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In God We Trust?

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IN GOD WE TRUST?

A Thesis Presented

by

KEVIN MEEK

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BOOK ONE

“We only seem to begin as we near the very end”

(Trillium McVane)

1

I waited outside a stone church at night for Rollo. The air was heavy and the evening traffic seemed to have all driven away. A faint hum from a street lamp or the occasional car turning into a distant gravel driveway was all that broke the natural night sounds.

Yesterday my headaches nearly killed me. To escape the pain I took a bath. I turned out all the lights and submerged my ears below a couple inches of water in my tub and placed a warm, wet washcloth over my eyes. I lay there for hours and eventually fell asleep. If it weren't for Rollo banging on the outside of my bathroom window, I definitely would have drowned.

When I woke up I was confused, not relieved. I didn't recognize the green tile walls or mildewed shower curtain, and when I turned on the lights I didn't recognize the blonde hair or big lips or blue eyes. The details of my dreams were vague, but I knew they must have been strong because I felt out of place now that I was awake. I stared at the stranger staring straight back at me and asked the same question I've been asking repeatedly over the past couple hours in this church courtyard—How'd I get here?

I've heard it asked over and over, but the question's become almost cliché – natural and expected. No one seems to linger very long on it except for philosophy students or politicians debating what the public wants to hear. Or it's asked in desperation, like my cousin Mickey looking at the cameras above a blackjack table and

asking the question after he lost his last twenty-five dollars. It's as boring as asking – Who am I? Does anyone really care why I'm sitting on a stone bench, hidden from prying night eyes in the courtyard of the church I once attended regularly, if a bit reluctantly, with my son and wife?

In the past I don't think I ever lingered on answers to the question – yet there the question always was, like a mole on the back of my hand, like a nervous twitch or hiccups that returned over and over and disappeared just as mysteriously. What was it that made me grip this question throughout my childhood like other children gripped blankets or bears? That made me write it over and over in my journals, in the margins of papers and books like some assignment or disciplinary action? That I could see in three-dimensional block letters at times when I closed my eyes – a billboard like the ones that dot some Midwestern roads – *What Commandments Do You Live By? Who's Your Savior? Got Milk?*

Perhaps it's not a question at all? Sure it's formed like a question, but doesn't it feel more like a declaration or acknowledgement – I hereby declare that the present situation that I find myself in is at least partially due to circumstances completely out of my control. Or an act of pleading – I'm not sure how I got here, but please omnipotent being or force or person with more money or power than me, will you show me how to get somewhere better? Sometimes it feels more like an accusation – So the hurricane hit and destroyed my house and my children all have cancer and my father keeled over at a restaurant buffet with a heart attack and died because two of the oxygen tanks didn't work, so now what's your big plan for me, what now? —It's your fault!

A couple years ago I was informed quite unexpectedly that Tommy, a friend of mine from high school, missed his second son's baptism. Apparently it was a very important event for his wife's entire extended family, and I wondered if he lingered on this question as he stared at the pea green walls of a New Orleans drunk tank. (And he lived with his wife and sons near Memphis.)

As his family watched his son get dunked, or whatever they do at these things, a New Orleans police officer nudged Tommy awake as my friend slept half-naked on a park bench overlooking the Mississippi. At the time I lived with my wife and son in an off-yellow Orlando motel. How I learned about the event and what I recall most about this story were from phone calls I received from high school friends I hadn't spoken to in years. During each phone call, each forgotten, so-called friend asked about the Mystery of the Missed Baptism:

"Can you believe it?"

"Do you think it was drugs?"

"Have you spoken to him lately?"

"He used to be the one in control."

Inevitably, each person would ask the same basic questions: "How do you think he ever let himself get to this point? How did he get there?"

I'm not the type of person who could field these questions. Hell, I'm the type of person that eats mall Chinese food alone and watches the old couples do laps on the old roller skating rink and wonders what they could possibly still have to say. I certainly don't know why any of these friends called me. But like most tragedies or confrontations between distant friends, a text message or email seemed to be the best response –

personal, yet controlled and rehearsed. Tommy didn't respond, and I was happy for the non-response.

Of course, I ran into that same friend nine months ago. I was in Reno coordinating the details for a conference for Dr. Rosenberg and some government officials—I'm basically a glorified administrative assistant for Dr. Rosenberg and his lab. I never asked Tommy why he was there, and he never offered an explanation. We sat in a small lounge and spoke about nothing, as guys tend to do, and pretended we were closer friends.

As I spoke, though, the conversation moved closer and closer towards something with substance, and after my third scotch I asked, "So how did this happen to you anyway?" The moment the words left my mouth I felt like the little kid in A Christmas Story who just said he wanted a football instead of a Carbon Action Red Rider B-B Gun—I waited for my own kick in the face or, at the very least, for him to leave.

But he didn't flinch. I liked that about him. And his response, though the details are a bit fuzzy in parts as I remember it, offered a bit of insight into the way I could answer the question today:

"I didn't let things happen to me. You know – nothing just happens. And there sure as shit ain't any hand pulling my strings, if you know what I mean. No – just choices and steps that led to more choices and more steps."

He stopped like music stops when someone pauses an MP3, like a car when the battery is disconnected, like a couple when the husband dies—it felt final, yet I could still hear his voice and felt like, for a moment, he still spoke. Then the sensation disappeared, and I was left staring at a silent man and his incomplete thought.

All I could hear were those stupid slot machines, the same ones that repeated over and over each night in my head the next five days of the conference when I tried to sleep. (Though, I must say I'd trade the blinding migraines and lucid dreams that have kept me up the past six months for those sweet, chimey refrains.)

Tommy didn't pause long, though, before he finished his thought:

"You don't have a clue what I'm talkin' about do ya? You never did in high school, why should it be any different now? Truth is, the biggest choices you make are to rely on a person or not – it's that simple. And it's your choice. Heck, my wife went to a day spa, the kids were at grandma's, and after talking to a guy I knew I decided to make it a night, you know...a memory. My choice and my buddy had it all set up." He stood up in the middle of his speech sometime, maybe at this point, and leaned over the table with both hands flat against the surface and finished his point only inches from my face. He spit while he talked, which I figured was a conscious choice.

"Should'a been an easy hit and would'a cost me nothin', but my wallet was knocked out of my hand at an ATM and stolen, my buddy's cane was laced horse tranquilizer and baking powder, and I woke up in jail. I don't even remember the police picking me up on the bench, and I sure as shit don't know what happened to my buddy – but nothing just happened to me, so I can't even answer your original questions. And I'm fine now. Hell, look at me. But you, you're lookin' for some kind of answer or savior or person to blame. And that just isn't me...so fuck off will ya? And tell the others to fuck off too!"

I never seemed to know what to say in these types of situations. Words sometimes stuck in my throat like they seemed to pour out so eloquently and sharp for others. I've

rehearsed the moments after Tommy's insult a million times since then, and this is what should have happened next – I should have grabbed his low hanging earlobe and jerked him back towards me, ducked below his punch and swept my left leg back and across his legs causing him to fall hard to the ground. Then I should have caught his arm and head moments before it hit the ground and cradled him into some sort of jujitsu, arm-bar. He would have been wide-eyed and immobile, and then I could have calmly informed him to just breathe and calm down; and then I'd discuss the factual and grammatical inaccuracies contained within his vulgar retort. And we'd leave friends.

But I didn't.

I stared for a few moments at his blood-shot hazel eyes and walked away. I remember how his corneas had a yellow hue and his eyebrows draped across the top of his eyes. I remember thinking how tired they looked, and then I turned and walked away. I remember thinking how happy I was that my son wasn't sitting with me. I didn't even leave my room until mid-afternoon the next day to avoid any further contact, any sort of apology he might give me the next day when he sobered up. Obviously, he didn't deserve the opportunity.

I've never seen nor heard from him again, but I've thought about his words like some students recall and contemplate the words of past teachers or books or even movies. Sometimes I've re-imagined Tommy as my own Lawrence Fishburne offering me a pill that unveiling the true nature of the Matrix, a key that could help me understand. I would have liked that. I would have liked that very much.

Unfortunately, chances are he was probably just some drunken ass—a trivial, drunken tirade from a guy who never liked me. Could I really be that stupid?

The church courtyard seemed to ebb and flow in the background as my eyes went in and out of focus.

I thought about my conversation with Tommy. As I re-imagined our friendship and the meaning of our meeting, my fingers traced along the coarse curves of St. Francis of Assisi's lips. The statue stood in the center of the church courtyard I'd been waiting in for over an hour. My son used to climb the five foot statue like some children climb slides or jungle gyms, or uncles with gangly arms and strong backs. And I'd let him. Heck, I encouraged him while Sharon, my wife, talked with the same people I felt awkward shaking hands with during the service.

A streetlight beamed through a hole in the wooden fence that separated the courtyard from the street outside and lit the worn edges of the statue's shoulder. I pretended to roll a quarter along my knuckles through the ray and watched as light flickered between my fingers and the shadows danced along the statue's face.

I thought about Tommy again, and no, I wasn't that stupid. He wasn't just some stupid drunkard. There had to be a bit of wisdom in Tommy's words. Why else would I remember them? And he wasn't saying not to trust anyone, to go it alone. His answer to the question lay in the choice of whom. Perhaps it was inevitable that each person makes this choice? I sat in a cold church courtyard right now because a person I decided to trust urged me to meet him here because he said he could help my headaches—and I was alone, and there are just so many movies a person can watch to waste the day.

His name was Rolando Pierce, but I called him Rollo.

Hadn't Rollo appeared seemingly out of nowhere only months before my son's accident? Hadn't he been the source of numerous arguments with Sharon? Hadn't he been the person that told me not to go with Dr. Rosenberg to Bohemian Grove? He was certainly the reason I found myself sitting here tonight.

Rollo Pierce – could the answer be that simple? But I've known him for such a short while.

I remember the first time we met, if you can call it that. It was near dusk, my favorite time to garden. In fact, it was a cloistered dusk that seemed rare in our valley, a dusk that lingered like so many seemed to linger when I was a child, when I'd gather fireflies in a jar or watch my neighbors play flashlight tag. I decided it would be a good idea to use kite string to attach each pea vine to a wooden fence that ran the length of one side of my garden. I liked the way the white lines looked as the sun disappeared, and the meticulous, exact work occupied my mind. I measured each vine first – there were ninety-seven individual vines, though two were eventually pulled that night. Most were varied lengths, though three were exactly the same. After I measured the vine lengths I calculated the length of string needed for each vine so that the combination of vine and string formed a three-foot line. I then tied one end of the string to the fence above each vine. Each string waved in the wind.

There are times when I allowed my mind to float away, and sometimes my senses seem to follow with it. That must have been what happened that night because when I returned to the garden, I found myself leaning against the wood fence, both palms filled with cold dirt, and my legs nearly buried in fresh, dark soil. Nearly half the vines

remained free. I looked towards the house and half expected Sharon, my wife, to be standing there with arms folded, but there wasn't anyone outside. It was a small moon, but as I scanned the yard I could see a face reflected, briefly, from the window in our old neighbor's abandoned tree house.

I remember staring at that tree house while still half-buried in soil. It was withered and decayed, a grey box on stilts hidden amongst tall pines. A decomposing reminder of kids long grown and gone. I'd explored it when the neighbors first moved out, hoping, perhaps, that it could become a way to reach my son, a way to go back to tree houses we never built. It was exactly eighty-seven feet from the northeastern corner of my garden, a post or lookout my son never even saw.

But Rollo claimed it. He claimed it like a child claims a spot in the forest with his imagination and weaves fantasy into a new, more important life. I didn't know he claimed it that night. In fact, I brushed the dirt off my legs after a few moments and went inside, showered and ate dinner with my family – and never mentioned the man in the tree house. But I could barely hold my spoon my hands were so shaky. The mixture of terror and excitement overpowered me so much that I couldn't say a word and finally dismissed myself from the table early and retired upstairs.

I spent several hours that night in my dark den, the blinds half open, and spied on my own backyard, but the man never appeared.

The next night, when I returned to my garden, every pea vine was connected precisely to the wood fence. There was no loose string and each line from ground to fence was exactly three feet. This started a trend that continued for two weeks. Each night I visited my garden and started a new task. When I returned the next day, the task was

complete. The man in the tree house became my Two-Socks, my Harry, my chance, perhaps, at something extraordinary, something different. When we finally met I can say, without any modicum of doubt, he was the absolute cleanest man I'd ever seen – his body, his fingertips (even after helping me plant melons in a circle around a blueberry bush) and his clothes were spotless and pressed.

I was measuring the exact distance between seedlings for my melons in a semi-circle, pressing my finger into holes and suddenly he was sitting cross-legged six feet away in the grass. At first I could hardly breathe. My heart pounded. Fear overtook me and I ran inside. But again, I didn't say anything to my family. It was as if something wouldn't allow me to, or that somehow I believed that it wouldn't be right. Each night I would go to bed worried that the man watched us from the tree house, but I also worried that perhaps he wouldn't appear. And so I would go back to my gardening, and suddenly he would appear. After a few days I remained a bit calmer and a bit more adventurous. Instead of trying to talk with him or running away, I decided that the best course of action would be to simply pretend like he wasn't there. I would plant rows of red leaf and romaine lettuce, and he would mimic my actions a few yards away. I could see him through my peripheral vision.

Over the next few weeks we'd sit occasionally and garden together without saying a word. I would demonstrate how to garden and he would follow my lead. At first I treated him like a deer that might scare off or like a wonderful, mythical creature and hid him from my family. We were like two men without language. He looked like a history professor– he was soft and calm. He had a small potbelly and beard that rounded with his

puffy cheeks. There was a high Easternism to him that I enjoyed. He seemed to be controlled enjoyment, and it was contagious. I spent my days thinking about what could be added or changed or enhanced in my life, or how or what I should say; but none of that seemed of any consequence to Rollo.

Then, just as comfortable and natural as the silence had been, one day he replaced it with talk, though he answered few questions about his past. He took to my son immediately, once I decided to share Rollo with the family, once he became more than the man from the tree house, once he became real. Often times they spoke at length along the rocks that overlooked the small spring in our back yard. But Sharon never trusted him. She was more grounded and secure. A strange man that disappeared for days and sometimes weeks and then appeared just as suddenly, clean and supplied and asleep in the neighbor's tree house, was not proper or safe for her son. She was very protective of our son, perhaps a bit too protective. It was all I could do to keep her from calling the police each time.

The church courtyard was getting cold. I was getting bored, and even though Sharon was safely at her home in bed, I wondered whether she would call the police if she saw me now. No, probably not. She probably wouldn't even care. I skipped a rock off another bench into an empty fountain across the courtyard. The rock missed a suddenly present Rollo by mere inches.

“Well, good evening to you too.” He picked up the rock and threw it back to my waiting hand and said, “And so, if I can ask, how does the night find you—better?”

Rollo appeared like a sound, like the image hidden in a three-dimensional painting I'd been staring at for hours and that suddenly came into focus. He sat cross-legged on the grass only a few feet from the fountain and wore a thick purple sweater that hung loose about his shoulders.

I wanted to ask where he'd been. How this courtyard was going to somehow heal my headaches. I wanted to ask if he was the answer, but like so many other unasked questions I folded them into tight bundles and filed them away.

"Really Jenny, how are you?" he asked. Since the day I introduced myself he had taken to calling me Jenny instead of Jenson, and I had never corrected him.

"Fine." He stood and placed his hands on the side of my head. I added, "Really, it's not so bad." I was lying. He pressed his fingers firmly into my temples. They felt hot and the pressure that had built up behind my eyes began to ease. I relaxed and slumped my body further into the statue when suddenly Rollo pulled his hands away, stepped back and looked into the sky. He seemed scared.

He sat next to me and asked, "Have you ever listened to Enya?"

"No."

"It's like lying in a pond with your ears hovering just below the surface with your eyes closed. I wonder if this is what unborn babies hear."

"Rollo—I don't mean to..." I began to ask, but he interrupted.

"Listen."

The night was a love song. I could almost hear violins and a slow, crooning voice as branches waltzed in the wind and the moon shined in on the courtyard along moving clouds. He continued, "I like how people can sometimes think in song."

“Yes.” I said, “I am very fond of it too.” (Though I’d never really thought about it before.) We both sat for some time listening to the nighttime songs. The old church creaked and moaned, and tangled branches untangled and scratched in tune. My anxious needs settled like sediment at the bottom of a shallow stream, and I felt almost clear, momentarily, until the inevitable motion and wind returned.

“Do the dreams still come?” he asked. An image flashed in my head– I saw a canyon crest dotted with small tunnels like a honeycomb that streamed by as if I were flying only feet away. The tunnels blurred into a dark line, as I seemed to move faster and faster. “Whoa there,” Rollo said as I stumbled into his arms. A pain shot through the back of my eyes as he helped me sit down. “The dreams?”

“All the time,” I said after I regained my composure.

“Then there’s still time.” He stood up and dropped a coin into the dried up fountain. “For good luck right?”

“Time for what? You know I’ve got work to do.”

“The good doctor’s reports can wait,” he said. “Did you know you taught me how to garden? Didn’t *you* learn how to garden from your father?” I didn’t understand why he was talking about gardening, but I nodded anyway. My father, a sort of gruff old German farmer, pretty much made us garden as kids, and those moments are about all the memories I still have of him. He died when I was very young.

“You don’t speak of him much,” he said, but Rollo seemed to be almost talking to himself. “I never had a father – did you know that? Actually, I didn’t have a mother either. I would have liked that.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, but didn’t really know why. What do you say when someone says something like that – was he looking for some type of comfort? Am I supposed to say I’m sorry? I was more stunned he talked about himself than anything. “Maybe we should go to my house. You know Sharon’s not there anymore. We could go inside and talk there. How would that be?”

“You are wondering why you are here? You have questions – no?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Answers I don’t have. But inside,” he pointed towards the church, “inside you’ll find a path to the answers you seek.”

“I just wanted the headaches to go. That’s it.”

“The pain will always return,” he said. “And what about your son? What about Sharon?” Rollo walked towards the arched gateway that led to the street.

“You’re leaving?” I asked. “Already? What does this have to do with my family, Rollo?” He stood frozen in the gateway; his left arm gripped the archway, keeping him from disappearing into the night.

He looked back. I continued, “Besides, I’ve tried all this – it doesn’t work.”

“You are here because you still believe. You do not know exactly what you believe, but trust me – you will find a path inside that could very well save your son. And it is a dangerous path. Keep watchful, Jenson Price.”

“Will I see you again?” I never asked him this question before. In fact, we rarely even said goodbye. In the past, I would go inside my home and he would disappear, only to reappear the next day, or the next week, or even the next month. But tonight, his tone seemed more final.

“Oh, I hope so, Jenny. I would very much like to see our garden grow.”

3

After Rollo left I considered going home. None of this made any sense, and why didn't he just tell me to go inside the church when he told me to meet him in the courtyard? He knew I had more work now that Dr. Rosenberg had disappeared.

Clouds hung low before the moon like gray drapes tacked around a light in an otherwise dark room. The church's stone façade had a Gothic, medieval feel, but the door I found myself standing before seemed like a modern, if not aged, garage door. I had followed a gravel path that led down a hill and behind the church. The path and door were hidden from the courtyard and street by a solid bush neatly trimmed near my head in a thick evergreen wall. Built into the wooden garage door was a standard-sized door with a brass turn lock on the outside and no door handle. I could tell it was unlocked because the frame edged slightly outside the garage doorframe.

I returned my gaze to the courtyard with false hopes that Rollo had returned. But of course the courtyard was empty. Part of me wanted to break into a grade school sprint like I had as a child fleeing from a haunted house, from my own Boo Radley, and curl up inside my empty home and watch Reality TV. Part of me wanted to drink through my headaches, to escape and sleep and wake up tomorrow and hope something had changed. It was late. But what had Rollo said? Inside I could find a way to save my son. How? God couldn't do it – or wouldn't. This was a waste of time. I couldn't go in. I couldn't. This was why Sharon hated Rollo so much. He just didn't make sense. What was I doing?

The garage door looked paper thin, a plywood drawbridge framed by an intricately cut stone castle. God's castle. What did my dad used to say? *Space does not*

separate people so much as fear or God. Or did he say fear of God? I gripped the brass turnkey, pulled open the thin, stiff door and walked inside.

It was black inside. The air was damp and smelled like an old basement. It was quiet. As I groped forwards in small steps, I could hear my shirt rustle and my shoes scuff along the pavement floor. As my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, I could see a white frame around a closed door on the far side. I must have been in a lower level most people don't get to see. There were no windows and the floor felt cold, even through my shoes. Occasionally I bumped into a bucket or box on the floor, and with each step, with each box I moved, the noises seemed to get louder and louder. I felt like an intruder.

I made my way up the stone stairs that cornered and led up to a closed door, all the while brushing one hand along the smooth wall and probing with the other in the darkness before me. I should have used the front door. I knew I shouldn't be here at all.

When I was very young, I remember standing at a door like this one and feeling the same way. It was winter, maybe February, and there was snow on the ground—but it was raining. Maybe the snow on the roof was just melting? And I thought I was alone. On the far side of our kitchen was a door we never used.

“Don't ever go in there, it's not safe,” my father said. And I didn't, at least I didn't for a long time. But my father had to know that by forbidding me to enter he was actually guaranteeing that some day I would. And after he died his words didn't seem as strong. I remember that I had to move the trashcan and vacuum cleaner sentries that guarded the door. Then I unlocked the brass doorknob and stood inches away from it – waiting – just like I waited outside the church door.

Then I walked inside.

I was in a dark, stale room. A loud noise emanated from somewhere below as I felt along the wall for a light switch. The wall crumbled at my touch. There were exposed wood planks and plaster I brushed against before I found the switch and lit the room below. Freshly cut 2 x 4 steps led to a cement floor and an exposed, chipped-rock wall. Pipes jutted out in strange angles and paint canisters were strewn along both sides of the steps. With each step I took down the stairs, the noise grew louder and louder, like an engine revving or Langoliers coming closer and closer. And even though it smelled dusty, the stairway seemed somehow clean – no cobwebs or dirt, except for the small stone chips that banked against the wall.

The room at the bottom of the stairs was nearly empty except for a large rusted furnace along the far wall and a large chair in the corner. Behind the chair were exposed bricks and a hole that disappeared into a thin rubbish pile and dirt. I don't know why, but somehow I expected some type of secret to be revealed. A cat to jump out. Bats to attack my blonde hair. My father's ghost to escort me into his private den. I opened the furnace to see if my mom burned old journals my dad kept in his secret basement – but there weren't any. I looked under the chair cushion and around the room for clues that might show me that my father or grandfather were Nazi sympathizers, or worse, SS refugees hiding out in America because they provided the government with nuclear secrets – but there weren't any. I even crawled into the exposed wall and dug through the rubbish, archiving each piece of trash, each paper clip or beer can like a CSI agent searching for answers – but they all ended up just being trash. So I invented a secret. I'd go down into that room over the next few years and sit in that chair and invent, silently, a past my

father never had and a secret life he never led. At times he was a German spy or a British double agent. He was a Kennedy bootlegger or master painter or recluse or Buddhist monk. As I grew older and went to college, the secrets became real and I told them to friends as truths – over and over until I barely remembered they weren't real.

It was an awkward moment when I realized I had become, essentially, a liar. It also happily coincided with the moment I knew Sharon truly understood me. We had been dating for four months when I found myself waiting with her in the café of a bookstore. She stirred her green tea and stared at the entrance, anxiously waiting for a half sister she only recently discovered existed to enter. Sharon wouldn't tell me why her sister contacted her; she only asked if I could stay "just in case." I didn't really know what that meant, but the idea that someone needed me was overwhelming and new. I wanted to help her more, to connect at a more emotional level, to help her through the event—so I invented a story.

While we waited and she continued to stir her green tea without drinking it, I told her about how I recently discovered, quite unexpectedly, that a lost brother of mine existed, and about how I met him for the first time at my cousin's wedding. His name was Joel Randall Feebs, and he was only two years younger than me. His mother was married to a Methodist minister, but had an affair with my father and kept it secret from everyone until her husband died. By that time, my father was already dead as well, and my half-brother and I grew up without knowing the other existed for several years. He didn't have any family at all, and my family was scattered across the United States. We all grew up alone until his mother died and he discovered his true father's family name

during a private reading of the will. Two months later he read an announcement in his local newspaper for the family reunion, and he decided to attend. I told Sharon about the anxiety he told me he felt, about how he didn't know what to say or how to act—whether to “hug me or slug me” as he put it. And then I told her about how it all worked out so well, about how now I'm not alone in this world, and that I have a brother I could share thoughts and dreams and feelings with.

After I finished my story, Sharon actually took a drink of her cold tea and smiled. A tall woman dressed in a black power suit walked through the door with her perfectly cut hair pulled back into some sort of stylish bun. It was her sister, I could tell from the description Sharon gave me a few minutes earlier. But before Sharon raised her hand to bring the woman over to her table she turned to me and gently kissed me for the first time on the lips. She hugged me tightly and held on for so long I didn't want it to end. Then she just said “thank you for the story,” released me and walked towards her sister.

At that very moment I accessed a file in my mind titled ‘first date’ and realized I had told her that I hadn't spoken or seen a person in any part of my family for five years. It was one of the only things I told her about my personal family over the next four months. She must have known that either the first conversation, or more than likely, the very latest story was a complete lie. But maybe it wasn't a lie. Doesn't a lie imply some sort of malicious intent? But that was never my intention – never. Maybe a trained psychiatrist would see some sort of father abandonment issue with my imaginary father files or perhaps I was simply a man trying to get a girl to like me? I honestly don't know how or why the new truths emerged, but they often times made it easier for me to talk, to

relate to others, to exist. And Sharon knew about the lies. In fact, she thanked me for the lie and allowed others to continue to exist.

I'm not so sure about my son. I think he believed the truths. I told Sharon and him about the door I was forbidden to enter in my father's house. I told them about the night I broke in, scared and alone, and about how I nearly fell down the dark, dingy stairs with the cobwebs floating above my head. I told them about the chair in the corner and the stack of letters my father left hidden in a tin box in the hole in the wall. Most of all I told them that my father wrote ten letters addressed to me, and that each one asked to be opened at a different year. How they were filled with advice I needed at different ages, about how he guided me, even now, and how he ended each letter with – love, your father who watches you even now. I invented a father that could prophesize, my own good Darth Vader resurrected in death through lies. And the letters helped resurrect my own self in my son's eyes. Or at least, I think, that was one of the reasons I invented this truth.

Maybe that is what people mean when they use the term *doors to your imagination*? Or is it windows? More like lies. Maybe that is all that waited for me, now, behind this wooden door – my imagination and more lies.

4

I nudged the church door open and quickly hopped into the vacant church hall. Something moved in the distance. I crouched low and waited. A small tapestry moved slowly in a breeze I didn't feel. The church was empty. I strained to see down the hall in both directions. Moonlight shown through tall, thin windows that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. I recognized the room; it led past the coat check nearly thirty-eight long strides to the right, and then to the entrance to the nave.

What if I ran into someone? How could I explain it? What if Sharon found out? She still attended church, I thought, and most people still considered us together. This was more than a church to her. It was a safe place she returned to like some children return to teddy bears or blankets when they are young. If anyone caught me in this place illegally the information would certainly, somehow, get back to Sharon, and it would feel like I had intruded into a part of her life she felt secure from my ability to screw things up. I would feel even more awkward and small around her.

I folded the questions away without answers and proceeded, heel-toe like a tracker in an

old Western, thirty-eight steps to the nave. With each step I stopped and waited for someone to see me – but no one did. I walked into the main church and stood in front of the back pew. Then the picture of a bright canyon wall flashed before me. I jerked my head to the side as pain shot through my eyes. I could hear loud knocks like iron slamming into a wall, and then all went black, and I fell back onto a wooden seat.

When I opened my eyes I found myself sitting in a back pew staring at the holy sanctuary in front of the nave. Small circles that seemed to change shape like colored haloes after you rub your eyes too hard pulsed in front of the stage and then disappeared. The church went silent again.

When I was a child, I regularly attended Easter Mass with my grandmother – a tall, disagreeable woman that seemed to live in church and smelled like Pepto-Bismol. I remember one Easter, it might have been the last one I attended, I finally decided to

follow the rest of my row up to the front to eat the bread and drink the wine. It wasn't some juvenile ploy to drink alcohol; I just wanted to be part of the group. I was curious. When I returned to the pew my grandmother slapped me as hard as I've ever been hit across the face, and then made me kneel and pray.

I felt the side of my face and momentarily wandered between two points in time. Of course, I hadn't really traveled through time, but I almost felt the result of my grandmother's slap as I sat in the back pew of the church. And the same silence that spread around my grandmother and I in church the day she slapped me seemed surrounded me now. I looked around. The assembly area before me unfolded in rows of permanent wooden pews, each facing a raised liturgical stage. I liked the symmetry of this church, I always had. During services I'd let my mind and gaze follow the center aisle to the altar, where the presider's chair and lectern now sat, ready for tomorrow's service. Then I'd skip over the priest and follow the lines up through the cross towards the stained glass windows above. Exposed wooden rafters spread from a central point from a central point in the glass windows like an autistic child's picture of the sun.

But the symmetry didn't quiet my mind tonight. The ceiling's wood ribs felt like a cage dangling above my head. The momentum of the cross as it moved up and in reminded me of Salvador Dali's *Christus Hypercubus*, a cross floating in mid air because the wires were hidden; and perhaps, that was the intention. Perhaps everything about him was hidden?

I wanted to pull it down. I wanted to pull the whole fricking thing down.

“So what now?” I mouthed, but no words came out. I rubbed my eyes, but the pressure behind them continued to build so I banged both fists hard onto the wood pew before me.

I thought about the last time I attended church. It was the day my wife left me. To be fair, it was the day I found her gone. I hadn't been home for days. That was just over a month ago. I remember there was a sawdust smell to the church that day because they had added two new, freshly carved pews. The smell's gone now. I actually don't remember how I got to the church that day, but I remembered that I didn't come to pray for Sharon...or me. It was midday, perhaps between services, but there were some believers praying in their pews. I remember the adrenaline I felt as I walked down the center aisle, the complete freedom. It must be the same feeling others feel when they are 'born again'. I walked straight past the liturgical stage, past the gawkers and saints and candles and statues; I stood at Christ's feet with arms spread wide, palms up, and my eyes closed. I tilted my head back and asked one last time for him to wake my son. I gave him the lies about my father, I gave him my failed marriage, and I gave him me – and only asked for Stephen. Surely he suffered enough? There was finality to it all at that point. I had come to this same church every weekend since we first found my son unconscious, since the doctors said he might not wake from his coma...and when I asked Christ to wake him, one last time, he didn't hear.

And now I found myself in this same church staring at this same Christ. My son's been in a coma for a little more than six months, now, and I didn't feel like asking anymore. Why should I? Why should anyone?

“WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO?” I yelled, “TELL ME – GIVE ME BACK MY SON!”

My voice carried louder than I intended.

“It's best to be quiet,” said a soft voice that startled me to my core.

“Whoa!” I screamed and then sank into the pew. I couldn't see anyone.

“Really sir, the guards here are not so friendly,” counseled the same sad voice from below. I looked down and an aged man's face emerged from beneath the pew before me. He had young, blue eyes; but his face, especially his forehead and chin, were wrinkled like a man in constant concern. He tugged my pant leg and beckoned me to come down. “You should come down sir, the guard is coming.”

Somewhere behind the main altar a light filtered from a distant door and a man emerged. He held a flashlight and seemed to address me:

“Who's there? Yo, I know you're there. Just because this is church don't mean I won't arrest you. Come on out!” I ducked down with the mysterious man below the pews as the guard scanned the nave with his flashlight. Then the guard walked down to ground level. The man I now nearly embraced below the pews grabbed my shirtsleeve and pulled me along as he scooted behind a thick column. We got behind the column just as a light filtered through the empty space beneath the pews. I didn't dare look, but I assumed the guard was now searching below the pews. The strange man I just met saved me from getting caught. Why?

He motioned for me to be quiet while he broke off a piece of bread from a wrapped loaf that hung halfway out of his coat pocket. He offered it to me. From the smell I could tell it was banana bread. I shook my head and mouthed “No thank you”.

The searchlight jerked throughout the nave like a strange form of flashlight tag. I could tell the guard moved up the aisle and jerked the light to unexpected corners of the room, perhaps with hopes of catching us peeking around the column.

“Yo Dunge.” A new voice asked from further back in the church—perhaps from the door the first guard opened. “Where you at?” His voice was a whispered yell that reminded me of when Sharon used to try to be quiet when she spoke to me during movies. My heart pounded and the strange man beside me didn’t quell my fears. He was too at ease and too small. I watched him squat on two legs and nibble the bread like a fat, human mouse, like my own Gollum, my own blue-eyed troll.

“What?” The first guard asked.

“Quit fuckin’ around and come finish the poker hand.”

“I heard something.”

I wondered if I could dart out some back door, but I didn’t move. The flashlight still searched from wall to wall.

“You always hear something – Now hurry up, before we wake the Old Man.”

“And when is it you believe I fall asleep?” A third voice asked. So much for my belief that this was an empty church. I couldn’t go anywhere now. There were three people.

“Oh my, I’m so sorry. Sir, I wouldn’t – I mean, you know I hold you in the highest regard. I just...” The Old Man interrupted the second guard’s stuttered retreat.

“Don’t give it a thought. Either of you, really, I appreciate your work. Could you both just please check all the doors and then leave me a while so I can practice tomorrow’s Mass?”

The man beside me extended his hand and said, in his soft voice, “Where are my manners? Sir, I am Berger, but you may call me Bergie. It is a pleasure to meet you. It does get a bit lonely. You know--”

I felt he could talk all night and whispered, “What about the priest?”

“Oh that is not a problem, he is near deaf.” Bergie stood up and sat in the back pew. “He can’t see much either.” He gestured for me to join him. “But I must say, I’m not sure how we’re both going to leave now.”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. “How’s that?” I asked.

“Those two guards can ill afford to return to their card game now. They are most assuredly watching the two unlocked doors, at least until the Old Man finishes his Mass.”

I don’t know why I started to trust this creepy man, but he seemed to possess a certain amount of expertise. His soft eyes seemed innocent enough, so I asked, “How long does that usually take?”

At that moment the priest cleared his throat and began his practice. This was a new priest. It was strange. It wasn’t the man I stared at during so many masses with Sharon. The priest I knew had a Chicago accent. This man had an accent I couldn’t place. I guessed it might be Eastern European, but there was really no basis for that theory. As I watched and listened, I think Bergie answered my question, but I heard him as well as I used to hear Sharon when she spoke while I watched a movie. I knew it was occurring, I just paid no attention.

The priest was an older, gray-haired man with a hairline that reached towards the back of his head. He looked like Robin Williams in old man make-up leaning his hairy right forearm and most of his weight on a wood lectern. He didn't wear a black frock either. Instead he wore a button down blue shirt unbuttoned at the top and rolled at the sleeves.

Part of his sermon seemed familiar somehow: *"But do you think I would tell this true story if it were not practical for you? I told it to you because precisely it is practical for you. Again, St. Francis now. Now?"* He cleared his throat again.

Bergie tugged on my arm and offered up a thermos lid and I accepted. Each time the priest cleared his throat it reminded me how long it had been since I drank anything. It was lukewarm tap water that smelled a bit like onions.

"Sir, I hope you do not think me intrusive, but I heard you talk about your son. Is he ill?" I couldn't answer. I held the thermos lid to my lips and focused on the priest:

"St. Francis speaks of what I'm gonna call now Martyrdom by the Sword, which means any violent death suffered for God."

Bergie moved closer and continued, "I only ask because my son was sick for a time as well. For several months I came here every night and begged for answers, like you."

"What happened?" I asked.

"He died," Bergie said as he dug his long thumbnail into a small groove worn into the back of the wooden pew.

"I'm sorry." I wondered if I should continue, but I did. "I meant, how did he get sick?"

“That’s just it – he didn’t just get sick. One day he was a normal sixteen year old washing my car, and the very next day I found him unconscious on a cot in the basement.”

“What was wrong with him,” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean nothing?”

“I mean the doctors determined my son was a pillar of health, he just sort of shut down. Sure, they gave theories, possibilities, ran tests and gave me hope.”

“Was he naked?”

“Pardon me?”

“When you found him – were his clothes all gone?” I asked, forgetting all manner of decorum or proper behavior when speaking with a man whose son just died.

“Yes, actually – how did you know?”

“My son’s in a coma. My wife and I found him naked and unconscious in our empty pool one day and he still hasn’t woken up.” Another pain shot through my eyes. My mouth tasted like dirt. I quit talking and grimaced as the pain intensified so much I began to hear ringing in my ears.

“Here, try this.” Bergie handed me a yellow pill that looked like a butterscotch hard candy that someone had already sucked on for a while and then re-wrapped.

“No thank you.”

“For the headaches, it helps,” He said. I took the pill. I wanted to ask how he knew about the headaches. I wanted to know who he really was and if he knew Rollo and what this was all about, but the pain hurt so much I leaned back and listened to the priest.

Bergie seemed to understand what this meant. The yellow pill dissolved quickly in my mouth.

“Be it sword, be it poison” The priest sucked in his lips like a man with dentures and raised his right hand out and shook his head as he spoke, *“it is called, generally, Martyrdom by the Sword – Alfonzo speaks of another martyrdom. Are you ready now?”* He raised his left hand towards me and rocked back and forth between his right and left foot. My headache began to ease, but my nose became stuffed up, more and more it felt like the pressure behind my eyes drained and stopped somewhere behind my nose. It felt much better, but cloudy, almost as if I were submerged.

I turned to Bergie and asked, “What are these?”

“I am not certain. A new drug the university is testing and my company is hoping to sell.” He handed me a large bag filled with the pills. “Keep them.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Listen. My headaches disappeared the very second my son died. There is a connection. Don’t you see it? How old was your boy?”

“Fifteen.”

“Fit?”

“Yes.”

“And look.” He tugged the Polymer Science and Engineering Lab identification badge still pinned to my shirt pocket towards his face. “This is who made those pills. This is where my son interned last year.”

“I work in a different lab. This just gets me in the building.”

“Where?”

“I can’t talk about it.” I said

“Shhh!”

We both ducked down as a side door opened and one guard poked his head inside the nave and then disappeared back into another room. I listened as the priest continued: *“Martyrdom by pin pricks where you don’t die. You just suffer daily the stings and rocks of outrageous fortune. As Hamlet said – and take not up arms to oppose your trouble and end them. Of course you can do that sometimes, sometimes you have an obligation to, but there are some things you are just going to suffer from and Alfonzo said if you suffer for God with Peace and Love and consistently suffer – don’t ever call that cowardice as if it were a weakness for weaklings.”*

I looked at Bergie and needed to know more. I wanted to probe deeper and ask about his past, which he was, where was he from, how we could share so many similar experiences? But before I could ask any of these questions he interrupted.

“I’m sorry. We have little time, and my story is nearly done. I have given up myself to my own suffering. I have nothing. But for you there is still time. Your story is at the beginning. You need to help your son find his way back home,” he said.

“But how?”

“The pathway to answers usually begins at home.”

Another fortune cookie. Another riddle. I wish I had never listened to Rollo. This was Tommy all over again, another belligerent crazy giving me advice. What am I doing? I wanted to scream. I began slamming my heels harder onto the marble floor as I bounced on the balls of my feet.

He put his palm gently on my leg and steadied it as he spoke, “I don’t have the answers or I would have saved my own son, but I am certain if you begin looking at your own lab you might have a chance.”

“My lab?” I thought about my lab. I was an administrative assistant to a researcher who worked with private funds in a large building with five other researchers; but only Dr. Rosenberg interacted with the rest of the research. It was all very partitioned and secret, and even though it seemed I had no natural sense of curiosity, I had recently begun to question my allegiance to my boss and the entire project.

“Sir, you need to focus. You need to listen. One last thing, there is a connection between father and son, especially at this age. The dreams help you see those connections.” Bergie seemed distracted as he spoke, not as comfortable or clear as he had once been. What connection was he talking about? How could Dr. Rosenberg be involved with any of this? He loved my son.

“Sir, listen to your dreams. Find the secret to your lab. They are linked. The last image I saw before my son died was the inside of a green dome, and this--” He raised his arm and showed me a series of eleven numbers engraved into his arm by what appeared to be a regular ball point pen – repeated over and over until it scarred and inked permanently into his skin. “Wait until you hear me scream and leave through the garage doors.”

I stood to protest, but he ran out the door before I could say a word.

I wondered what to do – the numbers, a file. Did I know what the numbers meant at one time, but had filed them away under a password I no longer remembered? There was a familiarity to it, but I couldn’t filter through the files in my mind at this moment. I

had to figure out how to leave. How to get away from the church, from the guards, from Bergie the crazed conspiracy theorist who somehow knew exactly what I was going through. I listened for Bergie's scream while the priest continued his sermon: *"It is the strength of the cross of the immortal and if you bear that cross patiently, lovingly in heaven you will have the crown of a martyr, which doesn't mean someone who invented some kind of persecution...for thee who suffered for the suffering of Jesus and all of the sufferings of the immortal for the saving of the world."*

Then I heard Bergie begin to sing, and I was alone. One guard grabbed the priest and rushed him out a back door and the other ran off into Bergie's direction, a large baton raised high in his other hand.

I took my cue and ran for the garage door.

4

The pathway to answers always begins at home.

That saying couldn't be more wrong. I lived in this home for nearly three years, and it's only brought me more confusion. There was no path, and if there had been one Sharon would have probably taken it along with everything else.

The morning after I met Bergie in the church I laid in bed for hours after I woke trying to make sense of everything he said. Was he crazy? Was he a philosopher? Was he the person that was supposed to lead me on my path? I tried to put together the pieces to the puzzle as I wrapped myself inside the blankets and sheets. I rolled onto Sharon's side of the bed and stared at the shape of an outstretched hand that stained the yolk-colored wall. The stain appeared old, and I wondered what caused it.

The alarm clock showed it was half past nine, which meant I was already late for work. But, I didn't have to teach any courses for Dr. Rosenberg, and no one was scheduled in the lab all week. I actually hadn't even seen or heard from anyone in quite some time.

I slept fairly sound, and the pills seemed to ease the pain.

As I thought about the headaches, I grabbed another yellow pill from the nightstand and swallowed it whole. The vinegar aftertaste had started to make me nauseous, but my headaches had dissipated and the dreams had eased.

The whole morning I wrestled between my instincts to analyze the previous night's events and an even more innate urge to run away from them completely. I wanted a path, but like most men I was afraid what a path might mean. I liked the ideal of a path like I liked the ideal of a son or wife or fate.

I wanted to climb into a run-down, Southside apartment and hide from my own genius. I wanted to smoke and drink and tell stories and live carefree until an elf ship took me to heaven. I wanted to flee, to escape my fate, to quit my task or journey before it began.

But I wasn't a genius. There was no great quest or ring. This wasn't some fantasy or movie. No, I wasn't anyone special—I just wanted to disappear. I wanted to be the dove a magician cups between his palms and that, after a few moments, disappears.

I lay in my bed, wrapped in dirty sheets, and stared at the stain. Bergie said there was a connection between the lab and my son. What was it? The ceiling fan clicked above, and I thought about how I messed up my life – I thought about Dr. Rosenberg, my job at the university, and how it all had led to the loss of my son, the loss of my wife, and perhaps, now, the loss of my mind.

Five years ago, even though I'd finally come to terms with the fact that I would never become a doctor, I had a direction that nestled nicely into the classic suburban family portrait many people readily embraced. I was working as a permanent substitute art teacher at a local elementary school, and we were ready to purchase a nice home with a white faux fence strewn across the front lawn. I was even thinking about helping Sharon coach our son's soccer team. The job provided health insurance, an unexpected benefit I'd been missing for years. The school administrators also promised to help me become a licensed educator and promised to pay for future school.

I think I was still registered as a student in the Biology Department at the community college, but I hadn't really been to class in a while and had already given up delusions of medical school years ago. Of course, I hadn't really told this to Sharon yet. She still thought I was 'taking a break'.

But I had a job that promised a future. It was a steady job that stuck to the ribs. It also had regular and normal hours, which would, presumably, allow me time and opportunity to get to know my son. At the time he was, for the most part, a ten-year-old stranger. I don't mean to portray myself as any clichéd neglectful father. I wasn't a drunk who left for days without saying a word to my wife or family, and I wasn't some investment banker that worked twenty-hour days. My absenteeism existed on a far more subtle and dull level. When I first met and married Sharon we promised that we would sit together for dinner at least four days per week. We even alternated cooking responsibilities and turned the entire night into an event. I think we both looked forward to the nights, but after Stephen was born the events stopped happening as frequently and

eventually completely disappeared. I knew changes occurred with the birth of a child, and I actually didn't mind the disappearance of cooking night. Stephen's birth, though, and his very existence became Sharon's focus as well. It was as if it was a mission of some kind. For me, it just became easier to retreat into myself rather than trying to figure out how to act in the new situation or how to speak. Even this feeble explanation doesn't make sense to me, and it certainly didn't make sense to Sharon. After Stephen's birth the cooking schedule was replaced with a much more rigid schedule of daily chores that I often blamed for the distance that built up between Stephen and me. That's probably not fair.

Over the past few years our conversations were replaced by arguments, and the peace I had found in her assertiveness and attention to detail when we first met became replaced by self-doubt. I once enjoyed and depended upon her schedules that she would tape to the outside of the refrigerator each Monday. It was an outline for a life I desperately wanted, now, that we have been separated for nearly a month. When we were together, though, I purposefully avoided the schedule, which often times included Stephen's games or school events, or blamed my absence on work. It wasn't work, though, and it wasn't that I didn't want to get to know my son. I really think I didn't know what to say to a wife and son. It was all too horribly close.

I think there was a chance that I could have become part of Sharon's schedule if I would have never met Dr. Rosenberg. I think there was a chance that the storm that surrounded me could have dissipated and cleared. But just as my world seemed to settle, as my snow globe seemed to clear, Dr. Rosenberg shook it and the snow never seemed to settle again.

The elementary school, in an attempt to bridge the gap between parent and child, had an on-going policy that urged parents or relatives to attend a day with their son or daughter, or their nephew or niece. It was heralded by the superintendent and state as a cutting-edge, cross-generational resource that would be modeled throughout the state. I hated it. It just meant another person in art class that didn't care at all about what I had to say. One day, though, a student brought his uncle to class, and for some reason that uncle cared about what I had to say. The uncle's name was Dr. Markus Rosenberg.

Dr. Rosenberg was a tall, wispy, white-haired man. I found out later that he was a professor in the Polymer Science and Engineering department at a local university, but definitely not the department head. He got his degree somewhere in the Midwest, and some said he was once a roommate with the Vice President of the United States. Of course, I later found out these rumors were completely false. He was frail and wore jeans that were too big and tennis shoes that were a bit too white. He never seemed to have aspirations for running his own program or department like many of the other professors. He had a high teaching load and worked, occasionally, on opaque and unremarkable publications in journals that were only listed so he could continue his tenure.

At least that was his subtle history before heading the project I now worked for. The prestige of the cutting edge project and method coupled with the obscene amount of money he and it brought the university placed him in an entirely new position – a position that the head of the department and school didn't necessarily like, but couldn't do much about.

So who was Dr. Rosenberg? I thought I knew, but now I was beginning to wonder.

All that I learned about Dr. Rosenberg came from observations and overheard conversations.

He never spoke about himself and was obsessed with eradicating all Internet information that appeared. Parts of my job each day was to Google his name and notify him of every place it could be found. Some people, like Dr. Rosenberg, believed in privacy. That was why, I assumed, much of the secretive protocols for my job existed.

Who was I to question a man's idiosyncrasies?

Another part of my job was to assist Dr. Rosenberg with his personal needs. This brought me occasionally to his home, which was immaculate and bare: white walls with no pictures, hard wood floors with no carpets or furniture, white lace curtains without any frills. The only furniture outside his bedroom was a long card table in the corner of his dining room and a single chair. There were four computers and eight Ma Bell phones connected to a central server and placed at odd angles on the table. Several hundred framed colored renderings made by a computer leaned against the walls of every room. In the corner of each painting was, what appeared to be an equation and date. I didn't pay them much mind, but sometimes he'd show me his latest creation. In his bedroom, surrounding his single bed were three large salt-water aquariums. I didn't begin my work with Dr. Rosenberg as a servant or personal assistant; it just evolved into a full time, lifestyle that I accepted. Sharon thought it was extremely unprofessional that a professor for the university asked me to pick up his laundry or cook him food at times, but it meant that he needed my services. My services at home had become less and less useful.

