

A photograph of two soldiers in full combat gear, including helmets, goggles, and rifles, in a desert environment. One soldier is kneeling in the foreground, and another is standing in the background. The scene is set in a flat, arid landscape under a clear sky.

**GREGOREK**

**White  
Rose**

<http://OstrichEyes.com>

# **White Rose**

**Author**

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## DERAILED

"Attention please," announced the flight attendant. "The captain has turned on the fasten seatbelt sign," she stated with a sweet whispering voice. "Please return to your seats immediately." The aging flight attendant held the dated phone handset away from her face while delivering the announcement. Another, equally thin female attendant brushed passed her as she returned the phone to its wall cradle. They were dressed in identical form fitting, light blue pantsuits with bright yellow jacket cuffs.

The flight attendants walked briskly up the aisle. The first held a small garbage bag, clearing passenger tables and instructing them to return their seats to the upright position. The second followed close behind checking overhead compartments, making sure they were secure while also helping to close the tray tables and instructing some passengers to push bags fully beneath the seat in front of them. The pair moved quickly, with years of carefully rehearsed and expertly choreographed efficiency, until they reached a large, overweight gentleman.

Both ladies soon found themselves engaged with this unruly male passenger. He was a very large man with a scraggly gray beard. "Sir, please take your seat," the first instructed. "My wife went to the lavatory," he responded while squeezing himself back into his row to let the women pass. But the first did not continue on. She stopped outside his aisle entrance. "Please take your seat sir," she stated again, this time a little more forcefully.

"I have a bad back," the man complained. "Sir, the captain has instructed all passengers to return to their seats," the second flight attendant confirmed the orders of the first. "These seats are very uncomfortable," the man asserted gesturing to his aisle seat. "When my wife gets back, I'm just going to have to get up again." "Just sit



down," an annoyed man in the next row ordered. He was dressed in military fatigues which generated an aggressive response from the heavy man, "I don't take orders from the likes of you."

"Thank you Sir," the first attendant quickly responded to the seated soldier. "Why don't you mind your own business," the heavyset man fired back, continuing to engage the soldier. The attendant positioned herself between the men while the other stepped forward and continued to instruct the man to take his seat, "Sir, you must sit down now or you will be arrested for interfering with the flight crew." But the man did not wait for her to finish, "Arrest me?" He looked around for support from other passengers while the attendants both repeated the order to be seated.

A jolt went through the plane, as if the floor fell out from beneath them. All three stumbled. The attendants supported themselves against the seats around them. A woman seated across the aisle in the preceding row let out with a yelp, "Hey!" She was reacting to the second attendant grabbing the headrest for support and pulling her long, curly, black hair. The uncooperative male passenger reached down to rub his shin that impacted the metal edge of the seat.

Again, the plane jolted. "This is your captain," the overhead speakers throughout the plane reported.

"We are experiencing heavy turbulence. Attendants secure your stations." Both ladies looked at each other, understanding the seriousness of the order. "Sir, take the window seat," the second ordered while pushing the man back. He dropped back into the window seat still complaining, "Get your hands off me!" "This is not a debate," the first proclaimed while helping the other attendant. "Authorities will be waiting for you at the gate," but she did not finish her statement.

A forceful rumble went through the plane which began to list to the right. Turbulence jolted the plane upwards so quickly the attendants were thrown into the luggage compartments overhead. One fell back into the center aisle, now holding the back of her head. The other ended up in the seat behind her while the plane continued to rack back and forth. "All flight crew to your seats," the captain's voice vibrated heavily with the shaking plane.

The attendants helped each other to the jump-seats located in the forward galley. "My wife!" the heavysset man objected, unbuckling his seatbelt in time for another heavy wave of turbulence to buck him into the overhead air controls. His head hit the help button that now remained lit, signaling the crew with an audible ping in the forward

galley. "Stay seated," the older attendant warned her coworker. "This is bad."

With each violent bounce the plane lost altitude. Rapidly descending, the plane began listing to the right again; however, this time it was not recovering. Rooftops flew by the passenger windows. Now at nearly forty-five degrees, home after home could be seen, closer and closer, the view encouraged many screams. Even from the opposite side of the plane, yells and horror gripped the passengers' faces as the wing nearly clipped the passing residential community below.

Faintly, the captain and copilot could be heard over the passenger intercom which was accidentally left on. The emergency facing the pilots was well beyond the norm. "Cleveland Tower, this is Flight 619 heavy, five miles south of outer beacon on final approach runway one nine zero, executing emergency procedures, complete hydraulic failure." The copilot interrupted, "Engine two is down. Flaps frozen left wing ten degrees, no response rightwing." Warning buzzers rung-out across the massive control panel and the plane rolled further right responding to the left wing flaps. "Compensating left full rudder," the pilot announced. "Keep the nose up," the copilot warned at the same moment.

The plane passed a long stretch of ground with a few scattered trees, then a thick wooded area, before the wing impacted a chain-link fence. Oriented nearly ninety degrees from level, the plane's wing impacted the ground, dragging long portions of the fencing that ran alongside a single railway line. The nose of the plane dipped down from the force of the impact. The wing tip was removed by the fencing. The rest sliced the earth like a giant bladed weapon. With half the wing gone, it continued across the railroad dislodging many of the rails.

"Cleveland, Flight 619 going down, short outer marker," were the final words of the pilot responsible for two hundred forty-four lives. On board were sixty-four military personnel returning from overseas operations. Flight 619 was the fourth of five planes due to land at the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport that day with returning veterans of the decades long war on terror in the Middle East. One hour earlier Flight 220 landed safely with thirty-six returning military. The other passengers allowed them to deplane first, to a heroes welcome, all clapping and thanking them for their service.

On exiting the gangway and entering the terminal the twenty-nine service men and seven women were confronted by another warm welcome by a few waiting passengers in the small concourse

lobby. However, the big welcome came from beyond the screeners by the many friends and family waiting in the main entrance hall. In the middle of the remaining servicemen, a thin yet tall black man carried a rucksack over his right shoulder. "No. Wait by the car," Specialist Smith spoke softly into a cellphone held to his left cheek. "Is Rose with you?" He paused for his wife's response. "Stay with the car. I'm almost out. Don't leave Rose alone."

When he saw his wife, he dropped the rucksack to the sidewalk outside the terminal and quickly slid his phone into the cargo thigh pocket of his loose fit, camouflage pants just in time to give his wife a big hug, lifting her off the ground while receiving a big kiss from her. He spun around slowly before coming to a stop halfway around. Both held each other tightly as if no one else existed; even though, many moved around them with other military members experiencing the same type of joyous greeting from their loved ones, both inside and outside the terminal.

He lowered his wife Pam who was all smiles even though she wiped away tears. She turned quickly to retrieve his luggage from the sidewalk. Pam was a very thin Taiwanese girl, much shorter than Steve. She strained to lift the bag and Steve tried to take it from her. "No. I got it," she insisted with both hands holding the shoulder straps close

to her chest. From behind him, Steve could hear Rose calling out from their silver SUV. Her excitement was obvious. "Careful she doesn't get out," Pam warned moving to the rear of the vehicle. Steve used his body to block the door, but Rose was a large Siberian Husky and would not be denied. She leaped and squeezed out the side door as it opened. Steve knelt to the ground letting Rose lick his face while he held her securely.

"Alright, alright, get back inside." Steve held the dog back until the door pressed up against his arm, which he withdrew quickly to close the door. It did not shut all the way, so he gave it an extra push before moving to the front passenger door. Pam had already closed the rear gate after placing the large bag inside. She now stood on the driver side running board to peer over the car at her husband, still beaming with pride. Both entered the vehicle mindful of the large dog anxious to migrate into the front seats.

Before they buckled in, Steve leaned over to give his wife another big kiss. It was interrupted by Rose licking both their faces. Pam let out with a sharp laugh while Steve pushed the dog back. In moments they were off. "Your flight was ok?" she asked. "We've been experiencing heavy wind gusts all weekend." While petting Rose who positioned herself between the captains chairs of

the SUV, he responded. "After what I've been through it was nothing. The worst part was the thirty minute delay after landing. Finally home and another wait." He turned and sat back in his chair while shifting his gaze to the side window then back to the road ahead. "Severe weather is not going to keep me away from you."

Steve's voice calmed, "The people on board were very nice. Everybody waited and let all the military passengers exit first." He turned to look at her, "While I appreciate everyone's support, I hope you don't have anything planned back home." She responded enthusiastically, "Oh, I have big plans for you mister." He smiled, but shook his head, "I can't handle a surprise party. I'm exhausted." To which she smiled back, "Oh, you will be." Looking at the road ahead, she repeated with a big grin, "You will be. I've got a very important job for you."

Up ahead railroad crossing warning lights began flashing. "Oh come on," Steve blurted out. "We were doing good with all the lights and get nailed by the crossing." Pam put the car in park and unbuckled her seatbelt. "Well, maybe you can nail me right here." She spun around and slid over to Steve's side of the car, sitting on his lap with her back against the door. He held her close with his right hand behind her just above her hip and his left drawing her legs close. Pam slid her

left arm over Steve's shoulders and placed her right hand on his chest.

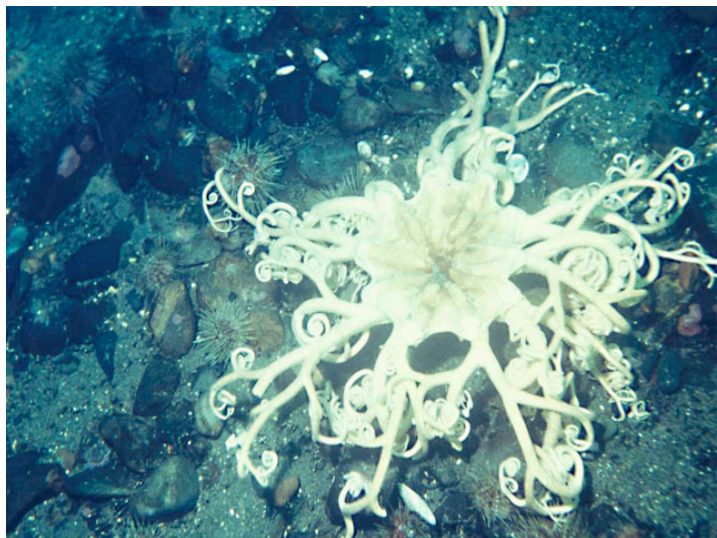
They kissed briefly and then held each other close, enjoying the embrace. Pam was the first to break the silence, "It's good to finally have you home for good this time." Her statement was answered by a loud, high pitched sound outside. Both heard its steady increase and looked outside, but the train had not arrived yet. Steve was first to comment, "That plane is very low." It could be seen above the residential community, dropping quickly. A thin line of smoke marked its troubled path. For a short time it disappeared behind the trees, but then emerged nearly on its side. The chain-link fence separating the homes from the railway was being torn away by the right wing now dragging on the ground. As the nose of the plane dipped down and crashed beyond the tracks, the fence that was being dragged became tangled with the crossing warning lights. Both were torn apart. The lights on the left side of the road were torn away while the chain-link fence was shredded.

Before they could turn to see the condition of the plane, the train arrived. The damaged tracks were unable to control the locomotive. It derailed taking out the first car in the waiting line of vehicles. "It's gone," Pam blurted out as the next railcar passed. Then a flatbed railcar tipped over dumping its cargo of two truck trailers. The stack



fell upon the two remaining cars in front of Pam and Steve's SUV. Both were dragged off the road in under a second. She slid off Steve's lap, as he helped push her back into the driver seat. Pam threw the vehicle in reverse striking the large sedan behind them. It moved only a few feet before it struck the next car in line. Nobody had time to react. A boxcar slammed into the raised shoulder of the narrow two lane road. The impact with the ground did nothing to slow it down. The boxcar was airborne, deflected upward by the collision with the road.

Pam was looking behind their car, screaming for others to move back. With her body turned to the center, she never saw the boxcar collide with theirs. The SUV may as well have been made out of cardboard the way it was torn apart. The boxcar ripped the roof off and struck Pam in the back of the head in the process. The top of her skull was torn away along with portions of her brain and spinal nerves. Steve was spared a direct hit but was now part of the rolling, crumpling mass of metal, sliding off the right side of the road. The raised shoulder helped save his life by providing a space for the vehicle to come to rest without being completely crushed. The last thing he heard before blacking out was a single "Yelp" from Rose.



## SPIDERS

Darkness. Complete darkness consumed everything. It was without variation until a faint thin line broke through the void. It was followed soon after by a burst of white light, intense flashes, like lightning. All around the perimeter of my vision, the dark void was under attack as if a storm was silently moving in from all sides. While the lightning storm began to rage more fiercely, a single object emerged from the darkness. Conical in shape, the creamy brown colored intruder retreated from view as calmly as it arrived. It was very long and sharp. The thin object returned as if in response to the flashes of streaking light. So

intense were they, the object faded from view. Instead of being illuminated, the slender object was temporarily darkened.

It is difficult to determine how long the dance of slithering white flashes held back the object, before a second appeared. Larger this time, together they held their ground against the light. More detail could be seen of these slightly curved objects. Their surface stained with rust, blotches of deep reddish browns covered their form in irregular patterns. As the flashes of light departed, the objects appeared to grow in detail and illumination as if absorbing the light. They were connected. Behind the large ends of the conical shapes, dark gray columns could be discerned. These bent twice before arriving at a common body, an orb with splotches of intense blue.

Suddenly three more of these sharp objects appeared. Lurching forward they threatened before curling closed and retreated into the darkness as if clawing at the void. The taunting mass was pushed back by another wave of intense light. Collectively, they looked like the long, slender legs of a hideous spider. The sharp ends being common to many large species to control and rip apart their victims. As the light faded, the monster returned. Lurching towards me with legs flared wide, it consumed the darkness. Its

advance stopped as quickly as it began. What stopped it was not known. Its bluish brown form glistened as if covered in slime as it clawed at the air inches from my face.

I tried to move back. I tried to reach out. But nothing, there was no response from my body as if none existed. I was as empty as the void. The lights returned, but this time held their ground against the giant arachnid. An intense light moved across the void pushing the monster back and out of sight. Even as the massive, wavering circle of light passed, my vision remained cloudy, covered in a blanket of swirling grays. For the first time I heard a sound. High pitched, it pierced through me like a passing jet plane. My head felt as if it were tumbling in its jet wash. In the turbulence, my thoughts were lost in the whirling rumble left behind. But I felt, as if for the first time, there was pain.

No longer floating in darkness, turbulence took over, followed by sharp pains in my side. Was this the creature? Had the massive spider returned? Was it latched onto my side, digging in with those powerful talons? Another circle of intense light blotted out my vision, reinforcing the thick, swirling gray cloud. I tried to move but my arms failed to respond. The rumbling sound intensified as another set of hot, piercing claws gripped my chest. "Another spider! I was being eaten," filled

my thoughts. Within my arm I could feel the monstrous spider piercing my flesh. It was deep inside my arm. "Why can't I move? What is holding me back?"

More needle like pains gripped my body. All over my legs at first, more gripping pain infested my shoulders, and now the back of my head. I was covered by these things. How many of these creepy monsters were consuming me? "MOVE!" But I remained paralyzed. "MOVE!" I insisted. "I'm going to move. On the count of three, I'm going to get up. One. Two. Three!" But there was no response. The pain still gripped me although greatly diminished. The darkness returned with scattered flashes occasionally marking the outer boundary as before. Squiggling quickly, the light traveled in random patterns, interrupting the image of another creature. However, this one persisted. It hung above a chair in a compact room. "Yes." It was a chair taking shape in this tiny room painted gray.

The new creature was fascinating and terrifying all at the same time. It appeared to hover in mid air. Like a sea urchin with long, thick cone shaped legs protruding all around a spherical body. These tentacles were like worms probing the air around it. As it approached, I lurched forward. Finally, movement. My eyes opened to find myself seated in a bed. A single white bed

sheet covered my legs and reacted to my movement by falling away from my chest. The pain was excruciating. It gripped my entire body like hundreds of needles poking straight through and into my bones.

I fell back into the medical bed. A series of machines beeped to my left. Near them were two garbage cans. Two plastic garbage cans, maybe thirty gallons each that might be used for gathering leaves were filled with medical debris. One overflowing; the other not far behind. There appeared to be a bathroom behind a half closed door beyond the end of my bed. To my right were curtains obstructing my view of the rest of the compact room. I had to turn my head to see this far. At this moment, I realized something was covering my right eye. As I reached slowly up with my left hand, I noticed a tube coming out from the back of my forearm. The image of the huge spider piercing through my flesh came to mind. It itched enormously.

