some reflection of previous life activity (a la military service record). This was provided by Exeter and several other Air Force officers who attested to Patson’s character and intelligence. The stellar references landed Patson in Kent State University’s Organizational Change program for his eventual PhD.

While studying power alignments and power abuses by both government and corporate sectors, he recalled the Oligarchy’s twin blows to his Cousin Rick: First came a heavy-handed IRS audit, and a false accusation of deliberate tax evasion. Then came an early death from cancer after he discovered that the company town’s company had buried toxins on his property without telling him.

Detached he was to everything peripheral to his crusade: he had barely semi-conscious recollection of an “academic courtship” and brief marriage to a soulmate named Frances. Frances became his new salt of the Earth, both in terms of serious schedule interruptions and the ultimate dedicative object of his humanistic work. Still, Patson barely remembered the day Frances walked out on him, with ne’er a voice raised. With her gone, he found solace in a teaching position at Georgetown University.

Patson and Martin Exeter exchanged letters and shared lunches, mostly to talk political strategy and expanding their limited government/citizens power network. Discussion of the Searing Secret of Patson’s Past was forbidden fruit. It drove a certain fragility in their addresses to each other. An exaggerated politesse.

Congressman Exeter offered Patson a senior position on his Congressional staff. Patson jumped at the opportunity to use his position to forge scores of community contacts. And to win his own Virginia Congressional seat.

Patson and Exeter relished the public rows with Speaker Dickerson over the latter's efforts to "moderate" reform initiatives. The press depicted them as virtual Siamese twins. It was not to last.

#### THE BREACH

It didn't happen overnight. There wasn't any heated exchange over dinner or anything like that. In fact, there was never any heated exchange at all.

They talked privately about Second American Revolution. Taking George Washington's beautiful concept of checks and balances and applying it to all institutions, to halt abuse of power wherever it lurked. The key was not to abolish the Constitution, but to greatly enhance it. But to do this, one had to break the Oligarchy. And one could not break the Oligarchy – which meant a clean sweep of everything, from bloated bureaucracy and corporate hierarchy – as long as one is part of that very Oligarchy. They envisioned a massive citizen descent on Washington, in which a cowered power structure would melt away and permit a streamlined government, and expanded democracy. Hopelessly idealistic? This dynamic had succeeded in Eastern Europe, against the most monolithic tyranny in history. So why couldn't it happen in the pseudo-democratic USA?

Then one night, amidst the laughter, Patson announced that, today I am politician – Oligarch, but tomorrow I am citizen – revolutionary. Out of the government. Exeter continued to razz him for an hour. Until it sunk in that Patson was serious. First came silence. Then a denialist monologue about his and Patson's future legislative plans.

By George, Patson just walked away! Exeter didn't speak to Patson for a month. Then he took his colleague out to lunch and spoke in a measured, slightly condescending voice – identical to the one used to counsel one Airman Valeria in the aftermath of the Wiggins death. Exeter paraphrased an old Southern beholding the civil rights movement, and it's two leaders: "Boahs, we bettah give this heah preachah his due. Or else wind up with the radical negro ovah theah!" Exeter began laughing stiffly.

That was the last time Patson and Exeter spoke, until Exeter was exalted by a panicked power structure to accept the Party's nomination for President. Lasa Light activists, in full throttle now, were enraged that Exeter – one of their own – could so openly accept tribute from a political machine, with their Oligarchical platform elements, which had done little to empower the tens of millions of disempowered in America, or break the corruption and debt machine called the US Government.

The Lasa Light organized a major demonstration at the political Party's National Convention. Chicago '68 redux.

Exeter sent a conciliatory letter to Patson. Addressed to My Dear Friend. The intent was to inquire about Patson's role in the planned demonstrations.

Patson wrote back that nothing the government was doing was indicative of any change he should make in his heartfelt beliefs and activities. He didn't tell Exeter that he was listed as keynote speaker for the Tea Party outside convention hall.

Exeter sent Patson an urgent invitation to Reaffirm the Deepest Bonds of Friendship Between Us. On the night before the convention, Patson was led past a wary flank of Secret Service agents to the hotel's VIP suite. There, at a big shiny roundtable, sat Exeter, and no one else. On the cusp of a storybook adventure to the highest pinnacle of power in the universe. Exeter gushed with appreciation at the sight of his former cutting-edge conspirator.

They talked for two hours, mostly about their families, Patricia's neverending community crusades in Cleveland, semi-humorous event from their past--when Exeter suddenly asked Patson which Cabinet post he'd prefer in the new Administration.

"Maybe it all stems from Indians many moons ago drawing lines in the dirt not to cross," Patson responded. "But conflict of interest is tops on my list of no-nos." He rose, thanked Exeter for the vote of confidence, and turned to leave.

"Chief of Staff," Exeter blurted out, as Patson reached the door. "You'll be the second most powerful man in America, the world. Cabinet Secretaries, and even the Veep, will have to go through you to get to me."

Patson paused; he was no less human than anyone else. Finally, he reached for the door.

"Deep secrets are intended to last for infinity," Exeter said in his Chaplain voice. "But sometimes the tiny fish flips through the fingers when the hand is at rest. And Airman Valeria, there is no statute of limitation for capital crimes."

Patson stood there for a full minute. With his back toward Exeter every second. The President-to-be, the moralist, felt a tidal wave of guilt over his burst of emotion. He apologized profusely. But Patson bolted out the door.

The second morning's front page carried a large picture of Patson--handcuffed, after being arrested for leading a human blockade on convention hall. Patricia Cross, graying and frail, sat on the same jailhouse bus with her son.

This history the arresting officer didn't understand. Only bits and pieces of it, when a half-dozen of the "stragglers" strategically emerged to attest that Patson had been doing nothing but expressing First Amendment rights. Emma was preparing the affidavits.

The arresting officer saw his peers unshackling Lasa Light's guru. Patson didn't make eye contact with the officer. The precinct sergeant took an eggshell stroll toward Emma Gonzalez with paper in hand.

“Just have your client sign here please, ma’am. Just a routine right-to-sue waiver over this unfortunate misunderstanding.”

Patson ripped the document in two pieces barely before the official had finished. He handed it to Emma Gonzalez, and Emma handed the pieces to the sergeant.

### Juno Brandon

“Look at the screen. For the treat of your life,” Hammaker said wickedly to Tygrier and Brandon.

The oversized TV monitor was snowy, depicting two blurs, one standing, one seated. The sound was staticky. Tygrier and Brandon appeared under duress. Hammaker, a hulky man with blubbery face, crewcut, and jagged tattoos vivid even between his watch and knuckles, was not someone you trifled with.

“The Black guy on the screen thinks he won the contest of his life. But man do we have a cruel little surprise for him,” Hammaker continued to Tygrier and Brandon. “The idiot has come to pick up his vacation package to Maui. From that hot little Rican coconut sitting there. Only the stooge doesn’t know the Rican’s a pro. On the short side of 17, too. He’s about to have a real public relations problem, after thinking he’s hot stuff with a thumbnose attitude against our leaders.”

Juno Brandon, the hard and hairy man with shadowy face, straight jet-black hair and oversized brown, steady eyes, suddenly turned away from the screen.

“Hey! Don’t worry, it’s all on computer. Don’t see it now, see it later,” Hammaker said with a flat smile. “Hey Grier, ain’t you ever wanted to see a porno movie, except where they ain’t play-acting?”

Tygrier, the rugged Black man with thick graying hair and silver walrus moustache, had one-upped Brandon by reaching for the door.

“Bingo promised you’d give us an in-depth briefing, Hammaker, before springing crap on us,” Tygrier said in a bearish voice. “I don’t whistle in the dark.” And he was gone.

“What’s his problem? And who assigned him to our team?” Hammaker accosted Brandon with a drill-sergeant voice. “Man got a racial attitude or what?”

Brandon shrugged. “He gets ticked when people call him Tyrone Grier or something, instead of his true name, Sam Tygrier,” Brandon related in a slightly-drawled voice lazier than his eyes.

The screen became clear. The young prostitute had her arms around the Black man’s neck. Feminine crooning sounds. Austin Vandevire was blinking, flinching, awkwardly trying to dislodge himself.

Brandon’s brown eyes were heavy on Hammaker. “Explain this right now.”

“Bingo didn’t give me all the details. But it came to President Exeter special delivery, the way I understand it, from Speaker Dickerson. A crumb for some pending legislation. They said you’re always square with commands, Brando. Was they wrong?”

Brandon joined Tygrier in retreat, and with parting words to Hammaker, “Looks like the Black victim in your porno trap game isn’t falling for the whore. He just walked out.”

Such was life in the Executive Investigate Branch, a self-styled domestic counterterrorist force formed to work in conjunction with Secret Service and report to the White House. Due to the secrecy of each operation, staff were rotated on teams just to work on an assignment at hand. There was a running joke about just how many domestic terrorists these high-profile agents had ever nabbed. Both Hammaker and Brandon were three-year veterans of the Branch. Sam Tygrier, always viewed as the new guy in town, ironically had been recruited by Director Bingo McBride on Day One.

Juno Brandon's proudest moment was to feel the very breath of the President of the United States as the medal was pinned to his uniform. A hand-carved model F-117A was presented to then Major Brandon. For mastery of the skies. It looked like a beautiful, proud bird; head arched down with determination. Rachel, his adopted Filipino daughter, would sort of stroke the F-117A replica like it was her pet, and it would give Brandon a knot in his stomach, because she never knew the real history behind it. How the bird was for her in every sense.

Brandon was raised a Catholic. But he never really became one until that dirty little war in the Philippines five years earlier. It was one of those open and shut deals, involving an Islamic guerilla force assisted by an outside tyrant, with the USA coming down on the other side, helping a besieged Philippine government. A blur on the history books, but a deep scar on the lives of living people who never counted to some power brokers. The Presidential accolade wasn't for USAF Major Brandon as much as that lethal black bird, which had blown every hostile entity away. History began with one of those rare freak ground attacks. The newspapers at first reported that it had wiped out a guerilla command post. Later news reports, long after the victory parade, confirmed additional deaths of nine Filipinos. Estimated ages: 2 through 5.

Juno Brandon, though still the Philippine Skirmish's most decorated hero, took an early out. His sudden aversion to airplanes became permanent. At bedtime, without fail, he would make the sign of the cross nine times. It's debatable whether the whispering voice of God or the voice of guilt prompted himself to adopt a Filipino orphan and dedicate his life to her. The first year was tough, all this seclusion and self-analysis, while selling surf equipment in his hometown of Sarasota, FLA. Until Bingo McBride came a-knocking.

Juno Brandon was born the son of two schoolteachers, who taught him how to focus at a very young age. They said he had a crosshair brain – that is, it would line up objects in sequential order and process them, one-by-one. By age seven he was able to achieve 100% concentration. It made him particularly adept at hand-eye coordination. In high school he was a science prodigy, and an excellent baseball and racquetball player. This analytical mind, together with the strong Catholic foundation of his parents, gave him a common sense, golden rule outlook on morality. In some ways it led to an over-clarification of good versus evil. He grew up a quietly confident guy who would make many friends, but few close ones, because the cauldron of emotions conflicted with his Rubic's Cube mind.

During his years in the Air Force, both before and after flight training, he gained every-increasing respect from his fellow officers and enlisted personnel for his dependability in assignments. He was meticulously fair, approachable in his low-keyed way, and the last guy to start trouble. His lifestyle,



including his love for jetfighters – their makeup mirror-imaged his brain – dictated an incompatibility with family domestication.

During the EIB years he took life one day at a time, viewed his assignments as minute-by-minute colorful obstacles in a mosaic of adventure. The uncertainty, and the hope of both scientific and moral advancement, kept him going. He hired a recent immigrant from Thailand (he gave her the American name Joy) to watch over Rachel, his adopted Filipino daughter. Brandon developed a platonic, non-physical relationship with Joy. It was convenient; she was nice, and she was totally content with this nice little arrangement.

“The President’s life is in danger,” Bingo McBride announced gravely to Brandon and a handful of trusted agents. “The weapon is a Yugar, developed by this crazy Jihad outfit. Shut down their nuke-making capabilities and they crawl into a cave somewhere and put together something primitively devastating”, McBride added in a quiet mumble of personal confidence. With wave white hair, grayish eyes, pale cracking skin, and beige suit, McBride looked like some kind of ghost. Considering the number of Presidents he’d served, he probably was.

The slide projector displayed a contraption resembling a motorized animal trap. “It’s a concentrated spring action,” McBride continued. “Imagine a trigger, then multiply its power by a hundredfold. Only it doesn’t shoot bullets, but hundreds of quill-like projectiles, specially designed to penetrate steel. Confiscated property of an Aryan Resistance force cell based out of Bellingham, Washington. Radical Muslims and Neo-Nazis have obvious targets in common—they’re the same cloth.”

He demonstrated its use. Take it out of a saxophone-seized case, square it up toward the target, prime it, pull a switch – and instant Swiss cheese.

Brandon reviewed the transcript of microwave-intercepted conversations between the local Nazi yahoos. They weren’t just threatening to assassinate the President. They had the place, date, and estimated time.

T minus 47 hours. Satellite surveillance of the Nazi compound was forwarded to Brandon and his fellow agents at several mobile checkpoints on the outskirts of Bellingham. The Canadian border was less than an hour away.

It was a fenced-in farm retreat. Two hired joes wearing security guard attire manned the front gate, which carried cryptic symbols. The guards wore sidearms but were decidedly courteous to all the pale faces which entered. The retreat maintained four buildings, including a chipped-painted, two story wooden house used as a recruitment center, a tiny, white triangle-shaped chapel to the right, and two ugly ranch-style stucco compounds to the rear. One contained the Yugar.

Tygrier, Hammaker, and others were on standby at various locations north of Seattle. Tygrier was annoyed with the operation. And not necessarily because the President was in danger. He had vocalized his anger that western weapons technology had again provided Middle Eastern terrorists with

fodder for their evil creativity. He also dreaded the idea of he and Hammaker riding shotgun together. Here was a guy violating every standard of government conduct by bringing along a prostitute—the older sister of the one trying to entrap the Black guy from Maryland.

Brandon understood the fine line between neo-Nazi live wires and radical reformers. That line was the inability of some victims on economic oppression from looking beyond their own immediate hardships. A tunnel vision blinding them from recognizing familiar prison bars delineating the realities of persons of color, in a fog-shrouded gulag called the imbalance of power. This was the nurturing tree of hate, and its shadow fell clear across the economic wasteland.

More insidious was the subconscious or conscious actions of certain moneyed elites who, feeling the twin tremors of minority encirclement and citizen empowerment, were happy to toss their green carrots into the stew of racial turmoil, to provide the shoe polish for the excrement. Very few of the racialists passing through the compound gates were your typical swastika-bearing, tattoo-covered yahoos. They were mostly dressed like middle America, and many brought smiling, happy children bearing their favorite sports logo. Inside, the dispensers of literature were clean-cut guys in business suits. They represented neo-Nazis, Holocaust revisionists, and others whose central theme of racial supremacy was often buried amidst the Madison Avenue fluff. One klavern went so far as to announce they would accept Blacks, as long as they were willing to work for the legitimate self-determination of the White race. Jihadist photographs were pictured next to those of Hitler. History brochures touted the alliance between the Nazis and Islamic Jihadists during World War II, with Jews and others as the common enemy. Nothing had changed.

McBride kept in constant 4,000-mile contact with Brandon, the lead agent, by way of the Ruzo, a pocket-sized combination cell phone and advanced surveillance weapon. McBride issued a rather riveting edict that no agent, no matter what the circumstance, was to physically engage the Nazi terrorists. To Exeter, the 11<sup>th</sup> hour status of his very life was secondary to the twin virtues often indistinguishable in his own mind: principle and politics. That explained why surveillance equipment outnumbered firepower by a 4 to 1 ratio. Brandon, contemplating his own responsibility in this operation, recalled the James Bond movie where the bomb ticked down to the final seconds. He wiped his palms more than once.

Any good manager will avoid placing two conflicting personalities together in a pressure-cooker assignment. When McBride teamed Tygrier with Hammaker for the Canadian excursion, he had received no negative feedback about their working relationship, which consisted of barely two hours. Hammaker drew Tygrier precisely because three other EAB team members had complained about Hammaker's vulgarity and pushy attitude. Hammaker, the ex-DEA agent, didn't fit the old-school-FBI-style EIB mold, and wouldn't have been in EIB at all if he hadn't busted more Mexican heroin traffickers than anyone else in U.S. history. As was often the case in Federal circles, some folks rode the hero horse to steamroller pitch, and even the most aggressive minions of humane restraint were wont to stand in the way. Hero-designates lost their mantle only by blowing up a building or something.

The EIB rendezvous point, near a compound where the ruzo had intercepted communications with the Nazi compound, was in Vancouver--an urban gem tucked snugly between a majestic mountain and glassy waters. Tygrier and Hammaker barely had exchanged pleasantries before Tygrier announced a new Branch policy of banning kiddie porn on Tuesdays.

Within five minutes Hammaker was in contact with Bingo McBride, complaining that this new agent, the Black guy, has a problem with the Whites. In the world of the Hammakers, putting someone else down increased one's self-esteem, and by mental projection, increased one's esteem in the eyes of others, also. Bingo McBride asked him straight up whether he perceived any irony in his statements about Tygrier, given that their current operation was all about stopping White supremacists.

The target was an elegant white-brick home built on a gently hill overlooking a marina packed with sailboats. Shiny highrises and various ethnic restaurants sat virtually in the back yard. The owner of the house was identified by Canadian immigration as a Japanese-American businessman named Marlo Marika. Marika's name had been funneled through every government clearinghouse--with special attention to any other links, no matter how tenuous, with the Neo-Nazis. The disappointing verdict: negative. So far.

An assortment of sporty cars parked in the quaint street in front of the house, and plenty of activity inside. Hammaker and Tygrier leased a boat and set up shop in the inlet just beyond the marina. Each agent unveiled a hand-held camera-like gizmo called a burrus. A rivetingly effective privacy violator. Push a given button and you'd get zoom, various angles, infrared, even solid object penetration. Another panel triggered microwave intercept of sound.

Figures took form as clear as a TV screen. The focus was the den beyond the picture window. A handful of rugged white guys in business suits. First glance was one of motorcycle gangsters mimicking bankers. It just didn't flow right. Movements tentative, eyes hard. C-immigration had already profiled the wiry guy with the streamlined shades, sloppy beard, freckles, and long blonde hair pulled into a tail as Drew Montgomery, lead enforcer of the Marika drug ring. Conversations, centering on nothing in particular, were laced with macho posturing and cursing.

Marlo Marika emerged. He looked like an aging Asian hippie. The man was well into his 50's but wore bushy hair behind the ears and down the back. A tight blue headband hid the cropped bangs in front, but not the facial lines. It looked like a gaudy, if not absurd, stab at lost youth. Tygrier perceived something sinister about the gold on every finger and knee-length maroon leather coat. He envisioned a walking hardware store. Actually, the Marika gang's racket was smuggling pharmaceuticals not approved by the FDA into the US. A huge black market that they had cornered, with some high-level Federal interference.

Marika's lighted cigarette jabbed everywhere like a computer mouse gone amok; ordering his men in cracking tones to position themselves against the wall. One man looked furtively outside, as a black Mercedes suddenly stopped in front of the house.

Hammaker and Tygrier exchanged looks. Set up for a kill, their synchronized minds concluded. Tygrier reached for his automatic, then recalled Bingo's prohibition on physical engagement. The burrus wouldn't miss an incriminating second.

Suddenly more people arrived from another room. There were frail men with ineptly-crooked ties, a whole bunch of women, White and Asian, dressed for a day at the mall, and a few waist-high children. Covered tables were wheeled in. With oil and water mixing everywhere water had gotten the upper hand; laughter abounded. The burruses invaded other rooms of the house, and zeroed in on other benign stragglers, as the juxtaposed walls appeared as gray shadows.

The person emerging from the Mercedes was another woman. Sleek and Japanese, with a maroon leather coat stretching to the hem of her knee-length skirt. A key went into the front door lock and then – bang! An eruption of voices, and an unveiling of a birthday cake proclaiming HAPPY BIRTHDAY SARI.

"I ain't buying this," Tygrier proclaimed. "Let's check the closets."

The burrus reduced the house to neat little compartments on a computer monitor. The little pockets contained nothing suspicious. So Tygrier aimed for the basement, which reflected a darker color because of the concrete occlusion.

Tygrier emitted one of his potential groans. We're in for the long haul. "Ham," he said. "Check the compartment on the far left."

Bullseye. Tygrier counted 16 Uzis. The burrus did a major zoom job and focused on the bullets in the magazines. Tygrier didn't feel like counting all night.

Hammaker singled out the guests one by one. The arrow-shaped cursor on the lens could isolate the source of conversation, "Anyone ever invite you to party, Grier, only they don't remember it?" Hammaker was loving all this.

The words Martin Exeter carried over the verbal rumble. EIB hound ears perked up. The burruses went sniffing. They settled on Marlo Marika and Drew Montgomery, and a glum conversation about Martin Exeter's capabilities. God bless America for John Dickerson. To restraint some of Exeter's whacko-radical impulses—Marika and Montgomery both agreed.

Record buttons were activated.

Hammaker said, "We complain about the garbage assignments the Ex gives us, Grier. Think how much worse it'd be if we worked for Dickerson."

Tygrier agreed.

"He'd have us after that rabble-rouser Patson. Every other freeze frame and tape vault would bear his name," Hammaker added. "No way with the Ex. There's that certain invisible bond between he and Patson that even bad blood can't break. No way the Ex messes with his old buddy."

Tygrier looked square at Hammaker. This was the closest to intellectual reasoning he'd ever see Hammaker come. Maybe the guy is human after all! Tygrier thought.

Hammaker's burrus followed the elegant Sari Marika expressing appreciation to the gift-bearing guests. "Hey Grier. Betcha didn't know the burrus could strip our little Sari right down. Naked as they come."

Tygrier was following Sari, too, but instead speculated on the extent of her involvement in the apparent evil, none of which was apparent on her person. Displaying a certain innocence much younger than her 28 years. An understated, reserved smile highlighted by a definite glow in the large brown eyes which seemed to hug everyone they came in contact with. A physical attractiveness which many men would consider a shakedown, and a baby doll face with jet black, silky hair pinned down her back like a beaver's tail. Tygrier watched her interacting joyously with the children and immediately pictured his own college-age daughter reading little innocent vignettes to the neighbors' kids. Sari even had the same soft melodic voice of his daughter; a non-threatening synchopatic upswing, as if each sentence were a question. Sari was conversing now with a small group of friends her age. The discussion centered around artsy subjects; apparently Sari was a dedicated purveyor of the Japanese harp (koto). The poignant-but-soothing notes were already playing tricks on Tygrier's mind; Stage One of hypnosis.

Then Hammaker delivered the wakeup call: "Babes like her throw angel dust in your eyes so you never see it coming at your back." A possibility reinforced by the arrival of three more cars of steroid guys jostling each other to get through the door. Just to bear little gifts to the princess in leather.

Then a magic word from Marlo sounded over the burrus: Bellingham. Hammaker and Tygrier veered the boat furiously toward shore.

"Hammer to Brando: four compadres heading your way fast, including Marlo Marika. Dark Sapphire, Canadian plates. No arms confirmed but consider very dangerous."

The Sapphire cruised into a Washington border crossing. The Marika gang would have no trouble; the burrus could detect nothing as incriminating as a nail file anywhere inside the vehicle. It was Hammaker's job to track them all the way, hopefully into Brandon's lair. Tygrier stayed behind in Vancouver to coordinate surveillance of the remaining gang members.

Dusk was giving way to darkness. Tall conifers were blending into the darkening sky. The red taillights of the Sapphire flashed on, then led Hammaker down a narrow two-lane road kissing the foothills of the mountains. His hand tapped to the varied rhythms of jazz--reflecting a certain impatience to end the assignment before his Caribbean prostitute on ice at the Seattle dive froze up entirely.

The Sapphire with the Marika leadership found an isolated two-story wood frame house, tucked in about 50 feet from the road. Someone had flipped a switch on the world, and light was nowhere to be found, except for the pale yellow of a full moon. The distant forest appeared as a haunting silhouette behind the house.

The dark figures got out of the Sapphire and went inside. A room light flashed on. For Hammaker that meant an entire night without his jailbait. He rolled down his window and braced for a long dark rendezvous with Gitchygumy. A whipping cool breeze creaked the trees and delivered a heavy pine smell.

12:43 A.M., P.D.T. Brandon was alerted to the approached of a gray van at the front of the Nazi compound. A single floodlight over the gate was a glaring perforation of the surrounding blackness. The late-night guard was giving the driver a pretty good third degree.

Brandon studied the encounter for a few seconds, then reached for his ruzo, activating sound transmission.

“Brandon to Hammaker. Talk to me. Something on your end I should know about? Over.”

Hammaker grunted. “Oh, Brando. Aaah, hi: No change up here.”

“Positive alert down here.”

“Not my marks, Brando. No movement, and I’ve been here every second. A Sapphire? Four guys?”

Brandon picked up his burrus. “One man in front. Wait. Three more behind an occlusion of some – a curtain, maybe. – Okay we’ve got three ski masks, three MAC-10 automatics, magazines primed. We got a situation.”

Brandon tapped Bingo’s number across the ruzo. McBride’s ruzo squawked in Potomac, Maryland about the same time that the Nazi night guard was reeling backwards, arms flailing: There was an eerily malevolent sound over the burrus, like someone’s cough being rapidly reproduced over a malfunctioning CD.

“This better be good, Brandon.” Came a smoky, dire-sounding voice over the ruzo. “I am horizontal.”

“So is one of my marks. Permanently,” said Brandon. “Unless that red facsimile of Ohio on the man’s brown shirt is a mirage.”

(Groan) “Brandon”.

“Fortified van penetrating compound on apparent all-out assault. Request clarification of orders, sir.”

(Sigh). “100% surveillance, zero engagement. Do you want the instruction in sixteen languages maybe?”

Four other EIB agents in Brandon’s RV also heard the word. There was a growing sense of surreal doom. The three ski masks now became four. Four compact shadows crept like malevolent black widows toward the rear compounds.

Brandon's agents had engulfed the compound in enough infrared to reduce the area to a massive aquarium of shimmering jello. All of the gunmen converged on the residential compound, pouncing on the flimsy wooden door in front. Two shoves opened the gate to hades.

Seemingly one switch had ignited four power drills, nonstop. The assassins were lined up in precision. The room doors melted away like rapid time-lapse warping. Reloading the automatics was barely a breath. There came moans and screams from stray bullets finding their mark. Now the death machines were inside the rooms unleashing a horizontal monsoon of lead toward people who were barely aroused. The lucky ones never woke up.

A 30 second pogrom had laid to waste 19 men, including the co-conspirators overheard plotting the President's assassination. There were constant wailings from one man and four women, down and riddled but not granted instant deliverance. The predators, now conferring, seemed unsure about what to do about the woman.

Then came the loud cries of a pajama-clad boy, no more than seven years old. He was screaming for his daddy at the same time that he hugged the lifeless body.

"Turn down the sound," one helpless EIB agent cried from the mobile van.

"No, leave it up," Brandon countered. "So that not one of us ever forgets how horrible violent death can be."

The sound was like the tightening of a lugnut, and the wailings stopped cold. The boy, the lone survivor, stood and faced the nameless, faceless assassin. Heaving breaths, his wide eyes reflected not horror or anger, but complete incomprehensibility.

"Don't you dare," Brandon said as a bare whisper.

The automatic jumped almost involuntarily; a brief second of a false start. Perversely cost-effective, as the boy fell still from the bullet holes in his chest. A world of high tech and high hopes for progress. And a virgin death as a blink. Brandon made the sign of the cross nine times. And then once more.

"Ranks maintained, mission accomplished," Brandon announced sardonically. "Maloney, take over for five minutes." In departure he squeezed his eyes shut so his men wouldn't see the mist forming in his eyes.

Just when they didn't think they could witness anything more terrifying, an event carrying even more destructive consequences was taking place. The burrus on "record" mode followed the path of two helicopters landing in the yard near the compound. The pilots also wore ski masks. Two gunmen were carrying a case that a saxophone could fit in.

Brandon's seclusion didn't last 60 seconds. He approached the window and stood there, hands on hips, like some detached bystander.

His agents were breathing down his neck. “They’re taking the Yugar,” one summated. “We’re just gonna sit here and let them do it?”

“You have your orders,” Brandon answered in an off-key voice.

“Tip off the local gendarmes?”

“Negative. Prohibited.”

“How about NSA or the DCI? Alert satellite recon?”

“Negative. Prohibited.”

“Then – they’re just going to get away with it?”

