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Don’t Be Home for Christmas

Written by

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“Christmas Eve will find me

Where the love light gleams

I’ll be home for Christmas

If only in my dreams”

Kim Gannon and Walter Kent, 1943

“There are people who want to throw their arms ‘round you simply because it is Christmas.

There are other people who want to strangle you simply because it is Christmas.”

Robert Wilson Lynd, 1915

PROLOGUE

November 25 – Early Ornaments

The first of the holiday hordes had finally scattered.

 Mounds of streamers and confetti drifted across Manhattan’s 6th Avenue like tumbleweeds. Workers with earbuds and fluorescent vests attempted to sweep the trash left behind by the mobs. Other workers tackled rows of bleachers that needed to be disassembled. A long-awaited opportunity for holiday pay with overtime. No one rushed and no one cared.

 Heading northwest on 42nd Street, a white Ford cargo van turned towards the busy afternoon crowds of Times Square. It idled around oblivious pedestrians and pulled onto a curb at the corner of 42nd and Broadway. A posted sign read, “Thanksgiving Day Parade Crews Only.”

 The driver paused to study his surroundings. The crisp air was filled with steam from vendors’ carts that were so diverse the United Nations would’ve been proud. He was parked near the rear of the building. The only tenant at the base was a Walgreens. The remainder of the twenty-four-story tower appeared windowless, covered in animated billboards.

 The crowds were gradually filtering into restaurants and a handful of shows that were open for Thanksgiving. The soundtrack was a cacophony of holiday melodies and honking horns.

 The driver exited the van. He was mid-fifties and wore blue coveralls. He appeared Hispanic, with a grim face. A younger man exited the passenger’s side. He was slim and darted his head as if new to the whole scene.

 The men opened the rear of the van. They retrieved two boxes, each approximately six feet tall and three feet wide. They rolled the boxes on handcarts towards the building’s rear. Above a rear door was the address, “One Times Square.” The older worker rang a grating service bell.

 After another ring, a wary custodian cracked the door. He squinted like he’d been roused from a cave. “*Qué quieres*?” he asked in a hoarse voice. What do you want?

 The older worker replied in Spanish, “We have two boxes, to the twenty-fourth floor. We are late.”

 “Late?” The custodian chuckled with yellow teeth, “The parade is over. No one is here today.”

 The older man sighed and pointed to an invoice. “Two patio heaters. Delivery for today.” He pointed up, “It is twenty degrees colder on your roof.”

 The custodian cocked his head. His eyes sparkled as if something clicked, “Are they perhaps for the show with the…Ryan *Seacrests*?”

 The workers shrugged. They didn’t know or care.

 The inside of One Times Square appeared ironically abandoned. Minimal lighting kept the space gloomy even though it was late afternoon. The walls were bare cement and drywall with faded graffiti. Bing Crosby’s vintage “White Christmas” echoed through the walls from a nearby merchant. The hollow atmosphere was like a 1940s haunted tower.

 The custodian led the men and their boxes through the deserted area. He pressed the button to a scuffed elevator. The custodian puffed his cheeks and stared at his shoes at the odd pause. He looked up at the men, “You see the parade?”

 “No,” the older worker replied, stoic. The younger man grinned and bobbed his head.

 On the twenty-third floor, the elevator doors opened to blinding daylight. The men squinted to see they were outside on a roof. As they rolled their boxes, they realized they had another flight of stairs they had to climb to an even higher level.

 Before he could be asked to help, the custodian shouted from the elevator, “Be quick! I will wait for you downstairs.” The door closed.

 The two men helped each other wrangle the boxes up the steel steps to an observation deck. The area was narrow, surrounded by railings. Despite the brisk wind, they quickly unpacked and assembled the stainless steel patio heaters. Each one had a cylindrical stainless base that looked like a robot, with a pipe and a circular hood to house the furnace. They rolled each heater to two corners of the forty-by-twenty-foot deck. The men stepped back and nodded at their handiwork.

 They turned to absorb a birds-eye view of Times Square. Flashing lights and animated billboards that shimmered. Visitors on the streets looked like busy insects. The towering Marriott Marquis and every name-brand shop imaginable. At the far end, red grandstands were already waiting for the New Year’s festivities over a month away.

 “Incredible!” the junior man exclaimed in Spanish with wide eyes. “Imagine seeing the Christmas lights from here!”

 His partner scoffed. “They barely clean the garbage from one holiday before planning the next.”

 Junior lifted his cellphone to take his own photo with the iconic background behind him. “But look at us now. Not a bad job we have.” He beamed and clicked.

 “Oh yeah?” The older man pulled a folded newspaper from his back pocket. “You may need to find a new job.” He slapped the paper into the kid’s hand.

 Puzzled, Junior unfolded the business section to read a headline. His smile faded to read, “FTC Clears Merger of Harding-Foxtel and the Bayonet Group.” Joy drained from his face.

 “The big fish never care which holiday it is,” Senior grumbled as he lit a cigarette.

 Junior gazed over his partner’s shoulder –and then up at something he had not noticed. “*Dios mio!*” he exclaimed. His eyes doubled in size and his mouth hung open. He lifted his phone to photograph what he was beholding.

 “No one will believe what I am doing up here…” Junior exclaimed.

 “You don’t know what we’re doing up here.” His partner exhaled smoke with a scowl, “Nor will you be telling anyone.”

PART ONE

(There’s No Place Like)

Home for the Holidays

Chapter One – A Few of My Favorite Things

December 24th

As in most cities and homes, time seemed to blur between Thanksgiving and Christmas in New York City.

 Twinkling lights bordered the corridors of buildings. The season’s first snow. Excited masses crushed in for the unveiling of the Rockefeller tree. Radio City flaunting their enchanting Rockettes. Eager lines for the skating rink, hot cocoas and carts selling snacks claiming to be chestnuts. A rush of tourists as people attempted to be five-percent kinder to one another.

 Business was booming for most companies, and they endeavored to reward their people with equal joy. Holiday parties, bonuses –and of course sending their employees home early on Christmas Eve.

 Except for the esteemed Harding-Foxtel Corporation.

 Two blocks from Rockefeller Center, the landmark Harding-Foxtel Tower still had illuminated windows. Not as clever decorations, but because people were still working at 5:20 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

 On the 42nd floor, Harding-Foxtel’s executive boardroom was all-business with a dozen dour executives seated around its long marble table. The men and women wore tailored business suits and maintained pensive frowns as they listened to each other drone on.

 Except for Kyle Colbert. Kyle had selected his red and green Santa tie weeks in advance. After all, “You can only wear it once a year,” he’d said to his wife Maria like a child, despite his forty-two years. Maria had smiled and nodded to allow him his fun.

 With the rare benefit of Christmas Eve falling on a Friday, Kyle had made a conscious decision to not wear a business suit or blazer to work. Just some nice khakis, a hunter-green dress shirt, his Santa tie, and a red and green scarf with his wool overcoat.

 He had briefly paused when he entered the boardroom to see his peers in their three-piece executive finest. *Really..?* Kyle had almost exclaimed.

 Christmas Eve at work used to be a day of fun. Sitting around, eating donuts, a catered turkey lunch with gift exchanges. Not anymore, not at Harding-Foxtel. Kyle even gazed around the office at their lack of merriment. Since the H.R. department wanted to curtail any religious-based grievances, the extent of any holiday decorations included poinsettia plants, which had dried up since no one knew they needed water. Instead of corporate holiday cards, each employee receive an automated email wishing them “a satisfactory non-denominational day of planning.”

 Kyle only half listened as Senior Vice President Chester Hawkins rambled on about a decline with year-end sales. Hawkins had a grating voice coming from his vulture-like bald head and skeletal neck. Kyle absolutely cared about his firm’s success, but couldn’t old-man Hawkins give it a rest until Monday or after New Year’s? What could possibly increase sales between Christmas and January 1st?

 Kyle nodded as if following along. Everyone appeared ten years older than their actual ages, and their faces had permanent frown lines. Conversely, his coworkers all said he looked like Jason Bateman or a young Tom Hanks, like a “friendly next-door neighbor,” whatever that meant. Kyle knew that everyone at the table would put the company before their families at Christmas, and they had evidently selected “miserable” as a life choice.

 Kyle expelled a powerful sneeze. Instead of anyone saying bless you, a few of Hawkins’ V.P. minions scowled at the disruption. Kyle huffed to himself and reached for another flu lozenge. He loudly opened its cellophane wrapper and popped it into his mouth. With two colors of pens, Kyle pretended to take notes on a legal pad. He doodled a halfway decent Christmas tree, a sleigh that had a jet engine, and a fireplace complete with stockings and flames.

 “–*Kyle!”* A voice whispered from the seat beside him, “Mr. Hawkins asked you a question.”

 Kyle looked up with wide eyes. It was his supervisor Connor Banks. He motioned to Hawkins at the end of the table. Kyle turned to Mr. Hawkins, “Can you repeat that sir?”

 Hawkins looked like a seventy-year-old angry eagle. He had a sharp nose over an eternal scowl. He blinked with impatience, “*Mr. Colbert*… I asked you –after the symposium we so generously sent you to– do you still believe we have the lead over Phantex?”

 Kyle didn’t blink for an eternal second. He then cleared his throat, “Both our firms agree the targets’ use of social media is unprecedented with how aggressively it engages people in the west.” He confidently shrugged, “We, of course, have the proprietary program I’ve been developing…” His voice trailed, unsure it was what they wanted to hear.

 Hawkins and his V. P. cronies remained still with severe faces. They then carried on with more indecipherable graphs that sloped downward.

 “I can never tell if they loathe me or if I’m some…faceless number,” Kyle said to Connor Banks as they briskly exited the boardroom.

 “Are you kidding?” Connor replied as if Kyle were some star athlete. “They think you’re some sort of… analytical genius.” Though Connor and Kyle were roughly the same age, Connor was technically Kyle’s superior. Connor was more bookish, with the standard uptight corporate face, a thinning comb-over and horn-rimmed glasses.

 “Right…” Kyle almost blushed.

 “Think about it,” Connor replied as they marched down the hall. “They sent you 11,000 miles to Dubai. That shows you their level of confidence.” He turned to Kyle, “Your work here could single-handedly locate all target accounts and stop this entire thing in a year.”

 Kyle paused, truly humbled.

 Connor leaned forward, “You’re our rival’s worst nightmare.”

 Kyle chuckled. “I’m the only one here who knows it’s Christmas Eve and you describe me as a nightmare.” He lifted a finger as he released another violent sneeze.

 Connor recoiled. “Are you getting the flu? Probably from sitting on a plane for twelve hours.”

 Kyle blew his nose, “Maria’s got a 151-proof rum eggnog that’ll knock it right out –if I can ever get home.”

 In Kyle’s spacious corner office that overlooked 5th Avenue, he shuffled through undistributed gift bags. Maria had neatly written name tags on each bag to help make his task easier. Kyle still had four gifts to deliver to his staff. A reliable mix of Yankee candles or liquor, depending on the person’s nature.

 “Chase Zahir called,” Rena Stacy announced, struggling to follow in his trail. “He said something odd’s going on. He said it’s important–”

 Kyle interrupted, “–He probably has news he doesn’t want to put in an email.” Zahir was a fellow analyst at another firm and they enjoyed trading industry gossip.

 “You and Zahir are friends? Isn’t he, like, your leading competitor?” Rena was mid-twenties and considered alluring by the mailroom guys who would bring her Starbucks for no reason. She was an intellectual brunette with olive skin and wide dark eyes. An L.A. casting agent would say she could portray any ethnicity.

 “I think of Chase Zahir as a friend, not a competitor,” Kyle replied as he studied gift tags. “He’s one of the few analysts I actually trust. Whatever the big news is, it can wait. I’ll call him after Christmas. Speaking of, this is for you, my most inquisitive intern.” He handed Rena an elaborate gold gift bag Maria had wrapped especially for her.

 Rena cautiously took the bag as if she were some species who’d never received a gift. “Uh, thank you..?” She sat the bag down and looked at Kyle, “Did the board today establish a window for the Bayonet merger?”

 “Rena,” Kyle smiled. “Do you want some inside advice?”

 “Absolutely.” She quickly readied her e-tablet to take notes.

 He stepped to a coatrack to grab his coat and a weathered leather satchel. “Here’s my suggestion:” He looked at her, “Just relax. It’s after five o’clock on Christmas Eve. It’s like everyone’s forgotten. If you want to glean every kernel of wisdom from me –*non-work-related*– would you care to walk with me? We’ll give out these last bags like Mr. and Mrs. Claus, and then head to Grand Central. You have to go that same way to go home –and that part’s an order.”

 Rena cocked her head and blinked as if needing to calculate such a concept. “All right..?”

 The crowds were lined-up for cabs on Madison Avenue. Diligent stragglers racing to get to their families. The street’s glow illuminated snow flurries –not enough to create traffic havoc, but enough to entice everyone to click photos of the holiday magic. Temperatures dipping in the twenties couldn’t keep people from smiling. Twinkling decorations arched over the intersections. Holiday classics crooned from unseen speakers.

 Kyle was bundled and smiling as he and Rena walked. “How exactly did you get into Harding for your internship?” he asked. “We’re a tough gig.”

 “Factually speaking, I was the top of my class,” Rena spoke scholarly. “I simply applied at the top IT firm.” She rolled her hand, “I then applied for you. You’re universally considered more clever than the others. You have the intellect, but you march to your own–” Rena paused, “Before I swell your ego, I recall your rule about ‘no shop talk.’”

 “Touché.” Kyle couldn’t contain a grin. “And thank you. You’re sharp as well, you seem to trust your instincts.” They paused to step around a Santa ringing for last-call donations.

 He smiled at Rena. “What are you doing for Christmas –I apologize; do you celebrate?”

 For the first time, Rena half grinned. “I’m not Jewish. But my father was Muslim. My stepmother does enjoy decorating a tree and we do exchange gifts.” She turned to Kyle. “Considering your… colorful tie, I presume you enjoy the holiday.”

 “Oh yeah.” Kyle grinned. “And this year’s special. With the kids and all… Doing the Santa thing. I promised to make this year as memorable as possible.”

 Rena smiled at the notion. Her eyes focused through the flurries to see the renowned facade of Grand Central Station. “And you make this commute every day?”

 “Absolutely.” He looked up as they approached the terminal. Three towering arched windows on its 42nd Street façade, topped with sculptures of Roman gods with an ornate clock at its center, all dusted with fresh snow.

 “It’s amazing how a ninety-minute train can erase the stress, horn-honking and furious pace of our beloved metropolis.” Kyle paused at his own words. “It’s like having a… time machine.”

 Rena cocked her head to absorb his perspective.

 He resumed their stroll. “When I board that train every day, I can’t wait to unplug. No more bad news of the world. When we pull up to the station at Twin Creeks, it’s looked the same for eighty years. People actually smile and say hello –imagine that!

 “The station’s guard, Francois –the nicest guy in the world– always waves with a big smile, ‘*Good evening Mr. Colbert...’* Then I walk out through the snow. Only four blocks to my house. I walk by a park that’s been there since 1890. It still has a town square with a gazebo and skating pond. They put up little white lights –like magic.”

 Rena remained quiet as Kyle painted images with his words.

 “My street is a cul-de-sac of little colonials. My neighbors have a holiday light contest. Organized by my buddy Jimmy next door. He’s a bear-of-a-man who cries like a baby if he doesn’t win. The block looks like a mini-Vegas with all the lights.”

 Kyle grinned, “Sometimes, when I come up the street, the kids stand at the window. I see ‘em as I walk up.” He beamed like a proud dad. “Maria works too, but I get home so late, she likes me to smell food when I walk in. If she’s got nothing, she does a little trick of just frying garlic.”

 Rena chuckled.

 “Sappy, I know. A ninety-minute ride, straight into a Norman Rockwell painting.”

 Rena asked, “*Norma* Rockwell is a painter?”

 Kyle shook his head. “Do you have any great plans or…traditions for this evening?”

 “We do. My stepmother and I meet at P.F. Chang’s in Hackensack.”

 Kyle smiled and blinked, waiting for more. “That…sounds lovely.”

 They stopped and he looked up at a brass sign that announced, “Grand Central Terminal.”

 “This is where I take off.” He turned to Rena, “And Merry Christmas to you –and no emails or texts about work until Monday.”

 “See you then. Enjoy your holiday.” She smiled, turned and was gone.

 Kyle pulled his phone from his jacket. The screen listed four missed calls labeled “OFFICE.” He narrowed his eyes and shook his head, *not tonight you don’t*... He clicked the phone to silent.

 Kyle then typed a text to Maria, “Leaving city now, excited about tonight. Love you.”

 Beside Grand Central’s entrance, Yuri, a roasted chestnut vendor, was calling it a night. The holiday was essentially over. The Monday after Christmas, he’d be back to selling pretzels. Yuri sighed before folding up shop.

 As he scrolled through news on his phone, a face in a story caught his eye. With fear etched across his face, he turned to the man who’d just entered the terminal. The man with the Santa tie and red and green scarf. *Could it be..?* Should he call the authorities –or get out of the area immediately?

Chapter Two – Like the Down of a Thistle

The MTA, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, had a north railroad known as the Harlem Line because it ran from Harlem, through Grand Central, north to eastern Dutchess County, eighty miles from Manhattan. A safe and reliable choice for commuters to work in the city, yet reside in entirely opposite environments.

 For Kyle Colbert it meant no more scrappy locals shouting or cars honking once he popped in his earbuds and the train departed the terminal.

 The train was less busy than usual due to the time on Christmas Eve. Kyle sat alone by a window, still wanting to see the city’s lights. With the frigid window, he decided to leave on his scarf and he wore a wool fedora. He slid on his reading glasses so he could peruse the latest trade magazine he’d saved for the ride.

 From either the magazine’s content, or the lulling rumble of the train, or the flu medicine combined with waking up at 4:30 a.m., Kyle dozed off within minutes. Right on schedule.

 “*Next stop Bedford Hills. Please stand clear of the doors –and Merry Christmas folks*,” the conductor’s voice proclaimed through the garbled P.A. system.

 The announcement triggered Kyle’s internal clock. Bedford Hills, another beautiful hamlet, was an hour north of Manhattan, which meant only thirty minutes for the final leg of his journey.

 Kyle adjusted his hat and glasses and opened his satchel to retrieve two handwritten notes. He scanned the first. On top was the name “Jack” scrawled in pencil. Under it listed, “X-Box; BB gun; Star Wars ship (classic only please.)” He paused for a mental inventory, and then made three check marks with a pen.

 He unwrapped another flu lozenge and unfolded the second letter. This one had been authored by “Cassie.” In a young child’s handwriting, it itemized, “Barbie doll; stethoscope; necklace...” He added more checks and made a few notes.

 Kyle knew this year had to go perfect. Could he measure up? Would be accepted into the family as one of their own? As a perfectionist and a strategic over-planner by trade, he tried to think of every contingency. Frowning at his watch, there were only a few hours left.

 Over the P.A., a crackled version of “I’ll be Home for Christmas” began to play. The instant nostalgia of Bing Crosby’s classic made him pause.

 “–Such a sad song, don’t you think?” an elderly female voice interrupted.

 Kyle turned to see a shrunken woman of about ninety seated beside him. “Pardon me, ma’am?” She wore a kitschy holiday sweater, ornament earrings and crooked red lipstick.

 “The song,” she replied in a Brooklyn accent. “‘I’ll be Home for Christmas.’ So sad...”

 Kyle winced, mystified. “I think it’s beautiful. It’s so vivid. Seeing snow... The mistletoe, presents on the tree..?”

 The woman shook her head as if correcting him. “The song’s written from a soldier’s perspective. During the war. It’s a letter of the things he wishes for.” She gave a melancholy smile. “But he knows he’s not coming home... That’s why he writes, I’ll be home ‘If only in my dreams.’ Very sad. My first husband was in the war.”

 Kyle withdrew at her interpretation. *What a buzz kill.* He installed a smile. “You have a very cheerful holiday, ma’am.”

 The conductor’s voice spared Kyle any further chatter as the P.A. declared, “*Next stop Twin Creeks. Please stand clear of the doors*…”

 Kyle stood to gather his belongings. As he glanced down the aisle, he caught the glance of a boy, about twelve years old. He was reading his phone and wearing earbuds. When the boy looked up, he locked eyes with Kyle. The boy gasped with wide eyes as if Kyle had done something wrong. Puzzled, Kyle looked behind him to see what the kid was gawking at. There was nothing there. When he turned back, the boy’s parents had pulled him into the next car.

 Kyle shrugged it off. He secured his scarf and hat and stepped towards the exit. Peeking at his phone, he was surprised to see, “MARIA: 3 MISSED CALLS."

 *She’s not a habitual caller,* he mused. Maria never called unless there was a reason. Was something wrong? Were the kids okay? Maybe she just needed him to pick-up something on the way home. After he stepped off the train, he dialed her number.

 After four rings, her friendly but assertive voice announced, “*Hi there. You’ve reached Maria Colbert. Please leave a message and I’ll…*” He hung up. Kyle tried to think it through logically. Maria hadn’t left a voice mail. If it was an emergency, like someone was injured, she would’ve left a message. Kyle knew his walk home was only fifteen minutes, so he decided not to worry. She was probably just anxious to get the festivities going.

 He was the only person exiting through the station’s breezeway. He passed a plaque stating the station was built in 1914. Over the Chicago brick main entrance was a large clock flanked by eagle sculptures. In 1975, the station had been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

 Despite the holiday, Kyle saw the security guard Francois by the exit. Francois was a Creole gentleman of about fifty, in a pressed uniform. He was in the shadows twenty yards away. As Kyle initiated his nightly greeting, he saw Francois turned away, huddled on his phone as if it were important. Kyle paused, but the man’s tense posture suggested the call was critical. *Hope everything’s okay,* Kyle thought as he continued out the building and into the snow.

 Kyle began his quarter-mile trek home. Unlike the city, when he inhaled there was almost no scent. Just a gust of spruce from trees fifty feet to his right at Metzger’s park. Flurries were falling and the ground held a ten-inch carpet of snow. When he walked, his shoes made the *chirp, chirp* sound through the fresh powder until he could get to the plowed street. Kyle thought the hamlet of Twin Creeks indeed looked like a Hallmark card.

 In fact, his view was like a portrait because no one was outside. This seemed odd. Kyle turned 180-degrees to observe no one else outside. No dog-walkers, no kids, no carolers. This was his fortieth Christmas in Twin Creeks, and this appeared strange. *Then again,* Kyle chuckled, *it is Christmas Eve*. Everything was closed and people would be inside with their families.

 Kyle walked briskly, but enjoyed the scenery. The park had white lights on the gazebo. A pond would be used for skating in another few weeks. Now it was a thin, frozen slush. To Kyle’s left were two-story colonials built in the 1900s, glowing with warm lights. The streets were laced with lights and retro-decorations as if the town was stuck in some vintage past. *Well worth the commute*, Kyle reminded himself daily.

 He noticed a large Victorian. It had a wide bay window in front of a living room. With its drapes open, Kyle could see the entire family inside by a fireplace. Old and young, all dressed up. They were laughing and clapping at something. Kyle smiled, but this made him want to get home faster. He accelerated his stride.

 Kyle turned right on Mayfield Lane, a road that ended with a cul-de-sac; his house at the end. The homes were cookie-cutter colonials, but generations had given each home a uniqueness with landscaping and mature evergreens. And the lighting contest was in full swing. The homes twinkled with an array of white, red, green –and every other color. Automated Santas, snowmen and pop culture characters Kyle wasn’t even aware of. It looked like Magic Kingdom with snow.

 About a hundred yards ahead he finally beheld his modest two-story home. It made his stomach flutter. He squinted to see any sign of activity –but suddenly flinched.

 A wolf-like Siberian husky jumped up beside him. Kyle took a deep breath with a cough, “Hey Bella… You scared me!” He stroked the dog’s large head. “Are you cold? Where is everyone? Enjoying the holiday I suppose.”

 Kyle resumed his pace, faster towards his home. The neighbor’s husky trotted beside him. “I’m late, huh girl? It’s weird out. Like everyone’s hiding.”

 Kyle looked again at his house. A hundred feet away, he could see the illuminated front window. He beamed to see the silhouettes of two children, one taller than the other. He said to the dog, “They’re waitin’ for me! See ‘em?” But the husky began to sprint, off into the shadows.

 When Kyle approached his driveway, he gave an overstated wave. The kids were still in the window. He shouted, “Daddy’s home! Better watch out, better not cry!”

 With lit candy canes bordering the sidewalk, Kyle could see perfectly to dash towards the door. This was the big night; what he’d been daydreaming of for weeks.

 He jogged up the sidewalk, clomped up the steps and grasped the doorknob. When he opened the door his smile disappeared. He was horrified.

 “Tha…That’s not funny Jack,” Kyle stammered, white as sleet. “What’s going on?”

 Nine-year-old Jack aimed a .30 caliber Winchester rifle directly at Kyle. Tiny blonde Cassie, seven years old, stood behind him in pajamas. Both were crying, their cheeks wet with tears.

 Kyle raised his palms. He attempted to speak with authority, “Put it down Jack –where’s your mom?”

 The stocky boy maintained his aim directly at Kyle’s chest. His sister cowered behind him with a high, whimpering cry. The boy replied with startling resilience, “You took her! And I have to kill you –now! They said!”

 “*They* who? What are you talking about?” Kyle instinctively stepped back.

 Little Jack began to hyperventilate, his finger trembling on the trigger. The gun suddenly fired and bucked. The jolt made Kyle drop down a step –the bullet buzzing over his shoulder.

 Shockingly, the boy aimed again. Kyle spun, dropped his bag and bolted to his right. His last vision of the kids was little Cassie lifting a butcher knife. The shimmer of her blade.

 Jack fired again.

Chapter Three – Running in a Winter Wonderland

Kyle had no time to evaluate what was happening. A primitive fight-or-flight instinct seized his body. He ran as fast as he could.

 The snow made him stagger as he sprinted to his next-door-neighbor’s house. He heard another shot behind him. It quickened his pace and he stumbled over a thorny holly bush. His foot slipped on the edge of a frozen sidewalk, and he almost collided with a plastic snowman.

 Kyle regained his balance and ran to the home’s rear. Despite the dark, he made it to a back kitchen door. Panicked, he began beating on the door with both hands.

 “Jimmy! Ana! Let me in!” He looked to the left, towards his house. “*Jimmy!*” Kyle tested the handle –it was unlocked. He opened the door and barged inside.

 He’d been in their kitchen a hundred times. The smell of home cooking that brought almost instant comfort. He panted, catching his breath. He looked up to see a frail mid-forties blonde standing in a robe.

 “Ana… Thank God…” He stepped closer. “Something’s going on! With the kids –they tried to kill me!” As he focused, he noticed Ana appeared shaken with wide eyes. She wore no make-up and her hair was up. He’d interrupted their private time, but this was an emergency. Kyle paused to see Ana slowly lift her hands as if surrendering. She was usually the life of the party.

 “M…May I go upstairs? For Jimmy?” Ana stammered.

 Kyle frowned at her odd reaction. “Yes –get him! He’s friends with Sheriff–” He stopped when he saw her dash into the living room. He heard her footsteps thumping up the stairs.

 Kyle leaned on the kitchen counter to collect his thoughts. He rubbed his eyes as his sinuses throbbed. He struggled to decipher his predicament. What had gotten into Jack and Cassie? Jack was too young for drugs, *right?* Should he call the sheriffs, or walk over with Jimmy first? He decided to go into the living room to shout for Jimmy.

 He walked from the kitchen into the dim living room. The décor was English country-style and homey. To his left was a staircase to the second floor. He noticed their menorah and Hanukah decorations. They’d been enjoying a quiet night at home. “I’m sorry Jimmy,” Kyle shouted. “I need help! It’s an emergency!”

 He scanned the room, his heart still racing. He looked up to see a mounted deer head. On the mantle were photos of him and Jimmy from a hunting trip two months earlier in Vermont. In the photo, bearded Jimmy was a foot taller than Kyle, with an extra fifty pounds. He was holding his prized Remington Sendero rifle with a stainless steel barrel –*click–*

 Kyle turned –Jimmy was aiming his rifle directly at him. He was standing on the staircase’s landing, aiming his prized Remington. The click had been the bolt locking a cartridge into the chamber. He was ready to shoot.

 “Wh…What’s happing Jimbo?” Kyle stammered, lifting his hands. “What the–”

 “–Stay there Ana. I got him!” Jimmy bellowed over his shoulder, crying. The large man was in a t-shirt and boxers, breathing heavy with misty eyes. He frowned at Kyle, “You think I *want* to do this?”

 “Do what?” Kyle replied, almost shouting.

 “Kill you now.” Jimmy’s hands quaked. He wiped a tear from his cheek. “All this time..? How *could* you..?”

 “Could I *what*?” Kyle exclaimed, frustrated. “What’s happening?”

 With a finger to his lips, Jimmy *shushed* him. “*Shh*… Stop... I can’t upset you. Or anger. Or even approach…” He began to cry and shook his head. “I have to shoot now.” Jimmy fired.

 Kyle dove back towards the kitchen, a blind spot from the stairs. He heard the shot ricochet off an antique fixture. Jimmy’s unsteady hands had saved him. Kyle’s momentum propelled him forward, through the kitchen and out the rear door, back into the night.

 Kyle panted as he ran, his lungs gurgling. He went left through the backyard. His pace slowed as he slogged through a snowdrift. He turned between two houses, back towards the road. As he checked behind him, he ran directly into a web of holiday lights like a net.

 “*I think he went there…”* a boy’s voice echoed from a distance. It was Jack.

 Kyle crouched and looked towards his house. He saw crisscrossing flashlight beams in the distant haze. A man’s voice echoed from the darkness, “*We can’t corner him!”*

 Panicked, Kyle squirmed to untangle himself from the string of lights. He feared being seen; he looked like an electric Halloween costume. He rolled and tugged the cord until something unplugged. The lights turned off. He turned to see more hazy spotlights in the distance.

 “*I had him!”* bellowed Jimmy’s voice, “*He went north! Get a gun!”* Several men were silhouetted by a distant streetlamp.

 Kyle wriggled and kicked off the remaining lights. He huddled behind a mound of snow between a plastic snowman and a thin evergreen. He tried to remain calm when he saw the flashlights moving in his direction. He laid as flat as a salamander and closed his eyes as if it’d make the nightmare go away. *Please don’t see me… Just keep walking…*

 On his neck he felt the warm panting of a beast –huffing inches from his ear.

 He cracked an eye. It was the snout and steaming breath of… *a wolf?* It was a Siberian husky. The dog Bella had found him. Sniffing him, two inches away. Kyle struggled to not move.

 Kyle whispered, “Good Bella… *Stay… Quiet*–”

 Bella barked. And then again. A sudden blast and Frosty the Snowman’s head exploded two feet away. The noise made the dog yelp and flee into the woods.

 Adrenalin launched Kyle into a sprint, away from the scene. He heard faint voices in his trail.

 “*There!”* a man shouted. “*Get him!*” screamed another. A third exclaimed, “*We can’t upset him!*”

 Main Street in Twin Creeks looked exactly like it sounded. Built in the late 1800s with a cobblestone thoroughfare. The storefronts appeared to be untouched by time. Feed stores and mercantiles had gradually transitioned into trendy cafés and craft breweries. A few shops still served as pharmacies, a barber shop, and other mom-n-pop retailers. In the 90s, Twin Creeks’ Main Street won a “Most Like *It’s a Wonderful Life*” contest in *Travel Magazine.*

 And this Christmas Eve was no different. A light snow fell onto Main Street. The merchants’ holiday lights glimmered, but with everything closed, you could hear the flurries land. Despite the peaceful beauty, the absence of any life gave it a surreal quality.

 Piercing the silence, Kyle Colbert rounded the corner, running as fast as he could. He jogged onto Main Street, almost meandering, with no evident goal.

 Main Street was four blocks north of Kyle’s street. He’d zigzagged, cutting through yards until he heard no more voices following. He fretfully glanced over his shoulders as he ran down the street’s sidewalk.

 Exhausted, he finally slowed in front of a row of shops. He erratically looked around to make sure no one was nearby. He bent, hands-on-knees, to catch his breath. He sounded like a saw as he hacked and coughed. “Jesus…what’s happening…Jesus…” Kyle panted.

 He patted his jacket pockets, remembering his phone. He lifted it to see the screen proclaim, “27 MISSED CALLS.” They were from Maria and other numbers he didn’t recognize. He hit redial for Maria’s number. He whispered, “Come on…come on…” A voice answered.

 “*Hi there. You’ve reached Maria Colbert. Please leave a message and I’ll call you back*.” A cold robotic male voice then interjected, “*Mailbox full. Please try again*–”

 “–Shit!” Kyle shouted. He sighed, depleted. A blue shimmer from the shop he was standing in front of caught his eye. He looked up and realized he was standing in front of Brett’s Television and Audio, owned by Brett Kelley, a pleasant Kiwanis member. The shimmer came from a wall of televisions that were on as a display.

 When Kyle turned towards the televisions, his jaw dropped and he inhaled. Twenty screens were glowing with a close-up image of his face.

 He cupped his hands on the glass for a clearer view. On a large-screen TV, the image of his face appeared to be from his driver’s license. A caption read “Kyle Donald Colbert,” so it was no mistake. His blank expression made it look like a mug shot.

 Under his face a banner flashed: “DO NOT APPROACH.” Words added, “REWARD -$1,000,000 DEAD OR WHEREABOUTS.”

Chapter Four – Do You Hear What I Hear?

His eyes darted with disbelief as if he’d crossed into some sort of *Twilight Zone.*

 Kyle stepped back from the shop. He swallowed the acid that crept up from his stomach. *What’s happening?* He tried to comprehend, but his mind was reeling. It had to be a bad dream or delirium. Maybe brought on by fever? *Or the flu medicine* –*an allergic reaction?*

 Standing numb, he recoiled at the sudden squeal of tires coming from his right. He instantly dropped behind a bus bench to hide. From ground level he saw a car speeding around the corner. It skidded to a stop in the middle of the intersection. Kyle focused to see it was a battered, red 1970s Chevy, maybe an Impala.

 Laughter bellowed from the car’s open windows. Kyle peeked to see four figures in the car. He could hear their laughing. They sounded like juveniles. The driver and rear passenger leaned out of their windows wearing cheap, rubber Santa masks –and the passenger held a gun.

 “There he is!” One passenger shouted, “Get him!” The Chevy’s V8 roared.

 Kyle huddled lower behind the bench. He squeezed his eyes tight and gnashed his teeth.

 “There! He’s there..!” One of them fired a gun with more laughter. The car launched forward with chirping tires.

 When Kyle realized the car wasn’t moving closer, he cracked an eye. The Chevy and the Santa thugs drove straight towards a man on the sidewalk across the street. Kyle noticed the man was wearing a coat similar to his. The thugs aimed a spotlight at the petrified man. The middle-aged man froze with hands up. Evidently seeing he was the wrong man, the Chevy raced away, screeching around the corner. The laughter faded into the night.

 Though the threat was gone, Kyle’s breathing became labored. His heart felt like it was thrusting out of his chest. He felt unable to move.

 The small brick Check Cashing Shoppe boasted in neon yellow that it was open 24-Hours –*Even Holidays!* There were only two older vehicles in its parking lot. One surely belonged to the poor soul who had to work there, and the other for its only customer.

 Santa Claus entered the shop –or rather, Timothy Baker, the resident Santa from the Twin Creeks Mall. His rendition was not good. Santa appeared haggard, with the fake beard pulled below his chin. He had thick black eyebrows and stubble that didn’t fit the classic *Coca Cola* image.

 Santa sighed when he entered the warm shop. He unzipped his stained red coat to reveal a tank top and a gold chain. He waddled up to the service window and repeatedly tapped its bell.

 “Alright, alright…” replied a gravelly female voice. The clerk appeared from a back room, still chewing something. The woman had thinning hair and appeared to be ninety pounds. With circles around her eyes, she coughed, “Ho, ho Santa. Last paycheck of the year, I suppose?”

 Santa slid her his creased mall paycheck without responding.

 She glanced at it, accessed her computer screen and pounded a rubber stamp. “I’ll see you next season, right?”
 Santa scoffed and slurred, “That shitty mall won’t be open next year.” He chuckled, “I need to win the lottery.”

 “You and me both. “ The clerk proceeded to count out a small stack of bills. “Now you be careful outside with this much cash,” she added maternally.

 Santa patted the side of his coat with a grin, “Oh… I got a .38 and a conceal permit.” He winked, “Ho, ho Patrice.”

 Santa counted his cash and turned to exit. A television mounted in the corner caught his attention. On its screen was the face of a male with the name “Kyle Colbert.” Santa put away his cash and continued towards the door.

 He then heard the newscaster state, “$1,000,000 reward…”

 A thick eyebrow went up. Santa paused to watch the broadcast.

 A diesel saw ripped into a thick maple branch. The icy limb had fallen onto a 120-volt utility line. No one had reported any power outages, but Creeks County Electric wanted to be proactive.

 The worker holding an eight-foot pole saw stood in the bucket of a cherry picker. He was a large man with a black safety helmet and face mask. After freeing the line, he lowered the lift to the ground. His partner stood below with another eight-foot pole saw and a cigarette.

 The two workers were the latest result of the state passing “ban the box” legislation. It prohibited employers from asking applicants if they had a criminal record. In the past, checking a box usually led to automatic exclusion from consideration without the opportunity to explain the nature of their crimes.

 Andre and Max had lengthy violent criminal records –but they were the only ones at C.C. Electric to volunteer for the Christmas Eve night shift.

 Andre revved his diesel chainsaw and swung the pole towards Max’s face as if trying to hit his cigarette.

 “Fuck you,” grumbled Max. He countered with his saw, pretending to fight back. The large men, swinging saws in helmets and masks, looked some fight out of *Star Wars.*

Andre finally stopped. He lifted his mask and lit his own cigarette. “God bless holiday O.T.,” he chuckled in a gruff voice “That just paid for my old lady’s braces.”

 Max laughed and nodded as he lifted his phone to check for updates. In the quiet of smoking, Andre did the same, scrolling through social media.

 Max squinted at his phone’s small screen. “Andre, you see this guy?” He turned his phone around to show the face of Kyle Colbert in a news post. “Says a million reward?”

 “What?” Andre leaned forward, riveted. “Read me what it says.”

Chapter Five - A Pair of Hop-a-long Boots and a Pistol that Shoots

Flinching like a cat at any distant sound, Kyle entered an alley off Main Street. So far, no other people were outside. No more cars –yet. He progressed deeper into the alley. Though it was dark and narrow, he was familiar with the lane that lead to a rear delivery road.

 Confident he was out of anyone’s view, he lifted his phone. Maria hadn’t called back –*is she okay?* Despite his bizarre reality, he knew the right thing to do was to call authorities. Kyle needed to be preemptive to protect himself from the deadly locals. The sheriffs would sort out whatever insane mistake was going on.

 He dialed 911. After four long rings, an automated female voice answered, “*You’ve reached 911 for Creeks County. Due to a high volume of calls, please hold*–”

 “–Are you fucking kidding?” Kyle inadvertently shouted. Suddenly the live voice of an operator came on the line.

 “911, state your emergency,”she uttered quickly.

 “Yes! Operator –don’t hang up!” Kyle exclaimed. He gripped the phone, “I’m *Kyle Colbert*,” he emphasized the name. “There’s been some huge mistake. I–”

 The phone then clicked through a series of tones as if being transferred.

 “Hello..? You still there?” Kyle plead.

 A man’s deep voice spoke, “Do you purport to be Mr. Kyle Donald Colbert?”

 “Yes!” Kyle stood upright. “What’s going on –who are you?”

 The man replied, stern and robotic, “Other callers have been untruthful about being Kyle Colbert. Can we verify by asking a personal question?”

 “Of course!” Kyle exclaimed. “I am Kyle. Ask anything!”

 A pause. “What is your spouse’s blood type?”

 Silence. *Shit!* Kyle stood with his mouth ajar. He had no clue of Maria’s blood type. He must’ve heard it one time. He proceeded through the alley to stay on the move. “I don’t remember –ask anything else.”

 “What is your current location?”

 “Tell me what’s going on first.” Kyle stepped out of the alley and froze at what he saw. To his left in the dim light were two tall figures. They wore helmets and held long pole saws like spears. They throttled their chainsaws.

 “It’s him!” growled one man. “Get him!” They lunged towards Kyle with their saws.

 “His hands!” a masked man shouted, “Cut off his hands!”

 Ignoring his phone, Kyle sprung to the right. The deafening chainsaws made his action automatic, like an animal running away from a threat.

 The two masked men leaped with their saws to follow in his trail. The taller man shouted, “Maybe just cut his arms!”

 Kyle pivoted left on a service road that sloped downhill. When Kyle looked over his shoulder, his leather shoes slipped and he toppled onto the street.

 Oddly, the two men paused. The taller man lifted his hand, “They said don’t upset him!”

 “Too late for that,” shouted the other man.

 Kyle attempted to stand on the icy road. He then staggered and fell onto his stomach. He began sliding down the frozen asphalt –away from the saws.

 Kyle struggled to regain balance on his knees, but the ice and gravity pulled him downhill. The road grated his hands and his belt buckle scraped the asphalt. When Kyle gazed up the hill, he saw the silhouettes of the two men holding their saws like scythes. They didn’t follow.

 Kyle came to rest in a gutter. His shirt had untucked and his stomach was scraped. His scuffed forearms were stinging with blood.

 He found himself on an industrial road that was nearly pitch dark. He was at least fifty yards away from the saws, and in the dark he hoped to remain invisible to the men. Kyle stood, and with a slight limp, moved towards the rear of a warehouse.

 Under a lamppost by a row of putrid dumpsters, he checked his abrasions. He hissed as he touched grazes on his arm and tucked in his shirt. He looked around in the darkness to gain his bearings. He realized he was in the shadow of a factory-like structure.

 “The sewage department…” Kyle groaned. “Merry *Fuckin’* Christmas…”

 He followed the building left, towards an intersection of two narrow roads. Maybe he could flag down a sheriff or a fire truck, even an old lady returning from church. Anyone trustworthy.

 In the brief calm, Kyle inhaled, comprehending his predicament. He held a quaking hand to his eyes, becoming almost manic. He impulsively shouted to the skies, “What else you got for me!?” He halted at a sound.

 The jingle of music warmed his ears. Before the corner of the building, he heard the faint melody of the Ronette’s Motown version of “Frosty the Snowman.”

 Kyle went deadpan, thrown by the unexpected sound. Curious, he turned the corner. There, he came face-to-face with Santa Claus.

 The haggard mall Santa stood twenty feet away. Motown playing from his 1984 El Camino. Santa was throwing beer cans into a dumpster when he locked eyes with Kyle. Santa and Kyle gazed wide-eyed at each other. Unflinching.

 Kyle finally asked, “So where’s your rein–”

 Santa aimed a .38 pistol from his coat.

 “–deer? *Fuck!*” With his reflexes already primed, Kyle dove behind metal garbage cans. Curled on the ground, he lifted two lids like shields.

 Santa fired. The bullet ricocheted off a dumpster two feet away. He shot again, the bullet hitting the gravel inches from Kyle’s feet.

 Kyle began tossing garbage cans at Santa as he maneuvered behind a dumpster. Santa fired again, bullets sparking on metal cans.

 “Stand still!” Santa shouted with a slur. “You’re my lottery ticket!” He fired again with diminishing accuracy.

 Kyle couldn’t appreciate his absurd reality: Santa aiming a gun with Christmas Motown playing. He crouched, squirming behind the dumpster, inching towards the building’s corner.

 “Show yourself!” Santa shouted, looking like he was about to topple over.

 Kyle made it to the edge of the wall. He could turn the corner and run back the way he came. Maybe the sheriffs would respond to the shots, and perhaps arrive at the intersection beside him.

 He rounded the corner –and cringed at abrupt diesel chainsaws. The pole-saw men were back, thirty feet away. When they saw him, they rushed forward, their lethal saws before them like lances.

 Kyle was cornered. The only open direction was into the narrow intersection. With hands up, he retreated backwards into the street.

 The helmeted men revved their saws, advancing within ten feet. A shot of dirt kicked up off the ground in front of them. They halted at the gunshot to see Santa approaching from their right, aiming his pistol.

 “He’s mine, assholes!” Santa shouted, walking towards the crossing, with his gun ready.

 Seeing the men now targeting each other, Kyle continued backward into the intersection.

 “Bullshit Santa!” yelled one man, continuing towards Kyle.

 Santa also moved forward, “I ain’t splittin’ no reward!”

 Kyle was out of options. Roaring saws in front of him getting closer. An armed Santa to his left. The three men were converging into the intersection. Kyle couldn’t run any longer.

 Santa grinned and aimed–

 A thunderous roar. Like a blur, Kyle saw the red Chevy return, racing into the intersection. In a flash, the car smashed into the men, their skulls striking the hood with thumps. A tire crushed Santa, tossing all three bodies like ragdolls.

 Kyle hurled himself to the side onto a snowbank. He watched the Chevy slide to a grating stop. In the shadows, his only plan was to play dead.

 Four young men wearing surreal Santa masks stepped out of the Chevy. They were dressed like gangbangers, muscular with gold chains and leather jackets. They laughed at the carnage before them.

 “*Yo,* shit, that was like bowlin,’” chuckled the driver under his mask. He gripped a semiautomatic pistol.

 The other thugs stepped over the men. In death, their arms had landed in unnatural positions. One man looked at Santa’s bloody corpse lying three feet to Kyle’s left. “Is it bad luck to ice *Santy* Clause?”

 The driver laughed –and then studied Kyle on the ground. “Yo, look who’s still here…”

 Kyle involuntarily shrunk. His eyes darted, anxious –that’s when he saw Santa’s bloody .38 pistol lying in the snow one foot away.

 The four thugs congregated to observe Kyle. A masked man cocked his head, “*That’s* what a million bucks looks like?” He chuckled, “Cryin’ like a bitch?”

 As the men laughed, the masked driver turned and instantly shot his three partners, pointblank. Two in the chest, one in the back as the man tried to run. The three thugs collapsed where they stood.

 Kyle gasped, curling towards Santa’s corpse, hands over his ears. He felt Santa’s gun under his stomach. He seized it.

 “A million divided by four’s too much math.” The driver looked down ominously at Kyle. “Ain’t that right?”