"Don't touch that," came from the narrow hall partially hidden by the curtain. The order was quickly followed by a short, stocky nurse. She had a pleasant, well rounded face, but was all business. Her face reflected no emotion as she moved to the machines, pressing a few buttons to end the annoying beeps. As fast as she arrived she was on her way out, "Someone will be with you in

a moment." I tried to ask about my wife but nothing came out. There was a long narrow tube taped to my face. It attached to a plastic plate where another tube descended into my lungs. Feeling my face with my right hand, I also discovered a thick patch of gauze covering my right eye. It too was just taped to my face, a single piece of tape that ran from my forehead to right cheek.

One pain on my body began to overtake all challengers. It was an irritation coming from my groin. Slowly, I lifted the bleached white sheet and moved aside the flimsy patient gown to see yet another tube thrust into my body. Taped to my abdomen, just below the navel, the tube ran into my penis. Any movement in bed triggered a very painful response. Three hours passed before someone in a white lab coat returned. In that time, I managed to retrieve a large plastic bottle of water from a small table next to the bed but had no way to drink it. "It's about time," I thought while motioning to the tube taped to my mouth. The doctor asked how I was doing, to which I could not respond because I have a tube stuffed down my throat, you moron!

He too was more interested in the machines than me. He scribbled a few things on a clipboard and returned it to a hanger at the end of my bed. I motioned to the tube to which he replied, "The

nurse will be in shortly to remove that." He barely spent two minutes with me. "Hi Misses Clinder." The doctor moved behind the curtain to the bed hidden from view. "How are you feeling today?" You've got to be kidding me. No recognizable response came from the patient. Just unintelligible groans of agony. "What is going on?" I was furious, and at this point I began pulling at the various tubes that kept me tethered to this bed.

This time the wait was only a few minutes. The doctor spent as much time with the lady behind the curtain as he did with me. Soon after he left the room, the nurse returned in time to scold me for pulling on the tubes. "Don't try to remove those," to which I responded with a simple hand signal, flipping my thumb outward after touching the tube covering my mouth. "I know. That's why I'm here." With robotic movement, the chubby little nurse removed the tube connecting the mouth plate to the machine which ushered in a very loud, sustained warning buzzer. She promptly turned the machine off before returning to me. With a single, forceful pull she removed the tape from my face that held the mouth piece in place. "Ok now, give me a soft but steady eeee," she stated as the long tube was removed from my lungs.



She turned to place the slimy tube and mouth piece into the nearly full garbage can, "You can drink some water now. It will help clear out your throat." But I was already demanding answers, "Where is my wife?" She returned with an odd looking device and pulled back the bed sheet, exposing me to the room. "Hey!" My objection was answered by an annoyed look. "You want that left in there?" After she detached the tube from a collection bag hanging beneath the bed, the strange device she had laid on the bed was connected to the remaining tube. I remembered the way she removed the tape and tube from my face and began to urge caution, but I was too late. With a single, steady pull the tube was removed. "Argh," involuntarily echoed from me. As painful as it was, it was good to have it out.

The stocky nurse placed the tube into the same garbage can and began to leave the room. "Wait!" I demanded while repositioning the light blue gown and pulling the bed sheet up, "What about my wife? Is she here?" She calmly turned and looked at the chart at the end of the bed, "I have nothing listed, Mr. Smith." I was quick to offer more information, "We were in an accident. A train derailed." She returned the chart to the hook at the end of the bed. "You were admitted three days ago, Mr. Smith. What is your wife's name?" "Pam, Pamela Smith Reading," scratched

its way from my throat. "Ok. Let me go check if she was brought in with you. Try to relax. You sustained some minor internal injuries. Don't try to get up on your own. You might tear your stitches. If you need to use the facilities, just press the call button on the remote on the bed near your right shoulder." Without any hesitation, she turned and left the room.

For the next hour I examined my body. Stitches closed a long gash on my left leg and many relatively short cuts on my arms, chest, and shoulders. Moving was very difficult. Considering the bruising everywhere else, I'm sure my back showed an equal amount of damage. Blood loss made me feel very weak even though the saline drip was supposed to correct that by increasing blood pressure. Through all this self inspection, I'm not sure when I fell asleep. I closed my eyes for what felt like seconds, but hours had passed. It was dark outside now, and nature was calling.

The first obstacle was getting out of the bed. Like some complex puzzle, I had to twist and turn my body to discover a path to simply sit up at the side of the bed. A path that did not include intense pain and avoided ripping or snagging any of several dozen stitches was difficult to find. The saline drip was attached to a hook above the frame holding various monitoring devices. It

wasn't on wheels like you see in the movies. I was able to stand without bending my left leg, and then just lifted the saline bag off the hook. It was at this time the nurse rushed in. She was different from the earlier one. She was finally responding to the monitoring clip that was attached to my index finger. Early on in this physical obstacle course, I had removed it from my left hand. This action set off warning buzzers that only took twenty minutes for the nurse outside to respond to.

"Don't remove that," the nurse on night shift ordered. "I have to go to the bathroom," I complained as she reached for the saline bag. "You shouldn't be out of bed in your condition." I lifted the bag up and pulled it away from her, "Would you rather I pee on the floor?" The skinny nurse looked up at me with an annoyed look, a look I was getting used to. "Let me get you a portable stand for the saline drip." "Why do I still need this?" I brought my left arm down, "Just take it out." Remembering the actions of the prior nurse, I quickly added, "Slowly." She shook her head, "I'll have to ask the doctor." While she left the room in a hurry, I pulled the thick needle out and removed the tape holding it to the back of my forearm. I stuck the needle into the bag and rehung it with the machines that continued to whine.

When I exited the bathroom, the nurse was waiting for me. She looked furious while silently checking my arm. I was more interested in getting out of here and finding my wife. "Where are my clothes?" She pointed to the table next to the bed, "In the compartment beneath, but you cannot leave until the doctor clears you. Until then you must remain in the patient gown should anything happen." She grabbed my arm and directed me back to the bed. "I can do it. It's better I practice. Can you get me something to eat?" She moved back as I leaned up against the bed, "I'll call down to the cafeteria." She said it with such venom as if I just asked her to wash my car or something equally ridiculous. While she rushed around the bed to turn off the buzzers, all I could think was just do your damn job. As she darted out of the room I muttered, "Imagine that, someone who hasn't eaten in over three days is hungry. The outrage."

As she left, a different doctor than before walked in. This one was a short Indian man with dark skin and balding head. He was followed by a police officer in full uniform. "Mr. Smith it's good to see you up." I opened the small cabinet table next to the bed. Inside was a small light gray bucket with my clothes rolled up along with wallet and cellphone underneath. "You are in no condition to leave Mr. Smith. You have sustained

several minor internal injuries. We must keep you for at least two more days." Without looking at him I retrieved my cellphone and asked bluntly, "Is that when my insurance runs out?" That comment really hit home. The doctor's pleasant tone became more heated. "The officer needs to ask you a few questions regarding the train accident." He moved toward the machines and flipped a couple switches. What that accomplished, I had no idea considering I was no longer attached to them.

"Mr. Smith, I'm Officer Bradley of the North Olmsted Police Department. I need your statement as part of my investigation into the train derailment that occurred on Sunday evening." The doctor worked his way around and began helping me back into bed. Ignoring the officer, I addressed the doctor. "My wife Pam was in the car with me. Where is she?" The doctor responded bluntly, "Your wife did not make it, Mr. Smith." Leaning back in the raised bed, I placed both hands over my face and quietly uttered, "How?" The doctor stepped back while the officer responded, "Your wife was found unresponsive at the scene. I need to know what you saw." I wiped tears from my face and then drove my right hand over my nearly shaven head. "Damn that's cold," I responded to the officer's question in a barely audible voice.

"How did she die?" I whispered. "It might not be good to go into the details at this time," the doctor responded. "How did she die!" I demanded. "Her injuries were severe Mr. Smith." The doctor tried to be comforting in his tone, "It was quick. I'm sure she felt nothing." I had to see her, "Where is she now?" The officer stepped forward. "Mr. Smith, she was taken to a different hospital. I really need to get a brief statement of what you saw for the investigation while it is fresh in your mind."

"In my mind?" I thought. All I had were images of my wife of nearly ten years playfully holding me. "Are you crazy?" I scolded the officer. "The only thing in my mind are images of my dead wife." The doctor moved the officer back. "I'm sorry Mr. Smith, this was too soon." I saw the small note pad in the officer's hand and responded, "A plane crashed. A train derailed. My wife died! Does that sum it up for you?" The doctor continued to usher the officer from the room. About five minutes later the skinny nurse returned with a small cup of water and had me swallow two small pills. She assured me these half white and pink pills would help me rest. I didn't care.



## ROSE

"We have a contract!" I yelled with the cellphone held out in front of my face. "I don't care about regulation changes," I stated with the phone repositioned against my left cheek. "But you took our money." An average size Asian man dressed in worn jeans, a plain black t-shirt, and construction work boots, walked into my hospital room. It was Pam's brother Jim here to take me home. "Then where's our refund?" I put up my hand to acknowledge Jim and let him know I needed another minute. "This is not going to stand. We'll be there in about twenty minutes." I slid out of the hospital bed already in my street

clothes. "Just have her ready." I closed the phone and made a comment to Jim, "I can't believe these people."

"Sir." The nurse entered the room with a wheelchair. "Sir. I need you to sit down so we can check you out." I did my best to slide passed her without pushing her aside. "Sir. Insurance regulations require the hospital transport you to the exit." My left leg was still very stiff, causing a small limp in my gate, but it did not slow my strides for the elevators. The nurse continued her objection. My response was a cold stare as the elevator doors closed.

Jim stayed quiet until we reached his pickup truck, "Let's get you home." It sounded like he wanted to say more, but I interrupted him. "We need to go to the cemetery first." The statement was a bit careless. "I'm sorry Jim. This has to be tough on you too." He gave a slight nod, "What was that call about?" I took a deep breath to calm myself down. "Rose."

"They found her?" Jim asked. He knew how important she was to Pam. "Yeah. As luck would have it, she was taken to our vet." I pointed to my neck looking for the words, "Her collar ID. She was delivered to the vet the day after the accident for disposal." I turned to look at Jim, "Can you believe that? They were just going to throw her



away in the dumpster." "Like common trash?" Jim asked in disbelief. "Yeah, apparently all their euthanized animals are disposed of that way. But Pam's friend Sue works there and had Rose transferred to the cemetery. She knew about the arrangements we made."

The drive to the cemetery was a short trip. Jim was looking as upset as me. "The cemetery director is refusing to bury Rose with Pam." That last statement hit me hard. The thought of burying his younger sister affected Jim too. My silence did not last long though. In a calmer voice I continued, "Three years ago Congress passed legislation that placed new restrictions on cemeteries. It was buried in the Affordable Care Act." "More like, Obama Doesn't Care," Jim mocked. "Nothing affordable about that. It's why Kelly and I moved north. Cabin life. You should come up and visit. Get away from all this."

Ignoring his generous offer, I continued to explain. "Well, the new regulations don't allow pets to be buried in family plots without extra fees and licensing. It also imposed additional requirements, special handling classes for the employees so the cemeteries simply dropped animal burials." "Obama Care passed three years ago," Jim noted. "That's just a few months after you both purchased the burial plot. I remember because Pam sent me photos that included the

caskets." He paused before adding, "It was creepy."

It actually caused us both to let out with a short laugh. "She was always outspoken," I confirmed. "The director of the funeral parlor is refusing to hold Rose's body. He wasn't there when she was delivered, and I've spent the last three days arguing with him on the phone." "Bastards," Jim muttered in support while pulling into the funeral complex. We both exited Jim's truck realizing Pam will be inside the building. "The wake is tomorrow," Jim cautioned. I understood what he was trying to say. "You saw her?" Jim nodded, "I had to verify the body. If you're not ready for this, I can go in and get Rose." I reached the main entrance of the funeral parlor and slung the door open without answering.

A door chime rung as we entered a large display room. Caskets lined both walls, forming a forty foot long hallway of high-end burial luxury. I received a full tour of the facilities when Pam and I purchased the family plot here nearly four years ago, little had changed since then. "It's back here," I stated moving toward an alcove to the left. As we entered, an old woman emerged from the office beyond, "Can I help you?"

"We are here to pick up my dog, Rose." The woman looked confused, "I'm sorry sir. Federal

regulations do not allow us to process animals here." The alcove connected the main display room with a wide hallway sharing a common wall. To the left was the main office door from whence the woman greeted us. To the right were several doors for storage and two lavatories. "Don said she was being held in the cold room," I stated turning right. "Mr. Phillips is not here right now. Maybe I can help you," she insisted while following Jim and I down the hallway. She looked uneasy with two large men barging into the hallway. One dressed in military camouflage, the other a skinny, Asian redneck. Jim really looked the part, complete with a long chained wallet and motorbike baseball cap.

I turned in front of the double doors at the end of the hallway, "Yes, you can let me get my dog." But she shook her head, "We are no longer licensed to process animals." Jim asked, "Can we get Mr. Phillips on the phone?" Jim was able to turn the woman around. As they made their way back to the office, I ducked into one of the bathrooms. Before closing the door, I watched her enter the office still commenting on licensing fees and regulations. With Jim standing in the office doorway to block her view, I made a move for the double doors. I was hoping the sound of the doors would be confused for the bathroom door closing.

Beyond was the crematorium. It consisted of a long narrow room which had a single wooden pew up against the wall to the left of the double doors. There was a small podium next to a rail system which allowed cardboard caskets to be placed, before being slid into the furnace at the far end of the room. To the right was another set of double doors, which led to an examination room. This was a full service cemetery with funeral preparations, cremations, casket and headstone sales. It also provided the nearby hospital with a small morgue. This room was clearly for autopsies and embalming operations.

In the center of this very clean room was a stainless steel examination table. It was oversized with various drip pans and collection hoses running underneath with several lights overhead. Along both side walls were additional stainless steel counters with numerous drawers. Beyond the table, centered in the far wall was a metal door that looked like a commercial freezer door at the local grocer. A gauge above the long handle reported the temperature of the chamber beyond to be thirty-eight degrees, just above freezing. Gripping the door's handle filled me with an eerie feeling because Pam might be inside.

I steadied myself and opened the door. The room was definitely cold. To the right were four rows of metal shelves forming two aisles. Several clear

bags with thick white stripes were scattered amongst the shelving — body parts. The bags contained body parts. Both internal organs and whole parts, like hands and feet, were organized on the shelves by type. To the right were six metal gurneys lined up, side by side, against the far wall. Each was polished to a high shine and had a single white blanket folded up on top, except for the one to the far right. It supported a body covered by the white sheet. This could be Pam. "Be strong," I muttered. A tag on the right toe listed the deceased as Jane Doe. I pulled the gurney towards me, rolling it out from the tight group so I could lift the blanket and see if this was Pam.

"What are you doing?" the old woman's voice rung out in the chamber. "You are not authorized to be in here!" I half turned and asked, "Is this my wife?" The woman pushed me aside and began pushing the gurney back into the corner. "Your wife is being transported to the chapel, Mr. Smith." She turned and moved toward the shelving area with a brisk stride. "Mr. Phillips says your dog is back here." She reached into the shelves but was unable to lift the clear plastic bag containing Rose. "Here," she motioned to me. We slid passed each other, and there on the bottom shelf in the corner was Rose. "You are keeping her in a plastic bag," I complained in a

disbelieving tone. "Where is the casket we paid for, the infant casket?"

The woman was in no mood to enter into a contract discussion. "Hurry," she demanded. "You are not supposed to be back here. State regulations prohibit..." I retrieved the dog from the shelves while the woman rattled on. As I picked the dog up, I noticed other organ bags. One contained an odd mass that looked like human skin folded like a blanket. The white stripes on the bags held writing in black marker but were difficult to read, mostly numbers and dates. "Hurry," the woman insisted. I was too shook up to argue. The woman ushered us out of the room all the way back to the main entrance where another couple was waiting. They saw the bag I carried. Visible through the semi-transparent plastic was a mangy, dehydrated dog, with her white fur stained in blood, grease and earth.