When I met Dr. Rosenberg for the first time, I didn't know any of this information. I was trying to teach a third grade art class. I had just finished reading "Giraffes Can't Dance" and was talking about how to paint giraffes with watercolors using the wet-on-wet method. Of course, I'd just read about the method and this entire lesson plan online an hour before class, but the third graders had no idea. Peter, Dr. Rosenberg's nephew, had informed me his uncle was running a little late. When Dr. Rosenberg entered the classroom I didn't say a word and didn't even look his way. He bent at the waist below an invisible line between my eyes and the students, and walked across the front of the room to Peter's desk. But as he stooped something fell from his pockets and seemed to scatter along the floor. The commotion sent Dr. Rosenberg scurrying along the floor and a simultaneous chorus of gasps and laughter through the room. I waited calmly at the front of the room and neither quelled the children's banter nor looked in the doctor's direction. I just waited.

My entire life, this is what I've done—I've waited or zoned out, or both. When I was a student, my teachers and other students ridiculed or punished me for these actions. They called me a daydreamer, a space cadet. I felt like the boy who could fly, except I couldn't fly. I barely paid attention to anything except for the task I was focused on at the time. This drove Sharon crazy. Every time we drove somewhere she'd point out a wild turkey on the side of the road, or some special observation about a house or barn or driver—and every time I wouldn't be able to participate with her. What often times infuriated her more was the fact that I actually did notice the turkey or the man with

implanted horns in his skull driving the truck next to us, but that I immediately filed the observations away and at that moment could not retrieve them. My mind worked that way; but weeks, months, even years later if a code word or observation helped me open the file labeled '*Man with Horns in Head*' I would bring it back up precisely to Sharon with complete details as if it happened only a few minutes ago. Whenever this happened, I swear she'd want to rip my head off. It wasn't my fault. That's the way my memory worked. I wasn't even sure she believed me.

But the day I met Dr. Rosenberg, this memory actually worked in my favor for a change.

Once Dr. Rosenberg gathered the objects from the floor and found his seat next to Peter, he apologized. I responded with just a silent shake of the head and raise of the hand, and then returned to my lesson.

He later told me that the object that fell out of his pocket was actually a box of tampons he picked up for his wife, and the reason he offered me a position as a desperately-needed, administrative assistant for a project he was starting was because I never looked when he dropped the box. I never asked why a man his age needed tampons for his wife or why he brought them to class. He also added that the borderline OCD organization of all materials, lesson plans and classroom procedures; the immaculate cleanliness of the classroom; and my focused, yet apparent lack of any curiosity were other contributing factors. But I liked to tell people it was because of a box of tampons.

While Peter and the other children worked on their watercolors, Dr. Rosenberg marveled at how every single second of the entire semester had been organized. He liked

my files and how I asked no questions and how I wasn't worried that there was no future in this job. He offered me the position in his lab at that moment, and I took it. I told the principal that night I wouldn't be able to work there anymore and began my job with Dr. Rosenberg the very next day. For a person that seemed to float through life I often times made quick decisions.

This was one of many decisions that ruined my life.

I was originally hired because of my compulsive organization and my ability to be completely disinterested with curious happenings or unanswered questions, and like most jobs—timing. He needed a personal assistant who was outside the science or academic community. How he knew that I would eventually perform any task at any time for him is something I never asked. For the first few months, Dr. Rosenberg seemed to regret his decision and seemed to want something out of me that I couldn't give. It was an odd situation because he would give me basic secretarial tasks without any explanation, and I wouldn't ask any questions, but after I completed each task he seemed upset with my performance. He wouldn't tell me why.

If the silence that built up between Rollo and I had a quieting, calming effect...the silence that built up between Dr. Rosenberg and myself those first few months was equally as frustrating. If it continued I would have either been fired or developed an ulcer. But after two months I showed up to the lab and found Dr. Rosenberg smashing a computer screen repeatedly over a black lab table and cursing loudly. At first I didn't say anything, though I was a bit scared. I tried to walk back outside through the door before Dr. Rosenberg could see me, but he stopped me from leaving and told me to clean up his

mess. While I picked up the computer pieces spread along the white tile floor and washed the table he asked, “Aren’t you even the least bit curious about anything?”

I just looked at him and wondered how to ask. I was obviously curious, but he had told me earlier that the reason I was employed was because I never asked questions. In fact, he stressed that I couldn’t ever ask a question about anything. So I simply shrugged my shoulders and continued to clean up his mess.

“Come on. Don’t you want to know why I just destroyed this brand new computer?” Again, I didn’t know what to say, but now I felt like I was being rude.

“I don’t know how to answer. The first day we met you dropped seventeen tampons on the floor and I didn’t make any comment on the occurrence, which was the reason you originally thought about asking me to work for you. The second time we spoke you commented four times that I could not ask any questions. Then four days ago you were typing another letter to your mother on the computer and told me never to ask about what you were typing.”

“How did you know I was typing to my mother?”

“I wasn’t spying, I just recognized the typing sequence. It is who you write to every Tuesday after you have coffee.”

“Wait a second. How do you know all of this?” he asked. Again, I didn’t know how to answer. I’ve been told that I have sort of a photographic memory, but it doesn’t quite work that way – as if I know what ‘that way’ means. Basically, I can file information away like a computer main frame, but I sometimes can’t remember where I filed it away without codes or clues. Over the years, I just found it easier to quit analyzing or trying. My mind works like a computer filled with information placed into

files based on chronological occurrence or based on common themes or ideas or information. Sometimes they are based on specific events or words or people. The problem, though, is that I don't control how they are filed away (or at least I don't know how to control the actual "filing"), and because the files are so numerous I can't just bring them up at any moment. I need a password to access them. Because I spent most of my life ignoring all of this and simultaneously ignoring my passwords—information became available only when others helped trigger the files. Or if, randomly, I remembered a password.

How could I explain that to Dr. Rosenberg? I hadn't attempted to explain it to anyone, but I still tried and he, obviously, didn't believe me.

"Alright, let's say I believe you," he said. "I'd like for you to prove it."

"How?" It was the very first question I ever asked, and it surprised Dr. Rosenberg and me. He smiled, and that was the beginning of a closer relationship between the two of us.

"I broke that damn computer because I was frustrated with a computer program I am trying to develop that will basically allow me to converse with other researchers working on this project. The problem, though, is that I need every person to be able to write in a different code and for only me to be able to decode the communications. And it seems easy enough, but I can't seem to get it all set up. To make matters worse. Now I've destroyed this computer."

"I see."

"You see what? No matter. The test is this." He handed me a large manual and gave me access to an even larger library of texts on this computer. "I want you to read all

of this information over the next three days. Then I want you to put this computer back together based on only your memory. If you can do that, you can keep your job. If not—“

I grabbed the book and interrupted him for the first time, “No problem.”

I completed the project and suddenly my job description and the work I performed changed dramatically, and so did the level of secrecy that surrounded my work at the lab. It all seemed so exciting, so new and important that I never questioned a thing.

The fact that the job evolved into something more than a secretarial position never helped convince Sharon that the choice to leave the teaching job was a good one. She hated Dr. Rosenberg, the secrecy and menial tasks he had me perform for the job, and the lack of stability and clarity the job description and tenure provided. My choice to leave the teaching position and become a glorified secretary became another piece of evidence Sharon used when she argued that I had no ambition, that I didn't care, and that I was a spineless loser she couldn't believe she ever married. Of course, she never called me a spineless loser or said at any time she questioned why she married me. Usually she would say she wished I was still the person she married, but I always thought she wanted to call me a loser. In fact, my decision to work for Rosenberg didn't go over well with anyone because, even though I was told I'd perform various tasks and have the possibility to work on some cutting edge information – basically, in the eyes of every other person, including the university bureaucracy, I was the administrative assistant. A secretary that even the other secretaries didn't like. So I kept to myself.

I took the job and didn't seem to consider my future or the ramifications of my actions on my life or my family. This matched a pattern I'd followed most of my life.

When I was young and memorized the answers to an entire test and wrote them down without reading one question, and then subsequently discovered the test had been changed, my teacher asked if I had considered what would happen if I got caught. I had not. When he, then, gave me a choice of when I wanted in school suspension I chose a Friday, even though the competition my father forced me to play in took place that weekend and the Friday suspension made me ineligible to participate. When my father asked why I chose Friday when I could have chosen any date, I didn't have an answer. Now I took a job that Dr. Rosenberg made sure to specify was only temporary and paid less than the teaching job, and for Sharon it seemed like I simply didn't care. Maybe that wasn't entirely true, but now it felt like it could have been true. But not out of any sort of malicious intent, it was just easier that way. It was easier, somehow, for me not to pay traffic violations until they took my license away; for me not to return library books until they charged me for the books; for me not to pay taxes properly until the IRS threatened to garnish my wages. When I met Tommy and I lived with my wife and son in Orlando, it was just easier to sell balloons at Disney World than worry about a so-called real job. It was the small stuff I couldn't ever suffer through. I liked the house's frame, but I could care less if there was a draft that increased the heating bill or if there was chipped paint.

Sharon said I was just lazy.

So, for the last five years I worked as the chief administrator for Dr. Markus Rosenberg. On the surface, and to everyone except for Dr. Rosenberg, I was a secretary. My main responsibilities were to order supplies, schedule lab time, and manage a seemingly simple computer program that Dr. Rosenberg and other scientists used to

communicate. But I soon learned that these weren't to be my only responsibilities, and this wasn't a simple, full-time job.

I learned an entirely new vocabulary and discourse, and I used it in conversations with Sharon to prove my importance, but she didn't care. It was training for nothing, and I felt like the new running back on a college football team who used big words from a dictionary that only made him look more stupid. Once Dr. Rosenberg understood the nuances of my filed mind he used it to his advantage. At least half of my time the first few years was spent studying science beyond my understanding. I could recite back to Dr. Rosenberg theories and algorithms and proofs, but memorizing the numbers wasn't the same as understanding what they meant or how they could be used. This was what Sharon understood much better than I ever understood. She never knew I possessed the ability to file away entire novels or sections of the library, but she did believe in my ability to do more with my life. She saw the scientific jargon and bits and pieces of nuanced information for what it was, glitter and polish on an otherwise limited former art teacher. She thought what I was doing had no importance.

But my work was important, I just couldn't talk to her about it. I was working with a cross-departmental research cluster focused on the creation of a new plastic that ashed over instead of burned when it reached high temperatures. I think there was a direct application with our airline partners so that if a plane caught on fire the chairs wouldn't burn the passengers to death. Though, as I was informed numerous times by Dr. Rosenberg, it wasn't the crash or even the flames that usually killed people, it was the toxic fumes. So he was working on plastic that didn't burn these fumes as well. At least,

this is what was unofficially leaked to the university and other researchers when the purpose of the entire project came up.

The project included six main researchers, including Dr. Rosenberg himself.

I'm not sure about the exact history of the group, eventually called the Rosenberg Six, or when it began. But I'm certain that the day I started had to have been near the beginning.

It was a unique group on campus, and perhaps on any campus, though I had no basis of comparison. It was funded entirely through an anonymous benefactor who also funded an entirely new administrative building and research library. Only Dr. Rosenberg communicated directly with this benefactor, though, over the years I've put together a file, 'benefactor extreme', which led me to believe that it was a powerful man in his seventies that wore glasses and liked to bowl. Also, there was no direct departmental oversight and the researchers only met once – after the first weekend I began work. I still have a photograph of the six researchers sitting on my desk. The men only met briefly, and Dr. Rosenberg wouldn't allow any of them to use their real names or to discuss any personal issues. Instead, they focused on the format for the project and after dinner watched a classic copy of the Ziegfeld Girls. After the show the six men posed, arms linked, like chorus girls and I took the photo.

I think it was the detailed rules and protocols for this position that I loved. I found a sort of pride in how I could follow even the most minute, odd detail. It was like painting an elaborate, multi-dimensional paint-by-numbers painting. What seemed, oddly, even more attractive about this position was that I couldn't ask questions, didn't have to analyze, and couldn't talk about it with anyone else.

Even though I couldn't share the details of my job with my wife or son, with so-called friends or family, I felt a need to go through the details with someone – even if that someone was me. So I turned the unfinished basement in our house into my own private den – my sanctuary where I sat in a leather chair nestled beside the gasoline heater, wrote in journals I kept hidden behind a loose cement block, and talked about my job.

All project data collection and communications occurred through a Linux collaboration program that only I managed. No one except Dr. Rosenberg and I knew that the program's official goal was not just the invention of a new Polymer substance. It was also the application of the overall research method.

Each person was given a specific task or focus with the understanding that the entire project would be published in collaboration as a series of articles that both introduced the individual findings that led to some overall goal, but also focused on the Rosenberg Research Method. And that method hinged, at least in my mind, on my meticulous adherence to every detail and duty.

I worked directly for Dr. Rosenberg for a while prior to the beginning of the research, but the bulk of his work began four years ago when the research cluster began. It was supposed to be a one-year project, but the project continued to receive funding. Each year my contract was continued and my duties were extended. Each year I also had to tell Sharon that I had to hold off on continuing school or going back to my teaching career.

Since I learned the several pages of detailed instructions for the program specifically constructed for this project and could create my own mental files for each

scientist, relaying the coded communications became an easy and necessary task I had to complete at any time of the day. Unfortunately, the only computer that I could use to complete this task was in the lab at school, and I could only perform tasks dictated to me by Dr. Rosenberg.

Basically, what this all meant was that every person involved with the Rosenberg Six Project was given a unique code that no other person could decipher. Throughout the project, then, researchers would communicate to Dr. Rosenberg through a virtual workspace designed specifically for this project. Originally, Dr. Rosenberg hoped to create a computer program that could translate these codes into the one specific code that Dr. Rosenberg could read. Then, Dr. Rosenberg could filter all of the information and either communicate directly with the original scientist who sent the communication, or he could translate it to English and send information to the entire group. This seemed easy enough, but this was when I entered the picture and watched him destroy a very expensive computer. Also, the risk of computer piracy or hackers terrified Dr. Rosenberg. If it were up to him, all of the communication would have been completed in long hand and delivered by messenger. But, of course, that wasn't possible, so eventually he decided to use me. I became the computer filter, and the remarkable thing we discovered was that I could perform the duties he imagined without ever actually translating the information to a code or language I could read. I could translate the code of one scientist into the code that Dr. Rosenberg could understand without knowing a word of what was written. This resulted in hours of each day translating words I never understood. My mind became a jumble of calculations and symbols with no meaning and file upon file in my own mind filled with these files of gibberish.

It was a unique trick – it was like a translator that didn't listen to or know either language, but that could translate back and forth so both parties could.

At times, Dr. Rosenberg would release data back to me and I would decipher it into a code the entire group could read, and that is how the communication worked. There was no computer filter to break the codes or decipher them, because there were only my files and the flash drives that Dr. Rosenberg collected. Of course, this entire process was a bit more intricate, but I didn't even know the details. I do know that I had to go to the lab any time Dr. Rosenberg needed a message transcribed, and this slowly evolved into an 'on-call' position that also included laundry and food-pickup, car pool and travel arrangements.

Dr. Rosenberg had two offices. One he used primarily for teaching – it was a small area where he held office hours and it was located in a central location with other tenured professors in the Polymer Science and Engineering Department. His other office was located in a separate building near the old power station, between the new soccer fields and a large student parking lot. It was, apparently, an old fraternity house converted into three offices and several different labs. This is where I worked – in the office, and usually alone.

6

So what was the connection to Stephen? For nearly five years I went to work every day, and I never spoke about my work at home. Then, about a year ago, Dr. Rosenberg asked me if I would like to bring my son to work. It was an odd request, and I

immediately said no. But he continued to urge me, and so about a year ago I introduced Dr. Rosenberg to my son—and the doctor took a shine to the boy immediately.

Come to think of it, their almost immediate bond mimicked, in many ways, the same bond that emerged between Rollo and my son.

I learned, while listening to Dr. Rosenberg and my son speak, that my son was interested in engineering and medicine. That he had a passion for the mathematics behind soccer angles and that was why he was a goalkeeper. That hair grew on the underside of his knees.

He never mentioned any of this to me, and after a few months it seemed I became little more than the secretary that buzzed my son into the building. My son's salutations became less and less involved, and I felt like I was in the middle of the "Cat's in the Cradle" song as my son spent more and more time behind closed doors with Dr. Rosenberg. I spoke with Sharon about this on a number of occasions, but she dismissed my fears and said that my ridiculous job might eventually give something back to the family. She said that it might have sucked the life and passion from me, but that it was giving an outlet to our son. She even visited the lab occasionally with Stephen, which made it even more difficult to explain to her how secretive I had to be with my job. She couldn't understand the work I did, and I knew that Dr. Rosenberg couldn't tell Stephen either. I could only play the part of the dumb secretary, the lab's janitor and Dr. Rosenberg's assistant who got to bring food to them both when Stephen came to visit.

But Dr. Rosenberg loved my son – he said as much the day I told him about my son's coma. He wouldn't let anything happen to him. Never. Dr. Rosenberg called seven times the day Sharon and I found Stephen near dead, and I ignored the first six phone

calls. It was the first time I had ignored any phone calls, and Dr. Rosenberg's initial tone displayed his anger. When he finally stopped talking, though, and I explained Stephen's condition he immediately made Sharon and I bring our son to the university hospital and promised to provide around-the-clock medical care, free of charge, for our son. He said it was part of the additional insurance policy needed for all lab workers, and that I reaped the same benefits. Since that day, experts from around the world visited our son.

That brings me to the last day I spoke with the doctor.

Three weeks ago, Dr. Rosenberg accepted an invitation to attend this summer's Bohemian Grove retreat. The retreat was really a large set of campgrounds located nearly seventy-five miles north of San Francisco. The campground was owned by the all-male Bohemian Club that hosted a two-week retreat for some of the most powerful men in the world. In the late 1800s, newspapermen and local businessmen created the club as an escape from the gold diggers and vulgarity of the early American West. Over the years it evolved into an elite club of leading government officials, artists, corporate leaders, media executives and businessmen.

Each year, usually around mid-July, members met at the Bohemian Grove and participated in a range of activities. They hired high-priced drag shows and artists, listened to lakeside chats that covered important contemporary issues, drank excessively, relieved themselves in the woods, and networked with other professionals. Each year, Bohemian Grove members also invited guest speakers to address the crowd the morning after the Low Jinks celebration. Past speakers included the Prime Minister of France, Supreme Court Justices and American Presidents. It was even rumored that plans for the

Manhattan Project were finalized at a 1942 lakeside chat. This year the guest speaker was Dr. Markus Rosenberg.

I didn't ask Dr. Rosenberg why he had been invited, though, for one of the first times, I truly wanted to know why. Luckily, he offered a bit of unsolicited explanation – the project made an unexpected discovery that needed to be shared with the most powerful men in the world.

This was the first time he gave me a reason for his business. He was supposed to give a talk to some important men about an ancillary discovery the Rosenberg Six had made, and he also mentioned '*them*'. That he could predict where '*they*' would appear next. I filed this away under project questions, and I still hadn't found time to return and think about what it meant. He also added that to properly explain these discoveries to each man he might need to be away for several weeks, for me not to worry, and for me to follow the protocols we had rehearsed.

He had disappeared in the past for days, sometimes for almost one week, but he had always returned and explained simply that it was part of the project. Whenever he returned, I felt a sense of pride that I could continue the process in his absence, that I could follow established protocols set up for me to follow any time he was absent.

What were these protocols? There were the normal protocols that required all members of the Rosenberg Six to communicate exclusively using coded messages through the virtual communication space. But there were also protocols established exclusively for when Dr. Rosenberg was gone. Two years after I started my job, Dr. Rosenberg told me six new protocols. I had just delivered two packages to the post office

(Dr. Rosenberg refused to use the university mail system) and returned with Dr. Rosenberg's laundry, when he informed me that he would be away for five days. I assumed this meant I would either be going with him or staying at home for the five days. I actually considered how nice this surprise would be for Sharon, but Dr. Rosenberg informed me that I really needed to spend more time in the office. He also told me I was important, and for the first time I felt like I was a part of the project rather than a secretary.

Before he gave me the protocols, he explained how every scientific project at the university has established protocols for administrative assistants when the project lead was gone. He also explained to me that the special nature of this project, which focused on the actual process of the project almost more than the content of what was worked on, required a higher level of secrecy that shouldn't cause me any alarm. Of course, just like the time my father told me not to go into the secret door in our kitchen, the moment he told me not to worry that the protocols seemed too secret, I worried about what I was doing for the very first time. And even more inevitable was my inability to act in any way on these emerging fears or questions. Instead, I listened to each protocol and recorded my observations and questions for each protocol into the same file.

Protocol 1: Utilize Stock Messages. (Basically, there was a list of coded messages for each individual prepared by Dr. Rosenberg in advance that I would use as replies whenever there seemed to be a direct message for Dr. Rosenberg.) This protocol didn't seem too worrisome. In fact, it made Dr. Rosenberg seem more normal and human. It seemed to me that he wanted to make sure none of the other researchers or university

officials knew he was taking a vacation from his work. I probably would do the same thing if I were in charge.

Protocol 2: Ensure Research Method & Quality Control. (Basically, this meant to make sure the Rosenberg Six didn't try to communicate with one another.) I thought it was a bit odd that he included a special notice for a protocol that already existed, but other than that this seemed a logical reminder.

Protocols 3 and 4: Fill the Void at Work and at Home. (Basically, this meant teach all his courses, attend any meetings, and complete any work he needed to complete as a professor at the university. It also meant clean his three rooms on a daily basis, check his mail at home and feed his fish.) These protocols seemed like a natural extension of the transition that had already started to happen with my job – from secretary to personal assistant.

The additional information Dr. Rosenberg provided me with prior to his departure for the Bohemian Grove and the additional protocols he provided caused me additional worry. He informed me that he assigned each researcher a near impossible task at intervals throughout the year, and that each researcher was given a specific due date for the completion of these tasks. He told me that the next due date wasn't until December 22nd, which should be sufficient time for them to continue to endure silent research and not to question Dr. Rosenberg's absence. With the allure of industry applications and a big payday always teased out to them by Dr. Rosenberg, not to mention the time they put into the project already, none of the researchers would probably try to contact Dr. Rosenberg or me directly, (or at least this was what Dr. Rosenberg told me before he left.) All of this was very odd, not because of the assignments or tasks, but because at no

other time over the five years of my employment had Dr. Rosenberg ever told me what he assigned the other researchers.

The additional protocols were even more odd.

Special Protocol Five: Dismantle and Mail the Computer. (Basically, I was told to dismantle the computer I put together originally at Dr. Rosenberg's request. He provided me with six different addresses around the country and also the Bahamas to send different parts of the computer and its hard drive. His instructions stated that after two weeks I was supposed to mail one piece of the computer out each day until most of the computer was gone and I was left with only one large piece. He said that I would receive information later, if needed, to inform me where to send the final piece.) This protocol prompted me to ask Dr. Rosenberg a question for only the second time during my employment. I didn't understand why I needed to take apart that computer. But unlike the previous time I asked a question, this time Dr. Rosenberg didn't smile and he didn't provide a comforting response. Instead he answered like my father would answer a similar request – "because I said so." He added, a bit reluctantly, after a few moments, that this was the location for each of the other researchers and that they understood why the pieces of the computer needed to be sent out in this secretive manner. I didn't really believe his answer. I shrugged, however, and filed the question and answer away as easily as I had filed the others away before. And after he disappeared for two weeks I dismantled the designated computer and mailed the six main pieces, though I was still stuck with the seventh piece that didn't have an address.

Special Protocol Six: Wait for Contact. (Basically, he told me that if any person attempted to influence the project or contact me I was to avoid all contact. If they

continued to attempt communication I was to feign complete ignorance. If they ultimately wouldn't leave, then I was to extract the main program and wait at home for contact.) This was the most disturbing protocol because he told me to act in contradiction with another possible authority figure. In fact, the biggest problem with this protocol wasn't that he was asking me to lie. As I had already figured out, I was essentially a liar. What disturbed me was that it made me interact with other people, and Dr. Rosenberg had to know that this wasn't something I felt altogether comfortable about. This protocol terrified me and I wanted to tell Dr. Rosenberg. But after his reaction to my other question, I couldn't say anything. I couldn't say anything to Sharon either. I thought Dr. Rosenberg felt my trepidation because this was the only protocol he signed and gave me to hold in case there were any problems. It was funny how a simple piece of paper helped me dismiss the rest of my worries, but it did.

Exactly three weeks ago, Dr. Rosenberg disappeared. It wasn't publicized. No one in the university or from the lab or from the Bohemian Grove, where Dr. Rosenberg had last been seen, bothered to say anything to me (or anyone else for that matter). There were no news headlines – there was nothing. So I didn't say anything either.

I continued my normal routine just as I had continued teaching the third grade class when Dr. Rosenberg dropped his tampons. I followed the set protocols to a tee. Seven days ago I began dismantling the computer, and over that same period of time I had ignored several messages from industry leaders, members of the Rosenberg Six and university officials.

All of the messages were for Dr. Rosenberg until yesterday. Then, the same individuals began leaving messages for me. This was a first. At no time in the past four years had anyone except for Sharon or my son left a message for me, and now there were at least four.

7

So here I was, lying in bed trying to use analytic skills that had been dormant for most of my life. The advice I had received over the past few days came from a strange man who lived in a tree house or from a man who hid beneath church pews. The cryptic clues I was trying to figure out seemed, somehow, to have something to do with my son. But the clues didn't make any sense. How could I save my son from a coma experts in the field have said he would never wake up from?

Perhaps it was time I woke up.

It had taken me only two weeks to master everything there was to know about university research lab protocols and a system of codes PhD professors couldn't break. Learning how to use these skills in a new way and putting together these clues should be simpler.

I took a bowl of cereal and my laptop into the living room and sat within the clutter: books, papers, empty boxes, dirty socks, movies, random candles and unopened mail. It was a sort of structured chaos, a Candy Land pattern of my memorabilia, a picture of my mind. Instead of files there were artifacts strewn about based on a point on a timeline instead of by password or clue. My bedroom, the kitchen and my bathroom were pristine and empty, but this room was my shrine, my museum.

A big screen television, still on the Jewelry Channel, covered an entire corner of the room. A well-dressed man sold Tanzanite to lonely women to help them cope with change. There was a picture of my wedding party in black and white framed in the middle of a bookcase beside the television and a framed coupon for a free backrub on the floor. I picked up a poker chip and couldn't recall ever playing poker in this room. It was more than clutter.

I left the bowl of cereal to harden amongst the Styrofoam nuts and several remote controls on the table and sunk back into the couch. The room seemed to close, the hallway outside suddenly disappeared behind my false and changing perspective as the faux wood panel walls circled around. I was part of the clutter, part of the museum. I wondered if this is what it looked like inside my mind. Is this what I had to sift through to figure out the clues? Outside, a church bell chimed noon, and in here the television auctioneer sold Namibian Mandarin Garnets for \$95.00. I gripped dirt particles in the carpet with my toes and watched as the man on television slashed the prices down more.

Suddenly, a pain shot through my head and I felt transported, somehow, from my living room to a place where I couldn't sense the existence of my own body. I was confused. It looked like I was in a cave. It felt clammy and the image of a man approaching me came in and out of focus, the entire cave was spinning. I could hear loud crashes in the distance. The man continued to walk towards me, and I couldn't move or talk or protect myself. Something pierced the skin on my shoulder and my eyes immediately focused, but I had no memory. Who was I? Where was I? I shrieked and jerked to the ground, expecting to find myself on the dirt floor of a cave. But it was gone.

It was only a dream. I found myself on my living room floor like a schizophrenic awakened from my own mind. Snot dripped from my nose and my heart beat rapidly.

Then my cell phone rang, and I felt saved. I answered it.

“Hello?”

The man cleared his throat, and I immediately knew it was Dr. Köln. He was the head of the department that occasionally visited Dr. Rosenberg’s lab. He had never deemed it necessary to speak with me, so I wondered what he could possibly want. I didn’t even know if he knew my name.

“Mr. Price?” he asked and then cleared his throat for an uncomfortably long time.

“Mr. Jenson Price?”

“Yes?”

“Oh Good. Is Dr. Rosenberg there?” he asked.

“Um – no?”

“When do you expect him?”

“I’m at home. Can we talk about this tomorrow?” I needed time to regroup.

“Well, this is sort of a delicate matter. We’d really like to speak with both of you as soon as possible. Can you give us his cell so we can set up a meeting?”

“I’ll leave him a message.” There was a bit of silence, so I tried to finish the call:

“Well, if that’s it I really need to go.”

“Um – Mr. Price?” The voice asked in between throat clears that seemed now a nervous tick than an actual throat problem. This was the longest I’d spoken to anyone from the school except Dr. Rosenberg in four years.

“Yes?”

“Yeah – I’m not sure how to ask this, so I’m just going to come right out and ask it. Have you been teaching Dr. Rosenberg’s classes?”

And there it was – finally. I was almost relieved. Of course I’d been teaching his classes. I’ve been teaching his classes on and off for nearly four years. It was a wonder students didn’t think I was Dr. Rosenberg. But I wasn’t stupid. I knew what this meant. I didn’t even have an undergraduate degree in science, let alone a doctorate. And over the past two weeks I’m not even sure what I had been saying. I don’t know physics. Time to initiate the last protocol – I guess my work at the lab was finally over. At least Sharon would be glad, as if she would ever find out. (Even though we’d been split up for a while, I could tell she still looked out for me at times and made sure I was okay. The other day I even found groceries outside the door waiting for me and I noticed that she still paid most of the bills online.)

Dr. Köln continued, but this time he didn’t clear his throat. The pattern change caught me off guard: “You know what, don’t answer that. Really. How about this...were you thinking about visiting your son tonight?” The question caught me off guard again. I began to question if I even had a guard.

“I hadn’t thought about it, but yes, I probably will.”

“Good – how about 7:00. We can talk then. We’ve already talked to your wife.”

“Sharon?”

“She’s listed as the emergency contact.”

“I don’t know.” I immediately wondered what they could have told Sharon. I had a good feeling that they knew I was performing duties that I was not qualified for, and even though it was at Dr. Rosenberg’s bequest I was certain I wouldn’t be employed

there much longer. I wondered if they told Sharon this exact point. And what about Stephen? He was still in the university hospital. I wanted to ask them what they said to Sharon, but how would I ask them that question.

“It’s settled then. And don’t forget to bring the lab’s laptop. It’s very important.”

What was this all about? They had never asked to just meet me before. And how did they get a hold of Sharon? I didn’t even know how to get a hold of her, and she told me not to visit the hospital when she was there. She said it was too hard right now – too hard, for whom?

The rest of the day I filled with Rosenberg chores – the list of duties that needed to be taken care of while he was gone. I fed his fish, which I brought to my house last week. (A Bahamian clown fish that was one of the most poisonous saltwater fish on the planet – great pet.) Then I got online and checked the Rosenberg Six file, the collaborative program through Linux specially designed for this project. I could only access some very basic features of the program online, and even then it required a series of encrypted passwords and steps only Dr. Rosenberg knew. But I had recorded them in a file within my head the first and only time he had me access the files from his home. A curiosity I didn’t think existed for me like it did for others overtook me as I reviewed the coded messages that streamed under each of the researcher’s code-name. At first I dismissed it and typed in some messages that Dr. Rosenberg gave me before he left. I didn’t know what the messages stated, but I was sure they were basic instructions and words of encouragement meant to make the scientists believe Dr. Rosenberg was still in

the office instead of hiking around the Redwood forest with some of the most powerful men in the world.

But I wanted to know what the messages said. Of course I knew it was probably like many of the scientific manuals Dr. Rosenberg had me read at times. I could recall the exact numbers and proofs, but I had no idea what they meant or the implications of the conclusions. I wondered if I could help Dr. Rosenberg even more by not only relaying the coded messages to different scientists, but by actually recording the content of the messages as well? Wouldn't he want me to address specific problems while he was gone? Wasn't I more to him than a secretary or errand boy? Of course I was. That was what Sharon never understood.

Usually when I translated the messages for the Rosenberg Six from one code to another I would occupy my mind with a memory. Sometimes I would invent a memory, but usually it was something real. I would use a password I remembered and open up a file in my mind about a time or place long forgotten or repressed and then allow myself to relive that memory as if it were happening at that moment. It was a trick I think I perfected as a child when my family would force me to sit in a chair for hours at a time because I refused to eat or had done something else wrong. But it was more than a daydream. I could taste and feel and breathe in that moment. I could disappear and leave myself behind as if I had somehow traveled outside my body through time. When I translated one code to another I would allow the parts of myself needed to perform the task to remain in front of the computer, but the rest of me would live in another moment.

As I sat at the computer and relayed Dr. Rosenberg's messages and translated the coded messages from each researcher into the code for Dr. Rosenberg, I thought about

the night I accompanied Sharon to a birthday party for her half-sister, held at her father's house. We had been dating for nearly a year when Sharon asked me to the party. During the car ride over she explained to me that she had only met her father within the last month at her mother and aunt's insistence. He was a small businessman and her mother was one of his accountants, and during a long business trip one drink led to another and they had a one-night stand. Her mother resigned from the business the very next day because the man was married, and she didn't tell him about his daughter for nearly thirty years. As I recalled the conversation that occurred in the front seat of a small compact car that smelled strangely like limes, I remembered how amazed I was at her nonchalant nature when she talked about such intimate events. Of course I didn't ask her any questions, but she did hold my hand as she drove. When we arrived, the party had already begun and there were no parking spaces. I would have driven in circles continuously until someone left, but Sharon parked immediately behind a luxury sedan near the front. We got out of the car and made our way to a side pool where the party was taking place, and I recalled how Sharon's hands shook. I had never seen her vulnerable or scared before, and rarely since. We talked and moved about the party like teenage kids stuck at a parent's luau, barely skimming the outer regions and trying to stay out of everyone's way. I got to meet her father, briefly, and her sister even more briefly as they moved around the room. The three of them, with me apparently coming as the fourth wheel, agreed to meet for drinks to talk more privately after some of the guests had disappeared.

After her father and sister disappeared into the crowd a fifty-something-year-old woman with a bob and a wrinkled, black cocktail dress stepped within inches of Sharon.

It was her father's wife, and her voice was slurred when she said, "You have some nerve showing up to my daughter's party. Some nerve."

I remembered that Sharon didn't get angry or back down. She just said, "Good evening Mrs. Gibbons. It looks like a very nice party."

"Well you're not invited so you and this boy can just leave. Who are you anyway?" She directed the question to me, and I still don't know why.

Sharon answered for me, "I'm sorry. I don't know how to act either, but your problem is with me, not him."

The woman continued to speak towards me, though, and it made me very uncomfortable: "Well I don't know you, but if you're with this – what do I call you anyway – you're no relation to me, you're an abomination, a tramp's daughter."

Sharon was visibly upset and I stepped in front, a gallant move very uncharacteristic of me then or since, and said, "Why don't we just leave."

But that was enough time for Sharon to regain her composure. She became the strong woman that so many times pushed me during our marriage to be something better, something more. She stood straight and said, "Go ahead and finish what you were going to say. Finish it."

Without warning Mrs. Gibbons threw the contents of her wine glass into Sharon's face, dropped the glass and took a huge swipe at Sharon's face. Sharon wiped the wine out of her eyes and backed out of the way of the swing just in time, but her foot also stepped over the ledge of the pool and she fell into the water. I didn't save Sharon. Instead, I caught Mrs. Gibbons and helped her sit in a vinyl pool chair where she promptly passed out.

My ability to distract part of my brain by reliving memories while other parts of my brain worked on the Rosenberg Six coded messages ceased the moment the task was completed. The memory disappeared, and I was left yearning and incomplete. That was what I felt the moment I completed the final stock response from Dr. Rosenberg to each researcher. I wanted desperately to return to the image. I also wanted to try and translate some of what the researchers had said. That was much more important than remembering the first time I saw the outline of Sharon's breasts. After I helped her out of the pool, her sister and I escorted her into a back room of the house where she put on one of her half-sister's white robes while she waited for her clothes to dry. The robe wasn't cotton; it was some lighter material that clung to her semi-damp chest. Most people might think Sharon was a bit on the heavy side, but from that moment on I knew she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen.

But right now I didn't have the time to settle myself into a memory, so I shook my head a couple times and concentrated on the symbols. How could I translate these codes into English? I scanned my eyes across the rows of symbols searching for a pattern, but even though I could find hundreds of different patterns, none of them led me any closer to understanding what the patterns translated to in English. I tried placing each pattern visually in my mind on top of one another in an attempt at seeing patterns. This didn't make any sense either although it seemed theoretically possible. When I tried it I couldn't quite figure out how to do it in my mind. So I decided to concentrate on the last few messages I just translated. I wished I hadn't allowed the rest of my mind to go back to the time when Sharon fell in the pool, but that was the only way I knew how to translate. As I

looked at the patterns that I translated from several researchers to Dr. Rosenberg, I noticed that even though I didn't know what the words meant in the different codes, several of the different patterns translated into the same pattern for Dr. Rosenberg. This meant that the scientists were talking about the same thing. That only made sense, they were all working on the same project. But what did that mean? After a while I gave up, but filed many of the similar patterns into a new file in my head. I only hoped there was a way to translate the information some day.

I left my home a little before five to dismantle the final parts of the computer and see my son before the others showed up. As I left, though, my neighbor approached me. He lived across the street in a nice green ranch house with a lawn that was kept nicer than a Major League baseball diamond by a team of local kids. I started back inside as he approached, but he wouldn't be denied. I hadn't talked to him in years.

"Whoa there Mr. neighbor," he said. He had a southern drawl that made me smile, but I didn't have time to become good friends. I knew he forgot my name, but no matter...I couldn't tell you his.

"Hi." It was awkward. I had to go – tell him you have to go. He came closer.

"Don't worry, I've got somethin' here for ya." He held up a FEDEX box. "I got to tell ya, I guess we've had it for a couple days. I'm so sorry. My wife wasn't paying attention and signed for it the other day – but it's definitely for you."

I grabbed it and wondered what it could be.

“I didn’t look inside,” he added, he must have read my look. I opened the envelope without saying a word. I couldn’t remember the last time I received a certified piece of mail.

“Well, just thought I’d apologize and bring it by. Maybe it’s a major award?”

I acknowledged his gesture with a quick nod of my head.

“Okay, well. I’ve got to go. I’ll see you around.” the neighbor said. He still stood by my door, and I still said nothing. Finally, my neighbor left.

Inside the cardboard envelope were a letter and two airline tickets. I looked at the airline tickets first – two tickets to Nassau, Bahamas. One had my name on it and one had Sharon’s name on it. I was confused. Then I looked at the letter. First, the surface of the letter was textured, like threads woven together tightly into an off-white sheet. There was no return address or detailed introduction. At the top my name was stenciled in dark block letters followed by several lines of English letters that didn’t seem to make any sense. It looked like a block of tangled words. After the English words there was a large block of characters written in Dr. Rosenberg’s code. I wondered if it was a direct translation of the English words above. If I could figure out the proper order for the English words and how they corresponded to the coded phrases, this could be the Rosetta stone I needed to start figuring out the rest of the coded information from the Rosenberg Six files. I carefully examined the English words:

*Meet All You at Don’t Don’t blue The table You Don’t the The It me
in will know Fish fret fret with tick your and tell Fry proj is the
wife be whom the a a part ets at you’re an last ect all and*

7:00 told this on bout bout I are will wife oth Saturday is up pm
have real is and the your for you you must er answers near to money
both soon from don't bills son any both one come soul trust done you Remember

I tried to rearrange the letters or the words, but I wasn't very good at identifying patterns unless I had previously seen the pattern and could recall the memory. I wished I had read more books on code breaking and patterns. I put the letter inside my coat pocket, got into the car and drove off. Perhaps I could figure it out later? The only thing I knew for certain was that the letter must have come from Dr. Rosenberg. No one else knew his code. The second thing I knew was that I was going to have to talk to Sharon. Her name was on the tickets, which meant somehow she was involved. The date for the departure was only one week away leaving the local airport for Nassau, Bahamas. As I drove, I reworked the different letters I memorized from the note and nearly got into two wrecks. When I reached the lab the doors were open, and for the moment I forgot about the tickets or the envelope.

Once I was inside the lab, it appeared obvious that someone had been there earlier that day. The file cabinets were empty, although there wasn't anything in them of importance...mostly school supplies, syllabi, papers, Dr. Rosenberg's personal items, and grooming tools for his dogs. My station was completely missing – computer and all. They even took the chair. I wondered what this meant. I went to the only computer still there, a large, older model hidden among other lab equipment that looked unused. It was still connected to the main server. I used a backdoor into the Rosenberg Six collaborative

computer program and grabbed the entire program like I would grab a stapler off my desk, and put it on my flash drive and into my pocket. The only thing that remained was the basic background for the program, or what Dr. Rosenberg once called the program's shadow.

As I extracted the information and left the basic skeleton of the collaborative program, my hands shook. This wasn't normal procedure for a scientific laboratory; I didn't care what Dr. Rosenberg might have said. This was something entirely different. I frantically typed passwords and bypassed simple firewalls to extract all the residue left from the last five years of coded communication between Dr. Rosenberg and the other Rosenberg Six and placed it on several flash drives. The process couldn't go quick enough. Why was I following these protocols when I knew it felt wrong or illegal somehow? It couldn't be that I was just following orders. It had to be more. Was I really just a robot, a person with no real goals or directions? This was what Sharon always warned me about – perhaps not overt invasions of my privacy by unknown people that clearly didn't care I knew they had been in the lab, but the basic premise of her argument still persisted. As I left the lab it suddenly occurred to me that I probably wouldn't ever return.

I felt a sharp pain pierce through the back of my skull and into my eyes. My heart pounded. I needed to settle down. There was only one place to go, so I drove to the hospital to see my son.

I drove and tried to shuffle the information from different files into a single one based on the last twenty-four hours, but the process proved too difficult at the moment. Rollo said the path was inside the church and then disappeared. He said I could save my

son. Bergie said I could save my son, that it had something to do with the lab, that there was some sort of connection between the dreams and the headaches and my son...and now there were these tickets and this cryptic letter. I felt like returning to the same question I asked in the church courtyard, the same question that I returned to over and over – How did I get here?

As I tried to reshuffle the information, I almost ran through a stoplight and hit a young boy on a bike. After I stopped, and as the kid flipped me off, a pain twisted through my neck and head. I slammed the car into park. The vision of hundreds of men walking down a dirt path around and into a deep hole flashed before my eyes. They looked like slaves attached to one another by long ankle chains. The sound of hammers crashing against rocks rang in the distance. Suddenly I felt my leg jerk and it was as if someone were pushing me from behind. I was tired, but I couldn't see my body. Was I part of the line? Above I could barely see small caves cut into the side of the cliff walls like honeycombs. The relentless sun above nearly blinded me. I could hear words, but I couldn't make out what they said. Something whipped me from behind, and then just as suddenly I found myself sitting back in the car. Behind me several drivers honked their horns. I could almost taste grit on my teeth. The headache pierced harder than before through the back of my eyes, so I swallowed two pills and drove like a man with two dilated eyes to the hospital—nearly blind.

8

The hospital wing my son slept in seemed unapproachable and cold, a brick prison framed by construction, steel girders and mobile home outposts. I wondered if he heard cries while he slept at night. A newly painted white cross above the front entrance added

the only hope to the entire dull facade, but it seemed threatened by the crane that hung frozen above it. I walked through the front doors without looking up and proceeded to his room. I needed to see Stephen.

It had been over six months since we brought him here, and for the first few months I spent every day in the hospital. Lately, I made sure to visit two or three times per week. As I approached the main desk on my son's floor I brushed my hand along the pink surface just below the white counter top, curving with the counter to the nurse reading a book. She had dark hair pulled back tight into a ponytail. A dark, unbuttoned cardigan sweater hung low over the shoulder of her white shirt.

“How is he today?”

Lisa placed a hospital magnet in her book and set it down next to a computer terminal and cup of coffee. “No change. You go right in though, I'll have Mary bring you a drink.”

“Um Lisa, you haven't seen my wife have you?”

“I'm not getting in between that again, no sir. You know last time I just about got my head torn off. Nope, never again. We haven't seen her since she threw you out. Now we're not going to have that again here are we?”

“No. Nothing like that. Just thought she might come.”

I walked on the peach stripe painted down the middle of the linoleum floor that led to my son's door. The hospital lights were dim. The hallway smelled like fresh bleach. At my son's door I touched the Claddaugh doorknocker. It was attached just below the room number, a gift Dr. Rosenberg brought back from a Dublin conference. The polished brass hands held a heart with a crown above, the symbol for love and

friendship; the sigil that originated in a small Irish fishing village near Galway. If a sailor from Claddaugh encountered another sailor or fisherman without the symbol on their sail or on their clothes...they would kill him. Sharon and I once wore identical Claddaughes on our left hands, the hearts pointed towards our own hearts to signify we were married. I couldn't wear mine anymore because my fingers had become too large.

I walked inside. My son lay motionless on a thin, clean hospital bed. His bedroom comforter was snug tight below both of his armpits. He was in what the doctors called a persistent vegetative state, the chronic condition that invariably emerges after a coma, comprised of what they called sleep-wake cycles, reflex movements like sucking and grabbing and a total lack of mental activity or consciousness. Several monitors and an IV drip framed Stephen and connected to his tall, fragile body. Beside him was a nightstand with a white lamp, a digital clock and a large, beige phone. I looked at the time on my own watch: 6:21. I adjusted Stephen's clock to reflect my exact time. I hoped Sharon and the Department head wouldn't show up at all. On Stephen's other side was a long table below a window with its curtains drawn closed. On the table were fresh flowers, Birds of Paradise, and several pictures of my family – of Stephen and his girlfriend and friends, and of me and Sharon standing behind a very young Stephen crawling on a Winnie the Poo blanket. On each side of the window were Stephen's two favorite posters, a velvet Led Zeppelin "Swan Song" poster that illuminated under black lights and a four-foot long Led Zeppelin "Stairway to Heaven" poster that depicted a wise, hooded man staring over a cliff in the dark with a lantern in his hand, and the lyrics to the song written in cryptic script below.

I pulled the curtains to the side and watered two plants sitting on the window's ledge. Outside, a fog dissipated in patches to uncover stars. I meticulously rubbed away smudges on the glass with a wet handkerchief, washed the brass handles to Stephen's bed, and then I stood beside my son.

Stephen barely seemed to be the 6'5" teenage goalkeeper with long forearms and long, bony-kneed legs. I brushed his jaggedly cut hair back against his head and watched it flop back into place. He had my cowlick, but he definitely had his mother's eyes. They seemed to change shades of green based on the clothes he wore and the sunlight outside. There was a barely visible scar below Stephen's eye, along his lower eyelid, from when a hanger hooked through and nearly blinded him when he was a child. Sharon blamed me for the accident because I let a young Stephen crawl over mounds of clothes in the back of the station wagon as we moved from our downtown apartment to the suburbs. A card from Stephen's high school soccer team lay face-up on the linoleum floor beside Stephen's bed. I picked it up. A team picture was taped below the words GET WELL SOON. I was surprised that Stephen was the tallest player.

"I'll go to games next time. I promise," I said. Then I moved the alarm clock and phone to the ground and placed the soccer team's card on the table. Stephen made a slight sound, but I knew it was only reflex, not a sign my son was awake. Stephen seemed like part of the bed. He had round cheekbones that rolled up to his lower eyes, even now. The sheets had few creases. I grabbed some skin cream on a small shelf beside the bed and rubbed it along Stephen's feet and calves, careful to avoid moving up too high and touching the emerging bedsores along his hips and thighs.

“What do *you* think I should do?” I moved to his shoulders and exercised his arms while I rubbed. He felt so tiny in my hands. “You think the answers are in Nassau too?” His joints popped as I rotated his arm and bent his elbow back and forth. I continued to talk to my son, “But how could I ask her? I know she’s still my wife, but what do I say to her?”

The ventilator breathed for Stephen.