 With no profound speech, Kyle fired up at the driver. Directly into his chest. One blast. Then a second, a third into the same bloody hole. *Click, click…*

 Christmas Motown played on.

 “Someone please explain what the fuck is going on!” shouted the woman in the small room.

PART TWO

The Human Fuse

Chapter Six – Everyone Loves a Surprise

 Maria Colbert sat alone at a metal table in the small, claustrophobic room.

 Though she was attractive with large brown eyes, she appeared exhausted. Her long dark hair fell on her shoulders and she wore a tailored navy suit as if she’d just left the office. The frigid room was only ten-by-ten with a single mirror along one wall.

 “I know you’re back there,” she shouted at the mirror in her Brooklyn accent. “It’s a cliché right out of Interrogation 101.” She then yelled, “Someone explain the charges!”

 The young male agent flinched at Maria’s outburst.

 On the other side of the mirror, boyish FBI Agent Davis sat next to young female Agent Harmon. Davis and Harmon each had notepads, observing Maria Colbert like a zoo specimen.

 “She’s a live one,” Agent Harmon bit into a candy cane someone had given her.

 “Did she resist or try to run when you picked her up?” Davis asked.

 “No,” Harmon shrugged. “But she was *pissed*. Like trying to wash a cat.”

 Davis looked at his watch and sighed, “Del Rey’s taking forever.”

 “Michael, it’s nearly 10:00 on Christmas Eve. What’d you expect?”

 He leaned forward, “But she doesn’t have any–”

 They turned and sat upright to see Agent Del Rey enter the office. With her long blonde hair and slender form, Agent Anthea Del Rey could be considered striking. But her steely demeanor and forever-stern appearance kept her colleagues from inviting her to any happy hours.

 “So that’s the spouse?” Agent Del Rey asked without any pleasantries. She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at their detainee on the other side of the mirror.

 “Yes, agent,” Harmon replied. “We apprehended her exiting her place of employment at approximately 4:40 p.m. She acted shocked and angry at our intrusion.”

 Del Rey scoffed, “Let me guess: she’s playing the pitiful innocent spouse. Sobbing how she knows nothing.”

 Harmon and Davis exchanged a glance.

 “No…” Harmon smirked as she read from notes, “She’s threatening to sue the Bureau –and you– for false imprisonment, abuse of process and intentional infliction of emotional distress.”

 “Mrs. Colbert’s an attorney with the city,” Davis added.

 “Great.” Del Rey rubbed her brow. “Where are the children?”

 “We weren’t able to secure them,” Davis replied. “They were visiting a friend’s house. We received a call from Twin Creeks Sheriffs that they’re home now. Cars are on the way.”

 “This should be enlightening,” Del Rey remarked with sarcasm. She turned to the door. “Imagine how sick you’d have to be to plan something like this on Christmas.”

 Maria Colbert looked up to see a woman enter the room. She was tall and slim with straight blonde hair on her couture black suit. The woman sat at the table across from her. She didn’t even attempt a fake smile.

 “Who are you?” Maria exclaimed. “And if you don’t have the authority to explain what’s going on, find me the person who does.”

 The woman gave a tight smile at her outburst.

 “I am Special Agent Anthea Del Rey,” the woman replied with authority. “With the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Domestic Counterterrorism.”

 “Wow…” Maria’s eyes widened, but she didn’t seem intimidated. “I did not see that coming. Is my husband in some sort of danger?”

 Del Rey raised a manicured brow. “Interesting, you immediately reference your husband.”

 “Why wouldn’t I?” Maria scowled. “He’s my spouse. He works in counterintelligence.” She motioned around the room, “All this melodrama seems very grim to *destroy* our Christmas Eve.”

 Del Rey shifted her jaw as if planning her words. “I prefer being direct, Mrs. Colbert–”

 “–Then tell me why I’m here!” Maria shouted.

 Del Rey cleared her throat. “Your husband has gone dark. We have evidence he is a sleeper cell, in possession of a dirty bomb which he has now hidden in the Manhattan area.”

 Maria blinked, dumbstruck.

 “We believe he’s had the trigger implanted somewhere on his actual body,” Del Rey continued. “If he’s cornered or provoked in any way, he will detonate the explosive.”

 Maria gasped. Her mouth moved like a guppy, with no words.

 “So…” Del Rey gave a subtle sneer. “Has your husband ever dropped words around the kitchen such as…‘slaughtering millions of innocents’?”

Chapter Seven – Follow the Star of Bethlehem

The shabby, candy-apple red 1970 Chevy Impala thundered down rural route 52, away from downtown Twin Creeks.

 Kyle’s hands gripped the wheel like wrenches. His eyes were wide and unblinking with adrenalin pulsing through his veins.

 He glanced in the mirror and wiped a spot of blood from his cheek. He had no idea which man’s blood it was. *Does it matter?* Kyle wondered. He chanted under his breath, *I just killed people…* In some survival mode, the real shock hadn’t set in yet. He knew it’d been self-defense, but were there cameras or witnesses that could prove it? He looked again in the mirror and saw a confused killer who had big problems.

 He looked away. Absorbing the interior of the thugs’ car, he wrinkled his nose. The car smelled like pot. On the floor were fast-food bags, lady’s underwear, candy and Red Bull cans.

 Kyle checked his surroundings. RR 52 was in the sticks. No other cars or lights in either direction. No street lamps or structures. Just frozen black woods rushing by, and snow flurries exposed by the headlamps.

 He turned on the radio to hear a choir caroling “Silent Night.” The melody made his blood pressure decrease a few points. He took a breath, but was then reminded of the holiday and his entire dilemma. He lifted his phone and redialed Maria’s number, again.

 “*Hi there. You’ve reached Maria Colbert. Please leave*…”

 Kyle tossed the phone aside, too numb to cuss.

 A knocking cough sputtered from the Chevy’s engine. Kyle scanned the dashboard to see the gas gauge under empty.

 “*Please no…”* Kyle cried, exhausted. The idiot kids had been driving on ‘E.’ He pressed the accelerator down. Nothing. He shifted the car to neutral and idled to the shoulder. When the car came to a stop, he slowly pounded his head on the steering wheel, groaning, “Please…Baby…Jesus…Not on…Christmas–”

 Something caught his eye. He ducked in his seat and turned off the car’s lights.

 To his left, 200 feet diagonally across the street was a small church. Though he’d never been there, Kyle knew it. The First Methodist Church of Twin Creeks, one of the oldest in the county. Being a small church, and having no midnight mass like the Catholic faith, the chapel was dark at 10:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

 But that’s not what caught Kyle’s eye. A man, presumably the church’s caretaker, was walking across the lawn. He was an older man, bundled in a plaid coat. Kyle watched him continue to the church’s nativity scene displayed in a small shed facing the road. The man turned off the display’s lights and closed accordion shutters on the front of the shack. The man then progressed to a pickup truck, the only vehicle in the parking lot, and drove away.

 Hunched in his coat, scarf and hat, Kyle scurried across the street like a raccoon. He rechecked the church and property. No lights, cars, or any sign of life.

 He walked to the nativity shed, positioned thirty feet from the road. It was about ten-by-fifteen feet, made out of timber like a small barn built by parishioners. The front shutters were predictably locked. He tried the only other entrance, the side door –it was also locked.

  *Why would it be unlocked for me?* Kyle exhaled and rested against the door. His head touched the door’s small square window. It felt like Plexiglas. He turned and tested the window. Miraculously, it slid open. He reached in, unlocked the door and quickly entered the shed.

Inside, he inhaled deeply, the first full, real breath since the train. He could feel tension fleeing his body as he exhaled. He fumbled around the wall until he felt a light switch. When he flicked it, he was stunned –and humbled.

 Gazing at him were three wise men, Joseph, Mary, a baby in a manger and a couple donkeys. Plastic, life-size figures illuminated from inside, surrounded by bales of hay. They had ill-timed, serene smiles on their angelic faces.

 Kyle was somewhat daunted. He looked up to see a Star of Bethlehem shining down at him like a spotlight. He realized the irony of the scene. He’d been longing for a *real Christmas.*

 He reclined on a bundle of hay to take a mental inventory. He had nothing useful on him but his phone. Kyle remembered he’d dropped his satchel in his front lawn. It contained his flu medicine, and he felt like his fever was rising. He checked his phone; 11% power remaining and no way to charge. He accessed the internet; maybe the local news could help enlighten things. Scrolling through updates, he gasped to see his face, the same photo from the television news. He clicked the link and pulled the phone inches from his eyes.

 A bold headline read, “HOLIDAY HUMAN FUSE?” He tapped a video from a local channel.

 A stern brunette newscaster was mid-sentence, “…the FBI has *not* commented, but it appears a video was anonymously posted, and already has over 2,000,000 views in the last four hours.”

 The scene changed to a grainy video of a dark figure veiled in black. The shadow spoke in a deep voice that sounded altered. “*Our brother, Kyle Donald Colbert, has courageously uncloaked, to cleanse America’s financial cradle. To spread its light with fire*…”

 Kyle’s jaw dropped. It was his name –could anyone else have that exact name? Again it was like a feverish dream.

 The veiled figure continued, “*The trigger has been surgically implanted. If our servant is hunted, threatened or even approached, he will detonate the device without further delay*…”

 Kyle’s hands began to tremble. He gripped the phone tighter to see the news cut back to the reporter. Seated across from her was a silver-haired man in a suit and a grim face.

 “We’re fortunate to have with us a specialist, retired FBI Agent Edwin Chance.” The reporter grimaced at the man. “Thank you for coming on short notice, Mr. Chance. Tell us: what would be the authority’s first step to find this… hazardous suspect?”

 The man nodded and cleared his throat. “First of all, thank you for having me –and Happy Holidays.” His face reverted to stern. “The first thing I would do to locate the suspect is track him through his cellphone usage. With modern towers, it’s easy–”

 Like a hot potato, Kyle almost dropped his phone as he fumbled to turn it off. He’d used it all night trying to call Maria. *What a fool,* he should’ve known. As an IT expert, he knew technology existed that permitted law enforcement to “ping” phones to locate users through GPS. But in his haste, he hadn’t expected cops on his trail. He thought it was just insane locals.

 He stood and studied the small shed, striving to plan his next step. Was there anything useful in there other than a baby Jesus and wise men? In a back corner he saw lawn tools. A shovel, a gas-powered weed eater and a gas-powered blower –*which might mean…* Yes, there was a red plastic gas can. He lifted it and it swayed with mass. It was half full, a couple gallons.

 Stooping beside the stalled Chevy, Kyle untidily poured gas into its tank. He entered the car and turned the key. It purred like a kitten with a cough.

 He needed to get rid of his phone and make another stop. But how safe would it be to return to his neighborhood?

Chapter Eight – The Christmas Crew

Maria was growing increasingly distraught. She wanted to slap the callous agent across from her.

 “You asked me the exact details of my morning,” Maria rubbed her eyes with a splitting migraine. “The exact details *are* me making canned *fucking* cinnamon buns and going to JoAnn Fabrics before work–”

 Agent Harmon opened the door. Her eyes were eager, “Sorry to intrude, but we just verified with Customs.”

 Del Rey rolled her hand. “Well..?”

 “Kyle Colbert did travel to the Middle East, until four days ago. He was there a week, returned December 20th.”

 Del Rey turned to Maria with an icy glare. “Tell me how that little nugget was never mentioned.”

 As an attorney, Maria’s face locked, evaluating the impact of any response.

 A triage team had assembled in a conference room. A half-dozen agents and several analysts were seated at long tables. They each had laptops or their own work stations. The wall held a large flat-panel monitor. A back table held a pitiful tray of holiday candy and leftovers from gift baskets that had been picked through all day.

 The ad-hoc team was on the younger side, agents who didn’t have seniority to guarantee Christmas off. They’d all been on-call, and no one was thrilled to get the call. Due to the emergency nature of the team, they came from varied backgrounds, including Cyber Division, Organized Crime and the National Security Branch.

 New York’s Jacob K. Javits Federal Building housed many agencies, including the FBI’s New York City Field Office.

 The office prided itself on pioneering the interagency task force. The city’s own NYPD’s counterterrorism police had teamed with the FBI to form the nation’s first Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF.) The need for such collaboration increased sharply after the attacks of 9/11. The city remained an enormous target.

 Their Joint Terrorism Task Force investigated multiple threats, including the 2007 JFK Airport bomb, the 2009 New York subway bomb, and the attempted 2010 Times Square bombing. They had successfully arrested terror leaders, cyber criminals and even corrupt CEOs.

 The office normally held over 2,000 agents and support staff. However, the workforce at 11:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve was alarmingly less. Nothing was considered more callous than a sophisticated attack on one of the holiest days of the year.

 Bookish FBI Analyst Dmitri Jenkins and elder Dr. Irving Weisman sat together at a table facing the others. Each man was dressed casual since they’d been roused from their homes. Jenkins was in a Nike sweat suit, and the sixtyish Weisman wore a flannel shirt and Dockers.

 Dr. Weisman was a retired medical examiner. He was currently the Division Director of Forensic Pathology at NYU, and consultant to the FBI.

 The leader of the crisis task force, Supervisory Special Agent (SSA) Vince Goldman, paced in front of them like a caged tiger. He looked like he used to be handsome ten years ago, but Goldman appeared flushed and he twitched like a man who’d just quit smoking.

 “Jenkins,” Goldman barked. “I know you’re in the middle of your move from Florida, but do you have any research how an ‘internal trigger’ is even… *conceivable*?”

 “Yes sir. We’ve seen similar concepts.” Jenkins spoke cool and logically despite the crisis. “A surgically-implanted improvised explosive device, or SIIED, can be hidden inside the body to commit an attack.”

 Goldman paused. The agents in the room looked up, curious.

 Jenkins continued. “An implanted device was used to assassinate *Prince Naya bin Mohammed*. The assassin offered to surrender if he could meet the prince in person. The Saudis agreed to fly in the fanatic, and they even searched him. He had no weapons that anyone could detect. Modern body scanning techniques proved an SIIED can evade most modern sensors. When he met the prince, the man detonated himself, killing the prince and his top security team.”

 The agents glowered at each other.

 “I need this to be bullshit!” Goldman shouted. His combed-back hair was in disarray is if he’d been pulling it out for the past three hours. “I’m supposed to be assembling a goddamn Barbie Dream House right now!”

 The agents perked up at his outburst.

 Goldman turned to the doctor. “Dr. Weisman, any theories how an *implanted trigger* could even be…powered?”

 The older doctor oddly smiled and blinked as he speculated. “There are some exciting advances with *piezoelectric-able* material called lead zirconate titanate.” He grinned as if thrilled by the notion. “Microscopic material called *nanoribbons* are placed directly near an organ. The human heartbeat then creates all the power needed. No more batteries.” He raised his hands, incredulous, “Imagine, using it for pacemakers and such.”

 Goldman’s face creased, irritated. “I’m not imagining excitement! I’m talking about this threat –*now*. Where could a trigger even be implanted?”

 Weisman shrugged, pragmatic. “Something as simple as his thumb or palm. Or his wrist… Anywhere on his body. And it would be powered as long as he has a heartbeat.”

 “Which has spawned these unsanctioned…vigilante groups,” Jenkins interjected. He aimed a remote towards the screen on the wall. “This was posted on social media earlier this evening.”

 All eyes turned to the screen to see a shaky YouTube video. Under it displayed an upload of December 24th, 8:10 p.m. It was dark and appeared to be the inside of a vintage red car. A face then looked into the lens –a man wearing a flimsy Santa mask. The sound of several young men’s laughter could be heard. When the camera turned, it revealed three other men in the car.

 “*We’ll find this trigger bitch!”* shouted a man in the video. He sounded like a juvenile punk. Cocky laughter from within the car.

 The agents observed at full attention.

 Onscreen, a second kid put on a similar Santa mask. He chuckled, “*I ain’t showin’ my face to no terror-ist. In case we miss him!*” Laughter from his friends.

 Jenkins typed and the screen changed to a second video. It depicted a bachelor-style living room with whiskey posters and laundry. Four large men were standing wearing full snow-camouflage hunting gear. All the men were holding beer cans and large rifles.

 “*See this here 6mm sniper rifle with scope?”* one man shouted, slurring and rowdy. *“I’ll bag this dipshit myself. It’s my Christmas gift to America!”*

His drunk buddies all hollered and lifted their rifles and toasted Budweisers.

 The screen faded and Jenkins continued to address the group. “As you all know, a viral post claims a $1,000,000 reward for Kyle Colbert. Its origin is still unknown.”

 Harmon added, “Because of the implanted trigger claim, the public has inferred the only way to stop Colbert is to remove his hands or stop his heart.” She paused, “Meaning…to kill him.”

 Goldman threw his hands up, “We can’t endorse a public ‘*kill order’*!”

 “It doesn’t matter,” Jenkins shrugged. “The message is a runaway train. A million residents have already heard about a threat, a million dollar reward, with a name and face attached.”

 “We haven’t been able to track the message’s source,” Harmon shook her head. “The Bureau’s best cyber analysts are all on vacation. Cox is in Vegas, Grodin’s on a cruise–”

 “–I get it!” Goldman roared. “The bad guys targeted our biggest holiday, with smallest skeleton crews.” He rubbed his temples. “So we’re it!” He motioned around the room. “Welcome to our… Christmas Crew.”

 Several agents turned to see Agent Del Rey enter. She sustained her stern expression.

 Goldman looked at her with hopeful eyes, “Did you get the wife to roll on his location?”

 “No –and she’s a pistol,” Del Rey huffed. “But Kyle Colbert is *textbook*. He traveled to the Mid-East –Dubai– last week for Harding-Foxtel. His job is to crack terrorist communications. And he’s been unhappy about a merger between his firm and the Bayonet Group–”

 “–Bayonet’s a defense contractor,” Jenkins interjected with concern. “They supply assault arms and aviation support.”

 Goldman scowled and turned as he interpreted the pieces. “So…an upset terror communication expert –who has access to military data– may be in possession of a *radiological bomb*?” He paused, “And he can ignite it if we approach or even *upset* him?”

 “There’s something else,” Del Rey looked towards the doctor. “According to his wife, he’s caught the flu. Colbert had a low-grade fever this morning.”

 “–Are you suggesting an infectious or deadly pathogen?” Dr. Weisman blurted with bugged eyes.

 “We’re sending the CDC to his office in Manhattan to swab his workplace and collect tissues from his garbage,” Del Rey replied.

 “Jesus… Mary and Joseph…” Goldman massaged his brows with closed eyes. He looked at Agent Del Rey, “I’m sorry to make you the lead on this. I know you’re alone with no kids or anything…” He shrugged.

 Del Rey frowned at his words.

 “News from Twin Creeks,” Harmon shouted from her screen. “The vigilante gang we just saw with the Santa masks,” she paused, “…were found dead. According to Twin Creeks Sheriffs, gunshot wounds, point-blank. Along with three additional victims, all deceased.”

 Before anyone could react, Jenkins spoke up from his laptop, “I got six pings from Colbert’s cellphone. All in Twin Creeks.”

 Goldman didn’t blink. He turned solemnly to Del Rey. “That confirms Colbert. And his location.”

Chapter Nine – Block Party

Kyle found an even more rustic road that intersected with RR 52. It was darker –if that was possible– and still surrounded by bleak, frozen forest on both sides. Confirming that no other travelers were anywhere in sight, he pulled the Chevy over and parked.

 He got out of the car and his shoes sunk in the snow up to his shins. He slogged down a forty-five-degree incline towards the entrance to the woods. He stopped before the forest and took out his cellphone. He cracked open the phone and removed the battery and SIM card. He tossed the fragments in three different directions into the blackness.

 *There…* he coughed. If anyone tracked his phone, he was almost seven miles from his neighborhood and five miles from the church he could use as a refuge if needed. Kyle couldn’t believe he was thinking in those terms, but he had only so much gas and –to his knowledge– his friends and neighbors were still trying to murder him.

Kyle sighed, *so what now..?* He froze at the growl of a truck.

He looked up the slope to see the headlights of an approaching vehicle. Lights skimmed across his parked Chevy. He squatted low, unsure where to go.

 A huge four-wheel drive pick-up truck approached. It was painted camouflage and had an array of hunting lights on top. Its enormous tires were well over forty inches. It stopped behind Kyle’s borrowed Chevy.

 *Shit..!* Kyle dropped into the snow, struggling to remain unseen in the darkness. He gazed up to see two men standing in the bed of the truck. They were wearing all-white snow camouflage with hoods and goggles. Like ghost hunters. Kyle heard faint laughter from the men.

The truck ignited spotlights towards the Chevy. “*Anybody home*?” a man shouted. The two hunters jumped on top of the car with thuds. They began to holler and make the car bounce up and down like kids on a hotel bed. The car’s shock absorbers squealed and the roof buckled. The hunters paused –and then turned towards the forest. Kyle squeezed his eyes closed.

 After a laugh, Kyle heard a voice from the truck shout, “*Fuck this*…” The hunters hopped back into the bed of the pick-up, and the truck sped away.

 Though Kyle heard the truck’s engine fade, he wondered how much more he could endure.

 The cul-de-sac at the end of Mayfield Lane was brightened with more lights than a Superbowl halftime show.

 The Colbert home was surrounded by police tape and three Creeks County Sheriffs cruisers. Red and blue strobes merged with holiday decorations to light the entire street. A few nosy neighbors milled around, pretending they were taking out the trash at midnight.

 At the foot of the Colbert driveway, young Jack and Cassie Colbert stood with female officers from two very different agencies. The sheriff had called the New York Office of Child and Family Services because the kids were under twelve years old with no local relatives. The FBI had an agent present to question the children in their haste for answers. To calm any potential clash, and in the spirit of the holiday, the two ladies agreed to work together.

 The Colbert kids didn’t understand or care who they were speaking to. They appeared exhausted, bundled in thick coats over pajamas.

 The boyish Child Services agent smiled at Jack. “Can you tell me *anything* else about your father’s demeanor tonight –I mean… his behavior?”

 Nine-year-old Jack rubbed his puffy eyes. “I mean…he was like, all mad...” Jack shrugged, “And he screamed at us –on Christmas too!”

 Seven-year-old Cassie just nodded, clutching her American Girl doll.

 The softer FBI agent attempted to clarify, “So your father was shouting? Does he do this often, or has it been more recently?”

 The children looked at each other.

 “It seemed like more tonight,” Jack replied. “And he ran from the house really fast.”

 “Hmm…” The FBI agent jotted a note. “Running from something…” The Child Services officer nodded.

 Standing twenty feet from the house’s front steps, a man looked like an astronaut in an explosive ordnance disposal protective suit.

 As a certified bomb technician from the New York Field Office, Agent Marvin Mavek had worked in Afghanistan and Iraq studying battlefield explosives. The FBI bomb tech had applied his skills to find signatures for unexploded devices and had saved countless lives.

 When he’d received the call from SSA Goldman, Agent Mavek and his fiancé, Rosa, had been preparing an enormous seafood Christmas Eve feast for her Costa Rican family. She swiftly reminded him she didn’t know how to cook the expensive lobster and prawns. The fiery Rosa threw cilantro at him, shouting he was going to be in *mucho* trouble if there was no bomb.

 Mavek had to reminder her the goal was there would be *no* bombs.

 Despite an icy breeze, Agent Mavek was sweating inside his protective suit. The full-body suit included trousers, a face shield-chest plate and a protective helmet.

 In the Colbert’s lawn, Mavek carefully approached the suspect’s leather satchel. According to Goldman, the suspect, Kyle Colbert, dropped a personal bag when he’d fled his residence on foot. The local sheriffs had taped off the bag with a fifty-foot perimeter. The accused may be in possession of a radiological explosive device, so his personal bag could contain evidence of explosives, radioactive residue, computer data or notes of a planned attack.

 “Approaching target,” Mavek announced into his helmet’s mic. He cautiously stepped within two feet of the satchel. He breathed somewhat easier seeing his Geiger counter was negative. That was good –no direct evidence of radioactive material. If there had been, his team would’ve sent in a remote-control bomb disposal robot. There was still a need to examine the bag for other materials and any useful information.

 “The image is shitty,” Goldman’s voice crackled through his headset from HQ in Manhattan. “Aim the cam and describe what you’re seeing.”

 “Conducting cursory inspection.” Mavek studied the bag lying on its side in the snow. “Unremarkable, brown leather satchel. Interesting: there’s no visible lock. Shows signs of regular use. Manufactured by…” He leaned closer, “Tommy Bahama.”

 “*Nice…*” muttered Goldman. “I only care what’s inside.”

 Mavek slowly reached for the bag. He recited a silent prayer as a tradition. He’d heard stories of booby-trapped devices. He grasped the leather handle. “Got it.”

 “Easy peasy,” Goldman’s voice replied. “I don’t want to scrape you off their house.”

 “Copy.” Mavek inhaled. Using both hands, he delicately turned the bag so any materials might slide out. The bed of snow below would provide a safe cushion. Gravity began to pull items towards the ground. Agent Mavek described them as they became visible.

 “A box of…flu lozenges, Walgreens brand–”

 “–I see some sort of rod, or device,” Goldman interrupted. “What is it?”

 Mavek lifted a tubular item. “It’s a toothbrush. In a travel container with a sample-size Crest.” He reached to slide two pieces of paper out of the bag. “There are two handwritten documents.”

 “Bag it as evidence!” Goldman barked. “Maybe a manifesto –or location for an attack?”

 Mavek leaned closer to inspect the notes. “They’re… Christmas lists of toys. For a Jack and Cassie.” He continued, “I do see a CD in a case –maybe an old-school CD-ROM.”

 “Computer data…” Goldman mused. “Our analysts need that ASAP.”

 Mavek opened the case to read the label, “It’s…Frank Sinatra’s *Rat Pack Christmas.*”

 “Seriously?–”

 “–Please hold,” Mavek interjected. He peered inside the bag like an alien might jump out. “Two more envelopes or packets…” He thumped the bag until the contents tumbled out.

 “Careful! You don’t know what they contain…”

 “Instant oatmeal. Pumpkin spice and that fake blueberry stuff.” Mavek paused. “That’s it.”

 After a silence, Goldman asked, “Are you sure that’s the right bag?”

 Agent Mavek was relieved –but then realized he’d be in *mucho* trouble at home.

 On the neck of the cul-de-sac, two Twin Creeks Sheriffs cars were parked to block any potential news vehicles. Two young deputies, Chip and Brent, stood hunched with their shirts untucked and hanging from under their department jackets.

 They faced their boss, Sheriff Dwayne Leon, who was standing erect and alert despite the hour, in his perfectly-pressed county uniform and leather jacket.

 “That’s seven bodies!” Deputy Chip brazenly shouted at the sheriff, as he wiped his mouth from a Mountain Dew. “Where’s our manhunt?” He thumbed to his partner. “Brent’s got dogs!”

 “Yes, sir,” the chubbier Deputy Brent with a mullet nodded. “I got four bloodhounds that really know their shit.”

 Sheriff Leon pursed his lips and shook his head. “FBI handles matters of a terror nature.” He shrugged, “How do you think I feel? Seven deaths in one night? I haven’t had a murder in nine years!” He bit his lower lip. “I only got *twelve* deputies in the whole department, and *ten* are off for Christmas Eve!” He hissed under his teeth, “You know what that means?”

 Brent and Chip frowned at each other. Chip shrugged, “What?”

 “It means *we* are it!” Leon thumbed to himself, frustrated. “Who could’ve predicted something like this on Jesus’s birthday? We’ll handle calls from citizens. But the feds asked us to stand-down in case this ‘trigger threat’ is true.” He stood tall at attention. “Is that understood?”

 Brent winced as if he’d tasted sour milk. “But what about the *reward*?”

 Leon cocked his head at the fool, “Rewards don’t apply to law enforcement!”

 Deputy Chip didn’t budge. “Most of us are auxiliary part-timers…” He looked at Brent. “So if we *quit*, we can get that reward –right?”

 The sheriff’s jaw dropped at their troubling mindset.

Chapter Ten – The Poked Bear

Maria Colbert was becoming drained of her strength and patience, and she was not accustomed to the feeling. The way in which smug Agent Del Rey was pummeling her with vague allegations, Maria predicted she might snap in approximately two minutes.

 That would be an overestimation.

 “I don’t know what time it is, and you haven’t arrested me” Maria leaned forward on her elbows. “Unlike most of your idiot detainees, I *do* know the process.” She locked eyes with Del Rey. “I need to be home.”

 “Interesting.” Del Rey cocked her head like a dog at a curious sound. “Why do you *need* to be home?”

 Maria scowled at Del Rey as if she were an imbecile. “Do you have children..?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “I have two. Expecting Santa for the only Christmas this year. And my two babies saw their new father splashed on the news as a *monster*!”

 Del Rey scoffed, “Some new father–”

 “–Right!” Maria shouted. “Married just seven months. This was supposed to be a big year for Kyle! Can you imagine an instant family?” She huffed, “Why do you think the children were so suggestible? Believing what they saw on every channel! They’ve known the poor guy for less than a year!” Maria’s brash voice reverberated within the tiny room.

 A male agent peeked in the door’s window to see if everything was okay. Del Rey gave a dismissive nod.

 “Mrs. Colbert,” Del Rey allowed a second to pass. “With the allegations on the table, and the magnitude of such a risk, you can clearly comprehend the job we have to do –since you understand the *process* so much.”

 Maria smirked at her sarcasm. “But you have nothing right now, do you? An anonymously posted video?” She pointed to herself, “What you do have is the public trying to murder *my* husband. Your whole plan is to procrastinate and keep me in here as long as possible as you all scurry, hoping to find anything. Any probable cause to keep me here. The oldest trick when I worked the D.A.’s office.”

 Del Rey frowned at a folder. “You keep reminding us that you’re an attorney and the ‘*D.A.’s office*,’” she mocked the term. “But wasn’t that ten years ago? Since then, you settled for a city attorney’s job, where you mostly assist the board of the New York Historical Society.” She closed the folder and looked at Maria. “Is there a lot of criminal work in researching old buildings?” Del Rey did an exaggerated shrug. “I think you’re smart enough to know I can’t just let you just Uber out of here.”

 Maria leaned in with sharpened eyes, “I know we’re in New York, but there’s never an excuse to be a bitch–”

 “–Whoa!” Del Rey shouted, enraged. “You’re talking to a federal agent!”

 “And you’re talking to an officer of the court!” Maria snapped, hands on her hip. “And a mother. And a human-*fucking*-being. Being courteous will always be a better bet. It’ll make me actually *want* to help you–”

 “–Mrs. Colbert–”

 “–I’m not finished.” Maria became louder. “Have you considered the fact I’m talking to you right now *without* an attorney? So I would listen.” She eyed Del Rey as if evaluating her. “I can tell you’re young and attractive, needing to make a name for yourself in a predominantly male Bureau. I get it. But I am thoroughly knowledgeable of procedure. You haven’t arrested me and I can’t get an attorney –or judge– until Monday. Are you really gonna’ place my kids in foster care on Christmas for *three* days?”

 Maria’s voice then softened, almost genial, “I need to *hug* my children. Lay out a few gifts before morning. Jack’s got one good Santa year left in him. Cassie, who knows?” Her face tensed, “But they have been *horrified*. And now their mom is *gone*. What would you do for your kids?”

 Del Rey inhaled for a retort, but Maria’s hand sprung forward to touch her wrist.

 Maria’s growl was almost wicked, “I can tell by your perfect nails and lack of empathy on Christmas Eve that you don’t have any children.”

 Del Rey gasped and her icy blue eyes widened, but Maria plowed ahead.

 “And I’ve done your job for you and resolved your ‘red flags.’ Kyle was sent to Dubai for work; he didn’t ask to go there. He has a commendable job history, and obviously no record of violence. This entire thing is a defamatory fraud.” Maria’s body eased and she spoke skillfully. “I’m not a flight risk. Release me to my residence –you can even park an agent outside, I don’t give a shit. But I *am* going to be in *one* bed with *both* of my children before morning.”

 Del Rey fumed. She gritted her perfect white teeth as she grasped for words.

 “–Everything okay in here?” SSA Goldman exclaimed as he stepped through the door.

 Maria glared up at Goldman, “Now you want me to tell *you* how things are?” She pushed out an empty chair with her shoe. “Have a seat.”

Chapter Eleven – There’s No Place Like Home… (Refrain)

Kyle cautiously returned to the town’s fringe. He pulled over at a darkened intersection. Snow falling, peaceful. A closed gas station on one side, and an abandoned Christmas tree tent on the other. He always felt bad about the unfortunate, flawed trees that never quite made it into someone’s warm home. *A culture that seeks perfection*, his blurred brain supposed. The radio played Nat King Cole’s flawless rendition of “Oh Holy Night.”

 With a slight tilt of his head, he spied wistfully down the road towards a glowing neighborhood. Four blocks away, he could see straight into Mayfield Lane. His house was just a nebulous sparkle at the end –with a few extra blue and red glimmers.

 *Is Maria home? Is she okay?* Kyle wondered. *How about the kids?* If he had any way to know they were safe, he’d be able to rest. He leaned his head against the cold window. He could feel his body giving up. To compound the trauma of his night, he’d been awake for over twenty hours, with certainly a fever to top it off.

Kyle tried feeling his own forehead. He wasn’t sure if he could feel his own temperature, like people can’t tickle themselves. But his face did feel hot to the touch, absolutely over a 100 degrees. He coughed into his hand and he could hear his lungs gurgling.

 He snapped to attention at a sudden wail of sirens and flashing lights two blocks ahead. Before assuming he was cornered in a manhunt, he saw the parade of vehicles turn towards his street. It looked like a motorcade.

 *What’s happening?* Kyle wondered. He didn’t see ambulances, so that was good. He needed a better view.

 He drove to a park located on the street behind his home. It was a wooded preserve with a hill that joggers loved to visit. It was dark and had no lights of any kind. He parked outside a flimsy metal bar that was supposed to be a gate.

 Kyle folded his arms tight as he plodded through the snow on a bike trail. The air had to have dipped another fifteen degrees. *Just what my lungs need*… He quickly walked the path that wound its way up the hill until his view was perfect.

 *There it is…* He squatted behind a stump and sighed. 150 yards below was his cul-de-sac and a direct view of his house. It was easy to spot, considering the red and blue lights practically formed an arrow. He squinted to discern any activity. At the very least, he’d been blessed with 20/20 vision, and the icy night was crystal clear.

There were multiple people standing around his property. They wore uniforms, but Kyle wasn’t able to recognize any departments.

 A black SUV in Kyle’s driveway opened its doors. He focused to see a female exit the truck –it was undeniably Maria. He’d know her coat, hair and body gestures anywhere.

 He instantly stood, striving to follow the drama below like a stage play. Two uniformed figures at his front door walked to meet Maria. Rushing behind them were two smaller people –children. *It’s Jack and Cassie!* Kyle almost shouted. He also knew their shapes and strides.

 Before his feverish eyes, Kyle witnessed his wife reunite with her children. She embraced them with arms that swallowed them both. She hugged them for almost ten seconds.

 Kyle wiped away a tear and his knees almost gave out.

 Kyle listlessly reentered the Chevy. He inhaled with a sense of serenity. It almost meant more to see Maria and the kids, all together, warm at home. Kyle then noticed it was after midnight on the dash’s clock. He released a near whimper as he accepted it was Christmas morning. “*Merry Christmas kids…”* He welled with emotion. Kyle finally had a family for Christmas, and he couldn’t be with them.

 It had been only ten months since Kyle was first introduced to Maria’s children. Fiercely protective of Jack and Cassie, she’d waited six weeks after their first date before exposing her kids to the new man in her life. It was a cliché, but Kyle truly felt like the kids were his, and he vowed to be the best father he could possibly be.

 Consumed with a demanding tech career for a federal contractor, Kyle’s social life had been almost monk-like. After years of sporadic, uninspiring dates, he’d never married until he was forty-one years old.

 Maria Maldonada had been previously married for eight years. She eloquently described the man as a “douchebag,” and his name was Hampton –that was his first name. When he got angry on the few nights he was home, he’d do things like kick-in the bumper of her car. He called her a “has-been attorney,” and would call Jack a wimp, telling him to “man-up” if he didn’t want to play football with the neighbor kids. He’d told Cassie she needed braces so she could “catch a man” one day. With Maria’s passionate disposition, their spats created toxic fireworks.

 When Maria had had enough, she utilized her network of attorney friends, and created one of the fastest divorces in New York’s history, according to her version of the story.

 Her concerns about Hampton’s character were confirmed when he didn’t contest child custody, letting her “have them.” He went on to file Chapter 13 to slow any child support payments, and married a wannabe model who worked boat conventions. Last she’d heard, they’d divorced in Miami Beach. No calls or birthday cards to the children since.

 On the complete polar-opposite side of humanity, Kyle loved having the children in his life. His dream had come true. He’d joked it was an “instant family.” Little Jack was quiet and could build anything. Cassie blushed easily and loved to read. And as he grew to know them, he was impatient for visions of Disney World in the summer and Christmas in the winter.

 Seated in the Chevy, Kyle’s dreams came to an abrupt halt. After his prayers and planning, Christmas with a family was not going to happen.

 His entire body flinched. A tower of lights ignited from behind. They shined down on his car like he was onstage. It was coming from *something* large behind the Chevy.

 Kyle instantly rolled to the floor of the passenger’s side. He had no idea if he’d been seen. The blinding lights probed his vehicle like it was receiving a scan from a UFO.

 His mind raced. If it had to be anyone, he hoped it was police and not crazed residents. But even cops might shoot if they thought he was a terrorist who could detonate a bomb any second.

 “*It is the same car!”* a man’s voice shouted. “*Go check it out!”*

Chapter Twelve – We’ve Been Good, But We Can’t Last

The giant camouflage pick-up with the absurd forty-nine-inch tires parked behind the Chevy. Its spotlights surveyed the car. Nothing could be seen inside through the frosted windows.

 One of the hunters thought it looked like the same red Impala they’d found abandoned earlier. “It’s gotta’ be it!” the driver shouted from his window.

 Two snow hunters jumped down out of the bed of the truck. They each held Winchester hunting rifles in addition to wearing full white camo and face masks.

 “Hurry,” shouted the truck’s passenger. “We gotta’ keep movin’.”

 The two hunters walked cautiously towards each side of the Chevy. One tapped on a back window and leaned to peek inside.

 “You think kids are screwin’ in this cold?” the driver shouted.

 “I thought I heard the car squeak,” replied the hunter near the passenger’s side.

 Kyle’s eyes twitched, trying to determine where the voices were coming from. The rumble of the large vehicle was definitely a truck. The sound of footsteps on the frozen gravel sounded like someone chewing ice. Kyle remained flat on the floor, his face mashed into the mildewed carpet.

 *Tap, tap*… A man knocked on a back window. Kyle angled his head to see the shadow of a man through the glass. The dark shape pulled back to talk to one of his partners.

Kyle scoured the floor for anything useful. He had only seconds. He heard men just feet away debating something. His hands raked through Red Bull cans, a pot pipe, beef jerky… *Nothing!*

 The crunching on gravel now approached the driver’s side.

 Kyle gently reached up to open the glove compartment. Just Taco Bell napkins and a tin of Altoids. A shadow then loomed directly above him from outside the passenger window.

 When he’d shifted the Altoids, the box made a *clunk* that sounded metallic. He instinctively opened it. Among three mints was a single .38 bullet. It appeared scuffed but intact.

 “Hello..?” The figure called out, inches from the window. “Someone in there..?”

 Kyle had a choice: don’t move a muscle, or scurry to locate Santa’s empty .38 revolver that he’d tossed aside. In that millisecond, his intellect knew that one bullet would do nothing. There were at least two men, more in their truck, and probably all of them armed.

 The *scrape* of a hand to remove frost from the window sounded like nails on a chalkboard. “I think I seen something move!” a man shouted.

 Despite the bullet’s uselessness, Kyle found the pistol under his seat. His hands trembled as he nervously attempted to load the single bullet.

 The dark shape cupped his hands on the glass to see inside. He then looked straight down. “What are you doin’ down there?”

 Kyle sprung upright like a Jack-in-the-Box. He cranked the key in the ignition and the engine grated. “I fell asleep! Thanks! Kyle shouted. He knew he couldn’t shoot at the man; the others would all fire back.

 A second dark shape appeared beside him at the driver’s window.

 Kyle turned the key again and stammered, “I…gotta’ get home!” He pumped the gas.

 The man beside him bellowed, “*It’s him!*”

 The two hunters stood on each side of the Chevy. They struggled to aim their long rifles at the car in such close proximity. Their barrels struck the car’s doors. A third hunter climbed down from the truck’s passenger side.

 “Don’t piss him off!” shouted the driver.

 “I’m gonna’ fuckin’ slay him!” yelled the passenger.

 The Chevy abruptly started and launched forward, hurling gravel. The men on each side pulled their triggers, shooting towards each other. With the car gone, one man hit the other in the shoulder.

 “*Ow..!* You fuckin shot me, dick weed!” The hunter dropped to the ground, clutching his arm.

 The two remaining men aimed their rifles at the escaping car and began to fire. They had to immediately stop as their driver raced forward to follow the Chevy, blocking their view.

 “You’re just leavin’ us here?” the wounded hunter screamed towards the truck.

 “Go ahead!” His partner threw his gun on the ground. “Let the terrorist explode Travis.”

 Kyle’s breathing became labored as he accelerated to sixty on the two-lane road. His eyes skimmed the rearview, then the gas gauge. “*Shit…”* Almost on “E” again.

 He mopped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. In the rearview, the pick-up was approaching fast, hauling-ass in the center of the road. One headlamp was broken, like a one-eyed monster. Kyle accelerated faster.

 He gripped the wheel with one hand and the gun with the other –but what use could one bullet be? He couldn’t do like in the movies and perfectly hit the truck’s engine block to kill the beast.

 The truck loomed closer, within thirty yards, fishtailing on the icy road.

 Kyle exhaled, despondent. To his surprise, when he breathed in the cool air, his helplessness gave him a new sense of strength. He suddenly didn’t care anymore. He was already a fugitive with the world somehow against him. He’d already alienated his family on Christmas –and he’d murdered people. A man who had nothing more to lose, had nothing to fear.

 He sat up straight as the one-eyed monster exceeded his speed and approached on his driver’s side. When the truck was beside him, Kyle glanced over, almost casually. Jockeying beside him at eighty miles-per-hour, the driver lowered his passenger window. Kyle could see the man trying to aim a rifle with one hand while steering.

 Kyle tapped the brakes. The truck moved ahead, with the driver losing aim. Kyle then accelerated, passing the truck. He could almost see the enraged driver shouting, “*Fuck!*”

 Side by side, Kyle played this game, making it impossible for the driver to aim his rifle while driving. Kyle found himself curiously smirking. The road’s potholes weren’t helping the driver’s accuracy either. But Kyle was running out of gas and he couldn’t play this game forever.

 His invigorated psyche got an idea. He would try something no one ever tried in the movies for some bizarre reason.

 Kyle ironically rolled down his window. The driver looked over, perplexed, like he wanted to talk. Kyle slightly braked and steered so the truck’s enormous forty-nine-inch back tire was three feet outside his window. Kyle held his breath and maneuvered even closer. The drone of the spinning tire was like a buzz saw, just eighteen inches away.

 Kyle effortless aimed the .38 and shot the massive tire. He accelerated.

 The pick-up’s back tire exploded. The truck fishtailed and then violently spun and tumbled off the road.

 Kyle’s Chevy vanished forward into the snowy night.

 If Kyle was a smoker, this was a moment where he’d light a cigarette and exhale smoke over his head, cool at his triumph. But nothing was really solved and he wasn’t a smoker.

 In the movies, whenever villains try to get away in vehicles, the good guys never just shoot out the tires. They always just shoot aimlessly towards the car.

 Kyle cringed at a shrill ringing in his left ear. The gunshot had resounded within the car, louder than he’d imagined. But that was the absolute least of his worries.

 When he had driven away, he’d seen the truck come to rest upright in a ditch. Earlier, he’d noticed the driver had a seatbelt, so Kyle hoped for the best. But –*again*– it was self-defense. Or so he’d plea in a court of law, if he survived that long.

 His face drained with a new reality: the original accusations about the whole terrorist nonsense didn’t matter anymore. He was now a certified criminal. Essentially driving a stolen car, with a trail of casualties in his wake. *I am a killer, on the run*…

 Maria would divorce him out of principle. She wouldn’t want such a character as a father to her children. Kyle coughed and felt his forehead.

 Craving any distraction, he turned on the radio. It was the high pitch of Alvin and the Chipmunk’s “Christmas Song.”

 It was perfect timing.

PART THREE

We Three Kings

Chapter Thirteen – The Bomb in the Punchbowl

“When you assemble those things, there’s *always* spare pieces,” Goldman whispered loudly into his personal phone. “I don’t know why! The instructions are in Chinese!” His back was turned away from the team. When he saw two agents approach, he uttered, “–*Gotta-go-love-you-bye*.”

 Goldman put away his phone and turned, “Agent Del Rey, any news or still stewing about Mrs. Colbert’s release?”

 Del Rey frowned at the jab. With the younger Davis at her side, she replied tactfully, “I understand the temporary need to release her for the sake of her children. I’d like to volunteer to staff the command in Twin Creeks. Colbert might even try to visit her.”

 “Sure…” Goldman wiped his face with his hand and rolled up his sleeves. “You want Mayberry instead of Manhattan, *Feliz Navidad*.”

 He turned to Davis. “Were you able to stop any local searches that could alarm the suspect?”

 “Yes, sir,” replied Agent Davis. “To help halt any county searches or news choppers, the FAA has agreed to air traffic restrictions over Creeks County, south to Manhattan and north to Canada in case Colbert heads for the border. Barring flights below 3,000 feet in the search area.”

 Del Rey added, “It’s the FAA’s largest restriction to assist a federal manhunt since the Boston Bomber in 2013.”

 “God forbid,” Goldman winced at the notion. “We need to *silently* track this sicko before he can exit the county.”

 “Uber and Lyft have issued photos to all drivers.” Davis added. “Amtrak has stopped all trains running through Creeks County. Area bus lines also suspended.”

 “Good work.” Goldman turned towards the team and spread his hands, “People! Listen up!”

 The Christmas crew was now an official “Terrorism Threat Squad,” expanded with ten additional agents from various specialties. Again, a potluck due to *who* was available. Goldman hoped their youth and backgrounds could offer fresh and diverse ideas, versus a room of rookies who might panic in a crisis. They all turned from their jumble of laptops to look at Goldman.

