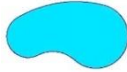


BILL SIMS

***Deep End of the
Spy Pool***



***“The Encrypted Fortune Cookie”
Episode 2***



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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My dream of writing and publishing fictional stories has finally reached fruition with my first book “The Encrypted Fortune Cookie.” This was the beginning of what is to be a series in the development and adventures of main characters Hunter, Erica and Joe, newly trained CIA Officers.

“Deep End of the Spy Pool” is the second in the series, with more exciting episodes and adventures to come for the trio.

Available on Amazon.

-Bill Sims

CHAPTER 1

The Farm

The pain was intense. I didn't know how much more I could take. I didn't have any weapons, just my hands and my body, to fight back. The loose clothing I was wearing offered no padding. Only my hands were wrapped. I knew if I didn't get aggressive now, kicking, punching, using every attack I had, that I would be worm food. I went for his face, throat, groin, chest, liver, every vulnerable part of his body.

When the whistle blew, I collapsed on the ground from sheer exhaustion. This was "*Krav Maga*," just one part of a very elaborate self-defense training program for CIA officers. It was an Israeli combat technique, which combines Boxing, Wrestling, Judo, Aikido, and Karate.

We were several weeks into our training at CIA facilities. Orientation took place at the George Bush Center for Intelligence, in Langley, an area of McLean, Virginia. Classroom training was held at CIA University, and numerous colleges and universities used by the CIA.

I had no misconceptions that ours was a typical training that new CIA officers were put through. For

most candidates, training might last six months or more, including everything from classroom lectures on basic law enforcement and criminal investigation, to weapons training and self-defense, and very real roleplay at the super-secret 10,000-acre Camp Peary, nicknamed “The Farm.” The Farm was over 150 miles from Langley.

After all, we were never meant to be full-fledged agents, but rather a team that the CIA would use to move secret data both physically and electronically, from and to covert sources, sometimes across the country, and sometimes internationally.

“Ohhhhh...” Joe moaned as he slowly lowered himself into the chair, his hands gripping the arms tightly to control the speed of bending his back, legs, and arms into a sitting position. “I feel like I fell out of a moving car,” he continued in a tight voice.

“I feel like I was hit by that car,” I added sympathetically.

Erica laughed. “You old guys are making me feel guilty.”

Erica didn’t sweat. She “perspired.” After workouts, she seemed to “glow” instead of “groan.”

We met in my room after the daily training. It became our daily ritual to meet in one of our rooms. It gave us a chance to compare notes. I tried to remember which days were mine so I would pick up

dirty clothes, throw out fast food garbage, and do a quick cleaning of the bathroom. After all, even though we might look beat up, with bruises, limps, even some cuts, it didn't mean we had to live like savages. Joe and I looked forward to Erica's days, not only because her room looked perfect, but it always smelled good.

The aroma of coffee filled my room. I always brewed a pot of coffee for the meeting there. Three reasons: it provided a sort of freshening and stimulating scent to the room; it could be both a pick-up and soothing drink for whoever was in the mood for coffee; lastly, it covered any lingering odors from dirty socks accidentally kicked under a chair, or leftover sandwich I neglected to find on top of the microwave for a few days.

"Mmm... love how your room always smells like coffee," affirmed Joe.

Erica, who might have been wise to me, scrunched up her face at the questionable atmosphere.

"One of these days you'll find those socks..." she said cryptically.

The Director of our special group, Officer Artemis Blackstone, had designed an abbreviated training course for Joe, Erica, and me, so as to become active and get out into the field as quickly as possible. Once

established in our missions, it would likely become apparent what skills were missing, and we would return to “the Farm” as needed. Basically, our team would be an experiment in serious “on the job” training. It occurred to me that if the CIA was not already doing this, we could be a pilot for quick reaction missions that couldn’t wait for future deployment.

The reality was that none of us had the prerequisites for most of our training courses. We received only the introductions to CIA training, condensing months-long classes to weeks. Our success depended on any technical and real-world skills we already had, along with an ability for quick learning. Erica and I had the technical backgrounds, while Joe had the real-world ones.

“How are your coding classes going, Erica?” I asked.

“I’ll never look at the world the same again!” she answered in excitement. “Anywhere you see text, pictures, even hear sounds, music, there can be a coded message inside.”

“Scary,” added Joe. “It would be great if they could come up with some kind of electronic scanner that would quickly alert you to those hidden messages. Like those electronic bug detectors for an office or house.”

“Maybe they have,” I said half kiddingly. “I wasn’t at the last meeting,” I laughed sarcastically.

We laughed and sipped our drinks. Joe and I took in the taste and aroma of the coffee, while Erica drank a Mountain Dew that I kept stocked in my fridge especially for her. She giggled a little as the carbonation tickled her nose.

“I really enjoy these evening get-togethers,” remarked Joe. “They take a bit of the sting out of the sometimes grueling days.”

“Especially since only a short time ago we barely knew each other,” chimed in Erica.

“Amazing what sharing a fortune cookie will do,” I joked.

At times in our training we were separated, being instructed in areas that enhanced our own individual strengths. Erica developed some new tech and coding skills, including a basic course in *steganography*, the practice of hiding a file, message, image, or video within another file. The latest form actually hides messages within network signals. Joe was given instruction relating to foreign travel, the use of multiple identity passports, arranging transportation, and being provided with foreign contacts we might need from time to time. I received a crash course on the kinds of electronics used by spies, and how to use and decipher the more common encryption methods.

The three of us together would make one awesome spy!

CHAPTER 2

Our First Mission as real CIA Officers

The morning after our last day of CIA training we were driven back to CIA headquarters in Langley, from Camp Peary. We met with Artemis Blackstone, who would be our immediate supervisor going forward. He was distinguished looking, black hair and beard, beginning to gray. Erica and Joe were both excited to hear what our next ‘mission’ would be. They reminded me of children anticipating a day at Disneyland. I was a bit more apprehensive but couldn’t help feeling some of their contagious enthusiasm.

“Good morning, Officers!” said Artemis, reminding us how far we had come in the past month. He almost beamed with pride at what he and the facilities here had transformed us into.

“So, how do you feel?”

“I feel the best I have since I got out of college” I answered truthfully. “My mind and body both feel rejuvenated. I’m ready to give James Bond some competition,” I laughed. “Of course, I’ll be needing an Aston Martin.”

“Well,” interjected Joe, “at \$200,000 plus, I’m guessing it’ll be a while.

Everyone was laughing by now, even Artemis, who nodded in agreement with Joe.

“I’m with Hunter,” chimed in Joe. “I feel like I’m a whole new person too, physically and mentally. It’s like taking on a new identity. I realize that a month can only accomplish so much, but even I’m impressed at the change.”

“If you say so yourself,” I offered a jab.

“Well,” began Erica, “you old guys probably went through something traumatic to get through all the pushups, sit-ups, and running,” she laughed. “I have to admit I was in pretty good shape to begin with.” She glanced at the two of us for some agreement, but we knew better.

Of course, Joe and I shared a thought at that moment. As much as we thought of Erica as “one of the guys,” we also appreciated that she was gorgeous, and definitely in great shape.

“That said, the endorphins kicked in,” Erica held on to her moment, “and I felt a lot more energetic and fit. But it was the new technology and learning about encryption, using codes, ways of passing information on without being discovered, that really made me feel exhilarated. I can’t wait to use those things in the field!”

“Terrific” exclaimed Artemis. “Truth is, we have a mission all ready for you to test your new skills against. This will be a bit more complex than your first adventure. The first big difference will be that you’ll already be a team and have some idea of what kinds of things to expect. You’ll have to work together using things we’ve taught you.”

“Here is a basic outline of what to expect,” began Artemis. “The mission will be to carry covert data to London, and then to receive and bring back more of the same to a facility we have in West Virginia. Although the info could be sent electronically, there would be too much chance these days of it being intercepted. Electronic surveillance by bad actors has become very sophisticated, so the ‘old fashioned’ human way is being used in this case. It will intentionally involve a number of misdirections and other spycraft to keep the data safe. Even using the mail or delivery services lets too much of the human factor into the process. So, in many cases, transporting the data using our agents, is the best avenue.”

Artemis continued, “You’ll all return to your homes after this meeting, just to rest up a bit, and to get your ordinary ‘lives’ back in order. Feed the cat or dog, bring in the mail, mow the lawn, say hello to anyone you’ve missed. Then, make preparations to

leave anytime within the next few days. Truth is you probably won't be gone more than a week."

"Awww..." I said quietly. Everyone turned to see what was wrong. I suddenly felt bad that I would be returning to an empty apartment, where no one had missed me.

"No cat, no dog, no lawn. I don't even know my neighbors. No one would miss me," I said with a tone of lament.

Everyone was taken aback by this. Erica rubbed my shoulder.

"Now that you mention it, I think we're all in the same boat there," admitted Joe.

"I have a goldfish," protested Erica. "She would miss me, mostly the food I sprinkle into her bowl every day. Although, I guess if my neighbor sprinkles it in it would be all the same to Goldy."

"Ahem..." Artemis cleared his throat as if to say "Boohoo... now get a grip, all of you." Although he didn't actually say anything, we just knew what he meant.

"Shortly after you all return home, Joe will get another package, just like the first time. The three of you will need to get together and evaluate what you find in that package. After your first experience with

the “*encrypted fortune cookie*,” you’ll have a better idea of what to expect.”

“The data you need to transport will be hidden in a photo. That photo will need to be delivered to a contact in London. Instructions on how to do that will be included somewhere in the package. It’s best that you not know every detail to some things ahead of time, on the very slim chance that someone interrogates you under duress. You can’t give away answers you don’t have. Your plane tickets, transportation arrangements, and hotel reservations will also be in the package. Most importantly you’ll find passports for each of you, using your real identities.”

Artemis paused to allow us time to take in the details so far. He stroked his salt and pepper beard. His face revealed no excitement, doubts, no emotions. We glanced at each other, and we knew what was expected so far. We had been through it once already. All that was left were the specifics: the riddles we would have to solve, the fortune in the cookie, putting all the clues together, and the timing.

“Your first full day in your hotel room will be Monday,” continued Artemis. You’ll be sightseeing for a couple of days. One of the places you’ll visit is the British Museum. Tickets will be included in your package. Make certain to pass through Victoria Station at 10:30 AM on Wednesday to get to the

Museum. Anyone watching you will be convinced you're just being tourists."

"On Wednesday evening, you'll purchase a copy of *The Sun*, the highest circulated London newspaper. In the personal ads, you'll find an ad by a name that we will send to you once you've arrived. You will encrypt that ad, word for word, and hide it inside a digital photo that you will take at the British Museum. Erica, you'll work with Hunter to first encrypt the ad, then use one of the steganographic methods you've learned, to hide it in the photo. The three of you will deliver it to a CIA site in West Virginia when you return from London. Any more details will be provided as things move along."

"Oh, and before I forget," continued our new boss, "I have something for each of you." He moved three medium-sized boxes from a table next to his desk and placed them in front of each of us. Each one had one of our names on the box.

"Go ahead, open them," Artemis said, almost beaming with anticipation. Joining the others, I opened my box to find a special CIA identification card in a flip-open official CIA leather wallet, along with a pistol in its leather shoulder holster. There was also an earpiece that I assumed would somehow let us communicate with each other. I radiated with pride as I stared at my photo. It was actually a good

photo of me. I couldn't wait to flash my badge at some civilian or even criminal.

“You are officially CIA Officers. Congratulations!” announced Artemis. If he had had a bottle of champagne, I'm sure he would have popped the cork at that moment.

The reality of it all was almost palpable at this point. Seeing the ID and gun brought home the actual truth that we were now involved in something exciting, and dangerous beyond any experience we had ever had before.

“Each of you has been issued this Glock 9mm pistol as part of your official CIA status. They are very effective and more easily concealed. In order to avoid any problems in traveling and getting through security and customs at the airport, we will send the weapons to you once you've arrived at your hotel. The kind of mission the three of you are on shouldn't require any use of your weapons, but it's better to be prepared than sorry. Also, it will give you the opportunity to get used to carrying a weapon.”

CHAPTER 3

We Were Burglarized!

I had almost gotten used to living the dormitory life at the CIA. Opening the door to my apartment, I felt a chill. It wasn't a temperature chill. It was a feeling of being somewhere strange, where I was no longer familiar with the surroundings. I knew it would take a little time to acclimate again to the place I actually called "home."

"Weird," I said to myself, trying to remember where the light switch was.

The lights came on, throwing an illumination over the hallway and living room. I left my suitcase in the hallway, then went to the fridge. I was parched from the dry air of the plane, and the twist-off Pepsi would satisfy my needs perfectly. Needing to sit down after all the walking and pulling the over-sized suitcase, I sank into the sofa and took a long cold sip.

It felt great to be home, though it was hard to relax after the past month or so living in a suspense novel. It still hadn't all sunk in, but glancing at the CIA ID made me want to pinch myself. I had somehow become a real-life CIA Intelligence Officer. Life as I had known it would probably never be the same. I felt certain that Erica and Joe were having similar thoughts.

We were given a couple of days to catch up on things at home. For me, that would mean checking and answering emails, paying a couple of bills, tossing out the few plants that had died in my absence, and packing a bag to be ready to travel.

I thought of calling the other two “musketeers,” but we would be spending all of our time together soon enough. I decided I would just wait for the call from Joe saying that he had received the package from Artemis with instructions about our mission.

Thankful that I had the foresight to stay paid up on my cable bill, I switched on the tv and found a local news station. Robbery, murder, car accidents, some upcoming flower show, nothing had really changed while I was gone.

Away from the stress of training and the anxiety of an upcoming mission, I fell asleep on the sofa for a couple of hours. I woke suddenly to a knocking on my door. I opened the door to an almost frail looking man, in his 60’s, who looked somewhat familiar.

“Hello?” I said questioningly, inferring that I didn’t know who he was.

“Hi neighbor,” he began. “I’m Carl Lynch. Live just a couple doors down from you.” We exchanged polite smiles.

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been gone for a while.” He quickly covered any possibility of creepiness

with “It’s a small community of condo’s so one notices things like that.”

“Yeah, I’ve been going through a training program for my work.” I kept my story close to the truth, so that I wouldn’t have to make up any big lies.

“I just wanted to let you know about something I saw last week, in case it meant anything,” the neighbor began mysteriously, almost with pride at some revelation he could offer.

“Oh? What’s that?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to go down this road of potential obligation to this man. My curiosity, however, got the best of me.

“One evening I was sitting on the bench in the community park right across from some of the condos’ front entrances. I noticed a man at your front door. I was surprised, thinking it might be you, since I hadn’t seen you in weeks. Then I realized it wasn’t you. The man was dressed in dark clothing, had on a knit cap, and an eye patch. He went inside your condo and stayed for maybe an hour. When he left, he seemed to just disappear into the night. I didn’t see a car.”

“Did you think about calling the Police?” I asked, trying not to sound too accusative. Inwardly, however, I wanted to reach over and punch the man’s grinning face.

“Well, I couldn’t be sure if the stranger wasn’t someone you had given a key to feed a pet or water some plants. Also, I didn’t want to get involved, having to be grilled by the Police, go to a lineup, you know.”

“Yeah, sure,” I went along with the man’s idiocy. I realized that my past impression of the neighbor had been spot on. The man wanted some emotional reward for what he had seen and divulged, but he couldn’t get involved. Taking care of ‘number one’.

CHAPTER 4

New Swimmers in the Spy Pool

After my neighbor left, I decided to look around the apartment to see if anything had been disturbed or was missing. Odd how under duress or threat you either can't decide what is valuable, or what you would miss the most. Is it your wallet, your favorite two-hundred-dollar tennis shoes, phone, computer, beer, or big screen tv? I settled on doing a quick scan to see if anything looked out of place.

I found several drinking glasses and coffee cups in the sink. Although it had been a month or two since I'd been home, I didn't remember ever putting them there. The laundry bin looked like someone had gone through it and randomly thrown things back in and on the floor around it. There might have been some underwear missing. Looking quickly through the bathroom, everything seemed as I left it. Upon closer inspection, however, several things made me catch my breath. All of my toothbrushes were gone, the newest, of course, was still in my suitcase from my time at Langley. A hairbrush that I used occasionally, along with a comb, were completely clean of any of my hairs. Even more mind-boggling, a thin layer of the bar of soap I used for showers had been carefully sliced off.

It suddenly struck me that there was one strange connection between the only items in my apartment that had been disturbed or taken. They were sources of my DNA! The man with an eye patch was after my identity. I didn't know why, but the reason seemed plausible. He wanted to know exactly who was joining his ranks of covert actors.

As I finished inspecting the bathroom area, and began to leave, I glanced back one last time and smiled. Perhaps for spite, perhaps out of a sense of humor, I noticed the toilet paper roll on the wall. The end of the paper had been folded into a point, just as it was done in hotels. A nice touch.

My first thought was to call Erica and Joe, to see if they had noticed a break in at their homes. At first, neither of them had been aware of any disturbance. Once I told them what I had found, it was a different story. Erica checked immediately and found the same kinds of things missing as I had noticed. She seemed to be shaking as she admitted it to me. CIA Officer or not, she was a woman living alone, and she felt invaded, somewhat helpless. She touched her newly acquired Glock to regain some sense of security. Joe had been oblivious to anyone having broken in and wanted time to check. He would call back.

Feeling certain that Joe would find the same evidence that he and Erica had, I decided it best to call Artemis right away. I knew that Joe had a much

larger area to check, but I had given him enough direction to know what to look for. Instinctively, I also warned them both against disturbing any fingerprints, or other incriminating evidence the stranger might have left.

“Artemis, we’ve been broken into!” I said excitedly over his secure phone.

“All of you?” Artemis questioned, almost knowingly. He stopped short of saying “I’m not surprised.” His inner reaction was that it was almost standard practice in the world of spies to identify any new swimmers in the espionage pool. He immediately sent a forensic team to the homes of Erica, Joe, and myself.

Artemis also quickly passed the description of the possible burglar given by my neighbor on to the Investigative team. They let him know that they would pull any camera feeds from both my and Erica’s buildings along with street level surveillance cameras in the area to see if they could find any suspects that would match the stranger with an eye patch, probably dressed in dark clothing, possibly a knit cap. They would do the same for the area around Joe’s mansion, though the possibility of finding cameras, especially ones that might pick up pedestrians, was unlikely. Sorting through camera feeds was a long, tedious process, and the team put

as many investigators on it as possible. Still, it would take days, if not longer.