The couple was noticeably disturbed by the sight. The woman had her arms crossed looking at one of the caskets near the exit. She raised her right hand and touched her chest lightly at the sight of Rose. By the time I reached the main exit, I was able to roll the plastic for easier gripping and carried Rose outside with just my left arm. She was a beautiful fifty pound Siberian Husky, now reduced to a mangled heap, no more than twenty

pounds of bones and fur. "Here. Wrap the bag up in this." Jim pulled a tarnished, white towel from behind the driver seat. I took it without responding and placed Rose in the truck-bed.

The drive home took almost thirty minutes, and felt like an eternity. "I noticed my rucksack in the truck-bed." "It was brought in with you and Pam," Jim was slow to respond. "The keys are in a small plastic bag taped to the top handle strap." "Thanks. With everything going on, I forgot about it at the hospital." "No problem," Jim assured me. "How's Carol and Frank doing?" They were Pam's parents. "They're managing," Jim confirmed. "The worst part has been the news media. You got to sleep through it." "Let me guess, constant coverage every fifteen minutes claiming more information only to have everything old retold by someone new to keep the story fresh." Jim nodded with a half smile, "Yep, poking and prodding hard for that tear shot." "That's media gold," I added.

We turned onto my street and Jim was first to notice the news vans across from my house, four of them. "Spoke too soon on you escaping their taunts." "Let's get it over with," I responded. "If you don't mind, back into the driveway and take the pack and Rose into the garage." "What are you going to do?" Jim asked. "I'm going to give them what they want." As Jim backed in, the van

doors swung open. The drivers moved around to the rear doors to retrieve cameras. One male and three female reporters emerged from the passenger sides of their respective vans. They also moved to the rear of the vans, retrieving microphones and checking themselves in small mirrors.

Before Jim made it to the garage side door, the reporters were quickly approaching up the short driveway. I waited in front of the truck for them to arrive while camera lights were turned on, momentarily blinding me. The reporters began asking their crucial questions, talking over each other. "Mr. Smith, your release from the hospital was not scheduled. Mr. Smith, where were you in the SUV when the train derailed? Why were you released early from the hospital? Mr. Smith, did you see the plane prior to the accident? Where were you stationed overseas?"

As soon as I started speaking they all quieted down. "I understand you have many questions about the crash site. You are interested in me because I had a front row seat." Two more news vans pulled up and parked halfway onto the neighbor's lawn. "You know as much as I about what happened. More, considering I just woke up three days ago." The reporters held their microphones out, desperate to capture every



word. "I want to tell you about my wife who lost her life in the train derailment."

After a short pause to compose myself, I began my quest to leverage the necessary strength to get through this. "I met Pamela ten years ago in this small town." I motioned to the manicured front yard, the many plants and arrangements. "As you can see, Pam was obsessed with gardening. But, it went beyond that. Her passion was cross breeding plants to develop deviations as she called them. Maybe it was her way of coping with my deployment overseas." The thought of her working conjured memories of her in the greenhouse playing scientist. It made me smile. "It seems the holy grail in plant grafting and splicing is producing a pure white rose. You can buy one, but it's not the same as making your own." I looked at the ground for a moment to stay calm. "That's what she would always tell me."

"She was getting close but there were always tiny flaws. Five years ago for our anniversary, I bought her a puppy, a pure white Siberian Husky. We named her Rose." I took another moment to keep myself composed. Memories of that morning were pulling at my emotions. "The dog became her white rose, and she moved on to other challenges. Rose was with us in the car. She did not survive." Nothing experienced in two active war-zones could compare to what I was feeling

right now. "I learned two things when I woke up in Elyria Memorial Hospital. My wife had died on scene, and my dog was minutes away from being disposed of in the trash." I panned the growing crowd of reporters. "Can you believe that? They were going to just throw her away. Don't they understand pets are family members?"

"Shortly after Rose came into our lives, we purchased a family burial plot at Grafton Devotion Cemetery. Unable to have children, Pam was adamant that Rose be buried with us in our family plot. I learned three days ago about changes in federal regulations prohibiting animals and humans to be buried together." I said the next few lines looking down, away from their cameras. "We even purchased an infant casket for Rose. But now, Rose was being treated like common garbage." I stared blankly into their cameras. "I know you are looking for details of the accident. But, I am hoping for a little help getting Rose buried where she belongs, with family."

"Mr. Smith, where was Rose found? How close was your vehicle from the tracks? Was this your second tour? When did you join the military? Do you come from a military family? Were you involved in the friendly fire incident at the Afghan school?" The questions began to pour out of them. "Thank you," was my only response. They

continued as I turned and returned to the truck. Jim was waiting there, "I put Rose in the freezer." He slapped the keys to the house in my hand, "You going to be ok?" "I'll be fine," I said with a forced smile. "I noticed your old truck in the garage, but if you need a ride tomorrow..." I began walking backward towards the garage, "Thanks for everything, Jim. I'll make it. Thirteen hundred right?" He smiled, "Yeah, one PM."

The garage was spotless. Gardening tools hung on the side wall. Each item outlined by a thick black line. Everything was in its place on the workbench that ran the length of the back wall. My rucksack lay on the swept floor in the spot closest the back door. The freezer box produced a dull rumbling noise. I placed my left hand on it, and let it slide across the top, knowing Rose was inside. The garage door made a few clanking noises as it closed. Inside, the house was well cared for, nothing out of place. It made me think of soldiers in the field obsessively cleaning their weapons. A compulsive disorder that emerges as emotions are buried deep. I could hear Pam's anxiety when we were able to talk through satellite phone. Even her letters showed it, but it's simply the pains of separation. I did not realize the extent of Pam's emotional sacrifice, something all military spouses must go through.

The house was immaculate too, until I reached the bedroom. I did not enter the room, choosing to lean up against the door frame instead. I remembered her playful words, "Oh, you will be." Her sweet smile responding to my statement of exhaustion. She staged the room with a few candles waiting to be lit and rose petals. She finally did it. Pure white rose petals sprinkled on the bed next to a sheer black nightgown. I couldn't go inside. Slowly, I shut the door. For a few minutes, I stood in the hall with my head against the door before returning to the kitchen. The fridge was stocked. Three unopened quarts of grapefruit juice were on the bottom door shelf next to two bottles of champagne. Dirty Mimosas — our favorite drink.

I was finally home and was never more alone, even worse than in military theater. At least in Iraq there was hope of getting home, reuniting, counting the days remaining in rotation. Now, there was nothing, literally nothing. No reason for me to be here. I turned the television on to provide a distraction, but it gave no relief. Being shown were images of the plane crash taken by amateur photographers, mere cellphone videos. At the anchor desk two men responded to questions by a woman seated semi-across from them. "We have breaking news on the sole survivor of the Olmsted Falls train derailment,"

the woman stated. "We are going live to Olmsted Falls where reporter Susan Franim has exclusive coverage."

"This is Susan Franim at the home of Army Ranger Stephen Smith." The video switched to a view of my house behind the young reporter. "We just learned of Mr. Smith's early release from Elyria Memorial Hospital this afternoon. I was granted a brief interview with Mr. Smith outside his..." She was cut off as footage of the interview outside my home began to run. "You know as much I do," was the only comment of mine reported. There I was for a brief moment, "More, considering I just woke up three days ago." That was it. Out of everything I said, that was the only line spliced out.

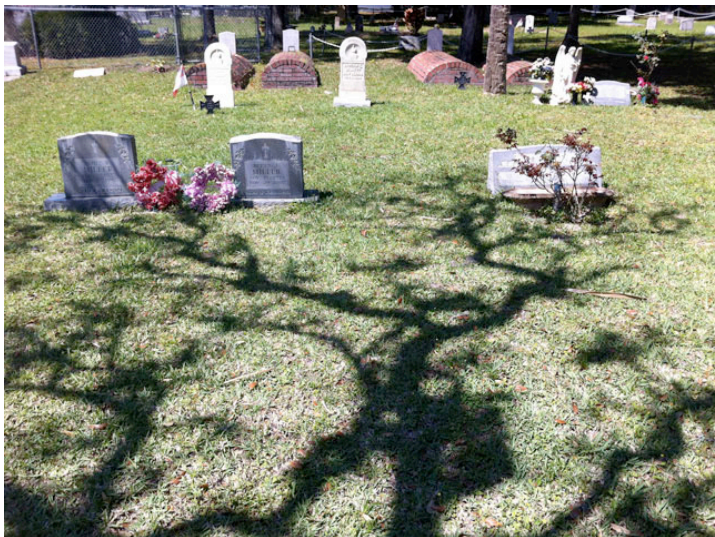
"Thank you Susan," the television broadcast returned to the anchor desk woman. "We'll have more from Susan's exclusive interview." I turned the television off. I gave them a heartfelt story about my dog, and all they can focus on is their own egos. They used that one line to bolster their superior knowledge of the event. That one line was used to declare they knew more than the victim. "So keep watching," I muttered while lying down on the couch. My head rested on the shallow armrest. One leg bent and resting against the backrest. I actually felt guilty. My emotions were empty aside from a sudden feeling of guilt.

No tears, as if not weeping was some type of crime. It was my military training taking over. I was back in theater thinking of the next mission. All that mattered was reuniting Pam and Rose.

"Breaking news," I mocked. "A live recorded interview." Even if they took the bait, there's no way they could help me. Pam's funeral is tomorrow. A statement given to a media hoard becomes an exclusive interview. Thoughts flashed through my mind, including hatred for the vultures outside. But, then I remembered something. When funeral director Phillips was showing us the facilities and describing the services they offered, Pam kept requesting more detail. The entire burial process and timing was explained. Pam's wake was tomorrow afternoon at our local church. She would be buried later that day, which means tonight the grave would be dug. Pam even asked about the equipment they used.

That was the solution. I'll go to the cemetery tonight and bury Rose myself after they dig the grave for Pam. I should be able to sneak in, drop down into the grave and bury Rose therein. Nobody will know. Why would anybody ever look beneath the standard grave depth? The grave itself will conceal my actions; easy in, easy out. I drifted off to sleep thinking about the mission at hand. The pain meds made me drowsy, and the

emotional roller coaster finished me off. Visualizing the cemetery and access points, I stepped through the needed actions and slowly drifted off.



## GRAVEYARD

Midnight. Eight hours passed in what felt like minutes. My body ached, racked with pain. It took a good ten minutes to leave the couch. I found Pam's carry-on luggage in the guest bedroom closet. It will make a suitable casket for Rose. She was so small now. Her thin body kind of rolled up on itself in the freezer. Fitting her in the small black, canvas luggage was not difficult. The keys to my truck were hanging on a wall peg by the garage door. No doubt Pam used the truck for her gardening projects, and yet there was no sign of it. She kept it clean and in perfect working order for my return.



Driving in a truck was unusual. I got use to the high riding Humvees in theater. This pickup truck felt very low, almost like it was driving through the road, wrapping around the vehicle. A dirt road led to the back of the large cemetery. From the perimeter fencing, it was a short distance to the grave site. Through the sparse trees along the border, the backhoe used to dig the graves could be seen. A small mausoleum was located east of Pam's open grave, about one hundred feet away. I used it and the many head stones to conceal my arrival. I carried Rose in the luggage, and in my right hand a short, digging shovel.

I stayed low to the ground as two men approached the open grave. They carried three small, black bags and a small cardboard box. I got a good look at them when they reached the grave. Their dark jackets did not hide their badges. Semi-reflective lettering on their backs revealed them to be State Police. One man carried an extra long rake. Each dropped their bags into the grave. Crouching down, one appeared to use the rake to cover the bags in dirt while the other dumped the contents of the box. It looked like more dirt distributed throughout the grave. After a few minutes both headed back to the main building. They talked but I could not hear what was said.

Once they were out of view, I slithered to the edge of the open grave. The stiffness in my left leg made walking a challenge but not impossible. Dragging myself and supplies was actually easier. At the edge, the small flashlight clipped to my camouflage baseball cap showed the grave to be empty. I did not waste time. I rolled over the edge and dropped into the grave. It was exactly six feet deep for the top of the grave was level with the top of my head. I grabbed the luggage that contained Rose and then the short shovel.

There was no evidence of the bags the men dropped into the grave. I dug into the soft earth near the head of the grave, the side where the headstone would be placed. Less than a foot down I encountered one of the black bags. My shovel broke through the thin fabric bag revealing X-ray plates and other objects that must be more medical waste. I continued digging closer to the center of the grave until the luggage fit, allowing half a foot of dirt to cover it completely. The dirt was very loose and easy to dig up. As I smoothed out the bottom, white and gray flakes of dirt caught my eye. I picked up a large piece, about the size of a quarter and three times as thick. It looked burnt along a thin edge. I placed it in my pocket, turned off the cap-light and peered out of the open grave.

Using the shovel across a corner of the grave, I climbed out keeping my belly against the earth. There was no sign of anybody. I made my escape crawling back to the mausoleum. Half dragging my left leg to keep it straight, I quickly moved away using mostly my arms. My right hand held the shovel. My fists punched at the short grass, while my right leg kicked me forward. From the safety of the mausoleum, I panned the cemetery for any movement before returning to the car. When I reached the outer fencing, I dug the shovel into the ground as before. Pushing it up against the fence, I used the shovel handle as a step to climb over the fence. The top of which was spiked, but only for decoration. The blunted tips hurt but did no damage as I rolled over the top. From the other side, the shovel was lifted and pulled through the fence. Simple.

The drive to the cemetery was full of purpose. I was on a mission. The drive home was different. I was filled with pride, subverting the system. Rose will now be with Pam forever. Suddenly, police lights whirled behind me. Directly behind me an officer turned on the vehicle's overhead lights. Both officers patiently exited, and approached from either side. I put the truck into park and rolled down the window. "Are you alright, Sir." The officer's voice was light, higher

pitched than expected. "Can you step out of the truck for me?"

The officer took a step back while his partner shined a flashlight quickly into the truck-bed and then into the cab as I exited. I could see their vehicle was State Police and not local. The shovel was clearly visible in the truck-bed. It was the only thing in there along with an empty red plastic fuel-can bungeed to the side near the cab. "License and registration," the officer ordered. I leaned back against the truck, "Sorry officer. I just returned to the States and don't have my license with me." I half turned and pointed to the glove compartment, "The registration might be in the truck." "Might be," the officer echoed, urging more detail. "It's my truck, but my wife used it while I was overseas."

His partner approached from the front of the car, "Why were you overseas?" I responded quickly, "Two tours, Iraq and Afghanistan." "You're military?" he questioned. "Coast Guard," I replied. The first officer challenged my response, "What's the Coast Guard doing in Iraq?" My explanation was short as I handed over my military identification card. "The fine print on the application states in times of war we can be called into service." "Drafted?" the second officer blurted out. "Up to two years after the service period," I confirmed. "Automatic enlistment in

the Army where I served in the Rangers forward recon lasing targets, amongst other things." The second officer made a friendly comment, "There's always something in the fine print."

Both officers looked impressed. "Do you know why we stopped you?" the first asked. "No sir. I was sitting at the light." "Through two light cycles," the officer added. Disappointed in myself, I apologized, "I'm sorry officer." But he did not wait for my full statement. "Have you been drinking?" "No sir," I responded while he shined his flashlight in my face. "Where are you going this late at night?" "I just needed to get out." "What's your first name?" the second officer demanded. "Stephen." "I knew I recognized you," he stated somewhat excitedly confusing his partner. "He was involved in the train derailment." He lightly slapped his partner's shoulder, "You helped pull him out of the silver SUV, remember?"

The first officer nodded, "Well Mr. Smith, it's against the law to drive without a valid drivers license." He looked to his partner, "We're going to let you go with a warning tonight." "Thank you officer." "Don't let this happen again," he ordered while returning my military identification card. "Get yourself home and clear your mind there." It was plain to see the officer knew what I was going through. Before they turned to walk back to the

police cruiser, I acknowledged the officer's names above their badges. "Officer Lynch and Mitchel, thank you for saving my life." Lynch gave a nod while Mitchel responded, "Thank you for your service."

I was only five minutes from home. "What a stupid mistake." These had to be the two cops I saw dumping the medical waste in the grave. State Police are rare in town. We have a small local police department. My thoughts turned to the shovel in the empty truck-bed, and soiled jeans. "What a stupid mistake," I repeated. Mitchel had to see it when he circled my vehicle. First thing I did on getting home was clean any dirt from the truck and shovel. Pam kept the truck so clean the fresh dirt was obvious. Considering they just came from the cemetery, I cannot believe they didn't see it. I paused as the revelation hit me. "This wasn't their first time." A first time includes nervousness, extreme caution. I saw it in theater. Everyone goes through it. Eventually, you go numb to it, but their attitude implied frequency. Grave dumping was routine for them.