Lisa knocked on the door, gently, and then poked her head inside. A stethoscope hung from her neck. “I’m sorry you two, but Mr. Price, there’s two men out here to see you.” She paused when I looked in her direction. I wondered if Sharon was with her too. I wanted to stay with Stephen and watch him breathe. I wanted to switch positions. Lisa added a few quieter remarks, obviously meant only for me: “I’ll give you two a few minutes before I come in and give young Stephen his bath.” I mouthed THANK YOU as she left and then looked at the sky. Outside the summer triangle shined brightly and I recalled how much Stephen loved the stars when he was very young.

“Look Stephen, it’s your favorite, the summer triangle. I’ll bring your telescope next time I come by so we can check out the stars.” I had packed his telescope away in my one and only attempt to clean after Sharon left. I paused for a second and said the word ‘star’ again. Star. The word triggered a file I’d forgotten existed. Several months ago I overheard a phone conversation between Dr. Rosenberg and the person I assumed was his anonymous benefactor. Throughout the muffled conversation I could make out several references to a star they discovered. But it wasn’t in the sky. What did Dr. Rosenberg say?

“The star’s got to be there.”

“Well, we can’t see the star, but mathematically it exists. Maybe star isn’t what we should call it. It’s like a flatlander – he can’t see me in three-dimensional world; but he knows I’m there.”

“It’s the energy. That’s the key. We need to find out when the energy spikes and then send the martyrs through.”

“We only know the latitude, 42.393. We still need the longitude and time.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him. You figure out more about that star.”

Lisa poked her head again. “I’m sorry Mr. Price, but they seem to be getting impatient. And your wife is here too.” I threw the bits of conversation into the new file I started earlier in my car and walked into the hall.

“Oh, Mr. Price. Good – we can get started a bit early.” An older, slightly balding man approached quickly and shook my hand.

It was Dr. Köln. His eyes were set low behind oval rimmed glasses and his lower lip bulged out. His age showed in his neck, mostly, as it dripped out of his collar in loose folds. He wore a dark suit and baby blue tie. Sharon and another, younger, Hispanic man with thick nose hair stood further away. I wanted to run out of the room, to flee back into my room and forget any of this ever occurred. Sharon seemed confused, flustered somehow. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and looked directly at me. What could I say to her? She looked beautiful. One night after she left I spent an entire evening rehearsing what I would say to her the next time we met. Part of the speech included every moment I could remember when we laughed, like a list of times we could return to if I willed it hard enough, but at this moment I couldn’t think of a single moment. And what was she doing with these two men? What had they told her?

Dr. Köln spoke: “Well, Mr. Price, as you might know by now, we have a bit of a problem. Actually, there are two issues we need to talk about, one of which, well, really both of which affect your wife – that is why we asked her here.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Well, I guess we’ll get right to it. It has come to our attention that you have been teaching two graduate courses in polymer engineering and one undergraduate physics course in place of Dr. Rosenberg since the start of the semester.”

I didn’t say anything – so?

“I take it you don’t deny it. Well, this is a breach of university and departmental policy, not to mention a major leap from the duties outlined in this contract outlining your job responsibilities.” He handed me a copy of what I assumed was my contract, though I hadn’t really read it in years. He handed another copy to my wife, before he continued. His voice was condescending. I already wanted to leave. “It has also come to our attention that you have been acting, for the most part, if not completely, on your own.”

The other man chimed in. His voice was cleaner, almost musical. “Even though you are only the secretary you are familiar with the security setup here. We are a privately funded research project working on, well, working on information and a process that is classified. It is sufficient for you to realize that your direct involvement with the project risks the integrity of everything some of the greatest minds in the world have been working on for many years.”

“Give him the bottom line,” Dr. Köln said. “Give him a chance to provide some answers. He deserves that.”

“I’d like to hear from him first. Is there anything you want to say?”

Yes. Of course I wanted to say something. I wanted to explain in detail how I knew the intricacies of this entire project and was somehow a key component. I just couldn't find the words. I couldn't even find any ideas. I looked up from my shoes at my wife and looked at her for the first time that day. I missed her. I've never known a woman like Sharon before. Sharon came from the Midwest, but she had an east coast attitude that never backed down. Her natural blonde hair darkened at the roots and curled at the ends. It seemed on the verge of becoming brown. Her eyes looked like Stephen's, but were more aqua because of her loose blue sweatshirt. She was larger than the man that stood beside her, slightly overweight, but she had a strong build like a former athlete in the off-season. She was beautiful. She had once said, after I asked for the hundredth time why she ever married me, that I softened the edges of her existence and that at a time in her life when she had lost hope in herself and others, I had given her purpose and simplified her life. And of course, I had given her Stephen. When I had asked what she meant, she offered no more explanation. At the time, the very idea that a person could think so highly of me inflated my pride and my image of myself, but now I felt very small. Surely, she couldn't feel I had simplified her life now. We locked eyes, momentarily, and then I looked back down.

"Listen," Sharon said, "I'll be the first person to praise the lord the moment Jen leaves this god forsaken job. I know it's none of your business, but it's torn this family apart and consumed his soul and every minute of his time for the last five years."

The younger man pulled out another document and said, "This report documents the security breaches caused by the actions of your husband."

"You're going to read it here?" I asked.

“We’ve both read it. It has circulated around the department for a week. This is an important project, and we understand the delicacy of your son’s condition. We wouldn’t approach you with this lightly,” said Dr. Koln.

“First, there is this business of teaching university classes.”

“I get it,” I said, “You don’t have to read any more.”

“Choose the lab stuff,” Dr. Koln said.

The younger man appeared to skip down the report. “Jenson Price, administrative assistant, was seen on numerous occasions taking a laptop computer from the lab to his home—A major breach in project procedure. Second, Jenson Price, administrative assistant, has been seen entering and exiting the primary laboratory without any supervision—A major breach in project procedure. Third, Jenson Price...”

“Administrative Assistant, yeah I get it,” I said.

Sharon interjected, “Let’s cut to the chase. These are all things he did as part of his job.”

The younger man moved back next to Sharon and said, “I understand you’re angry, but this is out of our hands. Mr. Price, I’m sorry to say but we cannot have you continue your work with this university. You broke your contract and you may have ruined a five year research project.”

“What about Stephen?” I asked.

Dr. Köln continued to look at me as he spoke, “Well, that is another issue – but right now I’d like to get your badge and id card, and if you could come to the lab tomorrow and help Dr. Householder here get into the message board and get an idea of all the materials and procedures, that would be great. Did you bring the laptop?”

I recognized the man's name. He was one of the Rosenberg Six researchers, but I wondered why he was involved now? Dr. Rosenberg would have never allowed this man to be face to face with me or this close to the details of the entire project. I remembered that Dr. Rosenberg stated that this man was actually a statistician with a hobby for calculating the odds of miraculous occurrences. When I met him he was so over the top, so Republican and annoying. I wondered how he had gotten involved with Dr. Köln.

I didn't even use a university-owned laptop. Dr. Rosenberg said that he purchased the laptop for me out of his own funds so that I could have one at home. I wondered if I should tell this to the men, but I didn't. I also wondered why they would want me to help them get into Dr. Rosenberg's files seemingly out of nowhere. What had happened? It couldn't just be because I taught a couple courses. There were far more incompetent professors at the university than me. Luckily Sharon intervened.

"What about my son!" Sharon demanded.

"Your son will need to be moved to another facility," Dr. Köln said.

Sharon charged straight away, she didn't even wait for an explanation or last word. She didn't wait for punctuation to signal the man was done. "Let me understand what you're saying." They tried to interrupt, but she continued inches from the old man's face. I wanted her to spit like Tommy. "What you two gentleman are saying is that because my husband's boss decided to quit coming to work, not only are you firing my husband, but you are also renegeing on a verbal agreement to treat my son – that's about right huh?"

I should have been standing beside her, adding solidarity and emotion, the forceful father that could pull together the trodden masses always ready to protest for a

cause on campus. Wasn't I in a union? Actually, I wasn't sure. My employment with this project had been worked through some agency outside of the normal university bureaucracy. That was part of what intrigued me at the start, and part of the practical problem Sharon had with the position since she viewed my redacted contract.

Dr. Householder interjected while his partner backed away from my wife's fierce gaze. "We understand this is a delicate and special circumstance, and we are not without a heart. If you help us out with the information tomorrow and with other information we'll continue paying your insurance policy through this month."

"But remember," Dr. Köln added.

"Oh yeah, that leads us to the second issue," The younger man continued.

"I thought this was the second issue," demanded Sharon.

"Well, since your son was administered into the university hospital Dr. Rosenberg has been paying the extensive bill for round the clock care and state of the art tests and assistance on his own. And there has been no payment for the next month."

"What are you saying?" I finally asked. My voice seemed so very small.

"At the end of the month we're going to have to move him to a state hospital."

"What about the insurance? They can't just drop us, even if I have been fired," I added.

The sympathetic demeanor, stooped stance and drooped brows the two men wore when they first spoke disappeared. They must have regained their composure now that I took the floor. As they spoke they seemed taller, as if someone grabbed behind their collars and jerked them straight up. "No. You're absolutely right – and the insurance is

very fair, but the costs for care for a patient in, well...pardon me – but in a vegetative state are extreme. We are a research university and we simply cannot pay the bill.”

“We’re sorry. Here.” Dr. Householder handed me a card as they both backed up to the door. “Call this number and they would be happy to talk with you more. We really are sorry.”

Sharon flew at the two men and yelled in their faces, “Sorry!” I thought Sharon might cry, but I should’ve known better. “Sorry! You fucking little men. You little, little men. We’ll see who’s sorry!”

“Sharon,” I said in a mock whispered voice. She turned immediately on me.

“No, God damnit! I won’t be quiet. You two go back and tell your boss that Sharon Price isn’t about to just let this go. You go back and tell him no one messes with my boy!” The two men disappeared quickly through the door without looking back, and then Sharon slapped me square in the face.

“They said we needed--” I tried to explain, but she slapped me as hard as she could.

“You’ll take care of it,” she replied.

Sharon leaned her huge frame against the wall in a crouched position – a stoic statue, an athlete after a huge loss – I wanted to comfort her, but I didn’t know what I would do.

Then I remembered the letter. I pulled the letter out of my pocket.

“Sharon – Sharon!” I yelled.

“You did this,” She whispered, shaking her head and looking down at the ground.

“I know how we can fix this...look.” I handed her the tickets with both our names on it.

“A vacation? You want to go on a fucking vacation?” She stood up and shook her head in disgust. “Why don’t you just go home?” Her tone reminded me of the tone my little league coach used the first and only game I played.

“No – it came this morning with a letter. It’s from Dr. Rosenberg. I know it is, but I can’t figure out what it means. I think he wants the two of us to meet him in Nassau. He promised me he would take care of my family no matter what, maybe he’ll give us money when we meet him?”

“Us? I’m done with this – with you. I’ll go to my company and beg for their help. They’ve got to. I’ve sold more shoes and sports clothing in a month than they have in a year.”

“What are they going to do?” I asked. “Look at this. I showed her the bill detailing how much the hospital and additional services cost each month. “They’re not going to pay this. But he will. He has to. You see, something’s happened, and I’m the only person that knows about the job.”

“What’s wrong with you!” Sharon demanded. “Why do you lie?”

“I don’t – what do you mean?”

“Your father? Those stupid letters? Come on Jenson, we know your handwriting, we’re not stupid. And I don’t blame you all the time. I don’t. Really, it’s part of what I love about you; but this is our son damnit. Our son! And I won’t let you do this to him.”

I didn’t know what to say. I felt shattered. Destroyed, but I had to say something.

“Sharon stop. Please. I didn’t invent this.” I held the tickets up towards her and continued, “And this isn’t about me. It’s about Stephen. I’m asking you to please think about Stephen.”

“You have no right. No right at all! God Damn you Jenson Price. Where were you the last fifteen years? Huh? And now suddenly, since he’s been here you’re suddenly better than me? You know better than me what to do for my son? No – all I’ve ever done is think about Stephen. No – you just stop right there.”

“I’m not saying that. I’m not saying I’m better at all. I know I’m not. I don’t want to argue. I never did. Just think about it. Will you?” I begged.

“I just don’t trust you. I’m sorry. Besides, you heard them. If you leave without helping them they could cut us off completely. Then where’d we be?”

“Here.” I pointed to the tickets and held up the letter.

“You’re crazy.” She grabbed the letter and read it. “Jesus Christ this doesn’t even say anything.”

“Well I’m going and you still have my passport. Just think about it tonight will you? The letter says we both need to come. Stop by tomorrow and bring my passport, and just think about it. Please.” It was the most words I’d spoken to Sharon in months, maybe years.

Sharon walked towards Stephen’s room. I asked again, “Sharon?”

“Just stop. I’ll talk to you in a couple days.”

“The flight leaves on Saturday.”

“I get it. Now will you just leave, please?”

The doorbell rang and interrupted my morning escape. Throughout the night and most of the early part of the day I attempted to clean up the cluttered mess of clues and events that occurred over the past week. Actually, the timeline went further back than that because I tried to trace clues and events back to the moment I began working with Dr. Rosenberg. I'm not sure when, but at some time I fell asleep on the couch with the television on, and when I awoke I found myself half asleep and exhausted, watching an old movie.

Whenever my mind felt cluttered or life got too disorganized I would either clean the house, make a long "to do" list or watch a movie. Obviously this was not time to watch a movie, but there I found myself – lying on a dirty couch and watching The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come. It was embarrassing and I didn't want anyone to know that in the midst of all that was happening I still couldn't act. I was the person Tommy called a loser and decided to retreat back into my mind, but only this time I didn't retreat into some imaginary retaliation. Instead I relied on the television. I listened for the doorbell, but the ringing stopped so I looked at the screen some more.

The movie wasn't too bad. It was a 1961 Technicolor drama that starred several John Wayne stock characters, but no Duke. The real star, Jimmie Rodgers, looked more like John Travolta in Grease than a boy from the mountains that falls in love with a Kentucky southerner who fights for the north. I thought, perhaps, the movie had a little more to do with trying to figure out where you fit in this world and then in heaven than it did about the war.

Most of the action took place between battle scenes and everyone spoke with pronounced drawls. You know, there's something about a girl with a southern accent on film that's much more attractive than in real life. Eventually there was the inevitable decision the main character had to make between duty to the North versus his love for a girl and father he meets on the battlefield fighting for the South. Then the main character's friend from the North and father from the South both die on the same battlefield and he buries them together. And then he meditates on his place in the world by saying he'll return to make a memorial to them both, and if God allows him to survive the war perhaps he'll finally know which one of their two ways is his belongin' place.

The doorbell rang again – this time repeatedly as if a trick or treater stood impatiently on the other side of my front door. I paused the movie again and stood up. The curtains were drawn closed and a blanket stuffed in the curtain rods helped darken the entire room. I pulled the blankets away and looked outside. The remnants of a morning storm washed across the landscape like a wet on wet watercolor in violets and gray. The two old men that visited Mandro's café everyday for fresh blueberry pie walked hand in hand across the street, but there were no cars in the driveway, no clues to who was at the front door.

It had been three days since I handed over the keys and the laptop that Dr. Rosenberg gave me to Dr. Householder and Dr. Köln. I considered my obligations as an employee to Dr. Rosenberg and evaluated the protocols and the situation with my son, but decided that the laptop and basic information would suffice for these two men. And it would give me at least a couple weeks to figure out what to do next. We met the day after the two magnanimous men fired me and told Sharon and me we had a couple weeks to

move our son to a state run hospital. I gave them my laptop, handed over all the files and walked them briefly through the computer program we used to collaborate for the project, even though now it was only a shadow of its former self. Luckily for me, they thought so little of me that not only did they consistently forget my name, but they really believed I knew nothing about the project and basically ignored me after a while. I told them I did most of Dr. Rosenberg's personal work, and I even mentioned the fish at my house. I told them that I believed he took most of the information with him when he visited the Bohemian Grove.

When I mentioned the Grove they seemed to recognize my existence. Apparently no one at the university knew Dr. Rosenberg had attended this year's retreat. I couldn't tell if the two men were upset or jealous. They asked, possibly as a way to make themselves feel better and to continue to put me in my place, why I hadn't gone with Dr. Rosenberg. Which, to their credit, was a legitimate question. Usually I would take care of all of his personal needs on any trip, even the one time he took a personal vacation with some college friends. I wanted to tell them that Rollo, the man who lived in my neighbor's tree house at times and may or may not know all the answers in the world convinced me not to go. But I just said that the Bohemian Grove provided a personal assistant, which was true. I also mentioned something about my marriage problems, which they cared nothing about, but which was also partially true.

I didn't mention the protocols or the computer I mailed out or my ability to work through codes. I was irrelevant, a custodian turning in my set of keys and helping them feel better about their decision to let me go.

Since that day I hadn't spoken with anyone or even left my home. Sharon told me she'd let me know her decisions about the Bahamas before Saturday. I didn't know what I would do if she didn't call or come, but that was out of my hands. Since the first day I met her, Sharon made decisions on Sharon time. It took nearly two weeks for her to accept my invitation to our first formal date, and I'd nearly blown that opportunity by calling her during the wait. So I occupied my time by trying to figure out the files in my head.

My living room looked like a cross between schizophrenic unravelings and a vice squad's detailed map of a New York crime family. I worked on names of relevant files based on passwords I remembered, and then I tried to bridge the gaps between seemingly unrelated information using yarn or string attached between the random ideas. It looked like a gigantic spider web with string linking words or ideas or pictures or cut outs from magazines or newspapers, and then strewn around the living room. I had moved everything else out of the room except for one lamp, the big screen television and the couch.

As I walked towards the door I sprayed spring scented deodorizer around the room to mask the smell and looked at myself in the hallway mirror. I looked bad. Yep, there's no way other than that to describe me. I wore Sharon's old college sweats and a button down flannel shirt. My blond hair was cut across the front in a straight line because I hadn't used pomade in a week, and the cowlick on the top made my cone head even more pronounced. And I didn't seem to have any color. I pinched my cheeks like I'd seen girls on television do before pictures or big dates. I drew the curtains to the side and

looked through the middle of a Christmas Wreath that still hung on the outside of my front door. It was Sharon.

She stood with her back facing the door, having a heated debate with herself. I liked listening to her debate. Her thick hair bounced as she spoke, and it looked like she slammed the passport she held in her hands against her thigh like a Tibetan monk after each point was made. I wish I could hear her, but I don't think she spoke out loud. Before the inevitable fight, I wanted to hear her Midwest drawl and deep, Kathleen Turner voice.

She wore her hair back in a ponytail that flared out and covered most of her shoulders and upper back. Since I first met her she had always either worn khaki pants and a shirt from Express (don't ask why I remember the brand) or something from Adidas. Today she wore a combination: khaki pants and an Adidas hooded track top. The beige khaki pants tightened at her large, strong calves. When I first met Sharon she had recently been in a Jet Ski accident that left a long burn along one of these calves, and somehow it became my job to rub ointment over her burn to reduce the visual scar. Her top was off-white with powder blue stripes down the sleeves and clung tighter to her body than it had when we first met. When she bent over to pick up the passport that fell out of her hands after she slapped against her knee, the track top pulled up and her khaki pants pulled down, and the dolphin tattoo that swam across her lower back appeared. I always felt proud, somehow, that I had a wife with her own tattoo, even one that was so cliché. It felt like I somehow stepped outside the boundaries of my youth or station in life.

She hadn't visited the house since the day she left. Most of the furniture and decorations were still hers. Most of the dishes, glasses, small piles of meaningless stuff

that decorated random countertops and bookshelves were hers too. I looked at a mirror again. It was connected to a dark wood bench and coat rack along the wall next to the door. I didn't like who looked back. He was old and the lack of color in my skin made me look sick. I pulled my lower eyelids down and drew closer the mirror to see. They were bloodshot, almost yellow. I didn't drink, but I still wondered if jaundice had somehow set in. I tried to fix the bed hair that stood up straight in the middle of my head like a cone with a licked palm like my grandma used to do when I was a child. I pinched my cheeks again and opened the door.

“Sharon?” I decided to play it cool and calm. I pretended like I didn't know who the person was at the door facing in the other direction. She turned around quickly, put off that I might have seen her arguing with herself, and, perhaps for the first time in a while, she couldn't find any words. I knew how she felt and wanted to find some non-confrontational way to begin to talk with her, an easy way to open up the negotiations.

“Where's your car?” Wrong question. Damnit!

“Where's my car? Really?” She had found her voice. “You know what, here.” She handed me my passport. “You have a nice vacation, and I'll stay here and take care of our son.” She turned and walked away.

“Are you kidding me? Come on. It was just a question.” Besides, where was her car? She continued to walk away, but I had to stop her. “Sharon. Please, could you just stop and talk for a second?” But she kept walking, then I talked a bit louder: “Fine, why don't you just leave. It's what you're good at.”

She spun around. “You want to go there huh? Really?”

“Well why did you come then if it wasn't to talk?”

She was nearly half way to the sidewalk. Her track top zipper clung to several strands of her hair. She ripped them apart before she spoke. “Alright, talk.” That was all she said. She always seemed to know when to give a long, eloquent monologue or when to make it short and sweet. I didn’t know what to say.

“Come inside.” I looked past Sharon to the neighbor standing by his car across the street, listening while he pretended to inspect his meticulous front lawn. I wished we were inside.

“No, I’m tired of being bossed around. You want to talk—you talk from there. If not, I’m leaving.”

“How many times can two people have the same exact argument? Normal people don’t act like this – they just don’t.”

“Normal?” Sharon asked and took a couple strong strides back towards me. “You call this normal? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Sharon,” I said in a loud whisper and then pointed across the street. “The neighbor.”

“Who cares? You want to know why normal people don’t have the same argument over and over? It’s because normal people eventually try to find an answer, or at least they compromise or move on. But not you. How many times did I beg you to go back to teaching? How many times did I ask you to get Rosenberg’s promises in writing or to keep receipts for our taxes?”

“Are you kidding me? That’s exactly what I’m talking about. It’s like...it’s like I’m stuck in uh, you know,” I held my hand parallel to the ground and twirled it quickly back towards me in a desperate attempt to remember the word that I’d somehow lost.

Only these arguments with Sharon caused me to forget a word I rarely ever used. Then I remembered, “It’s like I’m stuck in a freaking loop or a time warp. Why can’t we just have a logical conversation that stays on topic and seeks some sort of resolution? Seriously, I don’t know what to say to you. All I asked was “Where’s your car.” That’s it. No hidden agenda. No secret new way to make you feel bad—none of that. It was just a freaking question.”

“Could you just stop?”

“You know what? I quit. I QUIT!” I was absolutely exhausted and really did want to quit it all, to huddle up back inside and finish my movie and write her an email and resolve it without this confrontation. I felt beat.

“It’s gone! All right? Are you happy? The car’s gone. I drove it into the back of a steel bed truck and now it’s gone. I had a cab drop me off at the Benson’s down the street because I didn’t know if I could knock on that door. And look at us. Right back at it. Nothing’s changed.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just so tired. Let’s start over.”

“Don’t you get it, we can’t start over. This is where we are, and no movie or job or imaginary letter’s going to change any of this.” She covered her face with both hands and rubbed her eyes as she continued to speak. Her voice was muffled. “We are so screwed. I just can’t believe this is my life.”

I walked toward her and said, “Don’t be like this. Why don’t you come inside and let’s talk about this. Stephen needs us.”

“Oh no you don’t.” She said in a calm, almost dignified and steady voice. Her hands were now at her sides. “You will never use him against me— do you hear me? What

gives you the right? Seriously.” I’m not sure how it always happened, but this is the same argument I’ve had with Sharon over the past few years. Pretty soon I wouldn’t be surprised if she talked about my lack of ambition, how I’m not the person she married. Then, I’d pick up the dance step just as easily and talk about how this is exactly who I was when she married me. Then she’d revise her original argument, if you can call it that, and talk about how that is the problem, that I haven’t matured or changed. The argument would then somehow become about how bad I was as a father and then about my job, Rollo and Dr. Rosenberg.

But usually she yelled in ever increasing and decreasing pitches and valleys. At least then I knew how to react, and for some reason could when it came to my arguments with Sharon. But now here voice was so flat. It sort of scared me. I looked across the street and my neighbor was still watching so I tried everything I could to get her back inside and to break the stunning flatness of her voice.

“Sharon, please, the neighbors.”

“Of course—the neighbors. How did we ever get along, seriously?” I looked at her and desperately wanted her to come inside before the neighbor got across the street. I knew he was listening. I hated it.

“Please.” I was desperate.

“Quit worrying so much about some stranger across the street. That’s always been your problem, you’re so wrapped up in what everyone else thinks you never looked at yourself or Stephen or me.”

“I don’t know what to say. It seems like I never do the right thing.”

“Why do you make everything so hard? I know you love Stephen, and I know you’re just trying to help him. Just stop trying so hard.”

“Will you come inside? I’ll make you some coffee. Besides, Casper misses you.” I think the mention of the fourteen-year-old gray cat Sharon had to leave with me because her new apartment didn’t allow pets caught her off guard. She smiled.

10

As we walked inside I became very aware of everything out of place in the home.

Casper immediately circled Sharon’s leg as she walked down the hallway towards the kitchen. She had a near compulsion to touch different objects as she passed them like a butler inspecting dust before a spring cleaning or an auctioneer pricing objects before a big sale. But she said nothing until we reached the kitchen.

“Are you still feeding him the proper food?” She was referring to the prescription food Casper had to eat because he began developing crystals in his urine as he got older. The crystals ended up costing us several trips to the animal clinic and a lot of money, and since then he was supposed to be on a strict diet.

“Only the best for Mr. C – you know that.” I followed her glance from pristine counter to the floor I mopped each day, to the top of the refrigerator where we kept the cat food. The month’s supply was nearly gone. I opened the cat file and made a mental note to order more food, but of course, Sharon couldn’t recognize I had just taken care of this potential problem and said she would make sure to buy me more food. We made small talk about the house and Casper while I made the coffee, both of us pretending like the previous fight and all previous fights had not just happened. We pretended like we were a couple, or at least a couple of friends making coffee and polite conversation on a

Wednesday afternoon. This was a characteristic we shared—the ability to forget, at least for a moment, the pain and harsh words we had spoken only moments before. If other people were watching they would swear that suddenly a Stepford switch was thrown and we were thrust into Pleasantville, if only for a short while. After I poured her some coffee the conversation changed.

“Alright, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m in,” she said. She handed me the letter. “But this better be worth it.”

I looked at the letter. Sharon had obviously put some considerable time into trying to decipher the meaning. There were color codes and numbers, crossed out letters and various drafts written and scribbled out all over the sheet. But at the very bottom she wrote her translation:

All will be told real soon. You know whom this is from.

Don't fret about the bills. Don't fret about your son.

The tickets are for you both. You and your wife must come.

Don't tell another soul. The project is near done.

It is all up to you.

Meet me at the blue table in the Fish Fry with your wife and the last part at 7:00 PM on Saturday. I will have money and answers for you both. Remember – Don't trust any one.

“Is this right?” I asked, but I knew the answer.

“We’ll see.”

“But, well, never mind. I’m glad you’re coming.”

I had made the mistake before of asking too many questions or asking the wrong question. I knew she was good at puzzles. Since I had known her she had completed the New York Times crossword puzzle each morning. But this was different, and when I read the message over again I actually couldn't believe she was still considering the trip. This wasn't the type of mystery she enjoyed.

“The first part of the message had sort of a kindergarten rhyming scheme with nine lines, each with six syllables. Once I figured out the pattern, I could see that the first line on the letter you received was made up, partially, of the first syllable from the first nine lines. The second line has the second syllable from the first nine lines, and so on.”

“But what about these other words?” I asked.

“Yeah, that sure stumped me for a long time until I used the 7:00 and PM together and figured out that there were two other sentences attached that didn't follow the basic rhyme or syllable scheme. This was another message embedded into the other message. I figured out that the first word in the sentence started the first line, the next word in the sentence ended the first line, the third word in the sentence moved to the right of the first word after it skipped over the first two syllables in the first message and the fourth word moved to the left from the second word at the end of the sentence after it skipped two syllables, and this repeated until there weren't two syllables that could be placed between a word. Then the entire sequence was repeated on the next line.”

I looked at her completely confused. I could recall word for word exactly what she just said, but I had no idea what it meant. Then she showed me on the letter by crossing off words as she gave the same explanation. It all made sense.

“Well, don’t be too glad,” she finally said. “I’m going to do all the talking with your Dr. Rosenberg and not only am I going to get a guarantee in writing that he’s going to take care of Stephen for the rest of his life, but I’m going to give him a piece of my mind about everything else.”

“But...” I started to say, but was immediately interrupted as Sharon continued to talk.

“Please, we’ll just get into another argument, and I might change my mind.” She took another sip of coffee and then spoke some more: “And there are a couple other things that need to be said. First, we’re not getting back together. I don’t want to sit with you on the plane. I want separate rooms, and I don’t want you to attempt at all to, I don’t know, try to get back with me. That’s a deal breaker.”

“That’s fine,” I said, a bit upset but trying not to show it.

“The second thing is that I can’t go into this type of thing like you. I need more information, and the entire trip needs to be more organized.”

“What kind of information?” I asked.

“The kind we can’t get,” She said.

“I don’t understand.”

“I talked to Todd.” My stomach dropped, and I felt like throwing up. Why Todd? Todd Fitzgibbons grew up with Sharon and continued to be a close friend. Through high school they were a couple. She never said and I never asked, but I was pretty certain Todd was the first person she had sex with. And now he was some big time freelance sports journalist in Europe somewhere and wrote soccer articles for various online sports sites.

“You know we can’t talk about my job with anyone.”

“You know you don’t work there anymore. Now I’m sorry, but this is how it’s got to be,” she said as she walked towards the living room. “What’s the blanket doing over the door?”

I had tacked a blanket on both sides of the living room door to keep out the light when I watched movies. It also helped keep air from flowing inside when the front door was opened, which helped keep the massive set of visual files connected by string and hanging from the ceiling and walls intact. I ignored her question and tried to stop her from going inside by stepping in her path. “Hold on. What could some goofy kid that writes about soccer be able to tell us?” I don’t know why I called him a goofy kid; he was only two years younger than Sharon. Of course, she was four years younger than me. I just hated him because once or twice every year he’d somehow pop up, and every time he was around Sharon acted like an entirely different person.

“He writes articles for the New York Times too. Besides, he knows people.” She walked towards the living room door, and again I blocked her path. “What’s going on?”

“I just want to know what you told this joker.”

“Listen, Todd is a close friend and I told him that you lost your job and that they were moving Stephen.”

“Why would you tell him that?” I asked. I knew he had a thing for Sharon still. The last time I saw him he showed me a picture of Sharon’s high school freshman picture in her soccer uniform. It was still in his wallet.

“He doesn’t care. And you know what, it doesn’t matter. We’re going.”

“What do you mean *we*?” I asked.

“I mean you and I. He’s covering a national soccer match in a couple of hours and you’re driving.” There was finality to the way she spoke that ended like a period to a sentence, the last sentence in the last paragraph of a speech. I knew the tone in her voice and resigned myself to my usual subservient role. I couldn’t believe I had to see Todd again. Not to mention the fact that I hadn’t seen a soccer match since Sharon and I first started dating. As I thought about the upcoming meeting with Sharon’s ex, she scooted past me with her coffee in hand, and walked into the next room.

The blanket swooshed shut behind her and saved me from seeing her initial expression, though I heard it very clear: “Oh my God,” was all she said.

11

I always cringed when a mechanic looked under the hood of my car or when I met a person for the first time. It was too personal, and I didn’t have anywhere to run. There seemed like no escape.

When I was a kid my uncle used to make the kids in the neighborhood play this game – it was called escape from the pod. He would lay out several blankets and sheets and then a kid would have to get into the fetal position in the middle of the blankets while everyone else wrapped the blankets around him tightly until he was a tight little ball. And then everyone would watch him hop around, a bouncing kid wrapped in a tight blanket ball. Everyone loved it. When it was my turn I didn’t move. I wasn’t scared. I wasn’t suffocating, though it was very hot and very hard to breathe. I just sat there until everyone got so bored that they finally let me out, or worse...they just left. I knew they expected me to be different or they expected me to fail. So I let them keep their beliefs and played along. Whenever I screwed up or acted a bit odd in front of Sharon I felt like I

did when my uncle let me out of the pod – as if I'd just confirmed what he always believed, but was just too polite to ever say.

As I stood on the other side of the blanket while Sharon moved around the living room, I knew what she saw. The room was dark except for the paused movie and one light. There was no furniture except for the couch, and no pictures or paintings. Instead, it was my attempt to organize the files in my mind. I would begin with a picture or a word or a phrase. I would either cut the picture or words out of the nearly 100 magazines and newspapers I had purchased in the last three days, and then I would tack it on a space on the wall or ceiling. I only chose the pictures or words or phrases (pwps) that were lucid when I closed my eyes, and that seemed to, in some way, be connected to the lab or Stephen. There were fifty-seven of these original pwps spaced out evenly throughout the living room.

Then I would try to figure out the possible code to this potential file. Sometimes I found the password and cut it out and stapled it to the original pwp. From there, a file seemed to just unravel and it would be a stream of words I'd type and print out on the computer or a series of pictures and images and sounds. Anything that came out of the file I tried to put into some tangible form and staple it farther down from the original image. If any key word found in a file was the same as one of the original fifty-seven I would staple a string between the two pwps.

For most of the pwps I couldn't figure out the password yet, but I somehow knew there was a file. I wrote in different color ink and recorded all of the potential password

choices I'd tried and stapled this information to the original pwp. They dangled like the mobiles I used to have my art class make in spring.

Whenever I failed to figure out the password I heard the voices of my father and so many teachers telling me that if I continued to waste my gift someday it would suddenly disappear. Well, it hadn't disappeared, but it sure was rusty!

Then there were a few pwps that didn't have a file at all or that ended up not pertaining to my focus on the lab or my son. I followed a few of these files until I was exhausted, recording all the information and pictures. Each time I wondered just how many files there really were? Was there a maximum? Did I ever really get rid of any or forget? The time it took to recall and extract files wasn't consistent or predictable. Some were nearly instantaneous, while others grinded along for days.

As I stood behind the blanket, I thought about waiting outside. At least I felt a distance from my neighbor when he heard or watched Sharon and I fight. But it was hard to explain how I felt as Sharon stared at the contents of my mind. Maybe this is what John Nash felt like the moment his wife looked at his schizophrenic code breaking scribbled and pasted across the walls of his office? But I wasn't schizophrenic. I wasn't seeing what was not there. I was trying to remember what was there. That is the difference, but I wondered if Sharon would ever understand.

At that moment a sharp pain shot through my head, and a dream swept me away. My arms started tingling and then everything went numb. I couldn't feel or see my own body. But as my eyes focused, I could see several young boys gathered around another boy who was lying on the floor of a dark cave. Two small candles illuminated the filth-

covered face of the boy on the floor, and from a distance he looked pale and near death. A red haired boy, perhaps fourteen or fifteen, washed his face with a wet rag. They all looked thin and worn down.

“Who’s he?” the blonde haired boy asked.

“Don’t know. Found him like this,” said the red haired boy.

“He’s one of the old ones,” a voice said from somewhere I couldn’t see. It sounded a bit like Stephen’s voice. “Told me he’d been here for almost a year, came with the group before us.”

“Then he’s the last one.”

“No, there’s one more.”

“Nah, he died a couple days past. Someone said they hit a gas pocket or something,” the red haired kid said while he wrapped a rope around arm and injected himself with something and then slumped down to the ground.

The blonde kid and someone else, some I couldn’t see, moved a few rocks from a corner and began digging at the wall. When they moved the large rock several hundred small beetles scurried in all directions, several even walked over the red haired kid’s arms and hands. He didn’t move a muscle.

I jerked my head sideways and fell through the blanket door.

Then I pulled a yellow pill out of my pocket, swallowed it whole, and then stood up. I half expected to look up to see Sharon’s horrified stare fixated on me, but she walked around the living room with the same delicate, deliberate care she had used when she walked from the front door to the kitchen. She paused briefly at a pwp, touched it like

she did the candle and picture in the hall, and then moved to the next one. I stood there and watched her gallery walk through my mind with less apprehension. I wondered if this is what writers felt like when they let their wives or husbands read their work?

“I’m trying to get information too,” I said.

“What is all this?” Sharon asked.

“It’s, well, it’s what’s up here.” I pointed to my head and immediately felt dumb.

“What are you talking about? Is this some kind of brainstorming?”

“Not exactly. You know how sometimes I’ll remember something so perfectly that you say I’m making it up? Well I’m not. I see it just like I see you right now.”

“Are you saying you have a photographic memory?”

“No, not at all. It’s hard to explain. It’s like, well, you remember when your cousin Krissy went with her husband to see a hypnotist about his fear of heights? Remember how he had no idea why he was so scared that he couldn’t even go up a ladder? The hypnotist took him back to a carnival he visited when he was only three years old. He could hear the music of the carousel and the carnival worker’s banter. He could smell the sausages and cotton candy. He even remembered seeing his father step on a piece of gum. And then he remembered that his father paid a carnival worker extra money to let him and his son go on a small roller coaster, even though he was too small. He recalled how, at the moment the rollercoaster turned downhill, it stopped suddenly as if it hit a block or someone stepped on the brakes, and Krissy’s husband flew forward and was barely caught by his father. When he woke up he didn’t recall any of the words or events that took place while he was under hypnosis, but the hypnotist gave him a safe word – it was the carnival worker’s last name – Szczepaniki. And whenever he found

himself in a situation when he was afraid he might fall he said that name and immediately remembered the entire scene and how his father saved him. How he didn't get hurt, and it helped him get past his fears, at least partially.”

“You lost me,” Sharon said.

“Well, pretty much everything I've ever experienced or learned is like Krissy's husband's lost memory. But a hypnotist can't help me, I've tried. Instead, I've got to figure out my own safe word that will unlock each memory. It's like a file on your computer, and I need the password or it's locked away forever. The problem is I quit looking for passwords a long time ago.”

“Why wouldn't you share this with me? We lived together. We had a son together, and you didn't think this was important enough to share? You could have done so much.” She looked like she might cry, something I'd almost never seen.

“That's exactly why I never used it. You thought I just had a good memory and you still thought I was a failure. Imagine if you thought I could remember everything,” I said.

Sharon walked over to the Rosenberg note card and unraveled the crisscrossing mobile strand with all the file information I could extract. His file was complicated because it was layered into so many areas and there were so many unanswered questions. She ripped the narrative I had tried to organize and type on the computer and read it out loud:

“Dr. Rosenberg liked mint in his coffee and the smell of tobacco, but not tobacco and port wine from India. His goldfish ate – are you kidding with this Jenson? I

wondered sometimes if you were cheating on me with this man. This reads like a person on an online dating service. What's here that might help us?"

"I don't know, that's just it." She dropped the narrative and walked over to another file named codes.

"And what about this?" I explained to her about the codes and how I was now trying to now decode all the messages I'd relayed between the scientists over the last three years. The problem was, as I explained to Sharon, most of what they talked about was scientifically over my head. Right now I was still have trouble translating it all to English, but the information I could relay was usually incomprehensible. I was merely taking a typing test in a language I didn't know. I talked about how unique the group that worked on this project happened to be: a polymer scientist, a nuclear physicist who also was an ordained minister, an expert in quantum and string theories, a chemist who happened to also be a Buddhist monk, a geologist who also moonlighted as a meteorologist, and a biologist who also had a medical degree. These were unique individuals with multiple advanced degrees all working on a project that only one person seemed to be controlling. There was something very unique about this group, and what they appeared to be working on individually must add up to something—something important enough to have some very intelligent researchers all working anonymously for a lead researcher who hadn't accomplished anything in his life prior to this project except some small articles no one read and a mediocre score on professors.com.

"You don't make anything easy. I still don't know if you're brilliant or just crazy, and I don't know what to say about all of this. You know what this looks like, don't you? I mean, you're kind of freaking me out."

For the next hour, she walked through the living room and went on a gallery walk through my mind. She walked like a witness to a crime walking through the crime scene occasionally stopping at clues she recognized or that seemed to be more disturbing. Every once in a while she'd ask what a code or file meant, and I would try to explain the information. But more and more I felt like she was walking through a Salvador Dali museum and only liked realistic landscapes.

When she stopped at the file labeled energy spikes, she seemed particularly upset. I tried to explain that this seemed to be one of the words I could translate to English that each member of the Rosenberg Six discussed all the time. I thought perhaps this entire project might be about energy, which would make sense.

“Fascinating,” Sharon finally said as she wadded the file in her hand and threw it across the room. “This is how you were going to take care of our son? Energy spikes and secret codes? Is any of this even real? I mean look at this – what does any of this have to do with Stephen or with anything. Look at this one – Pearl Street – let me guess...it’s the secret location where you and the rest of your little friends compare decoder rings and figure out how to save the world. This is ridiculous, maybe I’ve made a mistake.”

“You don’t remember Pearl Street?”

“Should I?”

“The Monkey’s Breath was located at the corner of Pearl and Steal – you remember that place don’t you?”

“Oh my God,” she said. “It’s been a long time.”

“The first time we unofficially kissed,” I said.

She thought I was someone else at an outdoor jazz bar, and I was too shy to correct her. We talked for hours at a table behind this faux Bourbon street saloon and then she kissed me.

“Why was it unofficial?” she asked.

“Because you thought I was Kimbal Placik,” I said.

“I always knew it was you.” She looked at the picture of the bar I printed off their web page. “So if you see the word Pearl Street you can see that day?”

“I don’t just see it. I can smell the chili cheese etoufee you ordered with your friend Mickey and can hear the guy that sat next to you complaining that the menu didn’t have cheese balls. I can hear your friend make fun of my skinny legs.”

“I liked them that way,” she said.

I moved over to Sharon and put my hand on her shoulder. It was the first tender touch between us in months, maybe even years. “I know we can’t start all over, and quite frankly, I don’t want to. But can we put all of this to the side? You came here for a reason, why?”

“I told you, my boss couldn’t pay for Stephen’s bills.”

“That’s not all. You know something’s going on, that it’s not all in my head.”

“But what about this? Dreams?” She pulled the note card that read “Dreams” from the wall and looked at the pictures and words and phrases, mostly cut out from copies of National Geographic. The pictures moved from the Grand Canyon to Petra to jail cells and mines to what appeared to be long pipes and then a big body of water.

“Just what it says – dreams. Lots of people record their dreams.” (Of course most didn’t have a crazy guy from church telling him the dreams were some sort of key, and if they ever stopped, they signaled the day my son would die.)

“But they don’t tack them on the wall. And how can you stand the smell in here?” She pulled down the blanket over every window and opened the window. “We both need some fresh air. Let’s get some lunch and then go meet Todd at the game.”

12

When I turned thirteen, for one year my relatives and friends pretended I was an athlete.

I don’t know if it was a conscious choice or some sort of rite of passage all new teenage boys had to experience, but from the moment I turned thirteen until the summer before my eighth grade year, I was suddenly coerced into every neighborhood athletic competition, signed up for every sport or lesson, and somehow involved in every outdoor physical activity or game within a fifty mile radius.

Suddenly, after thirteen years of isolation I was thrown into back yard football matches where captains picked me last and quarterbacks never passed me the ball or I became the perpetually easy target as I tried to round a person’s house during a rousing game of ghost-in-the-graveyard. On random nights or weekends, someone I barely knew would pick me up and take me to a new practice or game or lesson: basketball, golf, tennis, hockey, racquetball and football. My family even enrolled me into a special track camp where we got to broad jump, high jump...and run. Can you believe that—a fun camp for a kid where the fun is just to run? That was my favorite, even though to this day I still look like Bambi trying to walk whenever I run. I swear my legs feel like they could

bend backwards at any moment.

And each time, right before a stranger and her kid reluctantly picked me up (and picked up money from someone in my family) a relative would smile and tell me how lucky I was to participate in so many activities; how I would thank them for helping me meet all the friends that would be close with me for the rest of my life. Of course, I haven't spoken to one of these 'close friends' in over thirty years.

I passed this rite of passage in two steps the week before school was to begin.

Step one occurred in my neighbor's back yard:

I was playing football, and on this rare occasion I was actually given the ball.

(Though later I discovered that it wasn't football at all but a game that the kids affectionately called "Smear the Queer". Basically, the rules of the game were simple: everyone tried to pummel the person with the ball, the "Queer". The thing I didn't understand was that everyone wanted to be the "Queer" until the moment before they were going to get pummeled, and then the person would throw the ball to someone else. I didn't know you were supposed to get rid of the ball. I kept it and the neighborhood piled on top of me.)

For a moment, I actually felt like part of the group. It was the first time I had ever been tackled, but a pain I had never felt before quickly replaced my glee. I yelled and screamed and cried. I think I even bit someone's arm. And when the ball leaked out and the pile moved on to pummel someone else, I lay in the dirt and kept crying and crying. I'm not even sure how long I cried before I realized I wasn't even hurt. No one said a word to me, and I simply brushed the dirt off and walked home. When I got home,

somehow my family had already heard the story, and they could barely look at me when I ate dinner.

Step two occurred at track camp:

For four consecutive days boys and girls in different grades ranging from first grade to eighth were coached in various track events. We were allowed to high jump, broad jump, throw a very light shot put. We even got to try the low hurdles. And of course there were the normal sprints, long distance races and relays.

Even though I hated running, and everyone, including the counselors, couldn't help but laugh each time I ran, it was probably my favorite sport because I never had to let anyone else down. If I lost, I was the only person that lost.

Or at least that was what I thought, but on day five the camp held an official track meet and invited all the parents and community to see. It was constantly promoted as a non-competition, an opportunity for the campers to show how hard they had worked during the week. But in sharp contrast to this utopian promotion, the top five finishers received first through fifth place ribbons and were given the opportunity to stand on a platform and get recognized over a loud speaker for the crowd. The other participants received ribbons too, but they only said *participation*.

We all knew it was a competition and the parents screaming from the stands helped emphasize this truth. I didn't mind knowing I would be one of the faceless drones that received a pat on the back, if I was lucky, and a participation ribbon. I would participate in my required three events, no one would notice I was even in the race, and that would be the end of this rite of passage.

The non-competition progressed, basically, how I had imagined. I came in second

to last in the long jump, last in the high jump and actually managed a second to last place finish in the 100-meter dash. My family seemed satisfied. I had satisfied the requirements for this camp so I gathered my things and began to leave. At that moment, one of the camp counselors informed me that he had signed me up for one more event: the girl's 4 x 100-meter relay. The anchor for one of the teams was injured in a previous race, and there were no other girls in the age group that could participate. In the men's group, the one person that I beat had already escaped with his parents in a light green mini-van and was probably eating cheeseburgers and enjoying the rest of his night. So I had to run. I don't need to go into the details of the race, but basically...my team was in second place out of three going into the final lap, my lap, and somehow I ended up last when I crossed the finish line. I filed the experience: "first desire to be dead", and only opened it at times when I felt so embarrassed I wished I were dead. It was my constant, my mode of comparison that all other embarrassing moments seemed to pale against.

As I drove Sharon to the soccer match in the Volvo Station wagon I had recently purchased at a fraternity fundraiser on campus, this is what I considered. Was it more embarrassing to lose a relay race for girls that day at track camp or to have my estranged wife climb into this ridiculous car? I thought, as I drove down the highway and Sharon struggled with a broken window knob to close her open window, that it might be a draw.

The car reeked of fast food and mildew. Spider web cracks spread across the windshield and there was a leak in the roof. There was also a small puddle below our feet from a recent rain. Sharon did her best to pretend like she didn't notice, and didn't make

any comments. She couldn't adjust the passenger seat, which was wedged back against the torn couch seat behind, so she reclined almost completely back. The only thing that kept the back of her chair from sliding completely parallel to the ground was a set of flat tires I stacked behind her seat. The rubber smell added to the overall ambiance.

Before I owned this car I used a car provided to me by Dr. Rosenberg or I rode to work with Sharon. Most of the time, though, I used public transportation or took a local cab.

The mood was awkward. It reminded me of the awkward silence that built up the first time I ate dinner with Sharon's parents. I wanted to pop in one of the 'mood' tapes Jack Nicholson used in As Good As It Gets. Unfortunately, I didn't even have a working radio. The silence built a wall around that grew larger and wider with each passing moment. I tried to coerce myself into speaking, but nothing came out. I just stared straight ahead and followed her occasional directions towards the stadium, which was nearly two hours away.

When Sharon finally closed her window, the influx of wind from my lone open window reverberated through the car in a putt-putt echo. The steady beat hurt my ears.