Ironically, the character who had flaunted his skills a bit too much at my apartment with the special “pointed” end to the toilet paper roll, had been “hoisted by his own petard.” There were fingerprints left on that last artistic flourish. In fact, forensics found multiple clear fingerprints due to the “origami” intricacies of folding the end of the toilet paper into a perfect point.

I smiled both in admiration and at the irony.

“Gotcha,” I said aloud, a vindictive smile on my face.

I called both Erica and Joe again to see if they had heard the news.

“They found fingerprints!” I almost shouted.

“Yes, same here,” Erica was jubilant. She was almost giggling sadistically at the thought they would catch and punish this bad guy who dared to invade her private domain.

“Fingerprints here too,” announced Joe when I called him. “Don’t you think it odd that a seemingly professional burglar would make such an obvious mistake?”

“Come to think of it,” I answered, “now that I know that he or they committed the same blunder in

each of our homes, it does seem either some complete ineptitude, or an almost intentional act. Like they wanted to send some message”

“Maybe he meant it more as a calling card. So we would know him in the future,” I guessed wildly. “Maybe he’s teaching us something.”

Everyone went silent, contemplating what that lesson or message might be.

Sparing no effort, the Investigative team soon discovered videos of the man wandering around the neighborhoods of both myself and Erica. They tried using facial recognition to identify the interloper but got no results. Either the street cameras produced too grainy images, or the man’s face was not in the data bank. Coupled with the fingerprints that were buried in some covert files that had been locked down so tight that even the CIA couldn’t get to them, the investigators had nothing to go on.

We waited to hear back from Artemis with any further results from the forensic and Investigative teams. As sometimes happens in the world of spies, however, a search through the files of AFIS (Automated Fingerprint Identification System) and the extensive FBI fingerprint data bank, even reaching out to Interpol, resulted in only a “blocked,” classified file, protecting whoever belonged to those fingerprints. Total frustration.

Although the result was both alarming and frustrating to the three of us, Artemis, on the other hand had seen this before. The world of espionage was a very complicated one, where sometimes the identities of even “bad” people had to be protected. He immediately tasked some of his top cyber techs to look into cracking the identity of the unknown entity, along with who it was that was keeping them hidden.

Even more concerning, what could the man, or whoever he worked for, want? Was it some kind of initiation by the intelligence world? Maybe some specific agency like the FSB or GRU of Russia, or the Ministry of State Security (MSS) of China, Mossad of Israel, MI6 of Great Britain, or any number of spy agencies throughout the world simply wanted to “update” their files.

CHAPTER 5

Emergency Meeting and Threat to Erica

Trying to leave the probe into “burglar-gate” up to Artemis and the CIA Investigative team, I set the disturbance to my apartment aside. I needed to rest before the mission.

The next day came, and the anticipation began to get to me. I had nothing left to take care of at home, and trying to rest up for the mission was out of the question. Since we still didn’t know any details about our travel, hotel, or location, I couldn’t even familiarize myself with the nature of our arrangements.

Fortunately, I was able to sleep the second night and woke refreshed around 8 AM. My instincts told me that this might very well be the day that Joe gets the package with our instructions. After breakfast and a shower, I double checked to make sure everything was locked, all unnecessary electrical items had been unplugged, and that I had packed anything I might need for a week. I made certain to use a medium sized suitcase, with wheels that I could easily roll, lift, and take up and down stairs. Previous travels with a large suitcase had taught me what a nightmare that could be. I also made certain that anything I packed, including cosmetics, would meet any travel regulations.

However, as they say, “the best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray.” And so it was when we all received encrypted phone calls from Artemis. The burglaries and subsequent CIA investigations had disturbed him enough that he felt that the novice team needed to meet before leaving for their mission. A plane would be waiting for us at a secluded hangar at Burke Lakefront Airport. We were to carpool in one of our own vehicles to get there, in order to not draw the attention that an agency vehicle might bring.

There was hardly time for the three of us to catch up before we landed at Reagan and were whisked away in a blacked-out limo, with no markings, to CIA HQ.

According to the call, the meeting would take as long as necessary. There were issues that needed to be discussed face to face. Afterward, we would be returned to Cleveland where we would receive our mission package and allowed time to continue any preparations for our trip.

What we didn't know was that the evening before Erica, Joe, and I were to return to Langley, Erica received a mysterious, perhaps even threatening, phone call. Likely from an encrypted or burner phone, she had no idea where the call came from, or who it was that was at the other end. The unidentified voice, which sounded electronically altered, said

only that they knew about the last project that Erica's parents were working on. They knew that it could have devastating effects as a cyber weapon. They also knew that Erica had some knowledge about the code and how the program worked.

The call ended as abruptly as it began. There were no questions asked, no demands made. Disconnecting the call, Erica's heartbeat threatened to break through her chest. The revelation and artificial voice may as well be threatening her life, and perhaps they were. It had been years since she had worked on the software with her parents. Even then, she didn't realize how powerful it was. She had a sense of it now.

Even without knowing about the late-night call Erica had received, Artemis was concerned enough about the safety of his new team that he arranged to have installed biometric alarm systems on each one of our homes. They required both fingerprint scans and iris scans. I guessed the installation at Joe's mansion would have been more complex because of the several entrances and numerous windows. It was comforting to know that the CIA was sparing little expense for the safety of their newest "investment." I also knew that in spite of whatever wealth Erica had inherited, she lived in a modest, though very nice apartment in an upper level of a high rise. Whatever security precautions that might entail.

Furthermore, the alarm systems at all three locations were to be monitored at the CIA Network at Langley, 24-hours a day by a Network Security team.

It seems there were definite advantages to belonging to one of the top intelligence agencies in the world.

CHAPTER 6

Possible Motives for the Burglaries

We met in one of the many conference rooms at Langley. There were no windows, and from what I had read, the walls might have been infused with copper to block signals. Of course, I had read that weeks ago, so it might very well be out-of-date information. Phones would find no connection.

“Welcome back to CIA HQ!” Artemis smiled at each one of us, his head moving slowly left to right, acknowledging each of us in turn. “In light of recent events, and the fact that this is your first mission, I decided that we needed to get together, all of us in the same room, and communicate any questions or concerns, instead of relying on the two dimensions of a monitor screen.”

Erica suggested to Artemis that it was actually our second mission, and I agreed. She joked, but inside her nerves felt twisted and raw. Joe wisely stayed out of what would be a moot point anyway. After all, only now were we officially CIA officers.

I sensed that something was wrong with Erica. I had come to know her well enough that I could usually read her like a book. For whatever reason though, she was keeping her ‘library’ of feelings offline.

“Someone seems to have an as yet unknown agenda, and it somehow involves all of you,” Artemis continued.

“Has the team come up with anything as far as the one-eyed man’s identity?” I asked the question all three of us wanted to know.

“Latest news I have is still inconclusive,” answered Artemis.

“Which brings me to this. Perhaps we need to move through this dilemma from the other direction.”

The idea seemed like a good one, although we had no clue what he was actually saying.

“Let’s try to self-analyze. Determine why each one of you might have someone stalking you, perhaps looking for something.”

Glancing around, both Joe and Erica’s faces seemed suddenly flush, their glances no longer meeting Artemis’ eyes. As if contagious, their reactions made me analyze my own back story, and any lurking danger I was aware of.

“Yes, it seems we’re on the right track, judging from your subtle reactions,” concluded Artemis.

“Hunter, let’s begin with you. Remind me of what shadows might persist from your past,” Artemis was direct, catching me off balance.

“Well... I’ve assumed that my past situation was exactly that, past. For the purposes of complete transparency, it’s possible that some danger may linger from my days of working as a contractor for the FBI. I had changed my name and moved, and even had a friend at the FBI in cybersecurity wipe my existence. You also told me that you had taken care of the situation when I began working for the CIA. So...” I paused.

“Yes, I did,” Artemis nodded in a positive way. “I feel confident that we are on top of your situation. That said, nothing is 100%, so don’t become complacent. As with everything you’re involved in with the CIA, you need to always be on your toes.”

I felt good that they were through talking about me. Nevertheless, I had some mixed emotions after what Artemis had said about the “100%”. Even at “99%” I now realized that I might have to keep looking over my shoulder the rest of my life.

“Joe, why don’t we take you next. What about your life could be the ‘bane’ of your existence?”

Artemis’ attempt at humor fell flat with the group. The atmosphere in the room was heavy.

“You probably already know the story of how I finished my father’s covert mission to, let’s say, “eliminate” certain depraved world figures,” said Joe.

“He led a Black Ops team over several years to complete the removals. I never knew exactly who or what agency created the targeted assassinations. I only knew that my father had made me swear on his deathbed that I would fund and lead his special ops team in the remaining removals from the “blacklist” that they had been given.”

“Which we did,” Joe concluded firmly, seemingly without emotion.

“Can you think of any repercussions that may have followed you as a result, Joe?” Artemis brought us back to the circumstances behind the meeting, the burglaries of our homes.

“Honestly, I can’t,” answered Joe, genuinely confounded. “The actions of the team were completely clandestine. In fact, by the time the list of assassinations was completed, the very program had long since been considered closed. So only those actually involved in the black ops operation knew it was still active.”

“Any thoughts?” Artemis turned to the whole group. “No bad ideas at this point.”

We all shook our heads, trying to stick to actual logic, and avoid total fantasies

“Alright, let’s move on for now,” Artemis said mercifully.

“Erica, last but not least,” kidded Artemis.

Erica actually blushed and turned her face down. She could sometimes be shy. Other times though, she could be a force to be reckoned with, and I was definitely glad she was on our side.

“I’ve given it some thought,” the shy exterior seemed to be gone. “There is something I should tell you that may be behind what’s been happening to us.” Erica began biting her lower lip.

CHAPTER 7

Erica's Secret Revealed

Artemis looked pale all of a sudden. Looking into the darkness of the unknown, being responsible for all of us, yet feeling helpless to control all the backstories our lives brought to the table, was daunting.

“I’ve told you that my parents were programmers who worked on different projects at Microsoft, Google, and Norton, among others,” Erica began. “They were among the best at what they did.”

“I also told you that they were both killed in the crash of a small plane a few years ago.”

“What I didn’t tell you was that they had been developing a software that could be classified as a combination spyware, malware, virus, and more, for one of their clients, which could take down very large networks. It comes on the heels of such powerful malware as the “*Emotet*” Trojan, the “*WannaCry*” Ransomware, and the famous “*Stuxnet*” Worm, and is possibly more powerful than any of them.”

“Criminals and even spies want it. Countries want it.” continued Erica with this incredible, if not disturbing story.

She was almost shaking with the next statement.

“I sometimes worked on it with them.”

“I think the burglars and whoever they work for are after me,” she leaned forward, head in her hands. She fought back the tears. There’s no crying in the CIA.

“And I don’t believe my parents’ plane crash was an accident.”

Every mouth in the room was open in shock.

There were a few moments of general silence, trying to understand what this dark revelation from Erica actually meant.

“Well, it’s too late to cancel your mission,” Artemis finally spoke in the reality of the moment. “Too much has been prearranged, and necessary circumstances set in motion.”

Erica nodded slowly, knowingly. Her instincts knew that her life, even her CIA life, couldn’t just stop because of possible threats that hung over her.

“We will, however, investigate any threats to you, Erica,” assured Artemis. “Rest assured, it will be a priority. Meanwhile, I’ll have special CIA officers maintaining a 24-hour surveillance on you and the team, wherever you go, including on your assignment.”

Why didn’t Erica tell Artemis about the call, especially at a time when they were revealing their inner secrets and vulnerabilities? Exactly for that

reason. She felt vulnerable, guilty that she may be bringing some danger to the team. She didn't want to look like an albatross.

Finally, the burden became too much for her, and the first opportunity that she, Joe, and Hunter were alone, Erica burst out with her heavy burden.

"I got a threatening call!" she gushed. It was so sudden, even loud, that Joe and I jumped in our seats.

Erica proceeded to give us an account of the call. Since she had just told us about her possible link to the software that her parents had developed, we immediately understood the implications of the call. We also quickly understood the potential for danger to her.

"Erica, I can't imagine how much stress, if not outright fear, you must be feeling," I tried to empathize with her without being condescending, knowing that there may be people looking for her and the secrets of this powerful malware.

"I do feel really paranoid and vulnerable right now," she admitted, feeling a little better because of the sympathy.

"I wouldn't worry about it," added Joe to the conversation, sounding almost callous. "The CIA has your back. Artemis has guys watching you, and we're here, so you're fine."

“In fact,” he added, “maybe the anonymous call had some other intended message. Could be it wasn’t meant to be threatening at all.” It was his awkward way of trying to make her feel better. On the other hand, maybe I just hadn’t noticed before that Joe put concern about his own situation over empathy for others.

Erica’s face was expressionless, her eyes distant.

“Yeah, I guess so,” was all she muttered, quietly.

I wanted to hug Erica, to reassure her, despite Joe’s words, but I knew she was in a very fragile state, and I didn’t want to crowd her.

CHAPTER 8

Dead Goldy and Threatening Note

We returned to our homes a second time within a few days. The first time, less than a couple of days ago, had been interrupted by the surprise meeting for which Artemis had called us back to Langley. Once all of us had discussed the burglaries at our homes and planned how to proceed not only with our mission, but also with our disrupted lives, we returned home to finish preparing for our first official assignment.

Even before opening the door of my apartment, after a month or so of being a guest of the CIA, I knew it would be hard to relax. No longer coming home to some mundane life, I had somehow become a card-carrying CIA Officer. Life as I knew it would probably never be the same. I felt certain that Erica and Joe were having similar thoughts.

Meanwhile, Joe was back in his mansion. The massive cold structure no longer had the feel that it had a month ago. There was no excitement there. Room after room of comfort and excess left him with the feeling of being in a museum. He had come to crave excitement.

Even though she had only been gone a couple of days for the meeting with Artemis and the rest of the team, Erica felt relaxed as soon as she opened the

door to her apartment. As they say, it's "home sweet home," no matter how long you've been gone. The familiar feel of your own things, the comfortable layout, your privacy, was always the best, no matter where you've been.

Erica set her small "go bag" on the ottoman, discarded her shoes, and let the large over-sized La-Z-Boy envelop her. At that moment, she was tempted to just fall asleep there for the night, instead of walking to her bed. She thought better of it, and decided to take a warm bath to relax.

Then she remembered her goldfish, Goldy, and decided to check and see if she had enough food. Once she knew that she might be away for periods of time, Erica bought an automatic fish-feeder, that dropped a small amount of fish flakes into the water periodically. Goldy wouldn't know the difference, or would she? Erica supposed that her goldfish might notice when she walked up to the aquarium to feed her. So she might miss that. In the end, however, the flakes hitting the surface was all that mattered.

Glancing across the room to the small accent table in the corner, she saw the goldfish bowl, but something looked wrong. Erica moved quickly over to the table, her eyes focused on the bowl of water, searching for Goldy. Then she saw her, floating on the surface of the water, dead. Tears filled Erica's eyes immediately. Goldy had been her family. It was

too much for her to cope with. It was like losing a child.

There was more. A note was taped to one side of the goldfish bowl. The message was handwritten in large bold letters:

“WE NEED YOUR HELP-WE WILL BE IN TOUCH”

Erica shuddered at the words. They sounded almost pleading, yet the message of the dead goldfish felt threatening. Her next instinct was to rush back to where she had left her bag on the ottoman. She quickly pulled out the Glock. Holding it with both hands in front of her, she began to move through her rooms, opening closet doors, looking under tables and beds. Only after she had gone through the entire apartment did she begin shaking. Erica fought back the tears. She was learning to harden herself. Now it seemed even more important.

Without hesitation she knew what her next step would be. She called me.

Fighting back any emotion, Erica said “Hunter, I need you.”

“What’s wrong Erica?” was my first response.

“NOW!” was all she said, then hung up the phone.

Not knowing what this was about, I didn’t know whether I should call Joe. Then I thought, if she

wanted Joe to know, she would have called him. For now, I was apparently her “chosen” one.

I jumped into the Mustang Cobra. From Erica’s voice I could tell that I would need to get there as quickly as possible. The 390 horsepower could do that. Fortunately, I still had the magnetic blue flashing light that I sometimes used when the FBI needed me quickly. I could only hope that no police would stop me. I didn’t have time for that explanation.

Arriving at Erica’s in less than 15 minutes, I rushed to her apartment. My pistol was in my shoulder holster under a light nylon windbreaker. Ohio, as I recalled, was an open carry state, but I didn’t want to draw any more attention to myself. Her front door was open slightly. I didn’t know if this was a bad sign, or if Erica was just allowing me to come in without announcement. I pulled the Glock from my holster and slowly pushed the door open.

Erica was sitting back in a large, cushioned living room chair, her pistol in her lap.

“It’s ok,” she said almost without emotion. “There’s no one here.”

“What... ?” I began to form a question.

“The goldfish bowl,” she said simply, a finger pointing at a far corner.

I couldn't believe that Erica had created an emergency over her goldfish, but I went to see the bowl and fish anyway. I immediately saw the floating fish and felt both shocked and sad. Goldy had been fun to watch and seemed always friendly. I felt a sense of loss. I still didn't understand the immediate crisis I had heard in Erica's voice on the phone.

Then I saw it. She had left the note where she found it, still hanging from the goldfish bowl.

“WE NEED YOUR HELP-WE WILL BE IN TOUCH”

I felt a chill run down my spine. The message almost sounded like it was coming from the spirit world. I immediately remembered the mysterious phone call that Erica had received. It was about the powerful and dangerous software that her parents had developed. Software that she had worked on with them. Obviously, someone wanted that software. Whether it was to use it, or sell it to some group or country, the dangerous combination of virus, malware, and more could be weaponized.

“I'm calling Artemis,” I said emphatically. “He was supposed to have special Officers watching over you!”

There was no response from Erica. She sat quietly in her chair, the pistol still resting in her lap.

As soon as the encrypted call connected, I practically shouted into the phone.

“Artemis, I thought you had people watching over Erica!”

“What... ?” he was taken aback.

“They’ve struck again, this time inside her apartment,” I took a deep breath.

I told him what had happened, and how Erica was either in shock or taking it very well. So far, no tears. I didn’t know whether it was the gruesome loss of “Goldy,” a companion for several years, or the note left on the glass bowl coffin, that had the greater effect on her. Possibly both.

“Pick me up at Burke in 2 hours,” said Artemis.