 “Our primary objective –aside from locating Colbert– is to confirm the credibility of any threat.” Goldman projected his voice like a coach in a locker room. “Did it start as just a prank that’s gone viral? Our few analysts are looking for any corroborating evidence.” He looked up at the team. “Since the Director’s enjoying his Christmas morning from over 6,000 miles away, we won’t have national support until we prove any legitimacy of a threat.”

 The men and women appeared tired but eager.

 “But I can tell ya’ this…” Goldman cupped his hand by his mouth with a folksy voice, “A ‘terror communication expert’ leaving bodies and chaos in his trail… I don’t need a Magic 8-Ball to know ‘*signs point to yes*.’”

 A young man quietly breezed into the room. His hair was longer than average, and he was handsome in a pretty way. He wore a tan blazer and scarf, and looked like every rich boy in a John Hughes movie.

 “Ah, Agent Snyder!” Goldman raised an arm like an emcee. “Sorry to *rouse* you from anything better than this.” He motioned to the room. “Welcome to our esteemed Christmas Crew.”

 Snyder flashed a quick smile and carefully removed his scarf.

 “Team, this is Bradley Snyder with the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office,” Goldman skimmed the room of young agents. “For those of you generously offering your time from other specialties, the DNDO is under Homeland Security. They’re our primary team to implement nuclear detection efforts. In short: If there’s a nuclear weapon on our soil, they’ll find it.”

 Snyder flexed his brows at the simplistic description.

 Goldman turned to Snyder, “Bottom line: what’s the credibility of this clown having a dirty bomb?”

 “Greetings.” Snyder nodded to the room and plopped casualty into a swiveling chair. “I’d rather be at my monster-in-law’s with her notorious wooden brisket. But this *particular* threat…” He paused pensively. “Could be valid.”

 The agents in the room exchanged solemn glances.

 “As you know, ‘dirty bomb’ refers to a radiological dispersal device –an RDD– that combines conventional explosives with radioactive material. It’s more of a speculative device, particularly feared since 9/11. The primary threat comes from the explosion itself, and the dispersal of radioactive material.”

 Despite the room’s diverse levels of experience, everyone was engrossed.

 “The secondary purpose of the weapon is to contaminate the area around the explosion with radiation. The bomb would be designed to disperse radioactive material over a large area, versus a smaller target like a café or school. Lastly, there would be psychological injury through mass panic and terror.” Snyder finished simply by crossing his legs and brushing off his slacks.

 Goldman cocked his head, “We’re not talkin’ an M-80 firecracker someone buys at Walmart.” He shrugged at Snyder, “So how could someone obtain radioactive material?” He rolled his hand, “–And then get it into the U.S.? I couldn’t even get a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue on a cruise ship.”

 No one reacted to his attempt at levity. All eyes turned to Snyder for his response.

 Snyder paused to sip his Starbucks. He lowered his cup and replied calmly. “A week ago, a briefcase-size case of iridium-192 went missing from an oilfield in San Antonio, Texas. Oil firms use the 192 to image the inside of pipelines. Iridium-192 is a category-2 radioactive substance. So the amount missing would seriously injure someone who handles the material, and it can kill thousands in close proximity within hours to days.”

 That quieted the room.

 Snyder took another sip and lifted a finger to say he had more. “Ten days ago, thieves in Atlanta hijacked a truck. In that truck was *cobalt-60*, a lethal radioactive isotope that’s used in medical therapy machines. The truck was hauling cancer treatment devices. If people are exposed to cobalt-60, severe radiation poisoning can result, which includes–”

 “–Burns and blisters on the victims’ skin.” Dr. Weisman interjected, aghast, “Then diarrhea, headache, and fever...” His voice trailed, “Vomiting blood from hemorrhaging intestines... Ultimately coma and death.”

 Severing the unnerving silence, Goldman spread his arms, “Well, Happy –*fuckin’*– holidays!” He gave an inflated shrug, “So keeping track of radioactive material is like herding cats?”

 Snyder replied coolly, “I was asked if the suspect’s threat is credible –and my opinion is yes.”

 Goldman looked straight up at the ceiling and cracked his neck to the left and right. “I can’t use choppers, or even a full-scale manhunt for fear of ‘distressing’ the suspect or triggering a device…” He looked at his junior audience and barked, “How do we locate the WMD?”

 Agent Davis spoke up from the front row, “Harmon’s at Colbert’s office right now. They’re doing a full radiation sweep. The results from his residence were negative.”

 Snyder spoke up, “The city already has radiation portal monitors installed near potential targets such as tunnels, federal buildings… But an RDD bomb could be between the size of a fire hydrant or a soda machine.”

 “No sweat!” Goldman flailed his arms with sarcasm, “Only 304 square miles to check every fire hydrant and pop machine before someone pisses off trigger boy!”

 A few agents struggled to stifle involuntary chuckles.

 “Or another possibility…” Analyst Jenkins interjected, pragmatic, “If the public finds him before we do…they may neutralize him for us. Problem solved.”

 All eyes in the room blinked in thought, silent.

Chapter Fourteen – Away in a Borrowed Manger

Complete darkness. With instant light, the serene figures illuminated. The wise men, Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. Strangely appropriate beacons.

 Kyle collapsed, reclined against a bale of hay. He felt his clammy head and wiped it with his scarf. He didn’t need a mirror to know he looked ghastly.

 Kyle had miraculously made it back to the church’s shed. He’d parked a block away from the chapel, in a dry ditch behind trees in case there was a hunt for the red Impala.

 It was nearly 2:00 a.m. when he’d parked. Before Kyle entered the shed, he read the church’s letter-board sign. The small chapel had a Christmas service at 11:00 a.m. Kyle hoped for five or six hours sleep before any employees might arrive. He needed to be long gone by then.

 Once inside the shed, Kyle had used some cardboard to cover the door’s small window to block any light from inside. There were no sirens in the distance, no traffic noise, no gunshots. Nothing but perfect silence.

 At that hour, in his condition, a bed of hay looked like the Ritz Carlton.

 Reclined in his nest, Kyle looked up at the three wise men and gave a weary grin.

 “So were you guys ‘wise men?’ Like ‘wise *guys*..?’” He tightened his scarf. “I shoulda’ paid more attention in Sunday school… Were you *kings*?”

 The glowing wise men gazed at him, reverent. One figure had darker skin; one had light skin and white clothes; the third was dark and heavier.

 “If you’re kings…” Kyle squinted at the figures, “I’ll call you…Elvis,” he said to the white king. “And you, Martin Luther,” to the darker one. “And for you…” He studied the heavier one. “I’ll call you B.B.” Kyle coughed and tried to snuggle in his coat. “Is that sacrilegious?” He turned to the baby in the manger, “Are we good?”

 Kyle squeezed his eyes closed. All humor was gone, replaced with a pained expression. Seeing his visible breath, it was still too cold.

 He stood to unplug the Star of Bethlehem. He brought the 125-watt bulb down to the manger. He raked aside any flammable hay, and plugged the light into an extension cord. He angled the bulb upright on the side of the manger, essentially creating a heat lamp.

 Kyle managed a weak smile at his feat of engineering. He curled up around the lamp like a cat near a fireplace. “*Think!*” He exhaled under his breath. “Apply deductive reasoning… What’s the available data? What do we know?”

 He spoke to the kings as if they were a three-man audience. “Fact: this is all really happening. Fact: I was identified by name.” He paused, “Also fact: I am *not* guilty. I have no bomb or…‘trigger.’”

 His audience remained still, pious.

 “Only one conclusion…” His speech became slower. “Another party perpetrated it...to *frame* me...” His eyes grew heavy. “Why..? I’m just an email hacker…” His voice drifted into a whisper, “With a family… Trying to go hom…”

 Kyle passed out. His body could function no more. Surrounded by the warmth of devout figures.

 Manhattan’s 5th Avenue was oddly desolate at 3:00 a.m. on Christmas morning. A few decorations were still lit –but no people. No food wagons, busses or cabs. A conflicting cross between peaceful and unsettling.

 The only amusing sign of activity were the flashing squad cars, government-issue sedans and white CDC vans parked on the curb of the Harding-Foxtel Tower.

 In Kyle Colbert’s 42nd floor office, two CDC agents in full biohazard suits swabbed the room. Sampling was being performed by the Center for Disease Control after reports that a missing terror suspect had become ill with a fever –and he’d recently been in the Mid-East.

 The CDC conducted a thorough assessment of the entire floor, including areas Colbert could’ve visited such as restrooms and break areas. Their personnel wore air-purifying respirators with their white biohazard suits. The protocol included collecting biofilm swabs of the area and any samples. At the New York Infectious Diseases laboratories, the swabs would be vortexed and tested for a wide range of infectious agents and biological security threats.

 Another job where they prayed for “negative.”

 Agent Lina Harmon wrinkled her nose to watch a CDC agent kneel to collect damp, wadded tissues from Colbert’s trash can.

 From outside Colbert’s office, she turned to her witness, Kyle’s supervisor, Connor Banks.

 “This is all so preposterous…” Connor huffed. His thinning hair was freshly combed over and he adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses. He wore a long coat over, what appeared to be, pajamas. He was making it abundantly clear he was not pleased to have been ushered from home, yet he timidly reminded the agents he was happy to help as his “civic duty.”

 “Mr. Banks, you’re Kyle Colbert’s immediate superior?” Harmon asked. They remained standing, neither wanted to be there any longer than needed.

 “I like to think of us as a team, but technically yes,” Connor replied in a nerdy manner. “Kyle’s our resident genius. He’s the firm’s lead *cryptanalyst*.”

 Harmon paused her notes. “What does that involve?”

 “A cryptanalyst decrypts hidden information, in our case encrypted emails. They attempt to breach security systems and gain access to the contents of encoded messages.” He gave a quick grin. “In layman’s terms, we’re hired to I.D. online accounts where terrorists communicate.”

 Harmon frowned as she jotted notes.

 “In fact,” Connor chuckled, “I just praised him earlier. A program he’s created could single-handedly locate a majority of all terrorist accounts within a year.”

 Harmon met his gaze, now grim. “So, you’re confirming that Kyle Colbert’s job involves communications with known terror groups?”

 Connor went deadpan at the implication. “No… I mean,” he stammered. “Well, sort of…” He quickly added, “The Kyle I know is an honest, family man. Right..?”

Chapter Fifteen – Let there be Peace

In the Colberts’ adorned master bedroom, Maria tucked-in her children. Together in one bed.

 It had been Kyle’s idea to have a small Fraser fir tree in the corner of the bedroom. The room had enough decorations for an entire home. Maria knew it’d be a soft, pleasing place for the children to rest. An “emotional cushion,” as the Child Services agent had recommended.

 She stared at Jack and Cassie. They were out cold. Despite the confusing turmoil, with the accusations about their new dad, they couldn’t stay awake any longer. Maria prayed they’d have no nightmares. Standing at the door, she smiled down on them. But her face dimmed, unable to escape the circumstances.

 *Jack found the rifle..!* Maria cringed. The gun had belonged to her ex-husband. Without her permission, he had taken Jack hunting when he was only eight. Little Jack knew the basics of handling a firearm. After the divorce, Maria kept the gun in her closet for her own protection. Kyle had been pestering her to get a proper gun cabinet, and she’d procrastinated.

Maria gasped at the implication –if Kyle had been shot, it would’ve been her fault. She held her face in her hands. Little Jack was blameless. He’d been terrified by the stories about Kyle on TV, and she hadn’t answered her phone. At a very young nine, Jack was vulnerable to suggestion, and he’d assumed his mom was hurt. Cassie would’ve followed Jack anywhere.

 Maria inhaled and stood upright. She had to be thankful for what she’d gained: her children were safe at home, and her freedom. She prayed rational law enforcement would find her husband before any insane locals.

 She was too wired to sleep. She descended the staircase into their living room that was still awaiting Christmas. It was bittersweet how perfect Kyle and the children had decorated the room. He’d scrutinized a dozen trees before picking out a flawless eight-foot Douglas fir. He’d driven her and the kids to a tree farm outside of Bedford Hills. With free hot chocolate and trees tied on car roofs, it was like a scene out of every Christmas movie.

 With a pit in her stomach, Maria smiled at their mantle. Everyone had a stocking. Kyle had personalized them with embroidered names in gold thread. She nearly welled with tears seeing the many gifts under the tree. Maria had screamed at a clumsy FBI agent during a home search when he insisted that he unwrap and examine each gift.

 Maria turned to gaze out the front window. There was still a light flurry outside. Her neighbors’ automatic timers had turned off all the festive lights. Also spoiling the mood was the monstrous FBI Mobile Command Center trailer parked right in front of her home.

 The feds had delivered a thirty-eight foot RV, customized as a command and communications center, essentially an FBI station on wheels. White, black and chrome, it was the opposite of merry. And right now, it was blocking Maria’s majestic view of anything nice.

 Perhaps it was the spirit of the holiday, or simply being human, but Maria decided she’d be the better person. She put on a coat over her pajamas and stepped into her rubber boots.

 Huddled in her coat, Maria knocked on the command trailer’s steel door. She shivered, blowing warm air into her hands. *Come on, let’s go…* She knocked again, harder.

 The door cracked open. Agent Del Rey peeked out and recoiled as if seeing a bug. “Mrs. Colbert. We asked you to remain inside.”

 Maria stomped her boots to stay warm. “When I said park an agent outside, I didn’t mean you. Or this beautiful…monstrosity.”

 Del Rey was not amused. “What do you need?”

 “Do you plan to stay inside…*that* all night?” She craned her neck to see inside, “On Christmas?” The trailer was boxy metal. Behind Del Rey was a clinical-looking office.

 “As you can see, I’m working.” Del Rey eased slightly. “It’s got coffee and a little couch.”

 “I also have coffee and a little couch.” Maria forced a smile, “And my house doesn’t look like the inside of a… proctologist’s office.”

 “I can’t just leave Mrs. Colbert–”

 “–You’re not screwing an ISIS suspect,” Maria interrupted. “It’s almost dawn on Christmas. I’m inviting you in –like you’re a vampire. I’m *allowing* you in my home.”

 Del Rey inhaled for a retort, but paused.

 Agent Del Rey guardedly followed Maria into her home. She darted her eyes to all four corners of the living room as if identifying traps.

 Maria chuckled, “Your *fibbie’s* already swabbed the entire place. You could eat out of our commode.” She frowned, “They took our hard drives and anything useful. Little Grinches.” She took off her coat and motioned to the couch beside a smoldering fire. “Please, have a seat.”

 Del Rey froze in place as if computing her next step. She turned and warily sat on the couch, as stiff as a poseable Barbie doll.

 “I made coffee,” Maria turned towards the kitchen. “Don’t worry, no Irish Cream in yours.”

 Del Rey was left momentarily alone. She absorbed the décor with the eyes of an enthralled child. She gazed up and down the decorated tree as if committing it to memory. “I should only be a minute,” she shouted.

 Maria returned with two steaming mugs. “You got your cell?” She handed Del Rey a mug. “They can find ya.’”

 Markedly slower that hours before, Maria sat across from Del Rey in a deep chair. She sighed heavily, “Listen: the only thing keeping me from falling to pieces is my kids.” She cocked her head, “This is a *bad* dream. I don’t know if anyone has slaughtered my husband, or where he is…” She looked Del Rey squarely in the eyes, “But I do know he’s innocent.”

 Del Rey shifted uncomfortably. She began to reply, and then stopped. Finally, “I cannot comment about an ongoing investigation.”

 Maria chuckled at the bureaucracy and sipped her coffee.

 Del Rey studied her coffee before tasting it.

 “It’s not my plot to poison one agent at a time who’s investigating my husband.” Maria smiled. “That’d take all night.”

 The ladies allowed a moment of silence as they sipped their drinks. Del Rey awkwardly nodded at her surroundings.

 “You will discover this is a huge fraud,” Maria said. “Created by one of his many targets. Kyle couldn’t bruise a banana. Your focus should be *finding* him, before some idiot does.”

 “Our job is to explore all avenues,” Del Rey quickly replied. She paused and motioned to the tree. “Your holiday tree is well… balanced.”

 “It’s what you call a Christmas tree. And thank you. Do you not celebrate?”

 “Of course I do,” Del Rey replied flippantly. “I’m Ukrainian Orthodox.”

 “Ah…” Maria nodded. “Don’t you use a different calendar or something?”

 “Yes.”

 The small talk was painful. Maria took another sip and tried again. “*Anthea Del Rey*... That doesn’t sound Ukrainian.”

 “I had a first husband.”

 Maria nodded, expecting her to elaborate. After silence, she replied, “I see. I do too, I get it…” She smiled in an effort to raise the mood. “Anyone else to enjoy this holiday with?”

 “I must not have children,” Del Rey snapped. “–as you previously concluded.”

 Maria raised her brows. “*Sorry…”* she reacted under her breath*.*

 Del Rey glanced at her watch and stood. “I’m not sure it’s appropriate for us to discuss my personal matters. Thank you for the coffee.” She stepped towards the door.

 Maria made no effort to stand or stop her. “Suit yourself –and Merry Christmas out there.”

 Del Rey closed the door behind her. Within seconds, Maria caught herself dozing. She stood to head upstairs with the children. She absorbed one last glance outside. Through the flurries, a pastel dawn was flickering through the clouds.

 It was Christmas morning and she wanted to cry. But she suppressed any emotion and returned to her children.

Chapter Sixteen – There’s Always Plan-D

In the task force conference room, SSA Goldman turned away to whisper into his phone, “Nibble the edges of the cookies like he ate ‘em. Then drink the milk.” He paused, frustrated. “I know you’re lactose intolerant –so just dump it in the sink!”

 Following the Jewish faith, this was the first time the Goldman family was attempting to celebrate any version of Christmas. His wife Brielle had been raised marginally Catholic, and after they’d married, they agreed to raise their family Jewish.

 Now, with their daughter approaching four years old, Brielle was curious of incorporating the traditions of a “holiday tree” and Santa Claus. Little Lauren was already asking questions, seeing all the decorations at school and she loved the classic Rudolph and Santa shows on television.

 They agreed to ask their Rabbi if it was acceptable to unite traditions from both faiths.

 “You don’t plan on bringing your daughter to a Christmas mass, nor are you foisting Christian beliefs on your daughter,” Rabbi Ariel Poplack passed a tray of poppy seed cookies. “You simply want to share the joy of added traditions. A rich and teachable moment for Lauren.”

 “What about the whole Santa nonsense?” Vince Goldman asked.

 Rabbi Poplack chuckled, “Religions and cultures can be very different. The traditions still come from a place of love and respect. As far as Santa, gifts of any kind come from love we have for one another. How can gifts to loved ones ever be a bad thing?”

 Seeing doubt on Goldman’s face, the Rabbi concluded, “Your family’s identity is also how you live the other 364 days of the year. Sharing other traditions could teach your children a new appreciation for our multicultural world and the many different roads we choose to follow.”

 And so Vince Goldman had to be a quick study on Christmas traditions. And, as fate would have it, he had missed the entire evening of Christmas Eve. Privately, he’d been looking forward to seeing Lauren’s face with her stockings on Christmas morning.

 Though he’d rather be home, Brielle accepted his innate sense of duty, especially if millions of lives were possibly in jeopardy.

 “So everything’s all set?” Goldman whispered into his cell. “The menorah’s still in the center with the stockings off to the side, right?” When he turned to see Jenkins approach, he exclaimed, “–*Gotta-go-love-you-bye.*”

 Though always stoic, Analyst Jenkins’ face was more grim than usual. A few nearby agents also paused to hear any update.

 “What is it?” Goldman shrugged, “You find something on Colbert’s hard drive?”

 “No,” Jenkins replied, realizing the team staring at him. “Our senior Analyst, Kevin Cox, is helping us remotely from vacation in Vegas. He reached out to his liaisons at the CIA…”

 “What?! What?” Goldman rolled his hands, impatient.

 “The CIA just deciphered a month-old post from a cyphernet IRC–”

 Goldman heatedly interrupted, “–Talk to me like I’ve been pissed off and awake for twenty-six hours!”

 “Sorry, sir,” Jenkins cleared his throat. “An *IRC* is an Internet Relay Chat, a chat room on the dark web. Basically, where bad guys communicate with each other anonymously. When the CIA finally deciphered a post from over a month ago, it purportedly confirms the delivery of a dirty bomb.” He pursed his lips, “In Manhattan, thirty-two days ago. No exact location.”

 Goldman went deadpan. He slowly rotated as he processed the news. The room was silent.

 “The bomb’s real..?” he rhetorically asked, needing to hear his own words.

 Jenkins added, “The CIA never followed up. They decipher hundreds of messages a day.” He narrowed his eyes, “But the timing *is* peculiar with the Colbert claims.”

 Goldman’s face slowly reddened. “If Colbert’s behind this, he *knows* where it’s located...”

 The team watched Goldman breathe harder, pumping-up with rage like the Hulk.

 “*If* Colbert’s still alive!” Goldman shouted. “Every armed civilian in four counties are hunting him like a rabid Nazi!” He habitually wiped his face with his hand. “He’s useless to us dead! Davis: where was the last sighting?”

 Agent Davis stepped forward. “Ten unverified reports from over three states. A lot of crackpots calling in. However, the cell hits were all in Twin Creeks –where the bodies were.”

 Goldman shook his head like a disappointed parent. “Idiots shooting each other like it’s the wild west…”

 He looked up at the team, resolute. “I want *more* agents covering Twin Creeks like fire ants –plain clothes, not looking like *Men in Black*. I know it’s a holiday, but everyone should be on call. Offer incentive pay, time off. I don’t give a shit. We *need* Colbert somehow alive…”

 “That’s the challenge,” Davis interjected. “If we discover Colbert’s whereabouts, how can we capture him without agitating or killing him?”

 An appealing young Asian American agent meekly raised her hand. “Supervisory Special Agent Goldman?”

 Goldman squinted at the back row, “Agent…Liana. Welcome –I know you’re new, from NYPD. Watcha’ got?”

 “Why have cops never used tranquilizer guns?” Liana paused to let her words sink in. The other agents looked at each other, equally curious.

 Liana continued, “If you recall last May, a tiger escaped from the Central Park Zoo. We discovered zoos have Emergency Response Teams. They sent over a guy with a .50 caliber tranquilizer gun –and it worked.” She shrugged, “It could keep Colbert from getting agitated or pulling any trigger. And keep him alive.”

 Goldman’s brows jumped high, intrigued. He shrugged at Dr. Weisman.

 The wizened doctor grinned as he spoke, “Sadly, there are good reasons you’ve never seen police equipped with tranquilizer guns. First of all, they’re not that instant. The drugs can take seconds to work. The suspect could still shoot –or in this case, pull some trigger.”

 The room’s optimism began to sink.

 “More significantly,” Weisman continued, “there’s too high a risk of killing the target. That’s why anesthesiologists are paid so much. It’s a very precise science. Based on size, body weight, diet, allergies... Otherwise you could overdose your subject or cause permanent brain damage.”

 In almost unison, all agents turned back to their screens.

 Goldman winked at Liana, “Nice input. We’ll table it as ‘Plan-D.’” He then shouted to the room, “Keep brainstorming people, and let me know of any *real* sightings.”

Chapter Seventeen – I’m Dreaming Through a White Christmas

Kyle was surrounded by pitch black silence.

 Echoes of the day’s events began to emerge. Swirling images from Kyle’s fevered psyche.

 Connor Banks’ face appeared, from after the meeting, “*Your work could single-handedly locate all target accounts and stop this entire thing in a year*…” His toothy smile and amplified words, “*You’re our rival’s worst nightmare.*”

 His words and sounds echoed, deafening. Kyle was confused at the replay.

 When he blinked, he found himself in his corner office. A more appealing figure turned. It was Rena as she’d been late in the day. “*Chase Zahir called. He said something’s going on*…”

 Kyle replied as before, “He probably has news he doesn’t want to put in an email…”

 The lights audibly clicked off like a switch. Kyle darted his head in the darkness, unnerved. When the lights clicked on, he was in the firm’s boardroom. The intimidating Mr. Hawkins was at the head of the table. A dozen executives sat on either side, facing Hawkins.

 Kyle froze, hesitant, the scene wasn’t like before.

 When the executives turned to Kyle, they were all wearing cheap, surreal Santa masks. Kyle gasped –they were the same masks as the thugs he had killed.

 A voice shouted from beside him, “*Wake up Kyle! Mr. Hawkins is speaking to you!*” Connor Banks nudged him angrily, unlike before.

 Hawkins craggy face smiled, “*No one wants a conflict, Kyle…*”

 Connor asked Kyle, almost critical, “*Are you going to I.D. all enemy accounts within a year*?”

 Kyle began to perspire. He turned to Hawkins, confused.

 The Santa executives raised glistening knives and bolted from their seats. Their chairs flew to the side as they lunged towards Kyle. He stumbled towards the door, rolling chairs in his wake.

 Kyle could hardly run; the floor was like running through tar. When he rounded the corner, a maze of work cubicles appeared before him. Hundreds of desks. He paused, but the armed executives were raucously approaching. He ran into the sea of cubicles like entering a maze.

 “*Yo, look who’s still here!”* a voice shouted from a corner of the maze. Kyle recognized the voice –it was one of the young Santa-masked thugs. The dead ones.

 With wild laughter, Kyle saw the four Santa thugs rushing through the cubicles, leaping over desks toward him. They had red blossoms on their chests –gunshot wounds.

 Unsure where to escape, deafening chainsaws ignited from Kyle’s right. He saw two pole saws wavering above the desks, held by the masked men, racing through the maze towards him.

 Kyle was petrified. Four killers running from one corner, two men with saws from the other. The clamor of the knife-wielding executives from behind.

 Kyle struggled to run towards the center of the maze. He looked back to see red behind him –a bloody Santa, furiously climbing over desks towards him. It was the corpse the Chevy had crushed. Bleeding with an arm that was bent the wrong way.

 Kyle was like a rat racing towards the center of a labyrinth. Killers were converging from all four corners. Power saws, blades and laughter.

 As he approached the center, the darkness revealed a brunette. Rena turned.

 She seemed somehow calm. “*You’re considered more clever than the others*.” Rena leaned forward, “*You’re smarter than them!”*

 Frustrated, Kyle shouted, “Then what the fuck is going on?”

 The saws, thugs, Santa’s corpse and the blade-wielding executives all converged like piranha.

 Kyle’s horrified scream jolted himself awake in the small shed. He gasped and rolled over to see a beast’s snout, inches away. He recoiled to focus. It was the nose of a plastic donkey, a guest of the nativity.

 He sat upright. It had been a feverish dream. “Jesu… Wha… What time is it..? He patted his pockets and recalled he didn’t have a phone. It took a moment to realize he was wearing a watch.

 “Almost two –*two o’clock*!?” he shouted. With ashen skin and circles around his eyes, he became emotional. “Christmas Day…is almost gone..?”

 It was official, he’d missed the holiday with his family. The only Christmas Eve and morning of the season. And it was over. He’d slept through any hope of miraculously solving the mystery in time to wake up with the kids and open gifts with his bride over spiked eggnog.

 *Did the kids have any semblance of Christmas?* Had Maria tried to salvage the day? Kyle wondered if gifts would even bring smiles to the kids. Or was the mood so annihilated that everyone was suffering? His nightmare in the real world was as horrific as his night terrors.

 *Christmas service!* Kyle gasped as he recalled. He’d slept through the service. Were people at the church? What if he’d been discovered asleep in the shed? Police could be on the way.

He slowly stood and his bones ached. He hobbled to the door and moved the cardboard used to block the light. He saw no people or vehicles in the parking lot. There was a fresh blanket of snow with no tire tracks. *A white Christmas to add insult to injury*…

 He cracked open the door to gaze towards the chapel. It had a sign posted on the door. No lights or sound, joyous or otherwise, emanating from the chapel. He didn’t want to risk going any closer. He returned inside the shed and locked the door.

 Was this a bad sign or a blessing, he wondered. He also noticed there were no distant sirens or the sound of any helicopters. No signs of life. Was it some sort of reprieve?

 Kyle began to cough. He reclined on a bale of hay and felt his forehead; it was warmer than before. He turned to the Three Kings.

 “Martin Luther: you’re a doctor, right? What am I, 102 degrees at least?”

 The king gazed serenely.

 “Sorry, I know you weren’t a medical doctor…” Kyle mused under his breath. He gave a faint smile to the king draped in white. “Hey Elvis. We got a lot in common. Up all night, sleep all day...” He chuckled. “And like you, I can’t go outside…”

 He looked towards Mary and Joseph, “I can’t contact Maria. Even if I had a way, they’re probably tracing her phone…” Though he was feverish and mentally fatigued, he needed to analyze his situation. His brain had recharged with nearly eleven hours of sleep and he knew his analytical skills were higher than average.

 He stood and stretched. With his rigid joints, he felt like Frankenstein. When he turned back to the scene, the nativity figures looked like an audience. Either a delusion or reality, all the figures were facing him, awaiting his words.

 Like a professor, he narrowed his eyes and lectured, “When confronted with problems, it can help to openly present the facts in order to analyze and brainstorm solutions.” He paused, “Since you’re all plastic, it’s called ‘thinking out loud.’”

 On top of a bale of hay, he unbundled a t-shirt from the Chevy. It contained Red Bulls, beef jerky, a Snickers bar and a wadded newspaper. He opened a Red Bull and the jerky.

 “Liquid stimulant and protein,” he said aloud. He unfolded the newspaper. “This is the *exact* same as coffee, bacon and the Sunday Times at home…” He frowned, studying the paper. “Tuesday’s paper. No new data.” He dropped the paper, agitated.

 “These are the goals,” he continued to his audience, “Establish suspects. If I can do so, I can approach authorities with more credibility –with a decreased chance of getting shot.”

 Kyle reflected on his daily routine to consider anyone he’d been in contact with. He slouched to realize his entire life involved waking up early to work ten hour days between solitary train rides home. He had no other social life. No bowling leagues or discussions about his career to strangers. As such, Kyle decided to brainstorm about his job.

 He smiled at the noble figures. “Joseph, I believe you were a…builder. I just *built* something I’m proud of: a program I call *GhostSeeker*. It’s designed to ID terrorist social media accounts, to stop the ways they communicate with each other.” He smiled modestly, “Some believe it could be a final blow to modern terrorism as we know it.”

 Joseph maintained a soft smile.

 Kyle shrugged, “If there’s anywhere I can toot my horn, it’s here.” He coughed. “The result of my work: it creates many enemies.” His expression wilted, “Suspects for my predicament will be…countless.” His voice trailed at the outlook. “Who knows..?”

 He finished the Red Bull. An eyebrow arched with a new thought, *who knows..?* He said aloud, “*Who knows* about GhostSeeker? The bad guys just know they’re getting caught –they don’t know *me*… Or my program.” His face lost all color. “It’s proprietary, only my company knows about it… And the firm that just acquired us.”

 Kyle looked at his audience. In his fevered state, the figures were facing him, riveted with curiosity. “I haven’t explained: I work at Harding-Foxtel. We’re an information technology firm. We’re being acquired by the Bayonet Group. They’re also government contractors, but they do weapons, combat stuff.” He shrugged, “I know... It doesn’t sound peaceful. Especially today.”

 Kyle looked down at his newspaper for any diversion. Whenever he was confronted with a dilemma, he’d take a break to use the other side of his brain. His left-brain was geared nicely for deductive logic. His right-brain could unleash some decent creativity if the mood was right. His logic was going nowhere, so he scanned the paper for any distraction.

 A weight loss ad for *Diet Solutions* caught his eye because his Snickers bar was lying beside it. A shirtless full-figured guy in the ad looked like he was staring at the candy bar. Kyle grinned at the absurdity –but suddenly went deadpan. A bizarre *déjà vu* gave him goose bumps.

 With a flashback from his dream, Hawkins’ face leered, “*No one wants a conflict Kyle*…”

 Connor’s voice had exclaimed, “*Are you going to I.D. all enemy accounts within a year?”*

 With a wave of nausea, Kyle processed the words. Did Hawkins mean *conflict* like a fight or a conflict of interest? Did the dream even mean anything, or was it just high fever running amok?

 Kyle recalled a lecture at an analytics conference. A psychologist had suggested dreams were useful in solving problems. The key was *lucid dreaming*, which produced realistic dreams, stemming from the higher activity of the brain’s frontal lobes.

 Kyle’s nightmare had been eerily lucid and realistic. Had his subconscious uncovered clues that have been there all along?

 “They don’t want a conflict,”he repeated under his breath.“Am I going to ID all enemy accounts..?”Glancing at the newspaper, his body surged with an epiphany. He looked at the kings, “B.B… Elvis… You were business men… It’s a conflict of interest…”

 He lifted the candy bar and newspaper. “Imagine a candy company…suddenly buying a diet business.” His glassy eyes widened in realization. “It’s a conflict. If my firm believes I can stop all terrorist activity… That doesn’t really help a combat firm...”

 Kyle paused with a thousand-yard stare. “If my program and I vanish, terrorism thrives. Everyone profits.” Rena had whispered, “*You’re smarter than them.”* If his new program could halt terrorism, that would hurt a combat firm. His GhostSeeker program had never been publicized. Only his bosses knew of its existence –and the company acquiring them.

 He had heard the business myth of a pharmaceutical company that discovered a cure for cancer. The cure mysteriously disappeared due to the billions in lost revenue from cancer-related narcotics.

 If terrorism was a cancer, Kyle had invented a cure. The success of Harding-Foxtel and the Bayonet Group depended on whether Kyle and his program existed.

 Was there any other possibility? *Who would believe me?* He needed someone logical to discuss it with, but he had no way to communicate.

He flipped through the newspaper with tense energy. A black and white image stood out and he paused. It was a photo of a man with wild hair in a tweed jacket. The caption read, “Meet Dr. Melvin Kennedy, discussing his new book, *Our Scientific History*…”

 “Melvin Kennedy?” Kyle exclaimed. “I’ve known Mel since the fifth grade…” He looked at his audience. “He’s a professor at Westchester. Biology or something…” He thumbed to himself, “He *knows* me... Melvin and I used to ride bikes every day. His mom would make us food at any hour. He later married Elaine Sims. He’s lived in the nicest house on Holly Lane for years…”

 Kyle paused with a nod. “Melvin will believe me. He’s a scholar, a man of science. And I need a phone and any help I can get…”

 The three wise kings all smiled.

 In the leather and wood-paneled country club, the skeletal Mr. Hawkins raised his sherry glass, “Here’s to our two great institutions, merged as one for the New Year.”

 A large man with a cowboy hat asked in a deep drawl, “When might we confirm our…*thorn in our side* will be eliminated?”

PART FOUR

Faithful Friends Who Are Dear To Us

Chapter Eighteen – Satan’s Little Helpers

In the old-world parlor, six men enjoyed cocktails and Cubans, settled in leather club chairs.

 In the center, the stern Mr. Hawkins scolded the cowboy, “This isn’t the time nor the place to track our success –yet.”

 Since 1922, the Thorne Woode Country Club has been considered a sportsman’s paradise within easy reach from the bustle of Manhattan. The venerable club offered golf, tennis, polo, horseback riding and sports no one knew still existed like squash, tobogganing and handball. On 200 acres of land, the club included a hotel, country club and private estates, one of which Mr. Chester Hawkins enjoyed as his own.

 The clubhouse seemed trapped in time, with carved dark woods, burgundies and hunter greens. Complete with billiard tables, cigar parlors and bars boasting priceless spirits and wines. The rooms had been decked with antique Christmas decorations and hand-blown glass ornaments from the 1940s. The sparkling thirty-foot trees had been cut from Thorne Woode property.

 As a private, invitation-only club, they’d prohibited female and ethnic members for decades. Chester Hawkins, who was the chairman of the club in addition to Senior V.P. of Harding-Foxtel, fought anti-discrimination laws vigorously to keep the members pale and male. As times changed, he grudgingly relented. And he was now glad he had, considering his new business venture required gentlemen from around the globe.

 Seated with Hawkins was the very white cowboy “Mr. Earl” from the San Antonio oil trade. He was well over six feet and 250 pounds. He was the most outspoken in his phony folksy style, and preferred suits that had a sheen to match his size fourteen rattlesnake boots.

 Also seated was the small, quiet Muslim “Mr. Sarif,” from Saudi Arabia’s office for Goch & Nole (G&N) a weapons manufacturer of assault rifles and grenade launchers. He intently listened and said very little unless he was curious, and always wore a bow tie.

 The well-dressed “Mr. Tong” looked like a model with polished hair. He represented South Korea’s Tech United Corp, which created parts for helicopters including Blackhawks.

 The always-smiling, silver-haired African “Mr. Dixon” was with Shield Systems, a South African company that produced armored vehicles and treads for tanks.

 Rounding out the circle was a young black man with glasses simply known as “Toby,” a British IT expert from ArmsTech, a London firm that created missile guidance systems.

 Mr. Hawkins preferred their “Mr.” monikers for their simplicity, and he didn’t care if the names were real or not. Likewise, he was to be addressed only as Mr. Hawkins.

 Despite the men’s diverse backgrounds, they all had one thing in common: they represented contractors for the U.S. Department of Defense. Few citizens realized the many foreign companies the U.S. military pays handsomely for products and services.

 The room was guarded by a large man in a black turtleneck and slacks, known simply as *Krug*. He stood at the door with crossed arms and an expressionless face that looked like it’d been carved from oak. His thick unibrow rarely moved unless he was angered by someone approaching too close. Krug stayed out of the conversations and appeared to be a bodyguard for the scrawny Mr. Hawkins.

 An ancient server in a tux approached. He bent to hear whatever Mr. Hawkins required.

 With a tone so all could hear, Hawkins ordered, “Tell the women to have the children clean and ready *on time*. We shall dine *punctual*.”

 The server nodded and exited the parlor.

 The calm Mr. Sarif asked, “The program, GhostSeeker, has never been shared outside the firm?”

 Hawkins winced as if he’d bitten a lime. “Those of us in civilized nations discuss business *after* our supper.” He rolled his head, “But…I assure you, the Seeker program has not been shared. It will be destroyed as soon as…” He gave a coy shrug to finish his sentence.

 Mr. Dixon knitted his brows. In a South African accent he articulated, “Our entire success is contingent on the public…*resolving* this situation for us.” The other men looked to Hawkins, equally curious. “That is a lot of hope in one plan.”

 Hawkins gave a lethal smile at being questioned. “Gentlemen, there are currently 44,510 registered firearms in New York state. Half of those owners have IQs less than 100. Debt-ridden simpletons with loaded weapons.” He raised a brow, “All it takes is one patriot and our little Colbert problem will be laid to rest –literally.”

 The men gave pensive nods and sipped their drinks.

 “Pardon sir, I’m not a computer fella,’” Mr. Earl leaned forward with a twang. “But how confident are we that authorities can’t trace the uploads and…online posts?”

 Hawkins sighed at the pettiness. With his hawk-like face, he gestured towards the sinister man in black, standing with crossed arms. “That gentleman is my security chief, *Mr. Krug*. He is a former *Spetsnaz GRU*, the Special Forces intelligence of the Russian Federation. He can give you a lesson on utilizing *TOR*s and bulletproof hosting to make uploads untraceable if you ask him nicely and say ‘pretty please.’”

 Krug’s stare was given weight by his heavy brows. None of the men spoke up.

 A dinner bell chimed signifying the holiday banquet was about to be served. At Mr. Hawkins’ insistence, they were to dine at the 4:00 p.m. seating.

 As the men stood to be led down the chandeliered corridor, Mr. Sarif approached Mr. Earl. He looked up at the large man but spoke softly, “The… *event* is still in play?”

 “Yes sir. A necessary calamity.” Earl whispered, “It’ll be live, ‘round the world.” He checked over his shoulder. “The collateral fallout will ultimately save millions of people and jobs.”

 Sarif cocked his head, curious, “How can anyone promise ‘live’ and ‘around the world’?”

 Earl stood upright with a wide smile, “You’ll see, little buddy. Now, let’s get some of that goose and gravy!”

 The men strolled past mounted heads of wild boars. Dark and hairy with razor-sharp tusks. Pigs that could kill.

Chapter Nineteen – The Best Medicine

Kyle squinted at the sun as if he’d been a prisoner released from solitary confinement.

 He peeked outside the shed to make sure he had no company. The afternoon sun on the fresh powder was blinding. As jittery as a squirrel, he scurried beside the chapel to a Salvation Army donation bin. He studied the metal container. It was locked and had a rectangular opening like a post office mailbox.

 Kyle scanned the ground to see debris laying near trash cans. He perked up to find a thin coat hanger. As sly as Wile E. Coyote, he unbent the hanger to create a three-foot long hook. He jammed it in the bin and fished around until it snagged anything. After false bites from stuffed animals and ladies underwear, he eventually cobbled together an olive trench coat, a pink scarf and a purple wool cap. At least his new clothes wouldn’t resemble any publicized descriptions.

 Before setting off for his Chevy, he dashed to the church’s front doors, curious to read the posted sign. A hand-written note had been taped to the door. It read, “Christmas services have been cancelled due to the terrorist-killer on the loose. Let us pray for his soul.”

 Huddled in his new disguise, Kyle gingerly drove from behind the trees and back onto the road. The frozen ignition had required several tense attempts. The gas gauge was wobbling over “E.” He groaned under his breath, “*Please*… *just a few more miles*…”

 If his boyhood acquaintance Melvin Kennedy still lived on Holly Lane, he knew he was about six miles away. With some quick math –assuming the old Chevy got twelve miles to the gallon– he needed exactly a half-gallon of gas sloshing around his tank.

 Kyle wanted to pray for a Christmas miracle, but realized a prayer for a small amount of fuel to go a long way was more properly suited for Hanukkah.

 *I’ll take any sacred faith that will have me…*

 A knock on Maria’s front door interrupted the day’s serenity. It was only serene at the Colbert home because nothing was happening. Maria was tired of the television endlessly speculating since there was no new news. The kids were quietly resting in their rooms. All the neighbors were off visiting friends to get away from *the terrorist*. With nothing more she could do, Maria opened another bottle of merlot so she could rest her eyes –then someone knocked on the door.

 Maria huffed, slid on her slippers and slogged to the door. She had an idea who it might be –maybe there was news. Still in her morning robe, she opened the door to see Agent Del Rey. She somehow appeared fresh, with an FBI trench coat, perfectly tailored as if she were a model for Bureau fashion. But Maria noticed she had an odd grin of humility.

 “You have news?” Maria asked, “Or apologizing?”

 “No…” Del Rey paused, “It seems…our trailer’s lavatory has backed-up–”

 “–the toilet’s second door down the hall.” Maria didn’t need the details.

 Nestled in her large plush chair, Maria looked like a child. But her heavy lids and worry lines revealed how she hadn’t slept, and the glasses of wine weren’t helping.

 Del Rey returned to the living room with a faint smile. “Thank you Mrs. Colbert–”

 “–Call me Maria,” she interrupted and listlessly motioned to the couch. “Anything new?”

 “You know I can’t comment…” Del Rey stopped herself. She pursed her lips and took a seat by the fire. “We have no new information that Mr. Colbert has been located.”

 Maria blinked to consider this. *Could be good news…* If something tragic had happened, someone might’ve boasted about it. Or they could’ve found his… Maria quivered at the vision.

 “How are your children?” Del Rey asked.

 Maria’s eyes widened at the unforeseen question. “Thank you for asking.” She half-smiled, “They slept until noon. They’re still very confused... We had a family vote to not open any of the gifts yet. In case we can still, maybe…” Her voice faded into a weak shrug.

 With her mind numbed from exhaustion, Maria erratically switched gears, “You said before you were Ukrainian Orthodox?”

 Del Rey tensed, guarded. “That’s correct...”

 “Don’t they…” Maria snapped a finger to recall a fleeting thought. “…use a different calendar, so Christmas hasn’t even happened yet?”

 Del Rey huffed at the random but harmless question. “Christmas is celebrated on January 7th. Something about the… Julian calendar instead of your Gregorian calendar.”

 Maria shook her head and took another sip of wine. “I was thinking… about the *ridiculousness* of this…”

 Del Rey leaned forward, struggling to follow her point.

 Maria put down her glass and lifted a finger, “Tell me *one* incident when a terrorist implanted something inside their own body. It’s ludicrous...” She chuckled.

 “January this year. Heathrow Airport.” Del Rey replied instantly. “A female Nigerian extremist attempted to board a plane with explosives. They were surgically inserted in her body as breast implants. The implants got through modern scanners.”

 Maria and Del Rey gazed at each other, unflinching.

 “I can tell you as an absolute fact…” Maria finally spoke, “Kyle does not have fake boobs.”

 After an awkward three seconds, Del Rey burst into laughter. Her stiff giggle was so out of character, it seemed like she’d never reacted to humor before.

 Maria cracked up with her. As the two ladies laughed, their moment was interrupted by an abrupt knock on the front door.

 Del Rey stood with Maria at the door, equally curious. When she opened it, Maria’s eyes glazed over at the daunting wall of officials.

 Facing her were Agent Goldman with two other agents in black FBI coats, a younger man and woman. With them was a man in khaki fatigues and a scar across his cheek.

 “Mrs. Colbert,” Goldman looked into Maria’s eyes and spoke firmly, “We need you in our mobile office –*now!*”

Chapter Twenty – Holly Jolly Lane

Rigidly seated upright and gripping the wheel, Kyle drove on the desolate road.

 It was disconcerting how alone he seemed. No other vehicles or signs of life anywhere. It was like those zombie apocalypse shows where entire towns were abandoned. Just snow-covered fields on both sides. He checked the gas gauge again, still hovering on “E.”

 As he crested a hill, he could see an overpass a half-mile ahead. He tensed when he saw flashing blue lights on the overpass –it was police cars stopped over the road.

 At forty miles per hour, the bridge was approaching fast. There was nowhere to turn off. Kyle could hear a thrumming in his ears from his pulse. If he slowed or turned around, he’d stand out even more than being the only car on the road. It was like he was swimming right into a net.

 But in some strange way, Kyle felt like he could handle anxiety better than the day before. Perhaps it was the sleep, or he was numb to it. Or maybe he was just losing his mind.

 He held the wheel tight and didn’t blink. He stared straight ahead as if they might not see him if he didn’t look at them. As he approached within two hundred feet, his peripheral vision could see it was two parked sheriffs’ cars, and two men standing beside them like watchmen.