"Could you please close that window?" she asked.

I really didn't want to, not because I liked the cold wind against my face or because I relished the fact that the sound was driving Sharon crazy. I just knew that with the window open, the smell wouldn't be as strong. Sometimes I thought I could smell my car on my clothes when I taught one of Dr. Rosenberg's classes. I didn't want Sharon to experience this same phenomenon.

"Fresh air's good for you. It keeps the lungs sharp."

“Seriously, it’s cold. Roll your window up.”

“Okay.” I paused for a second and then continued, “I’ll need to borrow the handle.” She gingerly grabbed the handle she used to roll up her own window, which she had just dropped by her feet, in the small puddle.

“I want to ask a question, but I don’t want you to jump down my throat,” I said as I reached over with both hands and rolled up the window. I used my knees to steady the steering wheel while I tried to close the window. Unfortunately, the screw that fit into the handle was nearly stripped.

“Watch out!” I looked back at the road as Sharon grabbed the wheel. I had veered into the other lane and cut off a small hybrid.

“I’ve got it.” I reached behind my seat and grabbed an old afghan blanket I kept in the car. “I’m sorry, I can’t get it closed. This should keep you warm.”

“Thank you,” she said and then asked for the handle back. I thought it was an odd request, though I didn’t say anything. She used the handle to quickly roll her window down an inch to get rid of the echo that reverberated throughout the car. “What was your question?”

“What do we really think we’ll learn from Todd? No offense, but he’s just an old soccer player. And why couldn’t we just meet him after the game?” I wondered if I had pushed my luck with the second question, but it had to be asked.

After a few moments, Sharon informed me matter-of-factly, that Todd had made numerous contacts throughout the world as a freelance writer for several major publications, not just as a soccer journalist. She hoped that one of these contacts could provide a fresh perspective on any one of the random, yet somehow connected clues; and

ultimately help her gain leverage somehow to ensure that Stephen was well cared for. She also said Todd had recently taken another position, Associate Ambassador for the United States Soccer Federation, and that it was because of this position that he was at the soccer games. She explained that today was a very important series of friendly matches between some of the biggest teams in the world, including the Nigerian international team. That interested me a little as I remembered the trip I set up for Dr. Rosenberg to visit Nigeria last summer, but then she continued to talk more about Todd. I began to regret my decision to open the conversation. He would be with us soon enough.

She spoke about how the friendly matches were the only reason he was in town, and although it was going to only be for a short while, he had to be there the entire time. She also talked about a rumor regarding an impending loan of a player from some team from Spain to a Major League Soccer team in the United States. I think she might have even talked about the importance of the match because there was a new coach or new system or something new—I quit listening because I simply didn't care. Instead, I watched the road and rehearsed what I would say to Todd when I saw him, and occasionally stole a look at Sharon's legs.

When the car pulled into the parking lot I wondered at the stadium and surroundings. I had never been to a big stadium like this before. It was built, seemingly, in the middle of nowhere. There was a quiet road and then, plop, a stadium with flags spaced symmetrically around the top. The roads wound around hills and small towns until I reached this flat area that seemed more like the Midwest. A circular mall and long

parking lots and empty fields surrounded the stadium. There were cars and people and soccer bumper stickers and more people and drums and little kids everywhere.

This was going to be awful.

After we parked and walked towards the front gate, the crowd swelled. The entire area sounded more like a concert I had seen on television, like those movies of Woodstock, except the crowd wasn't dirty hippies with long hair smoking pot and eating bad acid while screaming peace and love. This crowd was filled with suburban mini-vans and entire families. The tailgating wasn't just bratwurst and hotdogs. As I followed Sharon, parents served carrot sticks and power bars. Moms made sure that kids finished their meals before they ran off with a larger pack and kicked a ball in the air while standing in a circle. There were huge banners hanging from light poles and even the side of the stadium. I guessed these were the stars for each country. I didn't care.

As I walked I slowed down and lost myself. I became detached from time and place, I became ethereal, a sort of element as I walked through the crowd. The whole idea of being here with Sharon was just so unreal.

I really didn't know what to say or how to act. I experienced the same sense of displacement as I had when I was thirteen and found myself at the practice for a team filled with strangers for a sport I knew nothing about. I was in a modern day May pole festival or carnival, and I wasn't dressed appropriately. Sharon, of course, fit right in with her Adidas sweat top and soccer shoes. But me—at least I could have worn tennis shoes, if I could find them.

Suddenly, a long line of men, women, boys and girls with their faces painted danced by. Some of them had cowbells or drums or various noisy instruments. Some

carried banners and all wore green and yellow clothes, presumably the colors of the team they chose to embrace. I wished I had a team, someone to root for. I guess I could, or should, root for the United States, but there wasn't the same kind of exuberance from the American crowd. They seemed more subdued, probably just waiting for the right moment.

As I watched the drum line dance by, I swear I saw Rollo's face briefly in the crowd. I jumped in the air to see above a group of kids that just walked in front of me, but couldn't see much in the second my one-millimeter vertical jump gave me. When they passed there was no Rollo in sight.

"Hurry then, we're going to miss the start." I must have just imagined Rollo. As I walked a bit more quickly I wondered why we were in such a hurry. I hoped she would simply find Todd, get the answers and then we'd leave. But of course she wanted to watch the game if we were here. She loved soccer.

Sharon picked up the tickets at will-call, and we merged into a compact crowd that walked together into the stadium.

We entered through the West entrance; I only know that because there was a big sign. Then we walked down some stairs into the main concourse right at the base of where a faux volcano towered above. There was a bridge we could have walked under that led to the field level where players huddled at the moment, but we were headed further up a series of ramps to another long concourse that seemed to circle the entire stadium hundreds of feet above the field.

There were rows and rows of aluminum benches at the upper level. As I walked along a broad, cement-floored hallway there was a reggae band playing and jugglers

walking through the crowd. Concessions lined the sides and dotted the hallway. Again, it all felt more carnival or amusement park than soccer, except for the Congo lines of fans that snaked through the crowd and generally added to my ever-increasing headache. I only had a few yellow pills left, so I tended to save them until the headaches got too severe. Along the walk that seemed to circumambulate the playing field below, occasionally I could see out along the landscape and there was indeed a beautiful view of a bridge above the south end zone that was amazing. I wanted to grab Sharon and share it with her, but she had broken into a near-jog ahead.

Despite how high up I was, the field didn't seem that far away.

I stopped momentarily and watched dusk disappear. An autumn-colored grasshopper twitched in the wind as it steadied itself on the wire fence, and suddenly I felt silly for being so winded by the trip up.

“Come on. You're like a little kid,” Sharon yelled. When I looked at her she was smiling, and she looked at me like she used to. I wondered what I had done right. Our eyes met momentarily, and then her expression tightened as she said, “Can we go now?”

I told Sharon to go on while I went to the bathroom. I walked inside and there was a long trough in the middle. How could people live like this? A couple people bumped into me as I walked and I began to feel more paranoid. I stood at the trough trying to figure out how you were supposed to act when a man told me I had to leave. It seemed odd and I wondered if he worked at the stadium. Maybe I was doing something wrong. I apologized to the man and backed away from the trough unfinished, and watched the way other men did it. As I watched, a young kid with brown floppy hair looked up and said, “Do you mind?”

“Oh my goodness. No, it’s not what it looks like. Really.” I backed up and left the bathroom without completing my task. Forget it. I’ll hold it. Sharon told me earlier that we were seated in the first row in the upper balcony in section F, so I bought some food and two drinks and made my way to a big blue F. As I put mayonnaise and cheese on Sharon’s hotdog, just the way she liked, I swear I saw Rollo again. But this time he walked behind a column and seemed to be wearing a black cape or robe of some kind.

13

When I reached the entrance to the stadium and my section, I noticed that Todd had already arrived.

He had a sort of Nordic feel to him, chiseled cheekbones, yes I know it sounds cliché, but he looked almost fierce, cut carefully yet cool...and I hated him. I paused for a bit and watched them talk effortlessly and then started down the aisle to our seats.

“Whoa there, buddy.” A large black man with a breathe-rite across the bridge of his nose said with a deep, southern voice. His hand reached across the aisle like a pudgy barrier. “Gotta see your ticket first.”

I feigned a nonchalant search through my pockets, but knew perfectly well that Sharon never gave me my ticket. “Must have left it with my wife.”

“Sorry pal, I know pretty much everyone in this section, I’m sorry...I have to follow the rules.”

“No really, that’s her down there.”

“Sorry, if I let you into this section they’d take my job. I’m sure you can see the game just fine from your seats. Now go along now.”

I couldn't believe it. Why didn't he just let me get my tickets? "Seriously, that is my wife and she has my ticket. How about you move your arm and let me go down there and prove it?" I couldn't believe I had just said that with such attitude to this man. He was huge, and what if Sharon decided not to come? What if she had already thrown away the tickets thinking we didn't need them any more? I wanted to retract my last comment, to strike it completely from the books.

He paused and then lifted his arm, "Alright. Hurry up and bring it right back."

"I promise." I skipped two steps with each stride and nearly tumbled to the first aisle where Sharon and Todd seemed settled into a comfortable diatribe usually reserved for old married couples or best friends. They said quick hellos and I had to interrupt a more formal re-introduction with Todd so that I could confirm that I did indeed belong in this seat. I told Sharon and Todd I had to quickly show the big man at the gate my ticket, but Todd, of course, told me not to bother. When I ignored his advice completely and insisted that Sharon give me a ticket, he turned towards the big man and stuck both pinky fingers into the crevice of his mouth and whistled. I always wanted to whistle like that, but at that particular moment I felt like a spotlight had somehow been lifted from the jumbo-tron and was now focused on my graying head. Then he yelled the man's name in a fake British accent he adopted, apparently according to Sharon, sometime during the year he backpacked through Europe after his senior year of college, and then he pointed at my head with a crooked finger and said I was with him. This seemed like evidence enough, but I wondered if the man believed I actually possessed the ticket or if he thought that I had somehow weaseled my way to a man that had some power so I could stay.

“Thank you so much Todd,” Sharon said, for me, even though I could have easily shown the man the ticket that proved I belonged in this seat. Then she focused back on Todd, “And these tickets. Wow – what a view.”

“Not bad huh?” Todd said. Of course, the three-foot plexi-glass window that I had to look through seemed to contradict her sentiment, but I didn’t say anything. What did I care? I just wanted Sharon to get the information so we could leave. That’s it. I sort of cleared my throat, subtly, and when she looked at me I gave a look that I hoped communicated – “hey Sharon, ask the man what he knows.” Luckily, Sharon knew my looks.

“So Todd, I don’t want to seem pushy, but we’re in kind of a crunch. I was wondering if we could talk about, well—you know.”

“In a bit. You can’t tell me you’re not psyched to see what this new coach has to bring. When’s the last time you saw a proper football match anyway?”

“It’s just, well, I’m just a bit anxious.”

“Have I ever let you down?” She shook her head like a little girl, and then Todd continued, “Well then, let’s enjoy a bit of the game and we’ll talk in a bit.” I couldn’t watch anymore so I continued to stand and scanned the field.

I remembered the food and drink I bought Sharon and offered them to her.

“This isn’t a date,” She snapped at me before sitting down and continuing to speak with Todd.

I sat down between the aisle and Sharon and placed the two cokes under my foot along with the disgusting mayonnaise and cheese hotdog, which rolled off the cardboard and onto the cement floor the second I put it on the ground. Over the next ten minutes,

Sharon and Todd talked about the new head coach for the United States national team, the formation, his new job, her parents (apparently he used to know them quite well), whether her mom still made that wonderful green bean casserole, and they even talked about Stephen for a bit. Occasionally, Todd would bend forward and ask how I liked soccer or how I was enjoying the game. He even explained a few choice pieces of soccer (or football according to Todd) jargon that I found extremely dull and condescending. For a long time the conversation seemed to open up to every other adult and kid and fan sitting in the surrounding vicinity. The entire time I wondered if Sharon and I ever really had anything in common and the voices around me drowned out my presence completely.

“Since the US made the semi-finals in one of the first World Cups, we really haven’t done much of anything,” A man sitting in front of Todd said.

“Why is that? Why can’t we reach that top echelon of international soccer?” An older man in white-rimmed spectacles responded.

“We just don’t have the skill.” Todd said.

“And we’re too predictable. I hate how predictable the play can be,” said Sharon.

“So what’s the answer?” asked a lady with bat-colored hair.

“Our players have to leave home,” said Todd. “We’re too comfortable in this predictable, safe environment. Look at Brazil. Not one player on their national team plays in the Brazilian league. So why does half our team still play in the god-awful MLS?”

“But what about our responsibility to our league?” Sharon asked.

A young kid with a USA soccer jersey and Adidas baseball cap turned around and said, “It’s because the other sports get the best athletes. My dad says that soccer will be a joke until we get the best athletes.”

Todd interrupted the kid mid-sentence, and I wondered not only why he would interrupt a little kid, but also why this group of soccer fans talked so much instead of focusing on the game. “I don't think American soccer is a joke. There has been great improvement over the past fifteen years, and a number of US players are playing in top leagues worldwide. The problem is that in college soccer, it is all about who is bigger and stronger. We need to send our young players overseas and forget about college.” I thought this was a silly argument and almost said something, but I still couldn't find the words. I just stared at Todd as he spoke and watched the mole that touched his upper lip dance with each word. I wanted to rip it off. I imagined standing up in the middle of this suburban soccer diatribe and waking them all up with a sound, logical argument about why this entire conversation was like Billy Madison's answer in his oral quiz. And while I mesmerized the crowd with my eloquence, I would simultaneously embarrass Todd and empower Sharon.

But, of course, I said nothing.

Then Todd opened the conversation up to me with a question that I didn't really know how to answer. I'm not sure exactly where it emerged, as I was paying less and less attention to the scene next to me and occupied my time more by counting the number of diamonds that were mowed into the field. But it began when they spoke about the new professional women's league starting up again.

“You think she should try out again, don't you? I know I've sure tried to talk her into it.” Try out again? Todd might have opened with a question to me, but he was really talking directly to Sharon: “You know they'd take you back in a second. What has it been, three years, maybe four?”

“Try fifteen.”

“You look great. I bet you still have better ball skills than half the team.”

“I didn’t know you wanted to play professional soccer,” I asked, and they both looked at me as if I were a stranger that just sat down at their private Valentine’s Day dinner. Todd seemed truly astonished.

“Wanted to? Bollocks. She played professionally for two weeks until the entire league folded, and she hurt her knee. But you should have seen her play in college.”

“Oh, stop it,” Sharon said, and somehow sounded like sorority girls I’d seen as an undergrad selling candy in the dorms.

Suddenly the crowd erupted in a chorus of loud jeers and boos. Everyone around us stood and yelled loudly at the field or the referee or the other team. I stood to join the crowd.

On the field, I couldn’t really tell what was happening. It appeared that the United States had scored, but the referee had disregarded the goal because of some sort of foul. A couple fans threw trash on the field as the referee placed the ball just outside the penalty area and restarted play by giving the other team a free kick. I scanned the crowd and then looked at Sharon and Todd. They were close together and continued to talk. Then I noticed a man in a blue, button-down dress shirt. He stood two aisles away from Sharon and Todd, and a few rows higher, but he stood out. Unlike nearly every other person in the crowd, this man wasn’t watching the field or booing the referee. He seemed to stare straight at Sharon and Todd.

I moved closer and asked, “Do you know that guy?” I pointed to the man in blue. We all looked at the same time at the man who was now looking the other way.

“What guy?” Sharon asked.

“No, he’s right.” Todd said. “I noticed him watching us earlier.”

A couple fans threw plastic water bottles onto the field, and one barely missed the man-in-blue’s head. Water definitely dripped on his shoulder, but he continued to stare straight ahead.

“In fact,” Todd continued, “I didn’t want to say anything, but I think someone’s been watching me ever since we last spoke.”

“Me too,” Sharon quickly said to both of our surprise.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I asked.

“Don’t pretend to be so chivalrous now, Jen, it doesn’t suit you. Besides, I never really saw anyone. It was just--”

“A feeling.” Todd completed her sentence and I wondered if I had somehow just witnessed the period to my marriage.

“Maybe we should go,” I said to myself and Sharon, purposefully keeping my voice just soft enough where Todd could barely hear it. But he did.

“I agree. We can talk down there.” Todd pointed to the section near ground level behind the goal known affectionately, I found out later, as the snake pit. It was the most densely populated part of the stadium, and it was filled with the absolute rowdiest fans – the drummers I’d seen earlier Congo dancing through the crowd and the face painters and bugles and flags and banners were all in the snake pit.

Todd continued, “If anyone is following us, we’ll be able to find them down there. And besides, they won’t be able to hear a word we say.”

“Let’s leave just before half so it doesn’t look so obvious.” Sharon said, and I felt like the three of us were stepping into the role of secret agent too comfortably and without proper training. But I stayed in my seat and the three of us all sat and watched the match, which had resumed, without saying a word.

I finished a Coke and reached for the mayonnaise and cheese hotdog, but noticed Sharon had taken it already. In fact, without me noticing, she had drunk most of the Coke and eaten both hot dogs. We both smiled as she realized I had just watched her finish the last bite of food. It was a single nice moment in an otherwise miserable day. Then we both resumed watching the game.

After a while, the people around me stood up and went crazy in an attempt to get on the jumbo-tron as a man with a camera walked by. I stood up as well, late, and then remained standing after they all sat back down. Above the heads, many aisles below, in a section that curled around the opposite side of the snake pit, stood a man I swear could have been Rollo. But I could only see the back of his head.

What would he be doing at a game?

A few people around stood up as well, and Sharon and Todd were calling after me from above. They must have left their seats while I scanned the crowd. I wanted to make sure it was Rollo. I wanted to yell, but I still couldn’t yell in this crowded area. Then he turned, for a split second before a row of people paraded by...scooting past, I bobbed and weaved to try and see through the space between heads or arms...but when they were all gone, so was the man I thought was Rollo.

I stood up on my chair to see if I could find him, but there was no sign. Maybe it wasn't him at all – I couldn't be sure and certainly couldn't tell Sharon, let alone the guy whom she seemed to share so much with. She yelled at me from a far and I followed.

They waited until I was just close enough not to lose them and then made their way, snaking through the crowded, heavily odored section with flags and horns and beer, and I followed. I wish I had a leash like the one parents seem to use more often now with small children. As I walked, I scanned about for Rollo, but I was beginning to think more and more it was just some other guy.

I picked up the pace or they slowed, because I finally caught up in time for Todd to ask me if I wanted a beer. No, but I had to go to the trough again. I held it instead and we walked to our seats. When we made it there we were certainly in the pit. What the hell was this place? It was awful and no one seemed to care. I felt like I was in a fight or a big wrestling match because all the people were packed so tightly along with their flags and banners and painted faces and drums and horns and jerseys.

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Halftime's lull seemed like the quiet fizzle when an ocean's wave settles down and goes back to sea, but it went by too fast. The moment the game started, it was like a large wave crashed along the shore. Everyone in the snake pit went crazy, and we couldn't see anything on the field.

The commotion grew louder and the push and tug I had sort of gotten used to in the pit became a more violent spectacle when an announcement over the loud speaker informed the crowd that the best player on the US squad had just been ejected with a red card for unsportsmanlike conduct before the game even started. And that was it – bedlam.

A fight broke out between two guys in front of us that spilled into a more scrum-like brawl. Sharon grabbed my hand and Todd told us both to follow him. So much for his great idea.

We pushed through the snake pit down to row F where the crowd was a little more subdued. It was an older crowd you could tell just liked being sort of close to the crazy hooligans that were now littering the field with toilet paper and debris.

When we reached the side, Todd leaned over the railing and spoke with a security guard that stood ground level in an entryway that must have led to the inner belly of the stadium. Perhaps this was where the teams emerged from their locker rooms? I never noticed because, for some reason, we had decided to talk about the information that brought us here in the first place, not in private but in the middle of a mosh pit ready to kill the Italian referee.

The next thing I knew Todd motioned for Sharon and me to follow him to ground level, where several more armed security guards faced the crowd instead of the game. At a chained gate, the security guard Todd spoke with helped the three of us onto the ground level and into the entryway.

“You can wait here until it dies down. It usually doesn’t last too long,” the security guard said.

“Thanks Miles. I owe ya.” Todd said.

Miles looked Sharon up and down and said, “You bet you do.”

I’d had enough. This was getting ridiculous and I wanted to get back to my house and get prepared for the trip. Not to mention the fact that now I knew someone might be

watching or stalking Sharon, or me. I turned to Todd and surprised myself with my definite tone. “Can we talk about the information now? Please?”

Todd didn’t acknowledge that I had just spoken, and instead turned to Sharon and said, “Look, the thing is that I can’t really talk about this anywhere. I’m not sure this is something any of us should be looking into. Seriously Sharon, it’s not worth it.”

“My son’s not worth it? Now you listen to me, I’m not one of your little girls you can just talk down to. This is me. You know I don’t ask for favors and wouldn’t do anything that could get any of us in trouble unless I thought it was worth it. Besides, you owe me.”

“Did you know there is a top-secret military clearance rank on the Rosenberg Six Project? Military. That means big government. That means Homeland Security. That means phone taps and secret prisons and water boarding. I’m not taking a piss on this one mate. I just can’t.”

“Just tell us what you know. For goodness sakes, you’re not Robert Redford and this isn’t All the President’s Men,” I said.

“Listen pal, I’m not talking to you. I don’t know why he’s even here.”

“He’s my husband,” Sharon said.

“Well not for long,” Todd replied.

“And he’s Stephen’s father. Todd, please. This is very important. We won’t tell anyone where we got the information.”

“Well that’s just it Sharon. There’s not a whole lot of information I could get. I kept running up against locked doors with signs that told me that it was too dangerous to

enter. Look, this is serious, and I know it's your son. But let me help out. I can help pay for his hospital bills."

"Thanks, but we'll figure this out." I quickly said.

"Besides, it's more than that. It's, well, it's hard to explain."

"Look." I said and actually walked close up to the much larger, Nordic man. "Did you have Sharon come all the way out here just to try and pick her up, or do you actually have information that we can use?"

"Fuck you!" Todd yelled before shoving me hard in the chest. I tripped as I shuffled backwards and fell to the cement floor. Two security guards quickly jumped into the scene, but Todd told him it was all right and they backed off. Sharon helped me up and called him an asshole.

"Look, all I know is that your Dr. Rosenberg is probably dead."

"Then who are we meeting in Nassau?" Sharon asked.

Todd continued, "That's where I focused my questions, and as far-fetched as it might sound, I think you might actually be meeting someone connected to the Vice President."

"Of the United States? You're joking. That was only a rumor," I said.

"What? What are you two talking about?" Sharon asked.

Todd started to speak, but I interrupted quickly and explained the rumors that Dr. Rosenberg once knew the Vice President, but that all my research had proved this to be an urban legend.

“Well, on this point you are wrong. Though his footsteps have been well hidden or swept up or paid off, whatever version you believe, the fact remains that Dr. Rosenberg dated the sister of the Vice President’s roommate in college.”

“That’s pretty flimsy evidence.” I said.

“Believe what you want. But it seems that the current Vice President and Dr. Rosenberg also crossed paths in grad school where the Vice President actually finished his degree. Apparently he quit school during his first try, and helped finance, though anonymously, Dr. Rosenberg’s dissertation project.”

“What does this mean?” asked Sharon.

“It means that the anonymous benefactor, the wizard that could very well be pulling all the strings, the person in charge of the man coming down the stadium, and the man who sent us these tickets, could very well be the Vice President of the United States.” I said, trying to recap in my best “Murder She Wrote” demonstrative voice. I was trying to make it sound so outrageous that it would make Todd feel silly. But it didn’t.

“Not exactly, but that is the basic gist. More than likely, the men watching us are either part of homeland security or part of another group that thinks you two know something about this project. But it shouldn’t be a problem. I mean, no one ever blames the secretary.” Todd said, and I knew it was an intentional dig at my job.

He continued, “But there is a big golf tournament at the resort in Nassau the same weekend you are there, and the company sponsoring the tournament is the same energy company the Vice President used to be the CEO for. That is too much coincidence. Now, I don’t pretend to have much more, but I bet that someone that works in that company and still does the bidding of the Vice President is who you both might meet.”

He handed her a piece of paper.

“What’s this?”

“In case you need it.” Todd said. It was the name and number of someone in Nassau. “It’s a friend. Maybe he could help? Look, I’ll meet you when this whole thing’s over with – the whole thing. You just be careful and call this number if you need anything. He knows just enough to help.”

I knew what he was talking about and I was pissed. Sharon didn’t seem to care and put the paper in her pocket. I wondered what the crowd was like and ducked my head outside the entryway. Just then two familiar faces walked down one stairway towards us. I motioned to Sharon and she said one of them looked familiar.

“I think he asked me for directions outside your house earlier today. But he was wearing something different. He looked like a postman.”

The word “postman” opened a file– I’ve seen him too. The security guard on campus looked like the postmen too. They both looked like they were coming right at us. I turned, Todd was busy talking to one of the guards, and the soccer game raged on in the background. More boos and curse words rained down from the crowd and now pennies and coins were darting onto the field.

A line of well-armored security guards waited in the entryway only a few feet away, ready to squash any would-be-soccer rioters. Suddenly, I felt a tingling sensation behind my ears near the joints of my jaw. Then I heard a voice, but when I looked around no one appeared to say a thing. It repeated again: *Run Jenny. Run!* Todd interrupted my mental breakdown.

“We need to go this way,” Todd said and jogged past the security guards into the belly of the stadium. “They are getting ready to call the game and the crowd is going to go crazy. This could be the very first United States soccer riot. I’m going to have to stay and cover it – I have to.” Sharon hugged Todd, said thank you and told him to be safe.

“Take care of her,” he said to me. It felt like a cliché in a bad movie, and I loved it. “If Rosenberg was working on some kind of weapon, which is what I believe, and he was killed, then that means whoever killed him is still looking for that weapon. Getting close to the Vice President and getting out of the country for a little bit might be the safest way to go.”

“Why don’t we just call the police?” I said. Both Sharon and Todd said no, nearly at the same time. “Why not?” I asked.

Over the loud speakers the game was officially stopped and the riot police filed out the door quickly and prepared for a possible riot.

“If the police were involved, the Benefactor couldn’t risk contacting you at all, and there would go the real power to protect your family. Besides, you said it yourself—there’s more involved with this than just some secret project. No, get your stuff and hide out until the plane can take you to Nassau.”

“Besides, what would we say? Right now it’s just a bunch of hunches and feelings,” Sharon said.

Todd reached into his pockets and pulled out a set of keys. “Here.”

“We can’t.” Sharon said.

“They’ve got to already know your car. I’m parked just through this tunnel. I can pick it up later.” Todd grabbed his credentials around his neck and gave that to us as well.

The noise outside sounded like a battle scene from the Gladiator, but with less brass and more thuds.

I shook Todd's hand and thanked him. She was right, he wasn't that bad of a guy at all. "I owe you," I said, again sounding like a cliché.

Todd pulled me closer and whispered in my ear, "Remember, trust the connection between father and son. It's more powerful than you think." Then he disappeared into the coliseum to write a story I'm sure I would read the next morning, and I was equally sure would cause me to rethink the benevolence I felt for him at this moment.

Todd's car was a major upgrade, but it felt a little weird leaving my car in the parking lot. It was probably going to get towed; no...they might just junk it thinking it was completely abandoned. I didn't even know how to get a car that was towed. Who do you call? What do you do? Sharon seemed to be reading my mind: "I'll help you get the car back later, but right now we need to get home. We'll go to my apartment tonight."

"We should go straight to the police." I repeated.

"And tell them what? We don't have any proof of anything. And besides, Koln and Householder would immediately drop our insurance and send Stephen to a state hospital if we went to the police."

"Maybe he'd be alright there. I mean, there are coma patients in state hospitals. It's not like they'll just send him home."

"You know it goes way beyond that. This is all connected somehow – our son, his mysterious coma, your lab, Rosenberg, some government weapon or project, and Rosenberg's death. And now someone's following us – no, I need answers."

I still thought we should go to the police, but Sharon seemed determined, and something still bothered me... something Todd said sounded familiar. Didn't Bergie tell me about the connection between father and son? Was the similarity between their words just a coincidence? The more I thought about that tingling sensation and the voice I heard inside my head, the less I thought I was crazy. Or, at least, the less I thought it was some strange voice. It sounded like Rollo. It didn't have the features of his voice—the quiet, nuanced tone. It just felt like Rollo's when it told me to run. And it called me 'Jenny'.

A pain wrenched through my body and suddenly I was crawling along my stomach in complete darkness through a tight tunnel. A two-inch layer of water that smelled more like sewage filled the bottom part of the tunnel. I could barely breathe as it seemed like I reached my arms forward, dug my fingertips into the loose rock and pulled it behind me like a mole. The pace was frantic. It felt like someone or something could have been behind me, in the darkness, but I only felt it getting closer. My fingertips hurt, but when I focused on them they weren't mine. Suddenly the rock ceiling rumbled and dust and dirt fell on my body and head. I wasn't even crawling anymore as I willed myself forward on my belly through the dirty water and dirt. I could hear voices in the dark distance behind me and then a steady thump, like a man beating on a kettledrum. All went black, and I keeled over.

“Pull over,” I said

“I can't stop now.”

“Pull over!” Sharon pulled over, and I vomited then collapsed in the seat. Then I said, “No police then, we'll figure this out together.”

We decided not to take a chance on my house, at least not yet, but Sharon needed to tie up some loose ends at work. From her home she would set up appointments, have a conference call with her main office, and prepare her customers for her last minute vacation.

At first I started to ask her how she could think about work, how she could think about anything other than what we'd gotten ourselves into. Heck, we could talk about Todd or our marriage or Stephen or Rollo – anything. But I stopped myself before the words could come out and avoided another fight.

Instead, I had her drop me off near the church. After I threw up, my mind settled for a while and I figured out where the words were connected. Those were the exact same words Bergie used in the church, and they seemed to come out of nowhere. Todd purposely whispered them in my ear, and we hadn't spoken a civil word to each other ever. It couldn't have been just a coincidence.

It was getting late, and I thought Bergie might be in the church again. It was a long shot, but maybe the priest or someone else knew about the man they caught last week? I told Sharon I was going to walk the back alleys to my home from the church and gather some of my stuff and then meet her back at the church in three hours, which was possibly true.

She dropped me off. I walked through the same courtyard where I'd waited for Rollo only a few days earlier, the same courtyard where all of this seemed to begin, and then tried the garage door. It was locked. I decided to knock on the front door, but there was no answer. I went across the way and tried the private residence of the priest, I felt

bad, but maybe I could pretend I was having, I don't know...some sort of religious problem or crisis.

As I knocked lightly against the wintergreen-colored door, I couldn't help but feel somehow empowered. I would have never knocked on this man's door before today, let alone at this hour of the night. What would I say to him? I suddenly felt anxious and hoped he wouldn't answer. I shouldn't be here, I thought over and over. What if he knew I broke in a few days ago? What if Bergie told him I was here? I backed off the porch, nearly stumbling backwards down the steps, then turned around.

I decided to try calling the church, but when I dialed information on my cell phone the operator gave me a number that used a different area code (unless even though my house was only a couple blocks away this church somehow had a different area code.) Before I called the number, though, I jotted down what I wanted to say. I had enough practice losing my voice during a phone call to know I couldn't risk it now. But the problem was I still didn't know what I would do if someone told me they knew Bergie. They weren't just going to give me his address and let me ask him if he were somehow connected to Todd and somehow connected to a government conspiracy to put my son in a coma.

I still called.

Someone answered, though he was a bit confused at this late hour. He must have been asleep.

“Is this St. Francis of Assisi Church?”

“Uh? Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry.” I should have known, this wasn’t even the church. “It’s nothing, I’m sorry to bother you so late. Have a nice night.”

“Wait a second. Excuse my Basic English. I’m not in the church; I’m one of the caretakers. Is there an emergency?”

“No—well, yes. Sort of.” I was already lost on the notepad and took a few deep breaths before I read my script. “I’m sorry for calling so late sir, but I am worried about my brother. He has been missing for some time and the last I spoke with him he said he was going to sleep in your church.”

“Pardon me?”

“I know, I didn’t believe him. But I’m desperate. He has been missing for two weeks, and today was his son’s birthday. I’m afraid something terrible is going to happen. You see, his son died and, well, I just thought I’d call. You know what, I’m sorry...I shouldn’t have called.”

“No. No don’t give it a thought. I’m an old man and tomorrow is Sunday, but I’m always available for others. I’ve had two guards at the church over the past month because there have been local vandals breaking in at night. The other week someone even stole the donations. If your brother has been here at night or at all they will surely know. How can I get in touch with you?”

“I’m embarrassed to say, but I’m actually at the church.”

“Oh, I’ll have the guards let you in. I don’t normally stay at the church at night, only if I cannot sleep I stay there or if there is a big service the next morning.”

I wondered why he was there last Saturday. He continued, “But the guards are on site right now. They would definitely meet you. I’ll call them and have them come outside. You could wait in the courtyard it shouldn’t be but a moment.”

I waited in the same courtyard, and it seemed like *déjà vu*. I thought perhaps Rollo would suddenly appear out of nowhere. When they showed up, they were indeed the same two guards from the other night, visibly upset since I had probably broken up another card game, but obviously told by the priest to help me in any way. We walked inside the same garage door, but this time there were lights. It was indeed a garage with a car on one side and storage all around. Two desks with chairs sat on one side. They led me there.

“So we’ve been told a little bit, but why don’t you let us know who you think has been here.”

I described Bergie and even gave his name. They asked a few questions, but I emphasized that he told me he was going to be here last Saturday night. They talked about how even the priest was here, that he was sort of an insomniac and liked the peace of the church sometimes to sleep. But other than that they said there were no disturbances – nothing at all. Earlier the week there were a few minor graffiti problems, but all and all this was the easiest, actually silliest job the firm had ever sent them on (apparently they were with an independent security system.) I tried again and asked if I could walk around. They said there were absolutely no disturbances, no one screaming or yelling – I even said he liked to sing loudly and gave them the exact song that Bergie sang when he ran away...but they didn’t budge.

It was like he never existed...but he had existed, hadn't he? They led me through the pews, visibly getting tired of this, but probably a bit bored anyway. I walked through random parts of the church at first to make sure they didn't know I knew exactly where I'd been. But eventually I made it to the pew.

At first there was absolutely no sign of Bergie. What had I expected? And once the guards accompanied me, why would I think he'd show his face even if he were hiding somewhere inside? Then I saw it. There was a subtle groove etched into the back of the pew where Bergie and I had sat a few days earlier. I had watched him etch his thumbnail into that groove when he told me his son died.

Without thinking about it, I rubbed my own thumbnail into the back of the seat.

"Kids," one of the guards said. "Probably as bored with church as I am."

"Probably." I said, but it had to have been Bergie. I thanked them as I left, and even gave them my cell phone number in case my 'brother' showed up. They probably threw it away the second I gave it to them.

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I walked to my house and called Sharon.

She was not making appointments, it was too late, but she was finalizing her invoices and getting as much work as she could get done while also searching for files. I told her I'd go ahead and take a cab to her house and not to worry. She said to stay safe, but I wasn't that worried. There were mysteries, but I wanted to go home.

I walked down the back alleys, through a fence and into my own back yard right below the tree house Rollo used to sleep in. I even went up into the tree house to check if he was there, but he wasn't. The back yard looked neglected, especially my garden. In six

years I'd never left it alone as long as I had since my visit to the church. I noticed how the tomato plants had started to outgrow the original wire stands. There would assuredly be some tomatoes on the ground already rotting. I wanted to spend the night gardening. I wanted Rollo to help make the garden symmetrical and to help harvest the berries and tomatoes and zucchini. I wanted Sharon inside watching.

I considered the dysfunctional family I still wanted and gazed beyond the garden to the house. Immediately, I fell back against the tree house wall and gasped. Oh my. I crept along my hands and knees and peered up through the corner of the tree house window and watched as a tall figure draped in a dark robe walked along the shadow contours of my aging farmhouse. Who could it be? Did he see me? The man stood over six feet tall and held something in his hand, but I couldn't make it out. There were few clouds, but for some reason the moonlight was dull and brittle. The river that ran along the boundary of my property seemed high and rushed downstream, probably from a dam and local fish release. The sound from the river overpowered any sound either the stranger or I made, and I knew the line of sight from the house. The man couldn't see me from that spot. He couldn't.

Another man emerged from the side of my house and walked to the feet of the robed man, laid himself out on his stomach and raised both hands. He looked familiar, but he wore some type of leather tunic or harness. There was a leather strap connected from his neck to his genitals, but I couldn't make out any more specifics. It was too dark. I kept as still as I could and watched. I wanted to leave. I wanted Sharon.

The robed man touched the prostrate man lightly on his forehead and quickly the man on the ground leapt up and went directly for the spare key I hid inside the faux rock

beside the gutter. How could he know where I hid it? I had to know him, but I couldn't do anything. I could see the man's bare rear as he opened the door and walked inside. I had to do something, but what? I thought about what they would find inside. There was nothing. Sharon had already taken it all. I watched as the man in the leather tunic disappeared into my home and slowly emerged in my living room holding a lit candle. I instantly realized what they'd find – the map to my mind. Oh my god. And then I recognized the man's face.

I met him the day I took the picture that once sat on my desk. It was a member of the Rosenberg Six. It was Dr. Householder.

Before I could try to piece together this part of the puzzle, before I could wrestle with the implications of what I'd just seen, my attention was drawn to the open front door. The robed man stood tall and stared straight at me. I knew logically there was no way he could see me from the angle he stood. I'd tried many times. I knew exactly how to look into this window, and even though I knew Rollo was watching me from this exact window, I could never see him from my back door.

I was still worried. He didn't move, and I marveled at his straight, broad shoulders and long arms. I couldn't see his eyes, but his cheekbones were cornered and reflected the dull moonlight. He looked kind of like Rollo, but I didn't feel at ease in the presence of this man. As we stared at each other, neither able to see the other's eyes, a soft ringing emanated from rocks that were nestled into the interior corners of this tree house. I looked and they had a very faint blue glow that intensified, but didn't illuminate the tree house. It didn't make any sense. Then the sound and the glow disappeared.

I looked back outside, but both men were inside my house. Sharon might have gone closer to see what was inside, but not me. I got out of the tree house and ran, as best as I could. My knees knocked against each other and bruised my skin. I darted through the back yard of a couple homes, through an alley where I tumbled onto the ground and pushed myself as hard as I could. My lungs hurt. My eyes teared up. I couldn't look behind as my heart beat harder and harder.

As I neared the large oak fifty yards from the church courtyard two hands suddenly gripped the back of my shirt and my mouth and pulled me back first over a bush and onto the ground. My eyes widened in terror. I thought for sure the robed man had grabbed me. I wanted to kick my legs, pummel the man with my arms and hands, bite him – but I lay down and stared straight at the eyes that looked into me.

It was Rollo. I wanted to cry. He held his finger up against his lips and said, “Don't say a word.” He had me follow him down an old train track. We walked a few minutes until we reached a small area in the woods and walked inside. He quickly placed several rocks around us in a square, similar to the rocks that I found in the tree house. I didn't understand what was happening.

“We only have a few minutes,” he said. I wanted to ask so many questions, but I was just exhausted...so much had happened, a sharp contrast to the normal routine and movies and couch I'd grown accustomed to over the, well...over my entire life. I noticed just how much Rollo looked like the man that walked inside my house, but Rollo was much quieter – contagious laughter was how I once described him, but right now that wasn't the case. He had a determined look on his face I'd never seen before. I had so many questions to ask Rollo, but why would I think he had any answers?

“Was that you? At the game?”

“We have little time,” he repeated. There was something about his face and the way he answered that made me believe that he was there.

“It was you. What were you doing there? Wait, why didn’t you say anything?”

“Jenny, I can’t be the answer to your questions, but you’ve been shown the path.”

“You’re kidding, I haven’t been shown anything. Are you talking about Bergie? I can’t even tell you if he exists.”

“He exists if you believe he exists.”

“What is going on?” I asked, louder than I had expected. Rollo pulled me close, I thought he was going to hug me, but he rubbed my temples and the headache I’d had for the entire day disappeared. So did my questions. Then I heard the voice I had heard earlier at the game – that told me to run. I looked at Rollo’s face, but his lips didn’t move. He closed his eyes and the words flowed through my mind like the voices in a dream:

Listen carefully and don’t be afraid. You and Sharon and your son are all involved in an experiment beyond your comprehension. There are questions you have that I cannot answer, they wouldn’t make sense. You need to see them yourself to believe them.

“Can you tell me – was Bergie real?”

Yes. I can’t talk any longer, someone is always listening – and these crystals only cloud his senses for a while.

“One more thing.”

Yes, I was wondering if you would ask—Stephen is still alive.

“Can I save him?”

You have to – now go, take Sharon to the Bahamas, you'll find more answers there – but be aware. We will probably not meet again, until it is all over – good or bad.

He let go of my temples and embraced me in a deep hug. I'd never really hugged a man before. It was warm. Then he handed me two necklaces. A blue gem hung at the very bottom of each necklace.

“Your path is an important one Jenny, perhaps the most important one of all time. These necklaces should help you and Sharon. Rely on her strength—rely on the strength of your entire family—and hopefully we'll see each other again.” Rollo spoke in that voice that had calmed me so many times in the past. I felt like we could have been sitting beside each other in the dirt of my garden discussing pea pods or germination or Stephen or Sharon. But no, this wasn't the same. In fact, it seemed that nothing would be the same again.

17

I thought about telling Sharon about Rollo or the man who broke into my home.

Perhaps I should have, but when she picked me up I didn't say anything and she didn't seem to mind. There was a silence in her I didn't want to disturb, like an athlete's focus before a big game. Her eyes were glossed over. Her hair was pulled back tightly into a ponytail that propped up behind her headrest into a hairy crown. The sweats were pulled up under her knees and her calves looked smooth and strong. She smelled like peaches and Oreo cookies. I noticed, perhaps for the first time in the last few days that she wore her wedding ring on her right hand. As we drove away I looked in the rear view mirror with hopes of finding Rollo or Bergie or some phantom from the past that could explain what was happening. But, of course, there was no one.

Only Sharon. Only me.

Dave Mathews sang through the radio: “when the world ends I want to take you aside and say let’s watch it fade away, fade away...” and I thought about the only time Sharon and I ever took Stephen to the zoo. It wasn’t a big zoo. In fact, traditionally speaking it was probably more like a rich person’s collection of exotic and domestic animals located in a neighborhood park. But it was one of those perfect days that could take over an old man’s memory as he lies in bed and recalls his past. I couldn’t even trust the image, and I didn’t understand what had triggered the file. (Lately I had been trying to record all passwords in a notebook I kept in my front pocket, but this file opened on its own.)

Stephen was six and Sharon was unemployed. We lived in a cheap motel on Buena Vista Boulevard near Disney World in Orlando, but we found ourselves in a small city outside Orlando at a local park. I sold balloons most days on Main Street in Disney World, but this day I was off and we were a hallmark card walking hand-in-hand through the small zoo looking at monkeys and emus and bald eagles in ten by ten foot cages. The cages smelled a bit rank, but the grass fields that surrounded the park smelled like lemon grass. In fact, Sharon collected blades she said she would use later in a stir fry she wanted to cook that night.

After we left the zoo, though, and as Sharon purchased a stuffed-polar bear for Stephen. I could have sworn Stephen told me to look at a peacock that escaped the confines of the zoo. Normally that kind of seemingly insignificant detail wouldn’t warrant such a surprised reaction. But he didn’t say a word out loud until he was seven. In fact, for some time we took Stephen to specialists because we were worried that he,

well, that he was special. But he just didn't want to talk. Except for that day. But his lips never moved. He looked at me and smiled, and when I asked if he just said something he pretended not to understand, so I didn't press the issue. And I never told Sharon.

18

I returned to my home two days after I saw the strange man walk through the door.

Sharon came with me, and even though most people wouldn't be able to tell that anyone had entered or altered the house, I could. In fact, the house was immaculate and every file scattered through the living room had been taken. Some were stacked neatly on the tables, but as I accessed the file: "Madman's Mind", I could see the locations of the files and the mobiles of facts and pictures and ideas trickling down. The information in each file and the particulars were obviously filed under their individual passwords, but the picture of the entire room clearly indicated items were missing. What did that man want? Why was Dr. Kohl with him?

Sharon walked behind me and asked, "When did you find time to clear?"

I didn't have an answer, and I didn't want to tell her about the two men that broke into my home or about my conversation with Rollo—Not yet. The time to go to the police or to rethink the path I had begun with Sharon seemed long past. This information could have caused her to rethink her decision to come with me, and I needed her. I couldn't do this alone.

"Fine, don't answer," Sharon said, disgusted.

"No, it's not fine. I just tidied up a bit in case anyone came by."

"You didn't even do this when we were together. It looks nice."

We picked up our neglected cat from the house and brought him to Sharon's neighbor to look after while we went away. The young woman was an intimidating lady with a slight build and two kids. I had heard her; when she had visited on occasion for dinner or to talk with Sharon, discuss at length who could be the possible fathers of her two sons. She wasn't a lifetime movie special feature starring Meredith Baxter Birney. She was a successful florist. She owned her own flower shop and series of greenhouses that sold everything from Christmas trees to pumpkins to Pomeranians and lobster rolls during the summer. I liked her because the first time I saw her she said I was sexy. No one, not even Sharon the first time I met her, had ever said that. It occurred to me that I hadn't even really tried to find Sharon after we had separated or I would have probably considered the apartment this woman owned next to her home a strong candidate.

As Sharon dropped off Casper and talked about the trip and Casper's special diet, I accessed the file in my head that allowed me to see the map of my mind as it had appeared in the living room only a couple days before. I traveled through the picture like a person navigating images of files on a computer, focusing in on particular previews, then moving them back, inspecting each picture or password and then comparing it to the neatly organized files I found in my home after the intrusion. I finally figured out that the file titled: "Daytime Dreams", was missing. It was a collection of every dream I had experienced during the day like attacks after Stephen had gone into a coma. It bothered me that these two men would intrude, not just into my house, but also into my dreams. How would I have explained this to a police officer, though? I couldn't. What also infuriated me was that it was very difficult to access and record the dreams the first time. They were scattered through varied files based on content and not on the overall subject

of dreams, and they were still not translated or analyzed. What did they want with my dreams? Why did they clean my room and my house?

As we drove to the airport the Black-Robed Man occupied my thoughts and concerns. Over and over I considered different reasons why he might have cleaned my house, until it suddenly became clear. He didn't clean my house, and he wasn't after my notes. He wanted to clean my memory, the cluttered opaque memory of a project I barely understood. This strange man didn't want my dreams or the cluttered ruminations of past events or files I couldn't open. He wanted my entire mind. Sharon drove silently, and I inventoried the contents of my room by accessing the image in my mind. That is when I noticed two other items missing. First, the man took the picture of the Rosenberg Six linking arms in a chorus girl pose. More disturbing, though, was that he took a framed picture of Sharon. I realized something at that moment I hadn't realized before. Bergie and Rollo might have stated explicitly that I was connected to Stephen, but they failed to realize, or perhaps I hadn't realized, the connection I had, or wanted to have with Sharon. The loss of my job was one of the last stable and reliable forces that shaped my life. That structure and range of habits was now gone, just as my routines with Sharon and Stephen were now gone.

As I considered the new forces that propelled me to Nassau, the muscles in my body suddenly gave out, and I collapsed against the dashboard, exhausted and immobile and confused. As I lay there, something stirred in the darkness. I tried to listen, but I could only hear wind. Then, slowly at first as if I were watching a reel-to-reel movie brought into focus, I found myself on a steep cliff facing a clear blue sky. Several hundred hawks and eagles surfed air currents and occasionally landed in an overhanging

tree nearby. Below me, nearly straight down, a town straddled a dirt road that led to an unseen point along the horizon. It looked like a town from old westerns, except for a large, emerald-green dome near the horizon that towered above the rest of the town. Further down the mountain a long line of burrows trekked down a steep, dirt path that led to the lowlands. The bells around their necks gave away their location when they disappeared into the thick-treed lowlands below. I wondered if they were going to town. I scanned along what I had imaged would be their path, over a thick canopy of trees, down further to the town below and to the green dome. Was this the green dome Bergie's child saw moments before he died? If so, the time I had to save Stephen grew shorter. I had an overwhelming urge to reach that dome. I could feel the urge to run down the dirt path and reach the dome as soon as possible surge through me. Suddenly, the day sky began to pulsate like a strobe light. Colors swirled around. Then I blacked out.