“Yes sir,” I answered without discussion.

“Meanwhile, call Joe and have him get over to Erica’s asap,” Artemis added, then disconnected.

I walked over to where Erica was sitting and slowly, gently removed the pistol from her hands.

“Artemis is on his way. I’ll pick him up at the airport in two hours. Meanwhile, I’m calling Joe. Artemis wants him here, and he can stay with you while I’m gone.”

“What could they possibly want from me? Why take it out on Goldy?” Erica said in an almost pleading voice, betraying her grief.

“I don’t know Erica, but you can bet it’s for no good.” I made it clear I thought these were bad people. “There must be something missing from the software for them to place their bets on you. Could be passwords, encryption keys, or just some understanding of how the program works. Something they believe you could supply.”

“Yes, something I might know...” her voice drifted off. Erica had closed her eyes and fallen asleep. The stress had overcome her, and perhaps my presence made her feel safe again, for now.

Meanwhile, Joe arrived, full of questions. I shushed him so he wouldn’t wake up Erica. We moved to a different room, so I could fill him in on the details. His first reaction was one of anger, saying he would kill whoever it was that was responsible for this.

“I finally found a reason for having this Glock!” He was being serious. “They’ll be sorry they ever thought of harming a goldfish, or my friend.” Still serious.

“Artemis is on his way. In fact, I have to go pick him up at the airport. You be ok to stay with Erica?”

I asked Joe, having second thoughts about his anger level.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” tapping the bulge in his jacket, where his holster must have been.

“By the way,” I had an afterthought, “probably best not to touch or move anything.” Both Joe and Erica nodded, though hers was barely perceptible.

I got my jacket and car keys as I got ready to leave for Burke Lakefront Airport. I decided to take one last look at the big soft chair where Erica had fallen asleep. I was surprised to see that she was just waking up. Her eyes opened wide.

“I remember,” she said.

Hesitating, I said nothing, waiting to see if there was more to Erica’s either conscious statement, or some revelation in the last stage of sleep. She remained quiet, her eyes turning toward me.

“Remember what?” I tried to evoke some clarification of Erica’s announcement.

“I know what they’re looking for,” she added in obvious consciousness.

“What?” I tried to pull her from this loop of empty statements.

“My parents heavily encrypted their software. As I recall, they used AES encryption, or RSA, or a

combination of both. It would take massive computer power billions of years to brute force the code.”

“Ok,” I glanced at my watch to see how much time I had before I needed to pick up Artemis at the airport.

“Back when I was working with them on the software, they provided me with a location where I could find the ‘key’ to the encryption, should something happen to them.”

“The key?” asked Joe.

“It’s not a physical thing,” began Erica. “It’s a string of characters, numbers, letters, symbols, whatever, that when run by an algorithm will decrypt a file.”

“Sure,” said Joe, still lost.

“So where’s the key?” I hoped for a short answer, since I had to leave for the airport ten minutes ago.

“I don’t remember,” Erica didn’t give an answer that I was hoping for.

With that, I nodded and rushed out of the door.

CHAPTER 9

Erica Remembers

As soon as I got in the car and peeled out of the drive, my cell phone rang. It was Artemis.

“Remember me?” he said sarcastically.

“I am so sorry Artemis. Just as I was leaving to pick you up, Erica woke up and had some incredible revelation about what the ‘bad guys,’ whoever they are, might want. Wait until you hear...”

Artemis cut me off.

“Tell me after you pick me up,” he injected. “Who knows who could be listening.”

“Yes Sir.”

I drove as quickly as I felt I could without getting a speeding ticket. I decided not to use the blue light because it wasn’t really an emergency. Erica was safe, Joe was with her.

Artemis was waiting just outside the special hangar. He had a small bag, and there were two men with him. As soon as I pulled up, they pulled open the doors and slid in, Artemis in the front with me and the two other men into the back. They were all dressed casually, not the usual suit and tie. They were here to take some sort of action, not impress anyone as official CIA Officers.

“Hunter, this is David Baxter and John Atkinson. They are both experienced CIA Officers, working in *The Directorate of Support*, specializing in Security. They will provide 24-hour protection for Erica. Another team, a forensic team, is on their way to Erica’s home.

We arrived at Erica’s apartment in about twenty minutes. I decided to drive at a more reasonable speed with Artemis in the car. Besides, I felt confident in Joe being with Erica. Although, I honestly hoped that he didn’t shoot anyone in the meantime. It seemed that all he needed was an excuse.

“Hello Erica, how are you feeling?” asked Artemis, walking into her living room. Apparently, Joe had let her know that Artemis was on his way.

“Upset, but feeling a bit calmer,” she tried to stand, but seemed a bit wobbly.

“Don’t get up. I know you’ve had a shock. By the way, this is David Baxter and John Atkinson. They are two of the top Officers in our Security Division.”

“Hello,” Erica offered, with a slightly confused look.

“Has the Forensic team arrived yet?” asked Artemis.

“Yes sir,” Joe spoke up. “They’re back in the bedroom now. They arrived a few minutes before you did.”

David and John took a cue and joined their colleagues in the bedroom, to begin comparing notes.

Erica forced herself to her feet. She began walking toward the kitchen, her movement becoming more sure with each step.

“I’m going to start a pot of coffee. Anyone who wants tea is out of luck.”

Before anyone else could protest her actions, I stepped close to her, following along in case she faltered.

Minutes later, we were all seated around a large coffee table. It was essentially a very large, beveled glass table supported by a beautifully preserved and altered tree trunk with a couple of very thick branches. I was a little surprised at the beauty of the piece, almost expecting the “nerd” in Erica to have a table made of cinder blocks and laminated boards. This coffee table made me begin to rethink Erica. Of course, while some drank coffee, she drank her Mountain Dew. So there was always that.

Artemis began, “Erica, so far we know about your parents, their secret project, and the fact that you sometimes worked with them on it. We also know

that you believe that their plane crash was not an accident, but murder.”

The two Security Officers seemed to tense at this. Their jackets were open and I could see their holsters.

Artemis paused to give Erica time to gather herself together should she begin to feel emotional. She seemed still poised, so he continued.

“We’ve also come to the conclusion, based on the burglaries at each of your homes, and your own realizations, that someone or some group wants you to help them to use or sell your parents’ software. A threatening phone call from a disguised voice on a burner phone, and now this warning, attempting to show what the strangers are capable of. It’s apparent that you’re in danger.”

Erica remained silent.

“She thinks she knows what they want.” All eyes turned to the voice, my voice.

“What is it they want?” Artemis gave the obvious response, glancing at me, then Erica.

I glanced at Erica. It was her turn to talk.

She cleared her throat, then took a sip of her Mountain Dew. She looked over at the small box where Goldy’s body had been placed, for now. Then at the note, still taped to the goldfish bowl.

“I grew up in the shadows of my parents. They were incredible programmers, and had quite a reputation among some of the biggest software companies in the country. In fact, they had received offers to work on projects outside the country as well. I learned so much being around them all the time. Not until this final project, however, did I come to realize the seriousness of security surrounding both the code and my parents themselves. Even then, it never occurred to me that even their lives could be at risk.”

“I never knew who contracted them to create this super malware, or even why. In some ways they tried to protect me from the reality of their creation. When I was working on their code with them, I never saw the whole thing, just parts. So, to this day I don’t know whether the purpose of the software was to protect some group, or even nation, or whether it was meant as a weapon for some more destructive scheme.”

“Too late to make a long story short.” Erica formed a weak smile. “Their software was encrypted. I don’t know whether it was to keep it secret, or protected, or from being misused. The gist is they created a ‘key’ for me to be able to unencrypt the code should anything happen to them. I didn’t remember that until I came out of my fainting spell

just now. Now, I also remembered the ‘key’ they gave me to get into the code.”

The two CIA Security Officers were part of the group listening intently to Erica. They were frantically taking notes. In the background, the Forensic Team had moved from the bedroom to the kitchen, looking for any evidence of who the ‘interlopers’ had been. Joe was seated on an ottoman that he had pulled up to the coffee table. I stood leaning against a nearby wall, with my arms folded, unable to move, not wanting to miss a single word.

“Will just knowing that ‘key’ unencrypt the software?” Artemis asked the obvious question.

“No. It’s only the first step. Although knowing that first step can be used by experts to perhaps crack the code,” Erica’s voice had suddenly changed to slightly more than a whisper.

“And the other steps?” Artemis dug a little deeper.

“I won’t mention the key, and I won’t mention the specific encryption method used, but it goes something like this:

-begin with a word, string, name, numbers or whatever, as the key, use ‘abcde’ for example

-create ‘blocks’ by cutting ‘abcde’ into pieces
example 4 characters, 4 times

-so Abcd, bcdA, cdAb, dAbc

“Then use the standard steps of that Encryption method, multiple complex steps that can only be broken by knowing the original array or name, and then knowing what encryption method was used.”

“Wow,” I spoke for everyone.

“So do you remember the ‘key’?” Artemis asked, and we held our collective breaths.

“Yes.”

Relief settled over the group, and it seemed like everyone took a sip of their coffee simultaneously.

CHAPTER 10

Should the CIA Hide the Malware Code?

It seemed we were all “out of breath” mentally. The number of revelations we had just witnessed in such a short time, not to mention the degree, was exhausting. It was like watching the guy who solved a Rubik’s cube one-handed. So much of the mysteries of recent days had just been laid out for us in a few minutes.

Except for one.

“So where is the code to the software?” Artemis asked the question that hadn’t yet been answered. Artemis’ mind often worked wonders with information.

“It’s on the ‘dark web,’” revealed Erica. The statement was matter of fact, assuming that everyone understood the words she was using.

“Dark web?” asked Joe understandably.

“The ‘dark web’ is a very small part of the internet, which is basically hidden, and only accessible by using special browsers. In other words, if you don’t use that special browser, and know the exact address of the site, you will never find it,” Erica simplified the concept.

“I’m hoping that you know that exact site address,” continued Artemis.

“I do,” she smiled, as though some memory of the past had just been recalled. “It’s based on the name I gave my favorite doll when I was little.”

“So, the ‘key’ and that dark web address are what the persons behind the threats are looking for,” Artemis tried to condense what we had learned.

“Yes,” agreed Erica, “and the method of encryption.”

“It still comes down to those ‘persons’ getting the information from Erica, by force, or guile, or whatever,” spoke up Joe. “She has everything they want.”

We all took in the threats, dangers, and secrecies of the situation. Joe was obviously right in his conclusion. Even the CIA Protection team shook their heads, realizing it might be all up to them.

Erica stood up and walked calmly to the kitchen. She brought out more coffee for everyone. Smiling to myself, I noticed she didn’t offer anyone some of her Mountain Dew.

Finally, Artemis spoke up. “I may have at least part of a solution.”

“Do tell,” I spoke for everyone. Like following the turning heads in the crowd at a tennis match, all eyes moved from me to Erica, ready to move again to the next person.

“Would you be able to change the address of that site on the ‘dark web’?” asked Artemis.

“Hmm. I’d have to look into it,” Erica sounded noncommittal. “I could possibly change the domain, like from .com to .net.”

“I was thinking something more extreme, like from ‘myfirstdoll.com’ to ‘mydarkcia276xzn.com.’ The ‘tennis crowd’ almost had whiplash.

“I’ll have to look into it.” Erica didn’t sound completely confident. “I have some very talented technoid friends who might help.”

“So what I’m thinking,” Artemis continued, “is that you can somehow message the source of your threats and let them know that the CIA has taken over the web site where the software code exists, and they have changed the address so that even you don’t know what it is.”

“Brilliant. Maybe you could ask your own internet techs to do this, so I really won’t know the new address. I’ve heard that the CIA has established a presence on the ‘dark web’ through the ‘Tor’ browser, called their ‘onion service.’”

“Perfect. Hold off giving me the address of your parents’ site for now, until I make the proper arrangements.”

“What about the ‘key?’” I asked. “You haven’t changed that.”

“I’ll see what they can do,” the expression on Artemis’ face seemed to indicate that he may have forgotten about the ‘key’ He nodded in thanks for the reminder.

It was already late, and there seemed to be a mutual agreement to end the meeting for now. The Forensic team packed up any evidence they found and left for their hotel. The two ‘bodyguards’ were shown the second bedroom and the sofa. For tonight at least. I could see they had put a new alarm system on the doors and windows and installed a central unit that was connected to the CIA Network. Supposedly this was a much more advanced one than the one already there. It wasn’t clear whether Artemis would fly back to DC or sleep on the plane, back tomorrow. Joe and I each gave Erica a hug, then went home to our own beds. The three of us arranged to meet in the morning for breakfast.

CHAPTER 11

Another “Encrypted Fortune Cookie”

It was hard to relax after the past month or so of trying to perform at peak levels, especially when we continued to be surrounded by mystery and threats. There were burglars, threatening phone calls, and goldfish murderers. Fortunately, we weren't alone in all of this. There were the three of us, and now there was this club that we had joined, called the CIA. It still hadn't all sunk in, but glancing at the CIA ID wallet kept reminding me that it was all real. I had somehow become a card-carrying CIA Officer. Life as I had known it would probably never be the same. I felt certain that Erica and Joe were having similar thoughts.

In spite of the 'thriller' that Erica had added to our '*suspense novel*,' we still had a mission. The mission would begin in less than two days, so we all had to make certain that we were packed, made arrangements to take care of things at home while we were gone, and got ourselves into the right frame of mind to handle anything that was to come. It occurred to me that now that there might be many days when I would be gone from my home. I'd have to learn how to keep up with bills, shop for food in a way that wouldn't involve having it spoil, adjust my availability to my computer business, all the while covering up my new '*secret life*.'

The next day came, and the anticipation began to get to me. I had nothing left to take care of at home and trying to rest up for the mission was all I had left to do. Since we still didn't know any details about our travel, hotel, or location, I couldn't even familiarize myself with the nature of our arrangements.

Trying to leave the investigations up to Artemis and the forensic team, I set the previous disturbance to my apartment and the added drama of threats to Erica aside. I needed to rest.

Fortunately, I was able to sleep the second night and woke refreshed around 8 AM. After breakfast, I took a relaxing, clear-the-cobwebs shower, I guessed that this might very well be the day that Joe would call. Double checking to make sure everything was locked, all unnecessary electrical items had been unplugged, and that I had packed anything I might need for a week, I felt ready. I made certain to use a medium sized suitcase, with wheels that could easily be rolled, lifted and taken up and down stairs. Previous travels with a large suitcase had taught me what a nightmare that could be. I also made certain that anything I packed, including cosmetics would meet any travel regulations

My phone rang at 10:30 AM. It was Joe. The packages had arrived. He would wait until Erica and I got to his home before he opened both of them.

Forty-five minutes later, the ‘three musketeers’ were in the library, gathered around Joe’s vintage hardwood desk. The two packages, unmarked except for the destination address, were sitting in front of us.

“Well, this is it!” Joe exclaimed. “No turning back now.”

“To explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before,” said Erica with a big smile. The quote was from Star Trek. It was the nerd in her coming out.

We all laughed. “OK Joe, the honor is yours. Open the packages,” I said.

The first package included all of our travel documents, and tickets. We each had passports, tickets for our flights, and the reservations for our hotel rooms. There were three copies of our itineraries for the entire trip. The trip was to last five days. Also included in plain sealed vinyl envelopes was enough cash to last us for a couple of weeks, and a Mastercard for each one of us, to be used only in extreme emergencies. The labels on the opposite side of each card reminded us that the cards would need to be activated. Apparently to make things even easier on us, there were three Tube passes to enable us to use the very convenient mode of public transportation in London.

The second box was thinner. Joe pulled the strip of security tape off, and opened the flaps. Inside was a photo album We had been told to expect some photos as part of the mission. We would handle the photos per instructions and deliver to a contact in London. Another photo, or more, would be taken in London, then processed and delivered to a location back in the United States, to be identified later.

The dozen photographs in the small album seemed to be ones taken of famous locations in the London area: the London Eye, the giant Ferris wheel along the River Thames; a view of Parliament probably taken from the bridge crossing the Thames nearby; and the gates in front of Buckingham Palace guarded by a number of the Queen's Guards, along with a number of other photo's. They were all typical tourist photographs of places one might go when visiting the area. My eyes finally settled on a very strange photo. The site was recognizable, as it showed the giant stones stacked at the ancient grounds of Stonehenge, less than a hundred miles from London. What was so strange that it made me hold my breath for a second, was that the three of us were in the photo, posing in front of one of the giant stones.

Of course we had never been to Stonehenge, at least not together. Joe and Erica were equally astonished when I showed them the photo. Erica's

mouth shaped the word “What?!” without any sound coming out. Joe paused for a moment, then recognition set in.

“This is the photo we need to take with us to London! It seems obvious that it’s been created so that we would realize its uniqueness and know that it was the one that Officer Blackstone told us would need to be delivered.”

“I think you’re absolutely right, Joe,” I agreed. “Somewhere hidden in that photo is the information that’s being passed on. I still don’t understand how we’re supposed to accomplish that.”

Both Erica and Joe shook their heads slowly back and forth, also at a loss.

I began looking at both boxes again, their contents already laid out on the table. The large box had been filled with ‘popcorn’ packing material, and I dumped it out into a large empty bowl.

“Looking for food?” quipped Erica, with a grin.

Cracking half a smile, I sifted through it with my hands, I found nothing. I then picked up the second cardboard box, which only had a couple of crumpled up pieces of packing paper that had kept the album from shifting around in transit. Expecting to find nothing there either, I pulled each sheet open and looked inside the tight folds. There in the second sheet, falling out on the table, was what I was looking

for. It was a fortune cookie! Still whole, still wrapped, just like the one we had found with the laptop weeks ago.

I froze for a second, looking at Joe, then at Erica. I think I can say we were all flabbergasted, like finding the totally unexpected shiny new bicycle next to the tree on Christmas morning. We had hoped to find something hidden somewhere, that might give us a clue as to how to proceed with the mission. We never guessed it would be another fortune cookie. Although, having been through this once, the experience seemed to feel familiar. I picked up the fortune cookie and unwrapped it. Then taking it between thumb and forefinger of both hands I snapped it open like a wishbone. Pulling out the paper fortune, I read the words aloud.