 *100 feet, 50 feet, 20…here it comes…* Kyle held his breath and passed under the bridge. He labored to keep his speed steady. *I’m through*… He exhaled.

In his rearview mirror he could see the flashing cars. The silhouette of two officers looked like they were chatting to each other. Kyle focused to level his breathing and he tapped the gas.

 The two deputies stood on the bridge, calculating their holiday overtime as part-timers. Deputies Brent and Chip couldn’t get their phone calculators to arrive at the same figure.

 “Forget it,” grumbled Chip. “I just know it’s a lot.”

 “But not as much as that reward…” Brent blew smoke from a skinny Swisher Sweet cigar.

 “–Speakin’ of reward…” Chip grinned, “Donna’s on duty.” He dialed a number on his phone.

 “Creeks County Sheriffs, is this an emergency?” droned the young ginger dispatch operator.

 “Donna, this is Chip,” his voice replied. “You comin’ to my New Year’s party? I said I was sorry.”

 Donna winced like he was a bad odor, “I don’t know Chip. What do you want?”

 Chip got to his point, “You have to call me first if you get *any* sightings of the Colbert terrorist.”

 “I’m supposed to alert the FBI immediately and then Sheriff Leon.” She unwrapped a Hershey’s kiss and popped it into her mouth.

 Chip scolded with feeble authority, “The Sheriff said me and Brent need to be notified *first*. So we can confirm it.” He added, “Call the sheriff and ask him yourself if you don’t believe me.”

 “The boss went home to sleep a few hours,” Donna sloshed another chocolate in her mouth.

 “So you can either believe me…or call your boss at home and wake him up.”

 Donna dramatically groaned, “Okay! I’ll call you two idiots.” She hung up.

 Chip clicked off his phone. He smirked at Brent, “She bought it. Donna’s so in love, she’ll do anything for me.” His face turned grim, “You got your gear and scopes?”

 “I don’t go anywhere without ‘em.” Brent took a puff of his cigar.

 Kyle approached a community of private homes built on Bedford Lake. The road broadened and showed a little more evidence of life. Billboards and pretentious stone signs for neighborhoods with names like “Vanderbilt Manors” and “Yale Vineyard.”

 His head snapped to the right as he noticed figures against the snow –it was people, walking in a barren field. A dozen people in coats were walking in unison, side by side. Some held walking sticks. That’s when Kyle realized they were a search party. Like the ones he’d seen on the news when there was a missing person. But they were hunting him.

 As he got closer, he saw the walking sticks were actually rifles.

 Kyle slouched low in his seat and turned left on Holly Lane. The street had looked the same for as long as he could remember. Sprawling estates on Bedford Lake, bordered by an evergreen forest. People out here had money and wanted to be away from the middle-class of Twin Creeks. Oddly, Kyle noticed the homes had few holiday decorations. As if their kids were grown and gone, or these people were just spiritless and didn’t care anymore.

 He instantly recognized the only three-story home with beige brick on the right. Kyle exhaled with relief to see the mailbox specified the name Kennedy. Melvin still lived there.

 Kyle pulled into the long circular driveway and parked. The home and lawn had zero decorations of any kind. In fact, the yard appeared unkempt, with landscaping that had grown wild and a wheelbarrow on its side, covered in snow. What if Melvin had moved or was traveling? He’d be back to square-one –with no more gas.

 When Kyle stepped out of his car, he cringed when he saw a neighbor. The older man in a red ski jacket was shoveling his driveway –he then looked directly at Kyle. *Shit…* Kyle spun away and shuffled to the front doors. Hopefully the neighbor’s view would be blocked by hedges.

 Standing in front of tall oak doors, Kyle took a deep breath. He knew he’d have just seconds to plead his case to Melvin, if he was home. He rang the doorbell and a regal chime echoed throughout the home. Thirty seconds went by. Nothing. Kyle rang the bell again.

 After the *clunk* of a lock opening, the door opened six inches as if a child or housekeeper was being cautious. But Kyle had to look up. The pale, wiry man stood well over six and a half feet. His hair was in disarray like he’d been electrocuted. The man’s jaw dropped when he saw Kyle.

 “Kyle Colbert..!” the man exclaimed. “But you’re…” he stuttered with golf ball-sized eyes.

Chapter Twenty-One – Dr. Melvin K. Kennedy, Ph.D.

Kyle grasped the doorknob in case the man was going to pull the door shut.

 “Mel, you *know* me!” Kyle uttered fast. “I’m innocent. I can explain.” He took a breath, “And I’m sick. I need a phone –then I’ll be gone.”

 “Obviously you’re innocent,” Melvin Kennedy said astutely as if he knew all. He draped a quilt around Kyle and then stuck a thermometer into his mouth.

 Kyle sat in Melvin’s cluttered kitchen. Despite exquisite granite and copper cookware, the place was a wreck. Stacked dishes in the sink and weeks’ worth of newspapers on the counters. It smelled like Melvin had been frying cheap hotdogs. *On Christmas?* Kyle wondered.

 Kyle couldn’t speak with the thermometer in his mouth, so he just observed. Melvin Kennedy did *not* look like his published photo. That had clearly been an old faculty portrait from the university. The pasty man appeared strong but gangly. He wore a robe-like housecoat like he’d just rolled out of bed. He walked hunched with long limbs, reminding Kyle of a praying mantis.

 “How many years has it been?” Melvin asked as he sat across from Kyle at the kitchen table. “Since our ten-year reunion?” The question was rhetorical since Kyle couldn’t reply. “That’s a long time… Even without hearing from you all these years, I never thought you were capable of…what the news is saying...” He dipped his head with raised brows.

 Unsure how to react, Kyle mumbled *thanks.*

 “I mean…I watched the news all night long…” Melvin continued in a flowery manner. “I ran mental exercises how your scenario could ever be resolved.”

 Observing Melvin without the ability to converse made him seem more bizarre. His eyes darted as he spoke and his expressions were like twitches.

 “The gossip sites claim you might have a *bomb,* hidden somewhere in New York. The FBI isn’t commenting.” He gave a crooked grin, “For anyone to claim you are responsible is silly.”

 Kyle blinked at the sobering news. If an explosive was concealed somewhere in the city, it’d be futile, hundreds of square miles to search. At least Melvin seemed to believe he was innocent. Kyle stopped staring at him to glance into the living room.

 “You’re noticing no decorations or tree…” Melvin gave a wistful smile. “With Elaine gone –and she never blessed me with children– I figured what’s the point?” He gave an inflated shrug. “Buy more crap to add to the crushing debt she left me? Consumerism *murdered* Christmas.”

 Kyle had no idea how to respond. He could only gaze at Melvin with fixed eyes.

 Melvin swished his hand, brushing the topic aside. “I’ve had time to reason about your unique…dilemma.” He looked up, blinking as he hypothesized. “The news keeps speculating about your supposed *internal trigger*. That seemed absurd. But a power source sustained from a heartbeat? Now *that’s* intriguing... Elaine had been working on cryonic–”

 Kyle pulled the thermometer out of his mouth to interject, “–Melvin, I was so sorry to hear about Elaine. She was great, I truly enjoyed her–”

 “–Yes.” Melvin snatched the thermometer out of his hand. “We missed you at the funeral.” He glowered with an abrupt change in mood. He squinted to read the thermometer. “103.1… You are sick. We need to get you stable. I have some over-the-counter meds I can administer.”

 Kyle was a conflicted mix of grateful and uncomfortable. In a small town, everyone knew Elaine Sims Kennedy had passed away several years earlier. But Kyle considered Melvin no more than a childhood acquaintance. He hadn’t acknowledged her passing with a card or any message. And now he was asking for the man’s help with a life-or-death sentence.

 Melvin stood quickly to walk away –and then turned. He towered over Kyle, “I’m curious: are you here because you believe you can trust me as a man of science who despises guns?” He stared, “Or because we are friends?”

 Kyle inadvertently swallowed at the loaded question. “Because we’re friends, Melvin.”

 Melvin tilted his head and his whole face smiled. “There’s a phone in the den. Follow me.”

 Kyle audibly exhaled, relieved.

 Melvin led Kyle down a dim, parquet-floored hallway. The walls were dark, with no art or sentimental photos of any find. Kyle filled the awkward silence with, “Congratulations on your new book. I saw it in the paper.”

 “It’s recycled shit,” Melvin scoffed.

 “What do you mean? Seems like an honor.”

 “The university threatened to fire me. My professors union and I sued them, stating I had tenure and documented bipolar disorder.” Melvin chuckled with a snort, “I kept my job, and the university agreed to publish my old journals.”

 Kyle paused in his tracks. *What have I gotten myself into?* This Melvin Kennedy was no longer the shy, meek kid he’d known.

 They entered a small office and Kyle noticed a yellowed diploma from Columbia University. Melvin K. Kennedy had honorably earned his Ph.D. in Biological Science. The reminder boosted his confidence that he was trusting an educated professional.

 Melvin spun to face Kyle. “You may make a *thirty-second* phone call. But if it is traced, I’ll be forced to tell authorities that you broke in when I was absent.”

 “Thank you so much, Mel. This means the world.”

 Melvin gave a regal nod like a butler, “I’ll locate some meds.” He marched away.

 Kyle observed the room. It was a small office that elitists might call their “study” or “library.” It smelled like pipe tobacco and cat piss, and was cluttered like a hoarder lived there. The book shelves and desk were impressive, but the room was piled with boxes and newspapers.

 Kyle shuffled through coupons and candy wrappers on Melvin’s desk to locate an old rotary phone. He sat to clumsily dial a number. *Please be home and pick-up…* Would she answer if the caller ID was from a stranger?

 After four rings, Rena’s voice answered, “*Hello..?*”

 Rena sat up in bed in her neat, minimalist Ikea apartment. She’d been watching Netflix in a casual MIT t-shirt and sweats. She frowned, wary of the call. “Who is this?”

 “It’s Kyle –don’t hang up!” he blurted. “If anyone traces this, you’re not in trouble. I’m the one calling *you*.”

 Rena froze. She moved to hang-up, but pulled the phone back to her ear. She spoke soft and fast, “Kyle… The FBI was here. I told them I’m just your intern–”

 “–I only have seconds,” Kyle interrupted. “I’m being framed. It’s Christmas, so there’s no way anyone could get a court order to have your phone tapped. Are you willing to listen to me?”

 Rena didn’t respond. Her eyes ricocheted around her room. She slowly stood. “Yes…”

 Kyle sniffed, sounding emotional. “Rena, you said you respect and trust me. I’m taking a gamble you still trust me now. If you do, I need you to make *one* call and relay a message.” He inhaled, “If you don’t, or you report that I called you, at the very least tell Maria I love her and the kids –and I know who’s behind this and I will get proof.”

 Rena gripped the phone with both hands. She bit her lip, struggling to make a sizeable decision in just seconds. “What do you need me to do?”

 “Thank you, *thank* you,” Kyle’s voice cracked as if suppressing tears. “Do you still have the number for Chase Zahir?”

 “Yeah. Yes,” she stammered.

 Kyle spoke faster as if a clock was ticking, “I know he’s our rival, but he’ll be on my side. He’s the only one with the skillset I need. Tell Zahir to search the dark web. Specifically for…”

 Rena intently listened to his bizarre request. Her face tensed, “How will I let you know what he finds?”

 Kyle hunched over the phone. He looked over his shoulder at the sound of steps approaching from the hall. He whispered quickly, “Don’t call this phone. I’ll call you. Goodbye Rena.”

 He abruptly hung up as Melvin entered the room with an odd expression.

 “I may have a scientific theory that can buy you time.” Melvin then added curiously, “Who *exactly* knows you’re here?”

Chapter Twenty-Two – Ready, Fire, Aim!

Maria Colbert sat in a tiny steel conference room within the FBI’s Mobile Command Center. Glowering at her from across the table were Goldman, Del Rey, junior Agents Harmon and Davis, and the strange man with the khakis and scar.

 Trying her best to conceal her angst, she asked, “So what do you want from me?”

 The FBI’s Mobile Command, or MCC, was a customized thirty-eight foot RV used as a command and communications center. It was equipped with five work stations, laptops and a small conference area. It had six telephones and dishes for Internet, satellite phones and a weather station. The MCC could be dispatched within hours, and fortunately, the NY Field Office had one fueled and ready on Christmas Day.

 SSA Goldman stood with a foot on a chair. “Mrs. Colbert, These two are agents Harmon and Davis.” He motioned to the young man and woman. “They’re on our task force from Manhattan. Harmon grew up in Bedford, so she’s familiar with the geography and terrain.”

 Harmon and Davis nodded but remained stoic.

 Maria didn’t speak, unsure what geography and terrain had to do with anything.

 Goldman pointed to the weathered man wearing khaki fatigues. “This man is Mr. Renly, a specialist who has very specific questions. There is zero room for error.”

 Maria’s eyes imperceptibly widened.

 Mr. Renly loomed forward. He had a raised scar across his left cheek and skin like leather. Without any pleasantries, he spoke in a coarse Australian accent. “Mr. Colbert’s New York state driver’s license states he is five feet, eleven inches. Is that accurate? Or embellishment?”

 Maria shrunk, thrown by the random question. “Yes, I guess… Why –what’s happened?”

 Renly plowed ahead, ignoring her concerns, “Does Mr. Colbert have any known allergies?”

 “No, not at all…” Maria blinked in thought. “Maybe hay fever..?”

 The agents just watched, allowing Renly full reign.

 “What is Mr. Colbert’s approximate body weight?”

 “What’s going on here?” Maria finally shouted. “Have you found a body or something?”

 Donna Needler, the sheriff’s operator, quickly lifted the police radio. “Calling Deputy Chip, we have a possible 10-62. Over.” She chewed gum, waiting for a response.

 Chip’s garbled voice finally responded. “Donna, it’s me. Remind me what a 10-62 is.”

 She huffed. “Possible wanted subject, you idiot. Someone reported knowing where Kyle Colbert is.” She could hear fumbling of the radio as if Chip perked up.

 “Where?” Chip exclaimed. “How sure?”

 “It was an anonymous caller. But he’s *sure* the man matches the description.” Donna looked at a thumb-tacked map. “Do you know Holly Lane out on Bedford Lake?”

 “Yes!” Chip barked. “Gimme’ the address.” He tersely added, “You report it to the FBI yet?”

 “No,” she replied. “But I have to or I’ll be fired. I’ll give you a fifteen minute head start.”

 Melvin stood in his kitchen to sort through loose pills. “Try these…”

 Kyle cupped his hands to take the pills. They were a jumbled mix of red and blue capsules and tablets. It looked like a mix from either a candy store or a 70s music festival.

 “The red ones are for daytime and the blue are for night,” Melvin explained. “Basic cold and flu meds for standard symptoms, with a fever reducer.”

 Kyle raised a brow. Taking any of the pills seemed like everything his parents had taught him *not* to do.

 “Really..?” Melvin smirked at Kyle’s unease. “Read the tiny letters, they literally state ‘Daytime’ and ‘Nighttime.’ I’ll show you the boxes if you like.”

 Kyle squinted at the pills and Melvin was right. He quickly debated; night pills probably had a sedative. Day pills were made to be non-drowsy, which meant they’d have a stimulant similar to amphetamine. Kyle had to remain 100% alert, so he chose red. If two pills were suggested, he took four. He needed the fever reducer and sinus-pressure reliever to kick-in as fast as possible.

 Melvin handed him a bottle of water. “Very good.”

 “Thanks Mel, but I gotta’ run. I’ve been here way too–”

 Melvin touched his shoulder, “–No, no, no…” Melvin cooed in a *tsk-tsk* manner. “Like I said, I’ve been studying your situation. I believe I have a short-term solution.” He placed his other hand on Kyle’s other shoulder. “I told you Elaine worked in cryonics –have you ever heard of induced hypothermia?”

 Kyle frowned, confused. “No. I’m not the scientist here–”

 “–*Please,* Kyle.” Melvin loomed closer, insistent. “I’ll show you what I’m talking about. Out in the boathouse. I believe I could have an interim solution. You came here because you trust me. Can you trust me now?”

 Kyle paused. Melvin’s words of *trust* were strangely similar to his own plea to Rena. “Okay. Ten minutes, then I gotta’ keep moving.”

 The forest of evergreens and bare maples was as quiet as a sound-proof chamber. No birds or woodland animals, and no breeze to clatter any branches. The leaf-covered earth sloped down to the frozen lake, and a light snow decorated the entire scene.

 The crunching of footsteps interrupted the peace.

 Deputies Chip and Brent crept, attempting to not make a sound, but the frozen leaves sounded like walking on potato chips. They wore camouflage, and each carried hunting rifles with enormous scopes.

 Chip whispered, “There –third house from the right.” He pointed across the icy lake.

 They stood close to have the same line of vision. The lake was about the size of a football stadium. It was frosted silver with ice, reflecting the auburn afternoon sun. Most of the lake was surrounded by forest. The opposite side bordered a row of large lakefront homes.

 Chip pointed to a brick house approximately 100 yards away. “That’s gotta’ be it. It’s the only three-story.”

 Brent aimed his binoculars. The home’s small backyard had snow-covered patio furniture and a deck leading to an unfinished wood boathouse. He scanned the rear French doors and exclaimed, “I see something!”

 “What? Let me see!” Chip’s impatient whisper grew louder.

 “I see two guys!” Brent watched two men step out of the home’s back door. The man in front was tall with stooped shoulders. He wore a black coat over some sort of robe. Behind him was a shorter man in an olive coat. He focused on the man’s face. “It’s Colbert –I’m *positive*!” He handed the binoculars to Chip.

 With anxious hands, Chip focused the lenses. The two men were walking towards a short wooden dock. He looked at the second man’s face. From the A.P.B.s posted at the station, he was well acquainted with Kyle’s Colbert’s face. He grinned, “Affirm-ative…”

 Chip lifted his two-way radio. “Dispatch. Donna –you in?”

 Her voice replied through static, “Dispatch, go ahead.”

 “We’re out on Holly Lane,” Chip spoke with a dejected tone. “It’s a false alarm... You can tell the sheriff the tip was negative. Over.”

 Donna scoffed, “I’m not surprised. Over.” The channel went silent.

 Brent and Chip inspected their Remington M24 sniper rifles, equipped with Vortex hunting scopes. “You ready to quit this job?” Brent chuckled.

 They both crouched in a firing stance.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Sleep in Heavenly Peace

Behind Melvin’s home, a narrow thirty-foot dock led to a shed-like boathouse. There was no boat to be seen, but there were scattered accoutrements such as oars and coils of frozen rope. The solid lake sloshed around jagged rocks two feet below the deck.

 “If you’re suggesting your boathouse as a hideout, I already have one,” Kyle shouted, trailing three feet behind Melvin.

 “Not at all…” Melvin replied. “But I do have to show you, a few feet farther down.”

 “Make it quick.” Kyle darted his head like a cat at a dog park. At least no neighbors were outside.

 “It will be quick, I assure you.” Melvin turned to face Kyle. “Have you ever heard of *Dominique Jean Larrey*?” He pronounced the name with a pretentious French accent. “He was Napoleon’s surgeon general.”

 Kyle’s frustration was palpable. “I’m not a historian either!”

 “Bear with me,” Melvin lifted a finger. “*Monsieur Larrey* observed the farther away wounded soldiers rested from a campfire during the winter, the less likely they were to die.” He paused with a blink to see if Kyle was following. “The cold seems to buy time by slowing things down.”

 Kyle’s eyes narrowed for any clue what Melvin was preaching about.

 Melvin continued along the dock. “By removing energy –in this case heat– it decreases the rate at which chemical reactions –like metabolism– take place.”

 “You got two minutes to get to your point,” Kyle scowled.

 Melvin leaned against an upright wooden oar. He spread his hands with drama, “I’m talking about *induced hypothermia*.”

 Kyle quivered his head with an overblown shrug.

 “Remember the Hodges boy? Two years ago? He chased his little beagle onto the frozen pond near the gazebo. The boy fell through the ice. He’d been in *thirty* minutes before Sheriff Leon arrived to punch him out of the ice.” Melvin flashed an odd grin, “The boy lived... The ice slowed his heart to a *crawl*.”

 Either by the stimulants hitting his bloodstream or his intellect, Kyle suddenly understood. His eyes widened and he flexed to run –but he was too late.

 Melvin swung the oar like a bat. It connected with Kyle’s stomach. His fatigued body doubled over and he fell back into the lake. He crashed through the inch-thick sheet of ice.

 Melvin shouted over Kyle’s cry, “I don’t want you dead! We’re friends...”

 Kyle thrashed in the slush. The stinging water felt like a million barbs. He tried to breathe, but the oar had knocked the wind out of him when it struck. His temple was bleeding from fracturing a chunk of ice. Feeling faint, Kyle fought to gasp and stay afloat.

 Melvin stepped down to the rocks. He used the oar to push Kyle downward. “The ice will slow your heart… Just enough...” The oar pressed Kyle under the water. “You won’t die...”

 Kyle’s world blurred as he submerged, forced under a large sheet of ice.

 “I need that reward…” Melvin’s muffled voice faded.

 “What the fuck just happened?” Deputy Chip shouted.

 Crouched in a firing position, Brent adjusted his scope at what they were witnessing. Before he could pull the trigger, the tall man had shoved Kyle Colbert into the lake. The man was now pushing him under the water, thrusting him with an oar.

 “We got competition for that reward.”

 “Shoot ‘em both then!” Chip barked. He aimed his rifle, conflicted who to aim at first.

 From under the water, Kyle peered up through a pane of ice. In his distorted vision, he only saw the silhouette of Melvin standing over him, forcing his oar into his pelvis.

 With his last bit of energy, Kyle tried to scream. It came out as a cry of bubbles, the last of his lungs’ oxygen. He pounded on the ice with both hands. The luminous ice was too thick.

 He was heaved deeper. His vision became darker and distorted. His limbs were slower, locking at the joints. Numb.

 From above the ice, Melvin began to cry, struggling to hold Kyle in place. “Idiot! Stop fighting! My way keeps you *alive*..!”

 It became easier as Kyle’s body began to relax. Melvin cried to himself, “Anyone else would’ve killed you…”

 Melvin paused to watch Kyle’s horrified face through the ice. Kyle’s eyes were open, like dead fish eyes. His mouth opened and closed, and then stopped.

 A PAX-22 long-range rifle, armed with a massive scope, aimed towards Kyle and Melvin. But this rifle was held by Mr. Renly, crouching with a squinted eye. His finger paused over the trigger.

 “We got a situation,” Renly announced in his Australian brogue. “Please advise.”

 Agents Davis and Harmon squatted behind him, both wearing federal-issue camo. They’d entered the forest after the neighbor’s report of seeing Colbert. They were positioned across a narrow part of the lake, approximately seventy-five yards from the suspect.

 Harmon lifted her radio, “Agent Goldman: Colbert’s in an altercation with a civilian. Another male. It must be the homeowner. Over.”

 Renly grumbled, holding his aim, “I’m only paid to hit *one* man,”

 “I can’t have a yokel killing Colbert!” Goldman shouted into his radio.

 Maria tensed, horrified at the comment. *They can see someone hurting Kyle?* Maria almost cried. She was seated next to Goldman within the FBI trailer, riveted as they followed along. She exclaimed, “What’s happening..?”

 Goldman shook his head for her to be quiet. He asked into the radio, “Can Renly just shoot the other guy first?”

 Harmon’s voice crackled, “He said it would take too long to reload. Over.”

 Goldman pursed his lips and sighed, perplexed.

 Del Rey barged into the small room. Maria and Goldman turned to see her fretful expression.

 “Colbert’s intern left me a phone message,” Del Rey exclaimed. “She claims she spoke to him. He called *her*.”

 Maria gasped. Why would Kyle call Rena and not her? Then she realized Kyle was smart enough to know they’d be monitoring her phones.

 “Well..?” Goldman threw his hands out. “What’d she say!?”

 “I’m trying to contact her, but the message said Colbert knows who’s behind this –and he’ll have proof,” Del Rey turned to Maria, “And that he loves his wife and family very much. No other information.”

 Maria’s lips twitched with a smile –but she recalled Kyle’s crisis.

 Goldman lifted his radio. “Harmon: we need Colbert *alive*! He’s no use to us dead. I don’t care who else you eliminate!”

 Chip and Brent cussed as they tried to aim their rifles. Colbert was no longer visible.

 “God dang it!” Brent exclaimed. “I only see the big dude. Standing on the rocks. Colbert’s still in the water.”

 “There’s no reward for murdering an innocent!” Chip hissed, keeping his scope on the scene.

 “Okay,” Brent huffed. “How ‘bout this: *I’ll* shoot the big guy.” He tensed his aim, “When Colbert gets out of the water, you tag him!”

 “Sounds like a plan.”

 Kyle’s chest heaved with scorching pain. In the silent water, his heart throbbed in his ears. He held his hands against the pane of ice. When he pushed, it only forced his body deeper, like an upside-down push-up. The ice was too heavy. His last shriek came out as a trickle of bubbles.

 There was no flash of his life before his eyes. Just darkness. His body was shutting down, one circuit at a time. However, with his brain’s flaring synapses, visions of Maria, Cassie and Jack appeared in the gloom. His family smiled at him. Cassie mouthed the word *Daddy…*

 Kyle fleetingly regained awareness. His family morphed into a single silhouette, the dark figure of Melvin still standing over him. He appeared to raise his oar, just to drop it down on the ice. He lifted it again, and plunged it downward –but this time, the oar fractured the ice.

 The sudden blow jolted Kyle. His eyes strained to focus. The oar pushed at him through the crack in the ice. Melvin was holding him down, but closer to his torso. When Melvin pushed again, Kyle’s reflexes compelled him to grab the oar with both hands.

 Kyle then yanked the oar with all his remaining strength.

 The sudden tug pulled Melvin off balance. His rubber boots on the slick rocks lost their hold. Melvin tumbled forward into the lake. He emitted a shocked cry like a goat.

 Kyle gripped the oar and pulled again. Melvin flailed, almost on top of him. The glimmer of hope caused a rush of adrenalin. Kyle tried to stand, but the water was too deep. When he dove forward, his feet touched the bottom. He pushed up and the cracked pieces of ice parted. Kyle pierced the surface and gulped a deep breath. The icy air stung like it was crystalizing his lungs. Melvin was thrashing and coughing beside him.

 Two feet from the dock, Kyle was able to stand. The water came to his chest. Melvin spun like he was seeing a ghost. His face twisted into a scowl.

 “I’ll put you *down!*” Melvin burbled, a perverse evil in his eyes. He lunged.

 Kyle lifted a chunk of ice the size of a football. A primal, ape-like instinct for survival forced him to smash it down on Melvin’s skull. With a guttural cry, blood flowed into Melvin’s eyes.

 Seventy-five yards away, Mr. Renly steadied his aim. His crosshairs were positioned perfectly on the suspect, Kyle Colbert.

 “Are you certain?” asked Davis.

 “I got ‘em…” Renly whispered coolly. “Just gimme’ the order.”

 Agent Harmon lifted her radio.

 A hundred yards from the wanted man, Chip and Brent remained side by side, their rifles aimed.

 “They’re still thrashin’… Hold on… You see that?” Chip squinted into his scope.

 They gasped as the two men separated. Easy targets. Brent exclaimed, “I’ll take the shot…right… *NOW!*”

 He fired a perfect shot.

 Melvin growled, feral, “You’re going back under!” His face was streaked with blood like a melted candle.

 Kyle lifted the same chunk of red-stained ice, high over his head. Before he could smash it down, the left side of Melvin’s head abruptly burst like a melon. It was a gunshot.

 Kyle recoiled, but a sharp blast struck his neck. He gasped and instinctively touched the wound. He didn’t need a doctor to know a shot to his jugular vein would bleed a swift death. He looked at his hand to see it scarlet with blood.

 He’d been shot. A direct hit.

 Agent Harmon dropped her binoculars and shouted, “The other gunshot came from over there!” She motioned to their right through the trees.

 “Confirmed the subject is down!” Davis shouted into his radio. “But a second blast came from the woods, fifty yards away. Probably civilians.”

 With their Glocks drawn, Davis and Harmon trudged in the direction where they’d heard the other shot. “FBI! Stop where you are!” Harmon yelled as they labored to run through the forest.

 Mr. Renly stood and lit a filterless Camel. He relished a deep drag at a job well done.

 Brent and Chip tried to run, hysterical.

 “Those were feds you fucktard!” Chip panted as he shouted.

 They clumsily jogged uphill, winding their way around trees. They heard the faint, “*FBI! Stop where you are!”* echoing in their trail.

 “Worst…idea…ever,” Brent gasped. “*And* we’ll be fired!”

 Kyle slogged in slow motion. He’d barely rolled himself onto the dock, a dripped trail of blood behind him. He aimlessly weaved towards Melvin’s house.

 He tripped over a lawn chair. With tunnel vision fading fast, he collapsed onto a snow-covered patio set.

 From both sides of the house, a dozen plain-clothes agents appeared, guns drawn. After redundant shouts of “*FBI, hands-up..!*” one man approached the lifeless Kyle. He gently turned his head to observe the red plume of a dart protruding from his neck.

PART FIVE

A Long Winter’s Nap

Chapter Twenty-Four – Find it Hard to Sleep Tonight

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“Can’t you just wake him?” an agitated voice asked. “We need to talk to him –now!”

 “It doesn’t work like that, Agent Goldman,” replied the rational doctor in the lab coat.

 “Then please educate me how it works, Dr. Lee,” Goldman rocked his head as he spoke.

 The New York-Presbyterian Hospital in lower Manhattan was the closest infirmary to the FBI Field Office. On the flip side, the hospital was over fifty miles from Twin Creeks. For that reason, a converted Bell helicopter had been ordered from the Tactical Helicopter Unit to transport the OpMed agents.

 The FBI’s Operational-Medicine (OpMed) Program existed to provide medical care in critical situations. Their “medics,” as they were known, accompanied high-risk missions. A half-dozen medics had their holiday dinners ruined when they’d answered calls to be part of a Rapid Deployment Team sent to Twin Creeks. They all knew the importance of offering medical care –or body bags– for any casualties. Even if it was the dreaded Christmas terrorist, Kyle Colbert.

 Kyle lied motionless in a hospital bed. His eyes were closed and his skin was ashen. He appeared to be dead, but the dinging machines claimed otherwise. Barely.

 He’d been placed in a private room on a guarded floor. Standing at his bedside were Goldman, FBI Consultant Dr. Weisman and Dr. Lee, who’d been hand-selected from the hospital’s board, versus enjoying the comfort of his home.

 Dr. Naoki Lee was middle-aged, trim and considerate –but straightforward to anyone who tried to bully him. Even a loud FBI Supervisory Special Agent.

 “We *need* to question him,” Goldman pointed at Lee. “Why can’t you give him…*something* to wake him up?”

 “Because…” Dr. Lee paused to make sure their eyes were on him. “It was your idea to hit him with five milligrams of *Xylazine,* a tranquilizer typically used for horses –and I mean Clydesdales not Shetlands.”

 Goldman looked at the floor.

 “Your dosage was selected with the grace of a third-world cartel doctor.” Lee scanned a clipboard. “You made *no* allowance for his raging fever. Nor a high level of a flu medicine stimulant, *pseudoephedrine*, in his bloodstream. Or the fact his metabolism was almost zero from a thirty-two-degree lake. I’m amazed he didn’t go into cardiac arrest –or worse.”

 Goldman and Weisman glanced at each other like scolded children.

 “Um…” Goldman finally uttered, “The… *administrator* of the drug was the top security expert from the Bronx Zoo.”

 “A *zoo..?*” Dr. Lee winced like a silent sneeze, “Was he the only expert who’d answer a call from you on Christmas?” He frowned in disgust and turned to his patient.

 Kyle’s closed eyes fluttered back and forth in a deep REM sleep.

 Dr. Lee’s tone softened. “Even if he miraculously woke-up right now, questioning him would be useless. Entirely inadmissible. In his condition, he may suffer delirium or even hallucinations.”

 “Doctor,” Goldman cleared his throat with something approaching sincerity. “The threat about an implanted *trigger* is our first concern. Whether Colbert’s awake of not, we *need* to resolve that issue before we move on to larger questions.”

 Lee nodded as if he’d been awaiting any sign of humility from the brash agent. “Against my better judgment, I will allow the MRI you’ve requested.”

 “Vince,” Weisman touched Goldman’s elbow. “If *any* part of you still believes there could be a planted trigger, the magnets from the MRI could be a risk.”

 “If the trigger’s real,” Lee inhaled with alarm, “with metal components, the magnets could pull them through his flesh.”

 “Or activate the explosive,” Weisman’s words caused a moment of silence.

 Goldman tensed like a visible migraine. He crossed his arms and gave a brooding sigh. “Let’s proceed with the MRI.”

 The lab tech rolled the unconscious Kyle into the small MRI room. He was already in a hospital gown, and no sedatives were needed to combat claustrophobia. Jewelry such as his wedding ring and watch had already been removed. The room was freezing cold, but the patient wasn’t complaining –and it was much warmer than the lake.

 The MRI unit was surrounded by a circular magnet. A moveable exam table slid into the center of the machine which used magnetic fields, radio pulses and a computer to produce detailed images of organs, soft tissue and bones. The images should easily determine the presence of any foreign bodies, implants or alleged “hidden trigger.”

 Before rolling him into the machine, Kyle required an injection of contrast material into his bloodstream. Regarding any adverse reactions, the radiologist already knew from Mr. Colbert’s wife that he had no allergies. He was rolled into the machine as the radiologist and technician monitored the exam from a computer outside the room.

 Kyle appeared dead in the confining tube. The walls were three-inches from his face. The silence was shattered by the deafening drone and flashing lights of the machine.

 Like a jump scare, Kyle jolted at the vibrating pulse. His eyes began to flutter, faster.

 Despite the advanced machine that could see through his body, the radiologist would have no idea what was going through his mind.

Chapter Twenty-Five – A Star for the Masses

Kyle opened his eyes. His bed was surrounded by a dark space. No walls or ceiling. But a bizarre, warm serenity washed over him. He turned to see the radiant members of the nativity scene watching him. He smiled at the Three Kings, who stood by his bed like guardians.

 “Greetings, your Majesties…” Kyle tipped his head. “So, where were we?” In his mind, he wished to pick-up where he’d left off. “Ah yes –lives are at stake. *Many* people are in danger.”

 The figures appeared solemn. The Virgin Mary leaned somberly, with a hand over her heart.

 Kyle sat up in bed. He stared absently in reflection. “If the threat’s real… We must determine a possible location… Where could a bomb be hidden?” He rubbed his hands together, it was time to speculate to analyze the dilemma –or as he called it before, “thinking out loud.”

 He turned to his divine audience. “You were witnesses to the *real* Christmas. Today, the holiday still brings many…observers.” He rocked his jaw, “That creates a problem. For someone to have hidden a *bomb*, they couldn’t do it with so many people around. This time of year, there are more people in the city every day…” His eyes narrowed, “Could they have hidden it earlier, with less people around?”

 The kings grinned knowingly, as if he were onto something.

 “It would have to be…” Kyle rolled his hand with the theory, “…a day or time with less spectators, or workers… So when could that mean? A Sunday? A holiday?” He threw his hands out, perplexed. “But this is the city that never sleeps…” He exhaled despondently.

 He turned to the kings, “What about location?” He figured he’d approach from a different angle. “Terrorists plan their attacks to have the largest impact. How many landmarks do we have in the city? If you count buildings, monuments and tourist attractions, it’d be in the…hundreds.”

 He deflated, realizing it was futile. There was no “unoccupied” time in the city to hide a bomb, and too many landmarks to narrow down.

 As he brooded in the darkness, he noticed a light shining from above. He looked up and squinted to see the Star of Bethlehem. For the nativity display, it had painted beams extending down. Above the entire scene was a parchment-type scroll with calligraphy.

 Kyle shifted and strained to read the scroll, “Follow the Star, for the masses shall arrive to rejoice.”

 Like an electrical surge, a memory emerged. It was the dark figure on the video who’d first warned of the bomb. The ominous figure had said, “…*To spread its light with fire…”*

In the quiet, a faraway echo of a television became audible. Kyle cocked his head to determine what it was and where it was coming from. It sounded like the news or an announcer.

 In an almost hypnotic haze, Kyle recited, “The masses shall arrive…for a star… to spread its light.” He turned to the kings. “Where will masses arrive to watch a light..?”

 He gasped with wide eyes.

 In Kyle’s hospital room, the television was a little too loud. A nurse used a remote to decrease the volume, but she paused to watch the news story. It showed a close-up of the New Year’s ball over Times Square. Brilliantly illuminated. The video turned to show multitudes gathered below, smiling, having fun.

 “Soon the masses will be arriving!” The newscaster merrily announced. “Hoping to claim the best view as New Year’s approaches. Tune in here to see it live!”

 Nurse Darcy turned back to Kyle to check his vitals on a monitor.

 In his dream, Kyle sat upright, breathing heavier. The television sound faded. He turned to the nativity figures. Before his eyes –or in his delirium– they seemed to morph into vertical columns. *No, they’re buildings…* Kyle realized. They looked like tall buildings. At their feet appeared a crowd of thousands, like ants in the streets. Kyle looked up to see the “star” on top of a building. It was the Times Square Ball, radiating down on the masses.

 *The ball, radiating…* He gripped the sheets*. The bomb’s in the ball..!* He began to hyperventilate, “How do I tell them?”

 Electronic *dings* rang in Kyle’s hospital room. They increased in frequency.

 Nurse Darcy looked up at a sudden spike in Kyle’s pulse.

 “Update?” asked Dr. Lee, approaching from behind.

 The nurse turned at his sudden voice. “A sharp increase in his heart rate and blood pressure,” she replied. “Now 181/122. A hypertensive emergency?”

 Lee bit his lower lip, “Probably nightmares of his predicament…” He shook his head, “He may need ICU. Let’s get him adrenergic inhibitorsto get the pressure down, ASAP.” He looked at Nurse Darcy, “We need to silence whatever’s going through his head.”

Chapter Twenty-Six – Packing the Ornaments

It was an abnormally quiet Manhattan morning. Just a handful of cabs and wandering vagrants. A few health nuts jogged in neon spandex. The day after Christmas fell on a Sunday, and that fact was not lost on the collaborators. Phase two was ready.

 At 7:00 a.m., a black SUV pulled up onto the curb at 42nd and Broadway. Mr. Krug, in his usual all-black and turtleneck, stepped out of the truck and slowly looked left and right like a cyborg. The only addition to his apparel was a black fedora that unintentionally sustained his image as a 1940s noir villain. His scowl never moved like an eerie mask.

 Krug had been dispatched by Mr. Hawkins to prepare for the next stage. He walked to the building’s rear door beside a Walgreens entrance. A sign confirmed the address, “One Times Square.” Krug knocked with three sharp thumps on the metal door.

 An elderly custodian cracked the door. He squinted one eye like Popeye, “*Qué quieres*?”

 Krug plunged an 8,000 volt cattle prod into the man’s neck.

 Moments later, the service elevator doors opened on the twenty-third floor. To Krug –even with his decades of doing bad things for *Spetsnaz* Russian intelligence– the dark, vacant building was unsettling. He stepped out of the elevator and into the roof’s sunlight.

 At this hour and elevation, there was little noise from Times Square below. Krug scanned his surroundings. No people. He looked up to climb a flight of steel stairs.

 On the observation deck, he was not affected by the freezing breeze. To his left and right were the ornaments. Two stainless steel patio heaters. According to plan, they’d been delivered over a month earlier by two expendable deliverymen. Krug stepped to the first heater.

 He squatted to inspect the six-foot furnace. The cylindrical base was nearly three feet tall. From his pocket, Krug pulled an electric screwdriver the size of a flashlight. He attached the proper screwdriver bit and proceeded to open a panel. Inside the heater was a metal canister the size of a scuba tank. He removed the canister and closed the panel.

 He repeated the process with the second heater.

 Though both of the hidden canisters contained lethal levels of Iridium-192, he wasn’t concerned about being contaminated. His time touching the canisters would be limited, and Krug wasn’t trained to worry about repercussions.

 Krug stood and turned towards the final hiding spot –there it was: the massive, glistening ball. At the base of a 77-foot steel flagpole was the celebrated Times Square Ball.

 From Krug’s research, he knew the twelve-foot diameter sphere would be lit by 32,256 LED lamps. It was constructed with triangular Waterford Crystal panels. The ball was weatherproof, and unlike past decades, it was displayed year-round atop One Times Square.

 Krug was not awed when he approached the ball. It was just a job. He studied the triangular crystal panels. Each one was approximately one foot on each side. He changed the screwdriver bit and unscrewed fasteners on a triangular panel. After opening it, he slid one of the Iridium-192 canisters inside the ball. The internal framework held the tank perfectly. He reinstalled the crystal panel, and then repeated the process on the opposite side of the ball.

 Krug stepped back to observe the large orb. The two canisters had been flawlessly concealed, with no sign of tampering. Their weight would not affect the ball on New Year’s Eve. The entire transfer had taken nine minutes.

 His expression gave no indication if he was pleased with his handiwork. Krug put away his tool and proceeded down the stairs to reenter the elevator. The only aspect that did affect him, was having to walk back through the ghostly vacant building.

 On the first floor, he approached the incapacitated custodian lying by the door. He poured a flask of cheap whiskey on his mouth and shirt and placed the bottle in his hand. If or when anyone found him, they’d know he’d passed out drunk, babbling about a strange man in black.

 “Why *can’t* I visit him?” pled an emotional Maria to Del Rey. Maria blotted a tear with a tissue. “I just want to see him. Talk to him…”

 In a hospital waiting lounge, the ladies sat together, alone. In the corner, little Jack and Cassie studied a vending machine, allowed to get a snack if they could agree on one item.

 “Despite his condition,” Del Rey replied coolly, “Kyle is still a person of interest.” She blinked as if realizing how she sounded. She relaxed, “Maria, if everything his intern told us is true, we desperately need to talk to him –we *need* his help.”

 Maria glared, unsold. “*‘Person of interest’* is you people’s bullshit word for suspect. You know he hasn’t done anything.”

 “I think you’re right…” Del Rey leaned in to speak low. “But look at what we *do* know. We have evidence of a weapon hidden somewhere in New York. You’re one of the few people to know that. You and I want the same thing: Kyle awake and alert, to help us.”

 “If we want the same thing,” Maria clutched the tissue in her lap, “Then help me see him.”

 “There you have it!” Supervisory Special Agent Goldman shouted as he slapped a folder down on the table.

 Goldman stood in a meeting room on Kyle’s floor. Despite a fresh set of work clothes, his sleeves were already rolled to the elbow with tension. His restless energy consumed the tiny room. Wincing across from him were Del Rey, Jenkins and Dr. Weisman.

 Goldman had treasured his brief period of sleep and time with his family. Brielle had done her best to mimic Santa and other secular traditions, like placing a nibbled carrot outside to pretend a reindeer ate it. Little Lauren loved her gifts, but really didn’t care about reindeer diets or where her gifts came from. The tree was pretty, but brown needles were starting to pile up. The jury was out whether Santa would make an encore appearance next year. They’d already enjoyed a wonderful Hanukah, so it was just icing on a December cake.

 “I’ll be home next year,” Goldman had promised Brielle. “I’ll be there to help.” He prayed his Christmas Crew would be a one-time thing in his career. Kyle Colbert’s twenty-four hour Christmas Eve fiasco seemed like ages ago, yet nothing was solved.

 With fists on the table, Goldman leaned over the folder to rant, “The MRI’s 100% negative. There’s no ‘implanted trigger’ or any other foreign object nonsense. He doesn’t even have a dental filling. And the CDC reports Colbert has old-fashioned influenza. No bio-terror bullshit!” He flipped a page and shouted louder, almost losing his voice, “His leather satchel tested cleaner than the Pope’s browsing history. So why don’t I feel any better?”

 The room went silent. Del Rey and Weisman stared at the file, trying to think of any response.

 “Because someone claimed they transported a radiological weapon into Manhattan a month ago.” Jenkins blinked at his peers, “And the one man who might have a clue hasn’t woken up.”

 “Right!” Goldman barked. “And the clock’s just tickin’ away as we wait.”

 Del Rey spoke up, “Have we considered allowing his wife –and even his children– to visit him. Perhaps talk to him?”

 The men looked at her like she had three eyes.

 “You’ve heard those stories,” she continued. “People who are unconscious or in a coma, and how it helped to have loved ones talk to them…” She shrugged. “It might help.” She stared to match their gaze, “You got a better idea?”

Chapter Twenty-Seven – No News is Ever Good News

A hospital waiting room had been isolated to serve just Colbert’s family, close friends and law enforcement. No press or curious meddlers. Coffee was wheeled in every couple of hours with tins of picked-through holiday cookies. A rack held ten-month old *People* magazines and brochures for irrelevant drugs.

 For her umpteenth hour in a row, Maria sat alone. Through a window on the door, she saw the same young FBI agent in a suit guarding the floor. To the side, Jack and Cassie fought over a soda that gave them red lips while watching a television blaring an agonizing show with singing children. She took three more ibuprofens for her sleep-deprived headache.

 Maria swiped the remote and changed the channel as an eight-year-old girl was attempting to rap a Nicki Minaj song. “Sorry kids, it was gonna’ happen,” she shouted.

 Flipping through channels, she instantly paused when she saw Kyle’s face. It was a newscast showing his grim license photo that made him look completely guilty. She turned up the volume.

 “…Authorities won’t comment if they’ve captured the ‘human trigger,’ Kyle Colbert,” announced the square-jawed news anchor. “Nor confirmation about *any* threat of an explosive device. Some speculate it was a viral hoax designed to cause panic for the holiday.”

 The scene changed to footage of a bustling Times Square. Thousands of smiling visitors milling around. The newscaster flashed a smile, “New Yorkers plan to go about their business as the city prepares for *record* numbers this New Year’s Eve…”

 Maria turned, stunned to see Kyle’s supervisor, Connor Banks, step through the door. “Connor..? Hi.” She awkwardly stood, “Thank you so much for coming.”

 “Of course.” He pecked her cheek and gave a theatrical smile of compassion. His thin hair was glued down and he wore a powder-blue sweater tied loose around his neck. “How is he?”

 They sat. She fumbled with a tissue, “They placed him in a medically induced coma.”

 Silence. Connor muttered, “*My God*…” as if the news was truly unexpected.