BOOK TWO

“I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again”

(Sylvia Plath)

1

I sat in a dank, crusted airport terminal waiting to fly to Nassau. Over the past two days I had tried to reconstruct the dream files in my head, but many of them were locked behind passwords I couldn't recall or images I couldn't reconstruct. It was a unique phenomenon I didn't understand. I had never had trouble reconstructing an image before. Why were these dreams so different?

The stale air left a bad taste in my mouth, and the other would-be passengers lined orange vinyl seats like refugees waiting to be saved. I wondered if that was what I looked like to the other passengers gathered around. The occasional news update streamed across strategically placed televisions otherwise pulsating with one advertisement after another. Some couples talked softly like new lovers at their own private table. Little kids ran brashly in the face of oncoming traffic as their parents chased them down the moving walkway. The occasional golf cart honked through traffic or beeped in reverse. And my head killed.

Even though I'd decided to ration some of the yellow pills Bergie gave me, I found myself swallowing a whole pill every other hour. The taste rotted my stomach with heartburn and clung to the back of my teeth. I watched Sharon bounce around with excited and nervous energy. I couldn't move. I had felt ill and a bit weak since the morning drive to the airport, and I couldn't figure out why. I answered her questions or

listened to her new theories or ideas, and then scanned across the other refugees waiting for their trips to somewhere else.

I returned to the question I had asked so often throughout my life—What was I doing here? I knew that I had asked the question over and over. I also knew that I had savored the words and possible answers in my mouth, swirled them around my palette and spit them out. Each different answer to the question linked the pieces of who I was together along a path like the wood rails that connected the rungs to an old ladder. I just didn't know how to climb the ladder or where it led. The question had also taken on a different meaning, over the past few weeks. It was no longer a mere existential meandering of a passive mind. It had a real tangible purpose. Sharon and I were traveling together to Nassau to deliver a piece of a computer and answer questions in return for a large sum of money that would sustain Stephen in the best hospitals for the rest of his life. But that wasn't really all of it, not by a long shot. I was sure that Sharon had her own reasons in addition to the money. As for me, I somehow believed that when I handed over the material to Dr. Rosenberg I would find the courage to ask him questions I had never been able to ask before, and I hoped that these answers could help me save my son. That was why I was here, in the hope that I could save my son. Perhaps it was that simple for Sharon as well? Who knew?

“Did you know the Commonwealth of the Bahamas is a nation that consists of 700 islands forming a 100,000 square mile archipelago with a land mass area of

approximately 5,382 square miles and that it is divided into 31 districts and has been an independent nation since 1973?” Sharon asked.

I wondered how she could say all of that in one breath and said, “My head hurts.”

“Where are we staying?”

“I’m sure he’ll take care of it.”

“He? We don’t even know who he is. Are we staying on Nassau or on one of the other 686 islands? You didn’t even check to see if we needed a different currency did you?”

“Do we?”

“No.”

It was a circular conversation I knew would end in an argument if I asked why she even cared if I didn’t ask about currency since we didn’t need it, so I returned to her initial inquiry. “We’re staying somewhere on Nassau. I’m sure someone will help us when we get there.”

“Sure, this has been such an easy, straightforward journey so far.” Sharon handed me her carry-on bag, purse and Bahamas travel guide. “Hold these for me. I’ve got to go to the restroom.”

I watched Sharon disappear around the corner of a hallway, my finger holding the spot in the travel book where she left off. In typical Sharon fashion, she had highlighted the main text of the guidebook already and was revising her key points and itinerary before she gave it to me moments before we departed the plane. I didn’t mind so much because I didn’t really care. Waiting in airports, waiting in lines for taxis, not knowing where I was going – none of these things bothered me like they did Sharon. Of course,

my worries ran deeper, and as I sat in the airport terminal listening to airline attendants announce flight changes or ask for passengers to come to their gates, I wondered about the journey that brought me to this point.

If Tommy was right and there was no omnipotent being that guided me along my path, that everything was just a series of choices and steps that led to more choices and more steps, and that the only real choice was whether or not to rely on a person—I wondered what he would say if I decided to rely on God? Would this be a paradox that would finally shut this jerk up? What would it mean? I was never a particularly religious person, so I wondered how this idea emerged. If I asked Tommy why I was here, how would he answer? Would he blame it on my choice to trust Rollo? What about Dr. Rosenberg or Bergie or Todd or even the priest at the church? What about Sharon?

Sometimes when I withdrew into my own thoughts for a long time, I would hold my breath and forget to move. I would inhale and imagine the breath filling my mind with more space. From the time I inhaled to the time I finally had to exhale and inhale again, I tried to find the answer or password, or recall the dream or memory or analyze the idea. As I sat in the airport I played this game with myself over and over until I was sure the people sitting near me believed I was on the cusp of a nervous break down or hyperventilation, so I stopped for a moment and tried occupying my mind with other tasks.

First, I fidgeted in my seat like a young boy who couldn't still during a grade school program. I moved back and forth, but my left leg had fallen asleep. I dropped Sharon's book to the ground and massaged the pins and needles away. When I went to pick it back up I noticed that the orange seats were attached in long rows of twenty-four,

and that each of the four legs of the seats attached to the ground directly in the center of a different tile in the floor. I counted the tiles that spread from the window to the walkway that split the two gates. There were fifty-six tiles. The first five were all a different shade of beige and then the pattern started over until it reached the window. When the tiles reached the wall the symmetry was incomplete. They were cut off at nearly three quarters of the size because, undoubtedly, of a miscalculation.

I looked at my watch and wondered what was taking Sharon so long. We still had a few minutes until our flight boarded, but she had been in the bathroom longer than I had anticipated. What if something had happened to her? I had become much more paranoid since I witnessed the Black Robed Man break into my home. Over the past two days, Sharon and I had spent the time reviewing the files I had recorded and the trip that lay ahead. I didn't tell her about Rollo or the Black Robed Man, and I was sure she had her own secrets as well. The files we focused on were the ones that involved Stephen and the Rosenberg Six project.

After Stephen accepted Dr. Rosenberg's initial invitation to visit the lab, I had asked Stephen after dinner why he thought Dr. Rosenberg extended the invitation. He was a teenage boy, and Dr. Rosenberg was a university professor. I asked under the guise that Sharon and I worried about sexual predators in these times of internet rendezvous and in the wake of still more priest sex scandals. I had expected Stephen to immediately erect a wall and become angry or upset with my inquiry. We had not had a real heartfelt or parent-son conversation for some time, if ever. But instead he seemed quite rational and up front.

“He heard about my science fair experiment and thought I might like a tour,” Stephen said. “I wasn’t the only kid there either so I don’t know why you’re picking on me.”

Earlier that week Stephen’s high school held its yearly Science Fair on the varsity basketball gymnasium floor. Over forty-seven students participated in several scientific categories, each competing for the right to take their project to the Regional Science Fair that would take place three weeks later at the University where I worked. Stephen had worked diligently on his project for over a month, but at no time did he request any help from me. In his defense, I had been very busy that month preparing Dr. Rosenberg for the upcoming summer courses he was supposed to teach and for a fundraising event the school forced him to attend. I had very little time I could extend outside the office, and for several days in a row slept on a couch in the lab. And because I was so busy, I missed the opportunity to watch my son get announced as this year’s grand champion. He received a purple ribbon for his experiment on the aerodynamic principles of various car shapes that he carved out of balsam wood. Apparently, (although I hadn’t seen the finished project,) he had constructed a wind tunnel out of an old vacuum cleaner, plastic tubing with different perforated filters, and dry ice.

“What did you two talk about?” I asked.

“We just talked. You know, science and stuff. He’s a really smart guy.”

“Did you talk about the project I work on?”

“Not really, but after the other kids left he showed me a couple formulas he was working on, but I didn’t really understand what he was saying. He invited me to check

out actual wind tunnels next weekend at some auto-racing headquarters nearby. I can go, right?”

“He showed you formulas—actual formulas from the Rosenberg Six Project?”

“Yeah dad, what’s the big deal?”

“Could you remember them exactly and write them down?”

“I don’t know,” Stephen said with a strong hint of anger and frustration in the tone of his voice.

I handed him a piece of paper and pen and told him to write the formula down exactly as he had seen it. He paused, and my voice became more forceful. I yelled at him to write the entire formula. I pushed him harder and harder. Finally, probably more to spite me than anything else, he wrote down verbatim the entire, multi-page formula. The finished product combined not only the standard formula or proof, but also Dr. Rosenberg’s short hand notes that must have appeared in the margins of the original document. It was an amazing feat. Neither one of us could understand the meaning of what was on the page, but we knew it was an exact replica. At that moment I worried that Stephen had broken some security measure and might have messed up my position with the project. I grabbed him closely to make sure he understood and told him not to ever write it down again. I told him to forget it and not to visit Dr. Rosenberg again. I should have embraced him and explained that I knew how he could remember the formula because I should have recognized the surprised and worried look on his face. He didn’t know how he did it. I should have told him that my mind worked in a similar fashion, or I could have at least talked to him about his thoughts or feelings or worries. Perhaps he had a photographic memory and had hidden it out of fear that it would isolate him from his

peers? I should have bonded and protected my son at that very moment, but instead I had pushed him away. He threw the pen at me and yelled, "Fuck you! I'll tell Mom, and she'll let me go with Dr. Rosenberg. Just leave me alone." And then he stormed out, and Sharon eventually let him go with Dr. Rosenberg to the wind tunnel. When Stephen returned he told me that he hadn't taken my advice, and that he showed Dr. Rosenberg the formula, and that Dr. Rosenberg was so impressed he had decided to show him even more.

Stephen dismissed me at that moment and replaced me with the man I worked for. I should have done something, but I didn't say anything, though, in response to my own son. Instead, I crawled back into myself like I had always done. I relegated my family involvement to occasionally following Sharon's schedule tacked on the refrigerator door and focused my attention on the list of duties Dr. Rosenberg sent via email each morning. Perhaps Dr. Rosenberg involved Stephen even more with the project than I had anticipated? Perhaps Stephen was his back-up file for everything I knew? Could the same people that were watching Sharon and I have been the same people that somehow hurt my son? But the police and doctors found no evidence of any cause for Stephen's condition. Maybe Stephen somehow contracted something in the lab that doctors today know nothing about? I didn't have any answers, but I did know that at a moment when I could have saved my son, I didn't.

When I told Sharon about that moment, I neglected to tell her about the connection between my mind and Stephen's, but I did say that Stephen spent a majority of his time over those next few weeks with Dr. Rosenberg in the lab. It had been summer vacation. I also remembered that there was a small period that summer, one or

two weeks, when Stephen wouldn't answer any phone calls or messages from Dr. Rosenberg and instead spent his time with Rollo. Sharon believed that it was more probable that Rollo could have been somehow involved with Stephen's coma, but even with her slight suspicions she continually stated that their focus should be on the care of Stephen rather than on some far-fetched theories.

As I waited for Sharon to return and thought about the Stephen files, I rolled the blue crystal that hung around my neck between my fingers. I tried to imagine what would happen when we arrived in Nassau, but I couldn't even envision what the country looked like, let alone how I would somehow find the answers to all the questions I still had. What if no one told us where we were staying? What if this was an elaborate ruse to get us both out of town and away from the project? Sharon would never forgive me, and any chance that we would get back together would be lost.

I thought back to the soccer game and how flawless the conversation seemed to flow between Sharon and Todd, how they seemed to know each other in ways I had never thought possible or tried. Maybe Sharon would be happier with him. How could I know? I'd like to be that chivalrous, unselfish man that thinks only of his wife's happiness. Maybe that is exactly what I'm doing. When I asked her one morning how two people as different as we were could love one another, she said that love existed in the differences and how we meshed them together. It sounded a little melodramatic, but for a brief moment we were very good together, at least I'd like to believe we once were, and the reason we were so good was because of those differences.

When Sharon finally returned only moments before the airline attendants started boarding our flight, the eager excitement in her face had disappeared and her demeanor had drastically changed. Perhaps she was as tired as I was? She sat down a couple seats beside me without asking for her things and focused her attention on a cell phone in her hands. She didn't say a word. Even though I felt there should be something at that moment appropriate to say, I couldn't find any words, so I let the silence between us continue to settle. I wanted to tell her I loved her. I wanted to tell her that I had considered that God might be the answer, and that I would attend church with her and embrace her need for religion. But instead, I watched her play with the cell phone in her hands and imagined a different me that could say the right thing and act in a way that others could understand and follow.

2

At one point early in my high school career, my family finally quit forcing me to participate in sports and trying to help me meet and interact with other kids. I was left to navigate the world alone, and that is the way I kept it. I became infatuated with watching other people rather than interacting with them. On weekends or after school I began observing airplane passengers exit and board their planes for long periods of time.

Back then, you didn't need a ticket to sit in the orange vinyl seats and wait at the gate. The airport was an open space where family and friends could celebrate your arrival or bid you a tearful farewell. There were all the emotions of a good movie without the baggage of sitting alone in a chair in the dark with others behind you watching and judging. I could sit there all day and eat airport food, get a ten-minute massage and watch families enthusiastically embrace their children as they exited their planes. It was a

celebration that movies sometimes still made believe take place. I would ride my bicycle nearly forty-five minutes to the airport and spend an entire Saturday watching one celebration after another. But I wouldn't simply watch as people arrived. I enjoyed the departures as well – the tearful goodbyes or exuberant embraces of friends jealous they weren't going to Miami or San Francisco or Aruba. My family believed I spent my weekends playing with friends, studying or even drinking with other high school kids—and they were happy when I returned with stories and descriptions of friends taken directly from overheard conversations of passengers welcomed back home.

It was during these trips that I first realized I could recover exact memories much the same way a secretary might recover notes from a file. Saturdays soon became my own practice sessions. I would focus in on particular passengers, record all of the details, and then access the file and add to it each time I encountered the same passenger. I became a distant, voyeuristic biographer of people I didn't know and never would.

One Saturday in August during my junior year, an attendant seemed overly observant. She had watched me for hours, and even when I moved from terminal C to D and set up shop near a Cinnamon doughnut counter, she appeared. The woman cornered me while I watched a particularly exciting reunion between an obese young lady and who appeared to be her son. The airport lady tapped my shoulder lightly, and even though her innocent voice and inviting eyes caught me off guard, it was what she knew that finally ended my airport visit. She knew it. I never asked her how she knew my name, and I didn't wait for any sort of explanation. I excused myself abruptly and ran away.

My instincts told me to run away again when I handed the flight attendant my ticket for the Bahamas. She greeted me as if we'd known each other for years and said, "Enjoy your flight Mr. Price. Your seat is near the back." Sharon didn't seem to notice. How did this woman know my name?

As I walked slowly behind Sharon down the aisle, occasionally stopping as people put baggage in the overhead compartment or moved to their window seat, I couldn't help but notice that it was oddly quiet. No one spoke. No baby cried. No magazine or newspaper pages turned or crackled in someone's frustrated hands. In fact, no papers were even open. I looked down the aisle. There were three seats on each side, and almost every passenger sat solemnly and stared slightly downward towards the seat immediately in front of them. It reminded me of the Easter Sunday church services with my grandmother when I was very young. I gripped my wife's carry-on bag, which she miraculously let me carry, and saw two pairs of eyes finally look up from their prayers—a small boy with big, wet eyes and a man with ears flat against the sides of his head.

The boy reminded me of Stephen. He had rosy cheeks and full lips. The boy's mother snapped her fingers above the boy's lap, and the boy's head snapped back down. I wondered if someone had given the entire plane orders to stay quiet moments before Sharon and I entered. When we approached our row a man with swollen cheekbones and a high forehead sat in the middle seat and didn't seem ready to move. I asked Sharon if she wanted the window seat, and she immediately rebuked me by saying that we would sit in whatever seat was printed on our ticket, which meant I sat in the window seat. Once the man realized Sharon and I were together he offered to have both of us sit together, but Sharon refused.

“It’s a short flight and I’d rather have the aisle if you don’t mind,” she said. I offered the window seat to the man, but he said he was a little scared of flying and would rather be closer to the middle. Finally Sharon told us all that we would sit in our assigned seats. I wondered what the strange guy between us thought about being told what to do by Sharon. I was used to it, but I figured he would be more assertive. But he didn’t do anything. After a few moments he started small talk that I would have rather done without. I didn’t feel like speaking to anyone.

“So, are you going for business or pleasure?” I didn’t know how to answer and wondered if I could pretend like I was listening intently to the flight attendants explain how to use floatation devices that could be found under my seat. It didn’t work and he asked again.

“Oh, I’m sorry – a little of both I guess.”

“Me too. Left the wife and kids at home and plan on doing a little gambling if you know what I mean.” He hit me with his elbow in the gut. “What’s your game?” I looked over to see if Sharon wanted to be included, but she was looking at the cell phone again. A flight attendant approached and told her she would have to put it away. I watched her put it in her purse and close her eyes.

The man continued to talk: “Me, I’m a blackjack man, but I want to try Texas Hold’em. My kids play it online and love it. What about you?”

“What? Oh, I don’t know. I’m sorry, but my head is killing me. If you don’t mind I’d just like to close my eyes for a while. I don’t mean to be rude.”

“Don’t mention it again,” the man said.

I leaned my forehead against the window and stared outside. The plane reversed out of the terminal. An empty baggage cart skirted past two men wearing yellow jumpsuits and large earphones over their ears like earmuffs. The earphones reminded me of the ones Dr. Rosenberg made me try out at an automobile race to see if they blocked out the sound. It must have been something he needed for the project, but I didn't mind. It resulted in one of the few father-son trips I took Stephen on after I took the job for Dr. Rosenberg. Even though Dr. Rosenberg told me to go and gave me the tickets, I pretended it was my idea and forced Stephen to come. He wanted to stay at home and work on some type of science project. I didn't know the topic or type of science, and he never considered that I might be able to help him. So I forced him to the race and he never complained. But he was bored the entire time. I never forced him to spend time with me again.

As I thought about the race my head started to hurt worse and worse. I didn't even want to move my jaw because it ached so badly. I closed my eyes and leaned against the window.

"Ceaseless praying," Paul nudged me and said, "Yep, that's what helps me during take off. Seriously, try it." The plane stopped, and I gripped both armrests. I wasn't a good flyer. "Mr. Price." I turned towards the man next to me and wondered why he knew my name. He must have read my mind: "I heard the flight attendant say your name."

"What?"

"Let me help," the man said. "Here, this is our church in Nassau." He handed me a small, slightly bent business card for The Church of Christ in Nassau. "You should stop by. If you want, you can come by at night. We never lock the back door!"

“I’ll be fine.” I said. I put the card in my pocket and stared at the seat in front of me.

“Let me help you,” the man asked again.

“Really, I’m fine.”

“Just shut your eyes and let me help. Come on, what do you have to lose?” This guy had no idea. My son. My wife. Who knows what else? My life when the plane dropped thousands of feet into the ocean? I wished the man would just leave me alone.

I lowered my head and closed my eyes, but he continued, “Try to pull all other thoughts aside. Be calm. Be patient.” The plane sped up for take off. The man continued to speak, and I clenched my teeth and shook my foot frantically. “Feel your jaw muscles tighten. Acknowledge the pressure, the feeling...and then let it go. Calm yourself. Your fear is just testing the harmony of God’s voice. Listen.” I unclenched my teeth as the plane left the ground. The man beside me continued speaking in a soft whisper that mixed with the rev of the plane’s engines. His tone and message seemed vaguely familiar, but inexact and incomplete. It didn’t exist in a file in my head, but it vaguely mirrored other religious conversations or television shows I’d seen over the past few years.

Before I could figure out what his words reminded me of, a pain burned up through my elbows and shoulders, through the front and back of my neck and up through my eyes. I looked past the man still trying to convert me to Christianity towards Sharon, who lay quietly with her eyes closed. She couldn’t help, and the man beside me needed to shut up. I fumbled through my pocket for another yellow pill and swallowed it whole, but the headache didn’t ease. I closed my eyes, but nausea wrenched through my body, and I

dry-heaved phlegm onto my shirt. I think the man said something and then quit talking, but I couldn't hear anything. I opened my eyes and stared outside.

A bright light pulsed and blinded me, and suddenly my headache disappeared as well as my senses of hearing, smell, touch and taste. I was no longer on the plane. I no longer existed. The world I saw was upside down and confusing. It wavered back and forth as if on a pendulum and moved in and out of focus. After a few moments I could feel air and then tree branches whip across my face and arms. Then I realized my hands gripped a horse's mane and my legs gripped around the torso of a horse as it swiftly sprinted down the steep slope of a heavily forested mountainside. But the hands and legs weren't mine. They were strange, but familiar. The branches of a pine tree scratched across my chest and ripped through my shirt and skin as the horse charged onward. The horse leapt across a small crevice, over boulders and dodged and weaved through a maze of large tree trunks in a desperate sprint. I felt like I was running from someone or something. My heartbeat matched the horse's hoof beats. I could taste my own sweat as I wiped it from my eyes and mouth. Who was I running from? I looked back. There was no one. The horse leapt nearly straight down and I leaned back as far as I could, mimicking the Man from Snowy River until the horse hit the ground. I nearly fell over its head, holding desperately onto its mane for support. I glanced back over my shoulder again, hugging closely to the horse, and saw who was chasing me—three women on horseback and the Black-Robed man.

Then, the world seemed to give out beneath me. With little to no sound the horse and I broke through a thin layer of Earth and tumbled straight down into a pit that seemed

to have no bottom. I no longer hugged the back of the magnificent animal, instead we were both alone, racing straight down towards the rushing water I heard, but could not see, below. Moments before I hit the ground I could hear a voice in my head, it was deeper and different than any I had heard before: *I'm coming after you. I'm coming after you all.*

“Jen. Jen. Are you alright?”

It was Sharon's voice. I opened my eyes while Sharon shook my shoulders and sat in the seat beside me. The plane hit an air pocket and dropped for an instant. “Hey, it's just an air pocket.”

“What?” My head throbbed.

“You were screaming.” Sharon said and fastened the seatbelt around her. “You were scaring me so I switched with this nice man. Are you okay?” She put her hand on my thigh and for a moment I tensed and pulled away. She started to pull her hand off my thigh, but I grabbed it and held it tight for a few moments while I looked outside.

“Just another dream.”

“They're getting worse aren't they?” I didn't answer. A fluorescent wing light illuminated gray clouds outside. They formed an oscillating wall that I felt I could reach out and touch. It was like watching videos of swirling, bubbling ocean waves beneath the surface. Like the destructive plume of a bomb or apocalyptic cloud portrayed in the slow motion frames of a black and white movie. A volcano erupting and I was safe behind the glass.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I finally said. Everyone still stared ahead in the plane except the boy. I waved. The boy waved back. Then the mother forced him back again. The lights seemed dim. The air a bit musky. The man who once sat beside me spoke to a woman across the aisle, and Sharon put some earphones into her ear and closed her eyes. She still held my hand.

I thought about Stephen. When he was young he showed very little interest in science or math. He was his mother’s son. They discussed sports and literature and films at the dinner table. And when I arrived home late after running errands for Dr. Rosenberg, I would watch as Sharon and Stephen slept, an open book usually splayed across her chest. I wondered why I never told her how much I loved this image; why I never told her how I covered their bodies and retired down stairs and slept in front of the television because I couldn’t sleep with them? I should have acted. I should have climbed in bed with my wife and son instead of disappearing downstairs.

I stood up and said, “Excuse me. I’ve got to go to the bathroom.”

“Are you okay?” Sharon asked.

The man in the aisle seat didn’t say anything as he moved and gave me access to the airplane aisle. As I walked down the aisle towards the bathroom, the flight attendant that greeted me at the door bumped into me abruptly, excused herself and moved on down the aisle.

I didn’t say anything. Panic overwhelmed me. I wanted to run or leave. I wanted to be alone.

There was no line so I quickly entered the small bathroom, locked the door and sat back against the cool, plastic seat. I tried to practice the breathing techniques I had

just learned, but my heart raced and my breaths came quick and short. I tapped my feet against the floor and played with the razor disposal compartment. What was going on? Was I having a heart attack? That was the worse dream I had yet, and it bothered me that it felt so real. Whenever I got this nervous I liked to go through a series of small ticks and routines that calmed me down. I buttoned and unbuttoned the top button on my shirt, unbuttoned and folded up my shirtsleeves only to unfold and re-button them again. I stood and cupped water with one hand and rubbed it along my face and hair and the other hand, but then I was too tired to dry out my hair and the spot on my collar that looked like a ring of sweat. I took out paper towels and rubbed them vigorously along my collar. Water dripped on my pant leg. I rubbed the paper towel along my leg. Tiny bits of paper towel stuck to my leg so I got hot water and rubbed it over the spot of paper towel, and then rubbed more paper towel over my leg.

Then I sat back down. What was I doing? Maybe I was going crazy?

As I sat down I felt something in my back pocket. It was an envelope. But why hadn't I noticed it before? Where had it come from? I opened it and inside was a small index card with the name of a hotel in Nassau written on it and the name Whitely. I looked for more information in the envelope, some sign or clue, but it was clean. There was nothing.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

“Mr. Price? Are you okay?” It was the flight attendant again.

Then came another voice: “Jen? Jen honey, are you okay? Please answer.”

How long had I been in here? I threw away the envelope and put the index card in my back pocket. Then I flushed the toilet, turned on the faucet and threw more water on my face.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. I opened the door.

“We were worried.”

3

As the plane approached the islands, I watched a deep purple morning sky roll out along the horizon like the petals of a New England Astor. The sky was thick and alive as it bellowed out and across the sky. Remnants of inky blue clouds smeared into the heavens and the land quickly approached. Nassau lay below me, and I wondered what it had in store.

According to one of Sharon’s books, The Commonwealth of the Bahamas was an English-speaking country that consisted of more than two thousand cays and seven hundred islands. “Baja Mar” was what Christopher Columbus named the islands when he arrived on San Salvador in 1492. The Islands of the Shallow Sea. The name seemed appropriate as Providence Island, where Nassau and the airport were located, seemed to hover just above the water’s surface. I could see the dark contour of palm trees and short buildings floating on the reflection of the purple sky. As the plane lowered onto the island, I held Sharon’s hand, but after a few moments she moved it away. We both stared out the window, and I wondered if she felt the same dread I did at that moment. I had nearly convinced myself that this trip would end in total failure. Over and over I rehearsed what I would say when Sharon discovered there was no Dr. Rosenberg, no benefactor, no money, and definitely no answers.

The airplane wheels touched the ground with a squeak, and as soon as we landed, the passengers on the plane seemed to instantly come alive. It was as if someone had released them from a spell. At that same moment Sharon and I both sank back into our seats and stared straight ahead. That's when I realized she brought her worries with her too. We waited for the other passengers to leave before we summoned the energy to stand up, grab our carry-on bags and follow the others into the surprisingly modern airport. On my way out, I winked at the flight attendant I believed had given me the envelope and hotel instructions, and thanked her for her help, but she pretended I was another customer that had believed something special was exchanged between the two of us during the short flight. I wondered, for an instant, whether she really gave me the envelope when at last our eyes met and she gave me a knowing smile.

"Looks like somebody made a friend," the man that sat next to me at the start of the flight said as he slapped my shoulder. I thought I was the last person to leave the plane. He must have gone to the bathroom while the rest of us gathered our bags. I held up my hand to show him my wedding ring, and he said, "Don't worry, I won't tell," and laughed. I moved to the side and let the man disappear into the crowd of passengers herding towards the notorious Bahamas Customs line.

I had been waiting in line to have my passport stamped for only a few minutes when my turn came. During that time I had looked for the man who slapped me on the back, but he was nowhere to be seen. The couple in front of me walked away from the passport official smiling, so I should have felt a certain bit of confidence that I would leave the booth smiling as well. I had been warned that the Bahaman passport officials were notoriously strict and abrasive, and that the lines could last up to an hour. Well, the

line moved briskly, so I hoped that the other myth was equally untrue. I should have walked confidently towards the open window the moment they left, but I froze. I didn't know what to do next or what signal to follow, so I did nothing. Sharon stood at the front of a different line. The people behind me urged me forward, but I couldn't move. Finally, the woman inside the booth stuck out her head and yelled, "Next!"

I approached the window apprehensively, like I had approached police officers all of my life. My throat would close up, my pulse would increase and I would hold my breath. Each time I ran into a police officer, I had anticipated that somehow I would be arrested or find myself in trouble, and this conclusion was always completely unfounded. I almost never did anything illegal, and the police would have no reason to find me troublesome. Nonetheless, the panic always gripped me. As I handed the passport officer my credentials, the panic returned. I had hoped Sharon would accompany me to the booth, but unlike most married couples, we no longer considered ourselves a package. We were no longer 'one', at least according to Sharon.

The woman that took my passport had soft looking hands and an equally soft face, but the wrinkles that creased from the corners of her eyes and encircled her lips revealed her age and her smoking habits. I wondered how long it had been since her last cigarette break and hoped it hadn't been too long. She looked at it for only a quick instant, then stamped it quickly and handed it back. Throughout the entire one-minute process she hadn't spoken a word. I looked over at Sharon, who had already walked through the passport check and now stood in the Customs line ready to pick up her bags. I hadn't expected a second line. The relief I felt after getting my passport stamped lasted only moments because now I felt I had a legitimate reason for fear. Inside my wife's lap top

computer I had manually inserted the remaining parts of the Rosenberg Six hard drive like a common smuggler bringing contraband into a foreign country. What if they turned on the computer? I had assumed it still ran efficiently, even with the additional part stored inside its plastic covering, but I didn't test it before we left. Why hadn't I tested it? I walked through a tight aisle towards my luggage, half expecting someone to wrestle me to the floor, handcuff me and take me away to some sort of isolated prison or worse. It seemed like I took each step slower than the one before. I crept closer and closer towards where Sharon waited impatiently without knowing what I suspected. Someone had to be in the airport watching us. Perspiration leaked through the armpits of the button-down shirt I wore. Why was I going so slowly? I looked to the right and left, took two or three steps and then stopped and let the people behind me pass so I could see their clear intentions. What if one of the passengers didn't grab a suitcase or bag? What if someone was waiting for me to step outside the airport to arrest me or take me somewhere to figure out what I knew?

“Excuse me Sir. Would you follow me please?” I looked at the airport security officer and felt almost relieved. He led me to a roped off area with yellow painted feet on the floor, two chairs and a table. I wanted to hand over the computer right then and be done with entire affair. I was sure they'd let Sharon and I board a plane that departed immediately as long as we agreed never to return again. “Sir, are you alright? Would you like to sit down?” he asked. I didn't know how to respond. Why had he brought me over here, if not to sift through my bags and take the computer hardware I had smuggled through customs?

Another security guard approached and handed me a cup of water. I thanked him and tried to drink the water, but I could barely breathe. “Just calm down. There you go, have a drink of water.”

The first security guard who approached me felt the pulse in my neck and said, “You gave us a scare. For a minute there we thought you were going to have a heart attack. Are you with anyone?”

I pointed towards the passengers huddled around the luggage conveyor belt. The other security guard said, “That’s alright, I know who you’re with,” and then brought Sharon back to my side. By the time Sharon approached, a crowd had gathered around me and several security guards were directing the people to disperse. I could hear her talking to the security officer, but I couldn’t make out what she said. My head started to spin, so I lowered it onto my arms, which were crossed on top of my bent legs. Sharon rubbed the back of my head. They had asked what might have made me so excited she told them we were on our honeymoon and, with her best flirtatious, Midwestern accent, said, “Wouldn’t you be excited?” The men sort of laughed and the tension at that moment lifted.

“You don’t mind if we look through the bags just in case?” one security guard asked.

“Of course not, here. I’ve got a purse and some books, and I think Jen here’s only got his lap top, though I don’t know how much time he’s going to have for work. I plan on being outside every day.” I didn’t look up while the two security guards looked through Sharon’s purse.

“Could you turn the computer on for me please?” a guard asked. I didn’t move and Sharon continued to rub my head.

“I think it might be out of juice, but I’ll try,” she said. As I sat with my head between my knees I could hear the sound of my computer turning on. I was relieved. It worked. “Will that be all? We’ve got a pretty busy day and I’m afraid my husband might need a brief nap. That is if he can summon up the strength to finally leave the airport. How about it honey, you ready to go?” I had never heard her talk like this before, but I knew it was only a show. She had to have been furious on the inside.

“Absolutely. I hope your husband feels better.”

“He will. Thank you.”

“I feel bad, how about I help you two out? Where are you staying?”

Sharon hesitated for a moment. It hadn’t occurred to me yet to tell her about the index card the flight attendant, or someone, had given me on the plane. I looked up. Sharon pretended she didn’t hear the question and began escorting me away from the area. The security guard asked again, this time with a bit more of a curious police officer tone to his voice. Sharon and I stopped walking and turned back towards the police officer. I don’t know what she would have said, but she was getting ready to say something when I interjected and said, “Hotel Atlantis Star.”

“I guess I can’t really give you an upgrade so never mind.” Sharon and I both thanked him anyway and walked away both of us a bit upset someone on the island already knew where we were going to stay.

The twenty-minute cab ride from the airport in the outskirts of the city, into the packed two lane streets, gave us time to get better acquainted with the city. It also gave me time to try to explain how an index card with the hotel and a last name materialized in my back pocket. The cab itself was immaculate and smelled new. There was a DVD player and screen that the driver pulled down from the ceiling and displayed some type of R & B concert. As the driver sped through the streets of Nassau he pointed out his favorite eateries, restaurants, local markets and hotels, and provided a brief tour. We drove past the Fish Fry, a semi-circle of small, colorful local restaurants perched on two-foot wooden stilts along the coast. A large grassy area filled the space in the middle of the semi-circle, and fishing boats were docked behind their wooden, art deco facades. The streets were lined with stadium seating for a festival or parade. As we wound through these tight streets the driver pointed out a sprawling open market. I could see casino hotels staggered across the skyline above the rest of the city buildings and side streets that led to unique historical houses and churches. The ride seemed to take forever. Although cars filled the road, the sidewalks were nearly empty. Before we reached the long bridge that connected Providence Island to the small island where our hotel was located, our driver took a brief detour to show us a snack shop that served the best American cheeseburgers and the same church listed on the card the man on the plane gave me. While we rode in the cab, I asked Sharon whether she noticed anything odd about the plane trip. She said the only thing that stuck out was my screaming. I tried to explain how quiet and detached the rest of the passengers were on the plane, but she didn't feel or sense anything unique. It had reminded me, in many ways, of the silence I felt in my home growing up during the last two years of my father's life. I reconsidered

my own ability to analyze and judge my surroundings. Was the plane as mysterious as I had felt, or had I invented it as I had invented so much of my life up to now? No, it had to have been real, at least part of it. I pulled out the index card and showed Sharon, and she agreed that the sudden appearance of the hotel and the name she theorized our rooms were registered under signaled something very strange. While I described the way the small child on the plane looked at me and then was forced to stare straight down without making eye contact, I sensed, somehow, that we were being followed. I asked Sharon and the driver if they noticed any cars following us. Sharon said no, and the driver asked why someone would follow us. Sharon told the driver I was just being paranoid, but I could have sworn someone was there. The driver just shrugged and asked if he could smoke in the cab. I didn't care, but Sharon asked him if he could wait. What I really wanted was for Sharon and our driver to be a little more responsive to my claim. What if someone had followed us from the airport? What if someone had followed us from home? Neither seemed to care. Sharon returned to her focus on the cell phone in her hands, and our driver, a light-skinned man with ashy knuckles and a grey vest jacket and jeans, curled his upper lip around his cigarette and bobbed his head to a song playing on the radio. I stared through the rearview mirror and tried to find the car tailing behind. I couldn't pick out a specific car model or color, or even the voyeurs watching us from one of the cars, but I could feel their presence.

When we arrived at the hotel, I was a little underwhelmed. Based on the security guard's tone, I had expected some sort of island villa and not a standard cement hotel. The cab followed the circular driveway to the front door and a hotel attendant opened our door and asked if we needed help with our bags. We didn't since Sharon had already

begun unpacking and walking to the front door. The front of the hotel opened in a crescent moon shape that hugged the circular driveway. The outside walls were a vanilla-white and the trimming along the frame below the roof and around each window was a gaudy, Atlantic City gold. Two palm trees in four-foot-tall ceramic flowerpots kept watch on either side of the revolving front door, and a new soft blue carpet led to the front desk.

We weren't the only guests in the large, marble-floored lobby. A large family gathered at a round table by a closed bar, their beach supplies sprawled out around them as if they had built a protective wall to keep strangers at a distance. Another African American couple with New York Yankees insignias branding their hats, shirts, and bags stood by a side counter and reviewed tourist attraction options. The rooms smelled strangely like coconuts and sea salt, but the outside hadn't smelled at all like the ocean. I wondered if the hotel used some type of scented candle or spray to add to the imagined tropical ideals of its guests.

"Why is everyone so quiet," Sharon asked. She was right; it was like we had walked into a library.

"This was what it was like on the plane. I can't believe you didn't notice it."

"So you think someone was really following our cab?"

"I'm not as sure about that," I had to admit.

"There's something strange going on."

"That's what I'm saying. How about that guy on the plane?"

"He seemed nice. I talked to him for a bit while you slept. He told me about a church I might want to check out tomorrow morning. If you ask me, he was the least strange thing that's happened over the past few days. I think you're rubbing off on me."

I wanted to ask her how she could possibly think about Church at this time when we had so many more important questions to answer and tasks to complete. I rubbed the lap top computer in my bag and thought about why we were on the island in the first place. We were here to give the person that sent us the letter the last hardware component to the computer I had dismantled and mailed out as part of Dr. Rosenberg's final protocol. We were here to exchange it for money that would keep Stephen safe while we tried to find a cure. We were here because too many connections had been discovered between my former job and Stephen, and I hoped that the man who I gave the computer part to could provide me with answers that could ultimately save my son.

I could tell my silence bothered Sharon, but I didn't know what to say. We didn't have time to argue, and I knew that Church was a non-negotiable side trip we would have to make. "I don't like what's going on. I don't like feeling this unsafe. Why don't we check in and then you go to this outside café and get us some food," Sharon said and handed me a brochure for the café at this hotel.

"What about you?" I asked as we both moved to the front desk.

Sharon didn't answer, but instead gave our last name. The woman at the desk apologized and said there were no rooms reserved under that name. Then I told her to try the name on the index card.

"Ah, the honeymoon suite. We're so happy to have you spending such a happy time at our hotel. Here are your coupons for a complimentary Champaign brunch tomorrow morning." The front desk attendant handed me two coupons and several brochures publicizing couples massage options and other honeymoon services the hotel and nearby casino offered. I could tell Sharon was disappointed, but what could she say.

The surest way to draw more attention to an already strange and awkward situation would have been to ask for separate rooms.

“Can you bring up extra blankets and pillows please?” Sharon asked.

“Of course, Madam. If you have any other needs please don’t hesitate to ask. I just need a credit card for any phone services, the rest of the room has already been paid for in advance.”

“Here you go. How late does the café outside serve food?”

“I’m afraid it closes in only a few minutes. You’re hungry? Don’t worry, I’ll call down to the pool and tell them to keep it open for our honeymoon couple.”

Sharon started to protest, but the hotel attendant smiled and said, “No, no worries. Here you go.” She handed us the key and continued, “Have a wonderful stay.”

When we left the counter, a porter had already gathered our suitcases and the hotel attendant had given him the number for our room. Sharon gave me one key and said, “Go down and order whatever you want, and I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Who could you possibly need to call now? Why don’t you come get some food with me?”

“The Embassy for one thing. I want someone from America to know we’re here.”

“What could you possibly say?”

“I don’t know—something. Don’t worry.”

“Who else? We can’t really call the police. What would we say? And the letter said not to tell anyone else.”

Sharon hesitated for a few seconds and seemed to be contemplating what to say, so I pressed the question, “Who else could you be calling? What’s the big secret?”

“Todd. All right? I told him I’d call when we arrived. Besides, maybe he’s found something else out.” I couldn’t believe she was going to call Todd. Were they closer than I had even imagined when I saw them at the soccer game only a few days before? “Don’t look at me like that.”

I didn’t say anything. “The phone calls won’t take long. Why don’t you order some food and I’ll be right there. The front desk said the restaurant outside by the pool would serve us.”

While Sharon spoke with Todd, I sat poolside at the quaint hotel bar and watched tourists practice scuba diving in the pool. Several clouds sporadically blocked the sun, which apparently was a unique phenomenon for this time of the year in the Bahamas, but the weather was warm and pleasant. On the radio Jimmy Buffet played guitar and sang about Mondays, which added to the overall scene. I felt strangely at ease outside, as if I had been transported from the mystery and anxiety of my trip and had been dropped into my real honeymoon. A young girl with flowered shorts, a tight white t-shirt and tight braids weaved in rows along her head ran over and grabbed my knee unexpectedly. Her mother quickly ran over and grabbed her away, apologizing profusely while simultaneously rebuking her child. I smiled and made a silly face at the little girl and she started to laugh.

A waitress in a soft pink apron and collared shirt handed me a menu and welcomed me to the restaurant. She asked about my wife and I told her Sharon went to freshen up a bit after our long flight, but that I would be ordering for the both of us.

“Would you like to start with a drink or appetizer while you wait? I know how American women can sometimes be,” the waitress asked and I agreed.

“Any recommendations?”

“Well, I like the stuffed breadfruit and conch and crab canapés. You’re in the Bahamas, so you’ve got to try conch sometime.”

“I’ll try to the conch fritters. What’s Kalik?”

“Local beer, you’ll like it. I’ll bring this right up.”

When the waitress left I ran my fingers along the small granules of salt that decorated the plastic table covering. The menu lay face down before me. A large conch shell decorated the bottom of the back cover. Above the conch shell read: *Bahamian history is filled with stories of sea grit and true grit, of desperate deprivation and periodic prosperity, of subjugation and independence, of courage and pride. Nourished and supported by the local catch for centuries, the Bahamians have perfected a spicy cuisine using their traditional conch, grouper, crawfish, pigeon peas, breadfruit, guava, mango and a variety of hot spices. The classic recipes in this menu reflect the tradition and sophistication of the island. Savor the flavors and enjoy the fine family fare.*

I focused on the conch shell. Sharon had told me that the conch shell was one of a number of different species of saltwater snail found in these waters. It could also refer to the spiny shell that the snail used for a home. The animal inside the shell could be eaten raw, grilled or steamed, and often times the shells were sold by local merchants to tourists that didn’t know that transporting conch shells without a permit was illegal. Apparently conch shells are one of the items airport security in England and the United

States confiscate when tourists try to re-enter their countries. As I considered this fact, I reflected on how poorly I had acted when I entered this country. What could Sharon have thought when the security guard tapped her shoulder and told her to return to the security checkpoint? What did she think when she saw me keeled over and hyperventilating on the chair? Todd wouldn't have acted that way. Almost no one would, except perhaps a drug smuggler or a ninety-year-old man.

I looked back down at the menu. Even before Sharon told me this information about the conch while we waited for our flight to leave for the Bahamas, I was familiar with some of the myths and legends. I knew conch shells were placed over the graves in some Caribbean and African communities. I knew they were used in religious ceremonies by Hindus and Buddhists and for other East Asian religions.

Sharon added to this knowledge when she informed me that in the Hindu religion, Vishnu, the God of Preservation, held a conch that represented the life-giving waters of life, and in Buddhism the conch shell was one of the eight auspicious symbols that provided a physical representation of the Buddha's melodious voice and teachings. I had only imagined the conch as a decoration my father kept in our bathroom on the cabinet above the toilet. It represented both a piece of my family's Hawaiian themed bathroom and another wedge my father used to pry us further apart. One morning, when I was seven years old, my father caught me holding the conch up to my ear while I urinated all over the seat and room. I didn't mean to spray all over the room; I was just concentrating on the shell and the noise that I heard. When he entered the bathroom, I expected him to yell at me for the mess that I made and for not locking my door like an adult. But instead he asked me what I heard. I had done this before in class, so I thought I knew the answer.

I told him I could hear the ocean, and he just shook his head in disgust and told me to clean up my mess. I had disappointed him again. As always, I was wrong. Then he took the conch from me and placed it back on the cabinet without ever telling me the right answer.

He never mentioned the event or the shell again. I returned to that conch shell several times over the next few months and wrote down different possible answers in a journal I kept by my bed. Every so often I would re-read my answers and analyze and quantify the answers I had provided. I had planned on showing my father this work when it was complete, but we quit communicating for a while and then he was dead. A couple years after he died I returned to his grave and placed the conch shell next to his tombstone. It was one of the only times I recalled visiting my father's grave alone, and I don't know why I placed this shell beside the flowers and flags and small toys other people in my family had left over the years. For me, the pink noise that emanated from the shell when it was held against my ear became more than the incoherent or unspoken regrets that existed between my father and I. The pink noise became our shared song like epic songs of pasts and histories long gone. It became a symbol of the vastness I had imagined my father and I could have existed and occupied. It was an imaginary existence and stolen symbolism I hadn't thought of for years until I looked at the restaurant menu.

“Are we ready to order, or should we wait for your new wife?” The waitress placed the plate of food and beer before me. I hadn't looked inside the menu yet, but I knew Sharon would have wanted me to order before she arrived.

“No, I’m pretty much ready,” I said and opened the menu. The first item that caught my attention was the marinated mahi-mahi with tropical salsa or the red beans and rice. I asked her which dish she recommended, and of course she said she liked both. “Fine, I’ll take both, but could you bring an extra plate and two waters as well?”

“Of course. You’ll love the tropical salsa that comes with the meal. It’s made with fresh mangos and bananas and a spiced pepper sauce that people seem to really love. I’ll bring this up as soon as it’s ready.”

The moment after the waitress left my table Sharon arrived and stopped her.

“I’m sorry, did that man just place an order for two?”

“Madam? Are you the new bride?”

“New bride? Right, could you read the order back to me?” The waitress read her shorthand and soon realized the entire process would need to be repeated. Sharon asked about how the fish was cooked, when the chef had set up the specials, and whether or not the seafood was fresh. Then she changed the entire order and decided that she would have the Fettuccine Freeport, a pasta dish with scallops and cooked crawfish, instead of the marinated Mahi-Mahi. I didn’t say a word, but wondered if I had ordered the fettuccine first, if she would have changed it to the Mahi-Mahi?

5

Sharon’s hair curled down her back and bounced gracefully on her shoulders when she sat down. She wore a one-piece, lace-frilled white dress that hung low down her back and displayed her strong shoulders and arms. As she sat the fabric strained against her large hips, but complimented her olive skin. I didn’t think she would get dressed up. As she sat down I wanted to feign how little I cared that she just took the time

to call Todd, even though since the day she left our home she hadn't once called me. I wanted to be that strong, male archetype and hero that said, "I know," when a beautiful woman said, "I love you"—But that wasn't me. Even though only moments before I'd been considering the significance of the conch on my father's grave, a pettiness urged me towards a conversation I didn't desire. Stephen should have been my focus.

"I reached the embassy, but only got to speak to a secretary. I told her our names and gave her the hotel we were staying at, but I'm not sure how much help she's going to be."

"What reason did you give for calling?" I asked.

"I told her we were here on our honeymoon and that a man followed us home from the Fish Fry last night and scared us both. The lady told me to call the police."

I took a bit of the conch fritter and offered the last two pieces to Sharon, "You gave it a shot. Try one of these, they're great." Sharon picked up the piece of the beer battered and fried conch, and dipped it into a chipotle sauce that reminded me of Thousand Island salad dressing. What she hadn't mentioned, though, when she returned was more disturbing than the failure to find security from the American embassy. What about Todd? What role would he play in her life or quest? I didn't want to ask what they had talked about, but I couldn't say anything. I couldn't just let it exist, this relationship, this affair. But it wasn't an affair, was it? Had they become something more than friends? Were they intimate? It had only been a little more than a month since Sharon had moved out of our home. Of course, we had been separated from one another for some time before her physical departure. I told myself repeatedly not to ask, not to even

acknowledge a conversation between the two of them took place. But it had taken place, and I couldn't get that truth out of my mind. Finally, I blurted out, "What about Todd?"

"He's fine."

"What did he have to say?"