“Secure Stonehenge inside marked Tube pass wallet.” On the face of it the message seemed to be too cryptic. Nothing obvious came to mind. Both of the others simply shrugged. Then, turning the paper over, I found a second message, instead of the usual definition of a Chinese word. I read it aloud as well, *“Trust the cowboy belt buckle.”*

CHAPTER 12

Trust the Cowboy belt buckle

“Wow, they sure don’t make these things easy, do they,” I commented. “Even if someone intercepted the message, they still wouldn’t have any idea what it meant.”

Erica let out a sarcastic laugh, “I’m guessing that’s the idea.”

Joe seemed more contemplative before speaking. “At least we have some clues to work with,” he said.

“Do we? Care to elaborate?” I remained in the dark.

“Sure. The photo that we brought is a picture of us in front of Stonehenge. So, the first fortune somehow references that location, or probably the photo itself.”

“Ooh,” said Erica with the excitement of a sudden revelation in the tone of her voice. “And we each received Tube passes inside vinyl wallets! Maybe we’re supposed to put the photo inside one of the Tube pass wallets, just like the fortune says!”

“Hey, you guys are ‘brilliant!’” I said, using one of my newfound favorite British words. “Still not getting the ‘*cowboy belt buckle*’ clue, though.”

A bit more subdued, Joe said, “Yeah, might need to rest my brain to take that one on. Nothing obvious there.”

“Wait...” I stopped to take a breath, “Look at all the papers and tickets that were in the box. Here are 3 tickets to the British Museum. Didn’t Artemis specifically tell us to go there on Wednesday, and not only to make sure to go through Victoria Station, but to be at that station at 10:30 AM?”

“That’s right,” affirmed Joe. “It sounds like the photo somehow gets passed on there, inside one of the Tube pass wallets. And...” he formulated quickly, “I bet the cowboy belt will have some significance to us once we get there. The word ‘Trust’ in the fortune seems to say that it’ll be someone or something we can trust with the photo. Maybe we’ll be meeting the contact that we’ll be passing it on to at the Tube entrance.”

Impressed with Joe’s deductions, I reflected, “You know, that really makes sense! I think the three of us are a perfect combination. Six or seven weeks ago we were just average citizens, leading interesting, but not exciting lives. Although, to be honest, I don’t really know that much about your lives. I’m just making an assumption.”

“Well, you’re pretty much right on when it comes to my life. Nothing special going on there,” said Erica in a regretful tone.

“Other than occasional travel, I’ve just been leading a somewhat mundane rich man’s life,” added Joe with a bit of a smirk on his face. “Yet, in spite of perhaps uneventful lives, all three of us are pretty intelligent, and talented in our own ways. The two of you are technologically sharp, if not brilliant. Without your techno skills we would never have gotten this far, if anywhere at all. And as for myself, I’m pretty world savvy, whether it’s travel, or experience in cities all over the world, some languages, and a good understanding of customs, traditions and social mores. All that might come in pretty handy in our future CIA assignments.”

“You’re absolutely right,” agreed Erica, “We’re awesome!”

We decided it was time for each of us to return home, grab our suitcases and double check that everything was ready for us to be gone for a week or two. I assumed that the other two had done most of their packing already, the way I had. Our flight was out of Cleveland Hopkins airport, CLE for short, that evening at 8:10 PM. We would arrive at London Heathrow the next afternoon at 12:05 PM. The flight would be 10 hours and 55 minutes, with one stop in Chicago, at O’Hare. We decided to meet at Joe’s at 5:30 PM, and I would drive us to the airport, leaving my car in long term parking. My 10-year-old Ford Explorer was more than roomy enough for the three

of us, and our luggage, yet had enough hard miles on it that I wasn't worried about anything that might happen to it in a week of sitting in public parking.

CHAPTER 13*London Mission and the Uber App*

Being the experienced traveler, Joe had already checked us in electronically hours before our flight departure time. Upon arriving at the airport, all we really had to do was check any bags that we didn't want to carry onto the plane. We had decided to combine some of our things into two medium bags, rather than each one of us having separate luggage. Additionally, we each bought carry-on travel backpacks that would hold things we didn't want to be separated from, in case any checked bags got lost. These were still sizeable yet fit into the overhead luggage compartments. Although Artemis had chosen to get us economy seats, so as not to draw attention to us in first class, he had also sprung for the extra legroom seats on the transatlantic leg of our flight, which were wonderful for a 7- hour plus flight.

Erica spent much of the flight on the internet on her laptop, or playing some sort of games. I never really got into computer games, so I really couldn't identify any of them. She took a couple of short naps, her head occasionally falling onto my shoulder as she relaxed completely. Joe watched a couple of movies, then fell asleep as well. The extra legroom allowed him to stretch out his legs, while his head rested on the thick window next to his seat. I sat in the aisle seat, scrolling through all the different movies

available on the small screen in the headrest in front of me. I started a couple of different movies, then exited them when I realized there was too much dialogue, and they were starting to put me to sleep. I finally settled on “Goldfinger”, starring my favorite bond hero of all time, Sean Connery. It seemed only appropriate, considering our current situation, to be watching a spy movie. To lighten the mood, I followed that with a Mr. Bean movie, with Rowan Atkinson as the hilarious buffoon. I caught myself laughing aloud more than a few times, looking around to see if anyone had heard me. Finally, I fell asleep.

The three of us woke up when lights in the cabin started coming on, and the overhead speaker announced we would be arriving in London in about 30 minutes, that the weather was a moderate 18 degrees centigrade (about 65 degrees F.), and partly cloudy. It was typical London weather for this time of year.

The landing was relatively smooth, and as soon as the big jet finally braked at the gate, passengers began grabbing bags and jackets to be ready to disembark. Within a short time, we were moving down the walkway toward security checks and customs. At the end of the corridor, we had a number of choices to get through customs. We chose the aisle that was marked ‘Customs – Nothing to declare’, and

after winding through a serpentine line of at least a hundred arriving passengers, we moved on to baggage claim. Our baggage had been unloaded rather quickly from our plane, and we found the two medium bags with bright orange ribbons tied to their handles coming onto the carousel within ten minutes.

Our plan was to use the Uber app on one of our phones to order our ride to the hotel in Newbury Park, east of London. It was about 15 miles from London proper, about a 30-minute Tube ride. Artemis had arranged for us to stay at a Holiday Inn Express.

Joe decided to teach me how to use Uber and coached me through installing the app on my phone, and arranging our ride to the hotel. I arranged for an UberXL for the three of us and our luggage.

I got a photo of the driver and car on my phone, and a notification that he should arrive in 15 to 20 minutes at the location designated in the terminal for Uber. We were only a couple of minutes from that area, having already gone through the security lines and picked up our luggage. Just as we arrived, the Uber driver pulled up and said he was able to get to us earlier than expected. The driver was Pakistani, as I recalled the photo of the driver in my app had been. He said his phone had unfortunately died while he was just getting to us and asked if we could remind

him of our destination. Joe gave him the hotel name and address, and in a couple of minutes we were off.

During the drive we tried to take in any new sights that might characterize London. Of course, driving on the wrong side of the road made everything look odd. Watching the driver, it suddenly struck me that drivers in the UK not only had to drive on the left side, but even had to learn to shift with their left hands. That cured me of any thoughts of driving here... wrong side of the road, possibly having to shift left-handed... all too much. I was already imagining the pile up of wrecked cars that I'd be creating! Of course, Joe had been here a number of times, so probably nothing new for him. I made a mental note to ask him later if he had driven here, but for now our conversation seemed limited to "Hey, look...," "Wow...," "That's odd...," and things to that effect. We could hear the driver laugh a little at our comments, so we knew he could hear us. All the more reason to keep our conversation limited and generic.

In a little over an hour, we were at the Holiday Inn in Newbury Park. It seemed pleasant and modern looking. It would be basic accommodations, which is all we needed.

We got out of the Uber, stretching our legs a bit before grabbing our bags. The driver was at the back of the SUV pulling our bags out of the storage area.

Waiting while he was doing that, I pulled up the Uber app just to see if there was a place to tip him. He had already been paid at the time we had accepted the ride on my phone. It really was an efficient system. Joe and I moved to the back of the SUV to pick up our bags, just as the driver closed the door. He seemed to have another call lined up, and smiled, gave an abbreviated wave and said, “Enjoy London!”. He was in the driver’s seat and began to pull away before I had figured out how to give him a tip in the app.

As he pulled away, I glanced at his license plate, then back at my Uber app. The license plate number didn’t match! Neither did the type of car! Noticing the expression on my face, Joe said, “What’s wrong Hunter?”

“That wasn’t the car that was supposed to pick us up!”

CHAPTER 14*Someone is Following Us*

I turned my phone display toward the two of them, “I wasn’t paying attention at the time, since our Uber came so quickly, but this is a picture of the car, along with the license plate of the car that was on its way to pick us up. The car that came was a Ford Explorer, but the car in the photo is a Toyota Sienna. I just happened to glance at his license plate as he pulled away, and it’s not the same as the one in the photo!”

“Maybe it was just some sort of mix up in the software,” Joe conjectured. “Wrong profile came up for some reason.” Although, he was beginning to look concerned.

“I just now messaged the driver who had agreed to pick us up,” I said, “and he seems upset that we weren’t there when he got there. I messaged back that another Uber picked us up, and we thought it was him. His only answer was a frowny face.”

“I don’t like this,” said Erica. “I have a bad feeling.”

“Let’s check in and bring all of the luggage to my room,” directed Joe. “We should go over everything to make sure nothing’s missing or been tampered with.”

Within 20 minutes we were all in Joe's room. It was a typical Holiday Inn Express room, neat, minimalist design, air conditioner turned on and about ten degrees too cold. Joe turned up the thermostat a bit, and we began laying out all of the luggage on his queen-sized bed. Outwardly, nothing looked tampered with, but that didn't mean anything. None of the bags were locked, because of something Joe had said about them having to cut off locks if they saw something suspicious when they scanned the checked bags. We opened each of the two checked bags to see if anything looked suspicious. We were surprised and disturbed to see that the contents looked like they had been hastily gone through, with the neat piles now looking like they had just come out of being tumbled in a dryer.

Joe was shaking his head, showing concern on his face. Erica seemed almost in tears, but recovered quickly. She was getting better at controlling her emotions. Possibly because we seemed to be experiencing more and more stressful situations. So it was either "sink or swim."

"Ok," I tried to bring some calm to the situation, "It looks like that Uber driver looked through our bags while he was putting them into the back of the SUV. It's not as bad as it seems though. Anything of value was in our backpack carry-on's, which we kept right above our heads in the plane storage

compartments, and which we kept with us inside the SUV. More importantly,” I raised the front of my shirt, “the photo has been in an envelope taped to my midsection since we left Cleveland.” Joe and Erica glanced at the thin vinyl envelope, taped with a couple of pieces of surgical tape just below my chest, and nodded. This time, I did let them know what I was going to do, so they weren’t surprised when I reminded them. The explanation seemed to bring them some relief, and even Erica looked calmer.

“Yeah, I guess it could be worse,” said Erica. “We haven’t had anything stolen, at least nothing valuable that we know of. Although, I’ll have to count my panties later,” she laughed.

We all laughed at her attempt to bring some levity to things.

“One thing though, and it’s a biggie, who was this guy, and how dangerous is he?” Erica continued her worried thought.

“It seems like he’s after whatever he thinks we have,” guessed Joe. “No telling how far he’ll go, or what he’s capable of doing. In fact, to be safe, we should assume that he won’t be the only one.”

Tossing my thoughts into the ring, “Look, we just have to be very careful, and very suspicious. Any person or situation could be a ruse to get the photo, or any information that they might think we know.

We have to be on heightened alert while we're in London. Which reminds me, I'm going down to the desk to see if the package from Artemis has arrived. Then, I suggest we all go to our rooms, settle in, and take a nap before having dinner.

CHAPTER 15

Cracking the Instruction Code for our Mission

Taking a short ride down the elevator, I went to the desk and asked if a package had arrived for anyone in our group. Just as expected, the package had arrived. I signed Joe's name and brought it up to my room. I immediately opened it and found the three Glock 9 mm pistols inside another box with a special security tape designed to show if the box had been tampered with. There were a couple of magazines of bullets included for each pistol. For the time being, I would lock them in the room safe, though I didn't feel all that secure using it. I had heard stories of hotel employees being able to get into the safes, while guests were gone.

Knowing enough by now to check every corner of the box, I also found a sealed envelope. It contained a card that was blank except for a word printed in the middle of it... '*londonbridge*,' all one word. At first, I had no clue what this was. Directions to a meet, location for something clandestine, what could possibly be the purpose of this card? I decided to pocket it and take it to the group when we met for dinner.

I also decided to worry about the security of the room safe later and laid down on the hard bed for a

nap. My watch was set to wake me up in an hour and a half.

Too soon the alarm went off. I sat, still drowsy, on the side of the bed. I forced myself to start moving and not fall back asleep on the pillow that I had finally arranged perfectly for me. Joe had taken his clothes out of the big bag, and I brought it with me, with only my clothes still inside. I decided to quickly hang things up, and put the rest into drawers, then take a quick shower. Refreshed, I put on different clothes and called Erica to let her know I was going to come by her room in a few minutes. She had apparently already been up and dressed. Unlocking the room safe, I took out two small automatic pistols and their cases and slid them into a nylon carrying bag. I left mine locked up.

After we locked Erica's pistol into her safe, I called Joe and made sure he was ready to get some dinner and let him know we'd be at his room shortly. Once we had secured Joe's pistol, we found our way down to the hotel's cafeteria-like dining room. Finding an open table among the maybe thirty guests already having dinner, we enjoyed a surprisingly tasty buffet of dinner foods, fruits, salads, and then desserts. Even Erica splurged on extra calories and had some jello. Although, I'm not sure if jello actually has any calories.

Over coffee that we took up to Joe's room, we planned the mission. We were to go to the British Museum, tickets already provided by Artemis in the package we had received. We were to use the Tube passes, also already provided, to take the Tube train to the Museum, but had to make certain that our route went through Victoria Station. Just as importantly, we needed to enter the next leg of the trip through the gates at Victoria Station at 10:30 AM. Using the Google Maps app on my phone, I located the Tube route that would change at Victoria Station, before the prescribed time. Joe had been at that station many times, and said it was a very large station, and that we needed to allow ourselves some extra time for crowds.

The photo would be passed off at Victoria Station, inside the marked Tube pass wallet, to someone, possibly a transit employee, with a belt that had a cowboy buckle. As the fortune in the fortune cookie had said, "*Trust the cowboy belt buckle.*" I was imagining a figure wearing one of those big silver buckles with a horse, or buffalo, or some cowboy design on it somehow sticking out from the crowd. From there we would get on the train to the British Museum and try to enjoy some sightseeing. I reminded myself that I needed to take some photos while in the Museum, possibly with us in a few of them. I also reminded myself that we all needed to stay alert for anyone following us.

I then remembered the card I had found inside the package. Pulling it out of my pocket, I told them that this was a card I had found inside the package of Glock's. Opening it, I showed them the card with one word printed on it, '*londonbridge*'.

"I have no idea what this means, or what it's for," I said.

Suddenly Erica let out a loud, "the Sun! the Sun!" For a moment, I was reminded of Tattoo yelling out "De plane, De plane!" on the TV show Fantasy Island. Probably dating myself, so I didn't say it out loud.

"What?" Joe responded, confused.

"It's the name of the person placing the ad in the London Sun paper! Artemis said that he would send us the name to look for in the personal ads."

I nodded, impressed. "That's why we have you Erica, the brains of the outfit," I laughed. As a quick afterthought, I threw in "of course the beauty too." She blushed a little.

The levity was welcome at that point in our mounting anxieties.

CHAPTER 16

Victoria Station and the British Museum Test Run

Without any plans for that day, the mission not taking place until Wednesday, and all of us nervous about the details, timing, and our unfamiliarity with both the Tube itself and Victoria Station, we decided that the best thing for us to do would be to make a dry run. Better to get a feel for every aspect of this part of our assignment and get comfortable enough that we would be able to sleep that night, and perform with either precision or at least know ahead of time what the possibilities were of any things that might go wrong.

The Tube route had been planned beforehand. We would walk from our hotel a couple of blocks to the Newbury Park Tube station. This station is on the Central Line. We would take the train to the Oxford Circus station, disembark, and change over to the Victoria Line. A couple of stops and we would get off at Victoria Station. Pretty straightforward.

We had decided to go to my room before leaving, to remove the Glock from the room safe, and to fasten the holster and gun to my shoulder and side under my jacket. We decided that carrying only one gun would be sufficient for this trip, just in case. Half an hour later we were on our way. The day was

perfect, sunny, maybe 15 degrees centigrade (60 degrees Fahrenheit). The walk was pleasant, passing a park along the way. Crossing streets came with signs that warned about traffic coming from the right, probably for the many visitors from outside the UK not used to cars driving on the left.

The Newbury Park station came up on our left. It was a small station, but clean and attended by Tube employees eager to help. Fortunately, we already had our passes, called Oyster Cards. However, at second thought, not wanting to use the marked pass designated for the data pass the following day, I purchased a second pass at one of the machines near the entrance. We watched a few passengers going through their version of turnstiles, touching their passes to a large yellow lit circle on the side wall of each gate to gain entry. A green light would indicate acceptance of the card, and the metal panel with some sort of advertising that blocked the space would swivel open, allowing the would-be passenger through. Seeming easy enough, the adventurous Erica went through first, followed by Joe, then myself.

Finding our way to the train platform, we joined four or five other people waiting. I guessed that this was not a busy station. A sign above the walkway in either direction told us what trains were coming and how long before they reached us. Five minutes later

we were seated on the train headed southwest toward Oxford Circus. Fortunately, Tube maps were posted throughout the advertising panels on both sides of the train. Listening to the announcement of the conductor you could tell which station was coming up next, along with an ominous recurring announcement to “*Mind the Gap!*” as passengers stepped off the trains. In other words, be careful when stepping from the train onto the platform.

Leaving the train at Oxford Circus we followed the tunnel toward the Victoria Line trains. Determining which direction Victoria Station was from there, we boarded the next train headed toward the northeast. A couple of stops and we were at the famous Victoria Station!

Excited by the size of the station, along with the architecture and the idea that people from all over London and beyond passed through this spot, Erica almost squealed “Gosh, I’ve never seen anything like this!” She looked like a child on Christmas morning. To be honest, the building was impressive. Even Joe was laughing, though probably more at Erica than the vision of the station. I remembered then that he had been there before, so this might be anticlimactic for him.