 “They were worried about possible brain swelling.” Maria looked up to recall, “He had a head ‘contusion,’ along with extreme hypothermia from the lake…” she shrugged, not medically conversant. “Dr. Lee said calming the blood flow to the brain will give him time to heal.”

 “Do they know how long he’ll be out?” Connor asked, a little too eager.

 “They don’t know,” Maria blew her nose. “They’re monitoring his brain waves with an *electro…cephala*-something. They said his brain activity’s off the chart!” She chuckled, “His mind’s always so busy.”

 Connor rocked his eyes left and right. “Before he was put out, did he…speak to anyone?”

 “A little, for a few seconds…” She scowled at the door as an agent peeked in. “*Those* idiots aren’t letting me see him.” Maria then blossomed with a smile, “They *did* say Kyle wanted me to know he loved me...” She smiled pensively.

 After a beat, she casually added, “They said Kyle believes he knows who’s behind this. They’re circling like hawks waiting for him to wake up.”

 Connor went blank. Then a deceitful smile, “That’s magnificent. How soon might that be?”

 As Maria inhaled for a reply, they turned at the sound of the door. Agent Del Rey entered with the closest thing to a smile.

 “Mrs. Colbert, would you like to see Kyle? He’s opened his eyes.”

 Maria bolted upright, stunned and ecstatic.

 Connor froze in his seat with a look of nausea.

 As Agent Del Rey ushered Maria and the kids out of the room, Connor lifted his cellphone.

 When he was alone, he stepped to the window and dialed a number with a dour face. After a sequence of tones, he spoke quietly into the phone, “Requesting an encrypted memo. Going straight to the top.”

 Maria and the kids warily entered Kyle’s hospital room. Agent Del Rey remained outside to give the family a private opportunity to reunite.

 The room was smaller than Maria had expected. She knew the feds had no goals for comfort. She was instantly hit with that hospital scent of sterile cleaning solutions. It gave an almost dreadful ambiance, a cue that being in a hospital is rarely a good thing unless someone was giving birth. But this was also a good thing, to finally see her husband, alive.

 When she turned towards a mechanical bed, she was shocked to see Kyle with his eyes closed. He appeared lifeless. Her eyes instantly surged with tears to absorb her husband’s pathetic state. He was gaunt and pale. How could he have lost weight in such little time? He wasn’t conscious, *but they said he opened his eyes–*

 “–Hello, I’m Darcy,” the female voice announced from the door.

 Maria turned to see a nurse enter. She was thirtyish, with frosted hair and a soothing smile.

 “I’m the RN taking care of Mr. Colbert,” Nurse Darcy offered. If the medical profession recommended a tranquil voice to soothe family members, Nurse Darcy was a connoisseur.

 “They said he was awake,” Maria exclaimed. “Is he okay? What’s wrong?”

 “He’s very lucky.” Darcy stepped to observe vitals on a monitor. “With the decreased swelling and the negative MRI, Dr. Lee elected to revive him from his sedative-induced coma.”

 Jack and Cassie sheepishly remained behind their mom. Their unblinking eyes revealed they had no clue what was going on.

 “What’s that mean?” Maria stood beside Darcy at the bed.

 “We’ve administered *Anantadine*, a drug used to expedite recovery.” She leaned to observe Kyle’s face. “He’ll open his eyes again. All in good time. I promise.”

 Maria reached to touch Kyle’s hand. The last time they’d touched it was a quick kiss on Christmas Eve morning before he’d left for the train. And she never even felt it. She’d been asleep, but it was a custom Kyle believed in whether she was awake or not. Now, just the touch of his skin gave her a calming sensation.

 “He might not remember much,” Darcy looked at her. “And don’t be offended if he says things that don’t make sense or…peculiar. He’ll recover completely with time.”

 Maria nodded, grasping the information.

 “From one wife to another…” Darcy’s smile faded into a stern voice, “I will *not* let the FBI or anyone else talk to –*or harass*– your husband until he’s ready. Okay?” She paused to gauge her understanding. “It’ll only be Dr. Lee or myself in here. No one else.”

 “Thank you,” Maria exhaled with relief. Seeing Darcy’s sudden reaction to Kyle, Maria turned. Kyle’s eyes were open.

 Maria pushed forward and leaned over his face. “Baby..? It’s me, Maria.” Her voice cracked, “I love you so much, honey…”

 Kyle blinked. His pupils dilated and he adjusted his head as if focusing. He muttered in a hoarse voice, “What…”

 Maria moved closer to hear his words. “What’d you say?”

 He cleared his throat. “What…day is it?”

 Maria smiled through tears at his simple question. “It’s Thursday, honey. December 30th.” She grinned, “You’ve been out for *five* days.”

 Kyle’s eyes sprung open, wide as saucers. The *ding* of his heart monitor increased. His face revealed a spectrum of emotions as if he’d been transported to a different era.

 Nurse Darcy rushed in to check his monitor.

 “Just relax…” Maria whispered. “I am *so* sorry we missed Christmas…” She smiled, “But we still have New Year’s!”

 “But…” Kyle labored to speak, “I need to tell…”

 Nurse Darcy pressed a bedside button, “Room 708, I need phentolamine for Colbert.” She looked at Maria, “Best if we temporarily sedate him. There’s no need to rush anything.”

PART SIX

Operation Dirty Santa

Chapter Twenty-Eight – The Pickle

“Obviously we want to know who’s behind this,” Goldman lectured to the room. “But our priority is *finding* the radioactive WMD –if it exists. Understood?”

 No one responded. His taskforce either gazed or nodded to show their agreement.

 “Has anyone here been to the end of the world?” Goldman asked to rattle their attention.

 The team glanced at each other.

 “Our Director chose a place called the ‘end of the world’ for his vacation.” Goldman gave an ironic smile, “Ushuaia, Argentina, 6,600 miles away, the last stop before Antarctica.” He continued in a theatrical manner. “Which *means*…our ability to communicate with him is almost nil. So we have two clocks.” He lifted his index finger, “One: to verify or disprove the existence of a weapon before he returns.” He then made a peace sign, “Two: if it does exist, locate and neutralize it before the press catches wind of it and panics 2,000,000 people.”

 After seeing a roomful of mute eyes, he finished with, “Then *get on it!*”

 The taskforce formerly known as the Christmas Crew had expanded. Their previous conference room was not large enough to tackle the lingering crisis.

 Goldman’s new command center had been quickly assembled to match D.C.’s Strategic Information and Operations Center (SIOC,) the FBI’s global command post. The Manhattan “sigh-ock,” as it was referred, was designed specifically for the dirty bomb crisis.

 Goldman’s request for a team promised, “Around-the-clock staffing to maintain crisis awareness, to provide FBI leadership with strategic information, and to collect and disseminate data in a timely manner.” The room came with two dozen computer terminals and an interactive audio-visual system with large screens and teleconferencing abilities.

 The new room had the smell of plastic and unpacked electronics. Gear teams had arrived in the night like elves to assemble and hardwire the room. It was like a mini NASA control.

 Goldman’s memo to the Director required a project name. Del Rey had suggested the name “Christmas Crew” be changed. She said it sounded like a boy band that sang only holiday songs. Goldman huffed, “What about *Project Pickle?* You know, after your Christmas tradition.”

 Del Rey, Davis and Harmon frowned at whatever he just said.

 “We’re not following, sir” Harmon replied tactfully. “Pickle..?”

 Goldman quivered his head. “The *Christmas Pickle*!” He said it louder as if they’d now understand. “I’ve been researched your Christmas tradition stuff. The ‘Christmas Pickle’ is from like the 40s –it’s a glass tree ornament in the shape of a pickle. The parents hide it somewhere on the tree. The kids then try to find it –like ‘Where’s Waldo.’ The first kid who finds it gets an extra gift.” He shrugged at their ignorance.

 Without blinking, the three gazed like wax figures.

 Goldman flailed his hands in frustration. “We are *searching* for the bomb like kids *search* for the pickle. Plus, the threat puts us in a ‘real pickle.’”

 Del Rey daringly asked, “You’re advising the Director that you’re leading ‘Project Pickle’?”

 Goldman turned a shade of crimson. He barked, “So what’s your idea?”

 Del Rey looked at the others. “Have you ever played *Dirty Santa*? The holiday party game where you pick anonymous gifts and people take them from each other?”

 “Yeah…” Davis snapped a finger, “And you usually get a crappy gift.”

 “It’s called *Dirty* Santa…” Harmon smiled, “We’re searching for a *dirty* bomb.”

 Davis nodded, “And it’s a gift we didn’t want.”

 “Exactly.” Del Rey crossed her arms, gratified.

 “Fine!” Goldman turned. “Operation *Dirty Santa* sounds much better than Project Pickle.”

 Perturbed and back to business, Goldman stood a step higher than the team. He propped his hands on a railing with Dr. Weisman on one side, Analyst Jenkins on the other. Seated in the first row was the aloof and elegantly-dressed Bradley Snyder from Homeland’s Nuclear Detection Office. Del Rey, Harmon and Davis were to his side. The remainder of the team was rounded out with a variety of available specialists.

 One addition that had been forced on the team was Antony “Tony” Vassar, the Commissioner of New York’s Emergency Management Office. He was fortyish and bear-sized, with olive skin and a gold pinky ring. He was known as a softy that could get rough when needed, and extremely defensive of his beloved city’s wellbeing. Hence, he observed the squad like a mother hen.

 “Of course my priority is finding the device,” Vassar exclaimed in a brash New Jersey accent. “But you’ve made *zero* progress.” His tone underscored the word.

 “Commissioner Vassar,” Del Rey retorted, in no way intimidated. “Colbert’s the only one who might know something –and I can’t legally talk to him.”

 Dr. Weismann chimed in, “HIPAA laws can be thorny. If Mr. Colbert’s not under arrest, his treating physician *can* prohibit law enforcement from questioning or even visiting him–”

 “–Then arrest him!” Goldman threw his arms out. “I don’t care what for! Find something… Resisting arrest… Fleeing authorities... We’ve confirmed *seven* fatalities –eight if you count the psycho doctor– all tied back to Colbert somehow.”

 “The only thing confirmed is you got nothin.’” the imposing commissioner put his hands on his hips. “My duty is to Emergency Management. I don’t care if your boss is at the *end of the world.* We got a milliontourists for the holidays. You’ve had knowledge of a credible threat –and you want business as usual?” He shook his head, “My next stop is the mayor’s office.”

 “Whoa… Look at you,” Goldman bobbed with sarcasm. “What? You’re now Sheriff Brody on the Fourth of July?” He sneered, “You gonna’ close New York? Shut down Times Square? Send the Rockettes home?”

 Vassar’s eyes glowered. Only half the room got the *Jaws* reference, but they remained silent to watch the two men.

 Goldman released an exaggerated sigh as if relenting. He turned to the quiet Snyder. “Brad, tell him what we’ve already started.”

 “If you say so…” Snyder swiped his blond hair that touched his collar. He swiveled his chair towards Vassar. “For the radiation, we’ve begun to…” he paused, “spin a *web* across the city.”

 Vassar scrunched his face, “What, are you Peter Parker?”

 Goldman suppressed a chuckle. “Go ahead, show him. Use the main screen.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine – A Tangled Web We Weave

Bradley Snyder stepped over to Jenkins at the controls. Ignoring the feds’ black-suit-and-tie thing, Snyder wore an open-collar pastel Ralph Lauren under a taupe linen blazer. He looked like he was ready for brunch in Martha’s Vineyard. He sat casually on the edge of Jenkins’ desk.

 “Mr. Commissioner, we’ve deployed radiation detectors to create a real-time grid of the city,” Snyder summed-up efficiently.

 Vassar paused, waiting for more. “Wha..? Grid of a city..?”

 Snyder puckered to choose his words. “It was classified at the time, but last year DARPA tested placing radiation detectors on emergency vehicles. Detectors were installed on fire trucks and EMS vehicles that covered more than 150,000 miles –”

 “–Whoa,” Vassar interjected with raised palms. “I’m a civil servant, what’s a DARPA?” His accent made it sound like *Darper.*

 Snyder blinked to gather any patience. “DARPA is the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency. They develop technologies for use by the military–”

 “–They invent all the cool James Bond-type stuff,” Goldman blurted to simplify.

 Vassar rocked his jaw, absorbing the concept.

 “In Washington D.C. they secretly tested two types of radiation detectors,” Snyder continued. “A large size, like the ones installed on the emergency vehicles, and small ones the size of a mobile phone. The small models can be used by police officers.

 “The radiation detectors, called SIGMA, were designed to distinguish between nonthreatening radiation and deadly sources. For example, freshly-cut granite and certain medical devices can emit harmless amounts of radiation.”

 “What’s this gotta’ do with New York?” Vassar gave an overblown shrug.

 Four days earlier, on December 26th, agents in plain jackets appeared at the Firehouse, Hook & Ladder Company 8 in the trendy Manhattan neighborhood of Tribeca. It was a coincidence the exterior of the historic fire station had been used in *Ghostbusters* as their iconic base.

 A stern agent in sunglasses asked for Chief Hansford, the highest-ranking officer in the fire station. The chief had already been forewarned by his boss, the city’s Fire Commissioner, to allow the agents to do “whatever they need to do,” with no further specifics.

 The secretive agents carried detectors that looked like small yellow tool boxes. They proceeded to install the SIGMA radiation detectors on each of the station’s fire trucks and emergency vehicles. One agent vaguely explained to Chief Hansford they were installing “safety tracking equipment” with no elaboration. The agents were gone within an hour.

 The same team proceeded to visit Engine Co. 10 at 124 Liberty Street, across from the World Trade Center –the closest station during the 9/11 tragedy. When the agents installed the detectors on their trucks, no one caught the chilling irony that their vehicles were being covertly used to halt another possible attack.

 The SIGMA team carried out similar installations at a dozen other fire stations spread evenly around the city. The team then moved on to ambulances at a dozen city hospitals, including Mount Sanai, New York-Presbyterian, Harlem Hospital Center and Bellevue.

 When a nosy ambulance driver asked about the equipment installed on his van, an agent improvised, “It’s a…GPS beacon to make sure you keep driving safe.”

 Detectors were also placed on unmarked vehicles to inspect nearby shipping yards and airports.

 Snyder concluded, “We now have four days of data, and growing exponentially every hour.”

 Vassar poked a finger in the air, “*You people* have been tampering with *my* emergency vehicles –and this is the first I’m hearing about it?”

 “Tony,” Goldman replied, unruffled, “I think our Director has a tad bit of clout over your *town’s* mayor.” He stressed *town* as if New York was some one-horse village.

 “Gentlemen,” Snyder called out to dispel the rivalry. “Would you care to hear *why* we did it?”

 Overlooked by the men, the room of agents were also following along. The only thing missing was popcorn.

 Del Rey went ahead and asked, “The detectors aren’t just to check for radiation?”

 “No,” Snyder gave a shrewd smirk. “The detectors are helping create a real-time map of the city. With that many emergency vehicles, imagine how many miles they crisscross the city daily. From SoHo, to Tribeca, to Harlem, to Midtown. The detectors are sending us signals of the radiation levels throughout the city. *Trails* of information, looking for any unusual spikes that could indicate a threat.” He turned to Jenkins. “Onscreen.”

 Jenkins clicked a control. The room looked up at the seventy-inch monitor. It displayed an overhead graphic of the city. Hundreds of illuminated threads crisscrossed the city like a web.

 “Emergencies occur every hour, in every corner of the city,” Jenkins explained. “The vehicles are creating an unprecedented scan of Manhattan. From tiny radioactive traces in construction material, to levels found after medical treatments.”

 The complex web over the city shimmered with small sparkles.

 Vassar stared up in awe. “I’m guessing nothing has…*spiked* yet?”

 “No sir,” Jenkins and Snyder replied simultaneously.

 “If there *is* a radioactive device within the city,” Snyder added, “it’s just a matter of time before a detector comes near it. We *will* find it.”

 Goldman stepped beside Vassar to appease the bureaucrat. “We’ve ordered you the smaller mobile detectors for your police.”

 Vassar turned to him, quieted.

 “Imagine your cops carrying them at key locations: Empire State, Statue of Liberty, World Trade Center–” Goldman knocked on the table, “–*God forbid*…”

 Vassar suddenly realized the room of eyes gazing at him. He looked at Goldman and Snyder, “I’ll talk to the Mayor. I’ll recommend we don’t issue any alerts –yet.”

 He pointed into Goldman’s chest. “But if you get a *spike*, or confirm any evidence of a target, you will call me.”

 “Of course, Tony,” Goldman grinned.

 As the room got up to collectively breathe and head towards a replenished coffee machine, Agent Liana approached Del Rey.

 “Agent Del Rey,” Liana touched her shoulder, assertive but cool.

 Del Rey turned. “Yes…” She frowned to place the name. “Liana. Good job on the tranquilizer idea. What’s up?”

 “Do you sense a flaw in their whole radioactive grid system?” Liana asked.

 “No…” Del Rey tensed her brows, thrown by the query. “Such as..?”

 Liana looked to the side, and then replied gently, “Their scan is only on the ground. It’s just eye level. But how *high* *up* can it see?”

 Del Rey blinked as she processed the query. She then gave faint smile, “I think we should trust our experts. That’s why they’re here.”

Chapter Thirty – Cooks in the Kitchen

“*Ta da..!*” Chester Hawkins crooned to the tiny girl, wearing an apron on his gaunt frame. “There you have it. You now know how to bake *crème brûlées*.”

 Within his Thorne Woode estate’s kitchen, Hawkins stood next to his six-year-old granddaughter. They were dwarfed by the cavernous room. Gourmet brass cookware hung from the ceiling. Ornate stones framed the triple ovens, and a marble island was the size of most freshman dorm rooms.

 There was a side to Mr. Hawkins that his collaborators had never seen: his weekly baking lessons for his little princess, Renatta, his daughter’s second child. His daughter Porsha was away for the holidays on a Parisian shopping trip with her new husband. Hawkins had promised a team of servants to help care for her girls. But his baking sessions would be just him.

 A corporate psychologist once asked Hawkins if he enjoyed cooking with his granddaughter as a way to mentally offset his business tactics that many considered cutthroat.

 Hawkins replied by swiftly firing the corporate psychologist and blacklisting him with the New York Psychology Board.

 “Have you made mental notes?” Hawkins asked little Renatta as he took off his oven mitts.

 She shook her head with a shy shrug.

 “Renatta!” Hawkins scolded with a long finger. “You need to focus on your grand papá’s baking lessons!” He spread his palms. “How else might you *dazzle* a fitting gentleman one day?”

 The girl blinked large, marble-like eyes.

 Hawkins turned back to the stove, realizing under his breath, “Granted this may be a bit advanced, considering we must now torch the tops…” He smiled back at Renatta. “Do you recall our lesson on how to ignite butane crème brûlée torches?”

 Before Renatta could shrug, her eight-year-old sister came stomping into the kitchen. Fresh from a visit to the stables to ride her pony, she wore her equestrian garb of riding pants, a red jacket with tails and black riding boots.

 “Grand Papá,” she shouted with no concern of barging in. “This tablet you gave me is acting *insane!*” She huffed with a dramatic flair.

 Hawkins turned to his elder granddaughter. “What seems to be the trouble, Lunden?” He saw her holding a pink tablet computer he’d given her for Christmas.

 She pushed it towards him without looking him in the eye. “It says to get *you*.”

 Hawkins’ eye twitched. He clutched the tablet. Its screen was all-black with a single line of bold text that read, “BRING TO MR. CHESTER HAWKINS - ENTER ENCRYPT KEY.”

 Hawkins pulled the tablet to his chest and he grinned at the irked girl. “Well done, Lunden. You have done precisely as instructed.”

 As both girls stirred their fingers in the custards, Hawkins turned away to enter a seventeen-digit code into the tablet. He stared at the pad for nearly ten seconds until the words “DECRYPTION COMPLETE” appeared onscreen.

 “Get the torches ready,” he shouted to the girls as he stepped into the adjacent dessert room. His method to conceal communication devices among his granddaughters had worked perfectly. He slid on his narrow glasses to read the screen.

 After reading the message twice, his eyes darted. The news was not good. In fact, as they would say in the boardroom, it was sub-par. A real challenge. Less than ideal. He needed to convene with his men to brainstorm a solution. Kyle Colbert was alive –and now awake.

 Hawkins shouted over his shoulder, “*Lunden…* bring Grand Papá your new mobile phone, *s'il vous plaît*.”

 As he waited for the clean phone, he pondered the best way to inform his collaborators that their irritant wasn’t yet eliminated.

 It was a holiday miracle that Kyle was sitting up, pale but functional. Maria sat on the edge of the bed and held a straw to his lips so he could sip ginger ale.

 Maria was a new person. She was dressed in tight jeans that revealed curves that Victoria’s Secret angels would envy, and a black top with two buttons of overdue cleavage for her poor husband. With all the days she’d remained despondent, she was now an excited chatterbox.

 “…We saved *all* the gifts until you’re safe at home.” She chuckled, “The feds unwrapped all the presents during their search. I looked at them and said, ‘fuck you, you’re rewrapping every one of those goddamn things!’”

 She paused as Jack and Cassie tapped her from behind. She leaned down to listen to whatever they had to whisper.

 Kyle smiled at the whole circus. His wife was back to her feisty self. The kids were together, safe. His entire family, collected in one small room. Their voices and chuckles were like a joyful choir. After having cops and doctors probing him, he was now alone with his family. Kyle guessed it was the essence of what Christmas together would have been. Considering the threats he’d been up against, he would gratefully accept his current setting.

 Maria finished chatting with the kids and she turned back to Kyle.

 “This has really been tough on them…” Maria whispered. “At their age, confused with the TV and how everything…*happened* that night.” Maria smiled, “They have something they want to say.”

 Kyle nodded with a gentle grin.

 She turned to the children, “Go ahead Jackie, Cass. Come on over here.”

 The kids shuffled towards the bed. Cassie handed him a picture she’d drawn with crayons. It was of a vibrant home with four stick people inside it. In her innocent imagination, he was included in the family.

 Kyle’s lip trembled, “Thank you sweetie, it’s absolutely *perfect*.”

 Cassie’s face glowed at the compliment.

 Jack stepped closer to Kyle, but he uneasily avoided eye contact.

 Maria patted his back, “Go ahead honey, tell him what you told me.”

 Jack rolled his eyes up to Kyle. In a monotone, as if rehearsed, he said, “I’m really sorry I tried to kill you.”

 After an awkward second, Kyle expelled a sudden laugh. Almost unable to catch his breath, his laughter was contagious. Though the topic was nowhere near funny, Maria began to chuckle at his happiness. The kids gave broad smiles at whatever was happening.

 He held his sides and his smile faded. His lungs felt like they were boiling and he started to violently cough. He held a hand up to let Maria know he was okay. By the time his hacking subsided, his face was raw emotion.

 He looked at the kids. “I want you to know I love you and your mom more than *anything* I’ve ever had before.” He had to take a breath. “You know that, right?” He smiled with wet eyes.

 The children smiled. Cassie fidgeted with her sweater and Jack looked up at his mom, proud.

 “After all,” Kyle grinned, “I did promise to make this Christmas memorable.”

 After an interlude of bliss with Maria and the kids, Kyle sat upright. It was time to get back to business. He looked at Maria, almost frustrated, “I *know* I had a theory about an… attack. But...” He covered his eyes, “I just can’t remember…”

 She touched his cheek. “You’re safe here. The doctor said the meds take a while to wear off.”

 “I just feel like…” He shook his head, “I might know something, or at least a place to start.”

 She caressed his face. “Let the feds do their jobs. You will get better, every day.”

 Kyle’s eyes broadened at her words. “But how many days do we have?”

 Maria frowned, “We’re fine. Especially in here. Just let the experts work on this. Rena called Agent Del Rey –she’s been trying to call her back.”

 *Rena…* Kyle’s mouth fell open. The mention of her name made a gear spark to life. Could she be a key to whatever he had theorized –or to any possible timeframe? With a sudden idea, Kyle perked up. He looked at Maria and spoke fast, “Did you bring your laptop?”

 She recoiled, “It’s in my bag, down in my car –but you are *not* about to work.”

 “Trust me,” he snapped. “Can you please get it –but don’t make it obvious.” He gazed vacantly towards the room’s telephone. “And there’s something I need from the corner bodega.”

 “The market?” Maria was now completely baffled. “You want a snack? The hospital food’s not as shitty as you–”

 Nurse Darcy opened the door. Kyle and Maria turned to look at her.

 “Mr. Colbert,” Darcy spoke, humorless. “I emphasized you could *not* have visitors, but a *Rena Stacy* insists–”

 “–Let her in,” Kyle exclaimed. “She’s practically family.” Kyle wondered if this was some divine intervention that Rena had come. His clouded brain was struggling to clear its cobwebs.

 After Nurse Darcy exited, he looked at Maria, “Trust me with this. Please take the kids to run an errand. I’ll be okay –and most important: don’t talk to anyone.”

 Maria halted at the sudden, odd request.

Chapter Thirty-One – Some Assembly Required

The FBI’s Op Center was a flurry of activity like a newsroom on Election Day. On the large main screen, the graphic of New York glowed with intercrossing trails of data.

 After a lull, where people stretch, take restroom breaks and ask about each other’s holidays, *“Holiday? I was stuck in here,”* Agent Harmon tensed at her monitor, almost knocking her coffee. A single point flashed bright, due east of the city.

 She shouted. “A possible spike, at LaGuardia.”

 Goldman, Davis and Bradley Snyder rushed to her terminal.

 “Who picked it up?” Goldman asked.

 “One of our roving detectors,” Harmon replied. “Cruising through LaGuardia’s long-term parking.”

 “Nine miles away..?” Snyder frowned. “Doesn’t match our intel of a bomb in the city.”

 “It’s a van with radioactive residue.” Harmon looked up, “We’re getting a visual now.”

 An image appeared. The picture was grainy due to the garage’s dim light. It showed a parked white Ford cargo van.

 Goldman squinted to assess, “White, nondescript…no markings.” He flexed his shoulders, “It’s a standard serial killer rent-a-van. Probably there for weeks. How can we know more?”

 “I’ll get my office on it,” Snyder offered. “They’ll test if the isotope’s medical –or a threat.”

 “It has to be rented or stolen,” Davis added. “I’ll run the tag and check LaGuardia for video.”

 “Outstanding!” Goldman shouted. He pointed to the back of the room, “Round-up some of that coffee –they *finally* swapped-out Dunkin for Starbucks– and get the hell going!”

 Just as Kyle had instructed, Maria located the convenience store on Nassau Street, two blocks from the hospital. She entered the small bodega with her kids.

 A bell jingled on the door. An obese Latino boy behind the counter with an Abraham Lincoln beard nodded. The store was jam-packed with almost everything ever invented and arranged in no evident order, like a prize wall at a carnival. Aspirin was on a rack two feet from plungers, one foot away from birth control, next to frying pans. But Maria knew where to go.

 She located a rack of Foxtel pay-as-you-go mobile phones. She lifted a pack to read the label. For $35.00, the phones required no contract and came with 200 prepaid minutes, 500MB of data and 500 texts. To Maria, they seemed like phones bad guys used in movies to avoid being tracked. They just throw them away after being used. *What do they call them? Burner phones?*

 Maria wondered why Kyle wanted the phones. She knew he was an expert at covert communications. As instructed, she grabbed four phones and proceeded to the register. The bearded boy rang up the phones and one eggnog that was half-price. She promised the kids the drink if they didn’t act up, ask for, or touch anything in the store.

 After scanning the last phone, the clerk smiled. In a thick accent he asked, “You wish to activate phones now? I can do for you.”

 Maria locked eyes with the kid. “Nope.” She smiled. “I got it. Thanks.”

 Rena sat at Kyle’s bedside, but she did not look like Rena. Gone was the dark and appealing brunette who guys clamored to buy coffees for. She was pale with no make-up and dark circles around her eyes. She wore a hoodie over her head as if hiding. Rena appeared horrified.

 “This whole thing is really surreal…” Rena leaned close to speak, though they were alone. “Why are FBI agents at the elevator? To protect you? Or waiting to arrest you–”

 “*Shhh…”* Kyle touched her arm to calm her. “I’ll be fine. They can’t do anything now. We can talk in here, completely safe and private. Okay?”

 Rena’s eyes locked onto his. She gave a subtle nod.

 Having her complete focus, Kyle finally said, “Do you remember what you were supposed to ask Chase Zahir? What did he find on the dark web?”

 “He said…” Rena had to swallow, “U.S. authorities decoded a communication that they’re not telling anyone about.” Her lip quivered and her voice cracked, “The message said a dirty bomb was planted in New York City. *Thirty-eight* days ago.” She sniffed a tear, “Is it true?”

 “Rena,” He touched her hand as if pausing her fear. “What day was thirty-eight days ago?”

 Puzzled, Rena accessed her phone’s calendar. “November…25th–”

 “–Thanksgiving,” Kyle exclaimed. “They hid it on Thanksgiving…” He blinked faster as his inspired neurons collected the pieces, “Late in the day, businesses were closed... Less people–”

 “–Kyle,” Rena called out, halting his flow. “Zahir said something else, really bizarre.”

 He paused to see fear in her eyes. “What?”

 “He said…” Her eyes glistened, “do not trust the company...” She was overcome with tears. “How does he know all this –and who this Chase guy really?”

Chapter Thirty-Two – Ahab’s Spear

To Rena, Chase Zahir was like an annoying name someone keeps mentioning of a person you’ve never met. Until Kyle explained their past.

 Zahir was a friend of his who worked for their chief competitor. Due to the nature of the tech industry, Rena presumed you weren’t allowed to be friends with anyone who worked for your adversary. But Kyle Colbert never followed such rules.

 Kyle used an analogy from when he worked at Sears as a teenager. While on break at the food court, he’d met a nice kid who worked at JC Penney, which was Sears’ most despicable rival. But Scotty Baker was a cool guy, and he and Kyle chatted over Sbarro pizza every night about their jobs, cars, girls, and Van Halen. He and Scotty didn’t care if they worked for competitors.

 Now as adults, Kyle was friends with Chase Zahir, who shared his same profession. Zahir was the lead cryptanalyst for Phantex in Cairo, one of Harding-Foxtel’s lead competitors. The world of cryptanalysts was a small one, and Kyle and Chase had hit it off at the conference in Vegas several years earlier. It was like a kinship between gamers or Star Wars geeks. Very few people could talk the talk and understand their technobabble.

 Zahir was the same age as Kyle, married, with two children. Kyle had envied his adorable family until he was lucky enough to be blessed with his own. Though Zahir was halfway around the globe, he and Kyle chatted online weekly.

 On Christmas Eve in Stockholm –six hours ahead of New York– Zahir was stunned when Kyle’s name appeared online. First it was the strange posts, and then with the mysterious figure naming Kyle with the bomb threat. Zahir had immediately tried to warn Kyle. When he was unsuccessful, he had to anxiously follow the news online.

 There was one detail about Zahir that only few knew: He was a former hacker –and a pretty good one, according to his college classmates who aced every exam. Some European firms were less stringent than the Americans with their hiring practices. Zahir had enjoyed a brief career as a student hacker while at Stockholm University. When he discovered some firms hired former hackers –for more money with less risk– he jumped at the chance. And he retained many skills for any personal needs.

 As Zahir was engrossed with the news of Kyle’s manhunt, he was relieved to get the call from Rena in New York. She told him Kyle was safe, but on the run. She conveyed Kyle’s fretful request for him to search the dark web for unusual activity. She then relayed the more curious request: to check the communication activity of his boss, Chester Hawkins.

 In Zahir’s hacker days, he was called Ahab because he was an expert at whaling and spearfishing. “Phishing” was a hacker technique of sending fake emails to a company’s employees, disguised to look official with the goal of deceiving them into clicking a malicious link, or respond with private data such as account information.

 “Spearfishing” was targeting a specific corporate individual. “Whaling” was the next step, targeting a high-profile person such as the CEO. In this case, Kyle’s boss Chester Hawkins.

 The trick was to create an email that cleverly mimicked the company’s. For example, if the firm’s real email is “Harding-Foxtel.com,” create a similar but fraudulent email like “Harding\_Foxtel.com.” And emails that appear to be from high-ranking individuals are less likely to be questioned by junior employees.

 Zahir remembered how the popular app Snapchat had been a victim of a similar scheme in 2016. An email intruder pretended to be their CEO, Evan Spiegel, and asked for employees’ payroll data. The employee who received the email didn’t realize it was a con and responded with the information. The hacker then exposed the data to the entire world. Snapchat never revealed what information was compromised, or how many employees were impacted.

 Zahir knew arrogant leaders such as Chester Hawkins would have a stable of secretaries to handle his daily activities. He easily got their names by calling Hawkins’ phone number, and he already knew the company’s email format. At 4:50 p.m. New York time (the busy end of the day) he sent emails to three of the secretaries, supposedly from their finance manager in London, demanding an immediate click of an “invoice” link before the day’s end. Within minutes, two of the secretaries clicked the link containing a viral code.

 Zahir then had full access to explore the email traffic of anyone within the company. Not the content, but where they were going to and coming from. What he discovered was intriguing.

 Emails between Hawkins, Kyle’s supervisor Connor Banks, and five other companies had skyrocketed. The addresses included someone named Earl at a Texas oil firm; a Sarif with Goch & Nole in Saudi Arabia; to someone named Tong in Korea’s Tech United Corp.; a Dixon with Shield Systems in South Africa; and to a Toby at ArmsTech in London.

 With a few clicks, Zahir confirmed that Harding-Foxtel had no business with those five firms. The 1,000% increase in messages started after the public announcement of the Foxtel-Bayonet merger. The six companies shared only one thing in common: they were all U.S. Defense contractors. *Six unrelated defense firms suddenly making friends?* Zahir wondered.

 For Kyle’s first request, Zahir visited his favorite dark web chat rooms. The dark web was hosted through anonymous servers known as *Tor*, which routed traffic through multiple nameless servers, encrypting it every step of the way. Precisely why criminals enjoyed working and trading within the dark web.

 Zahir checked a government watchdog site that traded rumors from various government agencies. The site was typically used by human traffickers, digital currency traders and drug dealers to make sure the feds weren’t on their trails. Zahir wasn’t interested in any of those trades, but what he discovered from a month-old post made his pulse quicken.

 The CIA had supposedly uncovered a message that a dirty bomb had been hidden in Manhattan on November 25th. The gossip was the feds were selfishly not sharing the info, despite lessons about not working together after 9/11. The old post had rejuvenated interest after Kyle’s “implanted trigger” story. Zahir had no idea if the FBI was following up on the message.

 Zahir sat back at his pages of jumbled information. Did the two results overlap? Zahir poured another glass of Karlsson’s Swedish vodka and Red Bull. *Six defense contractors, suddenly getting together*… He processed it logically: corporations only exist to prosper. Defense contractors have the highest profits in times of conflict or war.

 He took a sip. *A bomb in New York…*. He chuckled mockingly. If a terrorist were to attack New York, that would certainly piss off the U.S. military. He froze with a sudden chill.

 *But why would Kyle be involved?* Kyle was an honest American cryptanalyst –one of the best. His greatest successes have been his wife, family and cutting-edge programs like… *GhostSeeker.* The program that could halt all terrorist communication.

Zahir almost dropped his icy glass. If his friend Kyle were…hurt, terrorism might thrive. He suddenly stood. *Defense firms would prosper...* He inadvertently stammered, “What…do I do?”

 He knew he couldn’t alert authorities without incriminating himself for hacking. He was no legal expert, but he guessed Kyle could use the data as excellent leverage. Kyle could use the knowledge to negotiate with authorities for his freedom and protection.

 Hearing his children laughing in the next room, Zahir took a breath. Now that Kyle was safe, secure in a hospital room, he would pray for his friend –and that the bomb threat was bogus.

 3,900 miles away in New York, Rena concluded with, “Zahir said he’ll send you all the proof. He just needs a safe text or an account you’ve never used.”

 “I’m working on it,” Kyle responded. With this new information, his brain was percolating with the possibilities. Audible dings on a monitor signaled his increasing pulse. “It should be here any minute–”

 Before he could say another word, they jolted at the clamor of Maria barging into the room like a whirlwind.

Chapter Thirty-Three – Enter the Sandman

Maria shoved the door open with her shoulder, “That asshole agent asked what I was carrying.” She huffed, juggling her laptop in one hand, a grocery bag in the other, with her kids behind her. “I showed him it was fucking eggnog–” She stopped, embarrassed to see Rena.

 “Hello, Mrs. Colbert.” Rena stood and stepped forward to give her a quick hug.

 “Call me Maria, please.” Maria thought Rena looked rough. She was usually so polished, but she looked haggard like she’d been up all night. Maria gave a bittersweet smile, “Thank you so much for your help during…this.” She inhaled, wanting to say more, but stopped.

 Maria turned to Kyle. “Mr. Workaholic wants a laptop. I think he needs a new hobby.” She handed him the bag containing the four cellphone boxes.

 Kyle tore through the boxes like a Charles Dickens orphan who’d never been given a gift.

 Maria noted the escalating pulse on the monitor and wondered if Kyle should slow down. She and Rena awkwardly watched Kyle open the boxes and remove each phone.

 Kyle looked up at Maria, “Can your sister come and get Jack and Cassie? For a couple days?”

 “*Linda..?*” Maria had a warped grin, thrown by the abrupt question. “She’s an idiot. Plus she’s in Philly, over two hours away–” Something made her stop when she saw his face. He was dead serious. Maria remembered the nurse’s warning about odd behavior or comments –but was this one? Or did Kyle have a real need for Linda to take the kids out of New York? Something in his eyes appeared in control. Perhaps she should err on the side of the children’s safety.

 She bit her lower lip and replied, “Sure. I’ll give her a call.”

 “Aunt Linda..?” Jack winced like he’d swallowed a gnat, “She doesn’t eat meat or sugar–”

 “–You be quiet,” Maria barked. “She loves you dearly and she has good music.”

 Kyle continued on whatever path he was headed. He blinked with a glint of impatience in his eyes. “Use only *these* phones from now on to call me.” He handed a burner phone to Rena and two to Maria. “They need to charge first, but they should have plenty of minutes.” He looked at Maria, “Give the extra one to the kids when they go to Linda’s.”

 The ladies just nodded, unsure how else to reply on short notice.

 Kyle looked at Rena, “Your stepmom in Newark has a different last name, right?”

 “Yeah…” Rena shrugged at his barrage of odd questions, “Jackson, her husband’s name…”

 Again, Maria wondered if his disjointed requests were a side effect of his condition, or perhaps he was on to something.

 “Good,” Kyle replied to Rena. He leaned forward, insistent. “Can you *please* stay with your mom for a few days? Until I can *finally* confirm–”

 “–Kyle!” Maria interrupted, “That’s too much to ask her!”

 “You don’t understand what’s going on!” Kyle shouted. He voice echoed in the small room.

 The ladies and children froze. They hadn’t heard Kyle raise his voice before. They turned at the sound of the door. Dr. Lee entered with a dour expression.

 “What’s the ruckus Mr. Colbert?” Lee asked. He scowled in his ever-present lab coat with a stethoscope on his shoulder like a parrot. He moved quickly to the bedside monitors.

 Kyle huffed, aggravated. “Nothing, I’m fine.”

 “You’re *not* fine,” Dr. Lee scolded. “Your blood pressure’s 138 over 95.” He turned to his audience. “You have *four* guests, two of which are children and one that’s not a family member.”

 Rena and Maria frowned at each other about the hard-ass doctor.

 “There is too much…stimuli.” Dr. Lee studied a drip bag and an intravenous catheter in Kyle’s forearm. “I don’t need to remind anyone you’re recuperating from a severe trauma and borderline pneumonia. He turned to the ladies, “He still needs to rest.”

 “I don’t want to rest,” Kyle snapped.

 With an almost sleight of hand, Lee depressed a syringe into Kyle’s catheter before he could protest. “This will help you sleep almost immediately.” He remove the needle and turned, “Your friends and family can see you tomorrow.”

 “I need to get Zahir’s informa…” Kyle’s words trailed. He blinked, confused. “There’s something big going…”

 Maria hovered over him with a poignant smile, “Maybe it’s for the best, honey...”

 Kyle opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His eyelids were already dropping.

 “Behave and you can go home a day or two after New Year’s.” Dr. Lee gave a feeble smile, “We have all the time in the world.”

 Mr. Hawkins poured the last glass of *Barbadillo Versos* *1891* sherry. From the eyes around the table, the men realized it was $15,000 per bottle. Everyone maintained their best poker face.

 Hawkins beamed at his collaborators. “I was truly hoping to avoid a cliché, but there’s no better way to phrase ‘the countdown has begun.’”

Chapter Thirty-Four – Last Train to FAO Schwarz

Mr. Hawkins sat at the head of a luxuriously carved table in the train’s dining car, somewhere around 1940. Or so it appeared. The vintage car was exquisitely refurbished with antique fixtures, tasseled curtains over the windows, Persian rugs and Victorian armchairs.

 Connor Banks was perched at Hawkins’ side like a beagle. Refusing to remove his cowboy hat, Mr. Earl sat at the foot of the table. Mr. Sarif sat on one side wearing a bow tie. Mr. Tong sat beside him, in a tailored black suit. Mr. Dixon was across from them, casual in a blazer. Toby sat beside him in a plaid jacket and bookish spectacles, monitoring at least two laptops.

 Predictably, Mr. Krug remained standing, arms folded, at the car’s door. He scowled into space as if glaring at a spot, wearing his easy-to-shop-for all-black.

 Hawkins addressed his guests with steepled fingers like a spider on a mirror. “Gentlemen, there is no turning back. The…*apparatus* has been armed, as the literal clock…ticks.”

 “Mr. Hawkins, sir,” Earl feigned modesty in his drawl. “Your planned…” he rubbed fingers together, delicate with his words, “*display* will be more of a spectacle, is that right?”

 Hawkins gave a tight smile without his eyes smiling at all. “I’m unsure how you conduct your trading post on the Ponderosa, but I would never hurt or eliminate children or innocents.” He shrugged with veiny hands. “I myself have two granddaughters!” He flashed a jagged smile. “Radiation in that dosage is little more than a riot-maker. But the message it sends is sufficient to ensure the nation’s immediate demand for *all* of your trades.”

 “Very true,” Connor Banks chimed in. “After the explosion, on live television, we project the President could deploy 10,000 troops immediately.” He gazed around the table, “Requiring *every one* of your industries –right away.”

 With astute frowns, the men nodded. This was exactly why they were there.

 Mr. Sarif’s soft voice asked, “If authorities were to get close to the…*device*, have we considered accelerating the timeline?”

 Hawkins slapped the table. “No!” Earl and Dixon jolted at the bang. Hawkins clucked as if the query were absurd. “The entire impact of our proclamation comes from its live, global coverage.” He chuckled at their simplicity. “Can you even comprehend a terror attack, on live television, broadcast around the world?”

 Connor added, “We plan to slowly dole-out contrived ‘clues’ to have the armies chasing every aspiring terror group throughout the Mid-East.”

 Hawkins held a hand to his mouth to contain a chuckle, “Can’t you see the forces, chasing their own tails –while expending all of your companies’ costly resources?”

 The men’s eyes widened, already envisioning their income statements.

 “Do *not* forget we are in this together,” Hawkins’ face wilted, now grave. “Our alibi will be the fact we will be there, *at* the site on New Year’s Eve. Invited as VIP guests.”

 The men’s eyes bugged and they collectively gasped.

 “That is foolish!” exclaimed Mr. Tong.

 Mr. Sarif mused, “The fallout alone…”

 “Are you fuckin’ *in-sane*?” yowled Mr. Earl.

 Hawkins waited with brows that asked *are you finished?* When the men hushed, he smirked, “There are obviously plans to protect your precious selves. We will convene in *this* train car. After all, look where we are located.” He motioned to his sides.

 The men glanced at their surroundings as if this made some sort of sense.

 “It takes precisely nineteen minutes to get here from the grandstands,” Hawkins added. “Don’t be so egocentric to believe that anyone will miss your attendance before the countdown.”

 The collaborators seemed somewhat more content.

 “Now…” Hawkins resteepled his fingers, “I need input for our efforts to *finally* eradicate Colbert and his vexatious research.”

 Toby, the young black techie spoke, “I’ve been monitoring *Mrs.* Colbert’s mobile,” he pronounced as the cool British *mo-byle*. “She has repeat calls to a residence in Philadelphia.”

 Hawkins shrugged.

 “I ran the address,” Toby typed. “It’s a twenty-four year-old female who shares Mrs. Colbert’s maiden name.”

 “Yes…” Connor Banks raised a finger. “Kyle’s wife Maria has a sister in Philly. She or the children may be planning to hide there.”

 Hawkins uncurled a nefarious smile. He turned to Krug at the door. “Check it out. Seizing the children might offer brilliant leverage for our predicament.”

 The men carefully stepped out of the train car. Or rather, the restored 1949 subway car. Hawkins’ team had painstakingly renovated the car within a forgotten railway line, a hundred feet below 6th Avenue. The adjacent subway station hadn’t been used since the early 50s. It had been sealed and forgotten.

 Despite their lofty positions at multinational corporations, the five collaborators observed the tunnel with trepidation. Lanterns hung on the outside of the subway car to offer minimal, flickering light. It looked like a forgotten prospector’s camp.

 Mr. Sarif looked beside the car to see a camera tripod and a black drape. It had been the set where they’d filmed a cloaked Mr. Krug, warning the world about Kyle Colbert. Sarif studied the pitch-dark tunnel surrounding them. They were told they were under a hundred feet of concrete and reinforced steel. Shielded completely from detection and any possible radiation. Toby had to use portable encrypted routers to gain reception for their systems.

 Hiding within the subway car –safe from any radiation or hazards– seemed like a perfect plan to Sarif. Perhaps he’d research similar subterranean safe rooms in Saudi Arabia. He wondered how Hawkins had come upon it.

 At over 115 years old, New York’s subway system was one of the oldest public transportation systems in the world. With more passengers and stations than any other metro, it was no surprise that countless stations had been shuttered and forgotten over the decades. Some had been so deeply sealed, they only existed on antique maps or debated in chat rooms.

 The Longacre Square Station –the original name for Times Square –was built in 1904, and designed to be a showpiece for the city’s transportation. It had Roman brick, brass chandeliers, vaulted arches with the same Gustavino tile that adorned Grand Central and Carnegie Hall.