## PAMELA

Pam's wake was held in our local church which was rather large. It serviced three neighboring towns. I'm an only child. My parents both died in a car accident while I was deployed in Iraq. A drunk driver crossed the median. It happened over a year ago just before my first deployment ended. It seems I'm always returning to another funeral. Pam's family was larger than normal. Her older sisters and brother Jim had children of their own. She volunteered at the animal shelter and made many friends with her floral business. It's amazing how many lives she touched.

The ceremony was open casket. A mirror on the inside of the open lid was angled to allow a clear view of her face. From where I sat, it felt as though she were looking right at me. Her father Frank gave the eulogy. I didn't hear anything. Even when the priest spoke, I remained deaf. Pam's stare held me. She looked alive. Even at the end of the service as people made their way out while others formed a staggered line to pay their private respects, I remained seated. As the people passed, my view of Pam was interrupted, but I did not move. Patiently, I waited for the next gap that allowed me to see her face again.

I don't know how long I sat there, equally lifeless. This is not the way it was supposed to be. "Steve," Jim tapped my shoulder. "Some of us are going to the Steak House later tonight. You should come." I stood up, "What time?" He smiled, "Seventeen hundred." I shook his hand and returned the smile. "Pam was lucky to have you as a big brother." He turned and left while I moved slowly to the side of the casket.

It was beautifully decorated with flower arrangements to either side. Ironically, funeral arrangements were a specialty of her flower shop. Several dozen roses were woven to form a short blanket laid on top of the closed portion of the casket. She was very creative. Everyone knew about her obsession to produce a pure white rose.



Her hands gripped the stem of a single white rose on her chest. A few petals were randomly positioned inside the casket. It reminded me of the preparations she made in our bedroom.

I was speechless. Her hands were covered by thick lace gloves. I placed my hand on hers to say goodbye, and was distracted by what I felt. Her hands were hard, like plastic. In fact, the entire arm moved. I pulled back, not wanting to disturb her body. Once again, I found myself frozen by her image. The priest came to stand with me, "It's time for her to go." He tried to be calming. "You will see her again." But, his actions were more like a waiter wanting to clear the table for the next customer. "The church's door is always open."

"When will she be placed in the grave?" The priest turned me around with his hand gently placed on the center of my back. With his other hand he pointed to the two men waiting at the side entrance. "They are here now to transport Pam to the cemetery." It was Mr. Phillips and a younger man, probably his son. I began to walk away, "Thank you Father Lomden." As I walked out, I noticed everyone had left. A new group was arriving. Once again, I was disappointed in myself. This time for thinking the priest was rushing me out. Apparently, I stood beside her casket for about an hour. Just frozen.

From my truck, I watched them load Pam's casket into the white hearse. I followed them back to the cemetery without incident. In fact, I pulled into the parking lot outside the funeral parlor with no memory of any of the many turns and lights to get here. My body was on auto pilot. I walked to the grave site and waited for the men to arrive. They parked in the rear of the building and brought the casket inside, while I walked to the gravesite. But, they had not emerged yet. "Why did they go inside?" I looked around, making sure I was in the right place. "Why am I the only one here?" The men finally emerged from the building wearing gray overalls. I was beginning to worry maybe there was a separate burial ceremony.

The men transported the casket to the gravesite on a small, nondescript trailer pulled by a covered white golf cart. They saw me at the site, but did not say anything to me. They barely acknowledged my presence standing only fifty feet away. It was all business. Straps were used to lift the casket with the backhoe arm and lowered into the grave. The straps were pulled out from underneath the casket and then the grave filled. The excavated dirt lay on a blue tarp next to the grave. The backhoe was positioned to push the top of the dirt pile with the wide loading bucket. In three passes the grave was filled and tamped

down. The men lifted the tarp in such a manner as to roll the remaining dirt onto the grave.

It was very efficient. The only thing missing was the headstone. The surrounding grass was protected by the tarp. The men left and returned about ten minutes later with the backhoe loading bucket filled with the grass removed when the grave was excavated. It was rolled up like a carpet. Placed at the far end and unrolled, the grave was completely re-sod by still green grass. Seeing the grave covered didn't seem right. In Iraq, I watched many of my friends die, or leave for the States missing limbs. It was difficult, but somehow you got use to it. There was always a distance, part of the job mentality.

Waiting for this final rotation home was excruciating, now what? "Home." Where exactly was that? I found myself thinking of another tour. I've watched others go through this. They return to the battlefield to hide from reality. Unable to assimilate into society, they turn back, but eventually have to rotate out. Many fall into this trap and end their lives. It's the only way out. The only escape that went undelivered in theater. If the enemy failed to do it, then they would just get it over with — similar to suicide by cop in the States. I never understood it, until now, because it was my turn. I was at a crossroads.

Turning back was not an option. I owed it to Pam to continue on. Maybe, I could pick up where she left off. Her flower business and volunteer work were now my path. Even in death she was guiding me. Her sanity was preserved by these activities. Maybe that will be her legacy, helping returning military cope with life beyond the battlefield. These thoughts filled me with a sense of purpose. But then something caught my eye. I was returning to my truck and approaching the funeral parlor. Near the back door something white began rolling toward me. It was very small, slightly curved, wafer thin, and bleached white.

The wind picked up again and the object covered more distance before coming to a halt only a few yards from me. It was a white rose petal. I detoured slightly from my path to pick it up. My thoughts raced. Only the casket was taken. The men closed the casket at the church. None of the flowers were taken. The only white petals were inside the casket with Pam. I continued walking toward the truck, rubbing the small petal gently between my fingers before putting it inside my pocket upon reaching the truck.



## RECON

When I was forced into service overseas, I was slightly overweight. My suit for the wake was uncomfortable. Dinner with Pam's family was soon, so I rushed home to change into old jeans and a shirt more suitable for my leaner size. I was still driving with no license but had no choice. I'll deal with that tomorrow. My old clothes were in the master bedroom closet. Seeing the white rose petals on the bed again was just as difficult the second time. However on this occasion, I had an uncomfortable thought accompanying my sorrow.

I pulled the fresh petal I found at the cemetery from my pocket and compared it to one from the bed. Pam told me enough to understand the difference between growers. Producing a new flower by selectively breeding them meant no two results would be the same. The deviations would be small, but always noticeable. While examining the two petals, the skin under my left eye began to twitch. It did this several times. Enough that I moved to the master bath to watch it in the mirror.

There it goes again. It would start and stop in clusters of seemingly random amounts like some bizarre message in morse code. The skin under my left eye would visibly contract. What use did this tiny muscle have? I looked at my eyes in the mirror, while leaning on the counter to get a close view of this strange phenomenon. The micro spasms did not last long. But now the mirror held me. Something about my eyes. Something I was not noticing. "What's wrong with me?"

Pushing away from the counter, I leaned my back against the door frame and now Pam's black nightgown still on the bed had my attention. I moved to the side of the bed and picked it up. Rubbing the material in my left hand made me think of the women in the Afghan towns. They were covered head to toe, concealing themselves. Their entire lives were spent in a self-made

prison. Was that what was going on here? Was Pam's life designed to hide the stress of my deployments?

Somehow, I found myself in the backyard looking through the window in the door to one of two large green houses. Everything was in its place. Automatic watering systems turned on and off. I always thought it was necessary for her work. The extreme organization was required for producing new offspring and carefully cataloging each new plant. But it was all just an escape, to get away from the waiting. The endless waiting for the next call. Being deployed, I had it easy. It was being home that was the nightmare.

"Damn it," I exclaimed softly. A quick look at my watch confirmed I was late for dinner with Pam's family. I rushed back inside and quickly changed into my old jeans with a dark t-shirt. A simple patterned dress shirt over the top would do. Before leaving the room, I noticed the nightgown rolled up at the corner of the bed. I don't remember putting it there, nor placing the two white rose petals on top. I grabbed them both and hurried from the room. In the garage, I discovered my rucksack still on the concrete floor. It gave me another idea.

By the time I reached the restaurant, dinner was over. It was just Jim, Carol, and Frank. She got

up and gave me a big hug interrupting my apology for being late. "It's okay dear," she said in a comforting tone. "Please sit," she motioned to the empty chair across from her while she returned to hers. "With everything that happened, we never got to welcome you home," she said with a sincere smile. "Pam was so excited," but then she stopped abruptly. Maybe memories of her youngest prevented her from going on. She took a sip of red wine from the nearly empty glass in front of her.

"I watched the burial," I stated. "I was surprised to be the only one there." It probably wasn't the smartest thing to say. Frank's expression was clear evidence of that. "I'm sorry," I tried to explain. "There are some things about the funeral that don't seem right." "What's right about any of this?" Frank fired back. Carol was quick to rescue me, "You're home now, and that's all that matters. Besides, that man Phillips bothers me. Something is not right about that man." Frank's expression softened, "We need to talk about the business." "That can wait till later," Carol cautioned, placing her hand on Frank's forearm. "Pam's flower shop?" I asked.

"We need to know what you plan to do with it," Frank explained. "A man came by the other day interested in buying it." "The client list is apparently what he is interested in," Jim clarified.



"I was thinking of continuing the business myself," I answered. "It might make a good form of therapy for returning vets." "That's a wonderful idea," Carol agreed. "Pam spent so much time working in those greenhouses. It would be a shame not to keep the business in the family." Frank seemed conflicted with the idea. "What do you know about farming, son." I answered him while looking at Carol, "Pam never stopped talking about it."

Frank didn't approve of me and seemed to dismiss my statement. I think he was trying to protect his daughter from a military life. He didn't have anything against the military. He supported the troops, but I'm sure he saw what I was only now realizing. The stress on her affected the whole family. "Tending a garden is very therapeutic," Carol came to my defense again. She knew how much Pam loved me. Who could have predicted this? I was finally coming home. My service contract fully satisfied.

In the parking lot, Carol gave me another big hug. I received the standard male hug from Frank. A hand shake followed by a couple of quick pats on the back. While they got into their car and drove off, I had questions. "Jim, hold up." We stood in front of his truck. "I found something at the cemetery. It has me thinking some crazy things, and I'm not really comfortable talking about it."

Jim laughed, "Well, don't ask, don't tell. Isn't that the military code?" It was funny but things got serious again very fast. "I need to know the condition of Pam's body. You had to identify the body. I need to know if she was missing any limbs."

He gave me a strange look, "No. The back of her head was torn off." "There was no damage to her arms?" I pressed for clarification. "I didn't exam her body," he stated angrily. "What is this about?" "I touched her hands. At the wake, I touched her hands and they were hard." "That's what happens," Jim confirmed. "Her arms moved," I grabbed my right shoulder. "All the way up to her shoulders. Her hands felt like plastic." Jim took a step back to lean against his truck. "It's called rigor mortis. The body dries out." "No. I experienced a lot of death in theater. Carried many bodies. The entire body goes rigid, but it still remains pliable." It was a bit more detail than Jim wanted to know, especially since we were talking about his sister. "What are you trying to say?" he responded with a disgusted look on his face.

"Remember the cold room at the cemetery?" I realized I was getting a little loud and took a deep breath to calm down. "There were body parts on those shelves. What if they were Pam's?" "That's ridiculous!" Jim asserted angrily. "Is it?" I pulled

the two rose petals from my front pocket. "Then what about these?" Jim looked at them briefly, "Rose petals." "Phillips and his kid took Pam back to the cemetery. I followed them." Jim interrupted, "This is exactly what the doctor told us to look for." "What doctor?" "Carol was very concerned about you and Pam. Worried she was becoming emotionally detached," he struggled to remember the word, "Repressive, and that you might bring the war back with you."

"Before Pam died, Carol began seeing Dr. Chad Edwardson," Jim explained. But I defended my findings, "I'm not hallucinating. I saw them take the casket back to the funeral parlor. I waited by the gravesite for over an hour. It doesn't take that long to change clothes. What if they were removing all the expensive upgrades to the coffin? What if they were removing the fake eyes." "Stop it!" Jim opened the truck door. "Modern grave robbers? Steve, you need to get yourself help." He pulled a business card from inside the truck. "The doctor warned Carol about PTSD. How it might be affecting Pam. He explained conspiracies were a common outlet."

I didn't let Jim continue, "Explain these." I held the rose petals up with my right hand. "They're just rose petals," he responded still reaching out to hand me the business card. "This one was on the ground outside the back entrance. It means

the casket was opened when they brought it back." Jim looked annoyed by the conversation. "It's a funeral parlor. They sell flowers." "Not from the back room, and these are from Pam's white roses. These were scattered inside the casket only." I took a half step back and turned slightly trying to organize my thoughts. "The inner lining to the casket was a thousand dollar upgrade alone. Why bury it when the evidence of theft was so easy to conceal?"

"You're worried about a refund? Pam's dead," Jim stated with disgust. "Take the card." I wanted to hit Jim for that last comment. I snatched the business card from his outstretched hand. As he got into his truck I realized he wasn't going to be able to help me. The mission tonight was to find out about Pam's injuries. That was accomplished. My suspicions were justified. I stepped away as Jim started the truck. His expression softened and gave a wave which I returned. A simple lift of one hand, palm out to show we were ok. Jim was just as troubled as I. He lost his sister and inherited the task of holding the family up. It wasn't right for me to involve him any further.

For me, my night wasn't over. Before leaving for the restaurant, I moved the rucksack from the garage floor and placed it behind the passenger's seat in the truck. It was a narrow space with side

seats that flipped down. I drove back to the cemetery. That's where my night would be spent. What did those troopers dump into the grave, and what did they do to my wife's body? The dirt road behind the cemetery property was not well travelled. The overgrowth would conceal the truck well enough. From the rucksack, I removed a night vision monacle scope and small cylinder, about the size of a thermos.

I was getting better at clearing the fence that surrounded the cemetery. I found a good spot granting a side view of the front parking lot and the back door. From here I could monitor any vehicles entering the complex and keep an eye on the back door. Douglas Wittak was the name on the large gravestone I sat up against to hide my silhouette. I spent three nights with Mr. Wittak before the State Police returned. The police drove slowly around to the back door of the funeral parlor. The car backed up close to the door when the flood lights illuminating the back area turned off.

The night vision monacle provided a clear view of the two officers moving to the back of the vehicle. A six times zoom allowed me to see the men pull two body bags from the trunk just as the rear door opened. The bags definitely held bodies, possibly bent at the waist. But, the bags were not filled. The bodies inside had to be very small. The light

from inside the door disrupted the night view but allowed Mr. Phillips to be identified. The cops were definitely Lynch and Mitchel in Squad Car 135. Lynch returned to the trunk to retrieve three small coolers. They looked like lunch coolers construction workers might use.

A few minutes later, the cops emerged with the coolers and placed them in the trunk. Lynch carried all three into the parlor with one hand holding all the molded plastic handles together. On the way out, each was carried with care. "Definitely smuggling parts," I concluded. "Who checks the backs and legs of their loved ones to make sure their skin wasn't removed for sale to burn units?" As the cops drove off, the lights were turned on again. A pair of cameras mounted at the top corner of the roof, watched the side of the building and the back door. The corner itself was a blind spot. I could approach, disable the cameras and gain access through the back door. However, that would have to wait. I had to follow the cops. Where were they taking those parts?

I removed the top from the thermos size cylinder. Inside a small plane was removed. Its coiled wings snapped open to extend two feet to each side. The canister was attached lengthwise to the side of the cap which held the flight controls. From the bottom of the canister a three stage antenna was flipped out and extended giving great

signal range. The small plane consisted of a small plastic fuel jar mounted in the fuselage and a small high-res camera lens beneath. It made a loud buzzing noise, similar to a weed whacker, but in seconds it was out of sight. At just five hundred feet it was nearly undetectable.

Catching up to the cops was not difficult. They were easy to locate this late at night. The remote control was line of sight. The further away the cops drove from the cemetery, the higher the drone had to fly to stay in contact. The gray viewing screen on the controls was only about four square inches, just enough to identify and track targets. At around one thousand feet, I watched the cops pull into the hospital nearly ten miles away. They moved to a service entrance where they were met by someone from the hospital dressed in light brown overalls. He took the three containers from the cops and all departed.