Brandon’s eyes narrowed. “Negative. Not by a long shot.”

The agents couldn’t get over the ski masks, and other pains the assassins had taken to duck surveillance. These killers obviously knew more than where to find the Nazi compound. Naturally, Bingo would want to know the identities of the butchers. Yesterday, of course.



## Sari Marika

“Marlo Marika has a pathological hatred for you Yanks,” said Canadian intelligence officer Jack McKelvey, who shot a strategic glance across the dinner table. “Does he have reason to be paranoid?”

“He won’t be able to take a crap without it being on camera. He won’t be able to think a thought without me being able to read it. I’ll be able to write his biography within a week,” Brandon answered. “Let him be as paranoid as he wants. He’ll never be paranoid enough.”

McKelvey looked genuinely puzzled. “What did the man do, except smuggle a few disease-fighting elixirs into your fine land? Products as legal as apple pie in Canada.”

Juno Brandon had bled as much information as he could from his Canadian friend. He didn’t like giving him the backhand. But he had his orders, and Juno Brandon had never disobeyed an order.

“You’re out of it, Jack,” he said simply.

“And who are you to tell me that, the Prime Minister?” McKelvey answered with contrived anger.

“The communiqué from Washington to Ottawa is imminent. I’m just giving you advanced warning as a friend.”

“So that’s the way President Exeter operates, eh?”

Brandon fixed his steady brown eyes on his friends as he filled his wine goblet: “That’s the way they all operate, Jack.”

Marlo Marika was once a U.S. citizen. Under Canada’s buy-a-country immigration law, Marika simply laid down a half a million dollars and breezed into Vancouver as easily as moving across the street. Not before sending out letters, to the President on down, renouncing his U.S. citizenship due to the Rabid Racism directed against the Japanese.

Marlo Marika grew up Mr. All-America in the rebel town of San Francisco. The textbook image of the United States had swayed him, giving him solace from his own father’s ravings about horrors directed at Japanese-Americans during World War II. Innocent citizens forced into concentration camps for no just reason and without due process. Massive deprivation of property, liberty, and civil rights during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Marlo’s adolescence was one of denial. The caring parochial school, the nice friends, the image propaganda from the media, just didn’t square with his father’s raw hatred. So, while becoming the first Japanese-America quarterback of his school’s football team, saturating his time with Hollywood movies and TV shows, and pursuing his engineering studies, he harbored a secret wish that his father would

either shut up or move to Japan. At Cal-Tech he enrolled in the ROTC (officer's training) program, in part to reduce his financial dependence on his father.

The war against the Philippines Islamic radicals smashed many things – specifically, Marlo Marika's sense of denial. Lieutenant Marlo Marika's most vivid recollection, while putting his engineering skills to work, were the Asian racial slurs from his fellow soldiers. The dynamic became America versus Asia. The yellow tide. His father's incessant ranting against the USA came to him as a revelation.

Nothing during the succeeding years dispelled his father's view of America. The often-harsh treatment of returning Vets seemed tenfold toward the veterans of color. Uncaring government bureaucracies. The impersonal, punch-the-clock attitude of some VA counselors reinforced his rage. The engineering companies wouldn't touch him; the raw edge in his war-maimed psyche always emerged during interviews. This propelled the destructive spiral even higher; implanting in him images of Asian bashers lurking in every vestibule.

Penniless and drawing off the savings of his newfound friend (his father), he made his official break with his Shameful Past by burning the American flag.

He searched the continent for a Japanese woman for a wife, and finally settled on an unassuming artistic-minded immigrant named Kyomi. She saw no dollar signs and didn't mind that family dole was paying for their meals. Yet while Marlo was attempting to force the Japanese culture on his family, Kyomi was immersing herself in Americana, from mastering the English language to going to rock concerts with friends. Over the years he became exasperated with her, lecturing her constantly on the Obvious Truths: The trade wars. Skinhead attacks on Asian Americans. Japanese internment. Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima!

Kyomi was unmoved. A wedge of silence between them grew wider over the years. Marlo's father passed away. Now this struggling, part-time engineer felt almost totally alone. The world was a vile place, indeed.

Marlo's only solace came from a handful of fellow Vets who he'd come to know through the rehab sessions at the VA. They spoke Marlo Marika's language without need of translation. Stressed out, unemployed. Cast away and forgotten by the very country they had risked their lives to protect. They knew America's mean side better than their own families. On the darkest nights they all would play a perverse form of monopoly where the streets on the board were converted to U.S. landmarks. The winner of the game took the money they'd won, and sold their winning properties for cash, all for financing a creative armament to use against the most highly-valued property. Baltic Avenue became Watts. Boardwalk became the White House. If anyone won holding deed to the White House, they would all, over a gallon of wine, put together a crude bomb, create a caricatured effigy of the sitting President. There were many ghosts of U.S. Presidents hovering over the Napa Valley. Until a member of Marika's gang lost his hand.

Drew Montgomery, Marika's closest confidant among the Vets, finally plugged into a small Pharmaceutical smuggling network from Vancouver. It was like striking oil. They turned it into a lucrative enterprise, carving out a small niche in the Pacific Northwest. Over the years their problems with the law were virtually nonexistent for two reasons: One, they knew their limits, and never ventured into the more lucrative and volatile hard-drug markets. Marlo Marika, if he could keep his volatile pulsating rage just under the surface, actually came across as a respectable even charming, man. Two, they trusted no one but themselves. They were family, and everyone beyond their little clique was their enemy. The Marika clan, all two dozen of them, laughed together, cried together, ate together, lived together – and if any outsider tried to violate this sacred family in any way, it was rock and roll time. These were war veterans whose memorabilia of lead was tribute to their common roots. And they had all killed before.

For Marlo Marika the family Pharmaceutical business was both economic necessity (and independence) and revenge against the structure of the country he hated. Now he saw American as a monster in a cage, and all he had to do was stand outside the bars and pepper the incubus with golden darts.

To the Marikas honor and loyalty meant everything. This Marlo and Kyomi tried to instill in their own children. Even if they did argue over the names, with Marlo insisting on Japanese names and Kyomi wanting American names. The first son was named Mitch as a concession to Kyomi. The second-born, a daughter, became Fumie, and created problems at school for the kids because of the contrast in names. The youngest child, another daughter, was named Sari as a compromise. It wasn't a common Japanese name, but the name had a vaguely Asian ring to it. The children presented Marlo a triangle of despair. On the night after the senior prom Mitch asked his father straight up whether he was smuggling in illegal drugs. Marlo wouldn't discuss the matter. Nothing else was discussed after that; Mitch simply walked out of the house, got a job with the San Francisco Stock Exchange to pay for a degree in Finance, and never once picked up the phone to call his father. Marlo refused to acknowledge the existence of a son. After all, no Marika would ever walk out on family.

Fumie was born with Down Syndrome. Marlo often made a big show of charity toward her, he was bitterly disappointed that one of his offspring was incapable of carrying the Marika mantle, and it showed in his conspicuous avoidance. A rush of affection followed a quick exit. And a shielding of Fumie from friends. This was the final blow for Kyomi, who quietly walked out of the marriage, keeping Fumie under her care.

This is how Sari became the Showered Goddess; the benefactor of Marlo's overwhelming angst over his first two children. A vicious Catch-22 resulted. Sari had inherited Kyomi's mind and soul. Sari saw the benevolent side of human nature, and appreciated people for their experiences, not as vehicles for monetary gain. She was branded with a deep sensitivity, in empathy for other's pain, and it manifested itself in a headlong dive into the performing arts. Following Kyomi's footsteps, Sari had mastered the Koto and applied it to music of the American variety.

She bled red, white, and blue just like her mother, and it drove Marlo crazy. A prim, wholesome, middle-American smile and outlook which any minister's daughter would envy. The more Sari emulated Kyomi, the more Marlo attempted to seduce Sari with expensive clothes, fits, offers of trips around the world. Marlo's vacuous bribes did nothing but reinforce Sari's instinctive disgust for material frivolity. Marlo never did get it.

Unlike Mitch, Sari could not hate her father. His dedication to her, as superficial and desperate as it was, provoked in Sari a deep sense of appreciation, reciprocated love, and loyalty. She accepted him with all his faults, just as she did many friends whose flaws would have driven away anyone with a pedestrian level of tolerance. For Sari each human entity was a unique work of art. To be beheld, appreciated for nuances, and molded if necessary. Evil was seen as something transient. A product of bad environment, bad childhood experience, bad karma, bad food, whatever, but ultimately controllable if treated with sufficient positive energy. Human relations for Sari was the ultimate manifestation of art, and she took great pains to reflect upon and perfect – as she would a musical composition – her own dealings with other people. Sari countenanced no deep romantic relationships, the very idea of one was a vulgar intrusion on the full range of life, its adventures, its new experiences, and the opportunity to love and appreciate various life forms which some almighty being had created. Sari approached such platonic make friends with a certain zest, and yet with a frivolity which sent a clear message that this was not a woman they could ever pin down. Ultimately every interaction with a human art form required positive resolution. Or else it was a scar on Sari's craving soul.

Her easygoing, bohemian friends at San Francisco State, where she was completing her Fine Arts degree, were amazed at her gracious restraint. Many remembered the raucous political demonstration on campus, feuding factions shouting at each other, even scuffling. And here walks in this tall, slender Japanese-American woman, tapped waning parties on the shoulders, calmly suggesting a third way, and barely flinching as elbows flew within inches of her nose.

Yes, she had heard the rumors about her father. No, she did not judge. Neither of them had come even close to raising the subject. Her warm presence was an anecdote to Marlo's pain and rage.

The breach in the family occurred right after college graduation. She became the instant mediator. If Mitch or Kyomi had anything to say to Marlo or vice versa, they would communicate it through Sari. Harsh words would often reach her ears, then she would translate them into benign euphemisms before passing them on. She was unsuccessful in encouraging her loved ones to communicate directly, and she considered this her biggest personal failure.

There were shockwaves felt throughout the Marika clan when Sari opted to join her father in Vancouver rather than stay with Kyomi and Fumie in San Francisco. But her reasons stemmed from Kyomi's unfamiliarity with and distaste for American legal system. Kyomi never divorced Marlo, nor did she ask for any of his money. She subsisted off of salary from managing an art gallery, and whatever money her flower-selling boyfriend slid her way. Fumie subsisted on Social Security Disability. Not a penny from her father. No way was Sari going to tolerate this arrangement. Her main focus in Vancouver was to divert some of Marlo's ample moneys to her disabled sister.

Sari had the scheme down pat: She agreed to manage, during the day, her father's Japanese restaurant – the front business for his drug enterprise. Sari could use her true talents by smoothing over customer complaints and mediating occasional conflicts among restaurant staff. The salary Marlo gave her was plenty to meet her modest needs. Moreover, it freed up her evenings to show off her musical wares as part of a combination folk/jazz band doing gigs around Vancouver. It was an exhausting but exhilarating lifestyle, enhanced by the breathtaking beauty of Vancouver and her appreciation of the generally peaceful nature of Vancouver's citizens. She reasoned that her presence would have a restraining influence on her father's volatile impulses. She deliberately ignored his on-again, off-again ravings about America, its government, its people. She felt perverse pleasure from being doted over by an army of macho guys.

Most importantly, it allowed Sari direct access to the money which flowed like water to and from the restaurant. Marlo was never one to micromanage the family finances; as long as he had more than enough, he didn't care. She had enough grasp of finance and technology to discreetly transfer a portion of Marlo's money to Fumie.

None of this prepared her for what her father had in store for her. It began innocuously, with the announcement by one of the Marika clan that he'd become a Christian, was renouncing the drug culture and returning to America. This defection – the first since those explosive nights in the vineyards – hit Marlo with the devastation of an earthquake against a mighty fortress. He saw the cracks everywhere. The rage and paranoia, shoved under the surface by the polish, the comfort, the gleeful revenge – suddenly roared out of captivity. His moods grew surlier. If any of the men were away for any length of time, he'd question them pointedly as to their whereabouts.

Finally, one afternoon, right after the newspaper headlines of the Bellingham massacre, Marlo called Sari into the den of his home overlooking the Marina. With eyes as frozen marbles, he put his arms around Sari's shoulders and pointed to a group of his own guys launching a sailboat.

"Those men out there. My lansmen, my brothers. They worship you," he said to Sari. "If the Washington cutthroats ever take me down, my men will turn to you. Any command. Say kill, and they will kill. Say jump off a cliff, and you will see the lemmings in action. But times come when we all recultivate our roots. You and the Vets. It is all I have. I must make absolutely sure we are one."

Sari gulped. She wasn't stupid; she knew what was coming. She was only surprised that he had the gall to ask it. She didn't owe him a thing. Not the way he had treated the family over the years.

"Sari, dear." He was stroking her arm. "There is a special favor I owe one of my few American friends. And I need a very special person to deliver a package to him." He kissed her cheek.

Sari looked at him straight up. "We've never discussed our differences, Papa. But those distinctions must remain. If the Marika family is about respect, then you must respect my life."

"Very well, my daughter." He was walking away from her now. "Then your life does not include the restaurant. That is but the harvest of MY life."

Marlo wasn't stupid, either. He knew the right moment to play the trump card of knowledge of Sari's secret slush fund for Fumie.

"I'm sure Fumie can survive on her welfare check and your garage band," Marlo riveted.

Kyomi's counseling had often touched upon situational ethics. In Kyomi's words, choices don't always come in absolutes, but degrees.

"I'm not asking you to hurt anyone, Sari. It's only a package."

She stood across the room without looking at him. "I agree to help you just this once. But If you ever ask me a second time, I will join the rest of my family in America. Permanently."

All Sari knew was that she had to drive across the border to the Seattle Airport, and wait in a designated ticket area for a man who would address her by name.

Mission accomplished. It was only 10:00 AM, and already she was exhausted. She couldn't keep her attention focused on the concert venue she had been reading. The half-hour she'd spent in the cold, sterile-smelling airport lounge seemed like all day.

"Sari Marika?" Came a deep voice from behind her.

Sari turned noncommitably and saw a tall, aging man clad in a blue blazer and blue jeans. A large red case rested by his side. He was pouring over a clipboard full of papers, a la some government official.

"Special delivery, ma'am. Our requisition indicates one envelope, and one bag." He indicated the bulky travel case.

Marlo had taken pains to shield Sari from all the ugly details. She decided to get a little cute:

"What's in the case?"

"Don't know, ma'am, and not allowed to ask. I'm merely the messenger service."

"I won't sign for anything I can't verify," Sari said soberly.

"Very well, ma'am." The frowning man turned toward another man there to verify the attempted delivery.

A shiver of recognition caused Sari to inhale rapidly: The feared Drewbie Montgomery.

Sari affixed her signature to the line.

The one-way ticket inside the envelope had said Washington, D.C. All she could think about on the flight were efforts made to restrain her father's darker impulses. Yet she was the one bloodied. A coerced invitation into apparent criminal conduct. With blinders.

Sari decided not to go through with it. But she had to convince her father that the foul-up was not deliberate. Sari took the bulky case and her shoulder travel bag and headed straight for the restroom. Inside, she set her bags down, looked at her thick shoulder-length hair, and give it a good tussle, pulling strands down over her eyes. There was a makeup kit in her travel bag. A little smudge mark below the right temple would suffice. She gave her burgundy dress a good yank at the collar. Nothing happened. She really wasn't very good at this sort of thing.

Women passed by her to and from the stalls. A couple of them looked kind of shaky. Sari recalled horror stories of crimes committed inside airport restrooms. Maybe someone would pull a knife a rob her. The perfect solution.

A petite middle-aged Black woman join Sari at one of the sinks. Everyone else had exited, giving Sari her chance.

"Excuse me. Could you please help me? I have a family emergency and need to unload these bags. If I gave you \$100, could you store them for me?" Sari said in her most demure voice.

The woman beheld a very unthreatening Asian woman standing before her. Smudge mark and all.

"For a wonderful act of charity", Sari smiled.

The woman beheld the bills in Sari's hand, then the bags, and suddenly envisioned dogs at the TSA counters.

"I don't know. What's inside?" She asked.

About the time a burly woman in a police uniform entered. Sari turned rapidly toward the mirror. The Black woman noticed, and abruptly left the premise. Sari felt an unfamiliar crawling on her back. Fumbling for a wet paper towel as the policewoman approached suspiciously. Close enough to feel her breaths.

Sari gasped at the touch of a clammy hand on the smudge mark.

"Are you feeling alright, ma'am?"

"Just a little nervous." Sari tried to smile. "The play is tonight."

Sari grabbed the bags, departed quickly, and couldn't shake the tingling feeling all over until she was a good 100 feet from the restroom.

Sari contemplated her tiny chance of getting any contraband bags through security and customs. Pit bull security mentality at all airports. She found a quiet place and peaked inside the bag she had inherited.

Nothing but clothes inside. Flashy, frilled dresses – some male's vision of what Marlo Marika's princess would wear.

The bag was a loyalty test. Which she disgustingly passed. Across the terminal she saw Drew Montgomery. Looking like Santa Claus after recruitment by Charles Manson. She would see him again, very soon.

5:00 PM. The late-model gray Cheshire accelerated to 90 MPH on Alligator Alley, the desolate, everglades-encased Florida highway linking Miami to the Gulf. This was Juno Brandon's favorite refuge in times of stress. Nothing but friends out there.

The speedometer hit the century mark. Flashers from a rapidly approaching state police cruiser jumped into his rearview mirror. There was no siren. He gradually swung over to the shoulder, with the cruiser right on his tail.

The husky man with a graying crewcut wore civilian clothes. A Captain's badge was pinned to his surfer shirt.

"Retirement ain't so bad, Juno," said Ken Grassley, a former EIB colleague, now one of a handful of Brandon's scavengers.

His stumpy right hand carried a folder stamped Confidential. The airborne folder landed on Brandon's front seat.

"This ditty comes from Justice, Public Corruption, Agent Eduardo Morales. Consider this birthday and Christmas rolled into one, Juno."

The power window slid upwards. "Juno," Grassley called as the window stopped three inches from the top. "You're welcome."

CONFIDENTIAL FILE: The name Marika was unknown within drug enforcement circles. Exposure came quite by accident--there was this Congressional Aid working for Congressman John Dickerson, on photo and tape. The Congressional Aid and a Friendly DEA Agent named Raul Juarez then invited themselves to a private dinner with Marlo Marika:

"A few well-endowed constituents with avaricious noses and little side businesses need to piggyback their cocaine product onto an existing pharma smuggling network. In their business, an invisible pipeline such as yours is the ultimate blue chip."

To which Marlo Marika responded, "Nose medicine is not my specialty."

"Ah, but you will be happy to learn the trade. Since you love your lifestyle. Liberty even more," reminded Agent Raul Juarez. "Besides, Marlo. You'll be one of only five people participating in our lucrative profit-sharing plan."



“You don’t get it, Sari. I would die for you,” said Drew Montgomery, inside a rented Chevy on a narrow street in Northwest Washington D.C. This was Sari’s first exposure to the true meaning of prison bars.

Montgomery had mini-binoculars primed on a quaint, paint-worn rowhouse about 100 feet away. With a free hand he lifted a radio to his mouth:

A few minutes later, the door of the house opened. Austin Vandevire and his girlfriend Audrey emerged, turned, and proceeded toward the far end of the street.

“There goes our mark,” said Montgomery, handing Sari the binoculars. Sari gave Vandevire ne’er a glance before returning the binoculars. “This creep’s all but history. Want to know what that monkey did, Sari? Raped three women. One was only twelve years old. Never let anyone say your father is only about business. Consider it poetic payback for terrible atrocities.”

## Vengeance Is Ours

“It’ll be fine now, baby,” Audrey said to Austin Vandevire. He stepped outside of Audrey’s Nissan and faced an imposing granite fortress at 10<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania Ave.

For the first time in his life Vandevire literally wanted to kill somebody. That’s precisely what brought him to the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Justice. He always prided himself on doing right by the law. Everything would be alright. Because Agent Morales said it would.

Austin negotiated the maze after a couple of wrong turns and found Public Corruption. Agent Morales, as Vandevire remembered, was that personable young attorney who’d set up a meeting with him right after the delivery of Jacki Carrera’s package. Morales had asked him, in a very sympathetic voice, to recount those final days at the bank and the critical hours spent with Jacki. Morales had asked about his family. Complimented his courage. And said that if the public trust had been violated by drug pushers and corrupt politicians, they would be dealt with swiftly. Morales was a genuine human being, and if he said to trust in the system, Vandevire tended to believe him.

Vandevire’s blood was pumping. Agent Morales would be ricocheting off the walls with indignance after what Vandevire was about to tell him.

Vandevire took his gray suit and breezy smile into a plushy anteroom occupied by a middle-aged, red haired woman, facing to the side.

“Excuse me. I am one of your witnesses against government corruption,” he announced proudly, with a rooster’s gait. “I need to see Eduardo Morales, please.

“Doesn’t work here anymore,” the woman said brusquely.

It was like a sucker punch. Briefly immobilized by the anticlimax, Vandevire fumbled through his papers for another name. One he had found on the Internet.

“Okay, uh---- how about Ms. Janet Lindy?”

The woman turned toward him, unsmiling. “Do you want to take a number? Do you realize who Janet Lindy is? Just the Associate Attorney-General.” Came a voice saying bluntly that this hotshot Lindy lady lawyer who’d been wheeling and dealing wasn’t about to talk to this nobody walking in off of the street. Vandevire turned to suppress a surge of anger.

“Wait right here, sir. I’ll see if someone can talk to you.”

A full hour later, a sloppy-haired, pork-bellied functionary named Turk appeared, and with a grunting beckon, took Vandevire back to a private, closet-of-a-room.

Turk popped open an accordion folder with Vandevire’s name on it.

“What I appear to have in front of me,” Turk grumbled, “Is a brief statement by you, an uncorroborated statement by a bank employee named Carrera, and sheets of numbers and statistics that don’t make a lot of sense.” Turk finally lifted his eyes. “You’re here to clarify something? Can you produce Ms. Carrera?”

“Not exactly.”

Turk grunted. “Then we have insufficient evidence to prosecute. Now what do you want me to do?”

Audrey had cautioned Vandevire to keep his emotions in check. “A straight factual presentation will enhance your credibility,” she’d said. “The mere mention of the events would offend the dignities of anyone.”

“A flurry of phone calls began a few weeks ago. Each time the caller would hang up. It gradually escalated. Next came scratching sounds at the other end. Then the calls would come at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. All the calls to my girlfriend’s duplex. But they were directed at me. The harassers think I live there.”

“How do you know that?” Turk asked with a tinge of impatience.

“Because the next call a voice came on and said, you’re dead, canary.”

Vandevire groused at the man chuckling at his words.

“The last four days have been unbearable. I got the latest technology to ID the caller. A day later the voice comes on, and says he jammed my trap, and that if I get cute again he’ll make sure I die slow. The next morning Audrey finds a dead bird on the porch. Audrey had her phone number changed to unlisted. The caller calls us on the new number, taunts us some more.”

“You have called the police, Mr. Vandevire?”

“They took a report and said they’d check on it. They’re still checking. Unbelievable.”

“Unbelievable, alright, that you would come in here and waste my time with this garbage. Jan Lindy has me buried, 12 hours a day, doing backgrounds on several high-profile cases. Question: Do I have time for this baloney? Answer: no.”

Vandevire came to his feet. He inhaled his verbal barrage and collected his thoughts. About how his situation was pure Hollywood. Conscientious citizen does the right thing by reporting the bad guys to the authorities, and the bad guys retaliate by terrorizing him. Now all that’s left is for the good guys to come rushing in, protect the innocent victim and send the bad guys packing for good. The story obviously to be continued. A sound line of reasoning. For someone unfamiliar with the workings of government.

“You have a responsibility,” Vandevire said finally. These threats began right after I reported the corruption. This is illegal retaliation.”

“I’m not interested.”

“If you’re too lazy or incompetent to go after the druggies and politicians, then that’s between you and the citizens. But when it’s my life on the line because of something I did in the public interest – I am entitled to protection. Me and Audrey both.”

“Let me explain the facts to you,” Turk said with a petulance Vandevire had never seen. “Witness protection occurs only for those involved in a criminal trial--when they have something to offer the government of distinct value. Your situation isn’t anything close to a criminal proceeding. If we were to provide protection to every schmoe who’s been threatened for one reason or another, then we’d have to make the Justice Department as large as the Defense Department. Now, Mr. Vandevire, you can choose to leave. Or you can be escorted.”

No words could capture Vandevire’s feelings of betrayal, isolation. Unsophisticated as he was in such matters.

“If it was YOUR family under siege, -- I’m sure you’d behave differently.”

Turk offered a pinched smile. “No doubt about it, Mr. Vandevire.”

It came to Austin Vandevire like a lightning bolt. The America he’d learned about in school. All about helping the weak, the afflicted, the oppressed. He laid it to rest.

That night Audrey gave her best performance. There was an extravaganza of six jazz bands at the club. A couple of radio stations had given the event some free plugs. It’s amazing how artists could turn out their greatest works or creations while under great stress, Vandevire reasoned. Or because of it.

The greasy-hair saxophone player with the studded jacket and cowboy boots brought the crowd to its feet. Marvelous Malvin Syndirene, someone introduced. Soloing and interplaying with the backup band such that he didn’t seem to want to stop. Vandevire barely heard the music, consumed as he was with his visceral education on power alignments.

Late that night Audrey took Vandevire into a room in the back for a private gathering with some of the performers. Everyone in the group was Black, except for the sax player, Marvelous Malvin. His wrinkled brown headband with a crocodile imprint looked as though it had been used on a lube job. This Malvin character spoke in slang to the point of parodying African-American culture. Audrey introduced him to Vandevire.

Vandevire returned a three-piece suit-style greeting, and Syndirene howled laughter.

“Seems, dude, when our moms hatched you and me, someone switched the paint buckets.”

Syndirene took to him instantly – Audrey’s Nice Friend. Talking at close range, constantly offering him the whiskey. Good ole boy tales with salty language, often followed by wheezing laughter. The conversations switched to the hardships of growing up Black in American, a subject on which Syndirene was, of course, an expert.

Vandevire suddenly blurted out, “The dark hue gives us no monopoly on hardship. When the man in the government smile looks at you and I, they may see race, but mostly they see advantage. They take it. Because we don’t. Then watch the power structure peel us off, one by one. Black, Yellow, Red, Brown, White. Like artichoke leaves—like me, after having the naivete to report public corruption.” Vandevire inhaled, surprised at his own words. They just came.

His guests were all quiet now. Until Syndirene bellowed out provocatively, “They want to see you runnin’. Like your tarred and feathered ancestors.”

“Ain’t happening.” He reached over and touched Audrey, who smiled with appreciation. “I quit my job at the bank, and now I’m selling sneakers. Making just enough money to share just a tiny piece of this beautiful woman’s world—even as I’m the Scourge of Washington. Audrey has stood by me through all the horrors. When you find a gem of a human being, you think twice before walking away.

“Send my C.V. out to several banks or research foundations. There are no openings they say, or if a vacancy is announced, they say you’re not quite the person we’re looking for. There was one job down in Virginia. Exactly the same thing I was doing up here. I call HR, the woman has my C.V. and she sounds excited. She tells me interviews will be conducted within the next two weeks. Two weeks go by. I hear nothing. I call the HR lady back. This same nice person is suddenly very cold, aloof. She says interviews were already conducted. She says she tried to call me several times, but I couldn’t be found. Too bad, Mr. Vandevire. No four-leaf clover today. And no, we won’t reconsider.”

“Dude, I don’t want you to gettin’ to thinkin’ that every employee or lackey in every company is part of a grand whistleblower retaliation conspiracy. It ain’t working that way,” Syndirene said. “Someone has the right power or connections, they know how to push the right buttons to make the system work their way. And all these people, in all these HR offices, and maybe even the goons carrying badges, are burying you. And they don’t even know it. Some predator, a powerful whistleblower hater, just hits that first domino.”— He made a flickering gesture with his index finger. “AV, it don’t take more than 4 or 5 of the rightly-placed people.”

Vandevire felt instant empathy coming from everyone. He felt a rush telling his story. Power of boldly exposing the evil. Pride in refusing to blink.

Ah, so this is what Ron Vandevire meant, mumbling the terms Spiritual Corruption and Moral Inversion in America all these years—a society placing few checks on the whims of the most powerful.

“Hey AV, check this out,” Syndirene said, after clandestinely taking Vandevire into a back-alley parking lot. “Come Lasa Light with us, man. Course, I need to polish up my invite a little first.” Syndirene opened up the trunk, and simultaneously raised an index finger to his lips.