We began to walk away from the Tube trains section of Victoria Station and into the huge expanse where waiting passengers, friends and family were

surrounded by shops and restaurants. At the other end of the long floor were gates for larger trains. I could see full sized passenger trains owned by the Southern Railway waiting at their gates for departure, or just arrived, unloading passengers. We decided to get some coffee and sit on the wooden benches and study the activities of the people and trains. Some of the wooden benches looked a century old, but well maintained, even comfortable. As we sat, I remembered with a jolt that we needed to be watching for anyone that might be following us, whose face would keep popping up into our sight as we moved through our dry run. After all, they wouldn't know that this was only a dry run! I made it a point to remind Erica and Joe of my concern, and to be on guard.

Finishing our coffee at a time when the crowds seemed to wane, we decided to continue on the next leg of our trip, to the British Museum, paying special attention to the Tube entrance gates where the next day I would be passing the hidden photo to some covert agent. We walked back toward the gates to the Tube trains, some of them showed they were closed by a lighted red X above them. The ones lighted green were open.

Instead of immediately entering, we stood off to the side and studied the gates, and where any gate attendants might be standing. Occasionally, an

attendant dressed in a dark jacket with bright yellow vest marked 'Underground' would assist a passenger having trouble getting through the gate. Many of the attendants stood in the area before entering the gates, to answer questions and give advice. It really was a customer-oriented system. Occasionally we would see a gate fail to open when the entrant placed their pass on the yellow circle. There might have been a buzzer or some sound accompanying the failure, but we were too far back to hear. One of the 'yellow vests' was quick to assist them. Finally, we decided that we would simply need to be at this gate by 10:30 AM the next morning, and be on the lookout for someone, possibly an attendant, with a *cowboy belt buckle*. None of us could come up with any other 'magic bullet.'

In the meantime, we decided to at least follow through our route to the British Museum, probably not actually going inside, but at least being aware of the general route and circumstances involved. It had already been a stressful day, and once we had actually arrived at the Museum, we would return to the hotel to rest up for the critical next day. So, getting on the Tube train toward Russell Place, we stayed standing for the short ride. Once arriving at the stop, and "*mind the gap*," we determined the exit to take that would take us out of the station toward the Museum. It was only a 10-minute walk, and we came upon a massive site with several

buildings that looked like they came out of a civilization gone by. Actually, I had done some research beforehand, and the British Museum had been built in the mid-18th century.

We walked through the black ten-foot gates with gold spearhead tops, and into the courtyard in front of the main building. The incredible architecture was definitely out of place in a modern city, but impressive nevertheless. Since we had decided not to go into the Museum until the following day, we sat on some low stone walls that surrounded the area. The stone was a bit warm under the intense sunlight. I took out my phone and looked up the architecture of the buildings. All I could identify were the numerous columns that were the 'Ionic' style. Being neither into history, nor architecture, I left it at that. I recalled that the movie 'Night at the Museum' had been partially filmed here as well. Joe told us what an incredible experience it was the first time he went into the Museum. The stories and actual pieces of history housed here seemed overwhelming. Erica was taking a virtual tour of the British Museum on her phone, and kept pointing out all sorts of amazing things, as though she were an actual tour guide. As an afterthought, I took a few photos with my phone of the outside of the Museum, in anticipation of the second part of our mission. A couple of them were actually selfies of the three of us with the main building behind us.

Now having traced our entire route for the next day, and being somewhat exhausted at the exploration, we decided to head back to the hotel. We would meet in one of our rooms after freshening up, then order whatever delivery sounded good. I had noticed that Uber actually had a considerable delivery business going on in London, called *Uber Eats*. Everywhere you looked you would see motor scooters and motorcycles and cars with an *Uber Eats* sign somewhere on them. I guessed that we would soon see more of them, even in Cleveland.

After a tasty assortment of Indian food, delivered by *Uber Eats*, we spent about an hour and a half in Joe's room talking about the mission the following day. We went over the route and conditions that we had experienced that day on our dry run, the timing, the potential for more passengers going through the station than we had seen, our approach to finding the person with the cowboy belt, and how we would pass through the gates. Joe handled the logistics of passing through the gates, sticking close together, locating the *cowboy belt buckle* person and making certain they were there to handle my pass when it set off a buzzer or light indicating a problem with it. Just as we felt comfortable with our plan, Erica decided to throw in scenarios where things went wrong. She was actually brilliant at it, and the three of us worked through possible ways to handle those problems. To be honest, I think we all felt better at that point, more

confident, more prepared. Retiring to our individual rooms for whatever sleep we might be able to get, we agreed to meet downstairs in the restaurant area of the hotel for brunch at 8 AM. Having checked the Tube train schedule for the following day, we planned on catching the 9:03 AM train to Victoria Station, arriving there around 9:55 AM, giving us over half an hour before we had to pass through the Victoria Station gates at 10:30 AM.

CHAPTER 17

Mission at the Tube Station Almost Hijacked

Although it seemed like only a few hours, my phone alarm started beeping at 7:30 AM. I felt like I had dreamed about everything we had planned, and even worried about it most of the night, and I probably had. Nevertheless, I woke alert and jumped in the shower. I turned the knob towards hot and felt my muscles loosen as the steam penetrated my skin and lungs. Just before I was about to get out of the “steam room” I had created, I quickly turned the knob all the way to cold! I practically yelped, and after 3 or 4 seconds shoved the knob in hard, cutting off the ice-cold shock to my system. I was awake!

Coming out of my room, I happened to meet both Joe and Erica in the hallway. I joked with them, saying “You’re probably wondering why I called you all here.” We each laughed, needing a moment of humor to take off a bit of the edge. The three of us practically filled the small elevator, as Joe pressed L for lobby. Since breakfast started at 8 AM, we were the first there. A middle-aged man, and younger woman, both in white jackets with chef’s hats on were finishing putting out the hot and cold foods. Though the selection was extensive, I settled for scrambled eggs, sausage links, and a bagel. Joe, being the more experienced traveler, not to mention accustomed to the more gourmet, or ‘haute cuisine’

as the French say, had onion bagels with cream cheese, lox, and tomato slices on top. It actually looked good, but I decided to stick with the old standbys. Erica, on the other hand, the healthy one in our group, chose different kinds of fruit and created a “pile” in a large porcelain bowl. It reminded me of the scene in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind.” The conversation was minimal as we began steeling ourselves for the challenges of the day.

We had allocated no more than half an hour for breakfast. Then it was time to go. Leaving the hotel around 8:25, we walked along Eastern Avenue, since both the hotel and Tube station were on the same street. The walk was actually only about 5 minutes, so we stopped at a small park of some kind that was along our path. The greenery after an overnight rain shower was serene. We only paused for a few minutes then continued on our way. Arriving at the station at 8:44, there was plenty of time to catch our train. Holding my breath as I passed through the gate with my ‘marked’ pass from Officer Blackstone, the gate opened and let me through. I breathed a sigh of relief. The plan as we had been told, was that my pass would work only once, allowing me through the first station on our way to Victoria Station. So far, so good.

Twenty minutes later we were on our train. The number of people was considerable, despite the fact

that 9:05 might be a little late for commuters getting to their jobs. On the other hand, we had discovered that Londoners were a highly mobile society, so trains and roads could be busy most any time. Depending on the time of day you rode these trains, you should be prepared to stand much of the way. Watching the Tube map on the panel in front of me, I kept track of where we were and how far to Victoria Station. I also listened to the conductor's announcements to confirm we were where I thought we were. Joe and I were standing, as a matter of fact, while Erica had managed to find a seat. Either that or some gallant young man had given her his seat. A bit nervous and excited, I looked down and smiled at her, giving her a little wink. She smiled back, returning my wink. Joe, watching the whole thing, just smiled, continuing his mental concentration on something unknown.

When Victoria Station was announced as being the next stop, the three of us began moving toward the door. We stayed close together so there would be no chance of us being separated. The train slowly came to a stop and the doors began to open to the sound of the conductor "*Victoria Station... Mind the Gap!*" Stepping off the train we moved out of the way of the moving crowd and huddled close together. I had noticed Joe preoccupied with something, looking into the distance.

I leaned toward him and said to him, loud enough to be heard over the noise of the departing train, “Is something wrong, what are you looking at?”

Erica also sensed something was wrong, and moved closer to the two of us to hear better. “What’s going on?”

Quietly now that the train had left the station, and so as not to be heard by people moving around us, he answered us, “There was someone on the train with their phone camera pointed at us most of the trip. They were pretending that they were talking on their phone, but it was obvious by the angle of the phone, and how they kept moving it to keep us in view, that they were either filming us, or taking photos. I saw him get off the train, and I think I caught a glimpse of him again following us. Then I lost him.”

“What did he look like, Joe?” Erica asked, while she searched her view for anyone with a phone pointed in our direction.

“Try not to make it obvious that we noticed him,” Joe said. “He was a young man, possibly Pakistani. Without trying to sound racist, he looked a lot like the Uber driver we had from the airport, who rifled through our luggage. I’ve traveled enough and met enough people of all races, that not everyone looks the same to me. I shudder to think that it might have been him.”

After a moment of getting our bearings again, and getting our heads back into the mission, I said, “Right now, we have to set that aside, and get to the gate. We need to do some reconnaissance there before 10:30. Keep your heads on a swivel, as they say, but remember what we’re here to do.”

Agreed, we left the Tube train area, exiting the same gates that we would be coming back in shortly. Stopping just inside the huge expanse of Victoria Station, as we had done yesterday, we acted like any group of tourists enjoying their holiday, smiling pretending to have a carefree conversation. All the time we kept watch in every direction for a suspicious cell phone pointed at us. After a few minutes, the three of us moved back toward the Tube gates and positioned ourselves to be able to watch for someone with a *cowboy belt buckle*.

It seemed to be a relatively slow time of day, only four gates were open. A couple of dozen passengers were passing through. Three attendants in bright yellow vests were helping passengers going into the gates with any questions, while two attendants were on the other side assisting passengers with any problems scanning their passes and getting through the gates. We watched the flow of people and searched for anyone, possibly an attendant, with a *cowboy belt buckle*. The time was 10:25 AM. We decided to make ourselves more visible, standing

together a little closer to the four gates, in hopes we might alert the ‘*cowboy belt buckle*’ and draw them to a more visible position.

Finally, out of the corner of my eye, I saw an attendant that had been standing just inside the booth start moving toward the inside of the gates, along the first gate on the right. My heart raced as I saw the shiny silver buckle with the head of a large longhorn steer imprinted in the metal, barely exposed at the front of his vest. I sensed that he saw me looking in his direction, but we both immediately turned away so as not to be obvious. I could tell by the expressions on their faces that both Erica and Joe had seen him as well. They caught my glance, and each gave an almost imperceptible nod.

The plan was for the two of them to go through the same gate one after the other, and I was to follow. In the unlikely case that the person with the cowboy belt was not an attendant at the Tube gates, we would move together as a group in the general vicinity of whoever they might be, using our bodies and whatever cover to affect the exchange. I still had the second Tube pass that I bought the previous day to use in case I had to give up the first pass. As we saw the attendant with the silver belt buckle moving near the first gate on the right, Erica and Joe moved into line at that gate. There was only one person ahead of them. Using their passes, they both passed slowly

through the gate, with me directly behind. I kept my eyes on the attendant who was our counterpart as I pressed my Tube pass against the large lighted yellow circle.

Immediately there was a low buzz and the pass was rejected, as it should have been. Artemis had made certain that it would only work once, and I had already used it once on the first leg of our train ride here.

Looking up, expecting ‘*cowboy belt buckle*’ to be there asking to check the pass, I stared into the eyes of a different attendant who had stepped forward ahead of our man, and began to take the pass from my hand. Was this man trying to intercept the coded photo? Did he know that we were passing it on to our contact, right here at the Victoria Station gate? I inhaled sharply in shock, pulling the pass back quickly.

“I, I... just loaded the pass up. There should be plenty of funds on it to last at least a few days!” Several people were staring at my frantic, and somewhat loud mannerisms. Erica and Joe stood frozen, unable to help me. On the one hand, I was acting a bit, making up anything off the top of my head. On the other, I really did feel frantic at the turn of events. In my desperation, I looked in the direction of the attendant with the *cowboy belt buckle*, almost

pleadingly. Seeing his opportunity, he stepped in quickly, feigning sympathy for my plight.

“Don’t worry sir, we’ll take care of you. No worries. Let me just have a look at that pass. Could be something simple.”

He took my pass and the clear vinyl wallet it was in. With a sleight of hand that even I could barely notice, he said, “Could be it was just folded,” and he handed me the pass he had tucked up in his sleeve. My original Tube pass, along with the photo tucked inside the wallet had disappeared.

Wanting this to be over, so that my heartbeat could return to normal, I pressed the pass he had given me against the pad, and the gate opened! I gave him a grateful smile, and thanked him, “Thanks so much. I’ll have to be careful with it in the future, make sure not to fold it in my pocket. Have a great day!”

He simply nodded and walked away. I noticed the expression on the second attendant who had tried to take the pass from my hand, and I could swear that he looked angry and frustrated. I was beginning to wonder if he hadn’t been there to try and intercept our exchange. As I looked at him, trying to memorize his face and features, I brushed my hand over my jacket to reassure myself that the Glock was there and ready.

CHAPTER 18

Reality of Danger Sets In

Having successfully passed the encrypted photo, I was through the Victoria Station Tube gate and joined Erica and Joe waiting in horror as they had watched helplessly as the nearly devastating chain of events had unfolded. It had been the most frightening and most threatening challenge thus far as fledgling CIA agents. This was no place to stop and dwell on what had just happened, among the small crowds of moving passengers, and potential spies.

“Let’s keep moving,” I said sternly to both Erica and Joe.

They followed without a response. Ten minutes later, we were on the train toward Russell Square, and a short walk to the British Museum. Both of them sensed the potential danger we had just experienced at the Victoria Station gates. It was very likely someone had attempted to intercept me passing the secret photo to the attendant with the *cowboy belt buckle*, who we guessed was some intelligence agent on our side. A quick response on both my part and the part of that agent had foiled the attempt, and fortunately there had been no violence. Nevertheless, the danger remained. There was no telling if we were still being followed, and if the enemy agents would make any further attempts to discover any more of

our assignment, and possibly steal any covert information we might be carrying. Truth was the three of us didn't really know who the 'enemy' was, or who they represented. Russian SVR, or Chinese MSS, both counterparts to our CIA, the Iranian Quds Force, maybe even ISIS, just off the top of my head, were all possibilities. We didn't even know what the contents of the encrypted message was. I suspected that would be the nature of many of our missions.

The lesson was, don't expect to know the contents of what you might be risking your life delivering to some covert person or site. They will be "Eyes Only." And NOT our eyes.

Leaving the train at the Russell Square Tube station, we moved as a close group out of the station, and in the direction that my Google Maps had indicated would take us to the British Museum. Of course, we had already done our practice run, so GPS was a moot point.

Erica still had a fearful expression on her face, frequently looking behind and around her for potential danger. Joe was a bit more stoic, not allowing his feelings at that point to show, but actively remaining aware of his surroundings, just like Erica. After a couple of minutes of walking, we stepped into a semi-secluded area along the sidewalk, where we thought it would be safe to talk.

“Oh my god,” blurted out Erica, “what happened back there?”

“Do you think that other Tube attendant was actually trying to steal the information?” interjected Joe, sounding very concerned.

“I saw the expression on his face, as I got through the gate,” I said, “and yes, I do think he was trying to steal the information!”

“At that point I realized that this mission was a dangerous one, and it would not be the walk in the park we had been expecting. His expression when ‘*cowboy belt buckle*’ stepped in and got the Tube pass and hidden photo, was frightening. He looked frustrated, not in a helpless way... but in a very angry way. If we hadn’t been in a public place, I suspect he would have taken further steps to get the photo.”

“Further steps?” Erica asked in a shaky voice.

“Let’s say I’m glad I have this Glock on me right now,” I stated seriously, as I reached under my jacket and touched the handle of the hidden gun, as I seemed to be doing more often.

“Maybe it would be better if we all carried at this point,” added Joe, intensifying the reality of the situation.

“Maybe,” I answered, “though we need to avoid the three of us overreacting with gunfire, especially in a public place, if at all possible.”

“Alright, well let’s get to the Museum for now, and at least try to look like tourists, in the likelihood we’re being watched,” suggested Erica.

We all agreed.

CHAPTER 19

Stalked on Our Mission at the British Museum

A few minutes later we were back inside the gate at the British Museum, just like we had been on our dry run yesterday. I made certain to remember to take some photos inside that we might use in the rest of our assignment. As we entered the Museum it suddenly occurred to me that bringing the gun through the entrance might be a problem.

Seeing me stop suddenly, Joe asked “What’s wrong? Do you feel ok?”

When I explained my concern, he nodded, coming to the same realization. “Maybe we can meet with someone from their Security, identify ourselves as agents, and ask them to lock up the gun while we explore the museum.”

A little uneasy about identifying ourselves as CIA agents to anyone, I nevertheless agreed. We asked one of the posted security guards to call their head of Security, or whoever was in charge, to let them know we had an issue we needed to talk to them about. I decided to let them know only about myself, keeping Erica and Joe from having to identify themselves as well. The man was middle-aged, a little graying, in a very sharp suit and tie. He extended his hand and asked how he could help. I identified myself and asked about locking up the gun. Unexpectedly, he

said he had already been contacted by Artemis, and that everything had already been arranged in case we were carrying our weapons when entering the Museum. He was glad to help, took my Glock and holster and directed me to where his office was, where the weapon would be locked up. He also gave me his phone number, should I need any further assistance. I thanked him and walked back to where Erica and Joe were waiting. I smiled and said that we were all set.

I asked Joe if he had been to the Museum before, and he said he had.

“It’s been a few years, but I remember how impressive, and how huge it is. Some parts of it are fascinating, both to the eye and the imagination. Other parts I found to be a little boring, since I can only handle so many ancient statues and antiquities. Still, reading some of the descriptions of each piece can really bring the stories of ancient history to life. One famous example is the actual Rosetta Stone, created around 200 BC. You can actually see it here, on display. It’s probably 2200 years old, for God’s sake!”

Erica responded with a girlish, “Wow! I can’t wait to see some of that.” It seemed obvious to me that she had led quite a sheltered life and hadn’t really gotten around much. It would probably be fun just to watch her reactions to things as we explored the Museum. I

might have a similar reaction, however, to her being able to hack into some company's files. So, it's all a matter of perspective.