I wanted to continue tracking the officers but the plane was not meant for long term loitering. I brought it back to the States for aerial photography, never thinking it would be used for this. The plane's wingspan allowed the engine to be turned off and grabbed by a wing as it glided passed. It had no landing gear. Start the engine and toss it to get the plane into the air. The flexible prop could handle crash landings, but

snatching it from the air protected the camera lens. As I recoiled the wings to put it back in the cylinder, I noticed dark smoke coming from the chimney above the funeral parlor. "The bodies," I muttered. "They're burning the bodies."

I hurried back to the truck. I had to get to the hospital. The cops might still be in the area. "Where did they get the bodies?" The cemetery functioned as the hospital's morgue, a common practice. Phillips or his son would pick up bodies. What were the cops doing delivering bodies from the trunk of their vehicle? That night I was not able to find the State Troopers. But I did know where they would be. Eventually, they'll return to the cemetery, and they did not disappoint. Only two days later the cops returned with several small black bags. Like the first night, they dumped the bags in an open grave dug the night before. This grave was probably for the body I saw in the cold room several days ago.

This time I was prepared for them. Two days before, I purchased a disposable phone and installed a locator app. While the cops walked to the open grave, I moved to their vehicle. With the rear wall lights on, the cops parked under the building's cameras to avoid being recorded. This meant I did not have to worry about the cameras on the wall of the funeral parlor. My approach was concealed by other structures and the large



corner blind spot. I stayed low to avoid the cameras in the trooper's car as well. A strong magnet taped to the phone secured it to the inside of the rear bumper. It was molded plastic with a metal frame. Rolling to the side of the building around the corner, I was clear to slither back to cover amongst two small bushes near an old wooden bench.

How long the cops would need to be followed was unknown. I also purchased a battery extender for the disposable phone, and it was a good thing. For the next three days I researched the hospital and the cemetery. They did not publicly announce their association through their websites. However, in some legal papers dealing with old lawsuits against the hospital, a reference to the cemetery was made. The hospital belonged to an umbrella company boasting over two hundred hospitals throughout the contiguous States. The cemetery was also part of a conglomerate. Even though each was uniquely named, they were all part of a single organization. Even the umbrella companies for the hospitals and cemeteries kept their distance.

It was their board member names that made the final connection. Separate organizations run by the same group of people that just so happened to be established in the same areas throughout the States. Each cemetery paired with a hospital no

more than ten miles apart. The cemetery network was slightly larger but consisted of locations that exceeded their storage capacity. In two cases both the hospital and cemetery were relocated at the same time. The data suggested this partnership was established in the early seventies. Coincidentally, that is a decade after the hospitals went nuclear. They've been dumping radioactive waste in the cemeteries all these decades. That would explain the sharp increase of cancer in the States compared to the rest of the world. And the hospitals don't mind, it's just more business.

For three days I tracked the phone attached to the state trooper's vehicle from the house. Every five minutes, the phone was pinged to preserve battery life. There was only one questionable location. Google Maps showed it to be a single-wide mobile home in the middle of a clearing. It was beyond the hospital, on the outskirts of the next town over, but close to the main highway. The area was surrounded by thick bushes over ten feet high. It was allowed to grow wild with a small winding dirt path that led to a two hundred foot diameter clearing with the small mobile home centered in it.

The location was not far from the town. Google Maps provided good detail of the structure. No power pole or line could be seen. An old farm bordered the property to the south. That would

be the way in. Concealing the truck was a problem. Leaving it off the side of the road might draw attention from local police assuming illegal hunting. The map data could be three years old, so I went there to check it out. Luck was on my side. The field was full of tall corn stalks and water ran off the road into a deep trench on the opposite side. It looked like a seldom used access trail ran along the edge of the field. Four wheel drive should get me through the slight drop-off in the roadway.

I pulled off the road and turned off my headlights after a couple of cars passed. Driving with just the yellow running lights, I made it through some thick brush to reach the path. The gap between corn stalks and pine trees was extremely narrow. The bumper and tires took down corn stalks on the right side while the left pushed through pine branches, some going over the truck in this mature forest line. About an eighth of a mile in, there was a small gap in the pines. I backed the truck into it and left it there.

The forest separating the properties was thick but easy to push through. From the edge, the mobile home was clearly visible even in the dark. The night scope helped identify a single camera mounted on the roof monitoring the entrance driveway. It was a hard packed dirt drive forming parallel tire tracks. That means it is used often

enough to prevent grass from growing. The field grass looked freshly cut. Patches of dry sandy ground peppered the field. I made my way to the end of the house where a large air conditioning unit was operating. It was way too big for a mobile home. The pipes ran through a gap in the vinyl skirt. A square portion of which was held in place by a cinder block. There was also crushed stones surrounding the house to keep the grass back about two feet.

The access panel was easy to move aside. The air conditioning unit provided plenty of noise to cover the extraction. It was odd not to see a transformer next to the mobile home. Typically the power line comes in overhead to a telephone pole near the home which also holds the power meter. Neither of those existed here. The night scope worked on ultraviolet light and provided a very clear view beneath the mobile home. There was no chance of the light being seen without a scope calibrated to the exact wavelength. Inside the opening, the power line emerged from the ground, attached to a small electrical box mounted to the frame. It appeared to split in two. One line powered the heat exchanger for the air conditioning unit, the other ran along the ground to a large concrete box beneath the mobile home. "They're stealing a little more than just cable," I thought.

The box structure hidden by the mobile home was made of concrete blocks. It was roughly four feet wide and sixteen feet in length. The power cable ran into it and not the mobile home which was cut away to accommodate the structure. The mobile home did not rest on a concrete slab at its center, but rather the concrete box extended into the mobile home. Two by twelve lumber framed the concrete, allowing the flooring to be nailed to it and seal the gap. It looks like the purpose of the mobile home was to conceal the entrance to an underground bunker. Lights appeared along the drive. Someone was coming. I ducked into the crawl space. Through the vinyl siding, I could see headlights approaching. I repositioned the cinder block from inside the crawl space and slid the access panel shut. I moved to the near corner and gently pulled in on a skirt panel to get a better view.

The headlights of the vehicle turned off. It was a black, cargo van with no windows along the sides. The yellow driving lights remained on and made it easy to see, so I kept the night scope off. Two men got out dressed in light brown jumpsuits, like the service workers at the hospital. The men went to the rear of the van and opened the double doors. Some crying could be heard, soft whimpering coming from inside. "Quiet," one of the men

ordered in a hoarse whisper. Another set of lights emerged from the wooded driveway.

The men semi-closed the doors as the vehicle approached. It was State Police Vehicle 135. Mitchel was unmistakable when he exited. As he approached the men, he scolded them, "Hurry up. The guest will be here soon." I felt something on my hand which was holding the siding seam back slightly. Barely visible was a small black spider, a widow, not common for the region. I remained still. I could hear the other officer walking around the mobile home, while the men emptied the van of four children. Each of the kids had a canvas bag over their heads. They looked like coin bags from a bank. Their hands were bound in front of them and leashed together by a single rope line.

They were guided into the mobile home where a light was turned on and a door creaked open after a padlock was removed. More sounds could be heard coming from wherever the concrete stairs led. Beneath the earth others cried out. Their cries muffled by fear but seeming to respond to each heavy step of the men descending the stairs. Officer Lynch finished a walk around the home. He failed to see the access panel was slightly out of place. The air conditioning unit helped conceal the entry to the crawl space. "Sloppy," I thought. It means they have been doing this for a long time. The power cables probably run

underground along the center of the serpentine drive.

The men emerged from the home. "Everything is in place," one of them stated. "Good," Mitchel responded. "Now get out of here, so you don't see the clients." Lynch stepped into view, "Move it." The men walked to the van and left the scene. They did not turn their lights on until they reached the driveway path through the dense brush and pines. Lynch lit a cigarette to Mitchel's objection. "You know the client doesn't like the smell of smoke. Come on. Put that out."

While the men talked about tomorrow's football games, I watched the small dark spider rubbing two spindly legs together. It was either cleaning itself or preparing to make a grand meal of my hand. I used my cellphone to gently brush it aside. This consumed a few tense minutes. Not long after, multiple headlights could be seen moving up the drive. Three identical black SUVs in total pulled up to the house. Four men exited the front and rear vehicles. All wore a dark suit like a uniform, with a white coiled wire behind their right ear.

The men quickly took positions around the mobile home, two at each end, two entered the home, and two remained by the vehicles. I coiled my body as tight as possible to fit tightly in the corner of the

crawlspace. One of the men on my side, removed the cinder block and slid the access panel aside. A weak light shown into the crawl space, moving slowly, casting numerous shadows across the uneven dirt. It was then quickly removed. "Clear," the man reported to the others. "Clear," came from inside the home. "Clear," echoed from the other end of the mobile home. All four doors on the center vehicle opened in response. Two more uniformed men stepped out of the front seats, while a man and woman emerged from the passenger doors.

The woman was heavy, extremely overweight. She straightened her jacket and brushed her short curly hair back with a single swipe. I recognized her as the anchor woman. Her photo was on another network. They discussed her selection to moderate the upcoming presidential debate in Cleveland just a few nights from now. With the sound muted, I took three photos with my phone before switching to video. I don't think I captured his face in the photos, but definitely got the tall, thin man on video. "Mr. President," Officer Lynch greeted while stepping back, partially blocking my view. The man did not respond and the woman cast a disgusted look at the officer. The impression I got was, "How dare you speak to royalty."



The two went into the house. I could hear them descending the stairs. I closed my eyes and waited. No weapons and severely outnumbered, there was nothing I could do. I lay there listening to muffled groans with an occasional scream echoing through the concrete. It was barely audible but bellowed in my mind. It was deafening. A stream of memories in the field flooded my thoughts. The number of people I watched through my sniper scope killed or butchered, waiting for authorization to fire. Thirty-two minutes passed as hours as the man and woman finally exited with vulgar laughter. I wanted to set them both on fire. The suited men looked like Secret Service agents. Cold, expressionless robots protecting the President when they should be protecting the Office from this pig.

I couldn't help remembering the few children encountered in Iraq. They were used by the terrorists as human shields and sometimes bombs. Here in the States missing children were being used as sex toys by the very people entrusted to protect them. No amount of negotiation can fix the continuous hatred taught to the children in the Middle East against the West. Likewise, no amount of counseling will repair these broken young lives. The kids in this building's dungeon will never be the same. Once

again, I was helpless to save them. I took more video as the people left, all the while thinking, "You're going to burn for this." As the three SUVs drove off, Lynch locked the inner door to the stairs and then the front door. He was met by Mitchel on the way to their cruiser. "Mr. President?" They walked to opposite sides of their car. "You know you're not supposed to communicate with the client. What's wrong with you?" They opened their doors almost at the same time. "You're going to get us killed," Mitchel warned.

I waited for them to leave before sliding out from beneath the home. Resetting the cinder block in front of the access panel, I paused. In theater, authorizations failed to come or were delivered to late. Key Al Qaeda leaders in my scope, and I had to watch them walk away. In one incident, I watched a man executed by a small boy. The young boy was handed a gun, told to shoot the man as some form of initiation. The boy didn't hesitate. All I could do was watch. My orders were to observe. Now, I had the chance to save the lives of these children, and I froze. The camera on the outside suggests cameras on the inside. If I am caught without weapons, then all these children die; nor do I have the tools to break them out quickly.

What I was thinking was not possible. "How many other locations?" Do I save these four and potentially lose hundreds of others. The air conditioning unit clanked as it turned off. The home was quiet. How many times was I not authorized to shoot. The things I had to watch like the servicemen tonight. They have a mission, but what about their humanity? I found myself back in my truck where I pondered. "It goes all the way to the top. How many are involved? Who could be trusted? It has to be wider than this one location."



## HOOAH

"Susan Franim, this is Steve Smith from the train derailment. You left your business card outside my home. I've uncovered a series of illegal operations being conducted from the Grafton Devotion Cemetery. I have reason to believe this is not isolated to this one location. It might be nationwide. Please get back to me as soon as possible. There are lives at stake." I hung up the phone and dropped it on the couch. A pile of printouts locating the hospitals and cemeteries across the nation were on the kitchen table. I had all the evidence the stakeouts could provide. "I left them there," my thoughts kept tormenting

me. Lives are at stake. It goes all the way up to the President. Nobody can be trusted. It was up to me. I had to do this. These swirling thoughts ended with one statement, "Rangers lead the way."

For the next two days, the computer was my entire world. I wrote a simple utility to fetch Google Map images. Since each hospital is paired with a cemetery, it makes sense that each dungeon would also be nearby. A one hundred square mile box was centered on the hospital, another on the cemetery for each pairing. All satellite images for each of these boxes across the States were downloaded and catalogued. After confirming the utility was working properly, I retreated to the master bathroom to wash up. I began thinking of the next step. Another utility could convert the images to border outlines and then pattern match to a template of the known mobile home site. They'll all be similar; a mobile home in a clearing, without power, yet sporting an oversized heat exchanger for an air conditioning unit.

I've done similar work in the past, but it is very demanding on time and wont guarantee all deviations can be captured. I'll have to set up webpages for each image box and scan them manually. It's the only way to be sure. Two hundred and twenty hospital-cemetery pairs. Ten

minutes to process each image group. Thirty-six hours to locate the other sites, plus about twelve hours to download all the images. That's if my IP doesn't get blocked. "Two more days." That'll put me close to my training limit. Sleep deprivation training, the longest period was seventy-two hours under full combat readiness exercises and testing. "I left them behind. I can do this," continued to drive me.

That night I began processing images. Each image group was revealing up to three possible sites. Candidates were circled for further examination. It was working. Once I knew what to look for, the process sped up. I made another attempt to contact the reporter, but once again I could only leave a message. That night marked thirty-six hours since I last slept. The last twenty hours were spent hunched over a computer monitor scanning images. All the downloads completed hours ago. I had all the data, just needed to power through and complete the mission.

I finished sooner than expected the next day and began re-examining groups with multiple hits. Around midday all primary and secondary targets were printed out. It's a good thing Pam kept us stocked on printer supplies. ~~~DINGDONG~~~ The front door bell rang. I left three messages for that reporter. Hopefully, that was her at the front

door. I was exhausted. I cannot even begin to explain the stress on my body. My eyesight was blurring. Who knew sitting could be so difficult. I steadied myself with the hallway wall as I approached the door. But it wasn't the reporter on the other side.

"Mr. Smith. We need to have a word with you," Officer Lynch stated. "May we come inside?" But he wasn't waiting for a response. From his left side, Mitchel fired a taser into my side. Both officers were positioned perfectly to hide the attack from anybody on the street. Lynch was first to enter as I fell backwards. He grabbed my arm and pulled me halfway down the hall, while at the same time rolling me over onto my chest. Mitchel shut the front door; and before I could recover, my wrists were being secured behind me with standard issue butterfly zip-ties.

I tried kicking with my legs, but it proved useless against the two powerful men. Together they lifted me off the ground, each grabbing a shoulder and just behind a knee. They carried me back into the family room and dropped me on the couch. Lynch moved behind the couch and sat me up. He wrapped something around my throat and held me there with one hand pressing down on my right shoulder and the other pulling back on my neck. "No need to make this messy," Mitchel urged. "The client wants you to see something."

He turned on the television to a national news broadcast. "I see you've been busy," he said looking at the pile of printouts behind me on the dining room table next to the kitchen. "We have the package," he spoke into a cellphone. "Understand," concluded the conversation. He slipped the flip phone back into his front pocket and then retrieved a flat narrow box.

The news cast changed. Breaking news banners streamed across the bottom of an image of a small log cabin. Fire streamed from behind the structure with smoke pouring out of the front and side windows. "We are learning today of a gas explosion of some kind in a small town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan." The screen continued to stream the breaking news banner aside a static "Live" label off to the lower left. "We are getting word Jim Reading, his wife Kelly, and two young girls Pamela and Caroline were found inside. We will have live exclusive interviews with neighbors who witnessed the explosion after these messages."

Mitchel turned off the television. "What do you think those neighbors are going to say? The media is racking the parking lot video of you arguing with Jim a few nights ago outside the Steak House. It's all about putting on a good show." He opened the long thin black box and placed it on the coffee table. "You did a very bad



thing." He removed a syringe from the box, its only contents. "You murdered your brother-in-law," he said with a big smile. "Madly in love with his wife but was rebuffed." "The emphasis on madly," Lynch added. "If you couldn't have her then nobody could." "Makes for a nice tragic love story," Mitchel continued. "The murder-suicide. People just eat that shit up, especially with the loss of your wife driving your insanity."