The steel seemed to flash beneath the distant neon rays. He proudly displayed his wares: pistols, derringers, shotguns, rifles, automatics, semiautomatics. Syndirene slid a compact pistol into Vandevire’s right hand.

“This little ditty gets off 12 rounds before you can blink. This is one market the Japs and Chinese ain’t never gonna corner. One hunnert percint Amurcan, all the way.”

Vandevire wasn’t into guns much. But he reached for a 30.06 hunting rifle. Standard fare in Montana.

“It’s on the house, AV. Paid for by your sweat and raw gizzard.”

“No excuse for not defending yourself,” Vandevire asserted.

“With the corrupt Jap lover Speaker Dickerson there’s but one defense. Playing by the law with him is like playing a football game where only the other team gets the ball. He’s got the guns, the money, the goons, and even the law. All you get is the biggest joke in America: principle. Boy, you ain’t even David. The only good bully is a dead one. So why not just turn his lights out for good?”

Syndirene wheezed at Vandevire’s look of horror. Crooking his left arm and laying a shotgun across the triceps. “Here, Mr. Dickerson. How about a lead kiss?”

The next day. Vandevire was getting to hate that shoe job. All the stooping in front of people. He dreaded 4:00, when he’d have to go in. He wanted to quit, but he had too much consideration for Audrey—not wanting her to date a freeloader.

Mal Syndirene called and asked in a pushy voice if Austin could clear his lunch schedule. Audrey had warned Vandevire about Syndirene’s bent-brain racial theories. Syndirene shot a cold streak down Vandevire’s spine. Yet there was something exhilarating about the unbridled defiance Syndirene symbolized. For Vandevire, the new-found liberation of refusing to lower one’s eyes to evil and corrupt power. Ron, his Bible-quoting father, could cite Romans 13, about obeying government authorities. That was offset by Acts 4; the Apostles refusing to obey evil orders of corrupt officials.

At a cheap Tenleytown deli, Syndirene paid for the sandwiches, then handed Vandevire a fancy card.

“Expose DOJ’s citizen-phobia disease to the Post. Or at least tell it to Patson and Lasa Light. I’m kind of on the fringes of the movement but can get you some exposure.”

“No, no.” Vandevire said—thinking all he needs now is public exposure of collaboration with a racist.

“Hey, AV, let me explain something to you. Print is protection. Makes certain predators think twice.”

Vandevire turned, but Syndirene had his arm.

“The name Janet Lindy mean anything to you, man?”

“Maybe,” Vandevire shrugged noncommittally.

“The hot-shot Justice lady who has your case. Listen to me, dude. She’s Dickerson’s mistress.”

“That’s bull.”

“No. That’s Washington.”

Vandevire visited Audrey’s at 2:00 PM, weary from the seven-hour prospect of fondling smelly feet.

All lethargy disappeared when beholding this piggish man – this invader – at the foot of the steps. An FBI badge in Vandevire’s face preempted the instinctive violent surges.

“Walk up the steps real slow,” the agent said as a low command.

Vandevire’s first thought was that something terrible had happened to Audrey. He called her name. Then the agent told Vandevire to keep his hands where he could see them. Tyranny with an edge had made its unwelcome appearance, Vandevire realized. He had mentally rehearsed this eventuality. That still didn’t stop the cold waves and the draining feeling in each limb, each appendage.

Reaching the top of the steps, he took several deep breaths. The door to Audrey’s bedroom was open. Inside was a rugged, hairy man with stone-sculptured face, straight black hair and black flak jacket with the word TUCSON printed near the lower hem. The man introduced himself as EIB Special Agent Juno Brandon.

“Where’s Audrey?”

“She’s doing fine,” Brandon said quickly.

“Don’t tell them anything Austin! Not a word!” Came Audrey’s frantic voice from the direction of the kitchen.

Brandon reached toward the bed and picked up a loaded semi-automatic he had just purchased in Virginia. “Is this your weapon, Mr. Vandevire?” Brandon asked.

“How do you know my name?”

“Don’t ask. The answer is too easy.”

Vandevire made a move toward the bedroom. “Stay where you are. Turn and face the wall,” came Brandon’s voice. “My manner is calm. But I’m not asking.”

Vandevire complied and felt the hands of the FBI agent rummaging his pockets. The agent found a can of cola tucked inside Vandevire’s suede jacket. The FBI agent was inspecting the can now. And Vandevire did everything to suppress thoughts of bars, chains, and electrical currents.

Brandon was holding Vandevire’s gun in a present arms position. “You have a permit for this semi-automatic weapon, Mr. Vandevire?”

This is America, Vandevire kept telling himself. There was something about probable cause. Due process. They just couldn’t.

“Lady hasn’t said a word,” said Sam Tygrier, marching down the hall. “Except to deny ever seeing the case.”

Vandevire found Audrey in the den. Sitting in her favorite chair, head down, wrists shackled in front of her. A female agent stood over her like a guard dog. Audrey lifted her eyes to Vandevire as a plea for help.

“Here is the problem, Mr. Vandevire,” Brandon said evenly. Indicating a saxophone – like case displayed on the coffee table. “We found it hidden in the bedroom closet,” Brandon said, then look at Vandevire straight on. “Please explain where you got this.”

“Austin, can they just question us like this?” Audrey cried out.

“Miranda is dead and gone, ma’am,” said Tygrier in a bored voice.

Vandevire looked right back at Brandon. “I’ve never seen this case before. So kindly go away.”

“The Lady’s got to come with us,” Tygrier interjected. “We’ve sufficient evidence to hold her. Until we get some answers.”

Vandevire decided it’d be a mistake to assume they knew about the whistleblower retaliation. “The case, whatever it is, was meant for me. I am the target. Audrey is an innocent party. This is a frameup, pure and simple. For my reporting corrupt activities to the Justice Department, possibly involving Speaker John Dickerson.”

Brandon’s eyes locked into Tygrier’s for a full five seconds. Vandevire sat down and waited for their next move. It seemed to pacify the tensions somewhat.

Tygrier sighed. “Two calls alerted us to drug dealing and a possible attempt against the President. The callers gave this address. Verified the lady here as the leaseholder. Threats against the



President give reasonable suspicion a wide brush. We conduct a search and – wham, there is the threatening case!” Tygrier looked at Vandevire. “That’s the ringer you and your girl are in. Comprehend?”

Vandevire detected a skeptical note in Tygrier’s narrative. Kind of like calling on a jock in class to read Chaucer. Likewise, Brandon sneered as he circled the case, then snapped it open.

“Fentanyl, Mr. Vandevire. Like to get high?” Brandon asked in an artificially loud voice. A gloved hand dug through the neatly-sealed bags and pulled out two blueprint-like documents. Brandon narrated, “Detailed composite of the deadly yugar weapon. Cryptic words about the need of President Exeter to die. Map of a route to be used for a Presidential motorcade. With red X’s for the proposed deployment of Secret Service officers.”

Vandevire’s gentle eyes became wide and gaping. Spontaneous surprise.

Brandon picked up on it. “Well, that about concludes my questioning.”

The FBI guy stiffened. “Oh? I didn’t know the interrogation had begun.”

“About does it for me, too,” added Tygrier.

“Excuse me,” the FBI guy continued, quite bothered. “Threats to the life of President Exeter exacts a more thorough response. “

“I’m convinced the President is indeed in danger,” Brandon said in a rebuking voice. “Quite possibly because we are here right now.”

“We need to take you in, Mr. Vandevire, the FBI agent said. “Unlawful possession of unlicensed semi-automatic weapon while loaded. Contravenes D.C. law which survived revised Supreme Court decision.”

The walls were closing in now. The numbing feeling had permeated his entire body. “I’ve never heard of such a law. About keeping a gun in your house? I bought this legally in Virginia. How can I be held criminally responsible for a law I didn’t know even exists?”

“Ignorance of the law in no excuse,” the FBI guy crowed.

Vandevire stood eye to eye with the FBI agent. “May I see the search warrant for my gun? Can you tell me the relevance of this to the original purpose of your search? “The words just flowed naturally, like beautiful notes from the saxophone. This was the most powerful moment in the very young life of Austin Vandevire. Standing six inches from an agent of the most powerful human society in history. And not blinking.

Brandon and Tygrier locked eyes again. For five more seconds.

Vandevire held his wrists in front of him--even as his eyes had an edge. The female agent fumbled around for handcuffs.

Just as Brandon was removing cuffs from Audrey.

“What are you doing?” Mr. Ignorance of The Law agent demanded.

“The gun’s not hers,” Brandon shrugged.

“Do I detect a non-chalant attitude here, when we have persons who may be connected to an assassination plot on the President?” The FBI agent said.

“Oh, absolutely!” Brandon said in a eureka voice. “As potential witnesses and informants. A delicate matter which you are screwing up as we speak.”

“We’re all going downtown!” The agent huffed.

Brandon held Vandevire in front of the Sergeant’s desk while the FBI guy stood a few paces behind; his pale face turning red. To him, Big Case! Involving the President! And here were all these hookers and petty thieves and candy cops.

“Tripped across this weapon while investigating an unrelated matter,” Brandon mumbled to the grey-haired sergeant.

The sergeant joked about finding the right form. Bantering with Brandon. Like buying candy at a drug store.

Brandon took the form from the sergeant and read aloud, for everyone to hear including the FBI guy: “Form DC 1891: Voluntary Surrender of Unauthorized Loaded Firearm.”

Tygrier handed the rifle over.

“The weapon will be tagged and impounded,” the sergeant said without energy. “You understand that you relinquish all claims to this property?”

“Yes,” Vandevire answered.

“He gave you any trouble?”

“None whatsoever,” Brandon answered,

“Check priors? Outstanding warrants? Any other problems?”

“Negative, nothing.” Brandon highlighted.

The sergeant sighed. “Okay. I’ll have Rock type it. “Sign it and you’re free to go.”

“Thank you.” Vandevire said to Brandon, who handed him a card.

“I may have to come back. But please, you can call me anytime.”

Sam Tygrier and Juno Brandon weren't a second late for their meeting in the West Wing of the White House. Enveloping oak panels so sublime as to emit an aroma not unlike that in the Northwest hinterlands. Mounted photos of political celebs hitting them from every angle. Hand carved mahogany desk directed in front of them. And behind that, the human behemoth Bingo McBride— if one could picture what a whale looks like when it dies and goes to heaven.

"Bingo, I'm going to give this to you in chronological order," Brandon said in his low-keyed voice carrying crosshaired intensity.

"Only the facts, no opinions," added Tygrier. "Just like you wanted."

Between Brandon and Tygrier was a case not unlike the Yugar case. A glaring red TOP SECRET emblem was affixed to it. Tygrier snapped it open and pulled out a sampling of small cartridges and transcripts. "Exhibit One," Brandon began. "Burrus tapes of incriminating conversations between Marlo Marika and associates, acknowledging restricted commodities distribution network from Canada into the Pacific Northwest, and a cocaine pipeline to DC serving unnamed political interests."

"Exhibit Two. Transcript prepared by FBI anticorruption expert Eduardo Morales, since transferred to Utah, depicting conversations between Raul Juarez, Speaker Dickerson staffer Jules Whitlow and Marlo Marika, Subject: Full-Nelson invitation to Marika to piggyback coke on his existing distribution channels."

"Exhibit Three. Statistical reports and unnotarized affidavits prepared by a bank employee named Jacki Carrera, implicating close associates of Speaker John Dickerson to cocaine, money laundering operation, involving Maryland-based financial institution."

"Exhibit Four. Burrus tapes of movements of Sari Marika between Vancouver and Seattle. Tape shows her carrying case similar to one used to transport the Yugar. However, no Yugar was found inside. At this point, our surveillance of Sari Marika ceases. Upon your instruction, sir. Within 24 hours surveillance is initiated on Austin Vandevire and Audrey Thorpe."

"Exhibit Five. Burrus tape of case, identical to one carried by Sari Marika. Now found in apartment of Audrey Thorpe. Contents of case: fentanyl, assassination threats, design of Yugar and map of Presidential motorcade scheduled for the 23<sup>rd</sup> in Baltimore."

Tygrier set the evidence on Bingo's desk. Bingo picked up a Burrus Cassette and juggled it like a ball.

"What is your assessment of all of this?" Bingo asked, almost sneering.

It was Tygrier's turn: "The Marika gang, using intelligence provided by the corrupt Federal agents, murdered the Nazis and stole the Yugar. The precautions taken by the assassins to avoid burrus surveillance is evidence of Federal involvement. Vandevire delivers Carrera's bombshell to the Dept. of

Justice. Someone at DOJ alerts Dickerson, who orders Marika to put together some drugs, the Yugar blueprint, and the Nazi plans to assassinate President Exeter, and plant the package on Vandevire. A crude attempt at whistleblower retaliation, and also to totally deflecting scrutiny away from Dickerson and Marika sources, if there is a hit on President Exeter.”

Bingo’s eyes were shifting back and forth. “All this has you hot and bothered?”

Brandon shrugged, “I’ve seen worse.”

“That’s where my colleague and I disagree, Tygrier said pointedly. “On a scale of political corruption, it falls off the edge.”

“What concerns me,” Brandon added, “Is that two innocent parties could have gone down hard for a crime they never committed.”

Tygrier looked at Brandon. “I’m glad you said it.”

Bingo said, as if suppressing a laugh, “You are recommending that the Speaker of the House of Representatives be the subject of a criminal inquiry?”

“Is the Potomac wet?” Brandon answered.

Bingo rolled his eyes. “Your textbook world wilts under political realities. The President’s bill on the Omnibus Trade Package is hostage to Dickerson’s endorsement.”

“Cramps,” Tygrier groaned, rising. He turned and walked out.

“Everything’s under control,” Bingo said as if trying to calm an irate spouse. “Dickerson is going to fall. But only when the President is in a stronger position. So put your angst at ease. – And by the way. Get out a pen. I don’t want you screwing up these instructions, Brandon. You’re to resume surveillance on the Marika family. But only for the purpose of recovering the Yugar. Capische?”

“Yes sir.” Brandon rose and delivered a reluctant salute.

Bingo tilted his ivory heftiness to the side. “Brandon, you’ve never let me down. Go talk some sense into Tygrier.”

“Yeah. Someone needs to be talking sense.”

“Brandon. Do I have to spell it out? President Exeter wants the full extent of Dickerson’s shenanigans played to completion before we jump.”

“Yeah, if the President lives to see it.”

## Double V

The evening after the FBI terror brought Vandevire the most elegant dinner date he could ever imagine: He and Audrey at their favorite mouth-watering Italian restaurant. Audrey's fawning accolades to him never seemed to stop: Hero, Braveheart, Unique Character, Mr. Integrity. It was the setup for the powerful punch:

"Austin, I need a relationship sabbatical. This is more than I can handle. Let's consider it a prudent suspension, not a breakup—that is, if you ever have me back. I am not worthy of you. "

To which Vandevire replied nobly, "I am not worthy of you for not thinking about it first. For your safety."

An hour after the extended farewell embraces came the pains in Vandevire's chest. Physical pushback from suppressed disappointment, loss. And prompting a call to 911. They kept Vandevire in the hospital, for precautionary observations. On the morning after his admission Vandevire found a bizarre voice message on his cell, from Syndirene:

"Hey, AV, Lasa Light is coming your way. Under no circumstances, I mean never, tell them I was the one who sent them to you."

Three hours later, walking into Vandevire's hospital room, was a strident man with dirty blonde hair to the shoulders, brown suede jacket, and eyes pulsating like kaleidoscopes. Vandevire had seen him. Maybe on TV.

He wordlessly tossed Citizen Times on Vandevire's bed. The photo on the front cover matched the face in flesh. Vandevire read the quote of the day: Patson: "When Shakespeare said we kill all the lawyers, ole Will didn't know the wonders of retraining."

"There's only one place for Party bosses, corporate bosses, and bureaucrats. That's rehab," Patson said to Vandevire. "But national evils are so deep they'll need serious isolation. Maybe Myanmar or someplace."

Patson then asked an unseen nurse to bring Vandevire food fit for a king. Patson sat wordlessly, very calmly in the chair next to the bed. Vandevire contemplated this self-appointed guardian angel and admirer. The words "get out" were drowned out by surge of power deep in his soul. Roaches scattering in the light.

"What I'm going to tell you now I'd shout from Mount Everest," Vandevire said. "If they cut out my tongue, I'll type it in Morse code."

And Vandevire recounted his adventure with the bank, the Justice Department, and the FBI invasion of his home. He concluded by reciting the agent's taunt, Ignorance of the law is no excuse.

"And you believed him?" Patson said. "Ignorance of the law is no excuse is the ultimate government propaganda organ. A weapon to keep citizens in fear. Think of the castle that's needed to store the legal code of the U.S. Laws. They are written that way for two reasons: one, so lawyers can get rich, and two, so the government can selectively enforce these laws, and nail some poor dissident who gets in the way. Want to make it so ignorance of the law is no excuse? Then write citizen-friendly laws, so I can put the entire legal code in my backpack."

"Being on the wrong side of power is why I'm here," Vandevire said. "Can't stop thinking about it. But you're so crazy calm."

"Tell you a secret," Patson winked. "A higher power up there. We've heard it in churches forever. Many people haint practicing what they got. But if you take the evidence of more than 500 people who saw Jesus resurrected from the dead—and radical life transformations of people facing death rather than luxury--into even the most corrupt court, it would be accepted as factual truth, 10 times over. Because of that power He gives me, I think about nothing except my faith and the Lasa mission at hand. Any other invading thoughts don't last long. Keeps life basic and simple—and I dare say effective. You probably wouldn't believe my story of what I've been through—and when the Almighty touched me. That power inside me makes the scars all gone. – Can you understand what it's like to have a life's mission?"

"I'm beginning to."

Patson held up a pen. "The Oligarchy is a double heroin pipeline. A rush of drugs with booty from the corporations to the government officials. Then it flows the other way. Money from the government to the corporations. A whirlpool of addiction. They're the pushers, we're the junkies. But needles are coming out of arms now, Mr. Vandevire. Then..."

Patson snapped the pen in two. Ignoring the ink on his hands.

Patson held up a photo. Vandevire squinted to see a middle-aged woman who looked like Jacki Carrera.

"Corazon Aquino," Patson clarified. "Remember the nonviolent People's Revolt decades back in the Philippines? Itty bitty grandma brings down an entire government. It's gonna happen again. The U.S. Oligarchy is too entrenched with its money centers, political party machines, bureaucracies, electoral rules, to ever allow Lasa Light to vote itself into power. No, we're going to have to – militantly nonviolently, but effectively – wrap a rope around its neck. It's not a matter of if. But when. The only question, how will the Oligarchy respond? Will they let the citizens strengthen our liberties and democracy? Or will they start America's Second Civil War?"

"Don't know if I'm up for your crusade."

“Says every straggler who wanders away from the power of numbers,” said Patson. “Whistleblowers is the ultimate four-letter word: HERO. You people provide the underpinning of civilized, moral society. There is no greater honor. And no greater threat to the Oligarchy.

Patson pulled a small tape recorder from his jacket. “Care to tell your story again? You’re gonna be in here.” Pointing to Citizen Times, the Lasa Light mouth for millions.

“You’ll want to see my documentation about Dickerson.”

“Proof on Dickersham? Already been verified,” Patson interrupted. “Bring the esteemed John Dickerson in front of a jury of his peers? Some say the jury is out on Dickersham. I say that proverbial jury is beginning to stir in its chambers.”

“How much?”

“Lasa Light’s got no organization. No paid officers. Just a big welcome mat for Americans passionate for liberty, citizens empowerment and democracy. You don’t get a dime. Neither do I.”

Vandevire, home after his discharge considered the full ramification of what they had tried to do to him. Put an innocent man in jail. He could not imagine a greater horror on Earth. Jail could be searing, second-by-second hell for even the most hardened criminal whose activities raise incarceration as a vivid possibility. But when you know in your heart you’ve done nothing wrong, and then 21<sup>st</sup> Century slavemasters come crashing through your space with no warning.

That evening, after Vandevire’s release from the hospital, leftover Chinese food was cold on his den table, and light jazz was playing from his cell. Syndirene came a knocking. Vandevire beheld the stained, plaid tank top, tattoos, seaweed hair, and uneven beard, and envisioned a derelict on a streetcorner trying to cop change. He made a note of the contrast between Patson and Syndirene, and pondered how government abuse expanded parameters of alliances, even if those allies weren’t on speaking terms.

Syndirene was good for him. Kind of like a reverse conscience. A constant reminder of a forbidden door where not go store one’s anger. Yes, anger could come disguised as a false prophet; a hidden boomerang adorned with the lures of racialism and violence.

Syndirene made himself at home. “Patson. I had to send him through an intermediary. He and I, well.”

“I understand,” Vandevire interrupted. “Perhaps one day you will.”

“Our guardian angel, boy, you don’t sneeze at. He had some of his Lasa Light people keeping an eye on your pad – Man, what if you knew the identities of the people who planted that box in Audrey’s place? Betcha you’d be mad enough to kill them.”

“A hypothetical answer to a strictly theoretical question.”

Syndirene's random-test eyes carried a glint as he leaned forward. "I don't think you comprehend what I'm saying, AV. I had Patson's network lit up by midnight on the night of the jazz party. Patson had Lasa Light people on the street keeping an eye on you by noon the next day."

Vandevire sprang to his feet. It was like yanking on the reins of wild horses. He walked with conscious deliberation into the kitchen, poured Syndirene his favorite Scotch straight-up, then sat beside him on the couch, such as their knees almost touched. Vandevire's hand trembled slightly. Suddenly he envisioned a gun there, an invisible face and a huge question mark.

Syndirene prolonged the suspense by picking at a scab on his bicep tattoo. "Man, I can give you a vivid description of the two white dudes who professionally invaded your girl's building with the case. Except I can do better. Lasa Light tracked their vehicle to Dulles Airport. Rented to an Oriental lady named Sari Marika---A name, Austin. Hear me?"

"What do we know about her?"

Syndirene smiled deliciously for his ultimate surprise. "Dickerson's private pharmacist at your former bank. His name is Marlo. As in Marika."

Vandevire tried to temper sudden optimism with objectivity. "If the Feds have been compromised, they still probably won't go after Dickerson," he said evenly. "How about a civil rights lawsuit? Hit them all for a couple mill. Big Brother can't stop that."

"Don't be stupid. Yes, they can. Patson's right. Dickerson and his power-center allies don't run the system. They are the system. All it takes is a few phony witnesses and doctored records to make you look like a fool in court. For Dickerson, four or five phone calls at most. The quote I remember best from Patson: The survivability of democracy depends on keeping the wheels of orderly change well-greased. But they've not only run out of oil, they've inserted a crow bar."

Syndirene produced two airplane tickets, placed them behind Vandevire's ear, then leaned his hairy mouth to the tip of Vandevire's ear:

"Think back, AV I know it's happened at least once. Some goomba comes by with his hotshot car. Just about runs you down. On top of it, he flicks you the finger, as if it's your fault. You turn around and say, thinking, just give me five minutes with this guy. Your heart races just thinking about it. -- Your dream has come true, baby. It's time to rock and roll. The Big V. Vengeance a la mode."

Vandevire looked at him sideways. "What do you have in mind?" Half fearing an answer.

"The most elaborate scam my Cajun uncle could ever devise. A big hole in their pocket, and they don't even see it. AV, I wouldn't miss this for the world. A Jap to boot. Just when you were starting to doubt my racial theories."



“Our man Marlo is chilling,” came Tygrier’s voice over the ruzo from Vancouver, to Brandon’s mobile unit. “I think he’s on to us. Next, he’ll be kissing babies. How about the daughter, Sari?”

“Like spacy music?” Brandon answered. “How about art? I’ve never seen more creative use of hair braids in the back of the head.”

Tygrier laughed. “I’m signing Marlo over to Joe before I need an alarm clock. I’ll pick up Drewbie. Revving up his cycle as we speak.” Tygrier signed off from afar.

The Marika restaurant occupied the second floor of one of the downtown Vancouver highrises. Brandon’s RV occupied two parking spaces on a nearby street, surrounded by ethnic restaurants, quaint shops, jewelry stores, and the kind of pedestrians which both carry cameras and attract them.

“Brando take a look at this,” said Hammaker from inside their cramped, dark, machine-laden quarters. “Isn’t that our Black canary from Washington?”

“You mean, the one who never bit on your hooker friend?” Brandon consulted his burrus. Austin Vandevire, dressed in a slick brown suit, was standing next to a wall-sized picture of Osaka. Looking rather tense while waiting to be seated.

“What’s he doing up here?” Hammaker barked ominously toward the two agents behind him. “Anybody been whispering in his ear?”

“Friends we don’t know about,” replied Brandon, eyes primed on the burrus. “Little murmurs about Switchblade Sari,” he added. “The word is out. Mess with Marlo’s little angel, and you get no warnings. It’ll come right at your back.” Brandon revealed a tight-mouthed smile. “I wonder if Mr. Vandevire ever encountered any venus fly traps in Montana?”

Hammaker’s big frame angled toward Brandon like a stalking animal. “That Black canary’s probably a greater asset to us alive.”

Brandon squinted from the harsh tone and foul breath. Taking his eyes from the burrus finally. “A brilliant observation, Hammaker.” Brandon took two Canadian \$20s from his wallet, then a little extra considering Marika’s price. “Do you prefer sushi or teriyaki?”

Vandevire had virtually no contact with Japanese restaurants or peoples, his only impressions coming from friends and media images. Paintings depicting Eastern images and Japanese characters adorned the walls. An alien sort of music, foreign but soothing, greeted his ears. He saw finely-varnished wooden tables with lighted candles, a manned sushi bar in back, and a curtained off area with images of people kneeling. The only thing western was the clientele (much of it), catered to by three sedately-friendly Japanese women, two young and baby-faced, the other middle-aged, and all supporting aqua kimonos and severely-mounted black hair.

Sari Marika, as Syndirene had described her, was nowhere in sight. Actually, Brandon's burrus had her seated quietly in a back room by her koto, plucking strings in unison with the folk music playing from the speaker.

Vandevire's eyes cased the joint with an edge. He recalled Syndirene's parting words: "Remember, if Sari Marika looks at you, it's either with pity or contempt. That's what I hate the worst about the Japs. They're such racists."

Vandevire felt chills at the thought of looking Sari Marika in the eye. The mystery of her explanation, her posture, when confronted without warning. What would be his reaction? Rage? Relief? More mystery? That was the ultimate adventure. Vandevire had to trust his own instincts.

Not too far away, Syndirene recognized the pickup truck and parked his black, tank-of-a-car right behind it. The two-lane road was isolated, embracing a haunting quietude. Evergreens were everywhere, piercing the sky like scores of dark green daggers. The crisp pine smell was like oxygen in the blood stream.

He climbed inside the truck to join the driver, a daunting woman with heavy breaths, large everything under a brown tent dress, floppy cowboy hat, and haphazard whiskers on the chin. Rural populism.

"Down yonder, a half mile or so, on the right. You'll see it," came a mild Missouri drawl. "Routine's like a granddaddy's pendulum. Two Marika toughies. Every Thursday, 5:00 they move the stash."

Syndirene checked his watch. "How long your Lasa Light people been onto Marika?"

"Five weeks, thereabouts."

"Hessy, who are they telling?"

The bovine woman thought for a moment, looking lazily ahead. "Certainly not Justice. They're the Man. Don't much trust the Staties up here, neither. Rely on theirselves mostly. Gosh. I don't know."

"We can't have no surprises, Hessy."

Hessy looked behind her. "Yeah, I can see. Where's you get that contraption? Reminds me of that ancient movie I just saw. Mel Gibson."

"Road Warrior".

"That's the one."

“I borrowed that baby from an old friend. A Creole Blood moved up to Seattle, but not a bad dude, not really. Tried to run the druggies off. They’d come at him, and he’d be the one laughing the rest of the day.”

“I think Lasa Light wants Marlo Marika bad,” said Hessy. “Because when Marika falls, so does His Majesty John Dickerson.”

“Here’s how it’s going to work, Hess.”

“Syndo, I don’t even want to know.”

“— About the money, I mean. A friend’s going to get a cut. He’s earned every dime, after what they’ve done to him. But it’s all a matter of degree. Put a C-note in front of him and his eyes become pies. You and I will have more than enough.”

“Lasa Light would go into fits if they knew you were up here, Syndo. Just remember, you don’t know me from nothing. I ain’t bee—essing. Doctor Patson would have me publicly excommunicated, just like you.”

Syndirene got out, checked the British Columbia tags on his tank, unlocked the trunk, and placed a big case on the front seat.

He smiled widely.” Juiced this mother up good, I did.”

Hessy peered back through the open window. “Don’t you be getting crazy on me, Syndo.”

“You’re about to see the true creative genius of Marvelous Malvin.”