We spent nearly 3 hours walking through the Museum. I doubt that we saw half of it, but what we did see was overwhelming and memorable. I remembered to take some photos with my phone, some with Erica and Joe in front of picturesque exhibits, even a few selfies with all three of us in them. I agreed with Joe that at some point the statues and very old pieces of stone became boring. Of course, just when you're thinking you couldn't look at another mummy or tomb, you come across the Rosetta Stone, something you'll brag about seeing for years to come. Nevertheless, even Erica agreed when it was time for us to leave. She did, however, buy a large bag full of souvenirs in the gift shop to keep the experience alive.

Exhausted, and our brains exploding with new knowledge, we made our way back toward the entrance and the security office. I called the number that the head of Security for the Museum had given me, and saw him pop out of his office, motioning us to come back down the hall to him. By now, I was certain he knew that Erica and Joe were with me, so they came with me to retrieve my Glock. He shook their hands, as I introduced them, and asked what we had thought of our Museum experience. Of course,

we had nothing but superlatives to offer in response. He laughed and told us most people hit the wall around the second hour, when every relic begins to look the same. Smiling, we each nodded in agreement, having hit that wall at some point. He had already unlocked the safe where he had stored my gun, and handed it back to me, along with the clips of cartridges, and holster.

The man's name was Roger, and as I put the shoulder holster back on, and my jacket over it, he seemed to pause, as though there was something more he had to say.

I looked at him inquisitively, and he began, "There's just one thing, perhaps just a suspicion, but something you should be aware of."

"What's that?" responded Joe.

"While you were in the Museum, I tried to keep an eye on you through our closed-circuit cameras," Roger revealed. "Mostly out of curiosity, but also as some sort of professional courtesy to the CIA."

"Well, that's no problem," I said, relieved that he wasn't about to tell us something bad.

Then he did.

"While watching you move around the Museum, I noticed a man that seemed to be moving to the same areas, even exhibits, as you were. At first, I didn't

think anything of it, but then I kept seeing his face, though partially covered with a blue baseball cap, everywhere you went. When you weren't looking in his direction, he was watching the three of you. I couldn't be positive he was following you, but after you had been in the Museum for about an hour and a half, I called two of my security people and had them stay close to him, and you."

Erica gasped, "What happened to him, is he still following us?"

"No," Roger said. "It seemed once he noticed that two security guards were staying in his vicinity for an extended period of time, he gave them the slip in a crowd, and I even lost him on all of my security cameras. The best I could do was to print out this photo of him, even though he made sure to keep the baseball cap down low on his face the whole time. I could have printed a larger photo, but then we'd lose more of the detail."

Roger handed me a 5x7 color photo, which showed pretty much as he had said, a face with a baseball cap pulled down low. It was a side shot, so we got a general view of his face. He was thin, with a mustache, brownish skin, black hair. Of course, the mustache and even hair color could be fake. There was no symbol on the baseball hat, and even his tennis shoes looked generic.

“Sorry, I couldn’t be of more help,” Roger apologized. “I’d be very careful if I were the three of you. London can be a dangerous place.”

CHAPTER 20

Erica Uses Steganography to Hide the Mission Intelligence

After a short walk to the Russell Square Tube station, that helped clear our heads a bit, we took the Tube back to Victoria Station. It was important to our mission that we purchase a copy of the London Sun newspaper that evening. Inside we would find an encrypted message in the personal ads that we needed to bring back with us to the United States.

I was pretty certain that I could purchase the paper at the Tube station. Erica and Joe and I had become familiar with the station by now. We knew that after disembarking the Tube train, we would have to walk back out into the massive lobby of Victoria Station to find a newspaper stand. Because it was around 5 PM, and the masses of commuters were coming home from work, the first stand we found had tall stacks of newspapers, mostly Sun newspapers, waiting to be sold. I grabbed one off a pile, amongst the greedy hands of passengers hurrying home, and paid the merchant. Unexpectedly, Erica and Joe bought copies of their own. Then the three of us were off back to the Tube area of the Station, to catch our train back to the hotel.

Over the dinner buffet at the hotel, we talked about how great it would be to be back in our homes.

Not yet seasoned travelers like Joe, Erica and I were feeling homesick after almost five days away. Joe laughed, “I’ve been on trips where I was gone for a month. After the first week or so you start to get into the groove. Of course, it helps to be staying in a very nice hotel,” he said, looking around at the nice, but stripped-down version of a hotel. “As someone once said, ‘*Living well is the best revenge*!’”

“Well, all of my plants were dead already after the trip to Langley and ‘*the Farm*’,” I joked. “So, nothing will have changed since I’ve been there. Still, I’m used to being surrounded by all my stuff, driving my car, saying ‘hi’ to George and Stella down at the grocery store, and being it’s Cleveland, the fun of trying to guess the weather the next day.”

This made Erica feel a bit nostalgic about her place too. “Ya know, I miss my computers! Checking my email, playing online games, hacking into government websites...” she winked as she said this, but in a way that made us believe she wasn’t kidding.

“Ok newbies,” began Joe, “let’s go up to our rooms, get together and work on this newspaper.”

The evening was still early, though we were all yawning, somewhat exhausted after a very full day. We each opened our copies of the Sun, Joe at the desk, Erica and I pulling chairs up to the bed.

“So, we’re looking in the personal or want ads for a listing placed by someone calling themselves ‘*londonbridge*’,” I instructed. “For some reason we weren’t told what kind of ad or what they were selling, so this might take a while.”

“It’s possible they wanted to keep that open in case they had to make a change in the information or code,” offered Joe.

“Sounds right,” agreed Erica. “Too bad this isn’t on a computer,” she continued, “we could search this in seconds.”

Joe and I looked at each other, as though a lightbulb had just switched on.

“Hey,” I said, “can’t you hack into the Sun newspaper website and search the files for today’s edition?”

“Of course I can!” an excited Erica answered. “Great idea! Let me grab my laptop.”

“Are you sure they won’t be able to trace this back to us, or you?” Joe asked with raised eyebrows.”

“Don’t worry, they won’t have a clue. I’ll be totally invisible!”

Taking Joe’s place at the desk with her laptop, Erica’s magic fingers began to fly over the keyboard. Even I didn’t recognize most of the things she was typing. I felt certain that the tools she used for

hacking were already installed on her laptop... whatever they were.

Ten minutes later, Erica sat back in the chair, “I’m in!” Joe and I just smiled at each other, he even patted her on the back. “Ok, I’ve located the want ad files. Now just have to do a search.” We watched as she typed ‘*londonbridge*’ into a special search window. The result popped up almost immediately. There it was, under ‘Computers for Sale.’ “It’s the seventeenth ad under ‘Computers for Sale,’” Erica announced.

Joe and I both grabbed our copies of the Sun newspapers we bought at Victoria Station. Already having been looking in the Personal and Sale ads, we searched for ‘Computers for Sale.’ As though it was a competition, I slid my finger down each column, forcing my eyes to move quickly.

“Bingo!” I had found the ad. Joe found the ad a few seconds later. The ad was for a computer that the owner needed to sell. It was a used *Dell Inspiron 3668 Desktop Computer*, with:

an Intel Core i5-7400 3.0 GHz processor

Microsoft Windows 10 Pro

8GB DDR4-2400 RAM

1TB hard drive

Intel HD Graphics 630 video card

DVDRW Drive
10/100/1000 Network card
a 802.11b/g/n Wireless card
and Bluetooth.
Name was 'londonbridge'
phone '020 5674 9108'
price £ 400.00

I could see from the intricate nature of the ad, especially the complexity of numbers, that the ad could represent a very detailed covert message. It was a perfect template for sending almost any kind of data. The sender was careful to use an actual model of computer, with a list of features that could be easily manipulated to hold an encryption for whatever information they needed to send. We had already been told that should anyone call that number, it would turn out to be a recording, that would simply say *'Thanks for responding to our ad. We're sorry, but the item has already been sold.'*

“Very impressive,” concluded Erica. “Even after the classes we took in steganography and encryption at Langley, I have no idea what method of encryption, or even hidden messages they used to create this ad. Also, there are literally hundreds of ads, in one out of many London newspapers. It would

be like a needle in a haystack for an enemy agent to even find the ad, much less figure out what it meant.”

Erica and I went to her room and began the process of encrypting the ad, then hiding it electronically in several ways that we had already thought about. Each one of us would carry the completed encryption in a different way, to ensure success. We began the process of encrypting the ‘Computer for sale’ ad. I could only guess how much data was hidden in the very detailed description of the computer, along with the seller’s information. Working together, we finished the encryption in about an hour.

The second step would be to use what Erica had learned in her Steganography class at Langley. I followed along, so that I might be able to use the process sometime in the future. She basically used an algorithm to hide the encrypted file code inside one of the picture files we had taken at the British Museum. The advantage of steganography over simple encryption, is that no one even thinks that something might be hidden inside a photo, or sound file. Whereas with encryption, they generally know that it’s being done, they just have to figure out how to crack it. To make it harder for any enemy agent, we were doing both!

We devised three different ways to carry the secret data. Each one of us would use a different method.

The first would be to hide the file on a micro-SD memory card, then secure it somewhere on that person's body. The second was to download the photo onto one of our secure CIA cell phones, which had been provided, and hide it in a photo which is then hidden on the phone, and accessible only with a fingerprint scan. The third was to hide the digital photo inside an electronic picture frame showing a slideshow of photos of the British Museum loaded onto a memory card. The frame had a logo of the Museum on it and was in a gift bag from the Museum gift shop.

“Alright, I think we're ready for tomorrow, except for the bit about getting some sleep,” I said sarcastically.

“You got that right,” echoed Erica. “I'll give Joe a call and let him know our mission is up to date, and we're hitting the sack. If he's still up...”

“Great, see you at breakfast,” the sentence trailed behind me as I walked out of the door.

For now, we would return to our rooms and get some sleep before catching our morning flight back to Cleveland. I reminded everyone to lock up their unloaded firearms in the lockboxes they had shipped to us. They would need to be identified at check in to the TSA and checked in with our bags.

CHAPTER 21*Goodbye London and On to the Rest of Our Mission*

We had decided to take the Tube to Heathrow, instead of taking a chance with Uber. Our experience taking Uber from Heathrow to our hotel when we first arrived, resulted in the driver, who might have been some kind of foreign agent, getting into our bags and rummaging through them in search of something. It was both disturbing and made us all feel threatened. The train would take about 45 minutes longer, but we would feel safer. Nevertheless, we would keep an eye out for anyone suspicious watching us or following us. We would take the Central line to Holborn Station, transfer to the Piccadilly line, which would take us to Heathrow. Other than carrying bags up and down stairs at some stations, the trip was straightforward, and considerably cheaper.

“Well, so long London,” mourned Erica. “In spite of the problems, and dangers, I really enjoyed it here. It’s an exciting city.”

“It’s always been one of my favorite cities,” agreed Joe. “You see the world in one place, not to mention the architecture, history, and culture. I love it here.”

“I have to agree,” I said, “for all those reasons. Of course, it helps that they speak English!” I laughed.

In a short time, we arrived at Heathrow. As before, Joe had already checked us in electronically over my laptop. Getting in line at the check-in behind a few dozen people, I looked around for an airline employee to ask for assistance. Seeing me looking in her direction, a young woman in uniform came over and asked if she could help. Taking her aside, I explained that we were with the CIA, traveling with firearms, that the firearms were locked up in their cases, and asked where we should go to check them in. A bit surprised at my question, she directed us to a check in counter at the end and called over one of the agents to assist us. After showing ID's and filling out some forms, our baggage, and the firearms were checked in and directed down a special belt through an opening in the wall. The agent then directed us to a special entrance leading to our gate, and we were on our way. It was nice to be special!

Forty-five minutes later we were on our way back home. Between watching movies, using our laptops, and sleeping, the time seemed to drag. I suspect that coming home can sometimes feel like it takes longer, because there's less excitement about getting home than to some new and thrilling location. Although, for many, getting back home might be the more exciting. In either case, we eventually landed at JFK,

our layover to Cleveland. After passing through customs with our special status we had an hour and a half before our flight to CLE departed, so we grabbed lunch in a pleasant looking small deli. The menu had lots of traditional deli sandwiches and meals, along with basic burgers and grilled cheese for the kids. Oddly enough, after looking over the numerous selections, almost 4 pages worth, we all ordered Reubens.

Erica laughed at the coincidence, “Either we’ve all eaten in a deli only once in our life, and we have more in common than one would think, or there is some kind of Vulcan *mind meld* going on here.”

I laughed along with her, understanding her nerdy Star Trek reference, and a bit taken aback at how we had all picked the same sandwich out of probably 50 possible choices.

“*Mind-* what?” Joe was drawn into the exchange. “Nevermind, I’m probably better off not knowing,” he said with a devious smile.

We seemed to be relaxing more the closer we got to home. Yet, as I had that thought, I subconsciously began to look around the restaurant, to see if anything suspicious caught my eye. I didn’t expect to be able to discern anything, but looked around nevertheless. Too many things had happened to us unexpectedly to deny the danger. Erica and Joe and I had spent enough time together now to be able to sense what

the others might be thinking. As I glanced at each of them, I realized they were scanning our surroundings as well.

A few hours later we arrived in Cleveland. Our baggage arrived at the carousel even before we got downstairs to luggage pickup. Joe and I immediately looked for the gun cases and grabbed them quickly. They had been placed inside special cloth sacks marked "Fragile," with tags that matched the ones we were given, so as to disguise the look of the gun cases. It seemed to me that the CIA might have a better system for transporting weapons on flights without the chance of them getting lost or stolen. I'd make a point to talk to Artemis about that. Immediately behind the cases were our two bags, which we pulled off the carousel. Erica had grabbed a luggage cart, and we loaded everything onto it. Pushing it out into the long-term parking area, I was happy to find my car still in one piece. It probably wasn't worth anyone trying to steal or tamper with it. I wasn't sure if the thought was comforting, or insulting.

We dropped off Erica first, made sure she went inside and checked around to make sure everything was alright. When she came back to the door and waved, we waved back, "See you soon!" and drove on to Joe's place. Arriving at his long dark driveway, I turned on the high beams, and slowed down around

the turns until reaching the front of the mansion. Joe had left some lights on timers, along with a few solar lights to keep the place from looking dark while we were gone.

“Come on in for a few minutes,” he said surprisingly, “we can go over our thoughts on the next few days of the mission, just to be ready.”

“Sure,” I agreed, “probably a good idea.”

To be honest, we both were a little anxious about anything unexpected we might find inside. I had unpacked my gun in the car and had the shoulder holster and 9mm Glock under my jacket. After all, I would be the last to get home, alone. Joe turned on lights as we entered, a little cautiously, moving first to the kitchen where we grabbed a drink, then to the library where we sat in a couple of large leather oversized chairs. I imagined the only thing missing were the cigars and brandy.

“I expect that we’ll receive some instructions tomorrow on where to deliver the ad from the London newspaper,” predicted Joe. “Artemis told us only that we would be going to a site in West Virginia. I’m guessing the drive will be at least 300 miles. I’ll have the car checked over in the morning to make sure it’s ready. No telling how soon he’ll want us to be there, but it’ll take 5-6 hours, maybe more.”

“I wonder if our CIA ID’s will get us out of a speeding ticket?” I joked.

“Well, you better get home and get some sleep. If the instructions come in the morning, I’ll contact both you and Erica right away. Be careful, and watch for anybody following you again,” warned Joe.

“Absolutely,” I answered, and was off.

CHAPTER 22

Final Leg of Mission and Erica is Attacked

It felt like I had just fallen asleep when the phone rang. I glanced at the clock. It was 7 AM, then at the caller ID, it was Joe.

“I’m guessing you’ve heard something,” I said in a tired, half-awake voice.

“I got a delivery about 15 minutes ago,” he answered.

“A delivery?” I answered, confused.

“Yes, of course, Chinese delivery!” Joe laughed. “I suspect it wasn’t really from a Chinese restaurant, but it was my favorite, Moo Shu pork!”

“What?” I almost snapped back, still waking up and baffled at this riddle.

Joe put me out of my misery with, “There was a fortune cookie too.”

“Aahh, now it makes sense,” I said relieved and finally wide awake.

“I’ve got the location where we’re meeting our guide car, again a short distance from our actual destination, wherever that may be. The fortune said to be there by 3 PM, and ‘make haste’. We probably need to leave by 8:15, no later than 8:30. I’ll call Erica and give her the message,” He seemed tense.

“I’m jumping in the shower right now, should be there by 8,” I answered with some urgency.

“While I’m waiting, I’ll pack some lunches and snacks for the ride,” Joe said thoughtfully. “The car is already full of gas, though we probably will need to stop at some point to get more. I had my mechanic give it a quick once over. I get the sense that delivering this ad is very important and needs to be done with haste.”

“I think you’re right Joe, see you in a bit,” I answered nervously, then hung up the phone.

The shower woke me up, and a quick few gulps of coffee got me primed. Grabbing my “ready bag” and my laptop, I was ready to go. Inside my shirt was the taped envelope with my copy of the ad, which I assumed the other two might also have done. Then I layered a t-shirt, a polo shirt, and the leather holster with the Glock. I threw on a jacket and was out of the door. I had gotten used to checking the view ahead cautiously, before moving too quickly. Glancing around corners, around and under my car, even inside it, before getting in. No sign of anything to worry about, at least for now.

I got to Joe’s mansion a few minutes before 8 AM. He was out front getting the car ready for our trip, while Erica seemed to be bringing out a couple of coolers, probably with our lunch and whatever else Joe had packed for us. She brought out a couple of

pillows and blankets just in case somebody still needed a nap. There were a couple of overnight bags, guessing one for Joe, one for Erica.

“I think we’re set, and should be leaving about now,” directed Joe. “We need to meet the guide car by 2:30 or 2:45. They said the destination is less than 15 minutes from there. We’re meeting at the Post Office in Brandywine, West Virginia, and from there, onto an area called NSA Sugar Grove Station. Sugar Grove Station is a National Security Agency communications site located near Sugar Grove. We’ll be going to a CIA site near there. So, if you both want to put the address of the Post Office into your GPS, here it is...11615 Blue Gray Trail, Brandywine, WV 26802. I already put it into the car GPS.”

Clearing my throat, I said, almost apologetically, “Not to belabor the point or to sound paranoid, but everybody should have their firearms unpacked and quickly available. This is the last leg of this mission, and possibly the most critical. So, it’s the last chance for any enemy agents to make their move.”