Mitchel got serious while explaining, "You saw things you weren't supposed to see, Steve." He leaned forward placing his left hand on my left shoulder, pushing me further against the couch. "Thank you for your service," he said with a mocking smile. Mitchel held the syringe in his right hand and moved it forward from his side. "This is going to hurt," Officer Lynch stated with glee. What they didn't know is my minimal squirming on the couch did not go wasted. In my wallet was a folding knife. It slid into a space behind the picture identification card like any credit card. I managed to pull out the wallet, then the knife, and deploy it to cut the nylon tie binding my wrists tightly together. While Mitchel was monologuing, I was preparing. As he leaned close, I grabbed his right wrist with my left. In a quick circular motion, the needle was pressed securely against the couch arm rest.

At the same time my right hand emerged from behind my back to stab Lynch in the left eye. His face was close to my right, focused on the syringe. He was able to pull back, but not before the knife cut through his eyelid and punctured the eyeball. He fell backward screaming. This freed me to stab at Mitchel who was also focused on the syringe. The fat two inch blade dug into his left underarm. As Mitchel pulled away, I kept the razor-sharp knife in contact with his side, skipping over ribs, cutting through flesh and cloth. I maintained a firm grip of the knife as it traveled to his navel.

Mitchel released the syringe as I pushed him over the armrest. Lynch was attempting to recover. His cries continued, pressing his right hand against his eye. Staggering forward he reached for his taser with his left hand. While he fumbled with that, I grabbed the syringe and stabbed his leg with it. Pressing against the couch, I reached out with my left arm. Like swinging a hammer, I stabbed him in the leg with my thumb discharging the contents of the syringe. Mitchel had a gun and taser too. Without knowing Mitchel's condition, I lifted the couch cushion in time to intercept two barbed darts from his taser. From the floor beside the end of the couch, Mitchel fired his taser.

I dove onto Mitchel. My left hand leading the way, still gripping the square cushion like a shield. It absorbed Mitchel's taser shots and blinded him to my attack. My right hand still possessed the knife, which found its mark slicing through the left side of Mitchel's neck. I rolled off to the right as blood gushed from his wounds. From one knee, I crouched there like a medieval warrior with a couch cushion as a shield and a mighty two inch sword poised to strike. But no strike was necessary. Mitchel lay on the floor motionless while his partner stood with left arm curled in tight against his side. His right hand clawed at his chest. Lynch fell to his knees gasping for air. A surprised, disbelieving expression on his face going blank. Lifeless, Lynch fell backward, trapping his legs bent beneath him.

I dropped the cushion, tossing it back on the couch as I stood back up, uneasy at first. The remaining nylon ties were cut away from my wrists. I stepped over Mitchel and retrieved my wallet from the couch. I took a moment to fix the cushion before folding the knife for storage. It was returned to the wallet and slid into my back pocket. The reality of what just happened was catching up to me. I stepped over Lynch's body that was still twitching. Sometimes the body keeps going. The nervous system refuses to

shutdown. It can last up to thirty minutes, although very rare.

At the kitchen sink, I turned on the cold and hot water to wash the blood from my hands, ducking down to run the water over the back of my head. Water flowed around to my face. It was calming. I've been awake for almost three days. They'll be coming for me. "I have to move," I stated in a barely audible voice. I was extremely tired — physically, mentally, and emotionally drained. When this brief surge of adrenaline wears off, I'll collapse like a rag doll. "I need to move," I whispered to continue encouraging myself into action. I turned the water off and dried off with the kitchen towel which was then tossed on the counter.

I took the printouts from the dining room table and headed for the garage. Backing the truck out, I stopped on reaching the curb and exited. I felt numb, as if I was moving in slow motion. I didn't have much time to make it to Billy's house. He was an ex-ranger too. He volunteered his time at the VA. Billy will be able to organize the boys. I dropped to a knee, reaching under the state trooper's vehicle. Along the frame the phone was still magnetically attached. I stood back up and looked around at the neighborhood. The residential lots were somewhat large, about a quarter acre in this area bordering the town. It

was quiet with a light breeze and an occasional bird briefly chirping. Everyone oblivious.

Billy lived in another small town on the way to Oberlin. They called it a city, but it was just a small community. The lots were half size, but Billy owned a five acre tract. It ran along a creek bed that turned into a seasonal swamp absorbing the local runoff. It took twenty-five minutes to get there. The speed limit was just forty-five, and I hit every light. About ten minutes in, I felt myself dosing off. I slapped myself in the face several times to keep going, even occasionally screamed at the top of my lungs. I've wanted to do that ever since I woke up at the hospital. It felt good.

I parked to the side of Billy's home, off the compact driveway sand. By chance he saw me drive up and was waiting for me on the front porch. "You look like hell, Steve." "Billy," I said, holding the printouts in front of me. "I need help." He moved quickly to help me into the house. "Damn, you stink." He sat me at the head of the dining room table. His son was watching television. "Could you have George move my car into the barn?" "Is that your blood?" he stated pointing at my left side. I just slowly shook my head no. "It looks recent," he added. "If I'm going to get through this, I'll need some black coffee too. Don't let me fall asleep. We need to mobilize as many as we can."

I sat there slumped over on the old wood table, my hands clasping my face, slowly transitioning to the top of my hanging head. George left through the kitchen to move the truck. ~~~DING~~~ The microwave sounded. Soon after Billy returned, "This was leftover in the pot from this morning." He took a seat along the length of the table. "It don't matter," I took the mug. It was hot, "I just need something to get me through the next ten minutes." I pushed the papers toward him. "These sites need to be reconned. The top one is confirmed. Each site will be similarly constructed and protected." Billy took the papers and began flipping through them. "These are scattered all over the nation."

"We need two to four military on each site." "What is this about?" Billy asked. "Tell them to use extreme caution. Treat it top secret, expendable." I leaned back, holding myself up with both arms extended against the table. I then took the top sheet. "This is the local site." I pointed to the various structures circled on the gray scale map of the area. "Cemetery, being used for radioactive waste dumped under the caskets. Full service funeral parlor, harvesting body parts for the hospital, and disposing of bodies from the dungeon."

That last one really shocked Billy, "What kind of dungeon?" I leaned back again. "I've been up for

nearly three days, I gotta crash here for at least till morning." Billy nodded and repeated his question, "Of course, but explain dungeon." I began to stand up. "Children. Human trafficking. Sex trade. The worst kind." My left hand stayed on the table helping to balance me. My right hand, with palm up pointed to the papers. "You can verify the local site. It's not PTSD. I'm not crazy. You can access through the neighboring farm, there. But you cannot extract." Billy was appropriately shocked, "Why not?"

"Two nights from today is the Presidential debate. That will give us cover to save them all." I reached over and uncovered the last set of images. "We go now, we save four, maybe six. We wait two days. Recon all the sites, and we might save hundreds." Billy could not believe what he was seeing. "This is the President." I nodded, "I have video. I tried uploading it and contacting Susan Franim, a reporter at WUAB." I pointed to the blood on my jeans and shirt. "Two State Troopers tried to kill me tonight." Then Billy recognized the name from the evening news. "Reading," he said softly. "He was your brother-in-law." I nodded slowly, "They made me watch the news coverage. They phoned it in right in front of me, Billy."

"What's the plan?" Billy asked still looking at the pictures. "Recon all the sites. They are easy to

confirm. Oversized heat exchangers outside. No power line above ground. No meter." I took a deep breath. "We extract during the debate. I then go on the news." Billy interrupted, "How do you know who can be trusted?" "I don't. I'll take it by force. Confirm broadcasting through disposable phones." I pointed to him, "That's when you go back to the dungeon sites. The kids will be safe at local churches. Your identities will be kept secret. Our people then go back to the sites and kill whomever shows up."

After a short pause to let that sink in, I explained the logic. "Whoever shows up will be reacting to the broadcast. How else will they know where the sites are, if they are not involved? I'm not interested in waiting on the courts or letting the rats scatter. Set the buildings on fire and bug out. Let the fire department reveal the network." Billy smiled, "Let the dead tell the story." I put up my right fist, "Rangers lead the way." He hit my fist with his, knuckles to knuckles. "Hooah," he responded.





## NETWORK

A ceiling fan slowly churns the air in this small bedroom. A standard mattress stuffed in the corner with a floral patterned comforter supports my body — a body racked with pain. I bent my right leg. My left leg itched. Two weeks since the accident, the stitches hadn't been removed yet. Wounds remained crusted over. New scratches and bruises graced my body. I was a mess. With my left hand I rubbed my face. The room was small, well lit from the light outside. At first I could not lift my head without help from my left hand supporting it from behind. My neck felt as though it would snap without assistance.

My boots were removed. They were arranged at the side of the bed along with my rucksack from the truck. I sat at the side of the bed, hunched over. From the rucksack I pulled a change of clothes, socks and underwear rolled up in a t-shirt. I dressed after cleaning up in the small bathroom across the short hall. Every movement was strained. My body refused to cooperate. The bedroom was located down a short hallway in a U-shaped ranch. A lot of noise came from beyond the hallway. Muffled voices talking over each other, as if none were listening to the other, came from the kitchen dining room area.

I remained in the hall, leaning up against the wall. Five men were scattered throughout the house. One spoke on a cellphone from the family room couch. Two spoke on phones seated around the dining room table, marking things on the image printouts I provided. Another man spoke with Billy in the kitchen. All were ex-military and easy to discern. "Good to see you back with the living," Billy stated from the kitchen. "Sixteen hours. Thought we lost you." The men at the table finished their calls. They left their phones on the papers organized across its surface. Remaining silent, both looked at me with cold stares, and then returned to the notebook computers on the table in front of them.

"Where do we stand?" I asked. Billy moved to the end of the table, pointing to one of the men. "Tom reconned the local site. Delaying rescue was the right thing to do. Nobody is comfortable with it. But it is the right strategy." He pointed to the printouts on the table. "We mobilized people at half the sites, including the three in Canada; Vancouver, Toronto, and Windsor. The complexes might be larger near the big cities. We are organizing more people in those areas." Billy looked frustrated by what needed to be said. "We should be ready to go tonight." I opened my mouth to object, but he was quick to address my concern. "I know. We need to use the presidential debate as cover."

The television displayed the news. I saw my military mugshot flash on the screen. "They are pinning the murder of your brother-in-law on you. There's a nationwide manhunt." Tom chimed in from the table still focused on his computer, "Congratulations. You made America's Most Wanted." I couldn't believe what was going on. "What about the state troopers at my house." Billy nodded sharply, "You're also a cop killer." He made a wave with his hands before putting both on his hips. "A true statement. They just don't know why. You'll have to stay here during the operation. Coordinate with the teams. Record results. When we return, we'll get you to

the news station." Billy shuffled through the papers and returned with two. "I have women walking these two cemeteries with radiation detectors in large purses. The devices generate GPS logs that can then be applied to the satellite maps. Combined with the radiation data we can color code hot spots."

Tom offered up another sheet. "This one was mapped early this morning. We'll need to add headstone dates and factor in any relocations to determine when this medical dumping started, but it looks pervasive." Billy interrupted, "The radiation levels are low, but there is no estimating the effects of prolonged exposure." One thing didn't seem right to me. "How are the cemetery workers protected, or even the cops who are doing the actual dumping?" "Don't know," Billy responded. "Maybe the cops don't know the nature of the materials being dumped and are expendable. It's not likely the people who could do this would give a damn about their own people either. You noted the cemetery workers, the funeral director, always wearing gray jumpsuits. Maybe they're specially coated." "Or maybe they don't know either," Tom added. "They just dig the holes with an extra space at the bottom. Because of the body disposal, the cemetery directors are at the mercy of whomever is orchestrating this nightmare."

The unknown stocky man from the kitchen stepped forward, joining the others around the table, "It doesn't matter because we're shutting it down tomorrow." "Is everybody clear on what needs to be done?" I asked for clarification. "After extraction, whoever shows up on scene gets put down." From the family room, the man ended his call and now stood near me. "Why not capture? Don't we learn more interrogating them?" "In and out," I stated. "We don't know how widespread this is." "Exactly why we need to take them captive," the man insisted.

"Possible," Billy stated being supportive to both plans. "But their dead bodies washing up on location will stir the public into action. They are the seeds that will foster thorough investigations. Far more than we can do on our own." I wanted to leave no doubt. "Our primary mission is to save those kids and our families. If we get too deep in this without public support," I pointed to the television; "They will tear us up through the news media. Look what they are doing to me." Billy confirmed my sentiments, "Bad cops are rare, yet everyone out there thinks he is a cop killer now. They'll kill Steve in a heartbeat. The news media has been weaponized." "Just like the IRS," Tom added. "EPA, SEC, FEC, HSA, NSA," the others rattled off.

"Fighting terrorists is nothing new for us," I explained. "We are facing an insurgency attacking our children here at home. We rescue the kids, we win. We flush out the rats, we win. Then we melt back into obscurity. Nobody can know it was us that did this. Any exposure puts every one of our families at risk. It's a thankless job, but it's what we do. Adjusting to civilian life is difficult, but there is always a need for our skills. It's why we must go on."

I continued, "In combat, I was responsible for lasing targets. We were called the forward deployed. We joked it meant we were the easily forgotten. Our mission was identifying enemy strongholds, weapons caches, tracking principals, even tapping communications. Whatever. Whenever. The slightest deviations often became the biggest clues. We are all trained to identify these things. We are the nation's night watchmen." The men responded with a collective, "Hooah!"

The silence that followed had us all notice the news feed on the television. They were now connecting me to the plane crash. "Moments ago, we heard from Special Agent Smith of the FBI." I turned to everybody, "No relation. I swear." The station began playing a video recording of the news conference they just broadcasted. "Our preliminary investigation shows the plane's

hydraulic system was disabled by a small explosion to the rear of the plane." "Lithium flushed down the toilet," Billy mumbled. "What was that?" Tom asked. "Lithium batteries are epoxy coated because they react violently with water. Even humidity can trigger the reaction, like a small bottle of gasoline in every cellphone. I tried to warn them."

"Warn who?" I asked. "The FBI and national news." "Why would you tell the media about that?" Tom pressed. "They keep saying, See something, Say something. Unfortunately nobody is listening." He pointed to the television, "They're blaming this servicewoman, and the only explosive not screened are cellphones and computers. She cracks the battery with a boot heel and quickly flushes it down the toilet. Instant bomb." Tom let out with a short laugh, "You are one scary old man."

The news cast replayed video showing a servicewoman arguing at an airport ticket counter. "Judy Hamlorick was delayed at the terminal and re-ticketed for Flight 619. She was scheduled for Flight 220 seated next to Specialist Stephen Smith. A ticketing conflict separated these two soldiers returning from Afghanistan." The news anchor turned to her guest, "We have in studio retired Colonel Anthony Milnton. What do you make of this connection to the fugitive Smith,

a trained Army Ranger?" "It's an absolute disgrace for the U.S. Army, and an act of Karma the sabotaged plane put him in the hospital." I walked over and turned the television off. "I don't need to listen to this right now." Tom's phone rang. "We still have intel coming in," I stated pointing to Tom. "Let's get to it."

"Never let a good disaster go to waste," Billy remarked. "Rahm Emmanuel, Obama's advisor," Billy clarified. "That's his motto. Democrats are pushing for deeper military cuts in the budget debate. You are perfect ammunition for them. Demonize the whole military through you and watch the Republicans cave." He headed for the kitchen. "Yet again," he added. I followed him as he continued, "Just like with every gun legislation debate. The week before every vote there's an attack on a school. And when they do that too often, they mix in a mall just to change it up a little. Or, a celebrity is killed to get the media dogs onto another topic." He half turned to look at me, "And don't give me any of this PTSD conspiracy crap. It happens every time."

"Your discovery is no different. Cemeteries! They're the perfect hiding place for medical waste. Compact it. Grind it up. It takes an Act of Congress to exhume a grave. The material degrades underground saving the hospital millions in disposal fees." "The crematorium is



also the only legally authorized facility for incinerating bodies," I added. "It's the perfect combination and spread out all over the nation for convenient access."