"He backtracked a bit on his Vice President theory, but he did say someone officially closed your laboratory until Dr. Rosenberg's disappearance could be accounted for," Sharon said as she grabbed my Kalik and drank nearly half the beer.

"I wonder if he's still alive? Anything else?" I asked. I felt like a husband pressing his wife to tell him the details of an affair.

"Nothing much. He mentioned that his friend couldn't meet us tonight, but that we could meet him at the green docks just beside the Fish Fry tomorrow morning."

"Why?"

"He said it might be the best thing to do if we feel we're being followed. Who can follow a boat?" It was a sound enough theory, but it could have also backfired. How would we get away if someone did follow us?

"He didn't say anything else? That's it?"

"Most of it was private. Oh yeah, he mentioned that a guy named Kaku showed up at the lab the last few days asking questions about Dr. Rosenberg, but he didn't seem to have much else. Apparently this guy is some famous doctor from the East Coast. Ring any bells?"

Actually it had. I opened the file "Kaku", but it was entirely coded. I needed to clear my head and focus on translating some of these files. I just didn't have any time. Apparently, Todd had numerous friends on the island and more than a few would be at

the Fish Fry looking out for our safety. I had to admit; I felt more at ease knowing that the benefactor and a local were both watching out for us tonight. But why did it have to be Todd or Todd's friends? I watched Sharon play with her hair and all my thoughts about Kaku or coded translations dissolved. I wanted to find out more about Todd. It was selfish. It was stupid, but I couldn't help it. All I could see was his face. All I could hear was his voice.

“You two seem to be a lot closer than I remember.”

“I'm not getting into this with you,” Sharon said.

“I'm sorry, it's just—I don't know.” I hated that I could never find the proper words.

“Let's just concentrate on helping Stephen this weekend,” she said, and I agreed.

We both picked at the remnants of the appetizers and then I asked, “Didn't you think someone would talk to us by now or give us some sort of sign?” The question didn't make sense out loud, but it sure made sense in my head. I just felt like there would be someone waiting for us with a sign at the airport. I imagined that we would step down the ladder, pick our luggage from the pile on the tarmac, and then take a limousine especially sent for us to a rendezvous with the man that sent me the letter. Instead I felt like I was on a vacation with a relative that could barely stand my presence. I was beginning to wonder if this wasn't all just a big mistake. Maybe none of this had anything to do with Stephen at all.

“Maybe we made a mistake,” I finally said.

Sharon leaned closer to me and said, “It isn't a mistake.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

She took the cell phone she had played with at the US airport and placed it on the table. Was I supposed to pick it up? Was I supposed to look up a number? Why didn't she say anything?

"You don't recognize this phone do you?" She picked it up, touched a button and held the screen up to my face. It was a picture of Stephen. "It's Stephen's phone." I took the phone and looked at the picture.

"How do you know it's Stephen's?" When we first discovered Stephen he had no possessions—no wallet, no keys, no cell phone. All of these items were missing and were part of the reason we suspected some sort of foul play. But there was no medical evidence to support this claim.

"It's his, and the batteries are fully charged."

"Where did you get it?" I asked as I verified it was his phone by searching all of his numbers. Most of them I didn't recognize and didn't even really look like numbers at all, but finally I found my office phone—a number that only he and Dr. Rosenberg had.

"A man gave it to me in the airport," she said as she looked around the bar.

"What do you mean he 'gave' it to you? Why didn't you tell me?"

"On my way to the bathroom an innocent-looking guy whispered my name and told me not to be afraid. When I balked a bit and started for the bathroom door, he held out Stephen's phone and said 'look'. What was I supposed to do?"

"After what's happened over the last few weeks you decided to follow some strange guy who gave you our son's phone? What were you thinking? Why didn't you tell me?"

“I’m telling you now. He said he knew what really happened to Stephen and said I needed to follow him to get the truth.”

“Tell me you didn’t,” I said.

“I didn’t have a chance. I heard a noise and turned to see where it was coming from, and when I turned back around the man was gone.”

“Why wouldn’t you say something?”

“I wanted to figure it out myself. Besides I don’t even know how to act with you. What are we? We can’t even have a normal conversation.”

“There’s nothing normal about this—about any of this. We should have gone to the police from the start and told them the truth,” I said.

“What’s that? You won’t even tell me the truth,” Sharon said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I can always read you when you’re lying,” she said, and she was right. “And we just don’t have time for you to panic or cause any drama.”

“Drama? What am I, a child you can’t talk to? First a man gives you a phone that disappeared the day our son nearly died, and then the guy who gave you the phone is probably killed or who knows what? What’s so dramatic about that?”

“That’s what I’m talking about. No one said anything about murder.”

“I could have done something,” I said. “I’m not useless.”

“Look at this.” She handed me the phone.

“What am I looking for?”

“Look at the names on the calendar for the day Stephen got sick,” she said. I opened the calendar function on his phone and navigated to the date almost seven months

ago. When I opened the specific calendar box it read: *Meet Dr. Rosen n Mat to discuss partic in proj.*

Before I could answer, a slightly built man in a beige banker's beige walked down the steps and straight for the two of us. Sharon quickly grabbed Stephen's phone from my hand and stuffed it in her purse. I looked at her and asked, "What is it?" She nodded her chin towards the man and finished my bottle of beer.

As he approached he seemed to work the room like a politician at his own fundraiser. I wondered when a mother from the crowd would hand him her baby for a clever photo opportunity before he continued on his tour of the room. He seemed to be everyone's close friend, and I had to admit, he seemed like a jovial enough character. I even liked his linen suit, which fit snugly around his bulking frame, and his small smile that seemed disproportionate to the rest of his hulking face.

"Good Morning," the man said as he extended a hand and I shook it. "Mr. Jenson Price I presume? I hope your trip's been pleasant so far." I looked down at my shirt, half expecting to find a nametag stuck there still from a conference I'd attended months before. I just couldn't figure out how everyone seemed to know my name.

"Do we know you?" Sharon asked.

"Oh, pardon me. You must be Mrs. Price? Might I say, you are absolutely lovelier in person. Your picture doesn't do you justice."

"Sharon. And you still didn't answer my question."

"My apologies. I'm from the American consulate."

"You're an ambassador?" I asked.

“In a way, I’m the cultural liaison for VIPs. My name’s Franklin Charles, but you can call me Frank. The moment we were informed by airport security that you arrived on the island I was assigned to your case.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” Sharon said.

“Many influential people are interested in the project your husband was working on, and since Dr. Rosenberg’s disappearance we’ve kept close tabs on the other members of the project.”

“But I thought their identities were a secret? Besides, I was just the secretary.” It was the first time I had said the words myself. Before that I had called myself the lab assistant or technician or even personal assistant. But I had learned that the term secretary carried with it a negative or limited connotation, among peers and men in general, that signified that I performed basic or menial tasks and had no real understanding of the daily happenings or scientific information. I had hoped the man would leave me alone. He stared at me for a while, smiled and then added, “My job is to make your stay as safe and enjoyable as possible. I see you two are settling in nicely.”

“Actually, we were just talking about...” I said until Sharon interrupted.

“Why exactly are you worried about our safety? Is there something we should know?”

“No, no,” Frank said with a slight laugh. “I’m more like a hotel concierge than a police officer or even political magistrate. I can set you up with hard to reach tickets, hotels, and VIP parties, banquets— that’s my specialty. But since you opened this topic, someone told me you were bringing something into the country to give to a man you are meeting tonight. Is that true?”

I looked at Sharon as Frank cleared his throat a couple times. I wanted to ask her how Frank knew about our meeting or how he knew about the computer part. I wanted to tell her that maybe it would be easier if I simply told this man about the phone and the computer and or son. Weren't we considering going to the police, and wasn't this man the closest thing to an American police officer we would find in this part of the world?

Before I could say a word, Sharon interrupted: "No, I'm afraid it's nothing as cloak and dagger as all that. We're just taking a honeymoon we couldn't afford when we first got hitched."

The waiter brought the rest of our food and the man excused himself from our table, "I'm in a hell of a hurry, but I want you to call me later today at the office, maybe I'll have something more to help you go on – you're staying here right?" I nodded.

"Under what name?" he asked

"Price, of course," Sharon said.

I looked at her but didn't say a word. That wasn't the name we registered under. We had decided to use the name printed on the index card I had received on the plane ride over. What had Sharon suspected? I watched her eye the strange man as he stood and started to walk away. Before he left, though, a bartender came to our table and told us that the cab would be ready to take us to the Fish Fry at 6:30 that night.

"Getting a taste of the local cuisine. That's a great idea, but no need for a cab. I can have my driver stop by at 6:30 to provide a much more elegant ride for two young kids obviously madly in love."

"That's okay," Sharon quickly said.

“It’s no bother, really, I insist. I’ve got to see another American couple across the street at the casino a little before 6:00. After I see them I can have my car swing by and take you wherever you want.”

“No, really. The bartender was misinformed. We’re going to the Fish Fry tomorrow. Tonight I’m just way too tired,” Sharon said.

“Yeah, I think we’ll probably stay around here tonight. We’ve got a really early day tomorrow,

”I see,” he said and handed Sharon his card. “Call if you change your mind.”

6

I’ve often felt completely inadequate and afraid. Each moment I found myself forced to confront strangers or ideas I hadn’t rehearsed or worked through on my own for several hours or days, I felt like I had the first time I had sex with Sharon. It was a feeling no person could forget or wanted to relive again.

I had known that intimacy would eventually need to be part of our relationship, but I only felt comfortable with my ability to kiss, and perhaps my understanding of what to do with my hands. I never had a father who tutored me about women or the ways of pleasing a woman physically. Nor did I have an older brother, or uncle or friend. We didn’t have the Internet at that time, and porn magazines or movies were more difficult to get your hands on then than guns and drugs are now. So I knew where to place my hand on a woman’s cheek and neck when I kissed from television and rated PG movies. I understood that after a few moments the hands needed to move slowly down a woman’s shoulders, behind her back and then rest tenderly on her butt. I understood, after days of practice on stuffed animals and imaginary women, how and when to rotate my head

during a kiss to maximize the moment and intensify the touch. But I had no concept about what it meant to have sex.

I had sex for the first time more than one year after Sharon and I had our first date. Her parents were out of town, and we ‘did it’ in her mother’s new bed. Since that time I asked Sharon why she stayed with me, and she said she liked the wait and liked that I was a blank slate she could mold and teach solely based on her needs and body. Of course, those needs were only met many months into her often times rigid and detailed lessons. That first night, though, that magical night when all the stars aligned, when young boys leave the room sprinting down the street to tell their friends they had finally conquered the Big V—It was perhaps one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. At first I even thought the moment I ejaculated was considered sex. Today this seems unimaginable considering the Internet and movies and health education courses, but I truly didn’t understand. We helped each other, awkwardly, out of our clothes. The entire time I felt self-conscious and stood as one piece of clothing after another was dropped on the floor. Then we crawled into her mother’s bed, careful to slide underneath the neatly creased new sheets. And then we lay there. I had kissed her hundreds of times and had felt every part of her body, but since I thought I knew where the kissing would lead, I didn’t want to start. I wanted to leave. I wanted to run away. I wished it didn’t have to take place, that it wasn’t so important. She made the first move and gently touched my body. Then I pulled her on top of me, but instead of having sex I retreated back to the dry humping technique we had used for so many months and within an instant I ejaculated on her stomach and on her mother’s new sheets. At that moment I felt satisfied. I had completed the deed. It was done. I could move forward, and we could be a couple that

said we had sex. But it wasn't sex, and after a few moments Sharon explained and soon realized she not only had to make the first move, but she had to teach me all the rest of the moves that were possible.

As Frank disappeared through a poolside gate, I drained the last spit from my Kalik bottle and felt like I had the first time I had sex. I was completely inadequate and too ignorant to participate any longer in this game. The clues I had at one time felt confident I could piece together now seemed hopelessly disconnected and incomplete.

“How did he show up so fast?” Sharon asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I just called them a few minutes ago. There's no way he could get here that fast unless it was planned in advance. He knew we were coming.”

“What should we do?” I asked.

“We've still got to go to the meeting, but right now we need to get more answers and stay away from that man.”

7

I walked quickly away from the ocean and towards our hotel when Sharon called. There was urgency in her voice I had learned to recognize, but when I looked at my watch it showed we still had a few minutes before the cab was supposed to arrive. I wasn't going to shower or change for the meeting. What would it matter? I had already been fired.

Over the past couple hours Sharon and I had decided to follow two very different courses in our search for answers. I had decided to sit calmly alone on the beach and

concentrate on the files in my head. There were simply too many files, and I lacked the experience and confidence necessary to access the ones I needed and to organize them into one coherent narrative. They were a jumbled story without a start or an end, and I couldn't figure out how to put them together. I felt overwhelmed and useless. As I sat on the warm sand, I buried my hands into cooler layers of white sand and watched the gentle waves slowly wear away the Earth. After a few minutes, without thinking about anything other than what I could sense, I traced the numbered sequence Bergie had engraved in his arm into the sand. What could this mean? Then I sat there in the sand and watched the waves while I traced my finger along the numbers in the sand over and over and over. A combination? No. File number? No. Lottery? Keno? Size? Dimensions? I must have sat there tracing the numbers in the sand for nearly an hour before I finally gave up.

So I decided to abandon the numbers for a while and focus on deciphering the "Kaku" file. It wasn't a very long file, and once I used the cipher I had already recognized for Dr. Rosenberg, the translation only took a few moments.

The file outlined information about a Harvard theoretical physicist named Dr. Kaku who Dr. Rosenberg had employed at the start of the Rosenberg Six project and at different junctures throughout the process as a consultant. Only Dr. Rosenberg knew about his assistance. There really wasn't much background on Dr. Kaku. I guessed that Dr. Rosenberg didn't need to record any unnecessary information. What the file did outline were Dr. Kaku's theories about something called a wormhole. He said that a wormhole was a theoretical structure that formed a connection between two separate points in time or regions in the universe. He even discussed how a wormhole could theoretically form a connection between two dimensions. An example of a wormhole,

according to many theories recorded in the “Kaku” file, was a black hole. By definition, a black hole was caused by a collapsed star and the gravitation force caused by the collapse was so immense that light couldn’t even escape the grasp. As I translated the file I considered the different movies and television shows about black holes. The pre-Eisner Disney version was probably my favorite. As illustrated in the movie, the theory that viewed a black hole as an example of a wormhole predicted that if a person fell into the black hole, even though that person should have been mathematically crushed by the forces present, because of the wormhole she would be sucked down a tunnel, known as an Einstein-Rosen bridge, and shot out a “white hole” in a parallel universe or at a different point in our universe. To more fully explain a wormhole, Dr. Kaku said, “The simplest way to visualize a wormhole is to think of Alice’s Looking Glass. Anyone walking through the Looking Glass would be transported instantly into Wonderland, a world where animals talked in riddles and common sense wasn’t so common.” I wondered why this file existed. Was Dr. Rosenberg looking for a way to jump through the looking glass? Was the Rosenberg Six Project involved somehow with Dr. Kaku? When I reached our hotel room I shared all of the information from the file with Sharon, and she seemed as clueless as I was about the subject.

During the time I was at the beach contemplating wormholes and inter-dimensional travel, Sharon spent her time using the laptop I brought to search the Internet for answers. After I told her about the “Kaku” file I asked her about her own search.

“I wanted to find out if there was a reason why we met here,” she said. “And you know that we both forgot?”

“I can only imagine.”

“We forgot about the Bermuda Triangle.”

She read to me a brief excerpt about a German historian and scuba diver who recorded the exact locations and value of deviations in the magnetic fields off the coast of Nassau. He recorded magnetic anomalies and their locations near several blue holes, which apparently were just underground caves. I had wondered if Dr. Rosenberg’s consultant had recorded these same anomalies. According to the German historian and a professor from Princeton, these magnetic anomalies could have been the result of micro-wormholes opening and closing. The original scuba diver and subsequent researchers had acknowledged that the wormholes were probably only a giga-fraction of a square inch in size “the number one preceded by 33 zeroes, preceded by a decimal point”, and could only be recognized mathematically or theoretically. They were real and could, subsequently, be evidence of larger or more substantial wormholes, which could provide some evidence or reasoning behind some of the mysterious happenings around this area, often times referred to as the Bermuda Triangle.

Neither one of us knew what to do with any of this information so I filed it away with hopes that our meeting tonight would somehow bring us more answers. The fact that Sharon had even mentioned the Bermuda Triangle sort of made the whole venture even less believable, and more like something most people would think I’d be involved with. I really hoped it was just a happy coincidence, but my hopes had a tendency of never coming true.

The coded letter that accompanied the Nassau tickets stated, “All will be told real soon.” That was exactly what Sharon and I expected when we arrived early to the Fish Fry meeting.

The exact location for the meeting wasn't clear, and for the past few days we had felt that at different times someone had followed us or kept a watchful eye on our every move. Also, the Consulate had overheard our destination, and we didn't want to meet him again, so we had our cab driver use a scenic, meandering route from our hotel to the Fish Fry. Also, once we arrived at the area known as the Fish Fry, we had the cab drop us off at a location filled with tourists and locals so we could try and mix into the crowds and disappear. We were looking for “the blue table”, which could mean anything. There were more than fifteen restaurants that lined along the shore in the so-called “Fish Fry”. Most of the clients on a Saturday night were locals or tourists dropped off earlier that day by a cruise ship and on their way back to the docks. Sharon and I really stuck out. When we arrived we tried to pretend we were tourists lost and wandering about. We wandered for some time between restaurants, along the coast pretending to collect coconuts, and then eventually we showed up to the meeting place. It was a small fish shack called “The Blue Table” nestled between two large fishing boats and the sea. We would have never found it unless Todd's friend, a large, local man that spent his days carving wooden mugs for tourists, hadn't sought us out and told us about the restaurant. It was a quaint, isolated eatery that truly only locals would know.

When we sat together on one side of a white picnic table that faced the one open door, neither one of us knew what to say. This was the main reason we had arrived. No waitress ever approached. In fact, we hadn't seen one waitress or bartender since we had

walked through the dimly lit door. I wondered if it was open at all or if we were sitting in an abandoned restaurant. As we waited I tilted my head backwards against the wooden wall behind. My headache had returned. I tried holding my nose with one hand and blowing through it as a way to relieve the pressure, but it didn't work.

“What do you think he'll look like?” Sharon asked.

“I just hope someone comes,” I said. I swallowed a yellow pill I'd found in the bottom of an old pair of pants. I had hoped to save the pill, but I couldn't stand the pain any longer. I wished the guy would show up soon.

“Do you think Dr. Rosenberg's really dead?” Sharon asked.

“I don't know. I guess, yeah. Where else could he be?”

“How do you feel about that?”

Since Dr. Rosenberg had disappeared, and more precisely, since Todd had told Sharon and I Dr. Rosenberg was dead, I hadn't given the reality that the person I spent the most time with over the past five years might be dead enough concern or thought. So many things had happened since, that I hadn't considered Sharon's question. How *did* I feel?

“I feel bad for his family.”

“Do you think you'll miss him?” Why was she asking these questions? I had no idea. I banged the back of my head gently against the wood wall behind me. Each time I hit my head against the wall the impact jarred my brain and momentarily relieved the pain. And then, instead of a slight jarring and muffled sound when my head hit the wall, I heard the sound of a small river rushing by from somewhere in the distance. When I tried to look I couldn't see anything. I tried to hit my head against the wall I thought was

behind me, but it hit nothing. My headache was gone. Slowly I gained the ability to see, and found myself transported inside a large cave. The smooth ceiling illuminated by a torch lodged in the ground disappeared in the distance and darkness above me. Where was I? The air was cool and moist. I couldn't tell if I was walking towards the wall or if the wall was moving closer to me, but either way the torchlight stayed close. When I got closer I could see the numbers Bergie told me, the same number I'd traced over and over in the sand, now engraved with rock into the cave's wall. Surrounding the numbers was a mathematical or scientific proof I recognized. I read each number and letter to myself, but it must have been from a file whose password had long been forgotten. As I moved from left to right along the wall I noticed that there were several notations scribbled along the outside of the proof like some sort of frame. And that was when I remembered the password. The first word at the top read: *Stephen's Rosenberg Proof*. This was the proof Stephen had memorized for Dr. Rosenberg, but why was it on this wall? Where was he? I tried to scream his name, but no words came out. I tried to reach out my hand to carve a message on the wall, but I couldn't move the arm. In fact, the arms weren't even mine.

“Jenson!” Sharon yelled, and I opened my eyes. I was on the ground of the Blue Table restaurant with my chin pressed against my stomach because the back of my head was wedged against the wood wall. “It's getting worse.” She grabbed a napkin from the table and patted it along a cut I had on the side of my head. I got off the floor at the same moment when a man in a blue, button-down shirt and blue jeans approached. He was short with bulky, bowed legs and big feet. Nothing about him looked proportional, yet at the same time there was nothing about him a person would remember the next day –

other than he looked a bit odd. But you couldn't put your finger on exactly what that meant. He walked straight up to the two of us and spoke:

“Mr. and Mrs. Price?” he asked.

“We thought we had the wrong place for a second,” I said.

“It doesn't open up until late. I thought we could use the privacy.” As he spoke the corners of his lips twitched.

“And you?” Sharon asked.

“Neville Vaught.” He shook Sharon's hand and mine with equal firmness and then got right to business. “Is that the computer?” He grabbed the computer with both hands, but Sharon quickly grabbed it from the shorter man and held it close to her chest.

“You should have most of it. This is what you need,” I said as I took the computer from Sharon. Then I slid open the compartment on the back of the laptop that was missing small screws and pulled out the hard drive component.

“Let's back up a second,” Sharon interrupted. “We need some answers.”

“Of course. What is it you want to know?”

“Who are you?” She asked.

“I work for the Benefactor that has financed the Rosenberg project,” the man said. He spoke in quick, tight bursts I barely understood. I needed longer sentences and explanations. I wished he had talked a bit more. I sensed that he was in hurry, as if he were a salesman and I was one of his smaller customers. He had to meet me to pick up a few small orders, but essentially I was a small stop on his way to bigger corporations or clients. All he wanted was the computer, and the quicker and easier it was for him the better. I didn't think Sharon would allow the conversation to go on like this for much

longer. I tried to think of questions, but I couldn't think of anything to say. Only moments before Neville arrived, I had thought of thousands of questions, but as always I suddenly went mute.

"This is all that is left?" Neville asked as he held the hardware component up in the light. "Doesn't seem like much."

"That's not yours yet. I still want to know why we're here. We could've sent you that piece through the mail like all the rest. Why in the world did you make him bring it to you? And for that matter, why am I here?"

"Off shore accounts are harder to trace from Nassau."

"That's it?" Sharon asked. I felt the same way too. It seemed so little.

"This offers a bit more privacy. Plus, we might still need your help."

"It doesn't feel private," I said. "Before we left I watched a man in a black robe break into my home, and I know it had something to do with this project."

Neville's entire demeanor changed. For the first time he seemed to think before he spoke and looked straight at my eyes. "He didn't notice you were watching?"

"Tell him about the Consulate," Sharon said. Then she proceeded to give Neville a brief inventory of each time we had been followed or approached over the last few weeks. She told him about the airport search and the unannounced visit by Jake earlier that day while they ate lunch.

"We've had people watching out for both of you since the day Rosenberg was found dead. You are not in any danger. As for Jake, he's essentially harmless. He's a bit of a religious nut, but usually he's motivated by greed. I'm sure he's probably working for a competitor. "

“Competitor for what? We don’t know the business you’re in or what the project’s all about. Hell, we don’t even know the Benefactor’s name,” Sharon bluntly asked. “I’ve got to stand up.” She stood up from the picnic table and walked towards an open window that looked over the ocean. Several fishing boats swayed along the waves.

“Is it the Vice President?” I couldn’t believe I asked the question.

“I can’t talk about that.”

“Well what can you say?” Sharon asked without even turning around.

The short man moved closer to Sharon and I when he spoke, “What do you two think this project’s all about?”

“We don’t know. That’s the problem,” Sharon said. “It doesn’t seem like anyone knows.”

“I know it’s not polymers or an alternative energy source, though I’m certain that’s a possible by-product. Sometimes I imagined it was for the military in some sort of way, but I really don’t know anymore. The big question is how was Stephen involved?”

“That’s right,” Sharon said. “What did you do to our son?”

“I can only address a few of your concerns, but rest assured, we did nothing to your son. As for the project, you’re partially right. In some initial stages it focused on how polymers burned and on alternative energy sources, but it isn’t some sort of military weapon. It’s pure science and focused on what we call hyperspace. Don’t worry, I don’t really get it either. That’s why I can’t really explain it. What I will say, though, is that within the last couple months Dr. Rosenberg utilized the information gathered from each of the other five researchers on this project, and made some sort of discovery. He felt it was so important that he risked scientific isolation and unemployment when he accepted

an invitation from the Bohemian Club to present his findings to the group this summer. We don't know the substance of Dr. Rosenberg's presentation, but we do know it had something to do with the energy spikes that he discovered occurred with surprising frequency near this area. Dr. Rosenberg stated that he had figured out when and where the next energy spike would occur—somewhere on this island in less than two days. And finally, that Dr. Rosenberg never got the opportunity to give his presentation because he was killed and all of his materials were stolen.”

I wanted to ask him about Kaku and the number. I wanted to discuss Rollo and the Black Robed Man, and ask him about the time we have left to find the energy spike, but none of that mattered right now. The first thing I needed was to help him reconstruct the computer and then get money for my son. Then I could find answers to the questions.

“We'll meet tomorrow because my people will need to put this computer together and make sure we don't need any passwords. If there are any questions or we need a password we'll need Jenson again,” Neville said.

“You never answered my question—Why am I here?” Sharon asked.

“You know your husband. As brilliant as he might be, he still needs a guide. Besides, you are the cover he needs, and you've already used it once. This would make a nice honeymoon.”

I wondered how he knew so much. Then I asked, “What about the funds?”

“We've set up a trust in your son's name from an anonymous donor, but we'll finalize it after we've put the computer together and retrieved the lost files. We'll get together tomorrow.”

“Sounds fine to me,” I said, but Sharon would have none of it.

“No, it’s absolutely not fine, damnit! We’re going to need a little more assurance than that.”

He pulled a computer out of the satchel he carried across his left shoulder and opened up a file. “Sharon, I expected nothing less from you.” He frantically typed for several minutes and then flipped the laptop so that it faced Sharon. “Satisfied?” I looked over her shoulder and read the basic text. It was a bank transfer notice for two hundred thousand dollars into our bank account. I wanted to ask how he had our bank code, but why would I have wanted to know? Sharon nodded, and Neville continued to speak, “That number will be tripled the moment we verify that the computer works and that the lost or coded files can be translated. We know about Jenson’s hidden talents.”

Neville continued, “My Company is holding a pro-am golf tournament and gala tomorrow night.” He handed Sharon two tickets. “These normally cost \$5,000 a piece. Please attend the gala, and then right after it we will talk and complete the deal. The approximate time that the energy spike will occur is only twelve hours after the gala. I need to find out the purpose for this spike and how to find it before then. I’m hoping that the information is on that computer.”

“And if it’s not?” Sharon asked.

“You’ll still get your money, but none of us may find out the complete story of the Rosenberg Six Project. Please, this is one of the most important projects in the history of mankind. We need your help. If you know or learn anything else about this project, let us know at the meeting tomorrow.”

I didn't like how Neville Vaught approached the entire meeting like a business transaction. It seemed too impersonal and cold.

Dr. Rosenberg had many faults. He had never considered the consequences of his needs, actions or the results of his experiment. The project took precedence over everything else, including my family. But at no time did he approach it as if it were a job. It was a passion for Dr. Rosenberg. Even though I had never known the purpose for the project, because of Dr. Rosenberg's emotional appeal and dedication, I had always felt that the project was something important and good. Now it seemed that everything I had identified myself with or as was now gone.

"I'm exhausted Jen. Let's go home," Sharon said when she helped me stand up. After Neville left we stayed. Instead of working on organizing and translating more files in my head or analyzing the clues we'd gathered that day, we both sat on the dock outside the empty restaurant and watched the moon as it reflected off the still ocean. It looked like ice spreading out towards that the horizon and the heavens were split in two—one half floating on the water below and the other half spreading to the corners of the universe I could see.

When we left the docks we walked along a dirt path that led between two "Fish Fry" restaurants towards a bus stop on the other side of the road. The grass field in between the restaurants and bus stop was filled with locals and tourists listening to an outdoor acoustic band play Nirvana songs to Caribbean beats.

"Are we still meeting Todd's friend tomorrow morning?" I asked.

"Let's call him when we get back and see if he'll take us diving."

“Maybe we could check out the blue holes where the German historian you researched discovered the deviations in the magnetic field. At least it will keep us busy until the party that night.”

Suddenly Sharon stopped, and I stepped on the back of her heel. Before I could ask her “What is it?” I looked straight ahead and understood. We’d just run into the Consulate.

“Glory be, if it isn’t my two new VIP’s from America. Good evening,” said Jake. His voice pretended surprise, but he had known we would be here, didn’t he?

“Hello Mr. Consulate,” Sharon said.

“Jake, please. And don’t you look a vision of beauty tonight? So I see that despite what you said, you still decided to take in a little local flavor. I’m glad. This is something you wouldn’t want to return to home without experiencing at least once. What delicacy did you try?”

Until that moment I had forgotten that we hadn’t eaten dinner. Originally we had expected to eat at the Blue Table, but it turned out to be an abandoned restaurant. I didn’t know what to say, but luckily Sharon gave Jake a couple of lies and had remembered the name of a restaurant we had passed earlier that night. He asked if we would like to visit his favorite spot for a drink, but we told him we were tired, which wasn’t a lie at all.

“Well then, since you took a cab here undoubtedly, you must allow me to give you a ride back home.”

“That’s okay, we want to take the bus.”

“No, no, no. Now this I cannot have,” Jake said. Then he text messaged something in his cell phone and a few moments later a stretched Lincoln town car pulled

up next to the three of us, and Jake ushered us inside. There were two long seats in the back that faced each other like the seats in a small limousine. Sharon and I faced the direction the car moved, while Jake sat across from us, facing the back of the car. The moment the car moved all of the doors were electronically locked and Jake began asking us about our lives. He asked about the wedding and the reception, about Stephen and our jobs. When he learned I could garden, he asked for tips that might help him with the fruit trees outside his bedroom window. The entire time, Jake kept the conversation focused on small talk about our personal lives, likes and dislikes. It felt like the first few rounds of a heavy weight boxing match, at least the one match I watched with Sharon and her father on what was supposed to be my bachelor party. It seemed like Jake was jabbing lightly across our perimeter to find weaknesses he could exploit, and to keep us backing up and on our heels.

“Where are we going?” Sharon asked after Jake told his driver to make a quick turn at the end of a dark street. I hadn’t even noticed we weren’t taking the simplest route home. Our ride out to the Fish Fry wound so many times and backtracked that my sense of direction, what little sense I had, was nearly gone.

“I want to show you something. It will only take a moment.” The car crept slowly around a service station and onto a gravel road that led towards what appeared to be a jungle or forest. I grabbed Sharon’s hand and she didn’t let it go. The driver accelerated the car as it hit the entrance to the thick forest. Tree branches and palm leaves whipped the side and top of the car like the rotating rags in an automatic car wash. It didn’t look like we were going anywhere as the car rocked and clunked through potholes and over exposed roots that cut across the gravel road. Jake knew we had lied to him earlier. What

if he was mad that we had lied? What could he do? He was a member of the American Embassy. He had said it himself...he was a glorified hotel concierge, not a killer. But what if he was Neville's competition? How important was this project? What if it was more important than any of them had even realized? What then? What if Neville was wrong and this man wasn't some harmless religious freak. I looked at the man before me. He held his long frame in a much more fashionable and dignified manner than Neville did. They were nearly polar opposites in every way, yet I didn't trust either one. I tapped the balls of my right foot against the floor. What had I gotten Sharon into? I looked past the man that smiled and stared at Sharon and watched the gravel road illuminated by the car's headlights. The forest disappeared. There didn't seem to be anything around—no trees, no rocks, and no houses. We had somehow found a road in the largest city on an island that seemed more like a desolate road in Kansas than one hidden in the flattest part of the Bahamas. Finally, the car stopped. Jake pushed open the door and held it open, a signal, apparently, that he wanted us to get out.

I didn't move.

"Please, I want to show you my favorite spot. You'll love it."

"We're really just tired. If you don't mind..." I said.

"I'm really not feeling very well. If you could please just take us home," Sharon added. I didn't know if it was a lie or the result of the bumpy car trip and lack of food and sleep.

"Some fresh air will do you good," Jake said as he stepped out of the car, gingerly grabbed one of Sharon's hands and basically pulled her from the car. For an instant I

considered staying in the car, but then I too stepped into the dark, desolate night and waited for whatever Jake had planned.

When I stood up I saw the most breathtaking sight I had ever seen. We were parked on an isolated, flat cliff that hung over the ocean below and was surrounded on three sides by nothing but waves. The city and its lights and distractions were somewhere in the opposite direction, beyond the forest behind us.

“It’s absolutely amazing,” Sharon said.

“My father and I camped on this sight when I was very young. It was one of the reasons I took this post in the first place. Go ahead, I’ll wait in the car. This is a spot for lovers. Let me know when the two of you are ready to go.”

I wondered if we had somehow misjudged this man, whether our paranoia had tainted every experience we had and every person we met. Sharon and I walked away from the Consulate and his car, which both blocked the only exit from the cliff. A small boulder stood alone near the far edge, so Sharon and I sat close together on the boulder and watched small birds swirl up and down and around the cliff on air currents we could barely feel. It looked like they rode the wooden horses on a merry-go-round as they repeated the pattern. The night air helped my headache. It smelled fresh and clean. Because the ocean water was so still and the night sky was so clear in the distance it felt like I was surrounded by sky, like I was a star or in space. It reminded me of the feeling of being in an IMAX theater and vertigo causing the loss of balance for a split second. Occasionally a star would appear to fall from the sky and dissolve into the reflecting ocean horizon. Sometimes a fish or dolphin would break the ocean’s clear surface and send ripples through the reflected sky. All my worries faded away as I stared straight

ahead. I let go of the quest and my past, and I gently rubbed the small of Sharon's back with my right hand and held her hand softly with my left.

Sharon softly kissed along my neck and moved to my ear. Then she whispered, "I still don't trust him." Then she rested her head on my shoulder. We stayed like that for a while, neither one of us really wanting to return to Jake's car or continue our search for clues. But this wasn't a vacation. This trip wasn't about the two of us. I leaned over to Sharon and whispered, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the Black Robed Man before. I just didn't want to scare you. Listen, I spoke with Rollo that same day. He's involved too." Sharon started to lift her head from my shoulder and speak, but I told her not to move. "Shhh. He's watching." Then I told Sharon about Rollo and Bergie, about the dreams and how they connected somehow to Stephen. I told her about the conversation in the church and the crystals we both wore around our necks. All of the information I had bottled inside me about the events and people and mysteries I'd uncovered and that still puzzled me flowed freely from my mouth, and Sharon listened quietly to it all. Then she lifted her head and startled me with a long, open-mouthed kiss. "We need to go."

When we returned to the car, Jake had moved to the front seat with his driver and was now smoking a clove-scented cigarette. He apologized for the detour and expressed his hope that the view was worth the lack of sleep. We both thanked him, but asked if he could take us directly home. We had hoped there would be no more detours, and there weren't. The rest of the ride was quiet and uneventful. Jake smoked in the front seat and we tried to stay awake in the back. As we drove down the two-mile road that led to our hotel, though, Jake finally spoke:

“You know, of course, he’s just using you?”

The question seemed to come out of nowhere, and neither Sharon nor I understood what he meant. Sharon asked, “Excuse me?”

“Your Benefactor. Neville. He’s using the both of you.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” I said.

“You two aren’t here on any honeymoon, even though I believe you two might still be in love. You’re here to give something to Neville. What did he promise you?”

Sharon and I looked at each other. We were both scared, and for one of the first times, neither one of us knew what to say. We couldn’t lie our way out of this situation, but we couldn’t tell him the truth.

Jake continued, “Your son, right? He promised he could save your son. You know he can’t. Only God can save him now.”

“What do you know?” Sharon snapped. I watched straight ahead as the car kept moving towards our hotel and tried to urge it to move faster.

“I know I’m probably Stephen’s only hope. If you want your son to live, you need to tell me what you know about the Rosenberg Six project and what you gave that man.”

“What are you, some kind of spy or something? How could you save our son? What, with more money?” Sharon asked.

“This project is an abomination, and I’m helping someone stop it before it causes irreversible damage for us all,” Jake said matter-of-factly as he continued staring straight ahead and gave his driver directions to the back of the hotel.

“So this is all just about some religion? Can we please just get out?”

The car stopped in the circular loop just outside the front door of our hotel and behind a blue cab. I tried the door handle, but the doors remained locked.

“I’m not some religious nut. I’m sure that’s what Neville said, but I really can help your son. I just need what you gave Neville. If you don’t believe me, next time you see your Benefactor ask him about the Red Curtain Hangar. Make him show it to you.”

“Can we go?” Sharon asked.

“Just think about it. I can be reached at this number,” he said and handed Sharon his card.

Then he said something to the driver and the doors unlocked. Sharon and I both quickly got out of the car and started towards our hotel lobby door. I wanted to get as far from Jake as I could. Before we got too far, though, Jake popped his head out the window and yelled my name, “Jenson!” I turned around. “I’ll be seeing you!”

10

The Sunday morning after our meetings with Neville and Jake began later than Sharon and I had planned. The night before we had called Todd’s friend and set up a time, just before dawn, to meet him at the docks down the street from the Fish Fry district so we could possibly go for a dive. It was his idea originally, and we needed to get away from all the different people on the island and gather our information, not to mention our strength. Besides, we wanted to see if there were any truths to some of the myths about strange anomalies that surrounded the waters in this area.

I woke first and immediately noticed the electric alarm clock on the table between the two full-sized beds blinking at 12:00 pm. The power must have flicked on and off sometime during the night. I picked up the blue jeans crumpled in a heap beside my bed

and grabbed my cell phone from the front pocket. It was already 8:15. We were supposed to meet Todd's friend almost an hour ago. I looked over at Sharon lying diagonally across the bed on her back, wrapped up like a mummy in her sheets. The corners of her mouth curved up into a natural smile as she slept. The light t-shirt she wore to bed was pulled down and displayed her long neck and strong right shoulder. I wanted to climb in bed with her. I definitely didn't want to cause her to wake.

The number for Todd's friend was written on a piece of paper next to the alarm clock, so I grabbed the paper and my phone and quietly walked into the hall. He picked it up on the first ring:

"Sharon?" The man asked. He had a slight English accent. I wondered if he was really from England or if Todd and all of his friends spoke with a fake English accent. I already hated the guy.

"No, this is Jenson."

"Thank God. I thought something had happened to you. A couple more minutes and I would have probably called the police. What happened?"

"We overslept."

"You're kidding? Do you know what kind of danger you're in? Todd would have killed me if I let something happen to you the first night. When are you guys coming?"

"Sharon's still asleep. Yesterday was a full day," I said as I paced up and down the paisley green carpet outside my room and looked through the hallway window outside. It looked like it was going to be a gorgeous day.

“That’s probably for the best. So when do you want to get together?” Todd’s friend asked, and I didn’t really know. I wished I hadn’t called, but I knew Sharon would start the day off in a fit if I didn’t take care of this before she woke up.

“How about around 10? Same place?”

“Sure. I’ve got someone I think you should talk to,” Todd’s friend said.

I paused for a few seconds and thought about the first thing Todd’s friend had said over the phone. I asked, “Just what kind of danger do you think we’re in?”

“The police found Dr. Rosenberg’s body an hour ago,” he said. I already knew about his death, but it surprised me that the police had only now found the body. I must have paused longer than I realized because Todd’s friend asked, “Are you there?”

“What’s that got to do with us?”

“Whoever killed him tortured him first. They were looking for answers, and you’ve got all the answers hidden inside your head. They’re going to come after you next, and if they can’t get to you, they’ll use Sharon.”

“What are you talking about? Should we leave? Should we go to the police?”

“You should be safe for now, but the police on this island aren’t going to be any help.”

“Why?”

“Don’t worry. Sometimes I talk too much; Todd’s just got me a bit wound up about you and Sharon. You know, you guys must be really close friends. I’ve never heard him so concerned about someone else in my life. Anyway, I’ll see you both soon.”

After I hung up, I walked down to the hotel lobby to get breakfast for Sharon and me. I thought back to my conversation with Todd’s friend and just couldn’t believe his

nerve. I needed to walk around a little bit. When we checked in they told us there was a full breakfast provided each morning in a banquet room near the indoor pool. I also wanted to check to see if there were any open rooms for our second night. Sharon had made it very clear when we checked in the first day that she desired two rooms. The request stung at the time, and I hoped that when I reached the front desk the hotel wouldn't be able to help. This was a popular hotel on this island, and all of the other rooms were, hopefully, already reserved.

The banquet room smelled like bacon and Belgian waffles. Small clusters of families ate around messy tables and went over their plans for the day. At a few of the tables couples sat across from one another and silently drank coffee and stared outside. There didn't appear to be any sort of structure to the line. I had expected that it would begin orderly at the right and move counterclockwise from trays and utensils, past the fruit and pastry section, past the cereal and warm plate sections, and end with the omelets and Belgian waffles. But as I waited my turn, small kids and adults alike moved in and out of the line at random, grabbing what they wanted and leaving without any waiting or set protocol. It bothered me. I wanted to stop them all and explain how if we followed the proper format for buffet lines it would run smoother. It was the same way I felt when I drove along a two-lane road on the way to the college and cars in front of me stopped at flashing yellow lights to let cars turn across our lane. It stopped the entire flow of traffic and became a flashing red light rather than a yellow one. I had always wanted to knock on the doors of the cars stopped in front of me and explain that civil engineers purposely placed a flashing yellow light at this intersection rather than a flashing red light for a purpose.

As I made my way through the buffet line with two plates in my hand, the people that jumped in and out of line were really starting to make me angry. When a young little girl jumped in line before me and grabbed a piece of bacon I told her sternly to get in the back of the line. Her mother grabbed her hand and told me that I should be ashamed of myself and walked her back to their family cluster near the front door, but not until she grabbed a handful of bacon and gave me an angry look.

What was I so angry about? It was a free breakfast. Why would people jumping in and out of line bother me so much? I felt ashamed. I didn't understand. I quickly filled both plates with the food that was within arm's reach, grabbed two orange juices and began to leave the room. Before I left I drank one cup of orange juice and threw it in a trashcan near the back corner. When I threw the empty orange juice container in the trash, though, several small fruit flies flew out a few inches and then settled back into unseen crevices of the trashcan and trash. Instantly the name "Fruit Fly" opened a Rosenberg Six file.

Most of the file was coded, but as I had become better at translations sometimes my mind seemed to translate some of the files on its own like the auto-correct function on a computer. I grabbed a handful of napkins from a table nearby and a pen that was connected to a "Breakfast Customer Remarks" box, and I started to record the translated points I believed could be important from the file. While I sketched the file imbedded in my mind, a hotel attendant who had seen the fruit flies quickly grabbed the bag, apologized to me, and then took the bag outside.

The file began with some background information, which was unique for the Rosenberg Six files. Most of them built on previous information, and since the files

weren't organized sequentially or chronologically, the holes that emerged or the lack of connection often times confused me more than the lack of knowledge. This file, though, discussed how this was the inevitable third step towards some sort of final conclusion. The first step had been the discovery of a polymer substance that would not burn or give off toxic fumes when exposed to high temperatures. There was a side note that the Benefactor for the project sold this technology to the major worldwide airlines and NASA, but that wasn't the purpose of its initial discovery. Apparently the researchers were hoping to work with energy sources that were exponentially more powerful than the most powerful high-energy particle colliders being used or constructed at this time, and they needed a new kind of protective gear.

I didn't understand what this had to do with fruit flies, so I skipped forward through more background until I reached some information about what they called the next natural step in the project – an alternative high energy source. This was what I had always considered the true purpose for the Rosenberg Six Project, and it made sense that the CEO of a large energy conglomerate would be the Benefactor for such a project. But hadn't Neville and others told Sharon and I that this wasn't the goal for the project? There were side notes in this file that discussed the various failed attempts to create what they called the Big Bang power needed for the project's ultimate goals. There were also some notations and pictures that described the biology and atomic make-up of human beings, but the discussion concentrated on subatomic particles I had never heard of before. It said something about how they were experimenting with ways of combining the energy from the largest high-energy particle colliders with the inert energy stored at the core of the human body. I didn't really understand the incomplete notes, and it didn't

help that I couldn't translate the entire file, but this information seemed to provide the first direct evidence that the Rosenberg Six Project might have at least been working on theoretical experiments involving humans.

Finally, halfway through the entire file I found the section that discussed fruit flies. I backed up a little to find the background for the discussion. It seemed that the coupling of high-energy sources with the inert energy of the body through a complex process that infused particles at the subatomic level had a secondary effect, at least theoretically. According to mathematic computations far beyond my education, it seemed that this process could transform a substance or entity from, say, a one-dimensional form to a two-dimensional form, or from a two-dimensional form to a three-dimensional form. More importantly, this power source could change a three-dimensional form into one of several multi-dimensional forms. And, according to this file, one member of the Rosenberg Six Project spent two whole years working with various forms of three-dimensional products and species to see if the coupling of these two energy sources within a multi-celled organism could result in a physical change. This member of the project understood that fruit flies had been used for genetic experimentation for years with tremendous success, so he utilized the same species for experiments on changes in dimensional form. There were no notations on the success of the project.

I re-read the information I had written on the napkin, and it didn't make any sense. What had I been working on for the past five years? Was the entire project really focused on traveling between dimensions? Wasn't that something you'd read about in a Star Trek novel? It wasn't something that was real or that hard science decided to invest millions of dollars to research.

The mother of the little girl I had chastised earlier walked by while I struggled to make sense of the “fruit fly” file and called me an “asshole” under her breath. The day was getting started on a great note already. I checked my cell phone. We only had an hour before we were supposed to meet Todd’s friend. I needed to go wake Sharon.

11

We had arrived at the dock where Todd’s friend said he’d meet us just as the local church clock chimed ten in the morning. It was a calm day and most of the fishing boats had already left for sea leaving the docks fairly empty. The smell of fish filled the air and sea gulls and other birds hovered around, waiting for the next boat to arrive. I felt surprisingly alert and well, but Sharon looked drained and tired. Dark bags had begun to form below her eyes. The extra hour of sleep hadn’t helped, and I wondered if she was coming down with a cold.

When Sharon first contacted Todd’s friend, it was his idea to take us out on an early boat trip and perhaps a friendly dive. He had said he would take us diving a mile off the coast of Nassau, and even if we didn’t feel like scuba diving, the trip itself would provide us with time away from the people that might be following us on the mainland. I hadn’t fought the idea, but I had never been too excited about relying on another stranger, especially one associated with Todd. But Sharon believed in Todd, probably more than she believed in me, and this friend of his provided a sense of security I couldn’t provide as we delved deeper into this strange world.

Last night we decided together, based on some of the information we had gathered and learned over the past day, that we definitely wanted to dive. Sharon contacted Todd’s friend again and asked if we could scuba dive some of the underwater

caves that surrounded the Bahamian archipelago. She explained that she was fully certified and that we wanted to see for ourselves if the so-called “blue holes” existed. I expected the educated man that spent most of his life on the island to laugh at our request or, at the very least, give some indication that our mission was laden in hyperbole and childish conspiracy theories or science fiction. Many conspiracy theorists over the years had sought the “blue holes” because they believed them to be portholes to parallel universes or to the lost city of Atlantis. But to his credit, Todd’s friend belied no such belief and told us he would ready the boat and gear himself if that were what we really wanted.

When we arrived at the dock, Todd’s friend greeted us both with a big hug and kissed the side of both of our cheeks. He was a slender, old man with long eyelashes and a soft voice. He seemed tender and nice, not at all the person I had imagined hating when we spoke on the phone. Sometimes I had to strain to hear him when he spoke, and he refused to give us his name. Next to him stood a man he thought we should speak with before we decided to go on our dive. The man had short legs and a long torso, and I wondered why he hadn’t given his name either. He spoke with a heavy British accent that I could barely understand. Todd’s friend told us that it was getting late for the best dive spots, and that the information this man could provide might change our minds.