Both Joe and Erica nodded, without comment. I could see by the expressions on their faces that they knew the seriousness of this trip, and the danger.

Joe felt fine to drive this time. I drove when we went to Pennsylvania, so that he could take a nap. This time, he said that he had slept well and felt refreshed. Erica sat in the front passenger seat, while

I took the back. Propping up a pillow against one of the sides, I sat across the back seat comfortably, after jerry-rigging the seat belt. I kept my phone handy, so I could see our progress through my GPS app. My turned position in the seat also let me look out of the back window from time to time, alert to the possibility of anyone following us.

Erica was on her laptop for the first half hour or so of the drive. Glancing over her shoulder once, I could tell that she was using Google Maps to investigate the area of West Virginia that we were going to. I remembered that the Street View actually lets you see the real roads, and buildings if you zoom in far enough. You can use the arrows to move down the streets, just like you were driving on them.

Once on the highway, the ride in Joe's luxury SUV was so smooth that I actually fell asleep. Maybe the stress of the last week had finally caught up to me. For some reason, my phone's GPS started beeping at me suddenly, and I woke from a pretty deep sleep. It was some kind of weather alert that signaled, in spite of the fact that I had turned the volume off. The alert for heavy rains seemed to be far enough away from our route that we didn't have to worry about it. Looking at the map on my screen, we were on US Highway 220 South, still a couple of hours from our destination.

Joe looked into the rearview mirror and noticed that I was awake. “There’s a rest stop up ahead,” he said, “I want to get some gas, and we can use the restrooms.”

I answered, “Sounds good,” and Erica nodded affirmatively.

A couple of minutes later we were pulling into a rest area and a Sunoco station. We got out of the car and stretched for a minute, working the kinks out of our stiff bodies. Joe began to pump super unleaded into the hungry SUV. Erica grabbed a small bag out of the back and said she was headed for the restrooms in the back of the station. I told Joe that I was headed for the men’s room. He answered, “I’ll finish pumping, then drive around and park in the back lot by the restrooms.”

After using the bathroom, I decided to wash my face, mostly to wake up. This would be our last stop before Brandywine, and I didn’t want to arrive at the CIA site smelling like a 6-hour drive. I imagined Erica was freshening up too, with whatever she had in that small bag. By now, Joe had probably parked and gone into one of the other men’s rooms.

I opened the door and stepped out into the sunlight. I saw that Joe had already parked and noticed a black Dodge Charger parked a few spaces over from him. As I came across the corner of the restrooms building, I heard a sound, almost like a

yell. I rushed forward and saw a man grabbing Erica with both hands. Before I could get to her, she let out another yell and brought the heel of her hand up under the man's chin, knocking his head back, and his body hard onto the asphalt. I began running toward her, my hand pulling the Glock out of its holster. Faster than I knew I could move, I was standing over the man with my gun aimed directly at his chest. Joe had seen the skirmish and was only a few seconds behind me, his Glock out and ready to use.

The man was unconscious, either from Erica's jarring uppercut, or from the concussion of his head hitting the hard parking lot surface.

I turned quickly, "Are you alright Erica? Did he hurt you?"

A bit shaken, she said "I'm fine. He tried to grab me and that's as far as he got. Good thing for those Krav Maga classes! I kicked his ass!"

I wanted to give her a hug but wasn't sure that one CIA agent hugging another was appropriate. Besides, it might come off as seeing her as weak... and she was definitely not that.

"When I came out of the restroom, I saw a man walking from that Charger over there. Erica explained. "As he got closer, he ran at me, then grabbed me. You saw the rest."

I leaned down and searched him. There was no wallet or id, only car keys, and a taser! He obviously intended to use it. However, he greatly underestimated his target, possibly targets... and definitely Erica. I asked Joe if he had any rope or tape in his car to bind the still unconscious man's wrists and ankles. He brought back a large roll of duct tape. There's not much you can't accomplish with a Swiss Army Knife and a roll of duct tape.

After taping his arms and legs securely, I asked Joe to help me carry him to the back of his Charger. Using his car keys, I opened the trunk, which fortunately was empty. Putting more tape across his mouth, we lifted him inside and began closing the trunk.

"Wait a minute," Joe spoke up. "One more thing." At that, he took a hammer he had brought from his car and knocked off the handle on the inside of the trunk that allowed a trapped person to get out. He then slammed the trunk shut.

"Brilliant," I said to Joe. "That's why you get paid the big bucks!" I joked.

I took out my phone and called a secure line for Artemis. I let him know what had happened, and where the man and his car were located. I could tell that he took in a deep breath at the development, but tried not to let on his concern.

“I’ll have agents there in 15 minutes to pick him up. Better if the three of you were gone by then. We should see you in a couple of hours. Be safe!”

CHAPTER 23

Mission Accomplished in spite of Threats

Heeding the urgency in Artemis's voice, we all got back in the car, a bit shaken, but amazingly composed under the circumstances. After a few minutes of silence, I reached up from the back seat and put my hand on Erica's shoulder, "Are you Ok?"

I was surprised to see her grin back over her shoulder, and say, "I'm terrific! I think I'm on a bit of a high at finally being able to use our training and take some physical action at the bastards that have been terrorizing us!"

Joe began laughing at this, "You go girl!" he said, borrowing a phrase he had probably heard on television. Even I had to laugh at this non-sequitur of vocabulary coming from the wealthy, ivy league world traveler.

The laughter seemed to let out some of our contained emotions, and we settled into a more relaxed drive toward Brandywine. Nevertheless, I had felt some comfort knowing that I had been armed, and ready to use my weapon. I never did ask Erica if she had been carrying her weapon when she was attacked, but it had probably happened so quickly that using her hands as weapons was the better choice.

We remained quiet for a while. Then I said what we all were thinking. “Erica, do you think this was about that threatening sounding phone call you received? Of course, we’ve suspected that someone was after us since our original mission in England. Question is, was the attack today more of whatever threat that is, or was it about the software your parents developed and your knowledge about it?”

Erica was slow to answer, her eyes fixed somewhere in the distance.

“I don’t know,” was all she said. I left it at that.

We all watched our phone apps and car GPS unit to know how close we were to our first destination. The last 30 miles seemed to take the longest, but I soon saw a sign saying that we were entering Brandywine, West Virginia, Population 218. It was obviously a small town along the country highway. The time was 2:40 PM and I’m guessing a good number of the town’s people were out and about, working or shopping. As we pulled up to the Post Office, it seemed like it might be one of the busier hubs of Brandywine, half a dozen cars pulling in and out, another dozen parked alongside the couple of US Mail vehicles.

Sure enough, toward the back of the lot, in an empty section, was the big black sedan, license plate ‘Joe.’ Joe pulled up alongside the passenger window, which powered down, and greeted the familiar guide.

Dark sunglasses and suit, he nodded, and with the usual few words, said “Follow me.”

Pulling out of the Post Office parking lot onto Blue Gray Trail, we almost immediately merged onto Sugar Grove Road. My GPS said we had about 13 miles to go to get to an area called NSA Sugar Grove Station. I had done some research on the internet and found that it was a former naval base that hosted super-secret NSA surveillance activities. The town is in an isolated area surrounded by the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, less than three hours from Washington, D.C. The internet article had said that the NSA facilities were being closed and auctioned off. Nevertheless, the remaining town was a self-sustaining community of approximately 120 acres, and was located in the United States National Radio Quiet Zone, a federally designated area in which electronic communications are strictly regulated. Other than that, I had no idea where our final destination may be, and what kind of CIA facility to expect.

We continued to follow the Officer in the black sedan, license plate ‘Joe,’ as we had done on our first mission. With rolling mountains in the distance, the landscape was mostly wide open. Because of the early spring season, the highway was lined with trees with new growth, large expanses of land covered with short grass, the winding river, dotted with

simple homes, barns, structures of varying sizes, and farm equipment.

There were occasional, plain, one story wood or metal structures that were homes, it seems, to people who worked large farmlands, planted with some crop or another, and pick-up trucks and tractors parked outside. Some of the homes seemed more elaborate, two-story, but still simple structures surrounded by farmland.

At one point the road began being followed on the right by a small river, or rather the road probably followed the river, and a thin density of trees occasionally formed a natural line between the highway and the river. For some reason, there were selective distances where guard rails joined the line of trees. Perhaps for reasons more apparent in the winter months.

We passed a complex on the right with a large water tower, a sign that said '*Navy Information Operations Command*', and a Redbox kiosk inside the large parking lot. Probably an extremely popular source of entertainment for this rural area. Eventually, we began to pass small, more developed areas, larger homes, maybe half a dozen or more closer together, bigger support structures, storage areas and long garages, more power lines visible. If you blinked you would be past them.

A small town came and went. I thought it was called Sugar Grove, the first noticeable structure being a very neat, well-kept church, wood, pale green with white outlines, looking like just what you would expect a small town church to look like. This possible downtown area also passed by quickly. Within a mile or so there were a number of very nice homes along the highway, but then we were back to the open terrain that was typical of our drive.

Eventually the trees around the highway began to get thicker, less open grass and farmland, more forests, and it seemed like the road had more twists and turns. Having lost my attention to the Route number while scouring the woods around our drive, I finally noticed that we were now on Route 25, called Reddish Knob Road. My GPS told me we were probably getting close to our destination, if it was near NSA Sugar Grove Station. Up ahead must be the turn onto Route 24. The surveillance station was nestled in a triangle between the two routes, and looked from my satellite view, like a giant bunch of crop circles and odd shaped clearings all linked together.

We seemed to skirt the main NSA listening station, following Reddish Knob Road in a wide circle, occasionally seeing large structures off in the distance, at one point passing a giant satellite dish not far from the road. The forest surrounded us as we

drove. Not far up the tree-covered main road, was another smaller road that turned off to the right. We turned and followed this unknown road deeper into the forest, away from the eyes and signal of our GPS.

“I feel like we’re getting deeper into the ‘rabbit hole.’”

“Well, at least we know that wherever we’re going, it’s very hidden,” answered Joe. “It would be hard to follow us without being noticed. In fact, I haven’t seen another car in probably half an hour.”

“I’m beginning to feel safer than I have in a week,” chimed in Erica. “Of course, we’re not there yet!” she added almost ominously.

A few minutes later we came to a large gate, with guards with automatic rifles posted just inside. It seemed they had been electronically alerted that we were on our way to the gate, which was surrounded by trees and high bushes that looked like they were interwoven with barbed wire. Here and there in the trees past them I detected men in camouflaged nests, apparently with large mounted automatic weapons as well.

“Wow,” let out Erica, “it’s Buckingham Palace, but in the woods!”

Joe kept his eyes on the Officer in the black sedan ahead of us, who was talking to one of the well-armed guards. Two other guards had come through

the gate and were walking around our car, looking through the windows, one inspecting underneath with a mirror, the other holding a leashed Belgian version of a German shepherd, sniffing the outside of the car. They walked away, motioning to the guard talking to ‘black-sedan agent,’ and the gate began opening. We were on our way to our final destination, at last!

“We’re here!” said Joe in a raised voice, like a line from some movie. Checking his view, we saw the huge log cabin structure that was a copy of the one we had been to in Pennsylvania. Apparently, someone loved the template for the reinforced structure disguised as a log cabin, except for the size of it, and the fact that there were several levels below ground. Who knows how many of these had been built around the country?

Joe pulled our SUV up alongside the black sedan we had been following and parked in front of the structure. We all got out, took a minute to stretch our bodies, breathing in the fresh forest air.

“I’d love to have a cabin in the woods like this,” I remarked. “Maybe not to live in all the time, but at least to visit. I wonder if they’d build one for me?”

Both Erica and Joe chuckled politely at the absurd thought. “Well, they probably would for the right price, but then they’d have to kill you,” joked Joe.

We all laughed some more, grateful to have finally arrived at our destination, then followed our guide through the front door. Even he seemed to have smiled a little at my daydream.

Assuming matching blueprints to the structures, we had already guessed the location of the office we were going to. Sure enough, Artemis was sitting at the large desk, studying some reports. He rose as we walked into the office, gave us a big smile, and shook all of our hands.

“Assuming you have the London Sun ad with you, and I don’t doubt that you do, well done! Another successful mission!” he said in an excited voice.

At that, we answered almost in unison, “In triplicate Sir!”

Artemis’s eyes had grown big at that surprise, followed by another very big smile, and a slow shaking of his head back and forth, “You ‘three musketeers’ may turn out to be some of my best agents!

We each started to reveal the hiding place of our own hidden file. Joe pulled off the tape and envelope he had taped to his body, taking his memory card out and placing it on the desk. I pulled out a British Museum gift bag from my carryon backpack, taking the frame out which was showing one photo of the Museum after another. I then slipped the memory

card out of the frame and placed it on the desk next to Joe's. I indicated that the data was inside a photo of all three of us in front of, ironically enough, the Rosetta Stone. Finally, Erica set her secure phone on the desk, already queued up to the hidden file location, asking for her fingerprint scan. A quick touch and the file was no longer hidden.

"Incredible!" exclaimed Artemis. He pressed a button on his desk phone and an agent almost immediately popped through the door.

"Take these two memory cards and secure phone directly to CyberSecurity. They are critical secret data, don't let anything happen to them," he warned the agent sternly.

"Yes Sir!" answered the very professional young man, and he was gone.

"Tell you what, I'll have some dinner brought in, maybe a bottle of champagne, and you can tell me about your adventures," offered our proud boss. "You'll be staying here at least overnight, maybe a couple of days, if you want to start learning some more about our operations in these facilities."

We had a wonderful dinner, seemingly prepared by a chef right on the premises. None of us had eaten that well in weeks, probably years, with the exception of our 'bon vivant' Joe. Even the dessert seemed like a creation out of the Cordon Bleu coffee

table book. Artemis proficiently popped the cork on the champagne, and poured a little for each of us into fluted but plastic champagne style glasses. He made a toast to the ‘three musketeers’ and we each had a sip of the bubbly.

Erica giggled at the bubbles in her nose, possibly the first time she’d had champagne.

“Now tell me all about your adventure,” Artemis asked, his face beaming with anticipation.

For the next few hours, we took turns telling what we remembered about everything, from the flight to the Uber driver, to the hotel, Victoria Station, and everything afterward. Joe or Erica or I would suddenly remember some detail we had forgotten, and the details would fill in even more, until we felt that we had relived the entire mission.

“One thing you should know, if you don’t by now, is that at times we have had either our own agents, or our allies’ agents keeping an eye on you. It’s not possible to do this all the time, but in many locations it is.”

“Although you were on your own during the Uber trip to your hotel from Heathrow, MI5 stayed in the area and monitored traffic cameras and hacked into the hotel parking lot cam to keep an eye on the three of you. They also intercepted Hunter’s call to the original Uber driver to confirm that he had been the

one that had picked you up. When it turned out he hadn't, and was upset that you hadn't shown up, MI5 picked up the phony Uber driver on the M1 highway. Turns out he was an Iranian, working for the Russian SVR, though they'll deny it."

"Also, at your exchange at Victoria Station," Artemis continued, "you were being watched by MI5. They had to stay out of the action itself, or they might draw attention to a secret mission. However, as soon as you were able to pass off the photograph to the man with the *cowboy belt buckle*, and left the gates, MI5 agents moved in and took the interloping ticket agent who had tried to interfere, into custody. So, in a sense, you helped take an enemy agent out of the field of play. We believe he was a Russian national, also SVR."

"Finally, on your drive to Brandywine, we did have a couple of agents following you. They had determined that a suspicious dark colored Mercedes was stalking you. When they tried to get a better view of who was in the car, whoever it was spotted them and took an exit at a high rate of speed. The agents unwisely followed them, instead of staying with your car. Although they were able to stop the Mercedes, and take them into custody, by the time the nearest agency car could arrive to transfer the two men into their vehicle, the agents assigned to you had fallen behind. Not until you called me, could we locate

where you were, and they were about 15 minutes away. Those two agents will get a stern dressing down, and some refresher time at ‘The Farm’.”

Joe spoke up first, “I think we felt we were pretty much on our own out there, depending on our training, and our wits. Truth is, I’m not sure if I speak for everyone, but I loved the challenge, and always believed we could handle it. Knowing you had our back, though, makes me feel even better, like we actually belong as CIA Officers.”

Erica followed, “It almost makes me feel warm and fuzzy knowing that the CIA and MI5 were watching over us. Although, remembering what happened at the service station on the highway is going to remind me that we sometimes ARE on our own, and fists, guns, or wits, we have to keep all of them ready.”

“We’ve come a long way from our first mission,” I said, and Joe’s right, it feels good to be learning to trust ourselves and react to the unexpected. He’s also right in saying it feels good to belong to this organization, to have people all over the world at our backs. So, when do we learn the secret handshake?” I tried to break the gravity of the moment, giving Artemis a playful jab in his side.

Beaming back at me, he answered with a devious smile, “All in due time, grasshopper, all in due time.”

CHAPTER 24

Danger to Erica – They Want the Code

“I hate to bring it up,” I said, all eyes turned to me, “with all our attention on the mission, it seems we may have lost track of the threats to Erica.”

“I haven’t,” disputed Joe, “and I’m still not convinced they are threats.”

Erica gave Joe a surprised glance. She couldn’t believe that he continued to deny the danger that the call and later burglary of her apartment had implied.

Artemis and I had pretty much the same reaction.

“What is it that you know that we don’t, then,” accused Artemis.

Joe’s expression froze for a second, then he turned away, his hand gripping the back of his chair tightly. Then he turned back, his face now pale.

“I do know something about who has been contacting you, Erica.”

We were all horrified by this sudden admission. What could this possibly mean? What possible dark secret could Joe have been hiding from us?

“What are you saying?” blurted out the now emotional Erica.

“I’ve known something about the people who have been sending you messages, though it hasn’t

been my prerogative to reveal anything about them. I've tried to let you know that they mean you no harm. Remember that their words have been asking you for "help," not threatening you or demanding anything."

"Killing my goldfish seems like a threat," Erica raised her voice at Joe.

"From what I've been told, it was an accident, by some overzealous agent," Joe tried to soften the event.

"Who or what is this group?" demanded Artemis.

"Again, it's not up to me to answer that question," repeated a defensive Joe. "However, I can show you and let you witness their identities for yourselves."

"Show us how?" I interjected.

"It involves going on a trip, one that even the CIA can greatly profit from," explained Joe.

Artemis stood expressionless for a moment, then said "Alright," having no idea what he was agreeing to.