“Exactly what I’m afraid of. I best be going.”

“Yeah. Better you best.”

Syndirene waved her off with a little swagger.

I ain’t no itch  
That makes me twitch  
When I get rich  
Get kissed by the –  
That mangy old dawg. Hah! Hah!

The woman suddenly sauntering into Vandevire’s sights possessed a sculptured elegance, a deep skin hue having nothing to do with Black, and slick flaxen hair knotted in back in the shape of a V. A kimono made her look more Japanese than all of the fixtures. He recalled Syndirene’s description of Sari, then heard one of the waitresses calling her name. And she wasn’t apologizing.

Vandevire spooned the udon into his mouth without tasting it. He was consumed by Sari stopping by one table after another to converse with the patrons. Phrases ended on an upnote, and a voice marked by a softness bordering on a whisper. The passing of time raised his blood level. Sari was avoiding his table. Refusing to meet his gaze. She recognized him, alright.

Vandevire thought of Karl, his old friend at the bank. Karl would have said, look, you're the only black in the place. Karl would have said, look, they put you in the rear so people walking in the door would have to stretch their necks to see you. Karl would have said, look, the only thing Asians ever have to do with Blacks is to come into the inner city, open up their little stores, take money out of the community, and spit on the brothers and sisters. Karl would have said, look, non-Blacks are so daunted by us that they are constantly looking for Good Blacks, any brown-skinned Leave-It-To-Beaver clones, as an anecdote to the Bad Blacks so they can tell themselves they're not racists.

Karl at that moment he had nailed Vandevire with a 4,000-mile sucker punch.

Vandevire refused to bite, and in fact extended himself kindly to the shyly-friendly Japanese waitress who brought him his check.

"Was everything alright sir?" Came the second sucker-punch: Sari Marika's voice two feet to his right. He turned but nothing came out except the stammered word, "Fine." He looked directly into her face and saw a slight-far-away smile. He began his rehearsed lines, but she was away in retreat.

If only Vandevire could read Sari's mind. And see she didn't recognize him at all. The only going through her mind was notes. Or some other contrived harmony to create an alternative existence. Because the world was suddenly quite confusing. Reinforced the night before by the unannounced visits of her brother Mitch. Telling her to stop degrading herself. Offering to introduce her to fine, respectable Asian people, so her natural inner beauty would not be polluted by this snake masquerading as their father. Mitch had given her the ultimatum: she could have a brother or father, but not both--the ultimate Hobbesian choice to Sari whose bedrock was family. ALL of them.

To Sari, the Washington trip was a semi-suppressed jumble of broken remembrances, none connecting. Rapist without rape. Setup without injury. Revenge without initial hardship. Determination without moral clarity. All driven by the constant evil eye of Drewbie, the blonde-hair crazy who she'd always considered an unwelcome stepbrother. Animosity and tension had to be cured, and if it was uncontrollable, the only option was to run.

The restaurant represented a mere extension of the hard-edge confusion. She tried not to think about the place, even while greeting the appreciative patrons. The restaurant was a mere toy of Marlo. Divvying up the ample money had nothing to do with managing, left to someone else. It wasn't in Sari's nature to deal with people as subordinates, whip in hand. Her nice thoughts dwelled on friends of the Earth, the spirit, the soul. One such friend, Jack, a travelling novelist of questionable commercial value, was bound on a jetliner to Tokyo to teach English. He could get her a job, too, he's said. Sari's only practical thought focused on the jaunt to the Japanese Embassy.

Vandevire paid the bill and then noticed Sari being confronted near the sushi bar by an irate customer. Some whale with a crewcut and brown vinyl jacket. His jaws and neck muscles were gyrating like an enraged baseball player contesting Strike Three, and he waved a plate of food around to punctuate apparent dissatisfaction with the service. Little did he or Vandevire know how this was playing into Sari's strength. Human conflict, manageable, begging for resolution. Sari nodded profuse apologies with every verbal assault. Finally, Sari turned, but he rotated with her getting right back in her face. With a nervous smile Sari raised her hands to beg off.

"What is Hammaker doing?" Came a shriek from one of Brandon's agents.

Brandon answered with a calm intensity, "Provoke a backdoor confrontation with the Marika clan which Bingo won't let us do straight up. Creative genius in his own mind. But really quite stupid. Double for me for letting him in there."

"Now the fool's got her by the arm!"

Sari was handling it with cool. Twisting her body, finally breaking free and running toward the kitchen. The only hint of violent intervention came from customers rising. And contemplating.

"Hammaker is worse than a loose cannon," the agent moaned.

"Give the sucker a cage," chimed in another agent.

Hammaker was stalking now, eyes shifting toward the crevices of the restaurant, with rueful anticipation, but meeting only silence. The consensus inside the RV: Hammaker was disappointed.

Brandon grabbed the ruzo and paged Tygrier.

Syndirene's tank crept down the dirty road toward the white farmhouse. He made sure his seat belt was firmly strapped.

"Okay, AV, I promised you something elaborate. Creative. How about an eclipse? Seems you'll be looking Marlo Marika's babe in the eye right about----"

He held his words and wild eyes until two men stirred at the front door. Bound for the Sapphire parked off to the left.

"Now!"

The hellhound vehicle tore ahead full throttle, taking dead aim at the two Marika guards crossing the dirt path.

"Dig for ants, you aardvarks you! Ha! Ha!" Syndirene hit the brakes about the time the hoods were doing somersaults through the grass. One of them dropped the red money case. "How's that for subtle?"

Syndirene's black machine just sat there, beckoning to them like a juicy fruit of deliverance. The guards ran full-speed toward the car. One started yanking on the door handle. It wouldn't budge. The opaque windows added to their frustration.

"Knock, knock. Who's there? Nobody. April fool! Ha ha!"

The frenzied hoods took two steps back, pulled out the latest-model NARM automatic pistols, and unleashed an incessant barrage of bullets at the window. Not a scratch; like water droplets off a brick wall.

"This is a designated unleaded vehicle. Ha! Ha!"

Syndirene waited for them to reload, then hit a switch to emit thick blue smoke.

"Drugs you say? Or was that bugs?" Syndirene was giddy, literally bouncing off the seat, watching Marika's thugs on their knees gasping for breath. One of them was grabbing his leg too; a flesh wound from a ricochet. He tried to hobble away, but the dreadmobile went into reverse in pursuit.

"Ride this horse, hoppalong! Ha! Ha!"

The bumper made contact with the hood and knocked him backward six feet. The second gunman, wheezing, made a move for the red case--until the vehicle roared ahead and sent him rolling into a patch of bushes. The now-unarmed hood gathered himself for one more assault. So Syndirene flipped on a gas mask and leaped out of the car brandishing an M-29 machine gun. Even on the Bayou Syndirene had never seen a man run into the woods so fast.

"Yo, slick, mine's bigger than yours! Ha! Ha!"

Still chuckling, he casually reached down to pick up the red case. Then he noticed the rectangular glass on the roof of the house.

Syndirene laughed no more. He and the case were suddenly in rapid retreat.

When someone has wronged you, never pass up the chance to look the person in the eye, Ron Vandevire had said to his son. A vivid *déjà vu* as Sari Marika walked briskly toward the bank of elevators. Vandevire collected his breaths for his golden opportunity.

Vandevire hovered to the side until Sari entered a down elevator. Then he rushed over and inserted his hand, preventing the doors from closing at the last instant. Now it was he and Sari. Nobody else.

The elevator descended slowly. Vandevire had his salvo already. He lined her up in the crosshairs of his eye. His mind counted, one, two, three ...

"Don't know of a greater evil. Than trying to throw an innocent man in jail."

Like so many other events in Sari's recent life, it just didn't connect. Blurted out of the blue by a virtual stranger. She gave him a nice smile, as if to say, oh, I remember you from the restaurant.

There was G1, G2, and G3. Sari gave Vandevire another smile. This one more guarded, as if to say, oh, you're still here.

The elevator stopped at G2. A gloved hand grabbed the door. Vandevire never saw the face. The unseen person released the door after a second.

The doors next opened at G3. End of the line. There were two figures blocking the doorway. Vandevire saw black corduroy from neck to ankle and ski masks with slots for the eyes and nose.

Before he could process the horror, he felt all the breath leave his body. He was doubled over, grabbing at the rock of pain in his gut from a full-force punch. Like many anticipating imminent death, his body was in reverse reflux; every muscle sort of pushing downward and his head very light. One last defiant instinct told him not to let them get away with it. If he was going to go, take a piece of them with him.

He lifted his head to spring at Sari.

Then he felt suspended animation at beholding Sari backed against the padding, thick tape covering her mouth, arms immobilized by twine being wrapped around her body by one of the ninja-like assailants. Body still and trembling. White-bordered eyes of desperation aimed directly at Vandevire. Pleading for his intervention!

Vandevire barely saw the second blow coming just above his temple. There was rapid spinning high-speed stars and a general blackness around him.

Brandon's burrus didn't miss a trick.

Tygrier proceeded briskly into the RV. "How many Neanderthals this time?"

"They've got Sari Marika and her sister hostage. This time there's five." Brandon gave Tygrier a hard look to see if he picked up the implication. "One more than last time, Sam."

A red sun, descending toward the Sound, cast a fuzzy film around the isolated ranch-style house six miles south of Vancouver.

An agent approached Brandon with two sets of burrus still-shots. Brandon examined them, then turned to Tygrier.

"It's the same crowd involved with the massacre at the Nazi compound," Brandon confirmed. "Four profiles match."

Tygrier said, "Where is Hammaker?"

“A very timely question,” Brandon said, twitching his eyebrows. “We sent him in as a buffer between Vandevire and the Marika crowd. Then we get distracted big-time. Hammaker’s been AWOL since.”

Tygrier grunted, then grabbed a burrus to zero in on the house. He used the earplugs so he could monitor sound without it interfering with the other agents’ reception. “Where’s assailant number five?” He asked.

“With Sari in the master bedroom upstairs,” answered Brandon. “Cat’s got his tongue, too: How convenient.”

The four perpetrators of the Bellingham slaughter were milling around the ground floor den like nervous housewives. Sari and Fumie were strapped side by side into wooden chairs, their mouths sealed with tape. The mysterious mummified fifth assailant was hunched back on the bed, book in hand. He was a big, menacing guy, too, such that Sari’s flitting eyes didn’t venture in his direction. Fumie’s eyes were downcast, almost lifeless.

“When did they snatch the other daughter?” Tygrier asked.

“We don’t know. Fumie wasn’t under surveillance.” Brandon again twitched his eyebrows. “Somebody knew that, too.”

“I guess this is like someone staring you down while prone at 3 AM. A brazen bunch.”

“We knew that already, Brandon.”

Brandon felt a trace of a shiver. “Yeah.”

“I can only think of one kind that brazen,” said Tygrier. “Them’s whose pockets contain more metal than money.”

Brandon turned slowly. “Why don’t you come right out and say it? The guy with the sisters is Hammaker.”

“Say it? I’ll put a hundred bucks on it.”

“Payment may become due in five minutes,” Brandon said with a tight smile, returning his attention to the burrus. “We can verify.”

“Shoot.”

“Send Bingo’s lackey to the West Wing to pick up Hammaker’s fiche and deliver it over the ruzo.”

Tygrier erupted with crackling laughter.

Brandon turned once more. “He who laughs gets to place the call.”



One of the assassins hurried his pacing, then snatched a mobile phone and punched out a number.

“Who is this?” Answered Marlo Marika’s testy voice over Brandon’s surveillance equipment.

“You didn’t get the message, Marlo?” The assassin said with a muted New York voice. “You want it repeated in enhanced decibels? No. I don’t think you want that.”

“Let me talk to Sari.”

“You’ll be able to take her out to dinner in an hour. All you need to do is take a 15-minute drive. It’s the easiest life-saving chore you’ve ever imagined. Just leave the case and its contents locked in a trunk on the first bend on three-mile road.”

“– Okay, maybe. Let me finish my business here. You’ll have it by morning.”

“Marlo. You have exactly one hour.”

The burrus picked up uneven breaths at the other end – “I know who you are,” Marika finally said.

“Good. All the more reason you should be worried.”

“Brazen and a half,” interjected Tygrier.

“So much as look at my daughters funny. And I’ll personally kill you. Piece by piece.”

The assassin looked away from the phone. “Hey, we’ve been challenged!” Then to Marlo Marika: “Okay, you’re on. How much you want to wager? Five G’s? Okay, if you kill us, we’ll give you the five G’s. We kill you, well, we’ll negotiate on it.”

The lead assassin beckoned the other three up the steps. They proceeded into the master bedroom. The fifth assassin barely lifted his eyes, while Sari seemed to be struggling harder against the twine.

“Come on, talk to me,” came Marika’s uneven voice.

“Talk to yourself, Marlo. I’m preparing for surgery. To process our wager.”

“Okay. I apologize.”

“No need to. You may even get lucky.”

Sari Marika was the least surprised at the turn of events. Painfully aware of her father’s reputation, his capabilities, she had long braced herself for this eventuality. Annoyed most of all by the physical discomfort of having her body constricted like a crushed lemon for over an hour. Angered that

they didn't have the decency to leave her mentally disabled sister out of their macho posturing. That anger was directed at her father, not at the gunmen breathing fire with each step. There was an overwhelming impulse that her father, Marlo Marika, was responsible for all this ugliness. He was the kingmaker who had made the wrong choices, setting these malevolent pawns in front of her into action. Yet she had been paralyzed by the paradox of volatile love: simultaneous attachment and revulsion. Monetary adjustments had to be made, and Sari was a symbolic bargaining chip. There would be a period of histrionics over the bad guys' bargaining table. Then there would be a settlement with the guys in the masks eventually raising wine glasses with her father. There was this perverse understanding--none of these streetwise characters would upset the ultimate gravy train by putting so much as a scratch on either Sari or her sister.

But something had gone haywire. Sari instantly denied – and continued to deny – the unearthly spectacle prompting her to close her eyes:

Fumie was screaming into a telephone held next to her face. It took but a one-second bolt from hell for one gunman to remove Fumie's gag and another gunman to rip the fingernail clean from her right pinky. The tickets to Japan melted in front of Sari's eyes. A surge instantaneous and complete. Of responsibility, which only Sari could provide. Redress for her defenseless sister. Or else Sari wasn't a Marika. Wasn't human.

Tygrier said, "Tell me, Brandon. How much is your knee-jerk adherence to authority worth? An eye? 100 surveillance, no engagement! Screw it, I'm going in."

Tygrier walked up to Brandon close enough for their noses to touch. "Go ahead. Stop me."

Both men stood perfectly rigid, eyes locked on each other – until another agent adjusting his earplug and called out, "Marlo just rolled over. He'll deliver the case now!"

"Friendly fire approaching from the rear," called an agent. There were two knocks, and the door opened for Hammaker. Wearing a twisted smile and glancing around, as if waiting for someone to acclaim him.

"Where you been?" The agent at the door asked pointedly.

"Don't ask," Brandon replied. Meaning he would ask later. In a different forum.

"What's the problem? I had yuz tagged," Hammaker said in a cutesy voice. "Pegged the scuzz in the house too. Wouldn't worry, though. They say retards don't really feel pain. The noise is an instinctive cranial reaction from any physical contact." Hammaker pinched his smile until someone laughed. Instead, the agent at the door made a point to walk by and brush shoulders sufficiently to knock Hammaker back a foot.

Brandon summoned all EIB forces and positioned them. Two of the assassins hopped into a compact Tempest and drove out to three-mile road.

A burrus zeroed in on rendezvous point. A beat-up Chevy crept along the narrow, isolated highway then stopped about ¼ mile from the intersection. It wasn't Marlo, but one of his Vets. He got out and started walking ahead. Two minutes later the ninja-like assassins drove up alongside, jammed open the trunk, did a split-second verification of the case contents, then tossed it in the back seat of the Tempest. So slick and routine.

A tense calm pervaded Brandon's RV. For there was the Tempest, in full view of the burruses creeping into the driveway.

"Sam, you can have the honors," said Brandon. Tygrier zeroed in on the truck for five seconds, then heightened the suspense by raising his eyebrows in a what-do-you-want-from-me pose.

Finally, a smile grew. "We got ourselves a PORCUPINE!"

The Yugar recovered; mission accomplished.

The four assassins at ground level were huddled around the Yugar. Case opened to reveal its hellhound spikes. Brandon took advantage of their obliviousness to direct a unit of agents to surround the house. A well-placed tourniquet.

The assassin with the New York voice commanded two accomplices to lift the Yugar and carry it upstairs. Then the other two took three steps back in tandem. It was a weird, blink-of-an-eye move that made Brandon's hair stiffen, as if a lightning bolt was imminent.

Two raised barrels and brief drilling noises confirmed Brandon's instincts. Two bodies of co-conspirators came down on either side of the Yugar. Blood sprayed all over the even-teeth, as if representing a perverse initiation.

"They're eating their own," an agent commented.

"The Marika daughters may need our alarm clock," Tygrier said.

Brandon activated a command of the ruzo to intercept the phone lines at the computer compound. Suddenly the phone hooked onto the lead assassin's belt began to ring. He regarded it like a cat in heat, like it wasn't supposed to be ringing. He raised it to his ear and pushed the button.

"Hey Kimo Sabe," Brandon said evenly. "I suggest you take a look outside."

The lead assassin hesitated. "Something tells me I don't have to," the New York voice answered in a chillingly calm monotone.

"The guys you just mowed down," Brandon said. "Expendable, weren't they? No way they were Feds."

"I guess we're among friends, aren't we?" The assassin answered. "You EIB?"

Brandon hesitated. "Better believe we are. Lay 'em down because you haven't a prayer."

“All the badges are friendly, Mr. EIB. Drinks are on Marlo Marika.”

“We’re coming in. And we’re all going to be nice,” Brandon said. “Or else you’ll be so full of lead you’ll sink through the floor boards.”

Two minutes later, the burruses confirmed the dormant positions of six weapons, including two from the third man upstairs.

Brandon led an onrushing contingent of ten agents toward the front. They opened the door and rushed in, weapons primed for war. The three assassins were seated passively. Lounging back and drinking beers, as if enjoying Saturday afternoon football. And the masks were removed.

It came back to Brandon in a quick rush. Humidified papers handed to him on one steamy Florida evening.

“And who may be Raul Juarez?” Brandon asked happily.

A raised arm came from the large man with sloppy moustache and sloppy gray hair. The New Yorker with the phone on his belt.

“Sit down, Brandon. We need to talk,” Juarez said with a dinner party smile.

Ten agents fanned out. Automatics primed, eyes like slits. Brandon had to finesse this hair trigger situation. If his agents had witnessed the horrors firsthand, they certainly knew about them. And they were human. An eternity seemed to go by without a breath. Except for Juarez, relaxed and angular, continually beckoning Brandon into an adjacent chair.

Tygrier asked for the badges of the other two assassins. There was no doubt they would hand them over. Tygrier waved two DEA badges. Just like Juarez’s.

Hammaker and another agent came in. Brandon nodded for them to check upstairs. He finally sat down next to Juarez. Several armed, tense agents drew closer, but Brandon waved them back with calming gestures.

“There’s been a major bureaucratic screwup,” Juarez offered. “My instructions said we had total clearance. No surveillance, no engagement.” His expression suddenly hardened. “What did they tell you, Brandon?”

“Retrieve the Yugar without engagement. Precisely done. There’s the Yugar.”

“Yeah, we got the Yugar for you. It’s all yours.”

Brandon leaned toward Juarez. “Marika was tight when you invaded that Nazi compound. But somewhere along the way, Marika fell off the train, didn’t he? He wanted to use the Yugar for his own enterprise. Outside the grand design.”

Juarez looked straight ahead. “The record will show that we averted a serious threat against the life of the President and neutralized the perpetrators.” Juarez turned. “What have you done for your country lately, Brandon? Besides interfere with a Federal operation?”

“Frame an innocent man for a crime, kidnap two women, torture one of them, kill innocents including a young boy. All to save the President. Worth three meritorious citations, at least. From, uh, who did you say you reported to?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions, Brandon. You could either do your career a favor and keep your mouth shut. Or you can wait until the West Wing lays you out.”

From Sari’s vision, here was a definite awkwardness in this big ox contriving sweet talk with Fumie while grappling with her restraints. The angle of Sari’s vision wasn’t the best, but this clumsy man seemed to have a hand where he wasn’t supposed to and – Sari looked away briefly, then looked back, just as Brandon and Tygrier walked in the door.

Hammaker abruptly withdrew, then began loosening the twine at Fumie’s wrists as if nothing had happened—and tacitly surprised that Fumie was competent enough to bellow out in anger. There was a brief exchange of glances from the other three, at which point Brandon considered the dynamic of power of the badge gone amok. The proclivity to engage in any desired behavior without fear of consequence.

“You’re relieved, Hammaker.”

“What?”

“Get out, right now,” Brandon clarified.

Brandon sensed a hair-trigger in Tygrier, perhaps in a glint or sudden start--such that he grabbed Tygrier by the forearm. Even then, Hammaker’s departure was accompanied by a swagger.

Brandon took the honors of unencumbering Sari. There was an understated trembling in Sari’s arms and hands. Brandon saw this as understandable fear and terror from the ordeal--when it fact it was the manifestation of a singular determination which could not be concealed. Sari had heard Brandon’s words below. Watched how he’d been carrying himself; thus, was no accident when she fixed a vice clamp around his shoulders. Brandon had to carry her down the steps and outside. Two agents had to deftly pry Sari from Brandon’s body. All these silent men loaded the Yugar into the RV and watched helplessly as two-legged snakes slithered away unscathed.

## Rats Don't Bark

It was an unfamiliar feeling for Sari. This big chip on her shoulder.

Sari spent every minute of her three-day trip to California with Fumie. Taking her sister everywhere, from shopping malls to cultural exchanges at Bay Area universities. Just daring anyone to make some remark about Fumie, or even look at her in a strange way. Begging for a pretext to launch into a lecture about respectful treatment of someone perceived weaker than one's self.

All to help atone. Somehow the kidnapping fiasco was Sari's fault. She could have prevented it. Even Kyomi noticed how uncharacteristically consumed Sari was. Sari had to be reminded to help Kyomi with little errands associated with the art gallery.

Their low-keyed dinner was winding down at dusk as two plainclothes police officers approached Kyomi's quaint Mission District townhouse. The lead officer pounded on the door. Sari answered then took two steps back. Feeling this lightheaded aversion to the sight of any badge.

The high-protocol officers demanded to see The Missus. Kyomi responded immediately, and the officer gulped for his gravest voice.

"I'm sorry to tell you that your husband has passed away this morning in Vancouver. Death came instantaneously from a single bullet wound to the head. I extend my condolences."

The overwhelming mood in the house was to get rid of the cops. Later, Sari contemplated the popular TV images of people reacting to family death. The screams, the wailing, the fainting from shock. Sari felt nothing of the kind--just a surrealistic suspension. It hardened her urgency to fly to Washington. She noted Fumie's response: surprise, but in a manner that the home team had lost. Kyomi seemed actually at peace. "They finally put him out of his misery," she commented.

Drew Montgomery called later that night, and in his hard voice said to Sari, "Death really is that simple."

Summing up the life of Sari's father: the impact such that a gust of wind could dissipate it.

The funeral was something out of Hitchcock: A cold rain, blunted daylight, familiar strangers in dark coats. And no family anywhere. Kyomi and Fumie were represented in flowers. Mitch sent not even a card. The necklace-laden New Age Minister came off like some witch doctor. To Sari, it looked more like a biker's convention. Her father, whatever his life choices, deserved much better than this.

They were huddled gruffly with umbrellas, watching the lowering of the casket into the grave, when Drew Montgomery, Santa Claus hair and all, approached Sari, the only female in attendance.

He handed her a copy of the Citizen's Voice, pointing to the Patson article. He waited for Sari's eyes to gloss over it.

“This is why your father died,” he said lowly. “Never forget the name John Dickerson. He knew your father knew too much. Silences him, he did, yes ma’am.”

After the ceremony Marlo’s odd crew members huddled around Sari. She envisioned spirits rising from the tombstones. Where were her local bohemian friends, to at least restore some tangible evidence of life?

Montgomery unzipped a black canvass covering and unveiled a gold-plated, latticed samurai sword: The Marika coat-of-arms as proclaimed by Marlo. Drew Montgomery held it high into the mist, then kissed the blade. Religious symbols were nowhere in sight; yet there was nothing more sacred.

“Marlo willed this to you,” Montgomery said to Sari, then promptly set it at her feet. “Your father’s wishes will be respected. We are at your service.”

More than Sari could bear. At first, she walked away. Then she ran.

“Heh, you know the government can’t add. You take a ledger sheet and by the time eight bureaucrats get through with it it’s a friggin’ jigsaw puzzle,” Bingo McBride said to Brandon and Tygrier with a note of forced humor. Close-quartered West Wing oak panels enforcing silence in the manner of casket walls.

“There was once this Budget Chief in the Pentagon,” Bingo continued, rocking on his derriere from behind his fortress desk. “Come justification time, he’d even brag of the funnel inside the long green pad. Swallow anything like quicksand. P2 supplies, computers, jeeps, entire army brigades. What’s a dozen fighter jets? Or two? Do some red-pen voodoo magic and watch the numbers smell sweet. One day a four-star honcho stopped and said, Ned, I swear, you’d throw a whiffle ball in the wind and claim you’d mastered the curve ball. Ned, of course, smiled at the compliment.”

Tygrier looked at Brandon. “Brando, I feel it coming.”

“Those bootleg Yugars in the Middle East,” Bingo continued. “Satellite recon thought they had it covered. One missing, but traceable to the neo-Nazi compound in Washington, then to Marlo Marika. Seems, though, our missing count was actually two.

“When’s my flight back to Vancouver?” Brandon asked.

Bingo laughed. “Had you said anything else, Brandon, I’d know the spirit of Peoria was in serious trouble.” His laughter stopped in mid-chuckle as he added, “Now, where are the burrus tapes of the Toyomi abductions?”

“What about the missing Yugar?” Tygrier insisted.

Bingo sighed. “Totally outside Marika circles, as far as we can tell. As soon as we get recon or any leads, we’ll plug you both back in. Now!” Bingo extended his hand.

Tygrier opened his briefcase and began sifting through papers. Delaying the inevitable.

He clutched the incriminating burrus tapes in his large left hand, reached the tapes halfway toward McBride, then hesitated.

“Sir, we would be willing to take full responsibility for locking these tapes in the vault. Guaranteeing their safety. In such compromising situation, might be difficult to distinguish among fair and foul among us.”

McBride lowered his head until his hard eyeballs met his eyelids. “And I am not capable of that?”

They were silent for several seconds. Brandon felt his ears filling up. He finally said, measuredly, “Considering demands of catering to high level people, you couldn’t possibly have the time to micromanage all the operations under your command. That’s what you hired us for. To take care of these little things.” Brandon then half-smiled in advance of an attempt at humor.

If anything, Bingo’s cloudy eyes grew even stormier. So Tygrier looked at Brandon. “Brando, these the right ones? I don’t recognize the codes.”

Bingo came to his feet. “Brandon. I’m giving you a direct order. Hand me the tapes.”

Brandon complied. Then kept his eyes riveting on the tapes as they were landing in Bingo’s top right drawer.

Brandon took a deep breath. “The agents want a meeting with President Exeter’s Chief of Staff Joe Rappaport. They insisted that I ask you.”

Bingo’s eyes dropped immediately. He turned and pretended to search through some papers. His face soured. “Involving the Ex’s Chief of Staff in such sensitive operations? Are you nuts?”

“Bingo, it’s out of balance,” Brandon said, trying to sound reasonable. “We need an idea from Joey Raps how long we must sit on clear evidence of high-level crimes.”

“What did I tell you the first day you were hired?” Bingo said in a droning schoolmarm voice. “The quickest path to the unemployment line is to meddle into office affairs extraneous to the assignment at hand. We could take Juarez out and hang him. And you’d never know about it.”

“We’d have more confidence in sanctions for Juarez if we could see you handling creeps like Hammaker,” Tygrier said, clearly agitated. “The man walks around this compound like he owns it. Next, he’ll be provoking a diplomatic incident, and still he’ll be bending over for everyone to kiss –.”

“You received the ruzo message?” Brandon followed up.

“I’ve already counseled Hammaker about his problem –.”



“COUNSELED him?” Tygrier pursued. “The sexual assault victim was both mentally disabled and physically incapacitated.”

“Bingo, we’re going on record with this one,” Brandon announced.

Bingo’s natural paleness became a deeper shade of white as he clutched the edge of his desk. Expressing more alarm at the possibility of two loose cannons than of a rapist under his command.