 The station was decommissioned in 1952 when its tightly-curved tracks could no longer accommodate the longer cars. Its subway line was abandoned, with the new stations built two blocks to the west. The line had a planned extension, 6th Avenue to Central Park, that didn’t exist on any known maps. Its existence had been completely forgotten except by history enthusiasts.

 That is, until a self-proclaimed “subterranean guerilla photographer” climbed down to locate the mythical stations and posted images online. Emotional preservation society members began to lament about “saving the historical splendor” of New York and the dilapidated stations.

 Shortly thereafter, after a friendly bidding war with pal Donald Trump, Hawkins planned to buy several buildings off 5th Avenue. He hired a structural survey of the underground support systems, and they discovered the fabled railway extension. Hawkins was overjoyed, preaching how good things always happen to good people.

 To illuminate the tunnel, Krug used a powerful Maglite to lead the men along the track. They quietly followed, their polished shoes crunching in the ballast rocks. The derelict station was roughly a fifty-yard hike.

 Connor walked four feet behind Krug. The five collaborators stayed together, twenty feet farther back. Sarif and the men glanced around in the darkness. A rumble could be felt through the ground from the bowels of the city, like a beast’s growl in a distant cavern.

 It didn’t help that Mr. Earl had joked about cat-sized spiders in the subway tunnels. Sarif had seen camel spiders in Yemen, and they were at least the size of kittens. He looked down to try to see his shoes. He kicked something, hoping it was just his laces.

 Mr. Tong silently stewed, furious about an offensive joke Earl had said about how he should be accustomed to giant radioactive monsters in his cities. Earl was too stupid to realize his insult to Tong –from South Korea– was wrong on about four levels.

 Mr. Dixon was edgy, either nervous with his surroundings, or also didn’t like anyone.

 In their silence, it was clear they were there for business and not as friends. They did scoff, however, when they discovered another thing in common: they had no family in New York. They did not care who got hurt, trampled, frightened, ill, or killed from the fallout of their plot.

 That was the only thing they had toasted with Hawkins’ absurd $15,000 sherry.

 With the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, lanterns had been lit within the subway station, offering a dancing glow ahead.

 Mr. Sarif tapped Earl’s shoulder, “To guarantee victory, we need more than just a ‘spectacle.’”

 “I concur,” Tong added. “We are risking too much for failure.”

 Earl adjusted his hat and spoke low. “The iridium came from *my* oilfields. There’s more in those canisters than they think. A bunch more than a ‘riot-maker.’”

 The men entered the yawning station. Lamps revealed baroque columns and stonework archways. The stale air smelled of mildew. With muffled rumbles overhead, some of the arches appeared to trickle sand. A brick wall displayed a faded poster of Uncle Sam pointing his finger for Korean War recruits. The stillness was like a tomb.

 Krug led them through a rusted door and down an unlit hall. A cage-like door opened to an ancient elevator that barely accommodated all the men. Once they were crushed inside like poultry, the lift groaned for over two minutes. It finally opened to an unlit flight of steps.

 Krug finally opened doors to a vast, empty retail space. Even with no power, ambient light revealed what the room used to be: the abandoned flagship site for the FAO Schwarz toy store.

 Before unfortunate financial difficulties, the iconic store had been a favorite for children and parents alike. The multi-level wonderland, with ten-foot Teddy bears and toy soldiers, had been like Santa’s workshop. Once featured in movies, it was now a vacant shell.

 The men looked up at a gloomy balcony to still envision Tom Hanks from *Big*, dancing on a twenty-foot keyboard. The *Home Alone* kid, lost again in another version of the store. And now the dream was deserted at the General Motors Building on 5th Avenue.

 Without pausing for any sentimentality, Krug led the men to a side delivery door. He unbolted the lock, and the men walked out into the icy New York night.

 In the alley behind the building, the seven shadows exited the once-happy place that had perished to oblivion. To homeless witnesses, the fleeing shapes looked like the ghosts of Christmas Past.

Chapter Thirty-Five – The Viper

Nurse Darcy hiked through snow flurries towards the employee parking lot after another twelve-hour shift. After completing her paperwork, saying her goodbyes and washing her Tupperware, it was more like a thirteen-hour shift –and then the hour commute each way. *Exhausted* was how she had started her day.

 At least her shifts were more interesting with her assignment to the FBI’s suspect that had been on the news. It wasn’t her place to judge, but after meeting Mr. Colbert’s wife and kids, Darcy highly doubted he was guilty of anything except having terrible luck. But no one would be asking for her opinion. It was her job to heal, and she felt blessed to do so.

 It was time to switch into mom mode. Dinner had already been solved, thanks to a nice sized pork loin she’d plopped in a crock pot that morning. She then huffed how she still had to go to Hobby Lobby to buy New Year’s hats*. Maybe I’ll call Chris–*

 “–Darcy Masterson..?” A female voice shouted with a slight Russian accent.

 Darcy was about to open her Camry when she heard the voice. She turned to see a tall brunette wearing dark nurse scrubs that appeared black in the dim light.

 “Darcy from Cherry Hill?” The dark nurse treaded closer. She had shadowy features with high cheek bones and wide, almond eyes. Though technically beautiful, she came off as unnerving. “Your daughter is Amanda?” She lifted a black vape pen to her mouth.

 “Yes…” Darcy frowned. She hated the e-cigarettes the younger people were smoking.

 The nurse stepped closer. With the vape pen in her mouth, she smiled with burgundy lips.

 Darcy tensed, trying to place her face. “Do…we know each other?”

 The nurse pulled the pen out of her mouth as if to speak. Like a snake, her hand struck forward, plunging the tip into Darcy’s neck. A direct hit into an artery. She pressed the other end like a syringe. Like a matador, the dark nurse spun to the side to avoid a spew of blood.

 Darcy instinctively touched her neck. Aside from a high-pitch gurgle, she didn’t make a sound. Her horrified eyes remained locked onto the nurse’s, begging *why?* Blood surged through her fingers and she fell to her knees. Darcy finally gazed up towards the heavens. She then dropped to the asphalt, face-first.

 It was over in nine seconds. The tetrodotoxin, derived from a puffer fish, caused a loss of motor functions and paralysis, while her excited heart pumped the blood out of her carotid artery. Between a Camry and a minivan in the large parking lot, no one saw a thing. A corpse lying in an expanding puddle of blood wouldn’t be uncovered for hours, especially if dusted by a fresh layer of snow. More than enough time.

 The dark nurse daintily crouched to not stain her scrubs. She carefully removed the ID security badge from the pocket of Darcy’s uniform.

Chapter Thirty-Six – Brittle Bones

From a phone room adjacent to the waiting lounge, Agent Del Rey watched Maria Colbert through a glass partition. She couldn’t hear her –and didn’t mean to spy– but was drawn to seeing Maria saying goodbye to her children.

 Standing behind the kids was a mid-twenties female, scrolling through her phone. Considering the girl’s features and large brown eyes, Del Rey didn’t need any special skills to deduce she was Maria’s younger sister. She had dark hair in a French braid, and long floral skirt and beads like she was on her way to Woodstock*.*

 Del Rey smiled pensively, witnessing the palpable love between Maria and her kids. The whole *mother’s bond* thing, she supposed. She felt a sudden warmth as she watched Maria lean over to give a bear hug to Jack. He dug his fingers into her sweater. Little Cassie fidgeted with her coat until it was her turn. She then clutched her mom like a Venus fly trap. The younger sister smiled at the kids, then resumed texting.

 Maria stood upright, decisive. The flower-child sister took the children by the hand and kissed Maria on the cheek. Maria lifted a finger as if she’d forgotten something, then handed the girl a cellphone. Gesturing with a finger, Maria delivered strict instructions of some sort. The girl smirked like she knew everything, and they turned to exit the room.

 Though the children were gone, Del Rey saw Maria stand in place for a few seconds. It was evident a lot was going through her head. Maria released a sigh and sat.

 *The kids will be fine,* Maria repeated to convince herself. She blotted her eyes with a napkin from her purse. Her sister Linda was sort of a dreamer, but she was an adult and watching the kids should be effortless as long as she had television and allowed some junk food. They’d be hidden away in a small suburb two hours away in case of –*God forbid*– any threat to the city.

 Maria looked at her watch, shocked it was almost midnight. Kyle was sound asleep, so she was conflicted: wait in the lobby or rest with Kyle? She wouldn’t be able to relax until she knew the kids had arrived in Philly.

 She looked up to see Agent Del Rey meekly enter the room –which was out of character because nothing about Del Rey could be described as meek. Del Rey pretended to be interested in the vending machine, and then walked in an awkward circle before sitting next to Maria.

 Maria grinned at Del Rey’s rare loss of words. So she started, “It never gets any easier… Letting them go.”

 Del Rey pursed her lips and nodded, wordless.

 “That was my sister, Linda, taking them to Philly for a few days.” Maria shook her head with closed eyes, “She’s twenty-four, describes herself as a ‘professional music fan...’ She’s sweet, but never the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree –if we’re keeping this holiday theme going.”

 Del Rey cracked a half-smile. “You’re privileged to have relatives they can visit.”

 Maria scoffed, “I don’t expect you to understand. I don’t want them to leave my *sight* after what we’ve been through.” She swooshed her hand, “You have to be a parent to get it.”

 Del Rey gnashed her teeth at her comments, but did not reply.

 Yet Maria continued, “As a mom, you want to shield your kids 24-7. But you know you can’t.” She looked at Del Rey, “For example, Jack’s broken *two* bones in nine months. His wrist, and then a collar bone.” She shrugged, “I can’t put him in a bubble. He’s just wild.”

 Del Rey blinked, processing the information. “Was your son ever prescribed inhaled steroids?”

 Maria scowled at the arbitrary question. “Yeah… He was on the nebulizer for asthma almost every day. So what?”

 “Corticosteroids,” Del Rey replied, “especially steroids for reactive airway issues, can cause brittle bones and osteoporosis in children.”

 Maria scrunched her face like she’d swallowed vinegar, “How do you know all this? You also a doctor now?”

 Del Rey looked into Maria’s eyes, “My son Richie has had asthma for ten years. He broke his arm in two places riding a hover board last year.”

 Maria’s jaw fell open. She inhaled, stammering for words, “I…I am so sorry.” She turned her body towards Del Rey. “I just *assumed* you didn’t have kids. I... just thought–”

 “–Technically my ex-husband has my son,” Del Rey interrupted to save Maria further unease. “He has full custody, because of my job.”

 “What do you mean?”

 “My career in the Bureau,” Del Rey replied. “I’ve been shot at by suspects. I’ve received threats from defendants –and their families. Late, unpredictable hours…. My ex argued that he could provide a safer, more stable environment for our son.” She sniffed. “The judge agreed.”

 Maria focused into Del Rey’s eyes without blinking. “I am *so* sorry Agent–”

 “–Anthea,” she interjected. “I’m just Anthea right now –and thank you.” Del Rey’s face softened. “The one agreement is I get Richie for Christmas every year.”

 Like a sucker punch, Maria’s eyes welled, “It’s *our* fault you missed it this year! This whole terror nonsense…” She felt dreadful even though Kyle’s predicament wasn’t their fault either.

 “Not at all,” Del Rey flashed a rare smile. “*My* Christmas. As a Ukrainian Orthodox it’s January 7th.” She paused and her smile faded, “I just pray this is all over by then.”

 “Wow…” Maria huffed with a sense of relief. “In eight days, I pray that too.”

 Del Rey’s posture stiffened, back to her old self. “Which is why it’s *imperative* we speak with Kyle. Our entire squad needs his insight. He knows *something*.”

 Maria paused, studied her, and then shook her head. “Nope. He doesn’t want to talk yet.” The attorney side of her brain crept in. “He was never arrested, isn’t in custody, and has no duty to talk to anyone. I would demand some sort of immunity, except he doesn’t know anything.”

 “*Please* Maria,” Del Rey implored. “He could have insight he doesn’t realize.”

 Maria shrugged with her hands. “Even if he did, he’s still not right in the head. Some of it’s crazy talk.”

 “Like what?”

 Maria sighed, exhausted with the topic. “When he sleeps, he mumbles, ‘*New Year’s plans*…’ He knows we can’t make any New Year’s plans –we’re stuck in here!”

 Del Rey blinked as if mulling the words. “What else has he said?”

 “You can’t take him serious. He also mumbled Elvis and Martin Luther King,” Maria chuckled, “Probably fell asleep in front of the History Channel.” She flashed a wry smile, “Get this: he said he analyzed the whole bomb situation with the baby Jesus’s three Wise Men.”

 The dark nurse exited the employee elevator. Knowing the hospital’s schematics, she knew Kyle Colbert’s room would be the second to the right –easy access to return to the elevator. The ease of the night had been pathetic.

 She could neutralize the target and exit the building before her 12:15 check-in call.

Chapter Thirty-Seven – The Snake and the Mongoose

The dark nurse –or *Viper* as she was called – pushed an empty wheelchair as if heading to or from a patient. Wheelchairs were plentiful in the halls since they were required for all departing patients. The employee elevator she’d used reminded her of hotel service elevators used for room service. At the late hour, the elevator was unused, and there were no guards at the doors.

 A security consultant would probably scold the hospital for their sloppy security. The dead nurse’s badge had been only needed to open some electronic doors. Viper walked quickly, with purpose. She even employed a tactic used by celebrities to snub paparazzi by pretending to be on a phone call to appear even more unapproachable. On the upper floors, the staff was minimal after midnight, and the halls were quiet for sleeping patients.

 Unlike the days of her *Spetsnaz* training, nurses no longer wore the cliché white uniforms or silly hats pinned to their hair. Modern hospitals allowed their staff to wear surgical scrubs, available at any uniform shop. In her form-fitting scrubs, Viper was just another nurse out of 7,000 faceless employees, hustling to assist a patient.

 She scanned the hall to see one man in a suit –presumably FBI– seated thirty yards away by the guest elevators, reading a book. Halfway down the hall, one female was seated at the nurse’s station. As calculated, Colbert’s room was twenty feet away, unguarded. It had been easy to obtain his supposedly “classified” room number. Viper had simply called Maria Colbert’s sister, claiming to be a coworker trying to send flowers. Maria’s sister had cheerfully replied, “Room 514, they’ll love them. Peace out*.*”

 Viper had correctly predicted there’d be no guards at Colbert’s door. He was never arrested, so he wasn’t any sort of flight risk. His door would remain unlocked for safety reasons. He’d be an open target like a crippled field mouse with its belly exposed.

 Kyle slept alone, reclined in bed in his dimmed room. Not a sound, except the monitors’ beeps and dings softly lulling along.

 The dark nurse entered the room. She checked left to right, and then gently closed the door behind her. Seeing nothing but her prey sleeping five feet away, her plum lips nearly quivered with a chuckle at the simplicity of the evening.

 Viper lifted a syringe from her pocket. No messy blades or noisy weapons required. She studied the fluid in the needle, inches from her smoky eyes. She turned to an IV pole holding a drip bag. She ran a manicured nail along the tube leading to the catheter imbedded in Kyle’s arm.

 Even with her training to ignore disruptions and plan for all contingencies, Viper flinched at the rattle of the doorknob. She turned to lock eyes with Colbert’s wife, entering the room.

 Maria was shocked to see a different nurse standing over Kyle. Nurse Darcy had promised it’d only be her. This nurse was tall and toned like a fitness trainer, with a high, black ponytail.

 “Where’s Nurse Darcy?” Maria’s voice severed the silence.

 Like a mannequin, the nurse scarcely moved. With a pucker of her lips she replied, “Her shift is over for the day.” She had a slight Russian accent. “I am for evenings.”

 Maria paused to assess. She saw the nurse tapping a syringe. “I’m Maria Colbert. What’s your name?” She stepped closer, hoping to move between the nurse and her husband.

 The nurse feigned a tight smile, “I am *Polina*. I need to complete my duties.”

 “Is that right?” Maria faced the nurse. “What exactly are those duties?”

 The nurse appeared displeased. “I am here to administer–”

 “–Yeah,” Maria interrupted, “show me what you’re administering.” She stepped closer, curious. As she leaned in, she placed a hand on Kyle’s food tray on a side table.

 Competing toe-to-toe, the nurse narrowed her eyes, “I am giving Mr. Colbert 250 milligrams of cephalexin to avoid infection. It will also help him sleep–”

 “–Looks like he’s sleeping pretty damn good.” Maria flashed an anxious smile, “–But did you account for his severe penicillin allergy?”

 The nurse halted. She blinked to recalibrate. “Of course. We are aware of his allerg–”

 Maria swung the food tray with all her strength, striking the nurse’s voice box. The nurse expelled a loud retch, biting her tongue. Everyone by now knew Kyle had no allergies.

 The nurse hacked, clutching her neck. With the sudden blow, she’d dropped the syringe. Maria struck her again with the tray, to the side of her face and then over her head.

 Kyle’s eyes sprung open at the uproar. He gasped and sat up, disheveled. His dismayed eyes attempted to comprehend the scene.

 With blood-stained teeth, the nurse seethed. She spun to grasp the steel IV pole. She swung it like a golf club, hitting Maria’s ribs. In doing so, the catheter ripped out from Kyle’s arm.

 Kyle shouted as blood spurted from the hole in his arm. He saw Maria on the floor, contorting in pain and holding her side. Both ladies looked at the syringe on the floor between them. When the nurse dove for it, Maria swung her leg, kicking the syringe. The nurse crashed and slid on the polished floor, and the needle spun under a chair.

 Kyle was too weary to move from the bed. He frantically looked for anything useful. He grabbed a metal bedpan and tossed it to Maria. She caught it like a relay and swung it down hard over the nurse’s head. The clang against her skull sounded like a gong. She hit her again, and the nurse threw a punch into Maria’s kidneys.

 Maria cried out in pain. Before the nurse could punch again, a shout roared from the door.

 “–*FBI! Don’t move!*” Del Rey bellowed, aiming her Glock in a ready stance.

 Kyle froze with his mouth open. He appeared overwhelmed with the blur of activity. He darted his head to see his wife and a nurse wrestling on the floor, and an agent aiming a weapon.

 Maria used the pause to kick against the wall and slide towards the door. The nurse was now exposed, alone in the corner of the room.

 “Do *not* move!” Del Rey readied her aim, “Hands up!”

 The infuriated nurse showed her teeth –and then lunged for the syringe under the chair. Before Del Rey could react, the nurse held the needle to her own neck.

 “Don’t do it!” Del Rey blinked, perplexed. “We just have questions! Who sent you here?”

 As if there was no option for a failed assignment, the nurse gave a wicked grin and plunged the needle’s contents into her neck.

 A large orderly that looked like a bouncer and two nurses arrived at the door. They peered into the room to see a woman in scrubs lying on the floor. Del Rey nodded and they rushed in to examine the woman. The orderly grabbed a defibrillator from the wall.

 Maria dashed to Kyle’s bed. After a tight embrace, they watched the experts, hoping for any explanation. All Kyle knew was he’d been awakened to see his wife fighting a nurse. There were blood drops across the floor, and now the nurse appeared dead.

 “She was trying to kill you,” Maria whispered with a tremor in her voice.

 Kyle’s breathing became heavier. He wasn’t shocked, considering an entire community had tried to slaughter him. *But weren’t we supposed to be safe in here?* Kyle’s mind spun.

 Del Rey stood over the scene, shouting into her radio. Kyle heard a garbled response that a “*nurse had been found murdered in the parking lot...”* He and Maria held each other tighter.

 On the floor, the nurses exposed the top of the woman’s chest. They quickly attached defibrillator pads. The older nurse shouted, “Stand clear!” and pressed a button. The body jolted. The nurse checked a monitor and shouted again, “Stand clear!” repeating the process.

 Maria and Kyle watched, riveted. After an attempt at CPR, a nurse shook her head solemnly.

 Kyle had a clear view of the lifeless woman. Her eyes were still open, but the whites were blood red. There was a sinister smile frozen on her dark lips.

 The younger nurse declared, “Time of death, 12:27 p.m.” The room went silent.

 Kyle’s brain was absorbing the reality. A dead woman six feet away –a woman sent to murder him. Blood smears across the floor. His wife crying in pain.

 Maria looked him, trembling. “What if the kids had been here?”

 With his pulse escalating, Kyle looked up at Del Rey. He stammered, “I…I’m ready to talk.”

PART SEVEN

“Ring Out the False, Ring in the True”

Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1850

Chapter Thirty-Eight – Commencing Countdown

Though dawn was creeping in with long shadows, the lights of Times Square still managed to shimmer within its dark canyons.

 Also approaching were the crowds. On the morning of December 31st, visitors were already staking-out their precious few feet of real estate to witness the New Year’s Eve festivities.

 The early birds were either hardened locals or savvy tourists who’d studied online advice. The “bow tie” crossing of Times Square –Broadway between 42nd and 47th Street– was fully closed to traffic. NYPD officers were everywhere to direct visitors to separate viewing sections. As one section filled up, the revelers were directed to the next viewing “pen.” And there they had to wait like cattle, all day, if they wanted to keep their spots.

 And the rumors were true: there were no public bathrooms available for the event. People were warned to eliminate everything in their bodies before arriving. This spawned the off-putting tales of people wearing adult diapers so they wouldn’t lose their prized viewing sites. Conversely, there were no licensed food vendors, so smart visitors brought snacks or energy bars, or would risk losing their place to elbow their way into some mobbed restaurant.

 Stages and bleachers had been erected on the center island between Broadway and 45th to showcase the many performers scheduled to start at 8:00 p.m. The countdown stages faced the New Year’s ball, perched atop One Times Square, glimmering down on the happy hordes.

 One subtle addition was an increased presence of uniformed officers, as ordered by Commissioner Vassar with the city’s Emergency Management Office. The officers allowed no backpacks at the entryways, and used wands for smaller bags.

 Also new were handheld radiation detectors distributed to the officers. At roll call that morning, the cops had been given the phone-size devices, with a vague explanation how they were provided with an “abundance of caution in light of the recent unsubstantiated threats.”

 The officers were ordered to keep their eyes open for anything out of the ordinary. Piece o’ cake, with over a million overtired, hungry, passionate, possibly inebriated guests.

 “…That’s a record number of people expected this year, Laney!” announced the golden-haired newscaster. He looked like a Ken doll had miraculously come to life, and he seemed too excited for the early hour. “The temperature’s expected to dip into the thirties –maybe a few flurries– but an all-around *splendiferous* evening!”

 In his crushed velvet robe, Mr. Hawkins watched the morning news on a flat-panel television that had a gold frame installed to make it look like a portrait. Within his large Thorne Woode estate, his “parlor” looked more like a room in Disney’s *Haunted Mansion,* with towering bookshelves and passé antiques such as knights of armor propped in the corners like guards.

 The news returned to Laney in the studio. “*Brrrr…*” she mimicked. “Those folks sure will be cold.” Laney looked she like was once pretty, but enhancements made her look like a shocked Batman villain. “It’s well worth it to get the *best* view of our Times Square Ball!”

 “Get a good view little lambs…” Hawkins jeered under his breath. He took a sip of his Earl Grey from a dainty nineteenth-century teacup. He studied the scenes of Times Square’s layout. He marveled how perfectly the ball was perched above so many people crushed into such a small area. He exhaled, “One million birds with one stone.”

 With the echo of approaching footsteps from the grand foyer, Hawkins changed the channel. He impatiently clicked until an image seized his attention. It was the blue logo of his own company, Harding-Foxtel. “What have we here..?” He leaned forward to observe.

 The channel had landed on “CNN Money.” A blonde in a black suit with trendy glasses sat with the Harding emblem at her side. Hawkins turned up the volume.

 “…On the eve of the historic merger between Harding-Foxtel and the Bayonet Group,” the anchor frowned to show urgency, “shares for both firms have *plummeted.”*

Hawkins’ brows jumped, and then fell back to a scowl. Onscreen, the logo changed to a large red arrow pointing down.

 The newscaster continued, “Since both firms are primarily defense suppliers, experts blame their poor performance on our nation’s record stretch of peace in the past two years…”

 Hawkins scowled at his pocket watch. “Give it another seventeen hours...”

 Krug clomped into the room. Hawkins noticed he seemed grimmer than his usual self.

 “Good morning Mr. Krug,” Hawkins smiled. “I presume you are here to report good news?”

 Krug clenched his jaw and removed his fedora. He grumbled in a heavy accent, “*Polina* has not check-in since hospital.”

 Hawkins darted his eyes to the left and right, “Do you find this behavior…unusual from your…hired minx from Minsk?”

 “*Da*,” Krug replied. “Viper knows *pro-ce-dures*. She has never *de-vi-at-ed*,” Krug enunciated his words. “She also came from *Spetsnaz GRU*. The top *in-tell-i-gence* training from the motherland. She has never failed.”

 Hawkins’ face pruned to ponder the ramifications. He finally replied, “*Viper*…” He took another sip of tea. “Why does she use that name?”

 Krug glowered as if this was not their priority. “Viper, like the snake. And she uses vape pen, so she is a *vaper.* It is a play on words.”

 “Ah, clever.” Hawkins rocked his jaw. “She was heavily vetted by the collaborators. Her bid for the job was persuasive. Perhaps she is staying off the grid to evade detection.” He sighed, “Let us give her a few more hours to check in.”

 “Then what?” Krug grunted with a shrug.

 “Then we have a go with our contingency plan. Possessing Colbert’s children should certainly draw him out.” His craggy face smiled, “After all, the holidays are all about the children.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine – Signed, Sealed, Delivering

Though the busy FBI Op Center was technically a 24-hour operation, it was just getting pumped-up for the day. Goldman had ordered coffee, bagels, cream cheese and Christmas tree donuts that were half-price in the Bureau cafeteria. After all, it was still the holidays.

 Goldman had just arrived. He had that look when people still have damp hair from a shower. His red power tie hadn’t been tied yet, hanging loose around his neck. As he blew into a fresh cup of coffee, Dr. Weisman approached with maniacal eyes.

 “Yes, Irving..?” Goldman blinked with impatience, “I was already briefed about last night. I’m trying to enjoy one goddamn cup of coffee.”

 Weisman opened his mouth, but then closed it to wave a report in his hands.

 After one sip, Goldman jolted his hands in the air, “*Okay!* What landmark discovery has already happened before eight a.m.?”

 “Toxicology results from the nurse imposter,” Weisman replied rapidly. “It was *Tetrodotoxin*, an extremely potent neurotoxin. The same strain and dosage found in the dead nurse’s body in the parking lot. She’d also had her carotid artery severed.”

 Goldman lowered his cup. He looked into it as if it didn’t taste as good anymore.

 “The needle *was* meant for Colbert.” Weisman looked at the report, “Dr. Lee states it would’ve stopped his heart and all organs within seconds.” He looked at Goldman, “It *was* an assassination attempt against Mr. Colbert.”

 “They *still* want him dead…” Goldman groaned rhetorically. He wiped his face as if already sweating. He turned to see Davis and Jenkins looming close. “Yes, you can approach,” he shouted with sarcasm. “God knows my day’s already started.”

 “Is there an ID on the killer yet?” Weisman asked.

 “No sir,” Davis replied. “Her prints match nothing on our domestic database. We’re waiting for CIA and Interpol.” He looked at Goldman. “Maria Colbert said she had a Russian accent.”

 Goldman flailed his arms, “Why is it always Russians? It’s like an old *James Bond!*”

 “She was just a hired hand,” Jenkins offered. Seeing his boss stewing, he shifted gears. “The *good* news is, Colbert has agreed to talk. Our priority is still to locate any weapon.”

 “Right…” Goldman gritted his teeth. “How fast can we can we link with Skype or *whatever-the-hell* so we can talk to him?”

 Jenkins swallowed to break the news, “Mr. Colbert is now attorney represented, so–”

 “–By who?” Goldman winced, “For what?”

 “By *Mrs.* Colbert,” Jenkins replied. “They’re requesting immunity agreements, and she’s a…” He gave a nervous chuckle, “Pretty fierce negotiator.”

 Seven hours earlier, when Kyle had decided to talk, Maria couldn’t have agreed more. Something needed to happen to move the case forward. They could not handle any more threats to anyone.

 In Kyle’s hospital room, Maria had turned to Agent Del Rey and asked, “Can you please leave us alone? I need to speak with my client before any discussions.”

 Before a stunned Del Rey could reply, Kyle added, “And can you arrange a new room –with better security?” He motioned to bloody smears, scuff marks and the destroyed IV pole.

 For the first time in days, Kyle’s eyes were crystal clear when he looked at his wife. “I have the pieces to my theory, and when you hear it, it’ll sound like some…fevered delusion.”

 Maria paused before replying. “How will I know it’s not?”

 “Chase Zahir sent me proof.” Kyle lifted one of the burner phones. “No one knows. It’s hidden away, filed in cloud storage.” He pointed to Maria’s laptop on a table. “With just a little research, I can confirm a few other pieces.” He looked at Maria, “Then I’ll need your expertise.”

 “*My* expertise?” Maria reacted, a hand to her chest.

 “Your work with the historical society.”

 Maria did an exaggerated blink as in *huh?* “Is this the delusion part?”

 When Kyle meticulously described his theory, Maria experienced a spectrum of emotions. First it was disbelief. Then curiosity, and then acceptance. But then came anxiety and fear.

 “We’ll need to demand…witness immunity,” Maria stammered, realizing their time frame.

 “Immunity?” Kyle frowned, “I didn’t do anything.”

 “But your theory is so specific, if *any* part of it’s true, they will presume you were involved.”

 “Witness immunity?” Goldman barked. “Do they know how long that can take?”

 Agent Harmon read from her notes. “Maria is demanding transactional immunity, or ‘blanket’ immunity, protecting Kyle from any future prosecution for crimes related to his testimony.”

 Jenkins spoke up, “Have you ever worked with attorney Donald Bronstein? We just had a case with him in Miami. He was able to write up a fast deal on that big Russian crime ring.”

 Goldman snapped his fingers to recall, “Is he a tall bald guy, wears nice suits? And he tells everyone he went to high school with Matt Dillon?”

 “That’s the guy.” Jenkins looked at the others, “Bronstein is a U.S. Attorney for the Southern District. He’s sort of an expert with drafting unique agreements in a hurry. He has a relationship with the A.G., who has fast-tracked his agreements.

 “Then *get* him on the horn!” Goldman retorted with a *go-get-em’* roll of his arm.

 It took until nearly 10:00 a.m. to get all the agreements properly executed. Considering the time crunch, the immunity hadn’t been that big of a hurdle. It was agreed by all that Kyle Colbert wasn’t guilty of anything. He wasn’t a sleeper terrorist with any “implanted trigger.” They then reviewed the fatalities described in the Twin Creeks Sheriff’s report.

 Bullets found in a dumpster area indicated the dead Santa had fired multiple shots at Kyle. The four dead gangbangers with Santa masks had been identified as members of a violent gang wanted for a string of drug crimes. The gang had even documented their mission to massacre Kyle Colbert on social media.

 The two electrical workers with chainsaws had been newly-hired ex-cons who’d bragged to their girlfriends about finding Kyle so they could retire. The driver of a truck that had crashed while chasing Kyle survived, confessing it was his duty to slay Kyle for America.

 Kyle Colbert hadn’t done anything wrong, and immunity was extended for his assistance.

 Goldman needed the same time to learn how to use the teleconferencing equipment. He finally looked up at the seventy-inch monitor. Onscreen was a clear image of Kyle Colbert seated in his hospital room. Beside him was Maria, with Agent Del Rey seated on the other side. All three were facing the camera, waiting to begin.

 “Okay, I see you –can you hear me?” Goldman turned to Jenkins, “Is this thing on mute?”

 “We can see you,” Del Rey replied. “Try hitting the little microphone thingy.”

 In Kyle’s new hospital room –two floors down on a secured wing– he was dressed in scrub pants and a t-shirt. Maria helped him shave and brush his hair. He looked a good five-percent better. Maria had her blouse and jeans from before, and Del Rey in her usual svelte black suit.

 Kyle sighed, impatient. Trying to talk Goldman through operating the video meeting was like explaining how to program a DVR over the phone to his mom.

 All three faced Maria’s open laptop. The small camera captured them perfectly. On its screen, they saw Goldman. He was now looking towards the camera, his team standing behind him like a mesmerized audience. “Del Rey, if you can hear me, we’re good to go.”

 Without wasting a second for pleasantries, Del Rey began, “With Witness Immunity under Title 18 –drafted by Mrs. Colbert and attorney Donald Bronstein for the DOJ– Mr. Colbert will be offering us his insight.” She turned to Maria. “Mrs. Maria Colbert is present as Mr. Colbert’s attorney, and she will be offering her specialized knowledge of the city.”

 “*Knowledge of the city..*?” Goldman mocked with a warped grin. “Aren’t you a lawyer who threatens to sue us every fifteen minutes?”

 Maria’s eyes blazed, “I am a city attorney who’s on the board of the New York Historical Society. Believe me, I have *multiple* grounds to file suit, including you almost killing my husband with a *grizzly bear* dart. And your ongoing failure to properly guard him, resulting in the latest assassination attempt, leaving two *more* people dead.”

 Goldman didn’t speak. Commissioner Vassar knew to shut up.

 Maria leered into the camera, “But we’d rather help you save a million lives in the next fourteen hours.” This silenced both rooms.

 Any vigor drained from Goldman’s voice. “Fourteen hours..?”

 “That’s how long we have,” Kyle finally spoke. “I know the bomb was hidden on Thanksgiving Day.”

 “How could you have that information?” Goldman exclaimed. “That’s classified.”

 “You *do* know I work in counterintelligence, right?” Kyle tilted his head with sarcasm. “Were you able to figure out that much?”

 Del Rey huffed, losing patience. She shouted at Kyle, “Just tell him what you told me!”

Chapter Forty – The Most Interesting Building in the World

Kyle looked at the camera. When he saw he had their full attention, he spoke, “I have reason to believe a radiological bomb is hidden in Time Square. My theory is it’s on the New Year’s ball.”

 After an awkward pause, there were hecklings of disbelief throughout the team.

 Vassar bellowed in his New Jersey accent, “Our cops have been sweeping the entire area with detectors for days. Nothing.”

 “But that’s on the ground, not on *top* of a building,” petit Agent Liana insisted.

 Goldman waved his hands for everyone to settle down. “How could anyone get a weapon to the *top* of a skyscraper? There’s too many people. Too many witnesses.”

 As everyone argued, Kyle’s voice shouted, “That’s why Maria’s here.” He paused to reclaim the spotlight. “Do any of you know why the address ‘One Times Square’ is so unique?”

 Maria typed a few keys. “I’m uploaded images.”

 The screen changed to show a tall, narrow building on a routine Times Square day.

 “*One Times Square* is the building that holds the Times Square Ball,” Maria narrated. In the image, the ball was visible on top of the building. “But that’s not what makes it the most interesting building in New York.”

 The screen changed to historic schematics of the building. “It’s a twenty-four-story tower on the most famous intersection in the world.” She paused, “But it’s hollow. A phantom building.”

 Goldman and his team exchanged puzzled glances.

 “Since 1995, the tower has been empty. It generates income solely from advertising. Its exterior is shrouded with electronic billboards seen by hundreds of millions of people. Last year that empty building earned over $23 million in revenue.”

 Maria showed images of the iconic building covered in flashing, animated signs. Ads from Toshiba to Dunkin Donuts and Anheuser-Busch.

 The agents intently watched, but shrugged at the implication.

 “There’s only a Walgreens and then twenty-three floors of vacant halls. No offices or people coming or going. The most exclusive real estate in America, with almost no occupants.” The image showed the roof of the building. “On top, a dormant ball that has a job one night a year.”

 “Our point,” Kyle added, “is it’s not exactly Fort Knox. With no tenants they *might* have one security guard for those empty halls –and certainly ignored even more on Thanksgiving.”

 The room was silent, the agents processing the possibility.

 Goldman shrugged at Vassar, “That’s not enough to cancel goddamn New Year’s –is it Tony?”

 Vassar roared, “Can you even imagine the chaos of a million pissed New Yorkers?”

 Bradley Snyder’s unruffled voice rang out from the group, “No one’s even tested the ball.” Everyone turned to Snyder, seated with his legs casually crossed.

 “This is all fascinating conjecture,” Snyder shrugged. “But the whole theory is moot if the ball tests negative.” He did a slow blink towards Vassar. “Without causing any alarm, let’s send undercovers with detectors. We’ll have our answer in an hour.” He sipped his coffee.

 Silence. The entire room gazed in thought.

 The closest Vassar’s SUV could get to Times Square was a Hilton two blocks south. He arrived with two volunteers from Snyder’s Nuclear Detection Office. The men wore basic blue coveralls with “NYC Buildings Dept.” emblazoned on the back.

 They quickly hiked the two blocks, weaving in and out of the thickening crowd. Vassar kept lifting his city badge, though no one asked for it.

 They approached One Times Square on 43rd and Broadway. Vassar looked up at the tower with a new sense of wonder. To the rear of the Walgreens, they located a service door. Vassar forcefully knocked and rang its bell. The DNDO agents remained quiet in their aviator shades.

 The door finally opened. A young black security guard in a uniform casually said, “If you’re with *the ball*, they won’t be here ‘til noon.”

 Vassar knew he was talking about the one office on the top floor. It was used by Countdown Entertainment, the company that operated the ball annually. A short-term but significant job, requiring a very small staff.

 “I’m City Commissioner Vassar, NYC.” He lifted a badge, “This is an unscheduled code enforcement inspection.”

 The guard let the men inside. “Sorry guys. I’m new here and we don’t get a lot of company.” He led them towards an elevator. “The previous guy had a panic attack and quit.”

 The three men studied their surroundings. The area was indeed vacant and dark, a stark contrast to every other square foot of Times Square.

 Vassar thought it was unnerving. He couldn’t comprehend an abandoned skyscraper. It was like the aftermath of some outbreak. Dingy unpainted walls. Faded graffiti and dust-covered furniture in a corner. Andy Williams’ vintage “It’s The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” resonated through the walls from some unseen neighbor.

 “You can all go up,” the guard said as he pressed an elevator button. “I gotta’ stay here.”

 The men didn’t reply as they stepped into the smudged elevator. When the door closed, they looked up at a flickering fluorescent light. It was like the old *Tower of Terror* ride at Disney. Vassar repeatedly tapped a button for the top floor, hoping it would make it.

 The doors opened to an outside floor. Wind lashed at their faces that seemed twenty degrees colder. The three stepped out, darting their heads in all directions. There were no terrorists camped out. The men climbed a flight of steel stairs to the uppermost level.

 On the observation deck, they squinted up to behold the seventy-seven foot steel flagpole. And there it was: at its base was the twelve-foot diameter orb. *The* iconic Times Square Ball.

 The men halted, awestruck by the ball they’d seen on TV every year since they could recall. They then leaped into action, knowing why they were there.

 The men wore no protective gear or masks for two reasons. One: the goal was to avoid creating any panic or suspicion. Two: Goldman and his team seemed confident that Mr. Colbert’s theory was preposterous. Just paranoid delusions from a medicated, feverish man.

 “Do your business,” Vassar shouted in the wind. “I’ll be over here.” He walked to a railing to look down. 350 feet below, arriving crowds were filling any visible ground. The masses crossed streets and congregated like swirling schools of fish. And getting thicker every minute.

 Antony Vassar was a Christmas-and-Easter church goer. But he reached for his crucifix on a chain under his tie. He prayed the threat was just an unsupported rumor or hoax. Especially in *his* city, where his wife and kids and millions others enjoyed their lives.

 The two DNDO agents unpacked gear from a backpack, including Geiger-tube radiation detectors.

 Greg Buckley was a nine-year Nuclear Detection Office expert. People loved how he always smiled. He was a Buddy Holly lookalike who’d never had a bad day, and was always full of optimism. Buckley had retired from the Navy as a commissioned officer after ten years in counterterrorism. He’d worked countless full-scale drills simulating various nuclear threats –but nothing like testing the Times Square Ball.

 Buckley and his partner Beahan split to approach the ball from two sides. They had orders to work fast and *not* touch the ball whatsoever. Their detectors would emit an alarm with even the most infinitesimal trace of radiation. They planned to scan their sections slowly, back and forth, over the ball’s triangular panels. Just a quick scan so they could get back to HQ.

 Vassar anxiously fidgeted with his pinky ring, alternating between watching he men and the crowds below. He looked at his watch, checked his cell, and looked again at the crowds.

 His head snapped towards an earsplitting alarm –it was coming from the men. Before he could ask what was happening, he saw Buckley stand and drop his deafening detector.

 Buckley’s eternal smile was gone. He turned to Vassar with absolute terror in his eyes.

Chapter Forty-One – Prepare the Bat-Signal

For the first time, Vince Goldman’s red face was replaced with a pale expression. He uttered simply, “Everything’s changed. This is real.” He realized the room of eyes focused on him.

 Because of the severity of the threat, the FBI had detailed procedures in place. They were the lead agency charged with responding to terrorist threats involving nuclear materials. Now, with a confirmed threat, the FBI would coordinate with other agencies, including Homeland Security, to locate and neutralize the threat. Already participating was Bradley Snyder with the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office.

 During periods of any heightened alert, Homeland needed to be aware of any investigative activities and nuclear searches. They would provide the results to senior officials, including the White House through its chain of command. It was no longer a local venture.

 A “specific threat response” was defined as a credible threat with specific information such as city or location targeted for a radiological weapon. For a specific threat of a time-sensitive nature –such as a New Year’s countdown just hours away– the FBI was to immediately coordinate a plan to facilitate the fastest possible response.

 The question was, where and how do you begin, with a literal clock ticking?

 Goldman’s team had just received the results from the scan. Bradley Snyder started cool as he read the report to the team.

 “In layman’s terms, the readings from the ball are ‘off the chart.’” Snyder looked like he was dressed for a party in a tux jacket and an open collar shirt, as if he’d assumed the bomb would be invalidated well before any festivities.

 “We don’t need layman’s terms,” Goldman replied. “We’re grownups.”

 Snyder gave a slow blink. “Using the detectors, we identified readings for *Iridium 192* in a catastrophic quantity. We then used vapor detectors to search for explosive materials.”

 For the first time, Snyder’s hands imperceptibly trembled as he held the report. “We identified enough C-4 to destroy the top half of the building.” He looked up to see no one blinking. “Combined with the Iridium, we estimate a fallout of 900 mR/hr, which stands for *millirem per hour*…” His voice trailed when he saw his audience waiting for the bottom line.

 Snyder cleared his throat, “Radiation that high can only be reached in a major nuclear accident, the detonation of a nuclear weapon, or a nuclear terrorist attack.”

 The room was as silent as a cemetery.

 Dr. Weisman stood to relieve Snyder of any further distress. “We predict a public exposure of 400R*;* R is a measurement known as *rad*.” Weisman bit his lower lip, “Fifty percent of the people exposed will die within one to three weeks. Those who don't die, will become violently ill –might even feel better in a few days– and then will sicken and die within a month.”

 With a vacant gaze, Goldman stated what everyone was envisioning, “The radiation will drift down, like snow. Above *one* *million* people who are smiling up at it...”

 The team exchanged ominous glances, unsure where to begin.

 Goldman stepped to his railing. He inhaled and looked out at his team with his head high. He appeared as if his disposition had clicked from high-strung, sarcastic hard-ass to a confident ship’s captain.

 “This is a confirmed specific threat. No longer a local job to investigate some…conjecture.” Goldman continued, pensive, “We’ll deputize a few NYPD to assist. With that many loose lips, we’ll need to advise the mayor and governor.” He took a breath, “Our Director has been advised, and the White House will be informed.”

 “But how fast can anyone get here?” Davis exclaimed with alarm, “We’re just hours away–”

 “–Shouldn’t we consult the Attorney General?” Harmon interrupted. “With possible civil disorder, shouldn’t we have armed forces?”

 “Armed soldiers out there?” Vassar bolted upright. “The stampede alone will kill thousands!”

 “Then how do we evacuate a million buzzed party-goers?” Goldman shouted.

 This caused the room to debate among themselves. Local action now, or wait for superiors?

 A voice rang out over the speakers, “Someone is still watching…”

 Everyone paused to see whose voice it was. It was Kyle Colbert, on the big screen.

 Kyle continued, clear, “They didn’t hide the bomb and run. They’re watching.” He paused for gravity. “If you send troops or ‘call off’ New Year’s, they’ll just pull the trigger now.”

 The entire room seemed to turn back to Goldman.

 “Are you suggesting we just let the clock tick ‘til Ryan Seacrest says so?” Goldman mocked.

 “Sort of,” Kyle gave a half-shrug. “It’s too risky to disarm. There’s not enough time, and the bad guys can just activate it. If they see an evacuation, they’ll just pull the trigger. If you send a bomb squad and they fail, either scenario just killed a million people.”

 In Kyle’s hospital room, the critical focus seemed to stimulate him. He sat up, reacting rapidly with his thoughts.

 Maria spoke before Goldman could reply, “With any risk management, we have to *remove* the risk. The risk is the ball. It needs to be moved *away* from the people.”

 “Move an atomic bomb from the top of a building?” Onscreen, Goldman was shaking his head with a smirk. “Like *Batman*? Hook it with a cable tied to the Bat-copter and fly it over the bay?”

 Del Rey covered her mouth to hide an untimely chuckle.

 “Batman would be ideal, but no,” Maria replied. “The exact opposite. At midnight everyone expects the ball to go down. Just not how *far* down.”

 Goldman now had both fists on a desk, livid with confusion. “What. The. Fuc–”

 “–I’m uploading plans now,” Maria interrupted. “And this will require an open mind.”

Chapter Forty-Two – How Low Can One Go?

Maria started by reciting the tradition everyone knew, “The ball remains on top of the building year-round. EveryNew Year’s Eve, the ball is raised to the top of the flagpole at 6:00 p.m. At 11:59, the ball slowly comes down with the countdown.”

 Everyone in the command center nodded. They watched the screens change to historic subway blueprints.

 “From my work with the Historical Society,” Maria explained, “we researched an abandoned subway line under Broadway.” Onscreen, the sepia maps looked a hundred years old. “The *Longacre Square* station, built in 1904, was decommissioned in the early fifties. The city’s current subway system was constructed two blocks west.”

 Everyone gazed up with astute frowns to study the diagrams.

 “They planned an extension to run from Central Park to Times Square, directly under…” Maria paused as if awaiting a drumroll, “Broadway and 43rd Street.” The screens now showed Maria. “For those of you following along, that’s right beside One Times Square.”