Early the next day we were on a CIA jet. Joe's disclosure that our destination would be Miami, was a shock. Nevertheless, we had a sense that what we were about to witness was that important. It was a measure of how much we trusted Joe that we

followed him almost blindly into what he assured us would be a critical mission in itself.

Landing in Miami, Joe had arranged ground transportation. Seated comfortably in the large limo, we avoided asking Joe questions, since it seemed his only answer would be, “You’ll see.”

The drive was about an hour and a half, much of the last part along some secluded coastline with only the occasional cottage. When the limo finally stopped, we slowly disembarked, groaning and stretching as we became upright again. There, opposite the limo, was a massive super yacht, possibly five-hundred feet long. I didn’t see a name anywhere on the yacht, usually on the bow near the front. That seemed to fit with the mystery of all this.

Once onboard, the First Mate guided us through a beautifully carpeted hallway, to a conference room. As the four of us entered the room, we could see that there were already dozens of people seated. The very large room, beautifully detailed with brass and polished wood highlights, held two long, obviously expensive tables, separated but parallel to each other, with a table and podium at one end.

All eyes were on us, as we couldn’t help staring back, trying to take in the unexpected vision of probably sixty people filling the seating. Truth be told, there was probably enough room for another twenty. Erica took my hand, and squeezed it a little

harder than I would have liked. Some of the already seated nodded to us, some smiled, some looked down at their crystal water glasses and took a sip.

The First Mate ushered us to the large table near the podium, at the head of the two tables. There were chairs for each of us. A Ship Steward carried a silver pitcher and filled each of our glasses with cold water. There was a bowl of ice within reach, with silver tongs, so you could add ice if your water wasn't cold enough. There was no food anywhere on the tables, only white laced linen at each seat, to set the glasses on. The acoustics in the room were very good, so only the podium had a microphone.

As the beginning of the meeting became imminent, I watched as the First Mate pulled the heavy door closed. The slight sound of air being squeezed made me realize that we were in a SCIF, a *Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility*. It's a secure room that guards against electronic surveillance and suppresses data leakage of sensitive information. There would be no phone signals or internet, Traditionally, no electronic devices were permitted. None of the ship's staff remained in the room.

Once seated, I began to notice printed placards on the table in front of each person, identifying a name and organization. I can't say that I recognized many of their names, but I was overwhelmed by their titles

and the companies and groups they represented. There were CEO's, a Head of one of the largest Cyber Security businesses, a representative of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), a three-star General, and too many more to enumerate.

As we waited for things to begin, I leaned over to Artemis and asked, "Artemis, you're the one with access to Intelligence, what is this all about?"

His face briefly took on a confused look, then he leaned over to answer. "The group is called the '*National Security Coalition*'. They are a think tank of sorts, a very powerful and influential one. I have no idea why we're here, or what they're about. Apparently Joe has the inside track on that, but I'm embarrassed to say that his connection to the group wasn't known to us."

Taking another opportunity, I browsed the crowd again. The Army General was dressed in blue, jacket and pants, with white shirt and black tie, and all the extra bars, pins, shoulder straps, and ribbons. He was an imposing figure. Most of the other men were dressed in probably custom made business suits. The women, seemingly near half of the group, wore a variety of business suits, with skirts or slacks. They all looked very successful, powerful, and influential.

The woman whose placard indicated that she was the CEO of probably the largest Cyber Security

company in the country, if not the world, stood up. She was middle-aged, attractive, her face framed with a short blond bob. She wore a perfectly cut black business pantsuit, with a white silk blouse. She seemed ready to be in charge wherever she went. She began walking to the podium.

Erica leaned toward me. “Impressive, huh. I’m both turned on and scared.”

The woman tapped the microphone to test whether it was on. Her placard said that her name was ‘Abigail.’ Her laptop blocked the view of her last name.

“Thank you all for coming to this special meeting of the ‘*National Security Coalition*.’ I know that it was short notice, but circumstances made it critical that we meet. As an organization that is dedicated to addressing the serious issues that threaten our country, very few of those threats have equaled the one that brings us here today.”

The room was silent. I could have heard the proverbial pin drop. I glanced at Joe, who was sitting with our group at the front table. He simply nodded at me. I saw him differently than I had the day before. I no longer felt confident that I knew or understood him. I tried to determine at what point he had become a deception to me. The transition eluded me.

Abigail continued. “First let me introduce our guests from the CIA. They represent a special team, who carry out various assignments. Their supervisor is Artemis Blackstone.”

Artemis nodded to the group.

“The other Officers are relatively new, and as I’m told, have shown great promise.”

She introduced Erica, Joe, and myself, each one of us nodding in turn.

“Of course you already know Joe, who has been a member of the *NSC* for a brief time. You have also heard of Erica, who is at the center of our current scenario. Her parents created the powerful software that concerns us, along with much of the world. Last but not least is Hunter, which I understand may or may not be his real name.”

I gave an ironic smile, then turned away.

CHAPTER 25

The National Security Coalition

I studied the group, trying to understand what they had in common. Obviously, they had some unifying purpose, and seemingly a very serious one. I began to have a positive feeling about them as I scanned their faces and titles. It put a whole new perspective on the phone call and note that Erica had received. As Joe had mentioned, it also made me realize that their choice of the word “Help” was unlikely a threatening one.

“We all know the background of this very serious issue at hand,” began Abigail again. “Erica’s parents, working for an aggregate of computer systems companies, created an innovative software that combines viruses, malware, and other programs, and is among the most powerful of its kind. We don’t know what companies contracted them, or what the intended purpose of it is. The code to the software is both highly encrypted and hidden.”

“Our only link to it is Erica. She worked with her parents in developing the program. Is that correct Erica?”

Erica nodded slowly, trying to understand the consequences to this admission.

Two weeks ago this was the very group that she believed were threatening her life. Her fear and resentment wouldn't pass easily. She missed Goldy. Erica glanced at Joe, still confused as to what his role in all this was. She thought he was her friend, someone who wouldn't have secrets from her. The fact that he had been part of this group all along made her feel betrayed, even violated. It would take time for him to earn her trust again, if he even could.

Now that she remembered what encryption her parents used in safeguarding their software, and where the programs was actually hidden, she felt even more vulnerable. It wasn't clear what this group wanted, or even what their intentions with the software might be.

“As a primary part of our Charter,” Abigail continued, “the *National Security Coalition* is dedicated to protecting the United States from Cyber incursions. In this case, we will act to keep this potentially devastating program from being weaponized. We have made an awkward attempt to get Erica's attention and hopefully, assistance. A final decision was made to call this meeting and to bring Erica and her team to Miami, to show her what we are all about.”

Abigail began to introduce Erica, then moved back to the microphone.

“Oh, by the way, unless Erica objects, we have prematurely nicknamed the software ‘*Hippo*’, which is the deadliest mammal in the world. Its aggression is unrivalled and ferocious, even attacking humans without being provoked.”

The suggested name and comparison had a sobering effect on the group. Even Erica seemed to nod her head in some kind of agreement.

Abigail again started to introduce Erica.

“Let’s give Erica a chance to say a few words, so we can get a sense of where she stands on the events since her parents death.”

Erica leaned over to Artemis. “What should I do?” she asked frantically.

“We believe these are good guys, Erica,” he answered calmly. She realized that he had used the royal “We” to mean the CIA.

As Erica moved timidly toward the microphone, I instinctively clapped lightly, then realized that I was the only one. I glanced at Artemis and he was shaking his head slowly back and forth, indicating that he thought my applause was inappropriate.

The thoughts going through her head were a jumble, so much had happened in the last week. On the one hand, she was still trying to decide if she should trust what seemed to be a legitimate security

organization. On the other hand, she almost wished she had her gun on her, because she couldn't bring herself to give away her parents' secret to 60 complete strangers. Finally, she saw no other way out, and if Artemis and the CIA trusted them, she had to trust someone.

“Hello everyone. My name, as you already know, is Erica. I am currently an Officer with the CIA. As you probably also know, my parents were top level programmers, who worked for an as yet unknown group, and created a powerful software, combining aspects of a virus, malware, and other destructive codes. It is believed to surpass the abilities of any previous such software. The purpose of the software, nicknamed “*Hippo*,” is still unknown, although I can't believe that my parents would agree to create something that would have a purely malicious purpose.”

Erica paused to gauge the reaction of the crowd. They were mostly poker-faced. A few whispered to each other.

“My boss, Artemis Blackstone, assures me that you are ‘the good guys.’ I don't know if that's true. Experience has taught me that every large group has the potential for someone who can't be trusted.”

Erica glanced at Artemis, then at me and Joe. We all gave her encouraging smiles, without trying to openly agree with her last statement.

“Apparently, my best choice for dealing with the danger that my parents’ software has created seems to be to trust your organization. Maybe someday we’ll find out who originally contracted my parents, and they may be ‘good guys’ too. For now, you’re it.”

The members of the *Coalition* seemed to be trying to be patient with Erica. After all, most of them were professionals, experienced in handling secrets and crisis situations. They realized that ‘*Hippo*’ could be a great threat to not only the United States, but the world as well. They also realized that they needed Erica’s full cooperation, and if that meant treating her with ‘kid gloves,’ then that’s what they would have to do.

Abigail stood and spoke, “Erica, let me assure you that we are completely on your side and will do anything we can to protect both you and the software.”

“One last thing,” Erica interjected, “which I’m not sure if any of you are aware of. Due to a recent trauma, some of my lapsed memories of my time working with my parents on the software have been restored. Working with Artemis and my team, I’ve remembered how the encryption to the software code worked, and even where my parents stored the program.”

The level of discussion between the members grew. I saw some smiles, enthusiasm, even shock.

“Excellent,” Abigail seemed to speak for the majority.

“Now seems like a good time for a break,” she continued. She pressed a button under a panel in the podium, and within a couple of minutes I heard the release of air and the SCIF door opened.

CHAPTER 26

The Solution to Protecting the Code

We were ushered into a lavish dining room for an incredible spread. It was buffet style, with everything from lobster to petit fours. Luckily, the members of the *Coalition* were the kind of people who were used to exquisite meals. Erica, Joe, Artemis, and I were fortunate enough to attend what might have been a typical lunch for some of them. I wasn't shy about loading my plate. Artemis watched me and just shook his head, but with a smile.

Erica seemed to be relaxing a bit as the lunch went on. Some of the threats and mysteries of the past week or so were being explained. Of course, the idea that the *National Security Coalition* was there to support her in the protection of her parents' software was a tremendous relief. Admittedly it was a relief to all of us.

"If you're finished with lunch," Abigail spoke up, "why don't the four of you join me in a private meeting room to clarify some things that we don't need the whole group for."

"Sure," said Artemis with a slight hesitancy. The rest of us nodded.

We followed Abigail down a side hallway to a small version of the conference room. Abigail

explained that it was actually a part of a larger SCIF that included several meeting areas. A counter on one side had a coffee machine that looked like it made everything but milkshakes. There were also several silver trays with desserts. Unfortunately, there was no Mountain Dew.

General Andrews was already seated, along with another man, maybe 40, distinctive and self-confident looking. Both stood as we entered and offered their hands as Abigail introduced them.

“General Andrews is attached to the Army Cyber Command, and this is Anton Schmidt, the head of our Security, formerly with German Intelligence.”

“We know that you probably have questions,” continued Abigail. “I thought it might be easier if we limited the number of people who could answer those questions.”

“I have a general question that might help limit some of our confusion,” I said. “A number of weeks ago, at the end of our training in fact, each of our homes were burglarized. The only things taken or disturbed were items, I guessed, that could be used to test our DNA. Did you have anything to do with that?”

“Although we began monitoring Erica months ago,” answered Anton Schmidt, “we had nothing to

do with those break-ins.” His answer was short and sweet.

I knew that Artemis wanted to ask that if they had been monitoring Erica, did they see who committed the burglaries, but he didn't.

He did, however, ask “How long has Joe belonged to your group and why did you recruit him?”

General Andrews answered this time. “He's only been with us a very short time. As a result of his wealth and world travel, he actually had an acquaintance in the *NSC*, so the connection was useful to us. As far as why, we wanted an inside connection to your group, both to mine information and to help protect Erica.”

“Speaking of protection,” continued General Andrews, “we have assigned a detail to shadow Erica and watch over her apartment. The rumors of her knowing something about the “*Hippo*” code, and possibly its location, have put her safety in question. By the way, we are aware of course that a similar team has been assigned by the CIA. We have come to an understanding with them, and have found a system to work together.”

“Impressive,” said Joe, and “Thank you.”

“One more thing, and probably the most important detail,” Abigail seemed hesitant, but definite, “we believe the best thing for all of us is for

the *National Security Coalition* to take over the software code, and remove it completely from your possession Erica.”

Total shock in the room.

“Wha... wha... what?” Erica was finally able to get out the word.

“Erica,” Abigail became more emphatic, “we have all the resources needed to keep the code safe. and a multi-level system to control its use. The code will again be encrypted, kept on an unknown site on the dark web, just as you wisely did, and access to it will require password input by six different people, one of them you.”

I thought that seemed very acceptable, but it was ultimately up to Erica.

“Honestly, I can’t think of any reason to oppose that idea,” she said calmly. I could see relief beginning to wash over her face.

“Even more importantly, we will let it be known that you no longer possess the code, and even your password will only work with five other members of our team, each with a different “uncrackable” password.”

Even Artemis was all smiles. It was a big weight off of his shoulders.

CHAPTER 27

Moles in the NSC

The CIA team returned to Cleveland the next day. The meeting with the *National Security Coalition* seemed to solve a major problem that they had faced days ago. The crisis revealed by Erica and some unknown group supposedly threatening her could be over. The powerful and dangerous software created by her parents, and potentially a weapon that could endanger any one from companies to countries, would now be protected by the *NSC* and out of the hands of Erica and even the CIA.

Everyone settled back into their home lives, satisfied that another potential catastrophe had been averted. Artemis decided that the “three musketeers” could take a couple of days respite as a reward. There was no pressing matter or mission anyway that required immediate action.

Unfortunately, things would soon change. Joe had received an Alert on his phone through a special messaging program set up by Security at the *NSC*. The message said “*Critical that all meet tonight 7PM. You, Artemis, Erica, Hunter.*” An address was given. Probably a safe house.

Joe immediately called Artemis, and then Erica, and Hunter. He would pick them up. Artemis would meet them there. As an afterthought, he realized that

their own security from the CIA and NSC would follow them there. There was no need to call them. He couldn't tell them much anyway.

Two hours later they were parked outside a Chinese restaurant, which was obviously a front for the safe house. Joe suggested they wait for Artemis, so we could go in together. A few minutes later Artemis arrived in a plain Ford, of course black. There was nothing memorable about the car, should anyone be watching, or following.

"Any idea what's going on?" asked Artemis, directed at Joe. "I thought we were pretty much rid of any 'situations'."

Joe shook his head. "Any guesses I could make would just be conjecture."

To be fair, Artemis glanced at Erica and me. We both just shrugged. It was what he expected.

"Anyone packing?" asked Joe.

Both Joe and I revealed that we were. Erica tried to avoid carrying her gun. She preferred depending on her "Krav Maga." We all knew that was foolish, but never pressed the issue.

"I am too," said Artemis. "I don't like surprises."

We entered a side door that had been indicated with the address. Up one flight of wooden stairs, we came to a single door. One might assume it was the

home of a family, possibly the restaurant owners. We knew better. We knocked.

Odd how we knew that somewhere in the background were possibly four bodyguards, assigned to us by the CIA and the *National Security Coalition*. They might have been stationed across the street, at a window across from the apartment we were about to enter, with a sniper rifle. Others might be right behind us on the stairs, waiting for us to enter the apartment before moving up the stairs.

The door opened and a man in a black suit let us in. Both Joe and I had pulled our guns, keeping them behind our backs. We both entered first, slowly and cautiously, trying to take in the room. There were several men and one woman, all dressed in black with white shirts and black ties. Some were seated on a sofa, one man standing.

“Come in,” said the man who had opened the door. “You won’t need those guns, we’re all on your side.”

Joe recognized one of the men. He was the head of Security for the *National Security Coalition*. They greeted each other. Erica and Artemis had entered and were looking over the room and the strangers, ready to react if needed.

“What’s going on Fred?” Joe asked of the man.

“Let me introduce these people first, then I’ll explain,” he answered.

One of the men and the woman were with the FBI. Two men were surprisingly with Interpol. The fifth, as mentioned, was with the *NSC*. My mind raced trying to get some grasp of what was happening. I saw Erica’s face almost mimic mine. FBI, Interpol, where did this come from? What could possibly have brought them here?

“There has been a development,” revealed Fred. “Since the seemingly productive and final meeting we had a number of days ago in Miami, both the CIA and the *NSC* have received Alerts from other Intelligence agencies that they are investigating one or two members of the *National Security Alliance*. They believe they are actually “moles” for either the GRU, Russian Military Intelligence, or the MSS, Chinese Intelligence. Both would have great interest in the software that your parents created.”

The senior member of the Interpol team spoke up. He had a slight French accent, which made sense since Interpol was based in Lyon, France.

“To give some background, Interpol has 195 member countries in our network, so our resources are extensive. Along with the FBI in the US,” he nodded toward the FBI team, “we have been investigating evidence of members of the *NSC* that tells us they are foreign agents. In fact, a ‘*Red Notice*’

is being issued as we speak, and your FBI will immediately be arresting the suspects.”

It was now the turn of the FBI to give their input. The female agent in charge spoke.

“Just to add a few details, we are aware that you have not yet given the software code into the possession of the National Security Alliance. In view of what has just been told to you, we must insist that you postpone that process until the arrests have been made and we feel that the NSC is again secure. Fred has kept them apprised of events, so they are expecting the delay.”

“I can’t help but feel great pride,” Artemis finally spoke for our group, “in the brilliance of our aligned agencies. I sleep better knowing that Interpol, the FBI and the CIA are on the job. And ‘yes,’ I know that I am patting myself on the back too, as an officer of the CIA, but I’m just a cog in a great wheel. We all are,” Artemis glanced at Joe, Erica, and myself.

“Amen to that,” I felt goosebumps at Artemis’ short speech.

I heard more ‘Amens’ coming from the group. It had been a united effort by some of the top Intelligence agencies in the world. A job well done by all.

“*À bientôt,*” said Joe our world traveler. “See you all soon.”

It would be sooner, rather than later.

WATCH FOR THE NEXT EPISODE....