Brandon reached for his briefcase and handed over written affidavits signed by him and Tygrier. “One from the victim’s sister is forthcoming,” Brandon added.

“Let me finish,” Bingo said assuredly. “I’ve placed Hammaker on modified duties, way out of the line of fire. He’s down in archives, where ne’er a two-legger roams. If he’s getting it on, it’s got to be with an occasional mouse.”

“Very creative,” Brandon commented to the side. “If Hammaker murders someone, you increase the administrative sanctions? Say, dock his pay for a couple days?”

Bingo heaved. “I should have given you the good news first. To avoid this stupid misunderstanding – Both of you have been approved for Special Achievement Awards for heroic service to your country in retrieving dangerous contraband and ending a potential threat to the life of the President. That comes with salary adjustment of \$25,000 per annum. Joey Raps—I think you meant Chief of Staff Joseph Rappaport--has already signed off on it. Congratulations.”

Bingo took two gold-on-wood plaques from his desk, then, in a big ceremonial display, rose and extended a handshake. He would be waiting for a long time.

“We’re supposed to act happy all of a sudden?” Tygrier said, rising and enacting his walking out routine.

Bingo looked at Brandon hard. As if Tygrier was his charge. As if the whole world was his charge. He sat on the edge of his desk, contriving a Dutch uncle pose.

“You two have been taking this case too personally, I think. I’m giving you and Tygrier a working vacation. You’ve both earned it, deservedly--Effective Monday, you will be temporarily reassigned to the Office of Research and Analysis. Pulling together some statistics useful for the President’s reelection effort. A transition campaign team is being assembled as we speak.”

“You’re saying we have a choice?” Brandon asked.

“I’m saying you will come through for us. As you have always done in the past.”

Brandon rose and saluted. “Yes sir.”

A few hours later, well after dusk, Brandon and Tygrier ran into Hammaker in a quiet White House corridor. Well away from the archives.

“Hey Grier. They ever tell you the story about this Russian songwriter? Visited America a while back, went out to Alabama and toured an asylum for insane rednecks. Went home and wrote the Nutcracker Suite. Too bad he missed the looney Japs in the internment camps.”

This time Brandon made a quick 180. Straight into Tygrier’s powerful forearms. Hammaker wasn’t worth it, they both quickly decided, resuming normal pace. They considered the imminent mission outside the compound: the duplicate burrus tapes.

Please come home, son.

Ron Vandevire had issued that plea via the telephone on the evening after Austin had staggered out of the garage elevator, sore, shaken, and alone. Sari Marika, and that whole riveting scenario, seemed like a recent acute dream. Syndirene, too, had disappeared. His father’s voice was instant medicine to his ailments.

Vandevire decided to rent a car and drive through the Canadian Rockies. The reminders and anticipation of home were like therapy. Taking his time to check out some of the trails, the breathtaking shrouded scenery, the out-of-the way fishing hangouts and the spontaneous, unpretentious people the likes of which he’d known in his previous life. This was the closest to revival he’d ever experienced.

He cruised into Missoula around noon of the fourth day. A natural tingling preceded his approach to the narrow road climbing to the familiar, quaint ranch-brick residential development in the foothills. He turned onto the street of all his fondest memories – nothing could prepare him for what he saw.

Suspended on barren tree branches high above the street was a giant banner reading WELCOME HOME AUSTIN VANDEVIRE. There were at least a couple hundred people lined on both sides of the closed-off street. There was an eruption of applause. A band playing “Tie a Yellow Ribbon”. Local high school cheerleaders, blonde hair and pink cheeks, waved pom-poms and ignored the crisp 45° air.

Creeping slowly into the allotted parking spot, Vandevire tried to study each face of his admirers. The familiar and the unfamiliar. A track coach he hadn’t seen for 10 years. His first platonic love, now laden with two kids hugging at her long-knit skirt. And, of course, his old camping buddies—now squirting his rented car with beer and peppering him with mock insults. Telephone poles carried enlarged copies of the recent Citizens Voice expose detailing his stand against political corruption. Even from the car, Vandevire could see the bold by-line above the article: PATSON. As promised. There was Vandevire’s photo on the cover. Vandevire shed open tears that not all of Americans had forgotten what constituted a hero.

It turned out to be like a wedding: not enough time to speak to dear friends he’d often spent days with. There was this definite strain, cramming one-on-one reunions into soundbites. Everything had changed--all these wide-eyed questions, as if he was some alien from another planet. A planet called Washington.

His childhood friends hadn't changed a bit, Vandevire realized. HE had. Yet with all the awkwardness, the hesitating conversations, Vandevire felt the soft cushion of security, knowing they would always be there for him.

Late evening on the second day. Dusk was encroaching, and the branch-rustling wind was carrying a bite. Such did not stop Ron from setting up the grill in the backyard climbing toward unstained woodlands. This was the best barbecue chicken on the high side of the Mississippi. Ron had invited a friend over for dinner. Ron and his sage friend sat in lounge chairs in the back talking about the acute political issues facing America. Austin paid it no mind.

Yet there was something different about this tall lanky visitor. In a clumsy but persistent way, he took an interest in Austin. Cordially inquiring about his whistleblowing experiences. Taking a break to tour the grounds, pipe in hand, then coming back with more sympathetic inquiries.

Austin almost wanted to feel sorry for the man. The drawn out, almost-goofy speaking drawl. Lumbering walk. Everything sloppy, from his ill-fitting cardigan 'n' tweed to his long gray hair falling shabbily over his ears and eyes. A professor emeritus put out into pasture, perhaps.

Then Vandevire noticed the dark, tinted-window sedans parked across the street. Suddenly the man's demeanor took on new meaning. A contrived ineptitude translating into making those around him feel a sense of self-confidence and relaxation. Translating further into a willingness of these relaxed acquaintances to trust and confide in this man. Translating further into power.

Over dinner, the man rambled on about the ultimate kiss of death for incumbent Presidents: a poor economy. He gave several historical examples in a voice making it clear he didn't care whether others agreed with him or not.

Ron Vandevire, savoring the ultimate surprise, introduced the man to his son as Joseph Rappaport, Chief of Staff for the President of the United States.

"President Exeter has pledged uncompromising support to the highest standard of government ethics," Rappaport said. "He is personally aware of your personal sacrifices and courage and wishes to reward the dignity and honor you have brought to the camp of honesty in the U.S. government. To this end, Austin, he has asked me to convey to you an offer to work on his staff at the White House."

24 hours later, after the euphoria had worn off, Vandevire realized it was actually a tough decision. Leave the security of friends and family to return to an environment where worst nightmares arrived in the flesh and rainbow colors? Yet Vandevire had taken the path of no return in confronting abusive power alignments. A high-profile offer from the President was a VICTORY he dared not deface; a statement he'd craved making, which suddenly arrived with an exclamation mark. Besides, he would be pursuing his beloved demographic research.

Vandevire sat in a booth of a hole-in-the-wall campus pub, slowly scraping the mildew off an old friend, and fighting off homesick urges to stay. Then Syndirene walked in wearing a studded cowboy hat and looking out of place, even in Montana.

Vandevire reluctantly took him to the side. Syndo partially unzipped a pouch--a cut of the Marika booty. Vandevire shook his head emphatically. No way did he want a piece of this. Especially now.

He told Syndo about the White House appointment. Syndirene's response was one of streetwise nonchalance: "Whatever the reason got nothing to do with ethics. The world to a politician is a jigsaw puzzle and weeze just the pieces. Most likely Exeter's ole buddy, Patson, taking a high profile stand on clean government, forced the Ex to chime in before the election. Exeter now must distance himself from Dickerson. Look, if Rappaport is going all the way to Montana, someone's got the Ex running scared. Whatever deal you got, AV, from this minute on there's an expectation of loyalty—and silence. For what is the Caucasian Edifice all about if not enforcing the ole Cajun axiom that rats don't bark?"

## The Big Dance

Twas a cold and desolate first week in Washington--thanks only in part to the winter's first snow. Vandevire had chosen a closet-of-an-apartment near George Washington U. Barren and lonely, but many a mile from his previous abode. A physical break, at least, from the calamitous netherworld.

Vandevire made it a point to befriend and crack corny Midwestern jokes with just about everyone he met--just to break the burdensome monopoly of running apartment errands and filling out dozens of forms asking questions in which he hadn't the foggiest notion of an answer. The folks he met were nice in return, but in a clipped way. Or maybe Vandevire just assumed everyone to be working for President arrogant. This was a childhood dream for perhaps millions of Americans, and he was beset with a natural inadequacy, as if he were a glorified tourist swimming in an ocean of VIPs.

Vandevire realized he had to stake out his own identity, or risk being tossed around like a twig in a tidal wave. His mark was the sensitivity toward power relationships. Once he aligned these sticks in his own mind, he felt blessed with an inner secret, a special insight permitting him to stand toe to toe with anyone. A swagger, and a detached assessment of every new person he encountered. Their weaknesses and insecurities, even if not readily apparent. Even the President, with his rumored high blood pressure and other nagging ailments, wore no special aura in Vandevire's eyes. When there were whispers in the halls about the proximity of the President, Vandevire took the cool approach, openly crowing, it's no big deal. That was, of course, a lie; what normal person wouldn't get butterflies at the approach of the most powerful person on Earth? Indeed, Vandevire kept a furtive eye primed for the outer reaches of the hallowed chambers.

Joe Rappaport enforced this unspoken barrier by telling Vandevire to report not to him, but to Carla Llanos, Director of Constituent Affairs. The most advanced computer, double monitors, statistical library in his office, the evergreen aroma and the six-figure salary were designed to be adequate incentives to accept a blatantly subordinate role, where decisions from the Inner Circle were expected to be obeyed, not questioned or debated. Constituent Affairs, a highly politicized branch mandated to respond to different ethnic, community, and business pressure groups, was quietly dubbed with the name, Smiling Help for the Interests in Tow—with added energy and pressure, especially with an election looming.

Carla Llanos, a reedy, dark-complexioned Hispanic woman given to colorful native attire and West Point mannerisms, was hardly shy about expectations: Respond promptly to all demographic profile requests from any of the constituent reps. Stay out of other reps' jurisdiction. When approached by rumors and gossip, walk away. If the job demands it, stay late, until midnight if necessary.

Vandevire yielded his petty work frustrations to the wise, calming voice of his father Ron, who counseled that worry is not an option and that you live life one day at a time, son. Every day is a gift from God. When pain comes don't fight. Accept. It's life. And it will make you stronger.

It didn't take long for Vandevire to detect a distinct lethargy in his fellow White House staffers. He was reading the poll numbers. Exeter may not make a second term. This was primary season, the Party Convention a few months away—and Exeter already had a Senator and a Governor challenging him in his own Party's Primary—not a good sign for an Incumbent President. This was totally reflective of an American reality of a poor economy, bloated bureaucracies, deficits and debt, multimillionaire corporate bosses above scrutiny, a pervasive moral anarchy, continued citizen alienation from the power centers, and a general malaise in America.

Perhaps it was the low-keyed, cool demeanor that Vandevire brought into the White House—that some of these discouraged White House staffers found Vandevire to be a trustworthy “listening ear” for their career fears, frustrations and personal challenges. Carla Llanos, not stupid, picked up on it, and dubbed Vandevire “Mr. Confessor.” She didn't object, because these brief one-on-one sessions with Vandevire's new empathets turned out to be low-grade morale boosters.

One Monday Vandevire walked in and knew something was brewing--the way colleagues walked up to their Mr. Confessor with knowing looks and leading comments.

Around mid-morning Carla stopped by and clarified it: “Patson is coming. He specifically asked to meet YOU.”

Patson's name carried celebrity status around Constituent Affairs. Not that any of the reps had ever met him. But they all heard the stories, some embellished. Patson and the President like brothers. Despite the media-circus schism, Exeter had left the White House gates half open for his former soulmate.

Not necessarily good news for Vandevire; recognizing a clear flashpoint situation. Carla Llanos was neither impressed nor smiling. She was aware of the Citizens Times exposes--and the possibility of conflicting loyalties.

“Mr. Vandevire, you represent the President of the United States,” she said gravely. “Your assignment is to take copious notes of Dr. Patson's concerns, then make it clear he understands President Exeter's programs, initiatives, accomplishments, and proposed legislation agenda.”

And to make sure Vandevire comprehended, Llanos gave him a seven-page idiot sheet for him to virtually memorize. Vandevire was being put to the test. By both sides.

When the next morning arrived kicking off the Big Day, staffers were nervously scurrying around, but Vandevire felt oddly at peace. By 10:00 there was a small mob of constituent reps, Secret Service agents and White House photographers huddled inside the gate facing Pennsylvania Avenue. Carla Llanos and others haranged each other tersely over petty protocol.

And here pops in this beat-up yellow VW with opaque windows, like something out of a circus. The window came down, and people rushed the door, as if triggered by a starter's pistol.

Patson was nowhere to be seen; it was Emma Gonzalez, who handed a Secret Service woman a confidential envelope with Vandevire's name on it. The yellow bug went quickly in reverse and fell in with the Washington traffic. Somewhere Patson was having a good laugh.

"I wasn't sure they'd let me come out here," Vandevire said to Patson, diplomatically short-circuiting Patson's genuine inquiries about Vandevire's family.

They were seated in a private booth at a quaint Chinese restaurant on Connecticut Avenue. Patson wore a Washington Nationals baseball cap pulled close to his eyes and a Georgetown sweatshirt. Low-key for this occasion.

"No chance that they would deny this moment," Patson said. "Not with an election looming."

Vandevire paid for his own lunch. There would be no chance of an accusation of a petty bribe of a government official. To Patson, Lasa meant zero tolerance.

Stepping outside into a sunny breeze, Patson pointed to a handful of seemingly-idle men hovering under a distant canopy. "Wave to your friends, Austin."

Patson gave them a big wave, to remind them that they were fooling no one, then called Vandevire's attention to a nearby intersection—the crosswalk, pedestrians and automobiles.

"Austin, what did you see?"

"Well, that woman almost got hit by a car."

Patson stepped into Vandevire's line of vision. "It's a matter of darwinistic brute force. The person turning the car into the crosswalk holds all of the physical power over the pedestrian crossing. Power to do what? To inconvenience the weaker person? No to injure, to maim, to kill."

Vandevire was thinking, maybe Patson's a borderline nut. Then he felt it. A sudden surge. Triggered by some jerk wheeling his hot rod in front of a baby in a stroller. The driver couldn't wait just two seconds.

"That inconsequential intersection is actually the social hierarchy," Patson began. "88 of the first 100 drivers had the power but exercised it benevolently. What about the twelve predators who cut in front of the pedestrians? What's the key word? (Hesitation) Opportunity! Why can the bureaucracy treat citizens rudely? Why can a corporate boss give himself a million dollar raise while firing hundreds? The answer is opportunity. Consider the origin of the word fascism. From the Italian word fasces: the orderly alignment of spokes, with all power originating from the apex at the top. Haven't we just defined the hierarchical, pyramid structure of American bureaucracies and corporations?"

"Back to our curbside analysis: The government wants to make everybody pedestrians. The corporatists want to give Mack trucks to only a few. I say, why not give everyone the opportunity for a

car? Not of the same makes and models and colors, or speeds, but with sturdy bumper guards, and plenty of roads, so each individual is free to chart his or her own destiny, free from either Big Brother or corporate boss plunder. Here's my quote of the day: You walk into a government office, only to be assaulted by rules you don't understand and didn't create. You walk into a bank where you have no power over interest rates or loan terms. You go to a job where you have no power over work rules. They call that democracy, just because every couple years you get to vote for Moe or Joe, neither of whom you know."

Patson suggested they stop at a deli, blind to the intrusive eyes of the Secret Service. They found a private corner behind the salad bar. Patson faced him eyeball to eyeball.

"My mother's father told me an Indian Country story about a most unforgiving man on the reservation. Judged every human failing as terminal and banished every alleged perpetrator from his home. With age, and a sensitivity to the will of God and his own failings, he mellowed. He invited former adversaries to his house, after laying a path of olive branches. Then said, all I ask of you is to clean away the pollution between us. Wash yourself outside before you place your feet on my rug.

"I have a message for Martin for you to pass through Carla and Joey Raps: tell Martin my lapse in respect for the loyalty of our friendship was due to impatience of youth. Give Martin my offer to meet with him. On the condition that justice is done to Raul Juarez and his rogue agents."

Vandevire gulped from the power of those words, then asked if the name would mean anything to the President.

"Austin, that's a question Martin alone can answer. MUST answer."

Vandevire felt compelled to insist that the White House payroll had no effects on his beliefs, principles, or activities.

"Of course, you've changed," Patson said almost casually. "It's like floating in a bay. You think you're still, but in actuality the current is pulling you. When you witnessed the bank corruption in Maryland, you were in a riptide and had to make a conscious decision. – You may have to do it again."

Vandevire briefed Carla the next morning on Patson; passing on the message about Juarez and the proposed Presidential meeting precisely. Carla took it down with seeming disinterest.

Then she began to talk. Initially, about the nagging office problems of short staff, slashed budgets, unreasonable requests by the Inner Circle. Then soliciting Vandevire's – advice? Counsel even? Ms. straight-laced herself was actually getting in line to flash her heart at Mr. Confessor himself. Not that Vandevire was totally unprepared: many a co-worker had confided that Carla's annoying rigidity and authoritarianism was a façade. Masking a passionate and sensitive woman who secretly extended herself to accommodate special needs of staff.



She leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, about the object of her concern: this new guy just assigned to the White House. Some Secret Agent type brought up from the Basement where only the Shadows Lurked. "He has a resume with a Capital R. But what's he doing talking to my people? Messing around in our world?" Carla didn't know whether to feel undermined or investigated, given the Titanic mentality in the fading Exeter Administration.

Carla gave this intruder a name: Juno Brandon.

Oh.

Vandevire's initial reaction was more of a vague concern rather than acute fear from a tangible threat. Then he recalled Patson saying that the germination of empowerment is strictly in the mind. So Vandevire hitched up his trousers and made some discreet inquires.

Clearly, Vandevire's cohorts held Brandon in an enigmatic awe. They knew he was a hero of the Philippines skirmish, and had watched the flat blade of President Exeter's sword touch his shoulder. A crack-wall swirl of embellished accounts had Brandon personally assassinating a drug baron in Peru and disarming a terrorist bomb bound for a London jetliner.

Vandevire finally found Brandon seated alone in a small snack foyer perusing through papers while several coworkers were huddled at the other end of the room.

Vandevire reasoned: Brandon was as the restraining force during the day of government terror at Audrey's. But he shouldn't have broken in there in the first place. How about something provocative?

Vandevire deliciously made a quick trip to Brandon's guilded office. Marched right up to Brandon, hovering over him. "Betcha you remember me, don't you?" Brandon looked up noncommittally, just as Vandevire lashed at Brandon's large desk with a curled-up pamphlet, as if swatting a fly.

"Brandon, I brought you some reading material, so you could learn a language totally foreign to you: The Constitution of the United States."

He turned and briskly departed without looking back. Instant juice for the gossip mongers, he thought with perverse joy.

Brandon ignored Vandevire and checked the message board and found a vetted yellow slip with the name Sari Marika scrawled across the top. It was the third message in the past week.

Sari's first call to him had come a month earlier, right after his reassignment. Sari had insisted no-end on treating him out to a nice dinner in appreciation for his heroics. After meeting her at a classy Thai restaurant several blocks from the White House, he was equally as insistent on paying his half of the bill. Sari said she wasn't surprised he was so fastidious on integrity issues--unlike others who could be bought over a fast-food lunch.

“That’s right, I don’t sell myself,” Brandon told her over the spicy Thai meal. “No, I just keep my mouth shut while the world gets uglier. Will gladly shovel dung to further someone else’s agenda. One more Special Achievement Award. Maybe I should be writing suspense fiction. The only place where people do what I want them to do.” His pigeonhole job allowed him one solace: returning to his home in Arlington every night to give quality company to Rachel and receive nice massages from Joy. Better than sex.

The insult of insults came to Brandon in the form of a long dark coat and a whiskey-laced Deep Throat voice. Approaching him late one evening in a Georgetown bar with eureka overtures about Speaker John Dickerson’s alleged involvement in selling classified technology to China. Baloney. They were testing him. Scavenging for any clues that he was anything but Mr. Genuflect. Brandon resisted an urge to hurl the man through the smoky window and instead have him a smile and the proper referral.

Sari Marika had just enrolled in a Master program in Sociology at George Washington U. as a part-timer. No problem: All the time and money in the world. Marlo had willed to Sari all his reportable assets, a figure in the six digits several times over. Drew Montgomery and Co. got the opportunity to keep the Pharmaceutical enterprise alive, albeit more carefully.

From Sari’s perspective the course work gave her the opportunity to meet new friends, schedule benign activities, and prepare herself for a world beyond her immediate objective of vengeance for Fumie. The money was there as a convenience until Fumie’s honor and dignity had been restored. Then Fumie would get almost all of it. A facilitator of poetic justice is how Sari envisioned herself. Kyomi, with her credo of situational ethics, would be proud.

As a pretext for continuing to liaise with Brandon, Sari suggested a cultural exchange for mutual benefit. Brandon had expressed interest in learning Japanese to enhance career options. Marlo had bombarded Sari enough to give her a passable grasp of the language. In return, Sari expressed interest in learning about human dynamics of high-level decision making in government--as a possible lead-in for working as a White House Intern. They agreed to meet once per week where they benignly sparred with each other.

By the fourth week they viewed each other as genuine friends--provoking in Sari ambivalent feelings since her inclination was to enjoy people rather than use them. But she finally rationalized: Brandon was benefitting, too. And if he was being manipulated, the manipulation was put to use in the name of a defenseless person. Besides, they could still be friends after it was all over. Sari had no idea where she was going with her ploy, or how to use her encroaching knowledge. But when the crack of opportunity arose she was confident she would know what to do. Even if it took years.

Brandon had no illusion about Sari Marika’s intent. Careful verbal gambits, but large brown Asian eyes which barely blinked and never dropped. Sari Marika was a possible key to the straightjacket Bingo had placed on him. The key to coping with oppressive chains of commands was to generate independent dynamics. Sari Marika could be that first domino, Brandon thought. And also perhaps Austin Vandevire. Both falling at his feet, like leaves in autumn.

Brandon's political research detail came with a cushy \$400,000/annum expense account. Obvious front pay for his continued lackeytude. He placed a call to a trusted former EIB colleague, now working in the White House press office. Asked him if he wanted a free slot in his office. Wouldn't count against his ceiling, either. Brandon even had the perfect person in mind! No questions asked.

"How about my family history?" A grateful Sari asked him. "Won't I flunk a security clearance?"

"A minor detail, given the keys at my disposal," was Brandon's reply.

Two days later, Sari was offered a position of White House Intern. Brandon had made his move. Now it was Sari's turn.

On the day Sari accepted the offer she returned to her high-rise Foggy Bottom apartment and found one of Drewbie's greasy-haired minions seated in her butterfly chair, no invitation and no key, of course. His expression was dour – as if Sari had ever seen any of these guys smiling – and Sari's first impulse was that something had happened to Kyomi or Fumie. Why else would they come all the way to Washington to bother her?

He escorted her downstairs to his fast car. A royal escort, that is. Opening doors, bowing, the whole nine yards. Obviously playing to Drewbie's ridiculous Family Matriarch fantasy.

Now the car was making more turns than a snake in heat. The ole surveillance shaking routine. Sari knew she was again being sucked into one of their crazy games. Eyeballs digging against eyelids, Sari silently endured a trip to Maryland exurbia. To another ramshackle farmhouse. Her father's vets sure had a nose for these backwater joints.

The wood frame house was tucked a good quarter mile from the road. No sign of life anywhere. They pushed open the paintless front door and beheld a musty den with cracked floorboards, ajar furniture, and an absence of heat. Sari drew her maroon leather coat closed to her throat at beholding a scene which pushed her limits of restraint: Drewbie and three cohorts were hovering over two bound and gagged hostages. Obviously reenacting in a symbolic way, the previous scene involving Sari and Fumie. One of the hostages was the crew-cutting Fed who had molested Fumie. The other one – well, Sari liked jazz and recognized Marvelous Malvin the sax player. The eyes of the bound Fed were hard; the eyes of the dirty blonde Cajun searched as if for an opening.

Drewbie bowed before Sari, then rotated his arm swan-like, as if presenting her a palace delicacy. Sari hyperventilated from the nth degree of disgust. Her delicate mission for Fumie was in jeopardy of being blown to smithereens by macho morons.

Drewbie then presented Sari with the shiny machete. The biggest blade of all for Switchblade Sari. They wanted her to perform some bizarre execution.

"This is the scum who molested Fumie." Drewbie indicated Hammaker." And this creep over here thinks he can rip off our family and walk."

This little piggy went to market, Sari envisioned him saying. Then she noticed blood on the greasy Cajun's index finger--from the fingernail removed sans surgical procedures. Another reenactment. That Syndirene was not involved with the torture of Fumie was but a minor detail to these guys.

"Your father has willed that you make the decision in such matters," Montgomery said eerily.

Sari squeezed her eyes shut—at the impossible situation Drewbie had placed her in. Perform the execution and face a murder charge. Refuse, and still face arrest as a material witness. Argue for the Federal agent's release and unleash this predator again—all without getting to the root source of the terror against Fumie.

"Then my decision is to turn the clock back one hour," Sari announced. "I am not here."

And within two seconds she wasn't. She sat on the stoop of the rickety porch, curled up her legs, took off her dress shoes and put on sneakers. An adept move for someone well versed on fleeing ugly situations on short notice. It would be a four mile walk into town. Plenty of time to think about how to salvage her plan.

Drewbie nodded for one of his men to remove the gag from Hammaker. Smirky eyes in the face of a gun.

"Do you know how many EIB officers there are in America?" Hammaker erupted. "You're not so stupid to be suicidal. Go up against a force of 19,000. Coming down on you like Gibraltar on a cockroach."

BLAM! Drewbie's .44 roared barely before he raised it. The right side of Hammaker's head looked like a caramel cherry which had been ruptured. Drewbie lowered his thick white beard to where Hammaker's ear used to be:

"Eighteen thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine."

Syndirene's gag fell before soliciting eyes. Where graveling was the foreplay prior to the orgasm of death.

"A condemned man doesn't get his last request? Not even a smoke?" The Cajun drawled and Montgomery took a pause.

"A real wiseguy, huh?"

"Smarter than a dumbguy."

"So smart you thought you'd get your ugly puss past our camera."

"Your camera? It's Dickerson's money."

Montgomery went stone cold. "You think that's Dickerson's stash?"

“Hey, doesn’t he want his face on a bill? Explains why I enjoyed every second of thieving though I don’t steal.”

“What do you know about Dickerson?”

“Brothers say he likes to double cross the Japs – uh, the Japanese. Nothing a bullet couldn’t cure.”

“Here, Deadguy,” Drewbie said, sticking a cigarette in Syndirene’s mouth. Syndo spat it out before the match could get there.

“Not that crap, man. I mean the good stuff. Ganja.”

“Ain’t got none.”

“Don’t jerk me around. What’s that crap in your back pocket? Hey, I can even smell it. Got a X-ray nose. Not that the stuff you peddle’s worth anything. Bringing it from Canada along with your Ecstasy and stuff. Snow dudes up there cut it with polar bear crap or something.”

A couple of Drewbie’s gang laughed openly.

“You got something better, Deadguy?”

“Down Cajun country we grow it in the back with the tomatoes. Spike it with these real fine minerals. Cleans your blood so tested sports dudes will pass with flying colors.”

“No way,” Drewbie said.

“Yeah, you want some? I’ll get it – on the same trip that I arrange a face to face between you and Speaker Dickerson. You’ll be able to shake his hand.”

Drewbie grabbed Syndo’s greasy hair and yanked his head back a foot. The tip of the .44 found Syndirene’s nostrils. “Any handshaking, Slick, you’ll be doing.”

Drewbie let him go, then reached into his back pocket. A reefer found the corner of Syndirene’s mouth a second before the match.

Syndo inhaled. “Hey, baby!”

Drewbie pulled out another reefer. “Here’s two. For both of your mouths.”

## Not In This Century

Fascinating and exciting, is how Sari Marika described her White House job in a letter to her mom. She was strictly an observer, but one constantly in motion. Using communicative charms to retrieve, on behalf of Presidential communications staff, tidbits from persons representing various outside media and NGOs. The only unsettling moments came when this tall, suit-clad Black man passed through her vision in the gilded corridors. He bothered her in the way one beholds a friend one can't quite place.

Then it came to Sari like a time warp lightning bolt. Placing her on a matchstick Northwest Washington street with Drew Montgomery—and Vancouver, too!