 Every eye in the room blinked, struggling to grasp the implication.

 “That subway line was abandoned in 1952,” Maria plowed ahead. “Six months ago, the city’s historians wanted to save it. The Society sent engineers to evaluate it, and they confirmed it’s a structural hazard that eventually needs to be demolished.”

 Maria leaned forward, peering directly into the lens, “That’s a trench, a hundred feet deep, under reinforced cement, directly beside One Times Square.”

 Goldman and Vassar stood together, their mouths slightly ajar.

 “Commissioner Vassar,” Maria looked at him. “How good is your city’s demolition contractor?”

 Vassar slightly recoiled at the question. “We use a firm, RDX, out of Newark.”

 “Are they good?” Maria asked.

 “The best.” Vassar became more animated. “They use directed explosives or whatever. They imploded the Nakatomi tower –they had neighbors ten feet on each side. The building came straight down without a scratch on anything.”

 Maria raised her brows with a nod. “Mr. Snyder,” she looked behind Vassar. “Does your Nuclear Detection Office keep a supply of sheet-lead panels?”

 Snyder stepped beside Vassar. His face seemed to blossom like he understood. “We most certainly do.”

 Maria gave a shrewd smile, “Is your city willing to pay holiday overtime to your experts for an *extreme* rush job?”

 Kyle watched Snyder, Vassar and Goldman stand together, gazing up in awe as Maria showed them images for her plan. In the glow of the screens, the men looked like his old friends, the reverent Three Kings.

Chapter Forty-Three – Precious Cargo

It was almost dark by the time Mr. Krug exited I-95 at Port Richmond, a suburb in northern Philadelphia. With all the holiday traffic, it had taken nearly three hours from Manhattan. He knew it’d be a lot easier leaving New York than trying to reenter it.

 He idled his black Denali SUV down Livingston Street to locate the small brick house. The homes were tight, side by side, which could create witnesses, but Krug didn’t care. His license plate was fictitious, and after collecting his cargo, he’d never be back. If all went as planned, by Wednesday he’d be in *Morjim,* a beach town known as ‘Little Russia’ in Goa,India,with enough offshore funds to purchase a bride or two. Anything to dampen the memory of losing Viper.

 Mr. Hawkins had confirmed the death of Viper. And more importantly, the failed assassination of Kyle Colbert, just after his post-lunch nap. Hawkins had an informant at the hospital, a security guard at their main lobby.

 Earlier in the week, Hawkins predicted the FBI would use the New York-Presbyterian Hospital because it was the closest to their headquarters. It was confirmed when countless FBI cruisers arrived, with agents milling around like black-suited termites.

 A hospital security guard, “Lucky” Lowry, a skinny chain-smoker with dyed black hair, had been an easy target to become an informant because he was a degenerate gambler.

 Toby, the collaborator’s hacker, had combed through social media, searching for people who worked at the hospital. He targeted menial jobs such as janitors, security guards and orderlies. He came across a security guard, Lowry, who boasted online of weekly trips to Mohegan Sun Casino, just north of New York.

 With a few easy hacks, Toby confirmed serious troubles for Mr. Lucky Lowry. An IRS lien, a pending repo and a foreclosure. Just about the easiest leverage for a snitch.

 Krug had simply offered “donations” to Lowry for useful information. And Lucky Lowry was well connected to doormen, custodians and valet parkers. He had eyes and ears everywhere.

 Unfortunately, on December 31st, Lucky provided the pivotal news that “someone” had died on the floor guarded by the FBI. It was definitely not Kyle Colbert, because he was being moved to a more secure room. According to Lucky, the hospital’s forensic pathologists had been called to the floor for a “deceased female intruder” who was the suspect.

 Hawkins had to give Krug the news. Their female contractor, *Polina Romanova*, professionally known as Viper, had been slain.

 Per his training, Krug showed no emotion. He thought fondly of “Viper” Romanova, who he’d first met at an assassination conference at a beautiful Marriott on the Volga River in Kiev. But they’d also shared a class on suppressing their feelings whenever on a job.

 Krug caught his own harsh glance in the mirror as he cruised down Livingston Street. A reminder he *was* on the job –and running behind.

 According to the calls placed by Maria Colbert, the residence was at 3600 Livingston Street. It had been rented to her sister, Linda Maldonada, age twenty-four. According to the DMV, she was five feet, two inches. A Medicaid claim reported she was 105 pounds. She had no registered firearms, and had no criminal past except marijuana possession at a Jimmy Buffett concert. The tiny girl would pose no threat whatsoever in case there were…problems.

 He easily located the 1950s-era home; it looked the same as photos from an old real estate listing. He carefully backed the large SUV into its driveway for an easier exit.

 Krug stepped out of the truck. His “FBI disguise” was as simple as wearing another black suit. His false FBI identification came from his glove box filled with IDs and badges for every agency imaginable. He looked over both shoulders and rang the doorbell.

 The home was so small, it didn’t take someone long to get to the door. A short pretty brunette cracked the door eight inches. She seemed stunned to look up at Krug.

 “Are you Linda *Mal-do-na-da*?” Krug asked in a baritone.

 “Yah…” She withdrew an inch with wide eyes. “What’s up?”

 Krug lifted a badge to her eye level. “I am Agent *Wil-kins.* F-B-I.,” he articulated.

 She opened the door another foot to study the badge. Large navy font stated “FBI.” It had the Bureau shield, and to the right was a color photo of the large man named “Larry Wilkins.”

 “We are *pro-tect-ing* Mr. and Mrs. *Col-bert*,” Krug uttered. “They now wish to have their little children with them.”

 Linda eyed the man, from his severe expression, down to his polished black oxfords. Her entire body seemed to relax. She exhaled, “Thank God...” She mimicked fanning herself with a chuckle, “I thought you were, like, a bill collector or something.”

 Krug stared, unblinking. “I need to go now.”

 “Oh, okay,” Linda turned to shout, “Cassie! Jack! You’re gonna’ see your mom and dad!” She flashed a wide smile at Krug, “I feel so much better knowing they’re properly protected.”

 Krug’s brows tensed, “Do not use your *tele-phone* to call your sister. She has no phone so no one can trace.”

 Linda’s eyes widened, “Yah… good call.”

 Jack and Cassie climbed into the back of Krug’s SUV and instantly buckled their seatbelts. Quiet and apprehensive, they looked around at the spotless black leather, and then at each other.

 Krug looked back at them from the driver’s seat. His face never changed, “I have for you comic book and *sugary* treats for the drive.” He handed Jack a stack of items.

 Jack frowned, baffled at the *Archie Comics* and black licorice. He mumbled, “Thanks…”

 As Krug drove, the kids looked back at the house. They watched their aunt Linda waving from the driveway. She wasn’t smiling and tilted her head as if not as sure as minutes before.

 “Where are we going?” Jack asked.

 Krug looked at them in the mirror. “You like to see New Year’s ball? I have *best* seat for you.”

Chapter Forty-Four – Building a Better Ball Trap

Time Square’s uncountable lights and signs had become vastly more exciting after dusk. Locals and tourists from around the globe clamored for space to celebrate. In spite of the crowds and frigid temperature, it was a sea of smiling faces.

 “We’re almost five hours away!” proclaimed the silver-haired television host in a wool coat and a Burberry scarf. His face was projected onto a dozen screens. “It’s thirty-one degrees, but these joyful faces don’t have a care in the world!”

 Facing the stages two blocks away, figures wearing all-black appeared at the base of One Times Square.

 The agents arrived simultaneously from side streets wearing nondescript black coats and fatigues. Broadway on the east side of the building was blocked to create a wide pedestrian area with café tables. The agents spread out to move the tables aside.

 “Sorry folks, gotta’ move,” agents informed the pissed people who’d been saving those seats for hours. “Let’s go, let’s go… Happy New Year…” they feds grew more forceful.

 A convoy of four eighteen-wheeler trucks appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

 Goldman’s request for four specific semi-trucks to arrive in Times Square had been no small feat. A little-known office within the Department of Energy was the Office of Secure Transportation (OST.) Their unmarked eighteen-wheelers provided transportation of nuclear materials and other missions supporting national security, such as this *Operation Dirty Santa*.

 On conspiracy websites, the OST was responsible for mysterious sightings across America of nameless trucks, cruising over three million miles a year on our highways. Goldman was able to acquire four of these OST trucks, which were available within an hour of Manhattan.

 The agents guided in the seventy-foot-long trucks as they arrived single-file on Broadway from the south. Some agents showed badges to pain-in-the-ass local cops, as other agents worked to move people out of the way.

 Directed by the feds, the four trucks maneuvered to form a large fifty-foot square on Broadway directly beside One Times Square. One truck parked lengthwise, snug against the building. Two trucks parked perpendicular to the front and rear of that truck, and the fourth truck closed the square. The trucks displayed temporary logos such as Coke and Coors, as if replenishing any of the hundreds of restaurants.

 As an agent ordered a herd of people to back away, a drunken guy with a curled mustache approached, “Yo *brah*, is this where I can get a beer?”

 The agent frowned, “No.”

 Twenty-four stories above, four agents stepped off the elevator of One Times Square. They wore backpacks over generic “NYC” jackets.

 Their first stop was the control room for the Times Square Ball. It was located in a dark hall on the top floor. For such a significant responsibility, the control room looked surprisingly like a utility closet. It had bare walls with visible pipes and ducts. A folding table had been placed between computer servers. The five employees of Countdown Entertainment sat behind laptops with cans of Monster Energy drink. Their annual job consisted of raising and lowering the ball, and controlling its millions of colors. The techie staff, all in flannel, were stunned to have guests.

 The agents introduced themselves as Fire Inspectors. In a cordial tone, they gave a convoluted story about a “glitch with the pyrotechnic fuses” on the roof for the fireworks.

 “To play it safe,” an agent smiled at the men, “you’ll need to control the ball from a broadcast trailer a block away. The city has agreed to pay you all double overtime.”

 The workers grabbed their energy drinks and laptops and merrily exited. The FBI technicians were then easily able to attach a wireless remote to the ball’s controls. No harm, no fowl.

 The agents were in reality FBI Bomb Technicians who had specialized knowledge to neutralize or apply explosive materials. But these bomb techs were not sent to disarm the ball.

 “We got the employees to exit the building,” the lead bomb tech reported into his radio.

 “Stay *low*,” Goldman commanded in their earpieces. “We may have eyes on the building.”

 “Copy,” the tech replied as they reached the roof. The men huddled low in the icy wind and went about their duties as fast as ants.

 The deck was tighter than it appeared from the ground and was bordered by railings. They had to step carefully around hundreds of pyrotechnic mortars that had been arranged for the fireworks extravaganza at midnight.

 At the base of the roof’s seventy-seven-foot flagpole, two feet of the shaft was accessible under the Times Square Ball. Two men removed gear from their backpacks. Putty-like C-4 explosive was molded into the shape of a cigar. The plastic explosive was a stable material, with no fear of ignition from dropping or jolting it. The putty required a detonator to be fired. The techs quickly applied putty and wireless detonators to the base of the flagpole.

 The other two techs carried spools of galvanized steel cable. The high tensile-strength cable would reach over 400 feet. On the ball, they removed two triangular panels of glass. One tech cautiously looped the cable through the ball. Another man walked to the building’s side and spoke into his radio, “Ready to drop line, over.”

 “Copy,” a voice replied. “Catchers ready.”

 Using the spool as an anchor, the tech threw the cable over the side. They prayed their fast work and the thin cable would not be overly noticeable from any unwelcome observers.

 At the base of the building, two agents stood in the empty fifty-foot square created by the trucks. They gazed up to await the cable. After falling twenty-four stories, the spool gently swung in the breeze. The agents managed to clasp and wrangle the end like tethering a blimp. They pulled the cable taut and temporarily attached it to a truck to keep it from moving.

 “Cable secure,” an agent radioed. “Zip-line complete, over.”

 “Outstanding!” Goldman replied. The first step of their plan had taken a total of seventeen minutes, with the techs visible on the roof for only nine.

 They were ready to initiate step-two of the ball trap. Goldman turned to a short, plump, bald man wearing a cap that proclaimed “RDX Demolition.”

 “Pinanski, update from your blasters?” Goldman asked with shark-like eyes.

 The man shouted into his two-way. “Randy: status on the boreholes? Over.”

 Despite his angry-baby face, RDX Project Manager Oliver Pinanski was excited to receive the call from Vassar for a rush implosion job. It wasn’t just the 400% holiday pay for him and his team, but he also thoroughly enjoyed demolishing things.

 But the real reason he was thrilled was because he’d lost a bet with his friends and they were going to make him dress as the “Baby New Year” at a party. At five-feet, two hundred pounds and bald, he was destined to wear nothing but a diaper and a top hat for the rest of the evening.

 To Pinanski, blasting things in the vicinity of a radioactive device was preferable. After signing a thick non-disclosure and receiving his up-front retainer, Oliver and his four top blasters were ready.

 “Boreholes almost complete,” RDX’s lead blaster responded in his radio. A “blaster” was the job title for a trained expert who coordinated demolitions. Currently, four blasters were vigorously working twenty feet under Broadway.

 With implosions, explosives were used to control the collapse so a structure would fall inward, therefore “implode” versus explode. Blasters usually targeted load-bearing walls and support columns. They then decide which type of explosives: common dynamite or a more potent RDX, which was used for newer steel structures. After drilling boreholes, the blasters position their explosives of choice throughout the structure. Typically, an alarm is rung three times before they charge the lead line. Then the fire button is pressed.

 However, in this case, the blasters were not targeting a building, and there would be no warning alarms.

 “Drilling level-one holes now,” Blaster Randy responded into his radio. “Standby.”

 In a subterranean storm sewer under Broadway, the four blasters wore hardhats with headlamps, goggles and respirators covering their mouths.

 Their demolition hammers had interchangeable drill bits depending on the job. Each man drilled two-inch-wide holes in the concrete above and below them in a circular pattern. They then filled the holes with old-fashioned dynamite.

 “Boreholes complete,” Randy wiped his face. “Proceeding to secondary level. Over.”

 Using maps supplied by Maria Colbert’s historical society, the blasters carefully progressed deeper underground. Following deserted storm drains and utility channels, they finally aimed their spotlights to behold a cavernous space around them. It was the derelict subway line that had once been the original Longacre channel.

 The four men looked up in awe. The space was both imposing and unsettling. It had Roman columns and vaulted arches. Randy felt like Indiana Jones discovering a tomb. Another man noticed a yellowed poster for a pageant called “Miss Subway” from 1952.

 It was going to be a shame to destroy such a historic site. But according to the city’s structural engineers, the space was unstable and in need of leveling.

 “Target the support pillars.” Randy forced his drill into a decayed stonework column.

 In the FBI Op Center, everyone was on their feet, gazing up at monitors.

 Through heavy static, Randy’s voice sounded over the speakers, “Blasters complete. We have exfiltrated. On schedule.”

 “*Superb* job guys,” smiled RDX’s Oliver Pinanski. “Meet you at control.”

 Antony Vassar exhaled, “Nine o’clock…” He shook his head in amazement. “Look at what we’ve accomplished in *three* hours.”

 Goldman turned to him, “How come it takes you ten months to fix a pothole?”

 The room released a tense sigh. But before anyone could move, Agent Harmon shouted from her station. “We got an ID on the renter of the radioactive van –and where he works.”

Chapter Forty-Five – Selfie Destructed

Krug’s driving app stated he still had two hours to drive. How was that possible? He’d already been in traffic over two hours. Hawkins would be furious if he didn’t get the children to the target on time. But he knew it was his own fault, he’d wasted an hour trying to get a snack for the kids.

 Krug had exited twice to look for a Sambo’s restaurant he’d visited during his first mission in 1979. He’d told the kids about their holiday peppermint shake. To his frustration, Krug couldn’t find Sambo’s anywhere. He then tried his back-up plan: a Howard Johnson’s soda fountain. Again, nothing. Krug cussed in Russian, then apologized to the kids who simply blinked.

 It was really Krug who was hungry. He asked the kids to look for a place to get something.

 The boy Jack replied, “There’s a Starbucks drive-through...”

 Krug frowned, *caffeine for children?* How inappropriate. The immoral nation had obliterated its best restaurants, and its spoiled offspring were addicted to stimulants.

 Krug relented, “Does the *Star-bucks* offer a line of fine food items?”

 In his hospital room, Kyle sat upright at the news. Maria and Del Rey leaned towards the laptop screen to see the info on the driver of the van that had transported radioactive material.

 “The van tested positive for Iridium-192,” Agent Harmon reported. “The van was rented from a Hertz in Yonkers. Here’s an image of the driver.” A New Jersey driver’s license appeared onscreen. It showed a young man who appeared Hispanic. “Albert Negrin, twenty-six years old.”

 Kyle’s eyes widened with recognition. There was a *déjà vu* seeing the man’s face, but he couldn’t place it. Frustrated, Kyle wondered if his condition was still blurring his thoughts.

 Goldman’s voice asked, “Do the rental people recall anything?”

 “A little,” Harmon replied. “It was the day before Thanksgiving; they were closed for the holiday. One employee remembers the man because it was a specific request. The driver told him he needed enough space in a van for ‘two patio heaters.’”

 Kyle frowned to envision the unexpected image.

 Harmon continued, “The employee showed him the cargo area of the van. He said the driver was with an older male who seemed irritable. They were dressed like delivery men–”

 “–You said you know where the driver works?” Kyle interrupted, impatient.

 “Yes, Mr. Colbert,” Harmon replied. “The van was charged to a corporate account. A firm owned by Harding-Foxtel.” There was a pause in the audio. “*Your* company, Mr. Colbert.”

 Harmon, Goldman and the rest studied Colbert’s reaction. He appeared predictably shocked with wide anxious eyes. But he replied, “I was right…”

 “What’s that mean?” Goldman recoiled, “It implicates you, *again*!”

 Maria interjected like the attorney she was, “Our explanation of the culpable parties is part of our immunity agreement. The evidence will be delivered after the *current* crisis. Our priority needs to be defusing the explosive.”

 Goldman huffed, but glanced at the room’s digital clock, “She’s right. Keep movin.’”

 “Check the driver’s social media,” Kyle blurted before anyone could speak.

 “Obviously we tried that,” Jenkins frowned. “There is a Facebook profile for Albert Negrin, but it’s locked with security features. We don’t have time for a subpoena to Facebook.”

 “Really?” Kyle gave a warped grin. “If *you* can’t bypass Facebook’s security, move over and I’ll show you how.”

 Goldman thrashed his hands to douse a few chuckles. He nodded to Jenkins. “Go ahead. Maybe Facebook won’t sue us if we save a million lives.”

 The stoic Jenkins proceeded as instructed, typing at his keys. “His profile has the same date of birth, confirming it is the driver.”

 “Check posts on November 25th, Thanksgiving,” Kyle added. “Onscreen so I can see.”

 The room’s screens filled with a Facebook profile showing an image of the younger delivery man, Albert Negrin, a smiling brown-haired man. Without reading any posts, Jenkins clicked directly to November 25th. The screen displayed photos of a family dining in a home.

 “Appears to be a standard Thanksgiving,” Jenkins remarked, scrolling through the images. The photos included a diverse family of all ages, laughing and enjoying a turkey and pork meal.

 “Scroll back to earlier in the day,” Kyle uttered.

 The photos abruptly changed. It was an aerial view of Times Square. Jenkins clicked to enlarge the images. One shot had been taken from a high vantage, looking down onto the streets. The next image was a selfie. In the photo, Albert had a wide grin with Times Square behind him.

 The agents in the room watched, curious –and then frowned at the next photo.

 It was another selfie, but Negrin was with a second man. The older man had an annoyed expression and wore the same delivery uniform. Behind them was the iconic New Year’s ball.

 “They’re on One Times Square,” Goldman marveled. “Delivering the bomb as patio heaters.”

 Kyle stiffened when he saw the photo of the two men. He gasped seeing them together as if they were ghosts. He instantly knew where he’d seen them.

 “Search obituaries!” Kyle shouted. “Search for Albert Negrin.”

 Kyle’s memories began to reassemble. He *had* seen the two men’s faces before –on a bulletin board at work. In a break room at Harding-Foxtel, there had been a flyer for the untimely deaths of the two employees, announcing their memorials.

 “There *is* an obituary for Albert Negrin,” Jenkins seemed dazed. “How’d you know?”

 “What happened?” Goldman barked.

 Jenkins looked up somberly. “Albert Negrin and his coworker, Ramon Diaz, were tragically killed in an electrical accident two days after Thanksgiving.” Jenkins paused, “They thought a live wire had been disconnected. Diaz was the other delivery man in the photo.”

 Maria and Del Rey reflexively stood.

 Kyle felt like oxygen was being sucked from his fragile lungs. His heart monitor rang as he stammered, “Check…his Facebook main page…”

 Jenkins clicked to the page they hadn’t read. It was a litany of sympathy posts, *“We’re so sorry Negrin family; God bless you Albert; You’re in a better place...”*

 In Kyle’s systematic mind, the pieces were all there. It was part validation and part fear.

 His company had undeniably hired the men to deliver the bomb a month in advance –and then murdered them both.

Chapter Forty-Six – The Rockets’ Red Glare

“Ironic how *extraordinary* our view is…” Mr. Hawkins whispered with visible breath seeping from his lips to Connor Banks beside him. The men sat with the five collaborators in the exclusive VIP Grandstands.

 On the main countdown stage between Broadway and 7th Ave., the scheduled events were moving along splendidly. The music was loud and the skies were clear with a few flurries.

 Networks competed for space and better performers. From the legendary *Dick Clark’s New Year’s Rockin’ Eve,* to every other version of the same show, to Telemundo and even amateur webcasts. It was like watching a United Nations panel, lined up to present the same message.

 To the side were the VIP Grandstands. The élite heated bleachers were filled with black-tie guests. Corporate bigwigs in tuxedos who’d paid grotesque amounts of money to be seen. Under fur coats, their trophy wives shivered in metallic gold dresses that could only be worn on New Year’s or in Vegas. Even a few commoners who’d won tickets on radio contests.

 Mr. Hawkins and his collaborators were seated in the center of the VIP benches. They had the requisite uptight corporate look, but stood out because they didn’t bring trophy wives, and their faces appeared constipated as they checked their watches every five minutes.

 The large Mr. Earl wore a shiny white suit and matching cowboy hat. Mr. Sarif sat small at his side with a festive “confetti” bow tie. Mr. Tong wore a flawless black Prada tux under a wool coat with impeccably-groomed hair to match. Mr. Dixon had an African-designed collarless Nehru jacket. The Brit, Tobey, wore a paisley jacket with bright-framed glasses.

 It didn’t matter that the men stood out, because their presence was designed to be their alibi. What men in their right minds would attend their own radioactive terror attack?

 The men glowered at a deafening rap song from someone with an invented name like Bardi-C or Cardi-D. Enough to make anyone long for the eloquent days of Fergie.

 “Have you placed a call to Sloan?” Hawkins shouted to Connor.

 “My wife?” Connor scoffed. “She’s still in Fiji, sleeping off *their* New Year’s with God-knows-who.”

 Hawkins closed his eyes with intolerance. “The *point* is…to create an electronic footprint of being here.” He motioned to the men. “Have them call their brides or ‘significant others,’ declaring their love, how they’ll be home soon and such nonsense.”

 “Genius idea, sir,” Connor gave a brown-nosed nod. “Everything seems on the button.”

 Hawkins’ face creased with a smug grin. He gazed out at the sea of people. “Things here are as unfailing as a German train *schedule.*” He pronounced it like the British *shedule*.

 During a coffee break at the FBI Op Center, where agents could refill their coffees but not pause their jobs, Goldman pulled Commissioner Vassar aside to speak.

 “Tony,” Goldman put a hand on Vassar’s shoulder. “I don’t care how you sell it. Say it’s the city that wants to put on a show for the latest *cause-of-the-month,”* he mocked. “But tell ‘em at *ten o’clock sharp* there will be an unscheduled fireworks display.”

 Vassar squinted, wrestling with the notion. “They’ve got a tight schedule. The networks map-out the night with the precision of air traffic control.”

 Goldman moved closer and lowered his voice. “I don’t give a cat’s ass if the networks like it. I just need everyone looking *up* at fireworks at ten o’clock.” He flashed a smile, “*Capisce?”*

 Backstage for the countdown stage looked like any other Broadway production. Trailers served as dressing and make-up rooms. Roadies held coats open as scantily-clad performers exited the stage. Frenzied stage managers shouted, “*Chop-chop, this ain’t a rehearsal*.*.!*”

 In trailer S-1, Mr. Ryan Seacrest was reclined in a make-up chair. With his hair immaculately sculpted, he wore an ice-mask over his eyes, with a Marlboro clenched in his teeth.

 A nebbish television executive with clammy combed-over hair entered. He cleared his throat, “Mr. Seacrest, may I approach?”

 “*Slutner,* is that you?” Seacrest lifted his eye mask. He jerked the cigarette from his lips and shouted in an unexpected Bronx accent, “Don’t you *talk* to me unless the news I’m hearing is horseshit!”

 Slutner fidgeted with his tie, “It…It is true.” He lifted a finger and stammered, “But…it’s the city, not the network. There will be a ten o’clock fireworks display. It’s supposedly for children who can’t stay up late.”

 “*Can’t stay up late..?”* Seacrest yanked off his make-up bib. “It’s only two more *fricken* hours! They’re gonna’ cut *my* big song debut?” He thumbed to himself. “Can you *comprehend* how many months I’ve been training with a vocal coach? And I’m talkin’ Ariana Grande’s coach, not some hack!” He flailed his hand, “They wanna’ cut my song? Cut Bieber!”

 Slutner paused to swallow. He looked Seacrest in the eye. “The fireworks *are* happening. Maybe we can move your song until after the ball. There’s never any excitement after the drop.”

 To the left of One Times Square, stone-faced agents pushed the barricades farther away from the four trucks. People shouted and groaned at being shoved into a tighter crowd.

 Within the empty square created by the trucks, agents pulled down steel panels attached to each truck. The fifty-foot-long panels folded down from the trailers to block any view from under the trucks. Anything that happened within the square would be invisible to the masses.

 After the last panel was in place, an agent lifted his radio, “Portal plan ready. Over.”

 “Copy,” replied Goldman’s voice. “Fireworks are ready. Get the hell outta’ that square.”

 Commissioner Vassar was able to borrow fireworks from across town, from the New Year’s celebration held at the Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn.

 Vassar concocted a story about how a small amount of fireworks got wet in Times Square. He needed just a small quantity, enough for a five or ten minute display. He promised the city would pay them back in time for the Fourth of July.

 In the spirit of the season, the Brooklyn organizers agreed. They didn’t find it curious that Vassar expressly requested, “Anything loud.”

 The FBI Op Center had a screen tuned to a New Year’s Eve broadcast. Goldman, Vassar and RDX supervisor Pinanski watched carefully.

 On the show, Ryan Seacrest appeared polished and perfect. He wore a tux jacket with an elegant black scarf. He beamed a million-dollar smile and said in a non-Bronx accent, “As an extra-special treat for our young families, we’re *thrilled* to showcase a ‘pre-event’ fireworks display. So round-up the kids, and we’ll be right back…*after* these messages.”

 “Alright gang, stand ready,” Goldman announced. He nodded to Pinanski beside him.

 “Team: coordinate the fire button with the pyrotechnics,” Pinanski ordered to his blasters. “Lead line ready?”

 The voice of Randy replied, “Yes sir. Lead line ready.”

 “The countdown needs to coincide *precisely* with the fireworks,” Pinanski clutched the radio with both hands. “Pyrotechnics crew ready?”

 “Copy. We’re a go,” a voice replied.

 Pinanski locked eyes with Goldman as the countdown began.

 An amplified countdown blared from speakers and reverberated throughout the buildings. An entire mass of people turned towards One Times Square, unclear what was happening.

 “…*Seven…Six…Five*…” the countdown echoed.

 Caught up in the anticipation, people whooped and clapped.

 In the VIP Grandstands, Hawkins pursed his lips at whatever was going on. “This wasn’t on the *shedule*…” He looked at his pocket watch; it was only ten o’clock.

 “They’re doing a fireworks display for kids,” Connor shrugged.

 “*Aughh*…” Hawkins huffed. He swooshed his hand and smiled up at their precious ball.

 The collaborators nervously darted their heads, trying to follow the commotion.

 “…*Three… Two… One..!”* The countdown sounded.

 With a booming crackle, fireworks sprayed upwards from the trucks beside One Times Square. The roar of applause swelled.

 RDX engaged the fire button. A boom resonated twenty feet underground. Simultaneously, an array of fireworks shot skyward.

 Inside the square created by the trucks, the buried explosion ruptured a twenty-foot circular hole. The chasm collapsed straight down. A muffled second boom pulsed deeper underground. The pit plummeted deeper.

 The ensuing plume of smoke and dust mixed with the trails of fireworks. The rockets painted the night with vibrant light.

 As all eyes watched the skies, Broadway now had a circular hole, twenty-feet in diameter and a hundred feet deep, terminating in the forgotten subway channel.

 The crowd clapped as the display concluded. They turned back towards the stages, oblivious of anything amiss as another band was introduced.

 “Portal complete,” Blaster Randy’s voice announced.

 “Gravity pulled it straight down…” Pinanski nodded to Goldman.

 Vassar gave an incredulous chuckle, “That was the fastest excavation permit I never got.”

Chapter Forty-Seven – Picture Perfect

With a dismissive frown, Hawkins lost interest in the fireworks nonsense. He grumbled, “Get the real show on the road…” He dialed Krug’s number on his encrypted cellphone.

 “*Da,*” Krug’s voice answered after three rings.

 “Where is your delivery?” Hawkins shouted with one hand covering his other ear.

 “About to enter *Lin-coln* Tunnel,” Krug responded. “Traffic is *stop*.”

 Hawkins scowled, “Your cargo is useless stuck in New Jersey! You need to make haste!”

 “I will be there. I may lose *re-cep-tion* in the tunn–” Krug’s voice faded.

 Hawkins gnashed his teeth. He *needed* those children more than ever before.

 Hawkins was confident the radioactive weapon would go off without a hitch. And the conspirators would be delighted with their industries, prospering after America’s knee-jerk retaliation. *But I still need that vexing Kyle Colbert!”* Hawkins seethed with fists at his side.

 The only guarantee that Colbert’s GhostSeeker program would never be made public would be if he witnessed Colbert’s demise himself. Brainwashing the public to kill him had failed. Possessing his children was one of the few remaining ways to draw him out of his safe hospital. *It’s all about the children, the children…* Hawkins whined. He hated this time of year.

 In Kyle’s room, he and Maria huddled close to her laptop to follow any developments.

 Dr. Lee was one of the few permitted in the room. Lee administered another fever reducer to Kyle. He recommended a painkiller, but Kyle didn’t want anything that would cloud his mind or dull his nerves –especially if his own company was trying to exterminate him.

 Del Rey concluded a call, “The portal blasted perfectly. All eyes were on the sky.”

 As they all took a breath, the ring of a phone pierced the silence.

 “That’s *your* old cell.” Kyle turned to Maria, “See who it is first.”

 She scrambled to locate the phone in her bag. Maria frowned at the display, “She’s not supposed to call this phone–”

 “–*She* who?” Kyle exclaimed.

 “Linda, what’s up?” Maria rapidly answered. “Are the kids okay?” Her eyes darted and then the color drained from her face. “What do you mean?” she roared with a nauseous expression.

 Kyle stiffened at attention.

 Maria lowered the phone with glistening eyes. “My sister’s asking if we have the kids yet. She said the FBI picked them up over three hours ago!”

 Agent Del Rey blinked in thought. “No we didn’t.”

 Thanks to movies and television, there was a misconception that the FBI couldn’t get involved in child kidnappings unless the victim was taken across state lines.

 That was false. It was a top priority in the Bureau to offer investigative assets to work hand in hand with law enforcement with the mysterious disappearance of any child. The FBI even had a special team available for these time-sensitive cases: a Child Abduction Response Deployment (CARD) team, which worked to recover victims as quickly as possible.

 The CARD team had a goal of arriving on-scene within an hour or two, to quickly assist law enforcement, as every minute counted.

 However, in the Colbert case, having a CARD team on the scene within “an hour or two” just wasn’t going to happen. It was after 10:30 p.m. on New Year’s Eve, and the entire FBI was somewhat occupied with a ticking nuclear weapon in one of the largest cities in the world. Bad timing for the Colbert kids.

 Nevertheless, Agent Del Rey recommended an immediate AMBER alert. The circumstances met all the Department of Justice’s criteria: There was reasonable belief an abduction had occurred –a fake FBI agent had driven off with the kids. The parents believed the children were in imminent danger of bodily harm, and both children were under eighteen.

 With a quick approval through Goldman and the DOJ, the kids were entered in the National Crime Information Center system, and the AMBER alert would be initiated. Broadcasters and transportation officials would be immediately notified. The alerts would be broadcast on radio, television and DOT highway signs.

 “That’s not enough!” Kyle shouted with one arm around his devastated wife.

 “It’s a crucial first step,” Del Rey attempted to pacify the emotional parents.

 Kyle raised three fingers, “Linda said it was over *three* hours ago. I don’t have to be in Mensa to know, at fifty miles-per-hour, they’d be over 150 miles in any direction of Philadelphia. That’s over… 22,000 square miles!”

 Maria cried louder.

 Del Rey’s voice softened, “They haven’t made any demands. There’s no motive for anyone to hurt the children.” When she heard herself say that last line, Del Rey had no idea if it was true.

 The hulking Mr. Krug plodded through the sea of people like Bigfoot wading through a baby pool. He pulled Jack and Cassie by their delicate hands. The children struggled to keep up, gawking in all directions, overwhelmed by the lights and noise of a million revelers.

 When Krug had finally made it through the Lincoln Tunnel, he’d proceeded straight, which would’ve led to the Times Square district. But with the closed roads, Krug growled like an enraged bear at every turn. The kids kept asking for more Tic Tacs and Juicy Fruit gum. Krug was further irked because he’d bought the gum for his flight home, and now he’d have none left.

 Krug finally abandoned his SUV at a Wyndham on 35th. He told the children to put on two new black coats he’d purchased at a Target. He pretended to be a guest valeting his truck, and then pulled his “nephew” and “niece” towards the thunderous excitement six blocks away.

 In Cassie and Jack’s sheltered lives in Twin Creeks, they’d rarely seen anything remotely close to Times Square. The only flashing neon was at the Moonglow Diner on Main Street. To Jack and Cassie’s large eyes, the animated lights, screens and music was like something from a movie. But to spoil the impact, the mobs of rowdy people were almost too much stimuli.

 Cassie’s bottom lip quivered. She asked in a soft voice, “Where’s our mommy and dad?”

 Jack darted his head up, left and right like a bird, anxious of his surroundings.

 Krug ignored them as he led them through the masses. He liked kids and could never harm one himself. For liability purposes, the *explosion* would kill them –not him. In fact, he was hoping to get them something like cotton candy. He saw no food vendors, so he kept moving. A few angry men shouted, “*What’s your problem?”* when he pushed through, but they shut up when they gazed up at the grim man.

 It was almost 11:00 p.m. when they finally approached Broadway and 42nd. The vast “bow tie” juncture was like a thriving organism. The mob of people seemed to move and roar together as one. Music from competing screens. Searchlights crisscrossed the skies like it was an air raid.

 Krug pulled the children towards a waist-high barricade in the center of the expanse. People seemed to move aside at his approach. He looked up to confirm a clear view of the countdown clock and the Times Square Ball directly above them. It was a perfect location.

 “Hold onto this gate,” Krug grumbled to the kids. They did as he asked, gaping at their surroundings. He lifted his phone and dialed Hawkins. After a single ring he uttered, “It is me–”

 “–I know your number!” Hawkins shouted in response. “Update?”

 He glanced down at the captivated children, “The lures are in place.”

 “Deliver images to Colbert’s mo*biles*,” Hawkins replied. “Just as we had conferred.”

 With slow Frankenstein-like motions, Krug lowered his phone. With clumsy thumbs he accessed the camera feature. He aimed the lens at the children.

 “Look here *chil-dren*,” he clicked. “Say hello to your *moth-er* and *fath-er*.”

 The kids began to breathe heavier, caught between looking at the camera and flinching at the commotion around them. They gripped the barricade, on the brink of tears.

Chapter Forty-Eight – Two Kids in a Hay Stack

“Linda’s a twenty-four year-old *idiot!*” Maria shouted. Her tears had morphed into anger.

 Kyle didn’t disagree, but now wasn’t the time to vent about his sister-in-law. Becoming light-headed, he returned to his bed. “Linda’s a victim, like we all are,” he replied tactfully.

 “Are you joking?” Maria’s hands flew, “This is the same girl who believed her car needs blinker fluid! She thinks every doctor with ‘MD’ after their name is from Maryland!”

 “But it was *my* idea to send the kids there!”

 Agent Del Rey opened the door and entered the clamor. She raised her hands, “Guys… This isn’t productive.” She paused until they looked at her. “Agents are with your sister; she’s devastated. But she’s given an excellent description of the suspect.”

 “A large man with an accent wearing black?” Maria scoffed. “Stake out my gym any day of the week!”

 Del Rey blinked to let the moment pass. She continued, “Do your children have cellphones that we can track their GPS?”

 Kyle froze to consider the idea. He then covered his eyes, “No… I only gave one new phone for Linda and the kids. An off-the-rack disposable. She kept it; the kids don’t have one.” Again, Kyle felt like the oversight was his fault.

 Maria sat beside Kyle. Del Rey crossed her arms.

 They all perked at the *ding* of a text message. When it chimed again, Kyle looked at Maria, “It’s your old phone –we told the kids not to use it.”

 Maria sprung from the bed to locate the phone in her purse. She pulled it close to her face to see the screen. She bellowed, “It’s the kids!”

 As Kyle and Del Rey rushed over, Maria added, “It’s *literally* the kids –their picture!”

 Their three heads nearly bumped as they competed to see the phone. On the screen was a static photo of Jack and Cassie. They were outdoors at night. The crowd and lights in the background were unmistakably in Times Square.

 “They’re alive!” Maria cried out. “Here in New York.”

 Kyle studied the image. The time stamp was from only a few minutes earlier. From the angle, it was impossible to pinpoint an exact location. But Kyle’s main concern was their faces. They didn’t appear harmed, but their expressions seemed anxious, with troubled eyes.

 “Send me the pic,” Del Rey stated. “The metadata might give us a precise location–”

 “–I already know it’s Times Square,” Kyle snapped. He unsteadily stepped to the closet for his clothes. “I’m going there right now.”

 Maria reached for her coat, as if instinctively in agreement.

 “Mr. Colbert,” Del Rey tensed her brows to lecture, “There are a *million* people out there. At least thirty percent are minors.” She followed Kyle as he awkwardly put on his pants. “Your kids are four feet tall –how are you going to see them? Leave it to the Bureau.”

 “I already left it to you,” Kyle retorted. “It nearly got me killed –and now my kids!” They froze as someone’s phone chimed.

 “Another text!” Maria shouted, gripping her phone. “It’s a message after the photo.”

 Kyle joined Maria as she read the message aloud.

 “It says: ‘Mr. Colbert: Report to us every location of your GhostSeeker software. Every site, hidden folder, even on the cloud.’” Maria looked ominously at Kyle.

 Del Rey recoiled, “This is all about a *computer* *program*?”

 “Yes!” Maria shouted, defensive. “Like he already told your entire squad! And it’s about him! His ability to hurt them!”

 Kyle stepped into his mud-stained shoes and had to lean against a wall to put on his coat. He looked at the women, “I’m gonna’ find *my* kids.”

 Hearing his words, Maria’s face wilted with emotion.

 “The suspects *want* you out there,” Del Rey stated tersely. “That’s their plan, to make you leave this place. You’re only safe in *here*.”

 “My kids aren’t safe out *there*. They’ve been *abducted*,” he stressed the word. “They’re standing at ground-zero for radioactive fallout in less than an hour.” He fastened his coat. “And by the way, I give our lofty ‘ball trap’ plan about a 20% success rate.”

 Del Rey was silenced.

 “You’re a mom, right?” Maria looked into her eyes. “What would you do for your Richie if the tables were turned?”

 Del Rey’s weary blue eyes ricocheted between the two of them like a pendulum.

 Kyle finished with, “So either shoot us –or drive us.”

PART EIGHT

“Please, come home for Christmas

If not for Christmas, by New Year's night”

Charles Brown, 1960

Chapter Forty-Nine – Enter the Hustle and Bustle

Kyle experienced tunnel vision when he saw the hospital’s hallway. It seemed a mile long and swayed like he was on a cruise ship. Thankfully, Maria held onto his arm.

 “Are you okay?” Maria frowned.

 “I’m fine.” He stood upright in an effort to seem normal. “Probably low blood sugar.”

 “You’re in charge of him,” Del Rey shouted to Maria. “This is an awful plan.” She briskly led them to the elevator thirty feet to their left. Arm-in-arm, Maria and Kyle kept up.

 With a meager show of power, Kyle pounded the elevator button three times. After being bedridden for days, he felt slightly better deep breathing with physical activity.

 A clean-cut FBI agent approached from where he’d been guarding the doors.

 Del Rey spoke fast to the young man, “I’m the Agent on the case. The witness is in my custody.”

 The man naively replied, “But I’m supposed to inform–” He was interrupted by a man’s voice approaching from behind.

 “–He hasn’t been discharged!” Dr. Lee scolded with a pointed finger, “You are not stable. You have fluid in your lungs and on a serious regimen of medications.”

 Kyle slapped the elevator button two more times. “I got a situation a tad more important.”

 “Don’t worry,” Maria shouted to Lee in her brash voice, “I’ll drag him back here myself!”

 By the grace of the Three Kings, the doors opened. The three quickly entered.

 Del Rey looked at the dumbstruck agent. Her face transformed to shockingly appealing. “Tyler, *please* wait ten minutes before you call Goldman…” The doors began to close. “I’ll be so grateful…” She smiled at the man and the doors closed.

 “Hello..?” Hawkins had to shout into the phone as yet another hip-hop act asked everyone to put their hands in the air. “Do you have news?”

 It was the voice of “Lucky” Lowry, their hospital informant. “Is it safe to talk?”

 “Obviously!” Hawkins snapped, agitated. “It’s encrypted! *Why* did you call?”

 Lowry spoke robotically like he’d seen too many spy movies, “The valet confirmed Kyle Colbert departed the hospital. They exited in an agent’s Ford Taurus that had been parked.”

 “How long ago?” Hawkins squinted at his watch to see it was 11:17.

 “Three minutes.”

 A wide grin uncoiled on Hawkins’ lips. “Right on *shedule…”*

 Krug stood over the children in their prime location. Jack and Cassie gripped the bars of the barricade like it was a jail door that would protect them from the drunken mob.

 With the phone to his ear, Krug tensed his brows. “So if Colbert comes, do *not* disable him?”

 “Correct,” Hawkins’ voice replied. “Your task is to keep him there, as we run the clock.”

 Krug blinked. “But is it not our goal is to *e-lim-i-nate* the target?”

 “Do not risk an altercation,” Hawkins replied. “You may have a bothersome hero in the crowd. You do not want needless attention or police.”

 Krug shook his leg and looked down to see Cassie playing with his shoelaces. He asked Hawkins, “How do you plan to *e-lim-i-nate* the target?” Krug had no concerns discussing how to slay the father of the girl at his feet.

 “Easy,” Hawkins chuckled. “The *explosion* will defeat him naturally. He just needs to stay there until midnight. Problem solved.”

 Krug’s large head flinched at the realization. “But what about…me?”

 “What do you mean?”

 Krug blinked faster, “Should I not also…meet you at the train car. With the others?”

 There was an eternal pause. Krug seemed to hear every sound, shout, voice, whistle and firecracker within a mile radius. “Hello..?”

 Hawkins finally replied, “You, sir, have *Spetsnaz GRU* training. You are skilled for *any* crisis. Is that not true?”

 Krug stood slightly taller, “Yes sir…”

 “You are a survivor! I know you will persevere.” Hawkins quickly concluded with, “You just need to keep him there until midnight.” He then hung up.

 Krug lowered the phone and his shoulders slouched. He tilted his head like a mutt, trying to interpret his orders. He then recalled his training, “*Dolg pered soboy*.” Duty before self.

 Agent Del Rey’s silver Taurus raced north on 7th Avenue. The traffic in lower Manhattan was ironically calm, with the masses congregated in other areas of the city. But Del Rey knew the clear roads wouldn’t last.

 She swerved in and out of traffic. Maria sat beside her in the passenger’s seat, Kyle stayed in the back. With a rolling feeling of nausea, he cracked the window for air.

 Del Rey glanced in the rearview. “What’s this *GhostSeeker* that’s triggered all this?”

 “I created a program.” Kyle rubbed his eyes, “It could end terrorism as we know it.”

 “Really?” Del Rey scoffed, “So what is it? I don’t work cybercrimes.”

 He took a labored breath to speak. “Violent extremists like ISIS use public websites to communicate. Facebook, Twitter, an app called Telegram... They share plans, messages, photos... They can create ‘secret’ group chats for 200 members and the messages self-destruct.”

 Del Rey quietly nodded, absorbing the information.

 Maria interjected with pride, “My husband invented a program that finds their accounts.”

 Kyle modestly bobbed his head. “The software locates their social media and email accounts. Basically stopping the ways they communicate. It’s already identified 149 Islamic State sites and 90,000 social media accounts. Also the IP addresses where the messages originate, helping locate their members.”

 “No wonder they’re pissed...” Del Rey sharply exhaled. “You’re the only one who has it?”

 “It hasn’t been made public,” Kyle replied. “That’s what they’re trying to stop.”

 Del Rey paused with a thought, “–So why didn’t it predict *this* attack?”

 “These aren’t terrorists,” Kyle pinched the bridge of his nose. “They’re my own company–”

 They gasped as Del Rey slammed on her brakes. All three clutched their seats and the car screamed to a stop. The traffic had come to an abrupt, bumper-to-bumper halt.

 “Shit!” Maria shouted. “We’re only at Penn Station.”

 Del Rey turned on a siren. A dash light ignited with blue strobes. She merged right around cars with two wheels on the sidewalk.

 Maria noticed the phone in her lap and exclaimed, “We got another photo! No message.”

 Kyle lunged to see over her shoulder. Maria tapped the image to enlarge it. Again, it was the children. They were deadpan as if they didn’t know their photo was being taken. The background appeared to be the same lights and crowd.