We walked across the street to an abandoned building and listened to the man talk. He was an experienced scuba diver and historian who had come to the islands nearly two years ago to study the anomalies and magnetic shifts along the so-called Bermuda Triangle. The government had issued him a diving license for those two years because he had pretended to be a treasure hunter looking for sunken pirate ships and gold.

Sharon and I listened as the man explained his discoveries and confirmed the existence of each anomaly. Then he asked, “What will you do when you find these anomalies?”

It was a question Sharon had asked me, and I had asked myself, and I could never give a clear answer. It was more of a need to find something that we could say we discovered for ourselves and that was actually real. Everything else up to this point had been based on hearsay or files I had accessed from codes that I had hidden in my mind. There were no hard facts we had shared. It would have been a way for Sharon and I to convince ourselves that all of what we had learned and what we had experienced had been, in fact, real.

Sharon answered, “I would know it was real.”

“I understand, but you wouldn’t see anything. There is no real to be seen. There is only evidence and mathematics,” the man said.

“Then they aren’t there?” I asked.

“Oh, the anomalies exist, but they aren’t what you think they are.” He didn’t wait for a response, and we didn’t give him any. Sharon and I were both too confused, so he continued, “For years people have used these anomalies and other findings around this area to ferment theories that the American AUTECH naval base on Andros Island, not far from here, is some sort of underwater Area 51, and that these wormholes are the way aliens have come in and out of this world. They’ve even decided that some underwater structures prove the lost city of Atlantis was once located here. But these are just myths the government likes to allow to fester.”

“AUTECH?” I asked.

“The Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center. It provides the real proof that there is no conduit between dimensions or planets beneath the sea. The multi-billion dollar photography and acoustic system the navy employs to ensure no submarine activity occurs this close to the US seaboard would record anything that took place in these seas.”

“I never thought I would find Atlantis. What about the wormholes?” I asked.

“Well...” the man began and then hesitated.

“Just tell them,” Todd’s friend said.

“Tell us what?” Sharon asked.

“The anomalies aren’t wormholes, they are the residue of wormholes.”

“You mean like exhaust?” Sharon asked.

“That’s exactly what I mean. The government is conducting hyperspace experiments using alien technology. That’s right. They’re creating some form of wormhole. Each time they try, the pollution caused by the experiment is dumped into your “blue holes”. This is the biggest example of ocean pollution in the world, and it’s all covered up nicely because it’s the Bermuda Triangle.”

“I don’t know about waste or huge government conspiracies. My goals are a little less ambitious. I just want to find a way to help my son. Does any of this information help me with that?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t we be able to see this waste if we dove?” Sharon added.

“That’s the problem. You wouldn’t know for years, and by the time you figured it out the pollution you’d been diving in all day would cause irreparable damage.”

“Besides,” Todd’s friend added, “you already found out what you wanted to know.”

“What you should be doing is figuring out how to get on that base. That’s where the real experiments are taking place,” the man said in his thick British accent. “They could come at any time. I should go. Good luck.” Then the man disappeared quickly out the door and sprinted down the road.

I turned to Todd’s friend and said, “And I thought I was paranoid.”

“Can we really take anything that guy said seriously?” Sharon added.

But before Todd’s friend could answer, we heard something outside. It sounded like an empty soup can kick along the street. It was probably nothing, but we had to be sure. Todd’s friend put his finger to his mouth and pointed towards the stairs.

12

Sharon and I watched Todd’s friend from the second story window of an abandoned office building as he walked onto the side street. The ocean breeze whistled by like the high-pitched crescendo of a violin solo, and Sharon and I held each other’s hand. Todd’s friend told us not to move. He had said, “No matter what happens you need to promise that you will not follow. If something happens it is God’s will. Find a safe place to hide out and call Todd. He can help.” Then he left so he could find out if someone was waiting for us outside.

It was hard to understand why Todd’s friend thought we would listen or believe in the man he brought to speak with us. He seemed so over the top and unbelievable. But one word he said had opened up a file I didn’t know existed – “hyperspace.”

As I watched Todd’s friend light a cigarette and sit on the stone steps, I tried to reconstruct the facts and figures in yet another one of the Rosenberg Six files. According to several communications I had translated for Dr. Rosenberg to an unknown recipient,

for an extended period of time he employed a consultant who he paid out of his own pocket to provide expert advice on hyperspace and particle physics. I couldn't translate the large emails between Dr. Rosenberg and the consultant because it appeared to be in an entirely different code, but the translatable parts of the file contained long bits of information regarding various proofs and famous names: Einstein, Hawkins, Rosen and Kaku. I couldn't understand most of what the files said. What did become clear, though, was that the Rosenberg Six project focused on discerning ways to not only prove the existence of hyperspace, which was space that existed in more than four dimensions—it was interested in figuring out how to use hyperspace to travel instantaneously to different parts and times throughout the world. As I reviewed the file, the words sounded so scientific and strange that they flirted at the edges of what I could comprehend.

The consultant had not given his name, but he had spent a considerable amount of time diving off the coast of the Bahamas. Some of his findings coincided with the conspiratorial ramblings of the man that Todd's friend had brought to speak with Sharon and me. The consultant had acknowledged the existence of the micro-wormholes, but he called them residue. He said they could be used to detect the next spike. I wondered if he meant to say energy spike. More and more I was beginning to believe that the energy spike was somehow the answer to a question I still hadn't asked.

“Get back. What are you doing?” Sharon whispered as she grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back against the wall. While I reviewed the “hyperspace” file I had forgotten that we were watching from a hidden spot as Todd's friend surveyed the area. I

had ventured into the window and Todd's friend below could see me. He was motioning for us to get back.

"Has he seen anything?" I asked.

"No, what were you doing? Are you okay?" Sharon asked.

"What if we were supposed to go diving?"

"Shhh. We're fine. Just watch the window. We don't want to be seen."

I wondered if the man Todd's friend brought to the meeting was thinking of our time and needs or if he was hiding something. Everyone else seemed to be hiding something. Sharon elbowed me hard in the side, and I looked outside. A man walked towards Todd's friend. He looked familiar. It was the Consulate. Before we could say anything, two police cars screeched to a halt on each side of Todd's friend. A man jumped out of one of the cars, grabbed Todd's friend's head and pulled him down to the street.

I stood up and started to yell, but Sharon gagged me with her hand and pulled me back into her body. I looked at her face and she held a finger to her mouth and told me to stay still and quiet. Then we crouched low to the ground and watched as a third police officer quickly ran up and injected Todd's friend with something in his neck. Then they picked him up, threw him in the back of the police car and drove away.

The Consulate walked around the area picking up the cigarettes Todd's friend left behind and a piece of his shirt. Then he looked in our direction. Sharon and I moved back from the window and sat still. The crystals that dangled at the end of the necklaces we both wore began to glow, and we both held our hands tightly over the light. When I peered outside, the Consulate was gone. I scanned in each direction, but he was nowhere

to be found. Then I saw him—the Robed Man. He stood in the shadows along a far building.

“We need to go,” I whispered, and Sharon agreed.

We made our way out of the room, crawling, down the back steps and out the back door. Each time the floor creaked or a sound echoed from a seemingly empty hall, I braced myself for a tackle from someone. My head ached, but it wasn't the normal headache. It was pressure built from veins at my temples working too hard. What had I gotten us into? As we approached a back door through some cobwebbed corridors, we hesitated and gathered our breath. Neither one of us spoke until finally Sharon pushed the door gently open. The door opened with little noise. Outside, the street appeared empty. It was a back alley lined on both sides with garbage bags in small clusters. We listened for a moment, but there was no noise indicating that the men had moved on to us after taking Todd's friend. I wanted to cry. I wanted to shrink into a ball and dissolve into nothingness. I wanted, most of all, to go home. I wondered if Sharon felt the same way. I wondered if she blamed me for everything.

She squeezed my hand while she scanned the alley. I looked at the crystal around her neck; it still glowed. The Robed Man was close. A tear rolled down Sharon's cheek. I took two deep breaths and stepped outside the door.

“Come on,” I said, and we both started running towards the coast and downtown.

“Keep running until the crystal stops glowing,” I said. Sharon didn't slow down to respond, but I knew we were both in agreement. She led as I ran in a desperate, awkward pace occasionally tripping over imaginary obstacles and tumbling to the ground. Each time I fell, Sharon came back and grabbed me by the shoulder and helped me back into

the fast pace she desired. After we ran a block down a side street we made it near the coast. We scaled a high fence, jumped to the ground and ran through a fenced in area littered with homeless people. I looked back and there was no one following us that I could see, but I felt they could still be behind. The crystal continued to glow, so we kept running and running. My heartbeat thumped in my chest. I could feel the artery in my neck bulge. At the other end of the fenced in area I tripped over a man hidden beside a palm tree and tumbled a few feet before crawling back to my feet. The man got up and hucked a coconut my way and grumbled something to himself. I wished he had been a little bit quieter. We ducked beneath the fence, ran along the sea wall and then up a small hill and into a new, nicer neighborhood with plastic chairs lining the street. Luckily, there were no people in the chairs. Once we got past the row of chairs we ran into a small, dimly lit restaurant that served conch fritters and rice meals. That was when the crystals stopped glowing and we decided to stop.

“We – need to – go back,” Sharon said while panting.

My side hurt and each breath burned my lungs. I could barely answer, “Go – back – for – what?” A waitress in regular black street clothes came by as Sharon and I collapsed into a back booth and hid as best we could from the front window.

“Excuse me, can we have some water?” Sharon asked.

“Is he alright?” the waitress asked, and I wanted to say no. Instead, I told her I was fine and she brought both Sharon and I some water. “Would you like some menus?”

“Water’s fine,” I said.

“You’ve got to order something. Sorry, you just can’t hide here,” the waitress said, and I wondered how she knew we were hiding. I wondered if this was a normal

occurrence. I looked at Sharon, but she wasn't her normal sure and confident self. Something was definitely wrong.

"We're safe," I said. Sharon looked pale. She vigorously rubbed her thumbs against her fingers. The waitress still stood by our table. I didn't really think we were safe. We were both very much in over our heads and needed to find a phone and call Todd. I couldn't believe I wanted to call Todd, but I did. And neither one of us had a cell phone that worked. We needed someone that we could trust, someone separate from this entire mess. And now that we saw the police working with the Consulate, we couldn't call the police.

"Sir?" The waitress asked in an impatient tone.

"Right. We'll have the conch fritters. You've got those right?" I asked, and of course they had this Bahamian delicacy that somehow had become the staple of my island diet. I just couldn't think of anything else. The waitress walked away perturbed that I had ordered the same thing every other tourist ordered, one of the cheapest items on the menu. I looked at Sharon. She had pulled her knees up close to her chest and stared at the front window. My own hand shook and I tried to wiggle my hand from a limp wrist vigorously like an alcoholic trying to shake away the shakes, but it didn't work.

"They just took him? And we let it happen. I should've done something," Sharon said. I had only heard this kind of talk from her on occasion. Once she screamed in her sleep because she said she killed someone, but when I asked her about the dream she said she couldn't remember it. I had always suspected that, perhaps, she was just a little embarrassed, but of course...I had no proof. Just like I didn't have much proof except for what was in my head for the Rosenberg Six project or the feeling that we had to leave the

restaurant soon. Sharon kept rubbing her thumbs against her fingers and laid her forehead against the tabletop. I didn't know what to say or how to comfort her. We sat there in silence for a while until the waitress returned with the fritters. It seemed like the interior of the restaurant was too bright. The light bulbs had to have been at 250 watts. I couldn't breathe. I watched Sharon silently cry and waited for the crystal around her neck to begin to glow.

“Sharon, can you move?” I asked. We had to move before it glowed again. I couldn't run much more, and the kidnapping seemed to affect Sharon more than it even affected me.

“They're going to kill him aren't they?” Sharon asked.

“What are you talking about? Come on, we've got to go.”

“How could we just leave?” Sharon repeated over and over. She looked past me as if I were not even present as the waitress brought two more waters. We hadn't even drunk the previous ones, but she must have sensed we might need them. I grabbed Sharon by the shoulders and made her eyes focus on mine.

“We need to leave now.”

Sharon nodded. I left more than enough money on the table to pay our bill, and then I followed Sharon to the door. But then she stopped. I tried to open the door for her, but she grabbed my hand.

“Look,” she whispered. I looked across the street and saw the Consulate, walking alone down the sidewalk.

I crouched down in a nearby booth and beckoned Sharon. We were trapped inside an illuminated Petri dish. “That was close. Let's wait until he leaves and then go that

way.” I pointed in the opposite direction. Sharon didn’t respond. “Sharon. Sharon. Are you alright?” I pulled her down onto my lap in the booth and wiped her bangs out of her eyes. She shook her head and looked back at me. Then she brushed my hand to the side and stood up.

“We need to follow him.”

“What are you talking about? Have you forgotten what just happened? I think you’re in shock. It’ll be all right. We’ll go home. I’ll get another job. It’s going to be fine.”

“I’m serious, come on,” she said and then walked out the door. I followed.

“Sharon, we can’t. It’s too...”

“Aren’t you tired of just reacting? I know I am.”

“What do you hope to accomplish? What if he’s just going home?” I asked.

“We’re running out of time, and we need some answers.”

“Fine, which way?” I asked

“That way,” Sharon said. She pointed away from the coast and downtown towards a less active, more isolated district. It wasn’t too far away. In the distance I could see the Consulate turn a corner and disappear. I could barely keep up with Sharon’s steady, fast pace as we wound through streets I hadn’t thought we had visited before, but that Sharon navigated with the ease of a native.

“Where – are – we - going?” I asked, as I stopped. Two cramps cut through the sides of my stomach and I could barely breathe. My knees and shins hurt as I hunched over and rested my hands and upper body on my bent knees. Sharon circled back.

“I think I know where he’s going.” Sharon said and then pointed to her right. It was a church. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I was back at Church. It was like I had started the journey all over again and half expected Rollo to be waiting in a courtyard to give me some sort of cryptic message or clue. Then I pulled out the card the man had given me on the plane ride over and looked at the name and address.

“It’s the same,” I said and handed her the card.

13

Up a small street with only a few neighboring buildings around stood a single-story house with two windows in front on either side of a white front door. This was the church and the place to which the Consulate had led us. All I could think about was what if the Robed Man found us, there would be no place to hide. I looked around, but there were no cars or signs that anyone was inside. I wondered if we had gone the wrong way.

The church’s windows weren’t stained glass. They were painted black with visible blinds on the outside, which seemed a bit odd. Each window was split in two by a thick piece of metal, with two separate blinds pulled down at varied lengths on each side. A cement ramp led up two feet to the front door and small, rounded stones were piled around the raised base of the entire small church. Church of Christ was written on a white sign that hung above the front door. On the one side, I could see that there were three sets of windows, each identical to the two windows in the front. Newly painted white trim bordered the triangular roof with its charcoal shingles. It looked more like a beach rental property than a proper church. The wood planks that made up the outside wall weren’t symmetrical. I wanted to get the string I used for my garden rows and straighten each plank out.

“I don’t know about this,” I said.

Sharon ignored my warnings and crept underneath a window hidden almost completely behind a high standing bush. I reluctantly followed and sat with my back against the side of the church while she peered inside. “What do you see?” I asked in a low, nearly inaudible whisper. She didn’t respond. I stood up and peered through a small corner of the window where the paint had thinned or dissolved. Neither one of us spoke. I stared at the dimly lit ceiling above. White-painted wood rafters spread like planks on the lowest deck of an old boat. White ceiling fans hovered and wobbled above the rows of wooden pews.

The church was very different from the one Sharon and I used to visit when we were married, the church where Bergie first set me out on this journey. There were no religious symbols in this church, no crosses or stained-glass windows or pictures. There were only rows of stiff, wooden pews divided by an aisle that led from the front door to an open area where two candles burned on each side. Thirty or forty people, mostly young men and women, sat watching and listening to a small group of men speak. The back door was visible behind this open area. It almost looked like a dance floor at a wedding, and everything appeared to be freshly painted and white.

In the middle of the main floor a young man kicked his legs slowly back and lay prostrate before the Consulate and two other men, a small leather strap attached around his neck and wrapped around his genitals were all that covered the man’s back. The man clapped both hands and then pulled a Holy Bible from a pouch hanging from his neck and held it with both hands above his head. His nose smashed against the hard wood floor. After a few moments the men laughed and switched places, but only one person wore the

leather strap. The rest wore regular Bahamian street clothes. They appeared to be practicing for something because each person took a turn lying prostrate and going through a series of movements, and then afterwards the Consulate seemed to be instructing them how to do it correctly.

There were at least thirty other people, mostly young men, sitting in the pews.

“Let’s go around to the back,” Sharon said. “Maybe we can hear something.”

I wasn’t so certain we should get any closer to these five men. They appeared to be in a cult or something because in all my years of attending church with Sharon or in watching movies or talking to friends, I had never come across something so odd in my life. What could we possibly learn from these men?

As we rounded the corner, we found ourselves in the middle of the remnants of an abandoned church and bell tower. The tower was nearly four stories high and was topped by a long cylindrical point. Chipped. Cobbled steps led from the side of the tower to a small gravesite overgrown with browning palm trees, bushes and weeds. The visible plots were raised, slightly, above ground and were surrounded by a layer of cement blocks stacked together two blocks deep in a rectangle around each plot and painted white.

The surface of the abandoned church was partially white. It seemed charred and the windows were boarded up loosely like a haunted house. The bell tower was octagonal with one single window built into the narrow cone that was nearly 1/3 the size of the rest of the structure. The top floor had a small circular window in each of the eight sides of the structure, and then there were several other randomly placed windows further down to the ground, each boarded up with frail two by fours. It made the pastel green house much more inviting.

Suddenly, I fell back and was launched into a dark room and another dream. The force of the switch caused my ears to ring. I could tell blood leaked from my left eye, but I couldn't move. Water dripped from somewhere into a pool and echoed. I felt like I was in a cave or tomb. It was damp and lonely. A pain wrenched up my spine, through my head and swelled behind both eyes.

A little boy with wet blue eyes poked me with a thorn-tipped stick and whispered in my ear, "I know who you are. Have faith and you will be saved." My senses of touch and hearing suddenly returned. Men and women yelled, drums beat in the background and a pole I seemed to be hanging from was inverted and placed in a small hole. A girl was untied and thrown onto the worn dirt that circled around us. I looked beyond the girl at the small, animal-skin-covered huts that surrounded us and then at a tall naked woman that sat on a large chair at the edge of the circle. She looked like a priestess.

My eyes unfocused and my headache returned.

When I could see again, I found myself standing against a pole with ropes pulling my arms and legs spread-eagle into different directions. Two men, wearing collars around their necks, walked on all fours and led the girl, now also naked and painted in a solid blue, along a flowered path. The priestess held out her hands and the girl sucked on each finger and licked the tips.

The priestess yelled something I could not understand and clapped her hands. It was a signal of some sort because immediately the two men leapt to their feet and sprinted at me at full speed. Within an instant I stood bare while the two men cut small,

grass-thin cuts along my skin. I wanted to scream, but I didn't know how. I couldn't feel any of the cuts. I didn't feel like the men were cutting me.

Again, my eyes unfocused and all my senses disappeared. When I was young I wondered what the characters on television experienced when the television was off, and at this moment I believed I finally knew how they felt. This feeling of nothingness seemed to last forever.

When I woke I couldn't see, but I could feel several hands rubbing some sort of liquid over my naked body. Teeth pulled my earlobes nearly off and I wanted to scream, but nothing came out. I tried to move my hands or legs, but they wouldn't budge. Drums beat in the distance. Then someone licked the tip of my penis over and over until it stiffened into an erection. I wanted to open my eyes. I wanted to see what was happening. Suddenly something hard and cold clamped around my penis. The drums stopped. The rope around my forehead loosened. My sight returned and I looked down.

There was a hollow clamp that ran the size of the tip of my middle finger to the heel of my hand, shut tight around the shaft of my penis. It pinched my skin and seemed to cut off the circulation to the head. Small whisper thin quills half the size of a fingernail stuck out of the clamp in all directions. I wanted to scream. The priestess led the young girl to me and placed her hand around the quilled shaft. The young girl's eyes were clouded over like a cavefish. I looked beyond her and swore I could see Rollo standing near one of the huts. I could hear his words tell me it would be fine. Then the priestess made two guttural sounds, gripped her hand around the young girl's hand, which was wrapped already around the clamp – then they squeezed, and I blacked out.

When I regained consciousness, Sharon held my arm across her shoulder and had been dragging me to a cellar door behind the church. My arm felt like it was being pulled from the socket and my head throbbed.

“Are you alright,” Sharon asked, “Jenson?”

“I think I see through him,” was all I said. I wanted to tell her that I could see through Stephen’s eyes, but I couldn’t say a word.

“Let’s get inside.”

I nodded. She pulled both my arms over her shoulder and carried me like a fireman through a back cellar door and down some stairs. My stomach heaved and I threw up down the front of my shirt and on her back. She kept moving. I tried to open my eyes to clean her back, and then all went black.

When I woke up I found myself lying on my back on the floor. The feeling of déjà vu overpowered my senses as I ran my tongue along the back of my teeth. The enamel had been worn away. Where was I? I was lost and felt disconnected and distant. I became my own version of Billy Pilgrim and wanted to stay on my back forever and wait.

I knew I had to get up, but each time I returned from one of the dreams it became harder and harder to return to reality. As I sat upright, I took off my vomit-stained shirt and threw it against the wall. Luckily it was a warm day. Then I looked around the room. It was a dark basement cluttered with old grade school desks and years of stored junk. I could barely make out Sharon’s shadowy figure only a few feet away. She held her finger against her lips, but I already knew we had to be quiet. Above us, people were discussing theology as if they were speaking directly into my ear.

“...And let no voice call that cowardice as if it were a weakness for weaklings. It is what I call Martyrdom by pinpricks, where you don’t die. You suffer daily the stings and rocks of outrageous fortune. You bear the cross of the immortal on this plane patiently and lovingly, and in heaven you will have the crown of a martyr, which doesn’t mean someone who invented some kind of persecution...for thee who suffered for the sufferings of the immortal, suffer for the saving of the world.”

I recognized the Consulate’s voice, but more importantly, I recognized the words. This was almost the exact same sermon I had heard in the church when I met Bergie. “Sir, may I ask a question?” A young voice asked.

“That’s why we’re here.”

“I understand much of what we believe comes from the Prophet that Walks Among Us, but at times we also use traditional sources like the Bible and Koran. I guess I just don’t understand what’s right and what’s wrong.”

“Exactly. What parts should we read and what about the conflicts between each book?”

“That is the universal question isn’t it? What is right and what is wrong? In the beginning, God created the heavens and Earth, and Genesis tells us that in six days God turned a formless, empty expanse into a populated world with animals and life and water and stars above—That he created Man in his image and it was Good. Is this right? If we were to compare the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible to that same essential lesson in the Koran, which version would we embrace and use as a building block for our faith and action on this plane? These are the questions you seek?”

“Yes.”

“What you must understand is that these are questions that are only important on this plane or in this dimension. What doctrine you rely upon in this dimension need only to lead us to righteous behavior at this time. Physical and spiritual rules must essentially change upon our transcendence. Our purpose is to ensure that God’s grand experiment on this world remains unsoiled. So it doesn’t matter which doctrine you wish you rely upon, so long as you keep your choice to serve the Prophet that Walks Among Us and the experiment we are all a part of.”

“What are they talking about,” I whispered in Sharon’s ear. I had no idea, but somehow the term ‘dimensions’ had crept up again, now in an entirely new context.

“We should probably go. This was a bad idea,” Sharon said. “Can you walk?”

We moved silently towards the cellar door that led to the back courtyard and stood still. I could hear the shuffle of feet above, and I was afraid they would all soon leave. I raised my hands and shrugged my shoulders to signify I didn’t know what to do, and Sharon understood. She mouthed the word “wait”, so we both stood still and listened.

“As you all know, when a person dies in this dimension their soul stands trial before God in the twelfth dimension we call heaven before they return to Earth or any one of a number of other dimensions and universes around. Our righteous actions determine how long we remain in the presence of God and heaven or whether we become one with him and join with his soul. There are those on this island that are trying to bypass a righteous life and enter and even exit heaven on their own terms. These so-called scientists need to be stopped. They have already sent countless young men through and have corrupted the experiment on another plane. Now that plane must be destroyed.

We cannot let that happen here. Let us pray that God and the Prophet that Walks Among Us can provide us guidance. Please kneel.”

Sharon jerked her head towards the closed door to signal we should leave. After a quick glance outside to make sure there were no people walking around, we both darted outside and ran towards the spot near the church where we initially looked inside. The large bush concealed our presence from anyone outside.

“Were they talking about us?” Sharon asked.

“I think they were talking about Neville,” I said. I stood up and peered through the small corner of the window where the dark paint had faded.

“What are they doing now?”

“It looks like they’re just praying. I can’t see the Consulate. Wait, each one of them is holding something. I can’t make out what it is.”

“We should go.”

“One second.” I pressed my eye closer to the window to try and make out what each one of the members of this strange congregation held in their hand, when suddenly I was staring straight into the eye of another person. I screamed and moved back. The eye still stared at me and something banged on the outside of the window. It was probably the man’s fist.

“Run! Someone saw me.”

14

My warning had been too late. I turned around just as a man walked towards Sharon on the right side of the bush. Suddenly, three more men walked towards me on

the left side. The first man lunged towards Sharon. She stepped to the side and grabbed a handful of shirt, and then she used his own momentum to throw him into the side of the building. I was amazed. I stepped over the man on the ground and moved quickly behind Sharon to the right. There was an open space for a few minutes until two more men joined the three on my left and the one man getting up from the attack. They made a semi-circle around us. The church closed our rear.

Sharon opened her arms wide and lowered her center of gravity. She looked like a basketball player guarding the person with the ball. I tried to mimic her stance. She moved left and right trying to ensure that the first person to charge reached her before he reached me. Two men launched themselves at her at the same time. She moved forward, ducked between them and turned to face both their backs. I put up my hands to protect myself, but before I needed to act Sharon kicked one of the men between the legs and grabbed the other around the neck. That's when someone charged, shoulder first, into my gut and threw me to the ground. I fell hard on my back but instinctually lifted both legs and kicked frantically in the air. I looked over towards Sharon who was biting into the forearm of the man gripping her in a headlock.

I connected one of the kicks to a man's head, but he fell unconscious on my body. As I tried to rock the larger man off my stomach a different man grabbed each of my legs and another man hit me hard twice across the face and grabbed my arms. I looked over towards Sharon, but she lay unconscious or worse on the ground, blood dripping from her mouth and nose. I tried to shake my arms free, frantically thrashing about until, for a moment, my left arm was loose. I lashed it about with no real purpose and yelled Sharon's name. Someone threw a bag over my head and hit me again in the face. I could

barely see or breathe through the pillowcase, but I continued to struggle. Someone kept telling me to quit, to settle down. Then something hit me hard in the stomach, knocking the wind out of me.

When they removed the bag from my head, I found myself in a secluded part of the courtyard behind the church staring at the graveyard and several men. I tried to move, but I was standing against a pole with ropes pulling my arms and legs spread-eagle into different directions. I couldn't move any part of my body, so I scanned the crowd with my eyes and immediately recognized two men in the front as part of the group that had attacked Sharon and me. Where was Sharon? I tried moving my head, but it wouldn't budge. Then I tried to yell, but when I opened my mouth to yell the rope wrapped around my mouth gagged me and I nearly threw up. Fear overwhelmed me. The last thing I remembered was seeing Sharon's body unconscious on the ground.

After a few moments two men with nothing on their bodies except for strange leather straps attached around their necks and wrapped around their genitals dropped Sharon on a worn path that surrounded me. She was only a few yards away. Each of the men moved to one side of Sharon and dropped to his knees, spread their arms straight out towards me, extended themselves forward and lay face down and straight without moving. I wanted to go to her. I wanted to pick her up and tell her everything would be all right. But I couldn't. She looked unconscious. Blood crusted around her nose and throat, but her chest was moving so I knew she was still alive – thank God. I looked beyond Sharon and the worn path that circled around me to an empty chair, and I half-expected to see the priestess from my dreams sitting on her throne, but it was empty. And

then, as if they had all heard a message at the same time, the people turned around and walked away.

I don't know how long we had remained in our frozen pose, but soon the sun set and Sharon and the two men still had not moved. I tried desperately to find some way to loosen the ropes that bound me like a witch from Salem to my sacrificial pole, but I had no success. Small bats swooped in tiny circles collecting insects that had come out at night. I tried to follow their paths, but my head couldn't tilt upwards. I wondered what the men had planned? Why had they suddenly disappeared? What were those two men waiting for? Was Sharon going to be all right? Then I looked across the graveyard and noticed a single tombstone with a cross carved in stone that rose higher than the rest. I focused in on how the shallow moon reflected off the white rock, and then I did something I promised I wouldn't ever do again – I started to pray. The standard Catholic prayers I had pretended not to remember each Sunday I spent with Sharon and Stephen came back word for word. I recited the Lord's Prayer in my mind and focused all my attention on that stone cross. Perhaps God was the answer to Tommy's question? Perhaps that was the only person I could rely on? I continued to pray, over and over, but my mind and body became so tired. I could barely stay focused. I thought about Sharon and tried to think what she would say if she knew I had decided to pray.

For so long I had secretly ridiculed or questioned Sharon's need to pray and go to church. I couldn't understand how she could place so much trust in God, even after we found Stephen in a coma. If I were Sharon, I would have abandoned that trust long before Stephen ever became sick. I would have quit praying when I was nineteen, the day my

best friend died because his family were Christian Scientists, believed sickness was the result of fear and ignorance, and because of this belief wouldn't allow him to get proper care.

Sharon had shared that story with me one morning when I asked her why she seemed so sad. It was the anniversary of his death. She told me that she had backpacked with a boy from Austria through Southeast Asia and they had become close friends. It had happened at a time, she said, after she left high school when she felt particularly alone and lost in the world. She had hinted, at times, that something happened the year before she traveled to Europe, but she wouldn't tell me or anyone else about it. This boy listened and didn't judge her, and helping her to heal her wounds. They had stayed friends after the trip for many years. After a while, though, they lost contact and then one day his family wrote her a brief letter telling her that the boy had died. They offered no explanation and didn't even tell her when the funeral would take place. When she researched the death, she discovered that her friend had contracted a highly contagious yet curable form of tuberculosis, probably from another one of his trips. Because he was a Christian Scientist, or at least his family was, they refused any modern medical care. It was their right, the local emergency physician had said after Sharon had spoken to him about her friend's death. But because it was a contagious disease, the city and state ordered that her friend had to be quarantined from even his own family. Sharon found out that her friend had died alone after a prolonged fight with a curable form of tuberculosis and had been in great pain near the end. I asked her why she continued to believe? Why this useless death hadn't opened her to the possibility that there just might be no God, or at the very least that he might not be a God that cares. I thought I had articulated a strong

argument, one of my strongest considering I could barely put together coherent sentences at times when we were alone, but Sharon said, “That’s not how faith works.” And now I stood bare and alone, completely helpless and without any hope. Was that faith or simply an act of desperation?

A stick cracked in the distance and I opened my eyes. I couldn’t see anyone. Sharon had rolled over, or someone had pushed her onto her back. Her chest rose and fell in a steady, peaceful pace, and she looked more like a woman asleep than someone that had been attacked earlier that day. My mouth was dry and insects had begun crawling along my arms and face. The crystal necklaces around our necks began to glow.

Then I heard a voice: *Hello Jenson.*

I looked around, but there was no one.

Then I heard it again: *And now we finally get to meet.*

Out of the darkness, like a part of a shadow that somehow separated itself and materialized instantly into human form, the Black Robed Man approached. He stood taller than six feet and had straight, broad shoulders and long arms. His cheekbones angled into the light, but his eyes and the contours of his mouth hid behind the shadows.

We have but little time, and yet have so much to tell. He said, but his mouth didn’t move. He walked towards Sharon and the two men and ripped the necklace from her neck.

Tont Crystals. I should have known.

He stood and clapped his hands two times, and the two scantily clad men that had stayed motionless on each side of Sharon scampered like roaches towards a small box to

the side and returned holding items in their hands. They returned to their knees, bowed their heads down and held the items up to the Black-Robed Man. One of the men held what appeared to be my laptop computer. Little did he know that the most important part had already been removed and had been given to Neville. Just then I thought about the party we were supposed to attend that night and our meeting with Neville. I didn't think we'd ever make the meeting, and I didn't think it would probably make any difference. Then I noticed what was in the other man's hand – it was Stephen's cell phone. Why had they taken the phone? How had they stolen any of these items?

The Black-Robed Man threw the laptop against a tree and said out loud, "This is useless. You need to find the other computer. Go!" The man that gave him the computer rose quickly and ran off into the darkness. Then the Black-Robed Man looked through the pictures in Stephen's phone and turned towards me, *You never knew what you had did you?* He asked the man before him, "Is this it?"

He nudged the kneeling man's forehead with his shoe, sending the man onto his back, and asked again: "Is this it?"

"Of course—as you asked." The man moved back on his hands and knees, kicked his legs slowly back and lay prostrate before the robed man. "Is it time?" The man asked as he pulled a Holy Bible from a pouch hanging from his neck and held it with both hands above his head. His nose smashed against the ground.

The Black-Robed Man examined the phone again, held the screen up to the man on the ground and asked, "And these people?"

The man strained his neck up while still lying prostrate, chest down, and looked at the phone. He strained as he spoke: “The Rosenberg scientists, but they all worked alone. Only Rosenberg and this man knew it all. No one else.”

“And even then he knew not what he really had, did he?” The robed man asked in a whisper to himself. “Then it’s over.” He crushed the phone in his hands. Then he gently placed both hands along the side of the man’s head and pulled his head back, straining the man’s neck until it looked like a reptilian spine bulging against taunt skin. “Then you have done enough.” A tear escaped from the man’s closed eyes. His face reddened. He didn’t say a word. “Do not worry, my son, about what comes next, you will see it when it comes.” Then he gripped the man’s chin with one hand and wrenched it back towards his spine with a snap, and then gently laid the limp man’s head back on the ground.

I tried to scream and used every bit of strength I could to pull my head forward and break the rope that bound me. I could feel the muscles, tendons and veins in my neck strain, but it didn’t move. Tears welled up in my eyes as the Black-Robed Man bent down and brushed tenderly along Sharon’s face. I asked God over and over to help. I couldn’t do anything as he brushed her hair back. Then he looked straight at me and smiled. His face looked familiar, like Rollo’s but more defined and lean. He stood and walked towards me in quick steps, stopping only inches from my face. I exhaled as hard as I could through my nose like an animal with no other way to respond. He pulled out a knife and cut the gag. It stuck to the back of my dry mouth and as I spit it out I coughed continuously for a few seconds and nearly threw up. I took in deep breaths and tried to calm myself, but there was no use.

“You must be worried,” he said as he pulled the crystal necklace from my neck.

“No wonder you’ve been so difficult to find. Where did you get this?”

I didn’t answer.

“No matter,” he said as he twirled his finger around my hair. “You must think me the devil, no?” he asked, and then held his robe open with his right and left hand. “The robe is just for effect. It adds theatrics these people respond well to.”

“What do you want?” I asked in a stammering, raspy voice.

“Good. I had heard she did all your talking. Me? I’m just a fellow scientist, much like your Dr. Rosenberg...but I know my place.”

“Did...did you...”

“Did I kill him? Yes...and no. We underestimated his ambition, much like everyone seems to have underestimated you.” I still couldn’t move my neck. I could feel his breath as he spoke and felt at any time he might kill me. The initial fear that had caused my heart to beat fast and every impulse in my body to strain against the ropes and scream out to anyone that could hear had changed into a strange calmness. It was like I was already dead and this extra time had no meaning or impact either way.

“You’re no scientist. You’re a monster,” Sharon said.

“I heard you wouldn’t be able to speak. Interesting,” he said as he rubbed his hand along my sweating face. I wanted to spit at him, but there was no saliva in my mouth. He rubbed both of his hands along my temples and asked, “Do really have the entire Rosenberg Six Project up here? You know your gift is what interests Him the most. That’s why you’re still alive.”

“Who?”

“What about Sharon? She’s got nothing to do with this,” I said.

“Nice touch. I too watch movies and appreciate the cliché, but she stays. She’s more important you know.”

“I know my wife, but who are you?”

“Did you know she had an abortion?” The Black-Robed Man asked. The question took me off guard. “When she was a junior in high school.” I looked at Sharon and couldn’t imagine the devout Catholic I knew could have had an abortion. I don’t know why it bothered me so much. Why should I care? I didn’t even know her at the time, and wasn’t I pro-choice? I told myself it wasn’t true or didn’t matter. “Abortions are actually a phenomena we don’t understand. We don’t really know what happens when they transcend, or if they even do? Maybe there is no soul to transcend, or perhaps there is an entire dimension populated with nothing but aborted souls.”

“What about Stephen?”

“Ah, that one. Now he’s caused us more problems than you have.”

“What do you mean? He’s been in a coma for six months,” I said.

“You haven’t figured it out yet have you? He’s not in a coma, he’s in another dimension.” As soon as he said the words I knew it was true. It was an idea I had been circling around for a while and just couldn’t say out loud. But the idea didn’t make any sense. Stephen was in a coma. I’d seen him. I’d touched him and bathed him and read to him every week since he got sick. How did this all fit together? I looked into the eyes of the Black-Robed Man and wondered if I would ever get the chance to figure it all out.

“You’re close, I’ll give you that.” I wondered if he could read my mind.

“Is he still alive?”

“For now, but we can’t have either one of you ruining The Experiment. I’m sorry it has to be this way.” The Black-Robed Man placed two fingers from each hand on my temples and began to rub, gently at first, and then with more pressure and pace. Heat started to build up. A pain seared through my eyes and brain, up through my entire body. I screamed as loud as I could, closing my eyes and begging God to make it end.

Then something crashed into the Black-Robed Man and he dropped his fingers from my temples. I opened my eyes. Sharon stood and now faced the Black-Robed Man; a broken log lay at her feet. His hand grabbed her throat and lifted her in the air. I knew it would be only a few moments before he snapped her neck.

“That’s quite enough,” said a voice behind me. I felt the ropes loosen around me as I slumped to the ground. “I said that’s enough!” I recognized the voice.

15

Rollo Pierce emerged from behind the post I had been tied to like a guardian angel that had swooped down to battle the devil. And the devil was scared, or perhaps only confused. As Rollo walked slowly towards Sharon, the Black-Robed Man backed up without saying a word. I pulled my legs in because they didn’t want to move on their own and removed all the loose ropes that once bound me. Deep cuts circled my wrists and ankles and my neck moved forward on its own because I had been pushing forward on the rope for so long. I massaged the muscles in my legs and arms quickly because I needed to move. I didn’t understand what was happening, but this was our only chance.

When Rollo reached Sharon’s body he knelt by her and placed a few drops of some type of liquid on her lips. Then he rubbed her temples and turned towards the Black-Robed Man. “You drugged her?” The Black-Robed Man shrugged his shoulders

and smiled. After a few moments Sharon's eyes opened. I tried to get up, but my legs collapsed beneath me.

As she woke, she rubbed her eyes and rolled her head a few times and asked, "What's...who's..."

"You've been drugged. The effects will wear off in a few minutes."

When Sharon recognized Rollo, she seemed confused and scared. Her lips quivered and she looked around as if trying to figure out if what she was looking at was real. She gripped a rock and a stick that were in arms reach and tried to speak, but nothing comprehensible came out. I yelled out, "It's all right. He's here to help." She sat up and looked in my direction, but when she saw the Black-Robed Man she dropped the rock and stick in her hands and scooted back frantically along the ground towards the graveyard. I had never seen her this panicked or scared. I could tell she was crying as she continued to move backwards at a slower pace. I yelled out, "Sharon. Stop!" but it was too late. She backed into the body of the man the Black-Robed Man had just killed. The force knocked her to the ground where her head landed only inches from the man's open eyes. Her scream echoed through the courtyard and sent chills down my arm. I couldn't wait any longer. I had to reach her. The Black-Robed Man hadn't moved and seemed to be taking in the entire scene with amusement. Using a long stick, I stood up and stumbled toward Sharon. When she saw me coming towards her, she stood up and raced towards me, her strength as she embraced me nearly propelled me onto the ground. I buried my face in her neck, holding the back of her head with my right hand, and cried. It was the first time I had ever cried in front of someone else. We pulled each other close and held

each other as if we were the only two people in the courtyard and the entire ordeal was done. But it wasn't, and we were definitely not alone.

Steady, loud claps broke the silence and pulled Sharon and I apart. It was the Black-Robed Man.

I could hear Rollo's voice in my head: *Leave! Now!*

"You know I can't let that happen," The Black-Robed Man said. Sharon and I moved further away from the two men.

Finish what you've started.

How? I asked Rollo without using my voice.

Find Stephen.

"You know the Experiment isn't complete. Are you really going to risk millions of years of work for this meaningless family? It would be like risking the creation of the small pox vaccination because you didn't want to kill a couple of germs. It doesn't make any sense," said the Black-Robed Man. He still didn't move.

"You know what will happen if we touch," Rollo said.

"You're not supposed to be here," the Black-Robed Man said in an exasperated tone.

"I've been here before."

"We can't occupy the same space. It's supposed to be impossible. It's like fighting myself."

"We're two parts of the same energy meant to exist on separate dimensions, but He knows it's not impossible. We're part of him, but separate. I'm my own person."

"That's blasphemous."

“What’s blasphemous is this religion of yours. Does He know you’ve made yourself into a prophet? Does he know about this?” Rollo said as he pointed towards the dead body.

“There’ve been prophets before.”

“There’ve been more garbage men.”

“We need to ensure the integrity of the Experiment. You know that.”

“These two are going, unless you want to end this Experiment today!” Rollo shouted.

“You know it’s too soon,” the Black-Robed Man replied.

“Then it’s settled.” Rollo looked over and then walked towards Sharon and me.

“They can go, but you’re coming back with me. It’s time we joined Him again.”

“It looks like we won’t be able to garden together after all,” Rollo said as he reached out and shook my hand. Before he let go he pulled me close and whispered in my ear, “get Sharon and your son off the island and do what you have to do.” When he let me go he walked towards Sharon and hugged her like a father might hug his daughter the moment before she got married. It seemed odd and out of character, and Sharon’s face showed that it surprised her too. I noticed that before he let her go he put something in her pockets.

“As for you,” the Black-Robed Man shouted in my direction, “He is infinite and all powerful, and you will not live long without aid. When you transcend, you’ll understand today’s mistake.” I didn’t care what he had to say. It seemed like Sharon and I would live. Now we had to figure out how to save Stephen. Then, as if the Black-Robed

Man had just read my mind, he said, “We’ll find him, and when we do he will answer for what happened here tonight.”

16

It was fifteen minutes past eight o’clock by the time we arrived at the banquet to meet Neville, well over two hours later than we had initially agreed. The thirty-minute walk from the Church courtyard and the time we spent in our room cleaning up and changing was a blur. We didn’t speak during the walk home, and as we entered the room I felt like I imagine runners must feel as they near the end of a long race—physically exhausted and mentally numb. I wanted to ask Sharon about the abortion. I wanted to find out why she had kept it to herself for so long, whether or not it was Todd’s or if Todd even knew. I wanted to pull her close to me and tell her that I loved her and that everything would be better, but I couldn’t find the words. As always, the words left me when I needed them the most and Sharon, and I walked beside each other like zombies.

When we entered the hotel room Sharon stepped out of her clothes and asked, “Maybe we should go home?” Her hands shook as she pulled her shirt over her head. Bruises and cuts covered her body. A long cut ran across her neck to the middle of her stomach. Of course, she hadn’t full believed in this idea. I could tell by her tone. It was more of a wish that we both shared. She knew, as I had known for a while, that we needed to meet Neville to complete our journey and to understand what had happened to our son. She walked into the bathroom and took a long shower.

While Sharon showered, I stared at myself in the mirror, and thought about her question. It would have been easy to leave, and I had even considered it for a second, but something Rollo said left me unsettled. He had said that I should get Sharon and my son

off the island. If Stephen was on this island, then there could be no other choice. I stared hard into my own eyes and asked, “Why can’t you figure this out? What’s the answer? What am I supposed to finish?” I stared at a stranger covered in cuts and bruises. I probably should have showered, but I couldn’t stop staring at the image in the mirror. I had almost died. I had almost gotten Sharon killed as well. I pulled my shirt off. Deep violet and brown bruises had already begun to form. I wondered if we shouldn’t just go home.

When the shower turned off I shook my head a couple times and quit staring into the mirror. That was when I noticed the flashing red light on the phone. We had a message. I called the number to recover the messages, and one message from Stephen’s hospital confirmed the path we needed to complete. It was a brief message from Lisa, the nurse at the university hospital. I had given her the number of the hotel the day after we arrived. She said that Stephen had been moved. She explained that she was told specifically not to contact me or Mrs. Price, and could only speak for a moment; but that several men with government identification badges and doctors she didn’t recognize from other hospitals showed up early that morning and took Stephen. They had signed government documents and every person at the hospital was told not to say anything, but she decided to go against the orders because she knew I would want to know. She apologized for not being able to do anything else.

After I listened to the message, I slammed the receiver of the phone down on the table over and over and then picked up the alarm clock and slammed it against the wall. Then I yelled as loud as I could. Sharon came running out of the bathroom half-naked, brandishing a towel rack bar she had ripped off the wall.

“What? What is it?” she asked.

“Do you have the number for the hospital?”

“What?”

“The hospital! Do you have the number?”

“Yes,” she said as she searched through her purse for her address book and handed it to me, “What is it? What’s happened now?”

I ignored her question and dialed the number for the direct line for Stephen’s floor. At first there was no answer, but finally, when I did get through, an older gentleman with a Spanish accent informed me that Stephen had been moved. I told him he had to have been mistaken and provided detailed information about the nurses that cared for him on Sundays and about what he needed, where he was located. The man kept telling me that everyone was gone, the room was completely cleaned out, and that there was a small box with some sort of brass doorknocker and some pictures waiting for me behind the desk. When I asked him where my son had been taken, he told me that the person in charge of paying the bill requested a transfer. The man told me that the person who requested the transfer had all the necessary paperwork. I asked him where he was transferred, and he seemed confused. He didn’t understand why I didn’t know. He asked where I was calling from, and then he told me that was what he thought. Then he told me what I was already afraid of, Stephen had been transferred to the American research hospital in Nassau.

When I told Sharon she said it didn’t make any sense. She said, “There is no way any hospital is going to release a minor, especially a minor in a coma, to someone else. There’s just no way. Especially when everyone knows us.” She decided to call back and

reached a different man. She went through the same line of questioning, but came up with the same result. The only explanation was that Neville had more power than we had believed. Or worse, I thought to myself, perhaps it wasn't Neville who had our son.

When we finished listening to the message, all thoughts of leaving were gone. There were no more choices. There were no more questions. We needed to find Neville as soon as possible and force him, somehow, to find Stephen.

The dinner and Pro-Am Ball hosted by Neville's company had been in full swing for several hours by the time Sharon and I finally arrived. We walked into the grand ballroom on the fifth floor of the Atlantis Resort Casino just as several young women wearing old shirts over work pants and rubberized work boots, clogged through the aisles between tables and onto the stage. The room was huge, perhaps the size of a football field, and with the lights dimmed for the show, it was difficult to see. As the dancers made their way through the crowd, Sharon and I tried to find Neville's table. I had no idea what I would say when I found him. The calm that had overwhelmed me as I waited for the Black-Robed Man to kill me had turned into an impatient, angry resolve.

Sharon and I split up and searched different sides of the large room because we didn't have much more time. We were supposed to meet over two hours ago. We hoped Neville was still there. The lights were dim and the sound of a full orchestra and singing distracted me. I followed the spotlight as it waded through the crowd. Waiters walked by with trays filled with food and drinks, and as I quickly walked through the banquet hall I stuffed handfuls of food in my mouth and drained several bottles of water. Neither Sharon nor I had eaten all day, but we didn't have time to wait. My legs and stomach

ached and I could still taste blood in my mouth.

Since the day Neville had given us the invitations to this party, I had, at least in some remote part of my mind, considered this a unique opportunity to rekindle the relationship I believed I once had with Sharon. But after the last few days, especially after our experience at the church, nothing could be further from my mind. I could barely walk.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“Do you think he left?”

“There!” Sharon said in loud whisper. I followed her arm as it pointed to a round table near the front of the stage.