Billy poured himself a coffee. "I met my wife, Sarah, at a metaphysical drumming circle back in the nineties. A friend of hers took us on a graveyard tour." Billy's voice became more solemn. "They claimed it was haunted because many of the photos taken in the cemetery captured balls of white light. Since we couldn't see them, they must be spirits. Somehow camera film could detect ghosts." He smiled, "It was ridiculous, but she was hot." Tom didn't look back at us but commented on our discussion, "Hot or demonic, it's a fine line." He laughed while Billy scolded him, "Don't be talking bad about my wife." He looked out the kitchen window, "She might listening." It lightened the mood. "Your wife is crazy, Billy," I added quietly.

After a sip of his coffee he tied the story to our present condition. "It never dawned on me the white shiny spots on the film were caused by radiation leakage." He looked down, "That was twenty years ago. Had I made the connection, maybe all this could have been exposed back then." He softly repeated, "Twenty years ago." I put my hand on his shoulder, "Don't let this eat

you up. Think about how many lives we are going to save tomorrow night."

"Carol mentioned something interesting," I shared. "I had dinner with her and Jim last week, the night of the funeral. She was upset with Phillips, the funeral director. The color of Pam's eyes were not correct. Carol learned about the embalming process and how the body was prepared for viewing. She called it a mutilation of Pam's body which violated her religion. She questioned the moral vacuum of Phillips."

"Pam would tell me about dreams her mother had. She mentioned something interesting, quoting the Bible. Those who endure to the end will be saved. That was it. She always thought it was intended to encourage people through tough times, but she got this wild idea we were hyperspace travelers." I motioned to the room, "All of this is just some computer generated fiction to help our minds survive the journey."

"Carol identified errors, as she called them. Like approaching an intersection and not seeing any cars until you got there. Nobody before or after, but as soon as you get there, another car arrives to block your path and make you wait. She said this happened to her almost every time. She reasoned these were little errors in the program failing to make this fiction seem real."

"I often thought about it in theater. Sometimes hoping she was right. Look at the nightmare we are facing right now. Believing it isn't real is the only way to explain this level of evil. This is just pure evil what's happening here, and somehow this fiction keeps us healthy." I left the story there. "I have a running dream," Tom stated still navigating through Google Maps. "I have to get back home, but every path gets me more lost. Landmarks change as if evolving around me while I remain stagnant. My legs feel like they are weighted down, slogging through mud. Fear builds and builds in me. Eventually, I look back and see Sarah chasing me." Everyone had a good laugh at Billy's expense.

I noticed the North America map in the center of the table. Many new lines existed on my original map, blocking off regions, some of which were filled in with contact numbers. "How is this all being done?" I asked Billy. "It took a couple hours last night to brief this crew," he began. "We divided the targets in groups of twenty cells to define eleven regions. Each of us had contacts to establish command centers in all but three. They are then responsible for establishing squads for each target cell in their region. This means reconning the location and estimating the force requirements." "Well, how can they do that? It's all underground."

Billy continued to explain. "The heat exchanger unit outside. The size of the air conditioner provides an estimate of the square footage. From that we compute the number of rooms and potential guests." "Guests?" I didn't like that word. "We don't know who might be listening," Billy cautioned. "After first contact, we communicate through Mythea." "Mythy what?" I reacted with a look of confusion. "It's a game." "We're communicating though a video game?" Billy continued to explain, "We can't use cellphones because NSA might be listening. Even disposable phones purchased with cash puts someone in front of a store camera. Email accounts could be setup for each cell where both sides can draft messages but not send them. Since both parties have access, we can check for and read each others draft messages. But even that leaves an IP footprint with drafts saved for extended periods like on Twitter or Facebook where nothing can be deleted, ever. And, it's very slow, worthless for a large operation like ours."

"Mythea is an online medieval warfare game. George plays it. There are more popular games like it, but this one has a very strong communications platform." "So how's it being used?" I pressed to speed things up. "We all have military contacts and can network across the country to contact able bodied ex-military in each

target area through cellphone, just to get them into the game. They join and then we assign them to a cell which is a kingdom in the game. Each can hold twelve players who elect the cell commander as their king. A local forum handles cell communication, but it is limited and automatically deletes all posts. It's useful for emergency and cryptic organizational discussions."

"There are twenty cells to a region with one appointed as region commander to manage them as noted by the kingdom names. Each region has its own special forum for higher level communications. Our cell is currently the central command center with yet another special forum for all region commanders. We also receive private messages from region commanders as they receive intel from their members to log persistent status updates. Further, all players have access to an emergency forum in case leadership is somehow disabled." "You've established a terror network," I acknowledged. "Right," Billy agreed with the label. "It's an ameba. There is no head to cut off." "Something Congress doesn't seem to understand," I extended the conversation. "They think cutting off the head of the snake will end the conflict." "It works though for their political needs," Billy sadly confirmed. "The people don't understand

guerrilla warfare. The news media gets some raw meat, but nothing is really accomplished."

Billy returned to explaining the communications networked through the game. "As military join our ranks, they enter the game and get assigned to a kingdom. Their province, kingdom, and forum name have a numeric extension to note their grid index. Each kingdom page notes are private where they can post their individual status, and each cell can check on others by simply looking at their kingdom size in the game. We're using the public kingdom notes to announce estimated troop requirements for that target. It's pretty easy to see who needs bodies." Billy pointed to the family room, "Each cell has one person extending the Google Map search East." He pointed back to the dining room table, "While Tom is moving West." "How far out?" I asked.

"You did a herculean job on your own," Billy acknowledged. "We extended the search an additional fifty miles. Multiple sites have confirmed your findings, but others did not checkout. Each cell is expanding the search area and finding targets as far out as forty miles from the cemeteries. All potentials get physically reconed. We try to limit our communications to target confirmation, squad readiness, or activity like searching, investigating, recruiting. Statements you'd expect in the game."

"All the command centers were established by morning. Most of the squads have formed. Ex-military is a tight family. We have Rangers, Marines, even a few Seals. We're sort of moving through the network like a pyramid scheme. Once briefed, they are responsible for their squad and helping to establish others. The game keeps it all organized without any delays. We need the cover of darkness to recon the sites properly. By tonight each target should have a squad established. The timeline is to have everything in place by noon tomorrow, at that time we go dark. Everyone migrates to their targets one hour prior to the debate. We execute when the President is introduced. As you pointed out, all the people involved in this will be watching the debate."

"Let's hope," I added. "What can I do?" "Watch Tony and Tom," Billy responded. "They'll need a break soon, and you can get into the rotation." "What about the raid on our assigned target?" "No way," Billy affirmed. "You're toxic. Someone sees you and this whole thing could fall apart." "Grounded," I mumbled. "When the kids are safe, everyone scatters. When all squads report in to their commanders, they'll check-in with us through the game. You'll have all the information you need for the media, and I can drop you off nearby. What I don't know is how you are planning to get out of there? SWAT will be all

over that place. You know snipers will be establishing firing solutions."

"Someone's got to be the messenger boy," I stated matter-of-factly. There was no doubt in what I had to do. This was my final mission. "So you're going to let them take you into custody," Billy reasoned. "Something like that," I responded. "It's not like I have a home to go back to." I looked around at the printouts and men working on this mission before unemotionally adding, "You said it. I'm toxic." I looked at Billy, "You can never contact me after this. Nobody can. It will expose the network. People, who would do this to children, will stop at nothing to round up and kill everyone of us along with our families and friends. This is going to be big." I took a deep breath, "The trail begins and ends with me."

I'm not sure if they understood what I was prepared to do, but even Tony overheard and turned to look at me before receiving another message chime in the game. His eyebrows were lifted. This was an emotional geyser from this man. The operation continued throughout the night. Everything looked settled at early morning with hours to spare before the noon deadline. Men and women were traded between kingdoms to balance site needs and hit the highway. They simply marked the province as migrating in the local kingdom page. Only a few of those remained



and looked to be well within range. Across the nation a new minuteman army was assembled in just two days time.



## FAITH

The Sheffield Church of Christ was the largest in the area and very close to the extraction point. Billy entered a side entrance to the large service chamber. Four rows of pews, two dozen deep each, formed a half circle around the altar where four women were unpacking and positioning narrow vases. He walked to the rear of the church via the aisle against the right side wall. Along the rear wall were four confessionals followed by a glassed baby room. The center aisle led to the main doors with office chambers to the right and a baptismal alcove. Billy crossed the main aisle and remained outside the doors to the auxiliary

service room where a small evening mass was underway. He sat in the last pew off the center aisle in the main chamber. Others were scattered around the other pews in silent prayer.

About fifteen minutes passed before the small service concluded. Another fifteen minutes passed as a half dozen parishioners spoke to the priest and requested a specific blessing. One was concerned about a difficult neighbor. Another asked for her father who was in the hospital. Everyone had a good laugh when an exuberant teenager in the church's youth group asked Father Schnakey to sign his arm cast, the result of a skateboarding accident. Billy waited patiently letting everyone go first. The nature of the pending conversation required it.

"Father, I do not attend this church," Billy began. "I need to speak with you in private. If someone overhears, they may get the wrong idea." Father motioned toward the center aisle, "We can speak in the office." "I am concerned people will hear us there. Can we talk in a confessional." He shook his head, "No. That would not be appropriate." Billy felt as though he just insulted the priest. "What about here?" the priest asked, entering a coat room tucked in behind the auxiliary service room.

Billy moved inside, out of the path of the doorway. He did not want the priest to feel trapped and also needed to keep a lookout for anybody that might be close by. "What I am going to share with you must be held in complete secrecy. Can you assure me this conversation will remain just between us?" The priest looked a little perplexed. "Are you Catholic?" the priest asked. "I was baptized but don't attend church services." "Have you denounced your faith?" "No Father," Billy said softly. "What is troubling you, my son?" the priest calmly asked.

"Father. I'm a local author and have reached a difficult part in a book I'm writing and need a genuine reaction. There is a priest," Billy motioned to Father Shnackey. "Who is confronted by a harmless stranger," pointing to himself by placing his hand on his chest, "requesting use of the church's mini-bus parked out back for about an hour. How would you respond to that?"

Father Schnakey responded in a cautious manner, "I would ask why the vehicle was needed and suggest a rental company." Billy smiled, "A completely natural response, but what if the vehicle was needed for an operation to rescue children? And, renting would be traceable, placing the rescue team members in danger by those who took the children to begin with."

Father Schnakey looked confused by the conversation and took a half step back. "In that case, wouldn't the police be the logical choice?"

"What if the discovery was made because four hooded and bound children were witnessed being led into a building by police officers? What if thirty hours ago the media was contacted, and within two hours an assassination attempt was made by those same officers against the discoverer?" The priest looked very uncomfortable, placing his hand on a stack of garments, fidgeting with their arrangement. "This is not a fictional story, is it?"

"I wish it was," Billy responded. "I need to borrow the church's mini-bus to rescue children from a sex dungeon." Billy could see the priest struggling with the blunt statement. He exercised caution with providing details. "Father. There is a group of us who have discovered a national chain of these institutions. We are going to execute a raid tonight and need the church's help to conceal our identities. Each group is asking churches in the target areas for assistance. Sheffield Church of Christ is the closest church, large enough for the mission at the local site." Father Schnakey looked scared. Maybe it was the idea people would do this to children, or maybe it was concern Billy was dangerous.

"I understand how this sounds. Two days ago it was brought to my attention, and I had the same reaction." Billy shared this to offer assurance and calm Father Schnakey. "We have been working round the clock to coordinate a rescue attempt. Our plan is to extract the kids and drop them off at a local church. It is a way to launder the participation of the team members. The people doing the rescuing have families. They need to be protected too. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but the church will insulate us from discovery." The priest asked the next obvious question, "What about contacting the FBI?"

"We don't know who we can trust, including news media. Sometimes common people are called upon to do exceptional things. We don't get to pick our missions, Father. When called, it is our choice to answer." Billy took a deep breath, "I understand this is a lot to ask, as I am a stranger. But we also need people here to receive the children and call for medical help." "When will this happen?" "Tonight," Billy stated. "You can have the keys to my vehicle and house along with my license for security. Worst case scenario for the church is the vehicle gets reported as stolen."

"And what if I say no?" Billy shrugged, "We drop them off anyway, using our vehicles. But this will expose us. It leaves traceable evidence that will connect us to the children. The people

responsible for these facilities will then retaliate against our families." Billy clasped his hands together as if reflexively praying. "Father, we are not sure about the conditions of the kids, or if anyone will be here to receive them. The mini-bus allows safe delivery into your hands. I cannot give you specific details, other than stressing the need for secrecy."

Billy's eyes showed the urgency of the moment and sincerity of his words. "It will be easier on everyone if we had a bus that could be dropped off and not leave any evidence of our involvement. We also need you prepared to receive these children. Get them help quickly." The priest remained quiet for a full minute, staring at the ground and then to the ceiling before returning to me. He looked less uncomfortable with me and more horrified by the information. "I will be in the front office." He put both outstretched hands on Billy's shoulders, and then pulled his right hand back and made the sign of the cross, blessing him.

Billy gave a reverent bow, "Thank you Father. Please say nothing to anyone, not even the people waiting to receive the children." "How many children do you expect to find?" Schnakey asked. "We estimate six at this location. Hundreds maybe thousands across the nation." Billy whispered, "Father, we don't know the condition

of the children. Some may just need medical help. I can imagine some will be brain locked, unresponsive. And still others extracted may need burial." Billy bowed his head, "Pray for us, Father. We'll need all the help we can get." Billy reached into his back pocket withdrawing his wallet. A key ring with his house and car keys on it was produced from his front pocket. He placed the keys and wallet in his right hand.

Billy looked at the watch on his left wrist. "The operation begins in twenty-five minutes, which means I need to leave here in about five minutes." He stated this while holding his wallet out for the priest to take. Billy held the key ring on top of the wallet with his thumb. "Right, now?" Father Schnakey reacted still trying to absorb the information. "Follow me." The men walked briskly to the front office where the priest had a private chamber. "Put that away," he whispered referring to the the wallet and keys. From a drawer in a simple office desk, he retrieved the keys to the mini-bus. "Not a scratch," he said with a strained smile, obviously trying to ease the tension.

"Do you have video surveillance on the parking lot?" Billy asked while taking the keys. "Yes," the priest continued to smile, raising his hands to heaven above. "The Lord is always watching." The good natured comment made Billy smile as



well. "It's one hour round trip if everything goes as planned." Billy left the office, pulling a rolled up cloth from his back pocket. Rolled up inside were dark blue medical gloves. He put these on by the time he reached the mini-bus. All team members wore these to avoid leaving prints. They also shaved their bodies from head to toe for the same reason of not shedding hairs on site or more importantly in the buses. Every precaution was being taken to protect everyone involved.

Billy was relieved to see the mini-bus was an automatic. He entered and slipped the black cloth over his head. It was a modified Muslim burka with the eye slit covered by a black screen. This would hide Billy's identity from store security cameras along the route, and from traffic cameras. Muslims wearing the full burka in the region was not uncommon, driving a Catholic mini-bus is another story entirely. Hopefully nobody notices. How many people actually read the charter labels on a bus?

Billy arrived at the site entrance. He entered without delay or caution. The two hundred foot drive, slithered through thick overgrowth. When he entered the field, his team members could be seen storming the entrance to the mobile home. Billy's arrival was their go sign. Tony disabled the camera mounted on the roof as soon as he saw the lights of the bus. As the team members entered

the building, Tony flipped over the roof edge and followed them inside.

Billy turned sharply to the left, and then backed up to the front door. He left the engine running and moved to the rear of the bus, throwing the single rear door open. Tom was the first to enter the mobile home. He held a fireman's axe to quickly remove the lock on the basement door. When Billy reached the stairs leading underground, he could hear the axe taking out another barrier. "Clear," echoed throughout the chamber below, as it was reported for each room discovered. As doors were broken into, the cries and screams of the children could be heard. It actually lifted Billy's heart. It meant they were alive and responsive.

Billy saw two children at the base of the stairs, huddled together. Even in the darkness the bruising was clearly visible. He motioned for them to come up the stairs. "Hurry!" Billy coaxed. "It's ok. We're going home." The partially dressed children clung to their torn cloths to hide their frail bodies as they struggled to maintain their footing climbing the stairs. Billy moved back to the entrance and helped the children into the back of the bus. "Take a seat up front. Stay together." Billy repeated the advice as two more children were helped into the vehicle. Each ranged between ten and fourteen. Their

malnourished, scrawny bodies and drawn, punished faces made it especially difficult to know for sure how young the children were. Smudged makeup on their faces was further disrupted by their tears and attempts to wipe it away.