Vandevire had noticed Sari from afar. He wasn't exactly shocked at her arrival--assuming that the same twisted political dynamic which brought him to Washington had landed Sari here as well. But her continuing, looming, unending presence in the same building weighed on him as an angry obsession. This constant reminder of rape having nothing to do with sex. It festered every time her eyes would glance his way from the far reaches of the hallway. And then continually refuse to acknowledge him. Vandevire's heartland upbringing was nothing if not an embodiment of the concepts of fairness, poetic justice. Sari Marika had violated him and had to atone for it.

The ghostly voices of people like Karl and Syndirene would badger him in such moments: Japanese Queen, nose in the air. Ever see her hanging out with brothers? Look, there she goes, walking again with some White guy, the kind who wears a pinky ring. Ever read in the papers about what some Japanese say about Blacks in America? You don't think her kind feeds her that crap? She comes into your own home like she owns it, and the next thing she's got a chain around your neck.

Vandevire ultimately expelled the venom of Karl and Syndirene, to find the voice of Ron Vandevire. That voice, in spirit, was alive at the ubiquitous White House staff multicultural sessions (and President Exeter had always been quite liberal on such matters). Ron Vandevire was well aware of the horrible aftermath of slavery. The cultural genocide, the gaps of economics and living conditions kept wide by open bigotry or insensitivity. Wide social inequity gaps decades after the Civil Rights Act of '64. Ron Vandevire knew the names of all the Black inventors and cutting-edge leaders whose names never made it into history books. One would expect to see a rock in Ron Vandevire's hand, but here was a man totally at peace with himself and the world. Racism: Borne not out of superiority, but of weakness. Profound insecurity. A belief that the only way we, meaning Whites, can survive is to create a system of artificial subjugation. Racism: the cry of cowardice and fear. And for us, meaning the Blacks, to respond in kind with hatred does more than feed into the insecurity and proliferate the human jungle. The trick is not to descend to the level of racist Whites, but to help them rise to ours.

Besides, Ron was wont to add with a chuckle. Equal racial power alignments will not be achieved through revolution but through demographics. The White race cannot be the premise of America when that race is suddenly the minority. There is nothing more horrible than the oppressed suddenly

becoming the oppressors. This transition period is a time for a struggle for justice, but also a preparation for the eventual civilized, benevolent application of power.

Austin often wondered where his father had attained such wisdom. Then he remembered Ron constantly giving tribute to a higher power, a Savior, Jesus.

Vandevire came upon Sari close-up in the White House mess. She was seated with some bearded egghead guy, until he finally stood up to leave. Man, she looked sharp, with maroon cotton dress, gold choker, black tights, and hair twisted up nicely in back. Vandevire thought, she probably knows she looks sharp. Vandevire cautioned himself to acknowledge justifiable anger but keep this on a plane of dignity. He walked up to her table and sat down from her – PLOP – distinctly uninvited.

He thought he saw a trace of a smile from her--just like in the Vancouver elevator. Followed by a hard swallow. Vandevire scribbled something down on a piece of paper, then waved it in front of her.

“This is my office number,” he said assertively. “For the next time you and your friends decide to play games with incriminating contraband and try to railroad me into jail. Save you the trouble of looking up my home address.” He slammed the paper down in front of her – perhaps a little too hard for reasonable sensitivities – then stood and departed.

The next move would be hers.

That came the next day in the form of a confidential envelope on his desk. Inside he found a cheque made out to him signed by Sari Marika. No notes, no explanation. Amount: \$20,000.

Vandevire charged out into the hall, brusquely asking one staffer after another where Sari Marika’s office was. It took five inquiries before anyone had even heard of her. Actually, she wasn’t that far away, 100 feet perhaps. Hang a left and – she had to be in her office. In Vandevire’s frenzied mind, she’d BETTER be.

She was. She rose from behind her makeshift desk at his approach. Watched while he tore the check into itty bitty pieces and scattered it like confetti. He savored the look of distress on her face.

Over the next few days he felt weird. His thirst for redemption totally quenched. He was now a little guilty about his behavior. He even contemplated slithering into her office to (gulp) apologize. But he was too busy playing Mr. Confessor to an endless parade of coworkers--some making multiple trips to talk about getting the heck out of the Exeter Administration before a feared Titanic moment arrived.

Then late one afternoon came a soft knock on his closed office door. In stepped Sari Marika, wearing the same outfit she’d wore that day in the mess. She pulled up a chair, leaned over his desk, crossed her arms and contrived a bargirl expression.

“I think just maybe we’re even,” she said in her quiet voice. “I was talking to my friend Drew, and he told me about HIS new friend. A saxophone player who could play your life history, Mr. Vandevire.”

“Wasn’t my idea, Sari. I refused to take a dime.”

His words ceased at the clamping of her hand on his.

“None of it matters. It’s all in the past. One big stupid idiotic misunderstanding between two well-intended persons. Okay?”

“Then came the voice of Ron Vandevire: check the mountain pass above you, son. That’s where you’ll find the lady you’re looking at.

“Let’s do this right. I’m Sari Marika.” She extended her hand.

“Austin Vandevire.” He laughed, and then she laughed.

“I feel like a victim, too,” Sari added. “Making phone calls with destructive consequences on the basis of serious misinformation. I am so sorry about the stress I put you through. Let’s move beyond this, okay? I want you to talk to a friend of mine. Can you join me for lunch tomorrow?”

The place was the Thai restaurant off of Pennsylvania Avenue. The “friend” was Juno Brandon. Vandevire felt his porcupine quills rising--until Sari gave him a relaxed smile and steered the conversation away from the netherworld. They both inquired about Vandevire’s demographic career and expressed amazement at his statistical wizardry. They seemed further intrigued about Vandevire’s depiction of growing up Black in Montana. If there was a prejudiced bone in Sari Marika’s body it certainly didn’t show up on Vandevire X-ray. A good lesson on preconceived notions of a person one doesn’t know. Vandevire surmised that straw dogs were mostly the product of one’s own mind.

Vandevire began to sense that Brandon and Sari had an emotional need to have him around. The Dickerson scenario was never discussed. Taboo. It was the hidden subliminal world which had bound the three together.

In virtually perfect timing, Ron Vandevire placed a call of encouragement to his son. Rely on God for your White House challenges, son! Then came some nice e-mails from Audrey. Deep concern for Austin as a friend, after the standard outpouring of compliments from her.

Austin Vandevire concluded that he needed that higher authority to navigate him through these hair trigger events at the pinnacle of power. He cultivated his church roots. He even convinced Sari to accompany him on Sunday mornings. Maybe she was sensing the same thing....

On a spring day of infamy, the voice of the TV newsman was low and somber: “President Martin Exeter had been taken expeditiously to Walter Reed Hospital for what had been diagnosed as a heart attack.” Condition unknown. At least to the general public. Networks ran eerie tribute to President Exeter. For millions of Americans praying for Exeter’s recovery, this one-sided tribute was a most ominous omen.



Although it was hard to conceive any news which could preempt reports on the President's condition, a more horrible form was taking form on hundreds of millions of TV screens across the world. Many Washingtonians had already received a premonition in the form of paralyzing gridlock around the Capitol Hill area, a cacophony of automobile horns, uniformed and plainclothes agents cordoning off several intersections, and helicopters whopping overhead. An electrical storm of flashing cameras picked up a bedlam scene in the Senate garage. There were medical personnel and Secret Service agents scurrying everywhere, but it was already too late. Vice President Sam Kaplan was already dead, the target of an assassin.

Cameras bore down on his limousine. The passenger's side contained dozens of bullet holes. Except there were no bullets at all. Technicians were removing tiny steel spikes. A perverse tribute to a most devastating weapon. The Vice President had been impaled 13 times by the loose Yugar. Not a lucky Friday for Sudden Sam.

With all the security surrounding the Vice President, how could any assassin hope to get away with such a sloppy execution? Many wondered. The answer was he didn't; dead in a hail of bullets from the agents.

Visceral rage well beyond the hawkeyes of the media. Fringe neo-Nazi in a state of panic that Martin Exeter may not make it—and give America her first Jewish President.

All it took was one yahoo carrying such desperation and pain in his life that a mullah's version of heaven offered deliverance. His warped view of God had paved an eternal highway of gold in reward for acts of hate in the name of the cause. The profile on the assassin came within hours of the tragedy: Thomas Barling, afflicted with that crazy Aryan Nazi bunch with ties to the Islamic terrorists—and recently released from the Oregon Hospital for the Criminally Insane after attempting to run down a group of Black schoolchildren in broad daylight.

Ten horrible seconds: Launching the tiny, devastating missiles, then doing a zigzag jog in retreat through the rows of cars. Adrenalized agents tearing off in pursuit, blasting away: successfully but too late.

A rented sedan with a swastika – stamped note inside: NO JEWISH PRESIDENT. NOT IN THIS CENTURY.

The next day, Brandon couldn't resist a little jab at Bingo McBride: "I am pleased to announce, sir, that the missing Yugar has been recovered. Please advise on the dispensation of medals of valor."

After 36 hours of apocalyptic pandemonium, the next tremor over the airwaves came as an anticlimax. As inevitability, like a cynical trump card.

Cardiac arrest. President Exeter did not make it this time. Time of death: 11:57 P.M. In the words of a pundit: A FOOL MOON TO BOOT.

The next few hours presented total paralysis. Nothing moved. Streets at sunrise were virtually deserted. Nothing opened. Not schools, businesses, banks, government agencies, or most stores.

Then the crescendoing shuddering of countless millions caused the very ground of America to shift, at beholding the TV images of a scaly silver suit, like lizard skin. The familiar tiny eyes, pinched mouth, and twisted, bed-ridden hair.

John Dickerson raising his right hand. To assume the Oath of Office of President of the United States.

## The Big Bang

At Martin Exeter's funeral, pundits with grandiose imaginations, seeking the subtle hints, noted that former First Lady Lydia Exeter, darkly clad for the darkness of mourning and the darkening skies of Arlington, wore Patson on her arm during the ceremony. Just maybe death had its way of forging together bottom lines of life's true value, rather than vagaries of petty political conflict between longstanding friends.

The following night President Dickerson held his first public address. Billed the Appeal To National Reconciliation. Somewhere in his Ivy League voice and 40-word sentences was a tribute to the life and accomplishments of the late President Martin Exeter. A man of the people.

And now this new President intended to use this untimely tragedy to inspire rebirth and regeneration in America. President Dickerson even found an olive branch—literally—to display in from of the camera to former nameless adversaries. He was rededicating himself to President Exeter's reform agenda. A platitude of intent; no specifics.

Vandevire, watching the speech on TV in his cramped apartment, understood perfectly how such politicians could continue to bamboozle the public all these decades. One could hardly resist being caught up in the swirling emotions of hope and anticipation. Part of Vandevire said, maybe the man has changed. Maybe becoming President, with its awesome sensitive-trigger responsibility, had affected Dickerson like a born-again religion experience. Give the man a chance.

But sanity precariously prevailed. Vandevire switched off the TV.

Juno Brandon returned to the White House grounds after what was for him an extended absence. Doomsdayers were already huddled outside the gate like vultures predicting the end of the world. When Brandon saw Tygrier walk into his office without so much as a hello he knew something was amiss.

"Joey Raps wants a meeting with both of us," Tygrier said in his most cynical tone. "Right here."

"Maybe I should go home and write a letter," Brandon responded. "Resign before they have the chance to fire me."

Press accounts: People assumed Rappaport was a loyal Exeter crony. Insiders were well aware of the popular misconception. Rappaport was a Party animal, and it had nothing to do with beer drinking. A resume replete with flirtations with the National Headquarters, and cushy political jobs somewhere even when his Party was removed from the White House. A 35-year career, floating between Executive, Campaign, K Street and Capitol Hill positions.

And despite media histrionics, a yawn from insider pundits when President Dickerson announced that Joseph Rappaport would remain on board as Chief of Staff.

Rappaport arrived at Brandon's office with the phalanx of aides. He asked them in his slow, lazy voice to wait outside, as he closed the door. He sat down with his too-large tweed suit and started into self-deprecating jokes about his political salubriousness, his age, his health, and other such corny issues of substance. Tygrier made a show of sifting through Brandon's files--derriere facing the Chief of Staff.

"Brandon," Rappaport finally said to the point, to the only man listening. "Bingo McBride has been asked to resign. His office will be clear before the nip of the evening arrives."

Brandon looked up sharply, then reminded himself not to be surprised. About anything.

"McBride was a cautious, timid man," Rappaport added. "The Dickerson Administration wants men with guts. Your heroism in support of your country is well-chronicled. The only question was loyalty toward the man you'd be serving. You were given an opportunity to violate your orders and subject President Dickerson to an investigation on the basis of unsubstantiated evidence given to you in a Georgetown bar. You refused. Therefore, the question of loyalty has long been answered."

"Don't blow it, Brandon," Tygrier blurted suddenly, facing front. "You may not get this chance again. Here it comes, on a silver platter."

"Stay tuned, big guy. What's coming your way isn't exactly sloppy seconds," Rappaport said, trying to be funny again. It didn't sound natural.

Brandon's chair rocked back two feet at the flick of Tygrier's wrist. "You have what for me, Mr. Chief of Staff? A million dollars? Not nearly enough."

"Please get to the point, sir," Brandon said low key.

"Please? Sir?" Tygrier mocked.

Rappaport positioned his large frame between Brandon and Tygrier, then rotated toward the former. "President Dickerson is offering you, Mr. Brandon, the position of Director of Secret Service. He is merging EIB under Secret Service. This gives you control over all Executive Office security and investigation functions." Rappaport squinted a glance at Tygrier. "The plan was to make you Brandon's Deputy. A flea couldn't sneeze at the difference between your two positions—or salaries."

"Well I'll be," Tygrier crowed. "Go home and find those hair extensions. And stick 'em somewhere between the ears."

"What do I tell the President of the United States about his offer?" Rappaport asked Brandon.

"Please give me 24 hours to think about it."

Tygrier was rapidly in motion until he was eye to eye with his colleague. “Think about what, Brandon? Know what I think?”

Tygrier took the badge from his coat pocket and tossed it at Rappaport’s feet.

“The man better not step on it. Some government law about defacing a nickel.”

He marched to the door, then stopped at the doorway, hurt all over his face.

“Brandon, I thought I knew you. I can’t believe this. I’d tell you return everything I ever gave you. But a man who can’t see more than two inches past his nose couldn’t find a thing anyhow.”

With that, he was gone, never to carry a government ID again.

Good gracious, Vandevire thought. Here was your typical sleazeball politician in danger of losing his Congressional seat because of serious ethical questions. What happens? He winds up President of the United States. His father had cracked during the most recent phone call, at least there’s no more hypocrisy in America. Vandevire noticed the sudden media silence on Dickerson’s misdeeds. No more reports of backdoor donations from corporations, or embezzling elderly legal clients, or maintaining quiet contact with companies supporting slave labor in China. Nothing about rumors of connections with drug dealers and whistleblower retaliation. A Clean Slate for the Spanking New President. Political earthquakes had a way of burying all the skeletons.

Vandevire was taking his life one day at a time--keeping focused on the recent reminder by Patson, quoted in the Post, that the next election – the voters’ decisive blow against this ugly aberration – was only months away. America could survive with just a few months of Dickerson. Right? Patson continually denied any Presidential aspiration, although his name frequently surfaced as a maverick independent candidate.

Vandevire had a quote made by Patson in the papers. He kept it folded well away from view: “We’re all about breaking down walls. We use chisels. But if that doesn’t work, we’ll use a sledgehammer.”

One of Vandevire’s coworkers, this straight-laced White guy named Ned, approached Vandevire as Mr. Confessor. “I’m scared,” he said, leg pumping, “It’s quiet, but I hear all the loud steps in the hall outside. Then they stop. Right next to my office.” A genuinely rattled employee? Or a veiled warning? With each torturous day of no work and lowgrade paranoia, Vandevire waffled between resigning right away, or just waiting for the official firing from Dickerson.

Sari found him packing and in a playful, mothering way began rearranging items in the boxes. Sari gave him the name of a friend teaching English in Tokyo and told him she could get him a job as English instructor in Japan, for a decent salary. “Don’t you ever get so sick of what’s going on in this country,” Sari asked, “That you just want to leave?”

Brandon stopped by. It was their normal lunch day, at the Thai restaurant. After giving their order, Brandon beckoned both of them closer. “The journals will carry the news that Dickerson plans to run in November as an incumbent President. He will make a public display of being very tolerant of former adversaries. You will both be kept on---I am walking proof. I was just appointed Chairman of the Whitewash Committee.”

Vandevire beheld Sari’s eyes widen a good quarter inch. Not a trace of knee-jerk indignation a la Tygrier. Then both Brandon and Sari locked their eyes on Vandevire. Waiting for him to read this right.

He said nothing, so Brandon grabbed his arm. “Austin, try to remember the most turbulent airplane flight you ever had. At some point you were saying, gosh, this plane will be landing soon, and the torture will be over. Well, for us, the landing is November. Only Dickerson believes he can actually win this election. Meanwhile, if you’ve got an out of control airplane, how much chance do you have to control that airplane—if you’re outside the airplane?”

Still Vandevire demurred. Until Brandon added, “Are you in? If you’re not, neither am I.”

“I’m in,” said Vandevire.

Vandevire caught the big print about the arrest of a James Panther, one of the Black leaders of Lasa Light, for plotting to kidnap the strongarm President of Guatemala. The papers said Panther was purportedly in violation of the Neutrality Act. What’s that mean? Vandevire wondered. Like a referee accused of throwing a football game? The only significance for Vandevire: it was Janet Lindy’s first publicized case as the new Attorney-General.

Newspaper headlines of all variety had a special significance for staffers. Provoking three-hour debates in the White House mess, because nothing was moving. Everything on hold until the new President responded to his new role, like a relief pitcher brought in following an unexpected injury to the starter. Staffers swirled around with resumes, classifieds, and exchange of contacts, a reminder that four additional candidates for President had emerged since Exeter’s death.

Vandevire still had to report to Carla Llanos, then Joe Rappaport. Only he barely saw either one. Carla would breeze in occasionally with incongruous smiles and small talk. Hinting discreetly about having a position on Capitol Hill lined up. It gave Vandevire plenty of time to fill in obviously knowledge.

Sari commented circumspectively, out of respect for Vandevire’s personal travails, that harassed dissidents carry a double burden. When institutions and their high authorities trump up evidence to brand someone as deviant, or evil, the public is inclined to believe them. Sari admitted to succumbing to such impulses. Giving the benefit of the doubt to the pedigree over the powerless. To believe otherwise could play havoc with one’s sense of stability. And concede the jungle. A very disconcerting thought. But now, just maybe, the jungle lurked inside the swivel doors, not out.

Two days later, the headlines trumpeted the arrest of three prominent Lasa Light leaders, including Patson's personal advisor Emma Gonzalez, as co-conspirators with Panther on the international kidnap plot. Janet Lindy said that the arrested Americans "intended to make a spectacle, from a hidden location with a detained Latin American leader, about the alleged human rights violations."

Within a breath of this volatile report came live footage from outside the Federal courthouse in Lower Manhattan. Hundreds of riot-gearred police officers formed a three-deep fortress, cordoning off a four-block area, the lines rocking to and fro like an ashtray on a storm-ridden boat, from the surges of angry demonstrators. Camera picked up a handful of skirmishes, appearing like occasional twisters in the large thunderstorm. Piercing sirens played a discordant tune, and people running helter-skelter carried handkerchiefs as protection from the eerie blue cloud of teargas.

For several miles on the Manhattan streets automobile horns screamed with the frustration. Every inch of pavement a parking lot of gridlock. A photojournalist cornered a petite, middle-aged female court reporter who'd witnessed the spark which had ignited the riot:

"I've never seen such a mob scene in the courtroom. As soon as Emma Gonzalez, Jim Panther and the Lasa Light Four were brought in for arraignment, the place erupted. People shouting and screaming and more people surging through the doors past security, who were helpless in the sudden rampage. I saw people crowded against the walls, waving stuff, chanting while the Judge kept pounding his gavel, then his fist, then screaming at security to clear the courtroom. Then the police stormed in and started pushing people. People were flying over top of tables. The protesters fell to the floor in resistance to the police grabbing them. Then I saw people being dragged. And police cursing when the protesters started grabbing chairs or tables or anything to impede their arrest. There were people clutching, twirling, and – I was told never to leave my work station, but I panicked, slipping out through the Judge's chambers, and trying to fight my way into the street. At break, an hour earlier, I had already seen the demonstrators beginning to gather in the plaza by the hundreds. Rushing toward the Courthouse like a sea of hornets after someone swats their giant nest. Now I could barely stand up from all the commotions. Police were fighting their way through crowd, swinging night sticks, grabbing people by the hair and I just began running out the few precious spaces I could find. A police stick landed hard on my shoulder and I remember falling to the pavement. My skin tearing at the edges. And a few kind souls actually helping me up. I continued to run, way down past Chambers. But the bedlam kept following me way down past Murray Street. Walls everywhere, especially from police protecting government buildings and City Hall. Cars seemed to be sinking in human quicksand. A half an hour later, as I crowded into the Battery Park subway, I thanked God I was alive."

White House staffers were captivated almost to the point of suspension by the escalating headlines. Daring not to breathe too hard. Dickerson, backhanding the media, issued a Press Release where he denied any knowledge of circumstances surrounding Panther or Gonzalez. Let the legal system take its course, he insisted in his bored voice. To be prosecuted by his longtime protégé.

The media eventually got around to sifting through the commotion in attempts to analyze just whether or not Emma Gonzalez and others were guilty of the charges. A debate fought with more questions than answers--to which Vandevire responded that he could never accept that Panther, Gonzalez or any other Lasa Light could be guilty of any crime accused of by the United States government.

The face on that night's TV was but a shadow. And the voice sounded like one of David Seville's chipmunks--disguises for someone purportedly inside John Dickerson's Justice Department. Out of fear for one's own life.

"There was video surveillance of Emma Gonzalez and her co-defendants present at a meeting when one Lasa guy made vague reference to the need to apprehend President Hernandez and try him for crimes against humanity. But there's no evidence that anyone AGREED with this person's histrionics or were prepared to follow-through in any material way. The prevailing philosophy among some of Dickerson's legal people in dealing with citizen troublemakers is this: there's really no need to affix a noose to somebody's neck. Most people sooner or later will stumble into one themselves. All we, as the Defenders of the Truth Accorded Us, have to do is provide a quiet shove. That quiet shove in Emma's case was the approaching of a small number of so-called witnesses caught in compromising positions and offering them one way out: sign an affidavit. Sign now, read later. But don't screw up your rehearsed lines. Fiction becomes fact upon the stain of ink. Even if there is no criminal conviction, the gain from bloodying the nose of Lasa Light, right before the election, far exceeds any stigma from losing a criminal case. There were Attorney-General people frothing at the mouth, waiting for Patson himself to join Gonzalez and Panther at that meeting. Then Patson, too, would have wound up in shackles."

Patson made a public appeal to stop the violence. Yet surging rage couldn't be suppressed any more than a tidal wave. It could only be redirected. Patson was suddenly an immense fulcrum. Turn at a certain angle and watch a mountain fall.

Citizen Times quote from Patson: "Hear ye, hear ye, citizens. Your presence is desired in our nation's capital. Come any way you can. If you have no car, walk. You will encounter many friends. Feel the power of your collective presence. And behold the futility of government which operates without your support. Governing without the consent of the electorate. Committing crimes without recourse for the victims. The unjust blindsiding of one citizen with chains proves that it could happen to ANY citizen. A clear and present danger lurking, but not against the government; rather, from it."

"This regime is illegitimate. A rogue masquerading as descendants of our founding fathers, with the U.S. Constitution totally trashed. Our populace cannot wait until November to restore democracy to our great country. These pretenders will fall under God's eye, nonviolently. By ten million plowshares and not one sword. But fall they will."

Lasa Light coordinators were already stationed at key points in Washington. Carefully constructed conduits to carefully harness the unharnessed energy. For the long-awaited Big Bang.



The most sleep deprivation a body can stand is about 36 hours, Juno Brandon heard from one of his subordinates. After that, it's difficult to distinguish reality from your own imagination. Little gremlins in the corners of yours eyes, stalking your peripheral vision.

Brandon was pushing it. 31 consecutive hours and counting. Such that he didn't remember the name of the Captain doing the talking. All these loyal cadres, nice guys, trying to get along. All running together....

Joy and Rachel knew not to expect him for a few days--guilt gifts and a friend to keep them company, as surrogates. All because the Secret Service apparatus was on full alert. Every government building had to be secure. Individual, elaborate blueprints for crowd monitoring, riot control, protection of top officials, and preventing sabotage. The ultimate contingency plan was a massive airlift. Brandon wouldn't sleep until all the choppers were verified in working order.

Two of them whooped over the White House grounds. Brandon occupied one for a quick panoramic view of Washington:

They were coming in by the busloads. Cluttering up parking lots from Rosslyn to the Georgetown athletic complex, up to American U. and across to Rock Creek Park. Campers were pouring onto the Mall and all the tidal basin area. Wilson Riley, Washington's Black Mayor and no friend of the status-quo, had his police force standing around as spectators. The chanting, bullhorn-armed crowd was converging by the tens of thousands on the steps of the Capitol. Demonstrators crowded around the White House fence like a mob of hair-trigger English soccer fans; a growing beehive of people spilling all the way to P Street in Dupont Circle. Every boulevard and alley dotted with clusters of placard-carrying demonstrators gravitating as if by a magnet to a central location.

Brandon watched this escalation like a compulsive meteorologist tracking a building hurricane. As evening approached, he landed on the White House roof. Voices cracked constantly over radios. Two dozen Secret Service agents with flak jackets and machine guns were well-positioned and well-camouflaged. This sight gave Brandon a sudden chill, and he quickly slipped down through the bomb proof hatch.

Staffers exiting through one of the White House gates were heckled while wading through the crowd of protesters. No vehicles were able to drive out of the White House compound. A Lasa Light-enforced discipline of nonviolence was holding up, as no one was unduly jostled, pushed, or attacked. The protesters could see the human walls of agents inside the gates.

Remaining staffers lurked near office windows, beholding the eerie silence in the hallways as a contrast to the echoes outside. Lights were dim, and folders were closed.

Vandevire felt a perverse thrill from all of this. He knew history was turning before his eyes. The ultimate mystery was, which way?

The door suddenly opened for Juno Brandon, flanked by a phalanx of six agents. Vandevire's friends didn't have to be asked to leave. Brandon gestured for his agents to wait outside, then closed the door behind him.

He rubbed his face and gave out a loud breath. "Austin, I'm giving you advanced notice. At daybreak the President will be ordering a total freeze on all White House records. No documents will be moved without written authorization from Service personnel wearing designated decals. Many files will be locked."

"Aye Aye, Herr Commissar," Vandevire responded, annoyed. "Phase II of the President's Reconciliation Program?"

Vandevire made a loud display of grabbing papers and tossing them haphazardly into drawers. He looked up and beheld Brandon's detached, bloodshot expression. Had Brandon been seduced? It certainly wasn't money. It was probably the power. Unbridled, to the point very few mere mortals could ever imagine. He recalled the Juno Brandon who'd gone nose to nose with the FBI sadist at Audreys and scheduled those coy little luncheons with he and Sari. Was it all gone now?

"Keep track of the media harping on the President's alleged misdeeds," Brandon said in a voice which seemed almost military. "It may mean the Lasa Light article on your whistleblowing will resurface, this time on the front pages and national TV. Should that happen, the President's handlers will stick a microphone to our face and ask you to issue a disclaimer."

Brandon turned and departed without further comment.

Vandevire then recalled Patson's warning about the crossroads he would inevitably reach.

Brandon woke up many, many hours later to a familiar pinching against his temples. His sense of touch, feeling, were muted, as if he were on drugs. He showered again for a little jump-start, then consulted the monitors, revealing the iron-thick wall of humanity completely surrounding the White House. As far as the eye could see. The mall filled with demonstrators, to the Capitol. The crackling radios reported on abrupt large population movements. This noncontiguous animal continued to grow.

Brandon received updates on Patson's apparent tactics: He was careful not to block bridges, major highways, or the like. Such massive inconvenience would turn the public against Lasa Light. He also spared most government buildings--not wanting to give Dickerson an excuse to halt Social Security payments to 50 million-or-so senior citizens or provide some other fiasco. No, Patson was aiming his massive human arsenal at the policy power centers -- the White House, the Capitol, the House and Senate Office Buildings, the Supreme Court building, Party headquarters, and a few buildings housing major law firms or prominent lobby groups. Brandon's massive surveillance machine identified thousands of Lasa Light monitors wearing blue arm bands--Patson's own crowd control mechanism, to keep his Big Bang both focused and nonviolent. Except for a few rock throwing flare-ups around the periphery, or short-lived skirmishes, Patson's pledge of nonviolence was holding up. Massive podiums and microphones were set up at several key positions.

