

Chapter One

The day was again overcast. The marine layer hovered over William as he rode the YST wagon to the heart of the tourist district in Old Town, San Diego. His fellow passengers had their noses in their video screen visors that covered their faces like helmets from the Middle Ages. “Knights in white satin,” William whispered to himself from a lyric he was hearing on the audio channels coming from the buds inside his ears. He preferred audio over video because it gave him a background soundtrack for his seditious thoughts. He was also able to see his brothers and sisters with much more clarity. William was turning 40 in three days, and he knew what was in store for him, but unlike all of these other digital monkeys, he didn’t trust a single word that came from Big Bro’s mouth.

Inside his Youth Socialist Hostel on Congress Street, it smelled of boiled ramen and yoga mats. At one end of the ranch-style building, at the end of the hallway, a huge hologram vibrated in 16,777,216 bytes of color. It was the gargantuan portrait of a man of about twenty-five, with a blond beard and ruggedly handsome features. William headed for his cubicle domicile four doors down the hall. The rest of the building was dark, as it was part of the “Put Nature First” drive to limit energy use. *Of course, that didn’t prevent the infrared spy cameras from being used in every building, in every city around the world,* William thought, limping inside his sparse apartment. His soccer knee was acting up again, and he took some pride at having injured himself playing one of the banned sports. On each wall of every apartment, the same hologram gazed at you, and

the eyes followed you as you moved about. The voice from the poster rang out, and it could never be switched-off to save energy or to prevent global weather changes. BIG BRO IS MINDFUL OF YOU, the voice said, in a deep bass vibrato.

Behind his simple cot and clothes dresser, the wall display was broadcasting the party's 24-hour news. It was showing the latest in digital gadgets from the party headquarters in downtown San Diego and how "mindful brothers and sisters were using the entertainment visors and meditation videos of Big Bro to reach new heights of sensory bliss." *Unless you've reached 40. Then, bliss might as well be taking a piss off Big Bro's nose*, William thought, remembering the gigantic statue of their beloved leader out in Balboa Park, next to the old statue of El Cid on horseback. William watched his own reflection in the monitor. He was a thin brother with a curly-black goatee and black racial features. Wide, flat nose with flaring nostrils, full pink lips and pink palms reflected back at him in the mirror image. William's mother, Rose, who had Lewy Body Dementia, thought that mirrors led to another world. Just like *Alice in Wonderland*. "There are no races or categories of discrimination," William smiled and spoke out loud to the spy monitor from Big Bro's propaganda. *We only discriminate against you as you get older*, he thought. "Forty is the new twenty," he spoke at the screen. *Forty puts you on automatic Anomic Suicide watch*, he thought.

Outside, the world looked cold. In the best equatorial spot on the Earth, the temperatures hadn't reached 80 degrees in over ten years. Devil winds were swirling tourist trash into spirals in front of William as he walked toward his place of employment. These were the microcosmic versions of the giant tornadoes, hurricanes and tsunamis that kept the world on guard throughout the year. The

oceans had risen to create new waterfront properties on every continent, and William could see the breakers coming into shore from the Pacific about two blocks away. The bearded bro stared down at you from every street corner, and he was the only color in this frigid world of dark shadows. The hologram on the building across the street was looking right at him and broadcasting: BIG BRO IS MINDING YOU, the voice said, as the image's dark eyes looked deep into William's own. Down in the street, another poster, this one of paper, was whipping along in the wind, and William could see the letters YSW across the blue-green image of the world. In the far distance, a drone hovered and then darted, like a dragonfly, between the low hacienda-type tourist traps. They were protecting the inner party members, those aged 1-39, who took in the sights and sounds of old San Diego, completely protected by the drones, which could call in an air strike or a "droid doom boom" in seconds, to disperse an unruly mob or individual. The drone patrols didn't matter, however. Only the Mindfulness Droid Protectors, or MDP, mattered.

On another building made to resemble a Spanish restaurant, the same YSW news was being broadcast. The screen could transmit and receive simultaneously, and William knew all the spy devices could pick-up even a whisper from a citizen in the street. A young party member of about sixteen walked toward him, accompanied by two females. They were walking amidst the hundreds of tourists who were taking their children on a walking tour of the pseudo-Mexican structures that looked more like Big Bro's idea of what Hispanic culture was than what it actually had been. The three party members had their telescreen visors over their eyes, and yet the two women were topless and giggling, as the young stud between them masturbated in public to the pornography going on in his private 3D world of illusion. William shook his head in dismay as he passed them.

The world was now broken into pods of control called “Mindful Metro Campuses,” and William was serving in the southern quadrant of what used be known as North America. The cities kept their names, and there were vague attempts at cultural identification, as it was in Old Town, but there was no longer any central government other than Big Bro and the Young Socialists World Party. After the War on Terror was declared victorious by the bands of millions of unemployed youth across the globe, in what was believed to be 2028, a new vision for the future was declared, and there was a unique coming together of computer and android technology and the vision of a powerful youth, who decided to snatch the wealth of their more primitive elders and construct a new world order. Religions were banned for the good of the libertarian principles espoused by the new party, and so were any sports, recreation, business or other human endeavor that seemed to promote any kind of collective values or principles other than what Big Bro was declaring as “the only path out of the chaos and militant fear that was our past.”

Up ahead stood the tall skyscraper—the only one allowed—of the Young Socialists’ Ministry of Mindfulness. This was where William worked, and it was also broadcasting the libertarian message of the party, in ten-foot letters, running every ten seconds across the huge digital banner in front of the building:

WAR IS IN THE PAST

FREEDOM IS ALWAYS TODAY

IGNORANCE IS IN WRITTEN HISTORY

The Ministry of Mindfulness contained four thousand rooms above ground and corresponding fortresses below. Scattered about San Diego, as in every other

major metropolitan city in the world, were just three other buildings of the same appearance and size. They were the giants in the land of Lilliputian structures and hostels, and they were the only buildings allowed to be constructed above one story tall. These were the skyscrapers that housed the complete apparatus of government for Big Bro's Young Socialist World Party. The Ministry of Mindfulness, which controlled news, entertainment, meditation, education and the fine arts. The Ministry of Visual Reality, which ran the armies of drones and androids. The Ministry of Freedom, which concerned itself with suppressing any rebellions. And the Ministry of Living Bliss, which maintained economic affairs. Their names in Mindfulvoice: Minimind, Miniview, Minifree and Minibliss.

William knew that the Ministry of Freedom was the most frightening and sinister building. It had no windows, and it was kept in complete darkness inside, as everyone who entered was issued infrared gear and goggles to see. It was guarded 24/7 by android guards armed with laser bio-demobilizing rifles that could cause a human head to explode. You could enter and exit only after having been injected with top-secret computer chips from Big Bro's office inside.