 “They don’t look hurt…” Maria studied the image. “Looks like they haven’t moved.”

 “Look for any location clues,” Del Rey suggested.

 Maria squinted at the photo. “I see a sign…it’s a Starbucks.”

 “That’s a lot of help,” Del Rey mumbled.

 Kyle shook his head. Seeing his phone, he thought of Rena, the only other person he’d given a phone. He could make the time in the car productive. He dialed her number.

 After four rings, Rena’s voice answered warily, “Is this you?”

 “Yes, it’s safe to talk,” Kyle uttered. “I don’t have much time. If I send you photos to analyze the metadata, how precise of a location can you get from the GPS?”

 Rena paused to consider the question. “The GPS can be inaccurate in cities. The buildings create an *urban-valley effect*. It’s like echoes near a cliff–”

 “–What’s your best guess?” Kyle blurted. He had to remind himself that he’d hired her because of her advanced skills.

 “I think the GPS will be accurate within ten meters,” she replied.

 “I’m texting you two photos of my kids. Please do your best.”

 “I’m on it –by the way,” she exclaimed before he could hang up, “Zahir sent all the records you needed from Mr. Hawkins. It’s saved as you instructed; no one else has access.”

 “Great.” Her use of the word *access* gave him an idea. But the concept was equally morbid. If he acted on it, it could never be withdrawn. He had no time to deliberate. “Rena: one last favor.”

 “Yes?”

 “You have access to my GhostSeeker file.” He cradled the phone with both hands. “Send a copy to Zahir. Tell him…” Kyle took a breath, “…if anything happens to my family…he must share it immediately with *every one* of our competitors.” He wiped his eyes at the notion. “Release the genie from the bottle.”

 Maria shouted from the front, “Twenty-five minutes ‘til the countdown!”

 “I can’t get any closer!” Del Rey growled. “We’re on 36th –it’s still six blocks.”

 Kyle lowered the phone and began to hyperventilate. Despite the software war, this was about the children. The car was at a complete stop. Kyle’s pulse quickened. He was failing.

 He looked to the right. In his blurred vision, he saw a white limousine pull up beside them. He narrowed his eyes to focus. A glow emanated from the limo’s back window. Kyle felt oddly compelled to lower his window to look out.

 “What are you doing?” Maria shouted. “It’s freezing out.”

 Kyle smiled at what he saw.

 In the limo beside him sat the glowing wise man, King Elvis. Kyle’s feverish brain didn’t even wonder how a nativity ornament could suddenly appear next to him.

 The King flashed a bright smile at Kyle. And then pointed north.

 “What are you grinning at?” Maria looked out. “There’s nothing there.”

 “I’m getting out right here!” Kyle shouted as he opened the door.

Chapter Fifty – Faces in the Crowd

Toby, the collaborator’s young hacker, was the first to arrive at the rendezvous. The subterranean subway car was ready and waiting. All generators and routers were operational.

 Toby dialed a number on his satphone. “The carriage is clear.”

 “Brilliant,” Hawkins replied through heavy static. “Alert me when you have tapped the feed.”

 “Of course, sir,” he replied in his refined London accent.

 Toby Cleese, the collaborator from ArmsTech, hated the title “hacker” for its negative inference. At parties his mates couldn’t introduce him with, “I’d like you to meet Toby the hacker.”

 “System intruder” didn’t sound much better. ArmsTech defined his job as someone who “specializes in penetration testing to ensure the security of the firm's systems.” It was sometimes called a “white hat hacker.”

 Toby agreed “white hat” seemed accurate. He believed his work with Mr. Hawkins was for a noble cause. Sure, there would be collateral fatalities in New York, but any ensuing warfare would ultimately save countless lives globally and stop “real” extremists. And, of course, all of their companies would heavily profit, fueling many economies, jobs and families.

 Toby had departed the grandstands fifteen minutes earlier. The crowds thinned the closer he trekked to the General Motors Building on 5th Avenue. As he had done many times before, he’d entered the vacant FAO Schwarz, to descend deeper into the city’s forgotten bowels.

 When he finally entered the car in the deserted tunnel, he turned on the lights and confirmed all systems were online. A corner of the dining table served as his computer workstation, complete with a remote control for the detonators connected to the Times Square Ball.

 Toby accessed the city’s Emergency Alert feed. The system was designed after 9/11 to serve as a mass warning system in the event of any major emergencies. If engaged, warnings would preempt every screen in Times Square. Currently there were fifty-five giant LED screens and over 230 animated billboards sprinkled throughout the square. The system was reserved for catastrophic scenarios such as a terror attack. Thankfully, the system had never been used.

 Since the warning system was created over a decade earlier, Toby was able to hack it within minutes. He then dialed Hawkins.

 “I’ve tapped into the emergency feed,” Toby typed as he spoke. “They *will* catch my intrusion, but… I can get a good ten minutes.”

 “That is ample time,” Hawkins replied. “It will be almost over then anyway.”

 “Nineteen minutes!” Maria shouted, pulling Kyle by his arm on 7th Avenue.

 Del Rey marched ahead of them. “Back-up’s on the way! But they can’t get through.”

 Kyle was determined to flee on foot. With no time to debate, Del Rey agreed to lead the way. They’d abandoned her car on a Macy’s sidewalk.

 Their path was congested with pedestrians, standing together in intoxicated groups. Others were also hustling towards the square for the countdown.

 Maria attempted to walk faster. She and Kyle meandered around people like fish swimming upstream. “Come on baby…” she uttered.

 Kyle did his best to keep up, coughing every few steps. His peripheral vision was blurred, but he had to keep moving. Visions of the kids fueled his weary body with adrenaline.

 He saw Del Rey disappear ahead. Maria pulled Kyle’s hand to keep up. The clamor of people shouting and honking horns echoed off the buildings. The hordes were growing thicker.

 Kyle saw a sign for 41st Street. His mind swam as he was momentarily unable to grasp where they were. Maria struggled to lead him through another swarm of people. They smelled like beer and cigarettes. They howled and blew ear-piercing noisemakers.

 Kyle began to feel dizzy like a child who’d been spinning in circles.

 “What’s wrong?” Maria looked back to see Kyle bent with hands on his knees.

 Confused about which direction to go, Kyle looked up. As a cluster of people parted, he saw a figure facing him. Standing before him was the luminous wise man, King B.B.

 B.B.’s dark, serene face smiled and winked at Kyle. He then pointed northeast.

 “This way!” Kyle gripped Maria with renewed vigor. “Only two more blocks!”

 It was time for the collaborators to exit the grandstands. Each of them nearly jumped out of their skins when their alarms vibrated.

 Mr. Hawkins stood with an arrogant frown to lead the men. Mr. Earl tipped his hat to a few ladies, “*Pardon, ma’am…”* Mr. Sarif followed closely, as did Mr. Tong and Dixon.

 On the ground, they hustled in a straight line away from the chaos. Northeast on 7th Avenue towards 58th. No other people were walking away from the square.

 Hawkins dialed his phone. “We are en route,” he announced. “Upload the feed… *Now*.”

 “Yes sir,” Toby’s voice replied. “Standby.”

 Behind them, every digital screen and billboard in Times Square simultaneously flickered with static. They no longer sparkled with ads for Coke, Disney, Toshiba, Marriott Marquis or the countdown shows. All 285 screens shimmered with hissing fuzz.

 The wide-eyed masses turned 360-degrees to notice the screens, confused.

 “What if she’s right?” Maria shouted at Kyle. “What if someone *is* waiting for you out here?”

 He paused with the *Crossroads of the World* just yards away. He looked at Maria, “I’ll be hidden among *millions...* How would anyone know me?”

 They turned to face the square –and their eyes bulged.

 Staring back at them were giant images of Kyle’s face. His likeness was repeated on every screen in Times Square. His photo looked like a mug shot, blazing from nearly 300 screens.

 “*My God*…” Kyle started to gasp. It was like the Main Street shop with every television tuned to the same channel –and again it was *his* face, some over thirty feet in height.

 Along with his face were the words, “HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN? $1,000,000 REWARD.”

Chapter Fifty-One – A Mohawk, Liberty and Gold Teeth

Ryan Seacrest cringed at the countless screens showing the same man’s face. “What the…?”

 Onstage, as U2 performed “City of Blinding Lights,” the band missed a beat with the abrupt change in the displays.

 Seacrest scowled offstage, “Whose *fricken* show is this?”

 Paralyzed with shock, Maria and Kyle spun at the spectacle of Kyle faces. They flinched as a figure rushed at them from the side. It was Del Rey.

 “Get down!” Del Rey shouted. She threw her arms on their shoulders and pulled them into a tight huddle. “You can’t show your face!”

 With their heads turned away from the crowd, they had a second to catch their breath.

 “I’m not leaving!” Kyle’s chest heaved. “We’re too close.”

 “Fourteen minutes!” Maria’s voice trembled. Her eyes watered with despair.

 “It’s thirteen,” Kyle corrected. “Our plan is set for 11:59 –one minute before their detonation.” He realized there was no use to explain since every second counted.

 Kyle dialed his phone. “Rena!” He had to shout, “Do you have a location?”

 “…*tried calling...GPS…*” Rena’s voice was barely audible with the thunderous crowd. “…*between…44th and 45th…you see a…Olive Garden?”* Her voice faded.

 Kyle squeezed his eyes shut at the elusive information. It was futile.

 “What’d she say?” Maria asked.

 He wiped his face. “Something about 44th and 45th and a goddamn Olive Garden.”

 “We gotta’ keep moving!” Del Rey exclaimed.

 Remaining in a cluster, they dove deeper into the action. Kyle struggled to keep his head down, with no hat or glasses to obscure his face. The crowds were still gazing up at the screens.

 Kyle brushed by a large man with a Mohawk wearing an Army-Navy jacket. The man jerked his head towards him, irritated. He then paused when he saw Kyle’s face.

 The Mohawk man nearly spilled his flask of Jägermeister when the man bumped him. With the reflexes of a bloodhound, he instantly stepped in the same direction as the man –he needed to see his face again. It was a white guy huddled in a dark coat. Mohawk then looked up at the video screens. It looked *exactly* like the same man.

 Mohawk reached for his belt. He unsnapped a leather sheath holding a ten-inch Bowie knife. Considering the night’s crowd, he knew to be properly armed.

 An obese thug roamed the crowd looking for pockets to pick as they obliviously celebrated. He stopped to lift his Statue of Liberty mask to wipe his perspiring face. When the six-four, three-hundred-pound man reopened his eyes, he saw a man rush past him with two women. The guy was darting his head like a terrified mouse.

 The fat man in the Liberty mask looked up at the surrounding screens, “$1,000,000 REWARD.” He turned back at the fleeing man. It *had* to be him.

 He trudged quickly to follow in the man’s trail.

 A scraggy man with gold teeth and tear drop tattoos under each eye was yelling into his phone. Scanning the crowd around him, he abruptly froze mid-sentence.

 “*What..? You there?”* a girl’s voice screeched from his phone.

 “I’ll call you back…” he lowered his phone. The fortyish man who’d just passed him was identical to the guy on all the screens.

 Gold Teeth reached for a .38 Special concealed under his coat. Considering the crazies in the city, Gold Teeth never went anywhere without protection. He swiftly followed the wanted man.

 SSA Goldman raised his voice into the room’s mic, “Del Rey: what are you doing?” He blinked fast, edgy. “We *cannot* delay our portal plan. The risk is too high.”

 From speakers within the room, Del Rey’s voice was lost within the roar of the crowd, “…*need to find…children…”*

 Goldman quaked his head with frustration. “Anthea, you got *twelve minutes!* Exit *now*!” He unintentionally shouted, “In case this whole plan doesn’t work…” His words trailed as he saw the eyes of the entire room upon him. “I need some water…” he mumbled as he exited.

 Goldman entered the corridor outside the room. He pressed his back against the wall and took a deep breath. He pulled out his personal phone.

 The Bureau had rules to not discuss any facts of an investigation to anyone without clearance, such as family members. If everyone on the squad suddenly warned their friends and neighbors about the dirty bomb, it could create panic and mass chaos, jeopardizing the entire operation.

 However, in the *real world*, what would anyone do if they had family or loved ones downtown in the blast radius? In the past twenty-four hours, multiple agents and analysts periodically stepped out for “breaks,” only to jog outside to make quick calls. Anyone would boldly risk a worthless administrative sanction if it meant saving their family’s lives.

 Vince Goldman had no plans to reveal the bomb to his wife or family. Not out of any sense of duty, but because they lived in Mahwah, New Jersey, nearly an hour away.

 Goldman dialed his wife. He cleared his throat when she answered. “Hi, Brielle,” he smiled.

 “You never use my name…” she mused, wary. “What’s going on?”

 “Oh…just work,” he caught himself. “The whack jobs come out on New Year’s.”

 “Lauren loves watching the countdown shows,” Brielle replied. “I said she could stay up–”

 “–Listen, hon,’” he interrupted. “That’s why I’m calling.” He rubbed his forehead, “Can you have Lauren watch something else? Just not the live shows? Please..?” He couldn’t stomach the vision of his daughter and wife witnessing the chaos, with possible fatalities on live television.

 “But she likes that Ryan…” She paused as if she suddenly understood. After ten years of being married to an agent, she had a sixth sense with his tone. “What’s happening Vince?”

 “Don’t you worry,” he lied. “Please just tell her that daddy loves her very much...” There was a fracture in his voice. “Save me some champagne. I love you and I will see you soon.”

 Goldman inhaled and concluded with, “Then put on *Little Mermaid* or some shit like that.”

Chapter Fifty-Two – When Passing Glances Meet

With the noise blocks behind them, Hawkins and the collaborators entered the ghostly FAO Schwarz. Without Krug there to lead, Connor Banks had to muster the courage to guide the men using a flashlight.

 The men followed the damp steps to its basement. Then on to the ancient elevator at the end of the utility tunnel. No one spoke. The men struggled to maintain valiant faces. With every step deeper underground, their postures eased.

 The elevator doors opened to the passage leading to the deserted subway station.

 “Quickly,” Hawkins darted forward, gazing at his watch. “Work to do!”

 Kyle and Maria snaked through the crowd behind Del Rey. They frantically scanned left to right in the search for Jack and Cassie.

 Maria saw no kids that young. Such small people would be invisible among the adults. She was determined not to panic, though her heart raced.

 “I can’t see...!” Maria cried out. She noticed odd things like hundreds of men all wearing red Yankees caps. Drunk girls shrieking, “*Whoooo..!*” The screens still showing Kyle’s face.

 She looked at Kyle. He was pale. “Put on my scarf. Wrap it around your face!”

 “We’re between 44th and 45th,” Del Rey looked at them. “Stay *low*. I’m armed, I’m heading out.” She turned to dive into a thick crowd. “You have phones –update me!” And she was gone.

 Mohawk followed thirty feet behind Kyle. He was closing-in fast through the dense crowd, with one hand gripping his knife’s handle.

 Slogging twenty feet behind him was a giant man wearing a rubber Statue of Liberty mask.

 Ten feet to their right was a gangly man with gold teeth and teardrop tattoos.

 Twenty feet to their left was a stocky man who pulled a ski mask down over his face.

 Several couples suddenly tapped each other and gasped, “*Is that the guy..?”*

 The screens displaying Kyle’s face flashed the word, “DANGEROUS.”

 “*You’re giving me a heart attack, Del Rey*…” Goldman groaned under his breath.

 The entire room stood, fixated on the monitors. The screens showed network countdown shows and a direct feed on the RDX team waiting to hit the fire button.

 “Seven minutes until 11:59,” Snyder declared what everyone already knew.

 Goldman and their experts agreed the perpetrators would use the stroke of midnight to detonate the bomb. That would assure the highest number of spectators, standing in place, watching the ball.

 That being the case, the FBI’s lofty ball trap needed to happen first –but not too soon that it could anger the culprits to detonate early. The Bureau’s plan had to happen when the ball was at the very top of the pole. It was decided 11:59 would be the target for their counterplan.

 “The city identified the screen hack,” Jenkins announced. “They’re removing Kyle’s face.”

 “The damage is already done for that poor bastard…” Goldman huffed.

 “But that’s my daddy!” Cassie bawled. She pointed her little finger up at the flashing screens.

 “Why is he on there?” Jack asked, anxious. “He hasn’t done anything bad...”

 “Silence!” Krug barked, growing testy. He did not want to scream at the children. “Hold the gate. Do not move.” Krug looked up at the countdown clock. Almost six minutes until midnight. He inhaled to puff out his chest, fearless.

 But Krug couldn’t help it. To plan for all contingencies, he looked to the right. How long would it take him to run to the closest subway station on 42nd? Perhaps he could get partially underground to protect himself from the radiation.

 *No…* He looked down. He would lose all honor if he fled. He would fulfill his contract.

 The collaborators entered the hidden train car. Toby nodded at their arrival and continued to type. The men took their seats at the table. Three monitors were tuned to the countdown shows.

 Mr. Hawkins stood at the head of the table and spoke in a fanciful manner, “DuBois once said, ‘The only way to properly face doom is to be on time.’” He grinned at his watch. “Superb work. Six minutes to spare.”

 The men released intense sighs.

 Mr. Earl pointed up, “Under a hundred feet of reinforced steeland *ce-ment*.” He winked at his peers, “Ain’t nothin’ can touch us.”

 “No time to rejoice!” Hawkins cautioned. He turned to Toby, “I trust your remote is ready?”

 “Yes sir. I was concerned of reception issues, but our routers are functioning nicely.”

 Hawkins squinted at a monitor showing Ryan Seacrest holding a mic. “Who’s this character?” He shook his head, “Poor Richard ‘Dick’ Clark... We never miss water until the well is dry.”

 The screens of Times Square sputtered with static. The crowds looked up. Kyle’s face vanished as every billboard reverted to their original ads. With collective shrugs, the crowds resumed their festivities.

 Mohawk paused, but clutched his knife as he remained focused on his target.

 Fat Liberty never halted, maintaining his stride towards the wanted man.

 Gold Teeth kept one hand in his jacket, firmly gripping his .38.

 Ski Mask and the rest hesitated, and then continued their courses, closing in from three sides.

 “Where are they?” Maria cried, turning 360-degrees. “There’s an Olive Garden there…”

 “It all looks the same…” Kyle sharply exhaled. As he spun, he became weary. He looked up at the ball and cried, “We’re too late.”

 With holiday decorations still on display, a sign caught his eye. Above a cluster of people, sparkling words read “Peace on Earth.” In the shimmer of the sign, a figure came into view. Under the word *Peace* stood the radiant wise king, Martin Luther.

 But unlike the other kings, Martin Luther pointed to the right with a hurried motion.

 Kyle’s eyes widened. “This way!” He tugged Maria in the same direction. “Hurry!”

 “What..?” she exclaimed. Kyle pulled her quickly to the other side of a waist-high gate.

 Through the crowd, Mohawk, Fat Liberty and Gold Teeth found themselves blocked by the barricade. Without any awareness of each other, each man had to trek around a thick group to avoid the barrier. They moved faster to not lose sight of their target. Sharks tracking prey through a sea of people.

 Forty feet away, Krug loomed over the kids. He frowned up at the clock showing less than six minutes to go. Could he still flee? He gritted his teeth, and then dialed a number on his phone.

 “Yes..?” Hawkins voice snapped, irritated.

 “I need to exit,” Krug uttered with a tone that invited no debate. “The *chil-dren* will stay–” His entire body flinched at an ear-piercing shriek.

 “*Mommy…!”* Cassie cried out with a high-pitch scream.

 Jack’s head spun in the direction Cassie was shouting. Through the shifting crowd, Jack saw a fleeting glimpse of his mother thirty feet away.

 And then she was gone.

Chapter Fifty-Three – City Sidewalks, Busy Sidewalks

Maria froze as if time had stopped. The shrill voice was unmistakably Cassie.

 “Baby..?” Maria screamed in the direction of the cry. It was mother’s intuition; she *knew* her daughter’s voice. Cassie was close –and in trouble. Maria turned to Kyle, “You hear that?”

 “What?” He turned to look. Nothing but interweaving people.

 “Cassie..!” Maria cried out. Her voice was buried by party horns and music. But then, laced within the clamor, she heard her daughter’s voice again.

 “Silence!” Krug did not want to shout. He drew a nine-millimeter Makarov out of his jacket. He waved the Russian pistol towards the children. “No noise! Do not move.”

 Jack rolled his eyes up at the man. Stiffened with fear, he grasped his sister’s hand.

 “Be good boy and girl,” Krug breathed heavier. “Do not move from *right* here.”

 Before the children’s shocked eyes, Krug turned and walked away. Faster than they’d ever seen him move before. They were left alone, surrounded by a forest of strangers.

 They flinched at a booming announcement, “*Five minutes! Let’s hear some* *NOISE..!*”

 Maria and Kyle struggled to get through a wall of tightly-packed spectators. The people were angry and smelled like B.O. with liquor breath. She pushed and fought to move in the direction she’d heard Cassie’s voice. One step forward, two steps back.

 “Are you sure?” Kyle wheezed when he inhaled.

 As they forced their way through, people gasped when they recognized Kyle’s face.

 “We’re almost there!” Maria pressed forward.

 “*Four minutes, people..!”* The amplified voice declared.

 Without any awareness of the impending danger, Jack held Cassie’s hand. He focused on a single spot and inhaled deeply. His dad Kyle would be proud of his courage.

 “Let’s go, Cass,” Jack’s voice trembled. “She was this way!”

 He stepped away from the gate and into the crowd, towards the last vision of his mom.

 Krug plodded in a rapid, straight line. He heaved people out of his path like a bulldozer. Nothing or no one could stop him.

 His skilled eyes noticed a man approaching from the opposite direction. A scrawny man with gold teeth was lifting a pistol. Not realizing the man was aiming at a different target, Krug’s reflexes forced him to react. Krug aimed his Makarov at the man.

 Both men froze, aiming weapons at each other, eight feet apart.

 “Who the fuck are you, *unibrow*?” The man with gold teeth and teardrop tattoos shouted.

 “Drop your gun!” Krug growled. People around them began to notice their weapons.

 “I’m not after *you,* dipshit!” Gold Teeth chuckled without lowering his gun.

 The surrounding crowd began to panic, backing away from the men.

 As the two men were locked in a standoff, a tall man with a Mohawk and an obese man with a Statue of Liberty mask easily walked around them.

 “*Just three minutes, ladies and gentlemen..!*” the voice of the square roared.

 Someone’s fireworks popped a block away. Krug used the disruption to fire his weapon –a direct shot into Gold Teeth’s scrawny chest. As Gold Teeth tumbled back, his .38 discharged into the air. With the deafening blasts, people scattered like a herd of gazelle.

 Maria and Kyle instinctively ducked at the commotion.

 “Those are gunshots!” Kyle pulled her close. The shots brought back petrifying memories.

 As the mob around them dispersed, the thinning crowd created a path. Like a magic tunnel, Maria looked into the opening to see Jack and Cassie running towards her.

 Time seemed to slow as the children ran. Their faces illuminated with smiles. Maria lunged towards her children. With tears in her eyes, she sprinted with every ounce of remaining energy.

 As Kyle followed, a man stepped into his path. He looked up to see a tall man with a Mohawk and a green army jacket. The man had crazed eyes that didn’t blink. Kyle knew why he was there. He cringed to see the man pull a ten-inch knife from his coat.

 Kyle pivoted to run, but collided into a larger man a foot away. It felt like hitting a padded wall. He stepped back to see a 300-pound man wearing an unsettling Statue of Liberty mask.

 Kyle stumbled back. His gasps sounded like sawing a log. Mohawk and Liberty stepped closer.

 Krug trudged towards 42nd Street, gripping his gun. He glanced back to see a pack of curious thug-types, some wearing ski masks, converging towards a horde of people.

 “*Two minutes! ARE WE READY?!”* The words resounded from a hundred speakers.

 When Krug turned to flee, he faced the black barrel of a Glock.

 “*Don’t move! FBI!*” Agent Del Rey roared, aiming her gun at the man’s wide face.

 When Del Rey had heard the gunshots, she’d turned to see a stampede of people running from a large man wearing all black. Another man was on the ground covered in blood. The big man matched the description of the suspect who’d abducted the Colbert children.

 “Drop your weapon!” Del Rey had to shout again, gripping her gun with both hands.

 Krug merely scowled with his carved expression. He aimed his Makarov at her face.

 Del Rey had to instantly assess. Despite gossip in the Bureau, she had never shot anyone. In the blink of an eye, her Quantico training echoed in her mind. The man was a foot taller, a hundred pounds heavier and fifteen years older. His mass and age would make him slower. Del Rey had a lower center of gravity. She knew she’d be quicker.

 She dropped to the ground and fired upward. The thug had no time to react. Crouching below his waist, Del Rey shot to kill, as she’d been taught. She could hear her instructor’s voice, “*Shoot your target’s torso, the largest part of the body and the most likely to incapacitate your threat.”*

 She squeezed the trigger until the hulking man began to sway. Krug fell hard, his face hitting the asphalt with a thud.

 Terror glistened in Kyle’s eyes as he was surrounded by a growing parade of attackers. His anxiety felt like an elephant stepping on his chest. He tried to utter, “The reward’s not real…,” but it came out as a whimper.

 Mohawk extended his blade. Fat Liberty tried to bump him aside, competing for the prize. A man in a ski mask stepped around them towards Kyle. From the sides, two men and a woman advanced with cold scowls like hypnotized assassins. One aimed a pistol, two had Tasers.

 It was surreal how many of them looked like regular people, Kyle mused. Your next-door-neighbors, willing to slaughter an assumed killer for money.

 “*Almost ONE MINUTE people..!*” Every screen flashed with splashes and colors.

 With a final, deep breath, Kyle stopped resisting. He was beaten.

 *Maria has the children,* he imagined, struggling to find peace. He’d nearly been killed on Christmas, and his entire family might perish at the stroke of midnight on New Year’s. *Please let them find shelter…*

 The circle of killers heaved each other, moving closer. Kyle simply gazed skyward. At the top of the flagpole, the ball gleamed red and green. He knew he’d be dead within seconds, more than likely, along with everyone else.

 Beyond the ball, Kyle noticed how the stars blended with the peaceful flurries. A tranquility fell over him. He closed his eyes and said a silent prayer for Maria and the children.

 “Where’s Kyle?” Del Rey shouted to Maria, whose children were engulfed in her arms.

 “He was right behind me,” she turned to look with a new tremble in her voice.

 Del Rey checked the clock; ten seconds. She shouted into her radio, “Goldman: I can’t kind Colbert–”

 “–It’s too late,” Goldman cut her off. “RDX has orders to blast in *eight seconds*.”

 Del Rey inhaled, wordless.

 Goldman added soberly, “God bless you all.”

 Kyle lifted his hands as a reflex, knowing it would do no good.

 His killers closed-in like a horde of zombies. They shoved each other to be the first to reach their prey. The remaining crowds roared for the countdown. Kyle’s plight was noticed by no one.

 He squeezed his eyes closed as his executioners converged.

 “*DON’T MOVE!”* bellowed multiple voices. “You’re surrounded! Drop your weapons!”

 Two dozen plain-clothes agents emerged from the crowd. Like an illusion of urban camouflage, the armed cops seemed to materialize out of thin air. A mix of FBI and NYPD, all dressed a regular partygoers. They’d been roaming through the masses, all wearing the red Yankees caps Maria had noticed.

 Kyle’s attackers froze. Most dropped their weapons and ran.

 Mohawk rushed towards Kyle, so an agent shot him in his back. Fat Liberty attempted to charge like a bull, but fell when a bullet ripped into his gut.

 The clocks flashed 11:59. Two burly agents dove to shield Kyle. He stumbled to the ground with two grown men on top of him wearing bulletproof vests.

 Fifty feet away, four agents leaped to cover Maria and her two children. Del Rey huddled over them as they awaited the blast.

 Goldman wiped his face with his palm. He turned to Pinanski with a weary voice, “Now.”

 Pinanski lifted his radio. “Fire!”

Chapter Fifty-Five – Roasting on an Open Fire

A field of faces smiled up at the Times Square Ball. The supreme event after hours of freezing, aching feet, hunger, laughter, tears and memories.

 “*ONE MINUTE!”* the voice thundered. “*Fifty-nine… Fifty*–”

 Voices around the world counted along as they waited for the ball to drop –but their smiles suddenly fell. Something was wrong.

 Twenty-four floors above, two compact explosions detonated at the base of the flagpole. The booms mixed within a spray of fireworks.

 With a whale-like groan, the steel flagpole began to lean to the side. Buckling under its own weight, the pole slowly fell like an axed timber.

 There was a choir of gasps from the world below. The pole slowly collapsed to the left. Some people ran as if King Kong were falling. Others watched in awe.

 The pole jolted to a hard stop as it landed on its side on the building’s roof. A third of the pole hung over the edge –with the ball at its tip.

 The jarring blow forced the ball to teeter like a cue ball about to drop into a billiard pocket.

 And then the ball fell.

 363 feet below, within the square created by the trucks, the steel cable extended from the blasted hole, up to the twelve-foot ball.

 Plummeting 125 feet per second, the ball dropped straight down. Threaded with the cable, the ball zip-lined directly into the twenty-foot-wide hole in the street. The entire feat took less than five seconds, almost too fast for eyes to comprehend. The world’s largest hole-in-one.

 With instant precision, thick lead panels were dropped to cover the hole. Two of the trucks were positioned to drive on top of the shielded pit. The trucks, weighing forty tons each, rolled onto the panels, and the drivers swiftly exited.

 After the blur of activity, there were still forty-two seconds to midnight.

 The bewildered crowd went silent. A million cheers faded. Many stretched and craned their necks trying to figure out what they’d just witnessed.

 “*What the hell was that..?” “Where’s the friggen’ ball..?” “Is this part of the show?”*

 Mr. Ryan Seacrest stood in front of the cameras with a warped scowl. Every musician and celebrity onstage was equally baffled at the abrupt silence.

 “Where’s my countdown?” Seacrest flailed his hands with a beauty on one arm. “What is this? I’m upstaged by fuckin’ Penn and Teller?”

 In the underground train car, everyone leaned forward. Hawkins and his collaborators gawked at the screens with their mouths hanging open.

 “Perhaps there’s delayed reception..?” Toby offered, frantically typing.

 “That doesn’t explain a broken *pole!*” shouted Hawkins.

 “I’m…still trying to detonate,” Toby stammered, anxious with Hawkins so close.

 Connor, Mr. Earl, Sarif, Tong and Dixon twitched, trying to follow whatever was happening.

 “No clapping yet!” Goldman shouted, hoarse. He turned to Jenkins, “Can it still explode?”

 Jenkins shrugged, “Maybe the impact effected the device? Maybe a delayed response?”

 A female’s voice crackled over the speakers, “Goldman!” It was Agent Del Rey. “The Colberts are safe. All four confirmed.”

 “Get ‘em the hell *outta’* there,” Goldman exclaimed. “This ain’t over.”

 A hundred feet below Broadway, the crushed New Year’s ball rested in a glittery heap.

 A haze of dust swirled in its wake. To the ball’s side was the forsaken subway line. Any light from above had vanished when the pit was covered with thick lead panels.

 In the silent pitch black, a tiny red light came to life within the ball’s guts. Like an awakening machine, the light began to blink.

 The Times Square Ball detonated with a blinding explosion.

 On the streets above, there was a muffled thump. The two trucks parked on the panels sprang two inches and settled back down. The epitome of anticlimactic.

 The entire crowd collectively shrugged at each other.

 As if on cue, all million spectators simultaneously cheered, “*HAPPY NEW YEAR..!*”

 Following the path of least resistance, the radioactive fire raced through the abandoned subway tunnel. The thermally-expanding gasses traveled 3,000 feet per second.

 “I *am* hitting the trigger!” Toby shouted, tapping a switch.

 Mr. Earl bellowed, “This is a clusterfu –”

 “–There has not been *one* casualty!” Tong interrupted.

 “We were promised much more than one death,” the usually meek Sarif added.

 Infuriated, Hawkins opened the door. “Perhaps this will enhance receptio–”

 The subway car was engulfed in a firestorm. The 5,000-degree blaze instantly ignited the oxygen within the car. Its windows were blown out by a shockwave of compressed air traveling at a supersonic velocity. Miniscule shards of glass and steel shredded the men’s bodies.

 Screams merged with the searing flames. Radioactive heat broiled the car.

 As the fire passed, all that was left behind was charred and melted wreckage that would one day be identified as a possible train car.

 For an entire square mile, Confetti fell like snow over the happy crowds. Fireworks streaked the skies with blooms of color. Over one billion viewers worldwide enjoyed the celebration.

 With fading short-term memories brought on by joy and fatigue, no one cared about a broken flagpole or the mysteriously-vanishing ball.

 Led by the many shows’ hosts, particularly Mr. Seacrest, the invigorated masses launched into a slurred rendition of *Auld Lang Syne.*

A billion voices sang together.

Chapter Fifty-Six - For Yonder Breaks a New and Glorious Morn

Kyle Colbert reclined in his hospital bed. He grinned and tolerated the sanitized smells and grim personalities because he knew he was minutes from going home.

 But mostly because Maria was at his side, with the kids fighting over a bag of Hershey’s Kisses. Surrounded by his family, who didn’t have a scratch or bruise, together and safe.

 Dr. Lee hovered over Kyle with a shrewd frown. He placed a stethoscope on his chest, “Breathe in –hold it... Now breathe out…”

 Kyle looked at Maria with a sudden thought, “Did we ever tell Rena she could leave her stepmother’s–”

 “–Quiet!” Lee scolded. “*Please,* Mr. Colbert.”

 “How’s he sound, Doc’?” Maria asked, running her fingers through Kyle’s hair.

 Dr. Lee flopped the scope over his shoulder and frowned at Kyle. “I’m *upgrading* you to walking pneumonia. You can go home –*if you rest*,” he stressed each word with a finger. “No more nonsense. I warned you would suffer delusions.”

 Kyle’s entire face seemed to smile, “All I’ve been trying to do is go home.”

 Seven hours earlier, just minutes after the final notes of *Auld Lang Syne,* FBI OpMed Agents had arrived on Broadway in unmarked Bell helicopters. The agents fanned-out, wearing generic fatigues, to tape-off two square blocks around the covered hole.

 Led by Agent Del Rey, Kyle and his family were whisked away, flown out in one of the choppers to avoid traffic.

 “Are we going home?” Jack asked with a tone of someone who wanted to call it a day.

 “Not yet,” Del Rey smiled. “We need to make sure everyone’s okay. Then you can go home.”

 “Who were all those agents?” Maria asked.

 Del Rey shouted over the helicopter’s drone, “FBI and local NYPD. Goldman got the same GPS info we did from the pics. The agents were sent for the AMBER alert and for any threats.”

 Kyle looked down at the scene. Thousands of people, unaware of how close they’d been standing to tragedy. He was grateful for the many people who had worked together for his family’s protection.

 The crowds that lingered in the streets had presumed the agents were cops to force everyone to go home. They had no clue they were there to test for seeping radiation.

 But the divine holiday spirits –perhaps the Three Kings– had smiled down on the scene. There was no trace of radiation at the street level. Agents from the CDC speculated that the tons of collapsed concrete over the blast had created a natural hundred-foot barrier.

 With Kyle’s submitted evidence, Goldman and his squad would begin an investigation to track the culprits –tomorrow, after a good night’s sleep.

 At New York Presbyterian, Dr. Lee concluded his exam and made a few notes. As he approached the door to exit, he motioned Maria aside.

 “You know…” Lee leaned in with a hushed tone, “The Bureau’s offering trauma counseling for the kiddies. I think you might should consider it–”

 Maria turned as her attention was drawn to the television. The news was showing footage of the Times Square Ball falling. It had gone viral online and on all the networks. Thousands of spectators had videoed the baffling event. Maria reached to turn up the volume.

 “…Engineers state the flagpole was over fifty years old. The city’s blaming ninety mile-per-hour gusts on top of the building, reported by the National Weather Service. The city says they already cleaned up the shattered ball, and a brand-new one will be ready for next year…”

 Maria and Kyle traded glances. The somber newscaster continued.

 “Emergency Management says there is *no* connection to a gas line that ruptured in an unused subway tunnel. They said accumulated gasses ignited from an old pipeline.”

 “Creative,” Kyle shrugged.

 “The only potential casualties,” the anchor tensed her brows, “are *seven* bodies found in the subway line. According to the coroner’s office, the bodies are unable to be identified, and presumed to be vagrants.”

 The newscaster flashed an ill-placed smile and finished with, “Other than that, we hope you have an *outstanding* New Year’s Day!”

 Agent Del Rey entered the room. As if the previous week had never occurred, she was back to her all-business demeanor in tailored black. “Greetings. I am pleased to see you are all well.”

 “The gas explosion was a nice touch,” Kyle half grinned.

 “A precautionary fiction.” Del Rey remained standing, “To account for any heat damage to utility lines or reports of any booms.” She paused to see the children playing with the window blinds. “Is it okay to discuss…*things*?”

 Maria swished her hand, “Now that we’re all together, the kids don’t listen.”

 Del Rey pulled up a chair and sat. She peered into Kyle’s eyes, “Mr. Colbert, you were correct with all of your theories. Your plans protected everyone.” She tipped her head.

 He didn’t reply. He wasn’t interested in praises or apologies. “I just wanted my family safe –and for me to not get slaughtered.” He looked towards the window. “It could have been *bad*…”

 “An immeasurable catastrophe.” Del Rey gave a solemn pause. “To assess the exposure, the CDC ventured into the subway line. They located an entrance a safe distance away, beneath a building on 5th Avenue.” She cocked her head to recall, “You know the old FAO Schwarz?”

 Kyle nodded, “I loved that store.”

 “Since it was a dirty bomb and not a full-fledged nuclear weapon, the radiation had diminished that far out, with no ill effects. Other than the seven deceased drifters and a lot less rats, there are no reported injuries. The tunnel will be razed, filled and forgotten.”

 “Buried. Like this entire story.” Kyle just wanted to resume his predictable life.

 “As promised, the Bureau will be issuing a statement how you were a target of a viral hoax, and in no way guilty of anything.” Del Rey shrugged, “–So your neighbors will still talk to you.”

 Kyle paused to process. He looked at her soberly with glistening eyes. “I just want to thank you, and your entire squad. For believing me and protecting my family.”

 A smile slipped from Del Rey’s lips as if it were an accident. “I’m not good at gratitude.” She glanced at her shoes and then back up. “Agent Goldman wants to thank you for GhostSeeker. I believe he called it, ‘a silver bullet to terrorism like our Cyber Division has *never* seen.’”

 “I hope it was worth it,” Maria spoke up. “We missed our first Christmas *and* first New Year’s Eve together –with a coma thrown in for good measure. Now we have to wait a year.”

 Jack and Cassie perked up at the mention of Christmas. They turned to look at their parents.

 “Kids, come here,” The vision of the kids approaching made him smile. He leaned down, “Believe it or not, everything will get back to normal. And Christmas *will* come again.”

 Jack shrugged with just one shoulder, unsold. Cassie blinked her large blue eyes.

 Del Rey observed the children’s faces and hopeful eyes. Her expression softened watching their exchange. She paused to look up as if an idea had flashed before her eyes.

 “Time will fly,” Maria assured the kids. “The holiday will come again, faster than you think.”

 With wide eyes, Del Rey exclaimed, “I may be able to help with that…”

Epilogue

“A very Merry Christmas and a happy New Year

Let’s hope it’s a good one without any fears”

John Lennon, 1971

It was another snowy evening in Lower Manhattan’s Little Italy. The ambiance was perfect for the warmly lit Holy Trinity Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

 The cathedral on Broome Street seemed out of place in Little Italy. It was built in 1901 in a Romanesque Revival style with arches and stained glass. Candles in the windows gave the building a heartfelt, holiday aura. But mostly because a lit sign proclaimed in English and Ukrainian, “JANUARY 7th, MERRY CHRISTMAS!”

 Beyond the candle-lit sanctuary, a Ukrainian choir sang “Carol of the Bells.” The pews were filled with merrily-dressed worshippers. For these happy people, it was Christmas Day.

 Seated in the center pew were Kyle and his family. He wore his favorite olive suit with a new Santa tie. His arm was around Maria, wearing a crimson blouse with black leggings that were acceptable for either church or a cocktail, depending on how she carried herself. Next to her, Cassie wore a new jade dress and Jack fidgeted with his clip-on tie and slicked-over hair.

 Thanks to church’s use of the Julian calendar instead of the Gregorian calendar, Anthea Del Rey had found a way for Kyle’s family to enjoy their first Christmas together without having to wait an entire year.

 Del Rey was smiling on the other side of Kyle, wearing a red skirt and an ivory blouse. She looked like a new person in something other than a black suit. She held the hand of her pride and joy: ten-year-old Richie. He had his mother’s blond hair, with curious eyes that studied the room.

 Immersed in the choir’s voices, Kyle soaked in the atmosphere. Fragrant ten-foot trees stood before stained-glass windows. He was fascinated by the chapel’s bright colors; blue, red and yellow. The hand-carved Bishop’s throne and tall icon cases were all glistening gold.

 At an early dinner before church, Del Rey had explained the church’s use of bright colors. Blue for the free, open sky. Red for life, passion and love. Gold made it possible to feel the radiant light of goodness. Christmas decorations and poinsettias accented the entire chapel.

 Behind the altar was a nativity scene. Kyle focused to see the figures appeared almost exactly like the ones from the shed. And smiling among them were the Three Kings.

 Kyle had no idea he’d be admiring such a place. A lot can happen in a week.

 When Kyle had finally returned home, it seemed as if time had never passed. Those few days after New Year’s when everyone’s decorations were still up. Cruising down Mayfield Lane, the area had been tranquil, with brightly lit homes and fresh snow. A few neighbors even waved.

 Once inside, the stockings were still hung and gifts sloppily-rewrapped under the tree. Kyle put on some Sinatra holiday music, and Maria whipped-up her 151-proof eggnog. With all phones and televisions off, their family resumed a near perfect Christmas Eve and morning.

 Within two days, SSA Vince Goldman had informed Kyle that Chester Hawkins, Connor Banks and the five defense contractors had inexplicably vanished. Based on the evidence Kyle provided, including a report of Iridium-192 missing from an oilfield where one of the contractors worked, warrants had been issued for all of their arrests. It was presumed they’d fled the country, so Interpol was also put on alert.

 According to Del Rey, Vince Goldman would be receiving the FBI Medal for Meritorious Achievement for his “extraordinary and exceptional service in a duty of extreme challenge and great responsibility.” Kyle was happy to have helped.

 Kyle contacted Chase Zahir in Stockholm to thank him for his covert research while he’d been on the run. When Zahir shared new data, they found it curious how all communication between the seven culprits had abruptly stopped on New Year’s Eve. The seven men’s last GPS locations were in the Times Square area. As Zahir kept mentioning “the seven men…” Kyle had a *déjà vu*, recalling a voice from the news, “*Seven bodies found in the subway line…”*

 Since Hawkins and Connor Banks had evidently gone AWOL, Foxtel’s remaining board offered Kyle a promotion. Maria scoffed, saying they were “kissing his ass to avoid getting sued.” Kyle agreed; he’d rather *not* work for a corporation that tried to assassinate him.

 One hour after that epiphany, Kyle was offered a job by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a lead cryptanalyst for their Cybercrimes Division. It’d come with a twenty-percent raise, and he could work from home three days a week. Less trains, less stress. And the Bureau had never tried to purposely kill one of their own employees –to his knowledge.

 “Look, Santa..!” Cassie’s voice pulled Kyle back to the present.

 He turned in his pew to see Cassie and Jack pointing to an older Bishop with a long white beard and a burgundy robe. The smiling man in spectacles looked like Santa.

 The choir shifted into a new song accentuated with bells. Though the voices were foreign to Kyle, the stirring melody seemed familiar.

 Then he smiled. Of course. It was a Ukrainian rendition of “I’ll be Home for Christmas.”

 And then –for a brief instant– it appeared almost as if the Three Kings all winked at Kyle.

THE END

Author’s Notes & Acknowledgments

Before any nuclear engineers, federal agents, New Yorkers, religious experts or holiday purists feel compelled to send me angry letters, this was a work of pure fiction.

During the holiday season, the annual debate about whether *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie or not always surfaces. So I was inspired; I’ll write my own full-throttle holiday thriller, and “Christmas” will be right in its title to remove all doubt. Though it is an invented tale of a man just trying to go home for the holiday, it may be interesting –or alarming– to know:

* Officials have warned of devices that could be implanted inside the bodies of terrorists. A senior member of the House Intelligence Committee stated, “We are concerned about surgically-implanted devices,” claiming the terror groups have surgeons who have developed techniques to defeat modern detection methods.
* A security alert was issued for London’s Heathrow Airport, to warn of female Al-Qaeda suicide bombers willing to board planes with explosive breast implants. Luckily none were discovered.
* In 2016, a case of Iridium-192 went missing from a storage facility for an American oilfield. In a separate incident, a truck was stolen from a hospital, containing Cobalt-60, a radioactive isotope used in medical treatments. The materials were never recovered.
* In 2017, a test was conducted in Washington, D.C., where radiological detectors were installed on emergency vehicles to create a real-time map of radiation levels throughout the capital. The test was aimed to search for spikes, to prevent attacks involving radiological “dirty bombs” and other nuclear threats.
* Details about the vacant skyscraper One Times Square, with twenty-four floors of no occupants (other than a Walgreens) is true. The most interesting tower in New York stands empty on the city’s most famous intersection.
* Ghost Security Group is a firm that targets websites used by terror groups to secretly communicate. They claim their software has taken down 149 Islamic State propaganda sites and 110,000 social media accounts since it formed. After the terror attack in Paris in November 2015, Ghost Security announced its "biggest operation ever," taking down 3,824 pro-ISIS Twitter and web accounts.

I’d like to give a special thanks to the Federal Bureau of Investigation for considering my unique questions. Specifically, Supervisory Special Agent Jeffrey P. Heinze; FBI Unit Chief Christopher M. Allen, and SSA Shanna Daniels, Investigative Publicity & Public Affairs. Also, thanks to T.J. Witham, Director of Communications with the Times Square Alliance. And to the hardworking ladies and gentlemen who helped create Google.

Rich Wickliffe

Marriott Marquis, Times Square, NY

January 4, 2019