At 11:05 AM, after some power naps, Brandon received a communiqué: Patson had clarified his demands. There were exactly two: 1) The immediate resignation of President Dickerson and his criminal coconspirators from positions they never received by consent of the electorate; the President pro-tempore of the Senate serving as interim President until the election; 2) The immediate cessation of legal harassment against the Lasa Light colleagues, or any other citizen engaged in nonviolent political expression. More sweeping Lasa Light reforms could wait until the restoration of democracy and human rights in America.

One of the Captains of the Service's new command structure approached. "Patson is talking about throwing tourniquets around the Capitol, the White House and the Pentagon. Human chains to seal off Washington D.C. entirely. Watching this snowball roll, by 3:00 he could have the numbers."

Brandon squeezed his eyes shut. Semi-dreaming about springing rubber bands, whirling belts, and tightening nooses. He opened his eyes finally.

"Oversee air surveillance," Brandon said in a voice like molasses. "Give me hourly updates."

After the Captain departed Brandon curled up on what was once, according to rumor, Nancy Reagan's favorite couch, and slipped into a deep sleep. Bells and beeps couldn't arouse him.

At 2:00 he was rustled out of slumber by loud voices. He cleared his head and beheld Chief of Staff Joe Rappaport and several agents. The Chief of Staff told the agents in descending voice to wait in the hall, then beckoned Brandon to the large window. He separated the sheer blue silk curtains and pointed across the manicured White House grounds to the fence beyond.

Demonstrators were stirring. Some grasping a hold of the bars. Hoisting themselves a foot or two upwards.

"Where have you've been, Brandon?" Rappaport said in his deep voice. "They're about ready to come over. The dikes aren't holding."

"No disrespect, sir. But there's been not one breach."

"There's been an incident," Rappaport said, eyes downcast. "They opened fire outside the Capitol. I'm not privy to all the casualties. But we've confirmed five fatalities. Some idiot was commenting that they've finally cleared Constitution Avenue. All but the stains on the pavement."

"Service?"

"It certainly wasn't DCPD."

Brandon squeezed his eyes shut again. To go back to sleep and reawaken from this horrible dream. He could envision the history books of the future: Juno Brandon, the security apparatchik responsible for the gunning down of unarmed protesters. Go to any lengths, follow any orders, to defend the regime of President John Dickerson.

“Are they saying I gave the order?”

“No. The official version it was spontaneous. Some of the demonstrators were allegedly closing in, getting a little rowdy. There were allegedly some debris being thrown. Some of the men on the front lines perceived a threatening situation and panicked. That’s what they say.”

Brandon turned toward Rappaport. “What do YOU say?”

Rappaport seemed pale and clammy. He trembled perceptively as he circled around. “I wasn’t there!” he called loudly, as a defensive protest.

The crowd beyond the fortress was backing away. To make room for a flaming effigy.

“Where is President Dickerson?” Brandon asked.

“You don’t know?” Rappaport yelled, circling. “Secure in the Oval Office. They accuse the President of being a sleaze, not a coward. He is determined to break the protest. That he has done. At least as it existed the past two days. Washington may well be in flames by sunset.”

Rappaport slowly moved toward Brandon, as if walking on egg shells.” I know you think I’m nothing but a political whore, Mr. Brandon. Let me tell you in confidence that there is but one reason I agreed to stay on. I knew Dickerson couldn’t possibly last past November. I had hoped to temper some of Dickerson’s more visceral impulses. A buffer, so at least a facsimile of the United States of America I grew up with would survive until the next administration. Obviously, I’ve failed.”

“Another loyalty test, sir?”

“History will judge me a coward,” Rappaport said lowly. “I could have taken the extra step. This is a day in infamy. Those shootings, an opening of an irreversible pandora’s box which will allow any lunatic the pretext to justify any extreme. America, with all her faults, has never been a third world dictatorship. Not until today.

“I saw it coming, Mr. Brandon, and out of fear-- rejections, dying poor, uncertainty. God knows what-- I chose to do nothing. Recognizing the natural dynamics of citizens insisting on increased accountability over government, other institutions affecting their lives. Then beholding the hammer rather than reasonable accommodation. Wielded by petty, fearful, insecure persons such as myself, flaunting power because we can flaunt nothing else. Beating our chests, playing manipulative games to ensure the entrenched strata are preserved. And pretending otherwise, insulting the American people by assuming they’d be fooled forever.

“This is what gives us Patson. And worse. God forgive me—Mr. President!” Rappaport shouted to no one. “Just talk to these people!”

Certain words of empathy rose to the tip of Brandon’s tongue. With each scuffing step of Rappaport toward the door, he was tempted. But he bit the words down.

“You won’t have to endure my crotchety commands anymore,” Rappaport added, stopping one last time. “Because President Dickerson has assigned all security matters to National Security Advisor Johnston White.”

“White? No way. He hasn’t even been confirmed.”

“Tell that to the President. Meeting as we speak with the Joint Chiefs of Staff.”

It wasn’t an hour until Johnston White paid Brandon a personal visit. Military get-up with epaulets, and a round bald head except for fuzz around the ears.

“What’s the status of your men here on the grounds?” White asked abruptly.

“They’re on full alert.”

“How many men are positioned on the roof?”

“14. And five women,” Brandon added.

White beckoned Brandon to the window. Pulled back the sheer drapes. “Those people have declared war on us, Brandon. They’ve bought their own ticket, so they can’t blame someone else for their fiery destination. As for us, for America, it’s a matter of survival. The time has come to clear the streets.

“Choose your best three marksmen, Brandon. Have them aim their barrels low so the bullets don’t stray. We don’t want any policemen or storeowners hit by mistake. Give the command upon my signal.”

Brandon felt a burning from his eyes down to his gut. He worked the action on his transmitter, as if it would slow down time. He had the sensation of falling off a cliff.

“Captain Loomis, come in,” Brandon said into the radio, then waited for acknowledgement. “Agents 19, 20, and 33 identified for Project McKinley. Over, Captain.”

“Acknowledged, sir,” came the nasally voice from the other end.

“Out.”

“Just what are you telling them, Brandon?” White demanded, hovering.

Brandon tried to act nonchalant about opening a black square case.

“The McKinley Project was so named because it’s a standing order dating back to President William McKinley. It Means, whenever a party or parties invade the grounds with hostile intent, the agents are to shoot to kill.”

“Who said anything about invading the grounds?” White shouted, eyes wild. “The President has ordered a counterassault! To be carried out immediately!”

Brandon felt his heart racing. He took a deep breath. “I apologize sir. But your original orders to me were imprecise. Now clarified, I will need a secure radio.”

Brandon focused all his concentrative powers on his hands. And suddenly felt very relaxed.

“Okay, sir. I think we are ready.”

“What are you waiting for, Brandon?”

“The regulations are precise, sir. You must give me an official command.”

“– Alright, go ahead and do it. Instigate counterassault! Now!”

Brandon counted one-Mississippi. Then he rapidly raised the silenced Eagle .52 caliber pistol and squeezed the trigger once with determination. And watched the bullet drill Chief of Staff Johnston White right between the eyes.

The gun slipped through Brandon’s wet hands.

“Instruction obeyed, sir. Counterassault initiation successful.”

Brandon beheld himself confronted with a maze of about 1000 trap doors. Liberty a galaxy away. He had to build this one block at a time. Odds were not in his favor.

He looked at his watch: Sari should still be in her office. He dialed her extension. And heard her listless voice at the other end.

“Sari, we have a date.”

“I’ll be right there,” she said, perking up.

“Here are the instructions –.”

Sari instinctively asked Vandevire to accompany her on the journey into the unknown. They proceeded wordlessly, past the highly fortified Oval Office, and into the East Wing. Agents were heading in the opposite direction, responding to Brandon’s command to reinforce the perimeter.

Sari faced a daunting wood-latticed door. “This is the one?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Vandevire replied.

“Are you sure?”

Vandevire looked at the door, then at the apprehensive Sari Marika. Wondering if he was about to step into a world unrecognizable to him. Or anyone else, for that matter. Envisioning an imminent, acute cessation of normal activities. His morning jogging routine, the smiling Mongolian server over on Connecticut Avenue, the computer program tapping into urban migration estimates, which kept him company before bedtime. All gone? Then there was Carlita, the attractive Honduran-American specialist working in the new Legislative Liaison office. Occupying his dreams for a month now, as he let it build up, to the day he would finally ask her out. Carlita soon to be past tense too?

Sari cringed as she gave the door three soft knocks. Brandon opened it two feet to allow his accomplices to slip in.

The vision of the dead man, head oozing blood on the Persian rug, was frozen in Vandevire's mind. He felt every pore welling up. His body in perpetual alert.

"He's the official responsible for the slaughter?" Sari asked.

"And the bigger one that was about to happen," Brandon replied.

Sari walked up to Brandon and placed an arm gently around his waist. Silent Solidarity. For Sari, instant justification for her compulsive assignment. Vandevire felt swept by an involuntary force, but friendly nonetheless. Primed by a subconsciousness already alerted to the tragedy on Constitution Avenue. Significantly, neither Brandon nor Sari questioned what he'd do. They trusted him to the end. For Vandevire, reality and life histories began at that instant.

"What do we do with it?" Sari asked sourly.

"How would I know?" Brandon replied, trying to force a laugh. He snapped his fingers. "We may have a chance after all. Don't leave this room and keep the door locked."

It took 20 minutes for Brandon to find Joseph Rappaport. He was seated in a deserted steward's chambers, head buried against a formica table. Brandon helped himself to a cup of coffee from the vending machine, then sat across from Rappaport, who looked up in time to take the cup.

"They asked me to open fire on hundreds of unarmed demonstrators," Brandon said, drilling Rappaport with his eyes. "The order came from the President."

"And?"

"And what? What civilized person would even feel the need to answer such a question?"

Rappaport looked away. "Something tells me I'd better not inquire about the moment."

"It was him—or them." Pointing outside.

Rappaport fell silent. Clearly at a crossroads.

“Mr. Brandon, I can arrange your rendezvous with the lethal injection machine. Guts? I don’t know if that’s the word.”

“You obviously have great compassion and concern for the impact of your power,” Brandon said measuredly. “Do you serve a rogue who tripped uninvited into the White House? Or the Constitution of the United States and the millions it’s designed to protect?”

Rappaport blinked rapidly, his left-hand trembling, as he contemplated his own great leap.

“Do you have any proof whatsoever?” He asked, focusing.

“Innocent bodies on Constitution Avenue isn’t evidence enough?”

“Well – we have holdover Exeter appointees lingering around. Amendment 25, Section 4, perhaps.”

“What’s that?”

“Unfitness of the President to Discharge Duties of Office.”

Sari was on her knees wiping away blood stains with Dory Kaplan’s silk scarves, still unclaimed. Vandevire struggled to wrap the dark-hued Persian rug around the body.

The silver knobs rattled an instant before the door opened. Vandevire and Sari froze. But it was Brandon.

“They’re going to catch us,” Sari said, pushing hair out of her eyes.

“We’re doing the right thing. It doesn’t matter,” Brandon answered.

Dory Kaplan’s closet was the only place to stash the body. It even had a lock. Property Inventory surely wouldn’t be working too hard on this day. Done in three minutes.

Brandon walked over to the gold-plated phone, hit three digits to secure the line, then dialed.

He smiled at the sound of Tygrier’s voice.

“Dickerson’s going down. You don’t want to miss it, I’m sure.” There was silence. So he added, “your stuff’s in safekeeping in the vault. Some nickel you threw at Joey Raps. A nickel no more.”

“Impeachment?” He finally asked.

“Nah. Too slow.”

“Oh, baby– I’m on my way.”

“Come by the west gate. You’ll find some friendly EIB faces.”



“Oh yeah? What friends?” Vandevire said dubiously after Brandon hung up.

“Ten aces to play, Austin. Guys who’d leap for me no matter what.” He preceded to make two cryptic calls over his radio.

Brandon’s radio beeped. It was a Captain named Jarred.

“Your predecessor is calling from afar,” Jarred reported.

“Bingo? What does he want?”

“Claims to have evidence implicating the President in crimes.”

“Don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“He claims you do, sir.”

Brandon pondered this bizarre call: Another loyalty test?

“You’re not supposed to be using these phones, Ex-Director McBride.”

“Hi, Brandon. You thought I’d destroy those burrus tapes, didn’t you? Two hundred grand, and they’re yours. And yes, my Caribbean bank takes treasury notes. Call it consulting work.”

“I’ll need more information on these shocking allegations,” Brandon said. “Leave a number where you can be reached.”

“Dickerson fever got you, too, huh?” Bingo said loudly, then hung up.

Vandevire and Sari had heard the exchange. “Big problem,” Vandevire commented.

Answered Brandon, “Joey Raps wants to convene Cabinet Members by 5:00 to discuss a fitness for duty declaration. We haven’t got until five. – Sari, how about your father’s playmates? How quickly can they be mobilized?”

Sari look him like he was nuts.

“Sari, we can be choosy about friends all we want. After we save a few hundred—or thousand--lives.”

“Um, okay – uh, they’re a pretty tight bunch. Drewbie can get some guys together in an hour. If I can locate him.”

Brandon handed Sari a secure phone. “Tell them we’re arranging an escorted White House tour. Just for them.”

Sari waited a few seconds for her fingers to stop shaking, then dialed them number. She took a deep breath to focus on her voice: low and deliberate. Voice message.

After 5 minutes which seemed like an afternoon, the phone rang. Sari lifted the receiver carefully, hesitating, afraid to speak into it.

“Sari baby. What a pleasant intrusion,” Drewbie began.

“Hi Drewbie. You once promised me if I gave you an instruction, you’d follow it. I need that assurance now.”

“Guys, Sari’s come home!”

“Drewbie! – Yes or no?”

“Uh, yeah!”

“No deviation. Okay?”

“Sure. And what might the occasion be today?”

“Your friend. The President of the United States.”

The corridors were quiet as they proceeded toward the West Wing. An occasional staffer would pass in front of them. Eyes filled with alarm, bags, and briefcases fat, hurried footsteps toward exits. As they approached the Oval Office area, agents were more visible. Brandon didn’t break stride. And neither did Vandevire and Sari at his heels.

Vandevire found himself in familiar turf: The Constituent Affairs section. Dull yellow lights burned in some offices. He saw backs of people in front of windows. Familiarity fed Vandevire’s strength.

“Your command is holding,” he commented lowly to Brandon.

“Why wouldn’t it? – Enjoy it now, because by sunset it might tear right down the middle. Gun battles in this building. Don’t be surprised.”

“I could try to mobilize some of my people here.”

Brandon pondered. “Just feed into their indignation. Not a word about our plans, until Joey Raps arranges some high-level buy-ins.”

“Okay.”

Sari hovered near the west entrance. Body stiff and apprehensive. Not in anticipation of Drewbie Montgomery’s arrival, but in fear of it.

Brandon rapped once on the door of a secluded office. Rappaport cracked the door, then took Brandon gently by the shoulder.

"It's a logistical nightmare, Brandon. Half the Cabinet members can't even be found."

"What's the alternative?"

"Overflow mobs past Georgetown and Dupont Circle. Gearing up, they tell me, for serious civil disobedience," Rappaport said. "There's a flurry of isolated skirmishes. Worse, Dickerson's Joint Chiefs are in touch with Quantico, Belvoir, Myer. Thousands of battle-ready soldiers are set to cross the bridges. That maniac in the Oval Office is flirting with civil war."

"How many hours. —"

"How about minutes? We're on the brink here. I've managed to pull together a meeting with 15 key advisors at 3:00. Cabinet members are slowly coming in."

"How can you be sure they'll lean our way?" Brandon asked.

"Well, out of this bunch, 11 have already offered their resignations in protest of the shootings. Now, how about those Aces you claim? They ready to roll?"

"As we speak, sir."

"For the big moment, we need a press conference. That means auxiliary hookups and airlifts of White House correspondents onto the roof. Can you arrange it?"

Brandon sighed. "Yeah."

Vandevire returned to his office, to the buzzing of an overhead light. He had a brief flash of terror about surveillance and the walls having ears. He envisioned intensifying footsteps. Stopping at his door. Stopping to arrest him.

The extraneous cranial activity triggered recollections of a magic number. Patson's private phone.

"Hello?" Came a meek woman's voice over the other end.

"Is Mr. Patson available?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"Can you take a written message for him?"

"— Yes."

"My name is V-A-N-D-E-V-I-R-E, a friend who works at the White House. Tell him that I have reached those crossroads he warned me about and need his help. Please, it's urgent."

"I'll try to page him."

20 minutes later the phone rang. Vandevire took a deep breath, organized his words, and slowly drew the receiver to his ear.

"This is Vandevire."

"I was going to ask you why you're still on the wrong side of the fence," came the familiar voice of Patson. "But it would be useful for us so-called crazies out here to get a firsthand glimpse of all the short circuits on the mainframe of civilization. Even the basest of common thieves will look for a semblance of a pretext before blowing your head off."

"How are you holding up out there?"

"Earning my keep at the office. Just your typical day trying to keep millions of people from possibly walking off a cliff, and not knowing which directions the cliffs are. So, before telling me whether you've met your quota of emergency decrees, do tell me you've a good reason for having me paged."

"There are key people here at the White house prepared to negotiate, Mr. Patson."

"Then what are those tanks and howitzers doing in Arlington?"

"My friends want to confer with you immediately. Your own private helicopter," Vandevire invited.

"I really don't think so."

"I'm the last person to carry Dickerson's banner. Surely you know that."

"I believe you but am highly suspicious of your assessment of the dynamics at work. Give a crazed megalomaniac the largest arsenal in the world, and all the goody-goody conferences in the world won't change a thing."

"Things are moving fast in here. You can help them move faster."

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"We're working on network hookups. For a regime-related announcement to reach hundreds of languages and rock a few pillars."

"Let me give you another number."

Brandon took Sari quietly into a deserted alcove. "Are you okay?" Sari nodded. Though she could never recall her heart racing so fast.

Brandon took a .356 caliber Tiger Snub from his coat pocket and handed it to Sari.

“Ever use a weapon before?” He asked.

“My father tried to teach me. I wasn’t a willing student. I am now.”

The first contingent of white House correspondents landed on the roof.

Brandon proceeded assertively, and Sari more tentatively, into the corridor facing the Oval Office. The contingent of agents was eight strong, not including the two EIB men standing discretely at the other end. Tacitly acknowledging Brandon with nods.

Brandon beckoned to the Captain in charge.

“I’m taking personal charge of security for the President. You and your men are needed on the roof to help monitor this afternoon’s press conference. Report to Captain Loomis.”

This 25-year bulldog-like veteran gave Brandon arched eyebrows before pulling his men away. Brandon waited until the coast was clear, then made a quick slashing motion across his throat to the EIB men waiting beyond. One of the men quietly brought a transmitter to his mouth.

Sari and Brandon positioned themselves on either side of the door to the Oval Office – Sari staring at Brandon without respite. Brandon took a deep breath of his own, counted to three, then opened the door.

Into a spirited discussion between six men clustered around the middle of an aircraft-carrier-of-a-table. Five wore military regalia of different colors. The lean, aging President seated at the right, and the first thing that came to Sari’s mind was a lizard: Slick grey hair, shiny matching suit, sharp nose, pinched mouth, and small, beady eyes. Aimed directly at her and Brandon in obvious annoyance, as not a sound was heard, save an occasional blip from the dancing computer screens.

“Sir. The whole computer system is down,” one of the Generals announced.

The two loyal EIB agents slipped in behind Brandon, then closed the door.

President Dickerson rose a might unsteadily, his face turning color. “Just what is going on here, Brandon? This is a command post and cannot be interrupted.”

“We have possible sabotage, Mr. President,” Brandon said almost casually.

“Who is the moron responsible for preventing such fiascos? That person is you, Brandon. You will be held accountable. Fix the problem now!”

Sari studied Dickerson, searching for some clue of any redeeming qualities.

“We have a national emergency, Brandon!”

“I know that, Mr. President. That’s why it’s imperative everyone remain calm,” Brandon said. “I’m confident I can deal with the problem in a matter of minutes. First of all, I need the Chiefs to accompany the two agents into the adjacent office.”

“What for?”

“This is a mandatory security precaution. Please, sir, I insist that you let me do my job.”

“– Alright, Brandon. But get this equipment fixed.”

The mumbling military men walked out reluctantly with the two agents, who closed the door. Footsteps and voices gradually fading.

“Now, Mr. President, let’s get started. Please sit down and relax. Everything’s cool.”

Brandon drew a silenced jetpack automatic. A second later Sari reached in her black handbag for the Tiger Snub.

“Wait a minute. These Decembrists have got me hostage,” Dickerson said to some unseen third party. While the President stood in shock, mumbling vague staccatos, Sari awkwardly groped at him in search of weapons.

“You will not be harmed,” Brandon said. “Out of respect for the office we’ll ensure that your basic comforts and dignities are maintained. Please, sit down and await the verdict on the Fitness for Office petition.”

Hostile eyes danced back and forth between this rugged man resembling an indigenous warrior and an Asian woman he had some vague recollection of. “– And you honestly believe you can get away with this? You are insane!”

“Out of proper protocol, Mr. President, we will allow you time to prepare a statement in your own behalf and appear for testimony when needed. Constitutional protections and provisions will be maintained.”

“No. I’ll just keep screaming and screaming until the rightful authorities place you traitors under arrest. You’re not going to shoot the President of the United States. You wouldn’t dare! – Help!”

“Don’t degrade yourself by forcing us to place you in restraints.”

“Look with respect at the leader of the most powerful nation in the history of the Earth! Subject to my authority, paid by me for your services! Obey my command to cease and desist! Ten seconds. After which there will be no possibility of rehabilitation, of pardon. – Now, what are you waiting for?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. President.”

“That’s it then. I’ll personally oversee your execution. You have my solemn oath on it.”

Sari felt something welling up inside her. Thoughts of things that could go wrong. And the unthinkable: that this monster could prevail. Fumie would never forgive her. A powerful urge prompted Sari to draw her pistol within 12 inches of him.

The President sat down unsteadily. The barrel of Sari's Tiger Snub descended in synchrony with the sharp tip of Dickerson's nose.

"Is there anything you need, Mr. President?" Sari said measuredly. "May we have the stewards fix you up a nice meal? A drink? May we bring you some books from the library? How about movie tapes from your personal collection? Please, Mr. President. Is there anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable?"

"There is one thing." Dickerson squinted a smile. "Get that gun out of my face, honey. Please."

Getting used to the slick communication devices was a chore for Vandevire. Creatures from Jupiter or something: Knocks on his office door interrupted his concentration.

"Who's there?" Vandevire asked, gripped in a natural murmur of alarm.

The door opened for a trusted young staffer. "Something's not right, Austin. Come check this out."

Vandevire stepped into the hall. There were four men huddled 50 feet down the corridor to their left. Speaking in soft, conspiratorial tones.

"Who are they?" Vandevire whispered to his colleague.

"The guy with the bulldog face is a Service Captain. The other three I've seen come out of the basement."

"The Ex's personal detail?"

"Never knew any of the Ex's people to come out of there."

"Don't look at them," Vandevire said to his colleague, facing him to the side. "Let's go down to the snack bar. Take our time."

They started their stroll, keeping their heads forward. Passing the foursome within six feet. Voices so soft Vandevire couldn't make out their words. But these rugged, blazer-clad dudes were armed and ready for action.

"Juarez!" Came a loud cry behind them. Vandevire turned and beheld a hefty Black man rapidly approaching the foursome. "Juarez. I need to talk to you in private," the Black man said stridently.

The eldest of the foursome gave the approaching Black man a crooked smile. “Mr. Tygrier! What a pleasure!” The whirling body motion made Vandevire duck. He heard the shattering aftermath.

The man named Tygrier was on the floor, bleeding on the carpet.

“The Oval Office!” Juarez called as they ran down the corridor.

Two more loud shots. The second found the bulldog-face Captain in the back, dropping him to an instant death. Vandevire saw Tygrier, his arms and gun extended. Trembling now. A third shot. But it came nowhere near the Juarez crew, their retreat as slick as an icepick to the heart.

“They’re shooting in the White House!” Some woman yelled. A small crowd was rapidly forming. Some shrieked, some tended to the fallen Tygrier.

Vandevire sprinted into his office. Frantically worked the transmitter. “Trouble is roaring your way, Juno. Big time. Do you read? Over – Please acknowledge – SOS – Over –.”

Juarez and his men tore into the gilded corridor, then slamming on the breaks at the sight of a blazer-clad patrolling agent.

Brandon’s ace came up firing his automatic pistol. Juarez spun to his left and down, but his men weren’t as quick. One became swiss cheese and the second reeled from a shoulder wound. A kneeling Juarez got off a rapid-fire round of his own, dropping the EIB man.

Echoes of gunshots were audible in the Press Room where the short list of correspondents were assembled. There were sudden rumblings inside. Cameras from networks and PBS suddenly roving.

“Please do not react that sound,” one of Brandon’s EIB men announced from the front. “An exhibit in the Rose Garden. Nothing to be alarmed about.”

Making things much worse. Secret Service agents inside began exchanging hard glances.

Rappaport, occupying the erect podium the President used, assertively grabbed the microphone: “The noise outside is precisely what this press briefing is all about. Now if I can have your attention, we can get started –.”

Five agents jumped up to respond knee-jerk to the shots.

“Will the Secret Service agents roaming around face the microphone? – Attention!” Rappaport yelled. The agents paused to face their Chief of Staff. “– Where are you going? You have standing orders to remain at your posts. We’re in a state of crisis, so you will do exactly as you are told!”



The door to the Oval Office flew open with one violent surge. Juarez's henchman, shoulder wound and all, twirled in, bucking right and low, gun in hand. Brandon was ready for this moving target, riddling him with a round before he could squeeze the trigger.

But Juarez was right behind him, blasting away, forcing Brandon into a lifesaving flip over the conference table, and a quick roll and leap behind the President's desk.

In the same breath, President Dickerson launched himself at the briefly-stunned Sari Marika, knocking the gun from her hand. While Juarez was crouched low, gunning for Brandon, Sari fell on the loose pistol, curling her body around it protectively. Dickerson dove after it like raw meat, and clumsily struggled to pry Sari's arms away. He finally used brute force, twisting her arm behind her back until she cried out, then lifting her off the ground with one arm around her waist and the other arm lodged under her neck, effectively immobilizing her.

Every few seconds Juarez would see Brandon peeking out from behind the desk. But he was astute enough not to empty his clip.

Juarez smiled slowly. He sensed he had the edge now. Never taking his eye off the regal desk, he pulled the door shut and raised the radio to his mouth with his left hand.

"Activate band 15. Repeat. Activate band. This is Raul Juarez, DEA Agent No. 313. We have a Code Blue emergency.

Brandon appeared as a blur and then came the roar of lead, forcing Juarez to dive in an instant toward the table. He returned fire at the desk. Juarez could hear Brandon reloading, but in his kneeling position he could do little about it.

"Juarez. Are you ready for an instant replay?"

"What do you mean?" Juarez asked unevenly, knowing full well what he meant. He lunged and snatched the Tiger Snub in his left hand.

"First of all, we've disabled your system, Juarez. Now---Activate band 15. Repeat. Activate band 15. This is Juno Brandon. We have a Code Blue Emergency."

Juarez suddenly rose, grabbing Sari Marika by the hair, then mercilessly yanking her from the President's grasp, and locking her head in his arms. He lodged the pistol against her temple.

"One more word, Brandon, and your girlfriend is a cripple for life---Give it up, Brandon. It's over. You haven't a prayer."

Juarez glanced quickly at Dickerson. He was shaking and appeared almost disoriented.

"Listen to me, Mr. President. Just walk out that door and start yelling for help. It's that simple, sir, to bring this to a close. Juno Brandon will not shoot the President of the United States."

"Wanna bet?"

And Dickerson hesitated, looking back at Juarez.

There were suddenly four firm knocks on the door. Everyone in the room froze.

“Identify yourself,” Juarez barked.

“I’m from Communications,” came the raised voice. “We heard there were threats against the President. We wanted to see if he’s okay.”

And Dickerson went off: “Help! Get me out of here! I don’t want to die! – Oh please, please hurry!”

Juarez’s smile grew wider with each babbling syllable.

“Hear that, Mr. No-Name? Do you need any more proof? We have the assailants pinned down but need reinforcements.”

“We’re five strong, including security.”

“Okay. I’m going to crack the door and carefully bring the President out. On the count of three. One – two – three –.”