Neville sat with his back to us at a small round table near the front of the stage. Several people surrounded him wearing tuxedos and expensive party dresses. Sharon walked to the right of his table and I met him on the left side. As we approached, the conversation at his table stopped and one of the people at his table, an older woman with a blue turquoise dress and a peacock feather stuck in her white hair cleared her throat and motioned with her head for Neville to turn around.

“A little underdressed for the evening aren’t we. You know, I had almost given up on you two,” Neville said, and then he turned to the crowd at his table, “What can I say, scientists? They have never been known for their sense of style have they?” The table laughed.

Sharon tapped him vigorously on his shoulder and said, “We need to talk.”

“You’re going to have to wait.”

“I thought this project was important to your boss?” I asked, loud enough for the

entire table to hear.

One of the drunk men at the table asked, “Your boss huh? Are they talking about your wife again?”

Another man at the table chimed in and said, “What are you working on this time?” He turned to address the rest of the table, “You know last year he worked on a new type of corn that people could eat and that could run a diesel engine. It made great popcorn, didn’t it?”

Neville turned around and leaned close to Sharon and me and whispered, “Now is not the time.”

“If you want our help, you’ll talk right now,” Sharon demanded.

“Those files are useless. The entire thing’s in some kind of code. I’m not sure we have anymore business to discuss.”

“You want the translations?” I asked

“You have them? How?” Neville responded, a bit of hope in his voice.

“We need to get out of here right now,” Sharon said and grabbed Neville under the arm and tried to pull him out of his seat.

He shrugged his shoulder free and stated emphatically, “I don’t know what you two have gotten yourself into over the last day, but you’re just going to have to wait until the party’s over. I’ll call you.”

“Do you want the Rosenberg Six files or not? It’s that simple,” I said.

“The only way you can help is if you can translate over eight different codes that the best code breakers money can buy haven’t been able to decode.”

“Exactly. That’s exactly what he can do,” Sharon said.

Neville addressed the table and said, “You’ll have to excuse me for a few moments.”

“What? In the middle of the dance? Tell your friends to have a seat and enjoy the show. They look exhausted.”

“It’s my nephew. You know relatives, always calling when you least need it. But I have to take this call. You guys enjoy yourself and you can fill me in when I get back.”

Neville led us through a side door into the waiting room between banquet halls, and then into a small back room. Inside he got straight to the point.

“If you can really do what you say you can do I will double my original offer.”

“Where’s Stephen?” Sharon asked.

“I’ll triple it. Can you really translate those files?”

“We want to see the Benefactor,” I said.

“I want to see my son! Where’s Stephen!” Sharon yelled again. Neville tried to ignore her again, and stared at me and asked me what I thought of his offer.

“I’d give her an answer.”

“Your son’s safe. We moved him to a new hospital. When you didn’t show up or call we wanted to make sure that no one hurt him or moved him to a state hospital before we could finish our business.” Neville’s initial shock to hear I could translate the files and that Sharon and I knew he had taken our son had placed Neville at a slight disadvantage, and his normal self-assured manner was a bit shaky. But he seemed to regain his composure and reversed the way the conversation was heading. “Let’s get back to business. Do we have a deal?”

“Money’s not enough.”

“It’s not enough money?”

“We want to speak to the Benefactor directly. I’m not doing anything until we talk to him,” I said.

“And we see our son!” Sharon added.

There was a long pause.

“We’re leaving,” Sharon said and walked out of the small room into the hall. I followed.

“Stop.” We both turned around. “I’m the Benefactor.”

16

We took a silver limousine from the Atlantis Resort to the U.S. Naval base nearby, and after Sharon and I bombarded him with question after question, Neville decided to give us some background into the project. He asked us to be patient. He said he wanted us to understand where it all began, and that it was a project that could lead to the greatest discovery in human history. We asked about Stephen, and he asked us again to be patient. He said if we allowed him to give the full story we would understand better the choices that had to be made.

He explained that the idea for the project actually began when he was in graduate school and was working with his father’s energy consortium in the 1970s before OPEC took control of their own resources. He didn’t want to go into any details, but the basic premise began with the discovery of a new mineral off the coast of Nassau during a mining expedition. The expedition only found a handful of the crystals, but the mineral compound and chemical make up were so strange that they decided to keep the find to

themselves while they figured out what they could be used for, and more importantly, what they might be worth.

I immediately knew he was talking about the same crystals that Sharon and I had used to keep our presence hidden from the Black-Robed Man. They were the same crystals Rollo had stuffed in Sharon's pockets when he hugged her in the church courtyard.

Neville said that he had met Dr. Rosenberg around this time, but he didn't think too highly of his character or potential as a scientist. They became occasional friends, but lost touch after college. During that time, he went about building the company and the fortunes of his family until finally it became one of the largest, least well known, energy companies in the world. He had forgotten about the crystals, but after his father died he re-discovered them. They had become neglected and were stored away in a hangar the company owned near Nassau.

As the limousine left the city, Neville explained that he decided to collaborate with Dr. Rosenberg because Dr. Rosenberg worked at a major research university, but he had no real ambition or publications and was dangerously close to losing his standing at the college. The initial project focused on examining the crystals and researching alternative energy sources based on discoveries made from the crystal research. A third part of the project was added after one year. This project focused on examining records that recorded several unseen energy spikes throughout the world over the past fifty years. Most of the records were the result of random occurrences—scientific expeditions that took place at the same time and place as when an energy spike took place. One record even stated that a man died instantly when he held the crystal. This discovery prompted

the third project, which was a massive investigation of the energy spikes. Neville wanted to predict their occurrences so that they could understand the cause and source and possible adaptation of these energy spikes.

The next shift in the focus for the project occurred after the American Superconducting Super Collider project was cancelled. At the time this project was the American answer to a similar project at the CERN Institute in Europe. At the very basic level, the project's goal was to construct two proton beams that would travel in opposite directions around a circular track that resembled a massive racetrack. The size and cost would have been immense. The one at CERN was over eighty-three kilometers in circumference and required over 9600 magnets. But the scientific goals for the project were equally immense. They hoped to create nothing less than the effects of the Big Bang—essentially, the scientific community wanted to create an energy source so large that they could mimic the moment the world was created within a controlled environment. When the project was cancelled because of rising costs, many government officials and members of the American scientific and political community worried that the loss of control over a discovery this important was a mistake. And because of this paranoia, they were willing to invest large amounts of money and provide a large amount of secrecy and lenience for projects that could produce results that could place the American scientific community at the forefront, even in the face of such a large discovery elsewhere.

Neville said that was when he approached several investors with a plan that he and some other particle physicists, a Dr. Kaku from Harvard and a Dr. Lisa Randall from Princeton, had been discussing—the potential to prove the existence of multiple

dimensions. He said he packaged the project with the original Rosenberg Six projects in a way that put each piece together based on theory and data collected at the time. He said that he believed that the crystals could be utilized in combination with his own, smaller Superconductor, to create a wormhole, and that the energy spikes that seemed to occur mostly around the Bahamian islands, coupled with the massive magnetic anomalies, could be used as the starting points for these wormholes. In essence, Neville said he gathered investors on the project based on his idea that wormholes already existed in the area and just needed to be made bigger.

“What about my son?” Sharon asked, frustrated and tired.

“I’m getting to that.”

“Well get to it faster.”

“The project progressed at a slow pace over the next four years, but we eventually made several promising discoveries. We eventually constructed a miniature superconductor and coupled it with a transformer that was powered by the crystals. Then we constructed our own dimensional doorway we believed provided the necessary reverse force needed to keep an individual alive when he traveled into a wormhole. The doorway was actually a small area where the power of three strategically placed crystals above formed an opening for the person to travel through. Unfortunately, none of the experiments on inanimate objects worked. The few rodents or monkeys we sent through what we believed could be a wormhole never moved or were destroyed. Then we made a hypothesis that we believe was a major breakthrough. We deduced that the problem wasn’t the actual doorway—it was with the form of the traveler. Basically, the Rosenberg Project believed that a form could not travel from the third or fourth dimension to a

different type of dimension in the same three or four-dimensional form. A person could not travel through dimensions as a person, he would have to become whatever existed in a fifth or six dimension.”

“I don’t understand what you are saying at all,” I said.

“This is ridiculous. Just tell me what you’ve done with Stephen. That’s it. I don’t want to hear any more about dimensions or high-powered super conducting whatever. Nothing else but my son!” Sharon yelled.

“We think we figured out a way to change the form of a person and send him through dimensions. During our studies we discovered that young boys are the best choice based on their chemical and hormonal make-up, for some reason, to withstand the transformation. During a visit to the lab, your son found a problem in the calculations that the Rosenberg Project had been using that made this discovery possible.”

“Stephen?” I asked.

“What did you do to him? How was he involved?”

“That’s just it. I’m not sure. Before Jenson disappeared the focus of his work had been on dimensional travel. I know your son was involved with that work in some way, but I don’t know how since I never got directly involved with the project at the university. But something changed.”

“The energy spikes,” I said.

“Yes. From what I can gather, Dr. Rosenberg finally figured out how to predict when and where one of these energy spikes would occur. It had long been believed that if we could set up a doorway at the exact moment these energy spikes occurred we could pry open the miniature wormholes and travel through dimensions. But Dr. Rosenberg

wouldn't share the information. Instead, he packed up all of his basic information and accepted an invitation to speak at the Bohemian Grove. I don't know why he decided to give up everything he had worked on for five years, but if he had told that group of people what we had been doing in this lab, the entire project would have been stopped."

"You killed him," I said.

"No. We think now that someone working with the Consulate might have been involved. Don't worry."

"Do you know where he is right now?"

"No. He's disappeared, but don't worry...we'll find him."

At that moment we entered through two large gates and made our way to a large airplane hangar near the back of the base. The main building, which looked like a commercial airport hangar, was surrounded on all sides by small army barracks and looked like an army installation.

"I thought you weren't with the government or Vice President," I said.

"I'm not, but we do have some collaborative contracts and projects. They allow me to work on this project, and I provide them with the ancillary discoveries."

We walked through the front door. There was a desk at each side and nothing else in the small front room. Two men sat at each desk. We approached the first one and showed our passports and Neville showed his identification. We were fingerprinted and the fingerprints were run through the computer. Then we went to the second desk where they searched us for weapons or other materials. Sharon had to leave her purse outside.

They found five crystal rocks in her purse. Neville entered codes into the door and the metal door released and opened.

Before we walked in Neville turned to Sharon and me and said, “Before you go inside you need to remember that this could very well be the most important discovery in the history of human kind. I’m not exaggerating. It could change everything we know and believe is true. Remember—that is the scope of what we are working on, nothing less. And everyone you see inside, including your son, volunteered for this project.”

As we walked through the doors the smell of antiseptic and floor cleaner was overpowering. I could hear the steady hum of machines in the distance. At first it was dark as we walked through a small hallway that puffed air at us in small bursts. Each time I was hit by a burst of air it startled me. What was this place? Neville didn’t turn around as he disappeared through a metal revolving door. Sharon followed him, and I was the last to enter. I worried about what I might see on the other side.

“My God,” were the first two words to escape my mouth. I stood and tried to comprehend exactly what it was that I saw. The room was built in a spiral formation from a central point that was lower in the ground. It looked like the inside of a giant conch shell. At the center was an empty table encircled on one side by computers and large transformers. It looked like a scene out of Frankenstein, but more comfortable and relaxed. The bed in the middle looked like one you’d find in a department store, not a laboratory. And there were three large white crystals that hung in a triangular formation above the table. This wasn’t the horrifying scene, though. This wasn’t what had Sharon near to tears beside me. Circling around this table and these computers were young boys

lying unconscious or dead in hospital beds, surrounded by the same equipment I recognized from Stephen's room.

"Are they dead?" I asked.

"No. Most of them are still alive. We keep the ones that have died at the top, isolated from the others."

"You're a fucking mad man!" Sharon yelled.

Neville didn't respond. "Follow me," he said and led us around the outskirts of the spiral formation. I counted at least fifty young boys, none of them looked like Stephen.

"What is all this?" I asked.

"This is your project."

"Who are they?" Sharon asked.

"Scientists, runaways and convicts. But each person volunteered. We have it all in writing."

"I'm sure that makes their mothers feel better. How could you do this?"

"These are all the boys we've sent through in the past six months. How many people died discovering America or exploring the western frontier? How many have died as we explored space? How is this any different?"

"Just take me to Stephen."

"Follow me."

Neville led us out of the main room and into a small hallway. There were three doors and a guard at each door.

"The main project is through the left and right doors."

“What about Stephen?” Sharon asked.

“I need to know if we have a deal,” Neville said. “The day Dr. Rosenberg left for the Bohemian Grove every computer file in this entire facility was encrypted with the same code on the computer you gave me. If you really can decipher every code and translate the entire computer, you can also help us get this facility back up and running.”

“And what you’re saying, then, is that if Jenson doesn’t get this—this place running again, you won’t lead us to our son. Is that it? You’re holding him hostage?”

“No, not really. We really brought him here to protect him, he’s through that door.” He pointed to the third door and Sharon ran towards it without any hesitation. The armed guard readied himself, but Neville told him to let her enter. Before I could go, though, he grabbed my shoulder and asked, “Do we have a deal?”

“I’ve been thinking about what I really need, and I need more than just my son. That’s not enough. He may have lasted longer than these other poor kids, but eventually he’s going to die like the rest of them. Unless we can figure out a way to bring him back. I can help you with that, but I’ll need to know that Sharon and Stephen will be safe and cared for throughout the rest of their lives.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I will translate all of these files tonight. I’ll get this entire place running so you can torture more defenseless boys, but I want assurances that Sharon and Stephen are someplace safe.”

“Are you talking like the witness protection plan or something? How can we do that?”

“You said it yourself. You have government contracts and if this is as important as you say, it needs to happen. Tonight!”

“How could I do this?”

“Then forget it,” I said. “Sharon may not believe this, but I know that chances are very strong that Stephen will never wake up. If you can’t give us anything other than a false promise and some money, then fuck off. I’ll grab my son and we’ll leave this place right now.”

“Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll figure something out, but you’ve got to start now. According to the last time I spoke with Dr. Rosenberg, the energy spike will take place in less than twelve hours somewhere on this island. This could be our only chance to use it to find your son.”

“Thank you. One more thing.”

“What?”

“I want Sharon’s friend Todd to go with them. They’ll need someone to help them wherever they end up at, and if something ever happens to me while I’m here I’d feel better and could work much faster if I knew he was with her.”

“I suppose I have no choice. Won’t he have something to say about this? What if he doesn’t want to leave his own life?”

“He will.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“He loves her.”

We shook hands and I felt a resolve and power and confidence I hadn't felt my entire life. I had just made a decision without Sharon and without fumbling my words. Before I entered the room at the end of the hall, I said, "I'll be with my wife and son. When you're ready to take them to their plane, and you have the papers to prove your promise, we'll have a deal. Until then I'll expect your men to leave us alone."

Two nurses left the room the moment I entered, leaving Sharon and I alone with Stephen. Sharon sat on the edge of Stephen's bed and stroked the side of his face. A ventilator inhaled and exhaled with mechanical precision. Sharon looked at me, tears in her eyes, "He looks worse doesn't he? What are we going to do?"

"You and Stephen are getting out of here."

"When?"

"Tonight. I just made a deal with Neville."

"You can't trust that man. Jensen, you can't. Besides, look at what they're doing. Rosenberg realized this, can't you see, he knew it was wrong. Maybe he figured it out too late, but he tried to stop it. What if you get it to work again? How many more mothers will lose their sons?"

"I don't think it works like that. He wants to find out when and where the energy spike will take place, but he doesn't really understand what that spike is."

"And you do?"

"No, not really. But do you remember the guy that Todd's friend brought to talk with us? He said the magnetic anomalies were pollution from this project, but that they also existed before the project. And according to the data I've looked at, the anomalies seem to coincide at times with the energy spikes already recorded. What if they are

pollution caused by the energy spikes? What if these energy spikes are the residues from a different type of project, one that doesn't originate on Earth?"

"What are you saying? Are you talking about aliens now?"

"No, I don't know exactly what I'm saying, but I know Dr. Rosenberg hadn't figure it out either, and when this project's up and running again, I'll be in a position to stop it just like Dr. Rosenberg was unless they stop using human subjects."

"How?" Sharon asked. I didn't really have any idea. All I knew was that I had to get her and Stephen off this island, away from these people, and to somewhere safe. Rollo had told me to "finish it", and I knew he hadn't meant to finish the project. I needed to find my son. And now that I had found his body in this dimension, I had to somehow find his body in the next dimension and bring him home.

"I can do it. I know you haven't had much reason to trust me or have faith in me for many years, perhaps ever, but I won't let you down. I promise."

At that very moment, as I held Sharon in my arms and stared at my son's closed eyes and sunken cheeks, a bright light blinded me and I fell back into the air and rolled backwards like a man pushed backwards off a high dive. But there was no water. There was no air or light or smell. I was nowhere and felt scared I would somehow stay like this forever. I started to panic and wanted to scream, but there was only the panic—no body, no voice.

17

When I stood up I found myself standing in the largest room I could have ever imagined. It was made entirely of marble or some shiny, white stone. There were hints of pink and mahogany smeared into the white marble, and the entire room was illuminated by the sun

shining above and through a large circular hole in the dome. The room looked like the inside of a snare drum, with a solid hemispherical green dome above. I felt like I had been somehow transported to ancient Greece. There were statues of men in various warrior-like poses perched atop large stone pedestals that circled the room. I walked towards a statue on the far corner that looked strangely like me. The statue portrayed me as a little thinner and older, but the facial structure and body type looked exactly like me. I walked closer and tried to read a plaque underneath the statue, but it was written in a language I couldn't understand. I did recognize numbers listed below. They were in standard American numerals, which seemed a little odd. I also recognized the pattern—it looked identical to the pattern Bergie had engraved in his arm. When I looked directly into the plaque I could make out my own reflection, but it wasn't me. I bent closer and rubbed it with the hem of my shirt. Then I looked again, this time really focusing on who it was looking back at me. And then I made it out—it was Stephen. I had known, perhaps before I had ever met Bergie, but seeing through my son's eyes and knowing this was him still shook me. I moved to my knees and looked up at the statue of myself.

A door opened at the far side of the room. I concealed myself behind the base of the statue. Several men walked inside carrying swords. They marched directly towards the statue I hid behind. I didn't move. I didn't breathe. Luckily the men marched directly across the hall without looking in any other direction. Once they left, a young girl with wet blue eyes, the same girl that I had seen in a previous dream about the priestess, stuck her head from behind the statue across the hall and beckoned me to follow. I looked in the direction of the men still marching away, their footsteps echoing off into the distance, and then ran across the open floor. I tried to make as little noise as possible as I ran on

my toes.

“We need to be quiet. He’s here.”

“Who?” I asked, but she didn’t answer.

“This way.” She led me towards a small hole near the corner. It smelled like urine, but it was just big enough for me to squeeze through. I held my breath and followed the girl through the sewage tunnel. The trip was disgusting and lasted for too long. The tunnel ran slightly downhill. The smell didn’t seem to bother the young girl. We finally emerged up a slight incline and through a similar hole, but in a very different part of the hallway.

“Wait here,” she said, and then disappeared back through the sewage tunnel.

I looked around the room that appeared to have no door or window on any side. The urinal was the only entrance, which I found hard to believe. The walls were a coarse stone, not like the marble that had been in the circular dome-room. On three walls were small paintings, but they weren’t painted on the wall like some sort of Egyptian hieroglyphic. They looked like normal canvas paintings with frames you’d find in a museum or rich man’s home. There was a contrast between the stone and paintings that seemed too distinct and out of place to make sense. Beneath each painting was the same pattern for numbered sequences, but all consisted of different numbers. I didn’t understand. The fourth wall was blank. In front of it was a small stone table and two wooden stools carved out of a single piece of wood. As I moved closer to the table, I noticed that there were buttons carved into the table with a number on each button. I touched one button and it lowered for an instant and then popped back up. I pressed a few more random numbers, and the same thing happened. A button lowered and then popped

back up, but nothing else happened. I looked around the room, but there was nothing and there was no change.

That's when the little girl popped back out of the sewage tunnel and said, "What did you do? He knows you're here."

"What is this?"

"A map. You've never seen a map before?"

"Not like this. How does it work?"

"We don't have time."

I felt like my son was going to leave at that moment, but I needed to know the answers. I had to know. I focused all of my thoughts and all of my energy on my son. I needed to reach him. He walked towards the sewage tunnel, so I repeated the words: stop stop stop stop, over and over in my mind. Suddenly Stephen stopped.

"No, we have to go," the little girl said as she grabbed my son's hand and tried to lead him into the tunnel.

"Show me how it works."

"You press in the day, month, last two digits of the year, time, latitude in degrees and inches and then longitude in degrees and inches. That's it. Come on, let's go." She was right. That was it. I repeated over and over in my head the exact numbered sequence Bergie had engraved in his arm, and Stephen approached the keyboard and pressed them slowly into the stone table. I could somehow will Stephen to act. He couldn't hear me, but he could somehow feel me. When he had finished typing in the coordinates, the table lowered to the ground through an unseen hole. Then the pictures along the wall shifted up or down and moved left and right. The whole thing looked like a puzzle I had seen when

I was younger, a cheap knock of the Rubik's cube. All three walls with pictures came alive and moved around until the pictures were aligned into one large, singular picture that covered all three walls. I looked at the picture and it looked very much like the Bahamas. Then the pictures rearranged themselves again and several shifted and spun and changed shape and finally formed together on the formerly blank wall as a map of Nassau. A dark engraved line circled around a small island off the coast of Nassau, and then everything on the wall moved to the side, the wall split in two and in walked a man in a white robe that looked remarkably like the Black-Robed Man.

“Run!” the little girl yelled.

Stephen ran across the room and dove into the sewage tunnel, propelling himself down the slight decline and crawling as fast as he could down the shaft. Behind him he could hear the man yell down the shaft. Stephen looked back, but the man couldn't fit inside. He crawled after the girl down a maze of different sewage tunnels until they finally emerged in a large cavern somewhere far beneath the domed-room above. The young girl led him to a small raft she had hidden underneath some trash and debris. “Take this raft and follow the water to the sea. You'll be safe there. Don't come back.”

17

I felt bone tired and defeated as I sat alone in a nearly empty room. I had briefly woken up after the dream and had watched armed guards and doctors escorting Sharon and Stephen out of the room, but I couldn't remember what they said or what exactly was happening. Then, before I could even speak, a tumultuous seizure ripped through my body and rendered me almost deaf and blind. I rolled onto the floor holding my stomach and stared around the room. I was lost. For a while I had thought the dreams and

headaches were gone, but I was wrong. My head killed, and I didn't want to move.

Instinctively I searched my pockets for more of Bergie's pills, but they were all gone, so I just lay on the floor and waited.

When I could focus again, I looked around the room. It appeared to be the office of an abandoned building. Bunk bed frames spread out in two long rows between where I sat and the front door. Two armed men in fatigues stood watch at the door, but I couldn't tell if they were keeping me in or keeping others out. Black paint covered the windows and a faint smell of vinegar filled the room.

"Hey!" I yelled at the two guards. "What's going on? Where is everybody?"

The two men stood as still as statues, and I wanted to grip their guns. It was an impulse that would have probably gotten me killed. I felt along my razor-burned neck and wondered what to do next. The Benefactor, Neville, had told me personally that he would fly my family to the destination of their choice if I provided the computer passwords and decoded the Rosenberg Six communications. They were supposed to be placed in some type of governmental witness relocation program. They were supposed to be meeting Todd, and I would presumably meet them once I finished my work with the project. They were supposed to be safe. I wondered if Neville had lied again. Why couldn't I figure out that I couldn't rely on anyone? Sharon hadn't believed him. She hadn't relied on anyone had she? Maybe that was our problem. I had to rely on everyone, and she had to rely on no one.

Two men wheeled a flat screen television on a cart into the room. When the door opened I could see that it was still dark outside. I tried talking to the two men, but they went about setting up the television and other multimedia equipment, while pretending I

didn't exist. After they set up the television one man placed a laptop computer on an empty table, turned it on, and opened up several password-protected files.

“Hey! I'm talking!” I put my hand on the cart only a few feet from the two men.

One of them turned and finally answered, “I'm sorry, we've got orders to set this up and leave. Someone will be in shortly to explain.” He turned on the television, switched a channel and then left. On the screen was an airplane waiting in the middle of an otherwise empty runway.

“What's this?”

I messed with the channels after the two men left, but all the other channels were white noise and fuzz, so I sat back and watched the picture of a plane. I didn't want to touch the computer. I never wanted to touch one again. Since I arrived in Nassau one person after another had tried desperately to get me to either put a computer together or take it completely apart. Now I knew what the Benefactor wanted. He wanted the Rosetta stone. He wanted to be able to access every file on the computer and restart the Rosenberg Six Project. But what did the Rosenberg Six files really know? For that matter, what did Dr. Markus Rosenberg really know, other than the Benefactor had used his research on human experiments? I wondered if Dr. Rosenberg knew about the experiments. I wondered if he believed in them. I'm sure he had believed the project could lead to something remarkable. But the very idea that travel from one place on Earth to another by accessing folds between space and time dimensions seemed like an idea destined to remain a part of science fiction. What they didn't understand was that these ideas challenged most people's notion of life itself and what it meant to be a human on Earth. They challenged religious doctrines and philosophy and physics, and opened up

possibilities that most people would rather have been left unfound. I didn't know the answers. What I did know, though, was that even if I translated every single piece of Rosenberg Six communication and added the small amount of knowledge I had accumulated over the past few weeks, none of that would ultimately save Stephen. They didn't know how to bring him back, and they had no idea why he still lived. But maybe I did.

For now I would be happy with the knowledge that Sharon and Stephen's body in this dimension were safe, and I knew that the more distance I could put between them and myself the safer they would ultimately be.

The front door opened abruptly and slammed against the wall behind. Neville and several other guards argued as they entered the room. None of the men noticed my presence until the door was finally shut.

"Why haven't you started?" Neville asked.

"Where's Sharon?" I asked.

"There," Neville said as he pointed to Sharon as she walked towards the private plane. Several armed guards surrounded the perimeter and accompanied Sharon inside.

"Your son is already inside." Then a stranger standing beside Neville said, "Don't worry, the doctors are by his side."

"The moment your fingers touch that keyboard and we can verify the information is legitimate, the plane will take off. When they are in the air they will be able to tell the pilot to go wherever they want."

"And Todd?"

“I don’t know why you want it, but yes...he’s agreed to the terms. He’s already in the air and when your wife contacts him, he’ll be transported to the same place. It’s all set. But we need you to do something else.”

“What?”

“We need the location of the energy spike.”

I looked at Neville and wondered how he could have known I had figured out the location through one of Stephen’s dreams. Perhaps Neville thought the information was hidden somewhere in the Rosenberg files. It didn’t matter. I knew what I had to do.

“I’ll lead you to them.”

18

I waited on my stomach amongst an understory of scrub brush and cacti below a low tree canopy in the middle of a thick dry patch of forest. It had taken me two hours to trek through the forest from the point where the Benefactor’s men dropped me off, and it was a testament to Sharon’s instructions and my memory that I somehow reached this point using only a compass and coordinates.

When I had been initially dropped off, an elite Special Forces squadron hid and protected my perimeter, but once I reached these exact coordinates, I felt very alone. I tried contacting them with the radio they provided. I tried listening to the earpiece lodged deep within my ear’s canal. But they were gone. No matter, this was probably something I needed to do alone. I wanted to be calm like I had once felt when I gardened late at night. Even now, I had imagined myself more in control and more of a hero. But I was scared. At my very core I knew I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to die.

I wondered if my father had wanted to die the day he killed himself.

As I lay alone in the forest waiting for the exact time the energy spike would take place, I thought about my father. I could smell the Old Spice he wore and could see the spit that always collected at the corner of his mouth. I could see his blue eyes and feel his hard stare chastising me each time I made a poor decision or picked up the wrong stock card. I could see the white hair collect in a square patch on the right side of his head, the same white patch that emerged over the last two years on the right side of my hair. But I couldn't hear his voice. I knew it was deep and had a southern drawl, but I couldn't hear it.

During the last two years of his life my father didn't say a word to me. Nothing. He didn't have a stroke, and he didn't stop communicating with the other people in my family or around the town. He just stopped talking to me. When I brought it up with other people in my family, they called me selfish, told me he treated me like he did everyone else. Then said he was sick. But he didn't look sick to me. He looked like the same six foot four inch former college basketball player that spent most of his summer days outside in the garden or inside playing cards. He talked to my mother. He talked to the boy that delivered his paper each morning. But even though we continued to occasionally play Honeymoon Bridge, between us there existed only silence. It was impenetrable. Even if I asked him a direct question, which I rarely did, he wouldn't react at all. It was as if my voice didn't exist.

After a while I quit talking as well, but not only to my father. I quit talking with the other people in my family except when someone asked me a direct question. I quit talking at school except when a teacher made me speak. The silence that scared and confused me for so long when I was with my father became something I almost needed.

It was powerful and I controlled it. At night I would sit up in bed in the dark silence and have long, imaginary conversations inside my head with myself or my father or other people around town. When I played cards with my father after I quit speaking, I recalled how peaceful it felt. His disapproving looks seemed to disappear, and at times I wondered if I had just imagined that he was disappointed in me every day of my life. Perhaps I was just too loud. It was a peace I wouldn't find again until Rollo appeared in my garden. It seemed like there was no longer anything my father and I wanted from each other and we just concentrated on the game.

But of course I soon discovered this wasn't exactly true. One month after my ninth birthday I learned that even my father relied on others and needed something from me.

It was a deceptively cool, sunny day. Everyone in my family except for my father and I were at a soccer game several hours away. My father watched old movies inside. For most of the morning I had been outside digging a small garden plot next to my father's large garden, where I decided I wanted to grow fruit. Now that I reflected on the decision, I'm sure it was to show my father that fruit could be grown in our back yard. He focused primarily on vegetables and spices—not fruit. I had spent the previous week purchasing various fruit seeds from the local hardware store. I even collected seeds left over from fruit the family ate at dinner. Then I checked out a Farmer's Almanac from the library to determine the exact time to plant fruit. Even though I didn't really know how to read the almanac, it gave the entire enterprise a sense of credibility that I could use later if anyone asked. One month after my ninth birthday, I decided, was the best day to cultivate the earth and plant baby watermelons.

The first thing I did was to take the exact measurements of my father's garden and reduce it by 1/16th. I also wanted to make sure the measurements and straightness for each side were precise, so I used two stakes and a four-foot string. Then I measured four rows for my fruit seeds and planted each seed exactly six inches apart. Afterwards I placed a stake at each side of each row with a black-stenciled sign that said: baby melons. It was a beautiful plot. Before I went inside to clean up and play cards with my father, I raked the topsoil with my fingers to make it smooth and even. I spent considerable time picking out every small stone or piece of glass.

After I washed the ground-in dirt from my fingernails and changed clothes, I entered my father's bedroom. For the past several months he had slept alone in the guest bedroom. The inside of the room was fairly plain, but it had a twin bed, a simple four-drawer dresser, a fake leather reclining chair, a mini-refrigerator filled with water and beer, and a television set. It even had its own unique bathroom. Apparently the prior occupants of the house had a physically disabled son, and the bathroom was completely set up to accommodate his needs. The shower was twice the size of a walk-in closet with a metal railing that went around the walls. It also had a toilet that was only a couple inches off the floor. I overheard my father on numerous times over the past few months yell at anyone that could hear that he was tired of being locked up in the "retard's room". A plastic chair and table once used for family barbecues were set up near the recliner for our card games.

As I walked to his room, I noticed that the door was locked from the outside, which seemed a bit odd. I knew my family, at times, locked the door at night because my father had a tendency over the past few years to wander around the house and

neighborhood in his sleep, but I had never heard of them locking him in his room during the day. I listened at the door before knocking. One request he made earlier that week was to have a Claddaugh doorknocker screwed into the outside of his door. It was the same doorknocker I put on the outside of Stephen's door at the hospital. After I knocked several times without an answer, I unlocked the hook on the outside of his door and walked inside. The thick curtains kept the cold room dark, but a black and white war movie flashed light across my father's body and face. He slumped in the recliner with his head tilted back and his legs spread straight out towards the television set.

At no other time would I have entered that room and sat down in the plastic chair and shuffled the deck of cards as if my father were awake but that is exactly what I did that day. As I shuffled the cards, guns and bombs echoed from the loud television set and a crisp wind blew across my face. It came from the window, which seemed odd because it couldn't be opened. When I pulled the curtains aside broken glass cracked beneath my feet. The sun momentarily blinded me as it illuminated the dark room, and I stood still until my eyes refocused and got used to the light. The entire window was shattered and broken glass littered the brown carpet. I wondered what my father had done. I walked behind his sleeping body and pushed him lightly on the shoulder. He didn't move. I pushed him a bit harder. Still, he didn't move.

His skin looked gray and plastic. His body seemed so much smaller than it had appeared only two or three days before. Then I said his name out loud. My voice cracked as I spoke, but he didn't answer. I wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to talk to him again, to talk to him at all. I pushed his head lightly and it didn't move. I yelled his name louder and louder, over and over, and moved to the front to look him in the eyes. Luckily they

were both closed. Then I noticed that blood pooled below his left hand, which hung limply towards the ground. I lifted his hand and couldn't believe what I saw. I immediately let his hand fall to the ground, and I fell back against the television, nearly pushing it to the ground.

Three of his fingers were gone and the others were chiseled to the bone.

I screamed and pushed my body back into a corner of the room and sat there with my knees pulled close until my body quit shaking. My ears rang. My jaw hurt from clenching and grinding my teeth against each other. I closed my eyes and crawled back towards my father. I don't know what possessed me to crawl back to see my father's body, but I needed to see him again. My initial shock turned into anger. I wondered how he could have done this to me? I asked him what I'd done to make him hate me so much. I even grabbed his collar and shook him hard yelling and screaming and crying. After I finished, I slumped to the ground only inches from the pool of blood. And that is when I noticed the letter.

Laying half submerged in a pool of my father's blood was my father's suicide note. I could see, even through the blood, that the letter was addressed to me. I grabbed the letter and went to my room, burrowing underneath my blankets and holding it for what seemed like hours. There was something inside, something solid and wet. I took a few deep breaths and opened the letter, only to be surprised again. Inside were my father's three fingers and a letter. I dropped the letter on my bedspread and moved the blankets to the side. I brushed the letter and its contents to the ground, leaving a bloody streak down the side of my sheet. I thought that my father must have been a different kind of sick. Why couldn't my family just tell me he was crazy? Why did he have to address

the envelope to me? I lay in my bed and stared at the bloody envelope for a while before I finally read the letter. I half expected it to tell me he hated me, and that it was my entire fault. As I read it I couldn't help but think that a different man wrote it.

Dear Son,

I've grown accustomed to hating God, and each day my penance has been a silence I can't overcome. You know I can't breathe in it. A father who can't talk to his son isn't real. You know this. I'm not here. This isn't my body. These aren't my fingers. They're yours. Take them. Use them. You can do better. Don't tell your family, they think I was still alive. But you're different. You knew it. That's why you didn't say a word. You knew I was already dead.

Dad

I called the paramedics after I read the letter, and I wondered if there was a chance I could have saved him if I would have called when I first noticed his injury. I wondered about the time I wasted in anger and in my room, and then I accessed the file I had just made and re-read the letter. Had I already considered him dead? Was that why I didn't immediately try to save him? Was I to blame? If I had continued to speak to him, even though he refused to talk to me, would he have reconsidered his ideals? What brought him to that point? Who did he rely on that failed him so badly that he ended up cutting off his own fingers and killing himself while being locked in the guest bedroom of his own home? Most of my life I considered that person to be me. I have always believed that I failed him, that I killed my father.

After that day I didn't speak about the letter or show it to anyone, including the rest of my family, until I showed it to my wife. My father wrote it to me, and he told me not to share it with another soul. And even though the rest of my family continually asked if my father said anything or left me a note the day I found him, I remained silent; and like most people they believed my silence was a result of depression and my loss. I'm sure that was a partial reason for my silence, but I had been silent for so long before his death that my silence after his death seemed natural. I became the silence and reveled in this identity. I welcomed it even more after his death than I had before, and everyone allowed it to happen.

Everyone, that is, until Sharon. Since the first time we met, Sharon wouldn't allow me to stay silent. She asked questions and pushed me, sometimes a little too hard, to figure out what I believed or how I felt or something as simple as what I wanted to eat. And now I realized that what Sharon gave me, more than love or even in some ways my son, was my voice back: There really wasn't any way I could repay her for that gift. I know that now. During the months after she gave birth to Stephen she fell into a deep post-natal depression. I tried anything I could think of to help cheer her up, to help alleviate the stress or fear or depression that eventually knotted her up so badly that she quit talking. Nothing worked. That was when I read her my father's letter.

She sat in a two-person rocking chair on our front porch and I read her the words like a soft-spoken poet reads his poetry in a coffee shop. The words and their meanings sounded so different as I heard them out loud. I gave the letter and my father a voice, and I wondered if the voice I had forgotten was my own. I don't know if the letter helped, or why I even believed reading a suicide note to a depressed person would help, but within

the next couple days the Sharon I met before Stephen's birth began to emerge again. She cried less and spoke more, and I liked to believe that the note helped. After I read the letter to Sharon she grabbed the letter and set it on fire, and then she hugged me and we watched the letter shrivel up and disappear in the fireplace.

Perhaps I've asked the wrong question my entire life. Perhaps I should have asked if I was even here. If I even existed. It was obvious that towards the end of my father's life he didn't believe in his own existence. Maybe it was a form of dementia? Years later I asked my family to explain my father's sickness, but by that time they had decided it was best not to talk about the incident at all. They had believed that it would be best for me. Basically, they had decided he didn't exist either. But he had, and I had the letter to prove it, or at least I used to have the letter. With no explanation for his behavior, I could only assume that he simply lost his voice and disappeared into the silence, but I don't think he really wanted to die. I think he thought that it was his only choice. And I was traveling along a similar path. Sharon had repeatedly told me as much as Stephen grew up. I focused more and more on myself and my questions and my gardening and my job. When she ultimately decided to leave me she said that the silence suffocated her. That she needed to breathe. Wasn't that what my father said – that he couldn't breathe?

I had failed my father as a child, but I wasn't going to fail my wife or my child as an adult. I knew I existed. I might have gotten lost in my own mind and traveled a similar path as my father, but I wasn't my father. Over the last few weeks Sharon had helped me realize this truth. She had also helped me understand why I was here. I was here because a father who couldn't speak to his wife or son wasn't real. Tommy was right, most events

in a person's life boiled down to decisions about whom to rely upon. But what he didn't understand was that it wasn't so much whom you relied upon, but it was about who relied upon you. Right now Sharon was relying on me to find Stephen and somehow bring him back, and Stephen was drifting on a raft in a vast sea waiting for someone to lead him back home.

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After I waited alone a few minutes beneath the trees, Rollo and the Black-Robed Man appeared together like two old friends strolling through the woods. The sight of the two men casually walking together and then sitting across from each other near a stone disturbed me. I thought they were gone or dead. It was like a bad dream. I hadn't explained it completely to Sharon, but I had thought the energy spike signaled the arrival of someone from another dimension. I never considered that it might signal a departure. I wondered why the two men were so friendly when only yesterday they seemed intent on killing one another. I wondered if I could still trust Rollo. Who or what was he? I hoped the crystals would protect me from both men. Hopefully, they thought I was dead or that I had returned home with Sharon.

As I waited I considered Rollo's role in shepherding me to this point. Had he known I would make it here all along? Had he told me the truth that night I spoke with him in the church courtyard? He had said that I would find a path inside to the answers I sought. Little did I know that I had so many questions or that inside could have so many meanings. Even more amazing was the fact that Bergie gave me the exact coordinates, date and time for this energy spike that very same night in the church. I would have listened and figured it out, then much of the journey over the past few weeks wouldn't

have been needed. But would that have been better? It was the path I traveled that provided the answers, not the destination.

Several large palm leaves and shadows camouflaged my body. Small rock iguanas scurried along my arms and back. I buried the crystals Rollo gave Sharon in a tight circle under the dirt around my entire body so that the glow wouldn't give away my position—but I needed their power. Rollo and the Black-Robed Man sat on the crushed leaf floor. I could hear their soft voices.

“You knew this is how it had to be,” the Black-Robed Man said.

“And how is that?” Rollo asked.

“His experiments must be clean.”

“Isn't their ability to travel between dimensions simply part of the experiment?”

“No. These people, especially this Jenson's son, has contaminated site 8.”

“Why?” Rollo asked.

“Because He said so,” the Black-Robed Man said. “When we jump you will see the damage you have caused, and you will help me shut that site down.”

“Why do you follow Him without question?”

“How do you question your self? He is infinite, and we are all an extension of his power.”

“You know He's dying,” Rollo said.

“Enough. This quarrel is useless. You cannot protect them anymore.”

“I agree. They need to find their own way. But you must admit the connection between this father and son was greater than even He could imagine. Perhaps they are the answer? Perhaps we should just let them live?”

“They are the dirt I clean off my test tube each night, nothing more. Germs.”

“That boy had a list of every jump we will make, in every dimension, for the next two weeks. I’m not sure you can call that the action of a simple germ.”

“The phone’s been destroyed.”

“You still underestimate them,” Rollo said.

“We will join Him soon, and then you will see. You’ve been in these worlds for too long alone. Now let us play one of these people’s games to pass the time. We need to occupy our minds before the jump.”

“Of course, you are probably right. This man couldn’t even save his own son.”

The two men sat around a flat rock and played cards only a few yards away. They appeared to be playing Honeymoon Bridge, the card game I used to play with my father. It was a card game I had taught Rollo how to play. For some reason it had always amused him. In this dry pocket on the island the air irritated my lungs. I fought back a cough and waited. Sweat dripped into my left eye. As I watched them, I padded more dirt on the crystals. If they didn’t work, the two men would easily sense my presence, and I would soon be dead. The forest canopy above looked like a green dome. A flock of dark birds flew out together from hidden spots in the trees and then returned to their same spots as if the trees themselves had taken a deep breath and sucked each bird back inside. Both men paused and stared into the other’s eyes. I looked at my watch. I knew it wouldn’t be long now.

As I lay on the ground, the trees exhaled the black birds again, but this time the birds escaped quickly and disappeared through the green canopy. The time was drawing near. I shook a large beetle off my arm and watched Rollo and the Black-Robed Man

continued to play cards. I tried to envision how I would stand after staying immobile for so long, and then how I would run towards the spot where these two men sat when the energy spike happened. I wouldn't be able to see or feel the spike. I could only go by the exact time and location the numbers provided. I had hoped the Benefactor's men would be able to use their instruments to verify the energy spike's position, but now I could only go on faith. I believed that the spike emanated and originated from an energy source unknown to the scientists and people of this world. The source and power of this spike were the discoveries missing from the Rosenberg Six Project. They weren't micro-wormholes. They were cosmic residue from much larger wormholes originating in different dimensions. The Rosenberg Six Project had failed to realize that they weren't transporting the body of the young men that volunteered for the experiment, they were transporting their souls. They were launching them without any anchor through an abyss without a guide. My son was one of these experiments, and I couldn't watch that body shrivel up any more. I had to do something.

By this time Sharon, Stephen and Todd should have disappeared somewhere within the United States. The Benefactor had promised each would have a new identity and my son would receive the best care. I had spent the previous night translating the rest of Dr. Rosenberg's codes. What did it matter? Originally I had thought that Dr. Rosenberg had predicted the occurrence of all energy spikes, but what he had really found was this single spike—the one that would occur in a matter of minutes. That was his true discovery. When the Benefactor learned about the importance of this specific spike, and how I not only knew its exact location but also understood, at least in theory, what it meant—that was when he decided to give me what I wanted. And what I had

wanted was the safety of the people I loved the most. In exchange, I not only translated the rest of the Rosenberg Six files, but I also agreed to lead a Special Forces Unit to this location and drop a new type of transponder into the spike. It was a transponder Dr. Rosenberg had been working on before he disappeared. It was believed to have the capability of transmitting a location through dimensions, which would, theoretically, give the scientist a way of bringing souls back.

Of course the Benefactor would be able to continue his experiments on humans, but he could have done that without my help. Now, hopefully, with the advancements the Rosenberg Six project had worked through over the past several months, the young boys would have more of a fighting chance. Without the three large crystals or the transponder that the Benefactor wanted me to drop into the energy spike itself, he would be left with little more than he what had begun with. What I hadn't shared with the Benefactor or anyone else was what I had discovered about Stephen's phone. The Black-Robed Man had said that I had never known its true value, and when he destroyed it I had wondered if I ever would. While I translated the Rosenberg Six files last night for the Benefactor, instead of separating my mind to relive a dream, as I had done before whenever I worked on files, I concentrated on what I knew about the phone. And what I knew was that I had reviewed and committed to memory every phone number in Stephen's database. Even though several numbers corresponded to regular phone numbers like Sharon's phone or mine...most of the numbers weren't phone numbers at all. They were exactly like the numbered series that had led me to this location. They signaled the time and dates and locations of energy spikes all over this world, and perhaps in other dimensions. I don't

know why I knew this had to be true, but I did. I thought, perhaps, that if I could bring these numbers back to Stephen, he could use them to find his way home.

Suddenly, Rollo and the Black-Robed Man dropped their cards to the ground, tilted their heads back and closed their eyes. A static shock surged across my skin. I felt like every hair on my body had been pulled at the same instant by millions of tweezers. My eyes rolled back. It felt like my heart and life stopped for an instant like a slow blink of the eyes, and then restarted anew. I looked around and the sky seemed suddenly blue and bright. The leaves and grass were like plastic green. I could breathe easier. I felt healthier than I had in years. Then I looked at the two men who were playing cards only a moment ago. Their two bodies were now slumped to the ground and charred. They looked shriveled and almost fake. The three crystals glowed white and gave off a strong heat. I leapt up as best I could after lying down for hours and ran towards the crystals. I couldn't turn back. I couldn't stop. As I got closer it felt like someone was sucking me towards the center. I knew once I entered the triangle I wouldn't be able to come back. I didn't know if the two men were dead. I didn't know if I would die. I heard a steady ring. The hairs on my arm and head all pointed towards the center of the triangle. I thought about Sharon and Stephen. I thought about my dad and how he must have felt as he sat in that chair and let the blood flow from his amputated fingers. Then I heard Rollo. He still spoke. He was still alive.

If you enter you may never be able to return. I can lead you to your son, but I will not be able to help again. The moment I help will be the moment He knows you are there.

I stood only inches from the center of the triangle. The crystals continued to glow, and I knew they had captured enough energy from the initial spike to send me through, or burn me to death.

“Who will know?” I asked out loud.

“*He calls Himself God.*” I didn’t understand his answer, but it terrified me nonetheless. I kissed my wedding band as the ringing got louder and louder, and the heat from the crystals began to burn my skin. Only the strongest boys were ever sent, and every one of them died within a few months except for my son. I stepped closer and the heat burned my skin. I began screaming. The pain was too intense. I thought about Stephen. The doctors had said that it was the connection between Stephen and me that had kept Stephen alive. And now I was going in alone. I began to question why I believed I could do it. Bright colors I hadn’t seen before flashed all around. The pain was too intense. I could smell my own skin and hair burning. I wanted to leave. I wanted to die. Then I remembered why I was here. I could see every file in my head that involved Stephen or Sharon as if they had all unfurled before me. This had to work. I had to find my son.

I closed my eyes. The pain had suddenly disappeared. I could see a deep pit and a canyon. I could hear hammers clinking against hard rock. I squeezed my eyes tighter, and I could see a small cave lined with cots filled with the bodies of young men. I had seen this cave before. It was the cave in my dreams. It was Stephen’s cave. I shifted my weight on one foot and hovered the other foot above the space between the dead bodies of Rollo and the Black-Robed Man. It felt like I had just put my leg into a rushing waterfall. I

could barely stand. The weight of the water seemed to be crushing my bones and skin. I opened my eyes, but I couldn't see anything. My leg appeared to be hovering in still air.

Suddenly, I heard Rollo's voice again: *Hurry. You're almost out of time.* I said a quick prayer and shifted my weight forward, clinched my teeth in preparation for whatever might happen, and stepped into the unseen waterfall and between the two dead men.