Austin Vandevire unleashed chemical mace in Raul Juarez’s eyes. Brandon was on him in an instant, pummeling him with rabbit punches, until he was unconscious.

Dickerson, panicked, reached down for the Tiger Snub. Sari went for it, too. And their hands touched it simultaneously. –

Vandevire leaped into the fray, knocking them both backwards. The President struggled to his feet, but Vandevire dropped him with an ankle tackle.

Sari picked up the Tiger Snub, squinting, grimacing.

BLAM!

All was suddenly quiet in the room. Except for President Dickerson, openly sobbing and watching blood ooze from a wound above the left knee.

Sari gasped, then looked over her shoulder at the crowd of people, mostly Brandon’s loyal Service agents.

“Sari. You just shot the President of the United States,” Brandon said disgustedly.

“I did not!”

“Sari.”

“It just went off. I – I didn’t mean to shoot. Oh no. Please get a medic.”

“It’s my fault,” Brandon said. “Just give me the weapon, Sari.”

Dickerson kept sobbing.

“It’s only a flesh wound. Our fearless leader will survive,” Brandon said in his bored voice.

“Bad public relations. Big time,” Vandevire said, trying to be cute. Except nobody laughed.

Joe Rappaport stood in the bright lights. Tie askew, tweed faded, but lined face dignified, if worn. Room silent, as flashes hit Rappaport like time-warp lightning.

The instant news: The President wasn’t there.

“Good afternoon, fellow Americans. My name is Joseph Rappaport, Chief of White House Staff. An emergency exists in our great land. There has been much civil unrest, but much based upon, I believe, in misunderstanding which we can now begin to heal. I regret to inform you that, after consultation with some of the President’s closest advisors, including the eight women and six men seated behind me, we all have been forced to initiate unprecedented proceedings under Amendment 25, Section 4, of the United States Constitution regarding the fitness of the President of the United States to fulfill his duties of office. This extreme declaration was initiated only after a consensus was reached that the President was in such a mental and emotional state that his decisions had a reckless impact on the orderly workings of government and created unprecedented life-threatening dangers to many innocent persons. Indeed, it was a deranged rampage by the President which prompted the needless and tragic massacre of unarmed protesters on Constitution Avenue, an action which has threatened to tear America at the seams. This fitness for duty initiative was undertaken while the President was conferring with America’s top military leaders, ordering combat troops to engage, and ultimately suppress demonstrators with deadly force, causing potentially hundreds of innocent deaths. By meeting the Joint Chiefs of Staff, without either the consultation with or approval by the officials presiding at this press conference, or Congress, President Dickerson was preparing the way for military rule and the suspension of Constitutional protections. Later in this conference, I will present to you an eyewitness to this recent calamity, Mr. Juno Brandon, America’s most decorated hero of modern times, who has received medals of valor for actions in this Philippines Skirmish as well as countering domestic terrorist threats.

“This council of advisors has elected me as Interim President. However, this is only a temporary measure while we initiate legal proceedings spelled out in the Constitution. I will request that the Congress meet in special session. They will then have 48 hours to determine whether the suspension of powers should remain permanent and will determine supplemental courses of action under the Constitution.”

## The Vices and The Vice

“The next two hours will be the most critical in the history of our great nation,” said Rappaport into the camera. “As a move to deescalate the climate of conflict, tension, and violence in our streets I am hereby ordering, as interim Commander-in-Chief, all activated military personnel to return to their barracks. Soldiers will be authorized to fire on civilians only when fired upon, or in the case of imminent threats to life and limb. I further order that all charges be dropped against Emma Gonzalez, Jim Panther, Mary Nolan, and Richard Smith of the Lasa Light organization. The Constitutional right to protest will not be abridged. But I am asking each American, pleading to you, to leave the streets, return to business as usual, and allow the restoration and the strengthening of our democratic and Constitutional process.”

“Brando, come in.” It was Vandevire’s voice over Brandon’s ear receiver. Shaking Brandon from the riveting scene of Rappaport’s address.

“Over, A.V.”

“Patson’s on the roof.”

“What!”

“In the craziness I forgot to tell you.”

“You invited him?”

“Didn’t you invite the Marika hoods? I think we’re even.”

“Sari’s idea. Okay, I lied. I think we all screwed up. Moments of insanity in the midst of insanity.”

“Sorry.”

“I mean, Patson came right into Dickerson’s womb, based on your word? That’s serious trust.”

“Call it subliminal whistleblower cultural bonds.”

Brandon said, “We can’t let Patson anywhere near Rappaport. Everything we’ve done will look like a Lasa Light coup d’état.”

“Dickerson getting shot and now this. I think we’re screwed, Brandon. We’re gonna fall hard, aren’t we?”

“God help us.” Brandon made a sign of the cross. “No, God help us, please.” Brandon stilled, contemplating what could be an unpleasant rest of his life, wondering whether God would ever forgive him for the child deaths in the Philippines, or even for his lustful thoughts of Joy. Future Wife? Brandon’s deep breaths concealed pleas for forgiveness mercy.

“Brandon? Are you there?”

“Yeah, Austin. I’ll have Louis round up a couple agents and escort Patson to the library.”

Two White House medics were in the Oval Office tending to President Dickerson’s leg wound, while Vandevire’s colleagues stared on with suspended disbelief. Three armed EIB agents were with Vandevire and Sari. Juarez and the Joint Chiefs of Staff sat quietly, handcuffed.

A portly Black agent heard Brandon’s command and made for the door.

“I’ll join you, Louis,” said Vandevire.

Outside, it was all spinning. People running to the left. People running to the right. Heated voices between two agents and two rough jean-clad men: Drew Montgomery and Mal Syndirene.

Louis, the Black agent, was beside himself. “Brandon’s got to be nuts. Get the Asian woman out here.”

Sari appeared and they came running!

“Sari! How’re you doing, Sugar?” Drewbie planted a wet kiss on her cheek. He and Syndirene wore red bandanas. Ready for war.

“Who are these guys?” Asked an EIB agent.

“Juno approved this,” said Sari. “Could everyone lower those weapons, please?”

They did. Except for Drewbie, who drew a snubnose .38 from his army jacket.

“All of you, drop your weapon,” said Drewbie, waving his, as Syndirene closed the door. “Put them down!” Hard eyes, guns lowered. Syndirene took the weapons from the agents.

“Someone shot Dickerson!” Syndirene shrieked. Eyes gravitated toward Sari. “Sari? It was you?”

“It was an accident. The heat of the moment,” Sari said, suppressing tears. “I didn’t mean to shoot anyone.”

One of the medics had a tray of food for the President.

Syndirene lifted the gold cover from the goldplate. “Hey Drewbie, let me tell you about this ginza gork’s talents. Man walks up to his friends, points at a rock and says I can make that taste like watermelon. The friend bites the rock and says, hey not bad. Then the cook points to a bunch of weed and says, I can make them taste like Caesar’s salad. The friend chomps on the mary jane and says, hey, what a delicacy. The friend finally grabs an apple and says, okay, hot shot. Make this apple taste like a corpse. The friend looks at it, takes a bite. Phuey! He spits it out. This thing tastes like a live person. Then the cook patiently pats his friend’s shoulder and whispers in his ear: No man, first you go barbeque it. Gasoline and fire.”

“You guys like recycling jokes or what?” One of the EIB agents said. “I remember that from my kindergarten days.”

“Yeah, Mr. Prezzy-dent. Sorry to hear about your accident,” Drewbie said. “Does it hurt?” And Syndirene screeched laughter.

“Oh no, the thing went off!” Came Drewbie’s falsetto, imitating Sari. “Oh heavens, what have I done! Oooh, it went bang!”

Dickerson smiled nervously. “Hey boys! This confirms what my ancestor who fought in the Big War, always said: Never met a Jap that could shoot straight.”

Syndirene whirled his gun around and CRACK! A bullet tore into Dickerson’s left shoulder.

“You shot me. Ah! Ah! You pig!”

“I ain’t no Japanese, Mr. President. That bullet hit its target. Cause you ain’t earned a quick death.”

Dickerson, whimpering loudly, began sliding toward the back wall.

Vandevire was feeling uncontrollable needles. Reaching into his jacket pocket for the pistol Brandon had given him.

Drew said, “This next bullet is for Fumie Marika. Who your henchman tortured and raped, Mr. Dickerson. For you, too, Sari.”

Dickerson raised trembling hands as Montgomery aimed the weapon.

“If this is for me,” Sari said, “May I take the shot?”

“Hey! Whew!” Syndirene cried out.

“You all pledged allegiance to me,” Sari continued. “Then I order you to give me the gun. Now that you reminded me of that atrocity in my family, let me do this right.”

Syndirene was almost giddy in handing the gun to Sari.

Sari determinedly aimed the pistol at President Dickerson. “How does it feel, Mr. Dickerson? Wondering when and where I am going to shoot you? In this little moment to poetic justice maybe you can think about those horrible things you’ve done and what you deserve.”

Sari drew the gun closer to Dickerson. The gun came within six inches, as Dickerson whined.

Then she whirled toward Drewbie. “Give me your gun, Drew.”

“What?”

“It’s over. Put your gun down. Right now!”

Drewbie laughed nervously. “You’re defending---HIM?!”

“We’re not assassinating the President, Drew.”

Montgomery turned his gun on Dickerson. “Darling, you ain’t got the guts to shoot me.”

BLAM! Montgomery dropped from a bullet in Austin Vandevire’s gun.

Syndirene raised his gun and then BLAM! Fell from the second bullet in Vandevire’s pistol.

In the library several reporters milled around. Worked some fancy equipment. Patson was front and center, at the head of the room. Louis and his two agents glanced at each other, while Patson flashed them an occasional weak smile.

Louis finally picked up on it. “This a communication hook up, Dr. Patson?”

“Uh-huh. We’re linking into cable news—and galaxies beyond.”

“No way. We’re not permitting it.”

“I hain’t neither the time nor inclination to obey your illegal order.”

Louis had the choice of initiating violence against a man in total control of the Washington streets, or yielding. He stared Patson down for a few seconds, then shook his head, resigned.

The bright light hit Patson, and memories conjured that momentous Friday a few days earlier.

Patson was hole up in an Adams-Morgan brick high rise, papers and phones flying, people running everywhere. The brain trust of Lasa Light, organizing the Big Bang.

There came a knock on the door. A bearded philosopher and opened it and then yelled, it’s the man!

Patson chuckled at his colleague’s histrionics, then approached the door warily. There was a man in a uniform. Nothing to do with law enforcement.

“Special delivery to Dr. Patson from Former First Lady Lydia Exeter.”

“Correction: She still is the First Lady,” Patson answered, then tore away the strictly confidential seal and read Lady Exeter’s handwritten note.

“Your support and kindness to our family during Martin’s passing will be forever remembered. Martin already penned this letter and planned a special dinner for you when the tragedy happened. He

was going to send this to you and tell you in person. And by the way, Jeremy really enjoyed those Cleveland playoff tickets. God bless you. We love you.”

Patson lamented this dinner that never happened. Then caught the President’s contrite words a page after the pleasantries.

“I can’t begin to fathom the pain that I caused you. My apology to you was quite backhanded and inadequate. I needlessly insulted you, violated our trust, and walked away from our deep friendship at the exact moment that our bond of trust, teamwork, could have transformed this great nation, in a spectacle not seen since George Washington.

“And the American people didn’t deserve me. I know now that I made too many compromises of convenience. Made deals that were easy, followed traditions because they were traditions. But in the end, I missed opportunities to take out great nation to higher levels of moral authority, of citizen empowerment.

“I have let so many people down. But this very communication is borne out my hope, even conviction, that it is not too late. Inspiration can rise from the ashes of my neglect. As long as I am humble and honest about my Presidential failings.

“At our planned dinner, I wish to seek your advice and counsel on how to present this apology to the American people. I am reaching the nadir of my reign. The American people won’t have me, and I will be very publicly, after consultations with you, following in the footsteps of President Johnson in 1968, and endorsing a more worthy leader in the upcoming election. I want this public confession to be my greatest legacy.

“Patson, you were so right. Right to stand for economic and political empowerment of the disenfranchised, without touching even a dirty nickel. Right for saying that this immovable Oligarchy is the problem, not the solution. For saying that compromising on tactics is prudent but compromising on principle is death.”

“But you are wrong in one area. You need to forgive me, as hard and undeserving it is. Don’t do it for me; rather yourself. Failure to forgive will pull you down not only in this world, but in your very grave.”

“My total forgiveness and confession have been very liberating. If I drop dead tonight, I know I am free. God has given me great peace.”

“As a gesture of our bonds of friendship and spiritual bonds, please accept this gift. It is the crucifix I wore for all those years as Air Force Chaplain.”

The tiny cameras rolled, as Patson concluded the reading of the letter to the universe beyond. Then he read from another source:



“Clyde Martinez, Age 44, father of two daughters. Leader of church clothing drive. No criminal record. No history of violence. Estimate time of sudden death: 3 seconds. By a soldier’s bullet. Innocent murdered by government agent on Constitution Avenue. Melissa Garvey. Age: 14 months. Cause of death: Broken vessels in the brain and lung failure from the impact of bullet from government killer on Constitution Avenue. Margaret Evans. Age: 3.”

Patson concluded his reading of excerpts from President Martin Exeter’s letter. The only sound in that library was the rustling of Patson’s papers. And barely a murmur from the estimated 800 million viewers.

“This is my final act of love for a dear friend,” Patson said, “To show his final act of love with each of you.” He held up the pages for the camera so people could see the genuine handwriting.

“True friends carry with them unique bonds. Martin’s and mine were the handwritten letters to each other. We would never exchange electronic communications. It was like our own private tattoos; our own private signature with every word. And in my Oneida nation, a signature, a word, is as good as gold.

“I cannot imagine a more courageous, compelling, and citizen-inspiring Presidential memoir than the one we heard today. President Exeter, I know up there in heaven, you share my tears over the twin vices of government oppression and street violence we witnessed today. But we both know there is a stronger moral voice of citizen empowerment over every societal institution; citizen empowerment over a more accountable government and a more accountable corporate sector, and coming from that higher power of love and source from God and Jesus Christ, who paid for our sins and is our hope for this life and most importantly the next wonderful eternal life.

“Some people don’t know how to accept grace. Some don’t know how to return grace. But let me try.

“Thank you, President Exeter, for loving me in spite of my neglect and arrogance.”

“Thank you, Interim President Joe Rappaport, for freeing the Lasa Light 4.

“Thank you all of you who took brave actions, for justice against a President who committed murder in the name of the U.S. government.

“Thank you to all of you in the Lasa Light, for your insights, love of country, love of liberty, love of justice, your hard work, your courage to stand up with a nonviolent check on government corruption and abuse.

“The grace I am returning is by humbly asking Lasa Light to suspend all protest activities. I ask all of you heroes in the street, please go home. I salute law enforcement and government workers getting blamed for the horrors of the power wielders. This is for them. Why don’t we all support the Constitutional process for transfer of power and gear up for the national debate.”

Patson froze the TV cameras in his pulsating eyes for a full five seconds. Pointing now. “When you do convene, Uncle Sam, remember, we’re not your vassals. You don’t run us. We the citizens run you. Forget that, and the next Lasa rally will be with 10 million.” Patson quietly walked away.

Brandon saw the wounded Sam Tygrier stretched out next to John Dickerson. Tygrier’s wound, a little deeper than Dickerson’s, but no more life threatening. Tygrier lifted his thumb skyward, much like an NFL football player carted off the field on a stretcher.

Brandon looked closer, smiling, on his fallen colleague. Tygrier offered no words, only slow blinking eyes.

“You dropped your nickel,” Brandon said, resting Tygrier’s badge on his chest.

Tygrier twisted his body and the badge slid to the floor.

“When the recommendation comes for your Congressional Medal of Honor for Heroism today – maybe you’ll change your mind.”

“Don’t think so, Brandon,” Tygrier finally ventured. “Fishing and grandkids on my pension’s a lot better.”

Sari Marika had Austin Vandevire by the hand, leading him to a particularly hollowed place.

Calamity often drove special friends apart. More often, though, closer together. Vandevire was acutely aware of Sari’s gentle-fingered grasp. Fine eastern beauty. Not that he hadn’t noticed before in a brief rush of seconds.

The President’s bedroom carried a deep flowery scent, soft lights. The giant bed so soft and satiny. The room was ghostly silent.

Sari sat Vandevire down with her, giving the mattress a little bounce.

“I wonder how many Presidents made love to other women, not their wives, right here at this spot.” Sari said, looking up dreamily. “John Dickerson hasn’t been here long enough, I think, with his wife leaving him six months ago – Austin, what do they call a First Lady who’s estranged?”

“Uh – First Separated Lady?”

“Right,” Sari laughed. “These ultimate secrets will not remain ultimate secrets forever. There’s a world beyond that knows – right here in this room.”

“Mmmm... Sari, what do you think of that common stereotype, you know, Asian women don’t date black guys?”

“Well, to personalize it, I’ve never thought of you as black guy, Just Austin. That’s not being noble – I’m usually racially conscious of other people. I think that’s normal, regardless of all the political posturing about color-blindness. – Austin, what really are you asking?”

“Nothing more than what I said.”

Sari looked away. “Austin, all I know about jail is the TV images. I’ve never been close to one – Austin, do you think we’ll get one, you know, with the open meadows and recreation facilities? Or will they cast us into some filthy hell with psychos and killers? – I didn’t mean to shoot the President. Honestly, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Austin!”

“What I meant is, you never made a willfully malicious decision to pull the trigger. But there was a small part of your unconscious energy, perhaps, charging up the gun.”

“You know what I mean.”

“And you know what I mean.”

“Yes. The worthlessness of instruments and destruction. All the more dangerous when in the hands of immature jerks like me.”

“The scale of Lady Justice may tip a little against you with your wounding of our esteemed President,” Austin said. “But it will lean harder the other way, toward you, by saving the President’s life.”

“Vengeance for Fumie was all that consumed me in these past few weeks. More important than you, Juno, my job, even my very life – Pastor Diaz at your church was so right about revenge, it’s consequences.”

Vandevire said wickedly, “You mean, you felt exhilaration watching Dickerson laying there bleeding?”

“Oh yes, sweet revenge,” Sari said. “Only I felt no satisfaction at all. Moreover, all those previous feelings of vengeance. Totally worthless. Totally empty.”

“Sari, I have a need to get away from this craziness,” Vandevire said, standing up. “Step back from this piece of history, sort this all out. I’ll be sneaking out of the grounds. Blending in with the crowds out there. – Want to come with me?”

“On the subject of Pastor Diaz, I finally made a decision. It all rang true, so next time I go to your church it will be as a member.”

“No way! Didn’t say a word to me,” Vandevire said, smiling.

“Wanted to surprise you with a written invitation to my baptism. You’ll still get the invitation, deluxe. – But I will not be leaving with you, Austin. Pastor Diaz’s most powerful words were the importance of personal responsibility. I will stay here and face my own actions. Good or bad. It’s in God’s hands now.”

The call came at 9:00 P.M. from well on the other side of Glaze City. Rappaport took the call on the President’s gold phone.

“Hi, Joey! I got my handicap down into the single digits,” came the familiar voice of General Horace Stanwell. “I think that transfer down Fayetteville helped.”

“No, Ace. You’ve probably been choking up on the driver more. Just like I showed you.”

“For that I owe you thanks. Better than that, a dinner.”

Rappaport paused briefly. “Any particular time in mind?”

“I thought we could do it tonight. We’ve a lot to talk about. I’ll come to you.”

Rappaport paused a little longer. “Sure. Come to give your blessings to the Constitutional processes at work, eh?”

“Precisely. There’s concern out here, Joey, that the President, or may I say the wounded President, may be deprived of his day in Court.”

“Renegade gunshots. Totally unauthorized,” Rappaport answered coolly despite the sweat on the forehead. “And he’s fine.”

“Joey, I’ve placed a vice around the corridors of power, including the White House and Capitol. Let’s you and I ensure any transition is peaceful.”

“I see. Mishap for the President, totally without the knowledge or consent of the caretaker government. And the response is a military coup?”

“Call it an insurance policy for the safety of all involved.”

“I hope, General, it never crossed your mind to use your authority to return to power this President, who authorized a mass murder of innocent protesters.”

“Sure, it crossed my mind.” An extended silence until General Stanwell added, “But not for long. Here is the reality. The military is supporting your fitness for duty petition and verdict. We are supporting you as Interim President, and will adhere to whatever your administration, Congress and the Courts finally decide. There are two conditions. One, no more reprisals directed against the President. Two, nobody leaves the White House. Everyone associated with these hours of infamy will have to give

account to the authorities. The truth will be preserved. I need to know your consent to this, Joey – I mean, Mr. Interim President.”

“I do. And I did before your heavy-handed actions.”

“Good you realize it. Because the vice is airtight.”

## Keys To The Castle

The next morning, Vandevire stirred from a loud knock on his office door, pulling himself away from the pillow and sleeping bag.

Juno Brandon stepped in with a raising motion of his hands.

“No handcuffs yet?” Vandevire asked rising.

“All peaceful on the home front. At least in our gilded prison.”

“Right. What’s the point of handcuffs? When Rappaport says we can’t leave?”

Brandon cocked his head. “Have any plans today?”

“Sari and I were going to do a DVD movie. Maybe a stroll in the yard. – After that, to the Bahamas.” Vandevire gave a big smile.

“Exactly. You’re taking a trip,” Brandon said. “To Lancaster, Pennsylvania.”

Vandevire smiled at an unseen party. As if listening to crazy talk.

Brandon looked at his watch. 7:07. “I’ll need you up there by noon. You’ll be meeting very privately with a very private citizen named Sean McBride. Retrieving documents for Congressional hearings on transfer of power. At first, McBride wanted a fat check. We talked him into a nice retirement villa in the Bahamas. Attempted extortion became whistleblower protection. Can you handle it?”

“Sure – when I get the fairy dust for the soldiers out there.”

“Don’t forget. I run this facility. I’ve got all the keys to the castle.”

“People were running everywhere,” said the Hispanic college student into the TV camera. “Still the armed agents kept shooting. I saw people falling. The screams I will never forget.”

“The crowd on Constitution Avenue did nothing to provoke them?” Came a voice from a male reporter.

The macho White teenager standing next to the Hispanic man hesitated. “Well, there was some chanting, mocking. Maybe some cursing. That’s all I saw.”

“No physical contact?” The reporter pursued.

“Not exactly,” responded an older Asian woman. “Some protesters were mimicking a movie filmed in the 1960s. Guns were aimed, and a few people took those flowers and tried to stick them inside the green barrels.”

Warm sunshine beat down on the quiet White House grounds. A lone vehicle, a van bearing the National Park Service logo, purred to a stop near the West Wing. A middle-aged Hispanic man and a younger black man with a beard emerged, carrying tools. Pruning, raking, etc. After presenting credentials to the soldiers outside, the two men slipped inside the White House grounds.

A few minutes later, Juno Brandon entered the library.

“Nice uniforms,” Brandon said to the two men, decked out in vivid green, matching hats, and Park Service patches. Over in the corner, Austin Vandevire wore an identical uniform. Perfectly still he stood, while a technician put the final touches on Vandevire’s fake beard.

“Disguise. The oldest trick in the world,” Brandon commented. “And it still works.”

Brandon had Vandevire and the black man stand side by side. Identical height, identical beards, other minor differences.

“Something’s missing,” Brandon said. The black man handed his sunglasses over to Vandevire.

Outside the White House grounds, the van immediately encountered the military checkpoint. Wordlessly, the Native American driver handed the soldier two photo Federal IDs and the work order. At the bottom was a fresh signature of President Rappaport’s Interim Chief of Staff, Greg Bowden.

The soldier held up a large photo that the military took when the van entered. He did a quick comparison of the photo and the occupants inside, then waved them through.

In a remote parking lot in far Northwest Washington, Vandevire found a shiny ’24 aqua-blue Panther sedan and open the trunk. Inside was a badge, a roll of \$50s, and directions to Lancaster.

Two and a half hours later, Vandevire found an isolated split-level subdivision on the outskirts of Lancaster. He cruised the designated street until the number on the paper matched that on the house.

The front door opened for a pale, bulky man with sloppy gray hair. The whiskers, foul breath, and robe told of a man with no morning urgency.

Vandevire displayed Brandon’s old EIB ID and McBride waved him in. A den adjacent to a bright kitchen.

“Had breakfast yet?”

“No.”

McBride tossed him leopard-spotted banana. “Enjoy the breakfast. I’m trying to lose weight. And some other bad habits. – Wait. I’ve seen you. You’re the guy on the tape with that whore. You never bit, you never gave in. I’m glad for you – of course, Brandon wouldn’t have sent anyone else.”

McBride nodded to a leather handbag on the table. Vandevire dug through it and found a handwritten note from Brandon.

“Hey Austin. These are the whistleblower documents you presented to the Justice Department. I had these preserved as tight as grandma’s jam. Don’t worry – Mr. Hero – there are backups. I’ve already convinced Interim President Rappaport to nominate you and fellow whistleblower Jacki Carrera for a Congressional award once the transfer of power is completed. We have arranged Jacki Carrera’s safe passage from my second home, the Philippines. She will testify.”

“By the way, Austin. Don’t forget the micro tapes underneath. Live captions/Marika gang/John Dickerson encounters. See ya (Signed) Brando.”

Vandevire silently walked away with the bag. McBride called to him.

“The Bible in Genesis refers to knowledge of the tree of good and evil. You’re carrying in your hand that tree, as it applies to America. Lose it, and maybe evil reigns in the highest pinnacles of American power.” Vandevire opened the door.

“Would you like to handcuff that bag to your wrist, Mr. Vandevire? – One more thing. That Panther sedan. Bulletproof glass. You may need it, driving back into the bowels of American power.”

Vandevire gulped as he stepped outside into the heavy hot air.

He stopped cold as a black sedan with opaque windows crept slowly down the street. Stopped directly behind the Panther sedan. Blocking its exit.

“Get back in the house, Mr. Vandevire,” came McBride’s low monotone.

From the passenger side of the sedan, a suit-clad bald White man emerged. Identical sunglasses to Vandevire’s. The man walked briskly toward the house.

“Get back in here!” McBride shouted.

“Mr. Brandon sent us as your escort,” the White man said.

The driver’s door of the sedan opened. Lone Eagle, the Native American man who drove Vandevire from the White House, beckoned to him with a big smile.



## Phoenix

John Dickerson sat behind the desk inside his private study. The outline of the bandage was barely visible beneath his linen white shirt. Scowling, he scribbled some notes.

“Molly!”

A middle-aged woman with wide glasses ran to the adjacent chair.

“I asked you for a list of the names of every person inside the White House compound. Do you have those names ready?”

“Yes, Mr. President – I may have missed one or two.”

“Well, get them! I don’t want any traitors in hiding.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And prepare a communication to Horace Stanwell, the General in charge. Tell him to transfer everyone in this compound, with names of exceptions provided, to the military prison at Fort Belvoir. Transfer to be accomplished by sunset tomorrow.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“And for you, Joseph Rappaport”. Dickerson looked toward the wall. “If you can hear me out there – you and your fellow mutinees will stand trial for sedition, treason, and murder. The delightful question in my mind is – whether you will face a gas chamber, a firing squad, or lethal injection.”

Joe Rappaport backed away from the TV monitor bearing John Dickerson’s face. Looked toward Brandon.

“I have nightmares. That he may be right. Rise again like a Phoenix from hell.”

“Mr. President let me paraphrase your distant predecessor Franklin Roosevelt. There is nothing to fear but fear itself. Or inaction--It was decisive actions by people who knew right versus wrong and acted on that right, that will keep us both out of those gas chambers.”

There was a knock on the door. The Captain came in.

“Mr. Vandevire has returned, sir.”

Brandon nodded, then addressed Rappaport. “Here, catch, Doubting Thomas Interim President.”

Rappaport plugged a micro tape into a small silver machine. He leaned down to try to discern the voices on the tape.

Johnston White: "Just what are you telling them, Brandon?"

Brandon: "The McKinley Project was so named because it's a standing order dating back to President William McKinley. It means, whenever a party or parties invade the grounds with hostile intent, the agents are to shoot to kill."

Johnston White: "Who said anything about invading the grounds? The President has ordered a counterassault. To be carried out immediately."

Rappaport turned off the tape with suspended fascination. He said, "Imagine if we had a tape like that – of Dickerson's recent meeting with the Joint Chief of Staff!"

"The EIB is nothing – if not the perfecter of surveillance." Brandon tossed Rappaport a second tape from his coat pocket.

Brandon lifted his hand to a salute: "As God is my witness – our great United States of America is safe."