Mark was next up the stairs. He carried a teenage girl, definitely high school age. She was shaking badly and sobbing heavily. Both her legs were broken below the knees. Two more kids, also in their high school years, helped each other navigate the steps. Something we did not consider is how difficult the stairs would be for the victims. They represented major hurdles, but the kids saw freedom up those steps and pressed on through the pain of their injuries. Billy backed up into the bus where Mark handed the girl to him. She screamed in pain as her legs grazed the floor of the bus. "I have her," Billy confirmed.

Mark went back to the stairs to help the other two kids. From below he could hear Tony and Tom flipping over mattresses and furniture to make sure no children were hiding. "Empty," now echoed below as each room was checked. Tony then climbed the steps with a teenage boy in his arms. The young man's head was hanging from his body lifeless. His broken legs were obvious, scars and scabs peppered all portions of his body that were visible. Tony had wrapped a sheet around his naked body, as was done for the girl

carried up by Mark. Tony shook his head as Mark came to help. "Check on Tom."

He handed the boy to Billy, who placed him across the seats at the rear. The girl brought up by Mark began crying uncontrollably, wailing at the view of her dead boyfriend. Billy covered the boy's face with the sheet, and seat belted him. Tom emerged from the mobile home and yelled, "Eight!" Billy looked at his passengers, "Eight confirmed!" Mark gave a thumbs up, and further responded by closing the rear door. Billy moved to the driver seat. "Kids you're safe, but need to remain quiet." He tried to inform them of the situation. "In order to get you home, I need your help. Please try to be calm and quiet. Comfort each other." Billy was in the driver seat, half turned around to look at them. "Can you do that for me?"

The kids nodded while tears continued to stream down their battered faces. Billy faced forward, throwing the vehicle into drive. "We are going to get you help. It's a twenty minute ride. Look at the other car lights, the homes and trees. You're free. Everything is going to be all right." Billy stated these things slowly, hoping the children would inherit his calm. They either knew it was important to remain calm, or they were terrified. There was no telling how long they were at the site. Billy checked the electronic controls in the

vehicle to ensure all the windows were up and doors locked. "Are you cold?" Billy looked at the kids through the rearview mirror. "Are you hot?" No response came from the kids. Considering they've been underground and are not dressed properly, he set the digital heater setting to eighty degrees to make sure they were comfortable.

The cover of darkness and glaring streetlights helped conceal the children from passing vehicles. How often do we pass people on the road and see the driver or passengers within. We're becoming more isolated the more crowded things become. Billy fought the urge to continually check on the kids. "Stay focused on the road. Get them home." These were his only thoughts. When Billy saw the church, a feeling of euphoria came over him. "We did it," he mumbled.

He pulled into the church parking lot. "Kids. I have to go. The priest and people here at the church are going to take care of you." He parked the vehicle near the front entrance and beeped the horn for a full second. "You made it. There's no shame. You are survivors." He stood up with the side door open. "Tell your story as detailed as you can so we can punish everyone who did this to you." Billy wasn't sure any of the kids heard him. They looked scared of the world outside. Their security blanket was leaving them.

Billy stepped out of the vehicle as the priest emerged from the church. Father Schnakey was startled by the sight of Billy swiftly removing the burka. "Eight," Billy said with a smile. His expression quickly soured. His lips curled in a bit, "One didn't make it. He's in the back row." He tossed the keys to the priest, "I was never here." The priest turned and prevented the glass door to the church from closing. "Help. I need help out front." Billy kept his back to the bus to make sure the kids never saw his face. His truck was parked along the far side of the church. As he turned the corner, the priest entered the bus. Billy slipped the blue latex gloves off before he reached his truck. He left the church parking lot through a side exit. He was briefly able to see the women who were helping setup the vases earlier, entering the bus as well."



## BOOM

Several deep breaths could barely contain the emotions boiling over within Billy. Two days not knowing and the lack of sleep made for a brutal cocktail. Disgust and anger now swirled with joy for the kids that survived and sadness for the boy that did not. When he got back to the house, Billy's emotions crashed. He realized the mission was not complete. He had to face my state of horror. I was thoroughly beaten down by depression, and felt like I was going to throw up. "Seven, zero, one," Billy reported in.

His wife Sarah was waiting for him also. She left the couch, tissues in hand, to rush over and give Billy a forceful hug. "I was so worried something would go wrong." Sarah's voice screeched, "At the mobile home, on the road, what if the police saw you driving the kids? What if they didn't cooperate?" Billy returned her hug, grateful to be home. "It's not over," I said solemnly. I clicked on our kingdom page in the game and changed the message to show our field results. "Seven, zero, one," I repeated softly while typing it in. This allowed everyone to check on results.

"How's everyone doing?" Billy asked. I ignored his question, "Change your clothes. Get those in the washer, now." I pointed to Sarah, "You too." She looked confused. "You touched him. Evidence transfer. Don't forget to flush the gloves and burka. Shred it first." When they returned, my disposition only got worse. "How bad is it?" Billy asked again. I leaned back in the chair letting my arms drop to each side, emotionally drained. "No messages reporting interference so far. Six regions have submitted final results. I'm monitoring condition discoveries." I shook my head slowly. "It's disgusting."

"You're not going to like ours either," I affirmed. "Tony logged it from offsite," I pointed to the computer. "He provided a scene description. He'll return to the site to help with the ambush



when I post I'm on the move. As a runner you didn't see the environment underground. The dungeons are sixty's style bomb shelters, a long central tube with short tubes attached to the sides used as individual bedrooms equipped like common prison cells. Ours had twelve chambers with a storage area at the end of the main tube. All utilities, electric, water, air, sewage ran under the floor in the curved crawl space."

"The kids were responsible for maintaining their rooms unless they were bound. Their cell doors were locked on the outside with a simple latch-pin system." I took a deep breath. "So far, the largest complex is in California. You can read the stories coming in on your own. They're pretty graphic. Not things easily forgotten." ~~~BING~~~ The computer chimed to notify a new private message in the game. "Region four," I informed Billy. "One hundred ninety-three, twenty-three, seven." The numbers were our code for saved, brain locked, and dead.

The brain locked children hit us the hardest. Those killed could no longer be damaged, tragic but it's over. Injuries and emotions can heal even though the experience will never be forgotten. But the brain locked have disconnected from the world around them. A life completely hollowed out — the real living dead. ~~~BING~~~

"Region nine," I read off the numbers. "Two hundred eleven, nineteen, three."

"How are our people in the field?" Billy asked in a shaky voice, forcing him to clear his throat. "Ambushes are in place." The teams remained on site, staging it to handle anyone checking on the facility. A couple of plastic gallon milk containers filled with gasoline were placed under the mobile homes in the crawl space. "Everybody is waiting on me now." Once I announce the operation on the news, the teams will wait one hour before igniting the homes to attract the fire departments, exposing the facilities underground. Any genetic evidence in the chambers should be preserved for forensic investigators to follow. Anyone showing up on site before that timeframe are most likely involved in the maintenance of the site. They'll be taken out. Their bodies will add another clue for the investigators to follow. Swift justice and a confession with every bullet.

The remaining regions reported their numbers within a matter of minutes of each other. I wrote the numbers down along with the final tally. "Unbelievable," Billy mumbled, looking over my shoulder at the total for all eleven regions. I changed our kingdom message to, "Carrier Pigeon Flying." I got out of the chair while tearing off the final tally sheet from a small notepad. "Time for the finale," I mentioned, stuffing the folded sheet

into my front left pocket. Sarah returned and was standing in the kitchen.

"Sarah. You watch the news broadcast. Contact Billy when you see me. Billy. You get on the highway. Orbit the city using the bypass circle, relay Sarah's call to me through the disposable cellphone. Sarah, if they change coverage or disconnect, for any reason, contact Billy." I pointed to Billy again, "You relay it to me. If they refuse to go live, then we'll have to depend on the church coverage and the courts to track everybody down. Our teams will all pull out in about ninety minutes. It's time to go."

Sarah moved toward me with her arms out to hug me. "No contact," I blurted out. "A single hair could track back here. Remember, Obama Care generated a national DNA database. The government is always watching now, even Sony has started putting listening devices in their televisions." "I saw that coverage on FOX," Billy confirmed. "They said it was exposed when Sony was preparing a video monitoring system, so they could monitor our expressions while watching."

Billy and I hurried from the house. He was already gone when I got the truck out of the barn. Even with the constant news coverage, my truck was never mentioned. The vehicle was registered in Pam's name because being deployed is

hazardous to your health. Real discussions force military families to prepare for the worst case. The national news station is located in the city of Lorain, roughly fifteen minutes away. We were cutting things very close. If I was spotted by police, well they are going to be surrounding the news building soon enough any way. They might as well escort me.

The debate was being broadcast on the radio. The Republican Presidential Challenger was presenting her closing remarks when I arrived at the station. Several large concrete planters prevented vehicles from driving through the main door. They also protected the full length glass windows framing the doors and south wall where the daytime talk show studio was located. However, at the far end a moveable barrier composed of several saw horse style wooden structures exploded on impact with my truck. Even though I was now parallel to the glass doors, the gap to the concrete planters created a large staging area for outside events in front of the station for the morning shows.

I turned sharply and floored it. My momentum was plenty to penetrate the double, oversized glass doors. My body surged forward at the impact. Metal framing on the doors stripped away the side mirrors, crumpled the side panels, and severely cracked the windshield. Steam

streamed out of the radiator of the truck now cloaked by the shattered heavy glass. The steam helped distract the startled security guards at the welcome desk now neighboring the vehicle. I slipped out of the truck before it came to a full stop. Opening the door quickly in this way allowed the vehicle a few additional feet of movement to get out of my way. It also created an obstacle for the guards.

Two pair of elevators created a short foyer with a hallway leading to the on-air studio to the left. Two interns walking with papers exited an elevator, completely surprised by my handgun now in their faces. The skinnier girl wore a short dress with a blunted suit jacket, the collar of which was now firmly in the grasp of my left hand. The redhead girl let out with a scream and dropped down, cowering to the view of my gun. Her withdrawal was unable to escape my grasp. My momentum turned us both around. I spun to my right while passing her. With a firm grip of the collar, she was forced to follow me. Half sliding across the floor, she stumbled to keep her feet.

Billy did a good job reconning the building. He was able to find the construction blueprints online buried in a PDF file used as a building remodeling application in the public records of the city. All day the station boasted live coverage of tonight's

debate with post debate reactions, featuring the morning studio as the location that would be used for in-house commentary. The studio featured a curved couch that could hold five large adults comfortably. As we moved down the hallway, the girl tried to slip out of her suit jacket as she was dragged across the floor at one point. The form fitting nature of the undersized jacket betrayed her.

I quickly changed my grip to hold her right arm near the shoulder. "Walk with me and nobody gets hurt," I warned while standing her up. The on-air light above the double doors leading into the studio was off. Before we reached them, one of the doors opened. A tall skinny, middle aged blond man peered out into the hallway. No doubt checking on the commotion beyond the door. "Back," I warned. He froze but did not move although his hands instinctively went up. "Step back," I repeated still approaching. I pushed the girl in first with the gun behind her back so it could be clearly seen above her right shoulder.

Continuing to hold the girl's right arm meant both my hands were in an optimal controlling position. "Everyone stay back. Move toward the couch." I slid to the left, keeping my back against the wall. We stopped short of an emergency exit door. "Keep your hands visible and shut up." I remained within arm's reach of the double doors

we entered. The tall blond man was still close. He only moved back a few steps as we entered. "Sir, take off your belt." He looked to his left, then right, confused by the request. "Sir," I raised the gun an inch and closer to the girl's head. "Your belt. Remove it, now!" The man reacted with one hand still raised.

"Wrap it around the bars of the double doors." The man responded, nervously doing what he was told. "Don't hook it. Tie a strong knot." While he complied, I scanned the room. "You three in front of the couch sit down. The rest of you sit down on the floor between the cameras and the coffee table." I checked the progress of the blond man. "Check it." He continued to be easily confused. "Try to open one of the doors," I stated slowly. He had his hands up again. Lowering his left, he pushed on the bar. The door opened about an inch before the belt held it securely. "That'll have to do. Join the others on the floor."

I moved further left. "I apologize for this interruption. It is not my intention to harm anyone. Some of you might be armed or thinking about being a hero. Don't be stupid. I am not here to hurt anyone," I repeated. "Unless you do something stupid." I took a deep breath to gather my thoughts. "If you are wearing a microphone, headset, earpiece, whatever. Take it off and place it on the coffee table. This includes cellphones."

They all began producing the requested items. "Not you big man." I addressed the large black man who was behind one of the cameras when we stormed into the room. "You keep your headset on." He slowly replaced the headset. "What's your name?"

"Douglas," he stated softly. "What do your friends call you?" I asked again. "Doug," he stated. "I'm not your friend Doug?" He fidgeted with his hands, not knowing to keep them up or not. "Yes Sir." "Sir?" I reacted harshly. "You don't know who I am, Doug?" "Smith." He stumbled with my name, "Steve Smith." "That's right Doug. You vultures have been butchering my character all day. By tomorrow I'll be the third gunman on the grassy knoll." I kept the girl positioned slightly to my left to partially block the site lines from the massive wall length windows. Already some pedestrians were noticing the events inside through their semi-mirrored view. They held cellphones close to the windows, already recording.

"You are my connection to the control room, Doug. Did they hear everything?" He hesitated. "I need to speak with them, Doug. Don't make me shoot this girl." She let out with a squealing, "Please." Seeking to negotiate for her life, "I have a daughter." Doug nodded as if receiving instructions, "Yes. They can hear you." Police



cars began pulling up outside. Lights flashing. They positioned the vehicles to extend the cover provided by the concrete planters. "Move back! Move back!" Their orders could be heard, greatly muffled by the thick glass. "Move back!" They repeated to the people outside attempting to document the events inside.

"Doug. Who operates that camera?" I motioned briefly with the gun to the one at the far left of the couch. "John," he pointed to another hefty man at the edge of the pool of bodies sitting on the floor. "Ok. John and Doug, move these large cameras in front of the window." John cautiously got to his feet. "Let's go! We're on the clock here." Both men moved with purpose. Kicking a few wires out of the way, the cameras were repositioned behind the couch, partially blocking the view from the window. "John. Back on the floor. Doug get the third camera centered on the couch." I moved with the lanky red haired girl to behind the couch. I looked over my left shoulder to the cameras behind us. "It'll have to do," I muttered with a shrug.

Standing behind the couch, I moved the redhead aside and placed the gun up against Susan Franim, the lead news anchor sitting in the center of the curved couch. "You were very helpful." I let go of the girl's arm. "Take a seat on the couch between the girls." I noticed two televisions on

the floor. The one to the left showed me up close. "Doug, zoom out so the whole couch is visible." He responded immediately. "Ok. That's good right there." I pointed with my left to the television on the right. "That's the current feed?" "Yes," Doug responded. "Ok. Step away from the camera. Doug you are my communications with the control room. They speak. You speak. Understand?" "Yes Sir." "Doug, we're friends," I reminded him. "It's Steve." "Yes Steve," he replied.

"Control room, The storm windows behind me are semi-mirrored to everyone outside. The thermal coating also makes it difficult to see inside. The cameras positioned here prevent the snipers outside from computing a favorable solution. I have a simple request." Doug nodded, "Go ahead." "Because of the Presidential Debate, you have withheld breaking news. I can explain why battered and bruised children are showing up at churches all across the nation tonight. That explanation will go out to the entire nation, a truly live exclusive." I pulled a cellphone from my front pocket and placed it on the couch back. "It looks like the debate moderator is concluding. You have one minute to introduce your audience to activities here, and broadcast this camera feed," I pointed to the camera producing the left monitor image, then replaced my hand on Susan's

shoulder while maintaining contact with the gun high up against her spine with my right.

"This cell phone will confirm the broadcast. Somewhere in America, you are being watched by a very important person. If you do not comply, I begin shooting until you do, and I brought plenty of ammo. After the first ring, you don't want this phone to ring again. It means the feed was interrupted or modified from this specific view. Don't even screw up the sound. There are many lives at stake, not just here." I struggled to remain calm and took another deep breath. "I apologize for this tactic, but you will appreciate my position soon enough. Then everyone goes home, unharmed, and I am taken into custody." After a short pause, "Confirm it!"

Doug nodded nervously, "Yes. They said yes." Soon after the monitor on the right changed to a man behind a desk in an upper studio. There was no sound from the monitor, but breaking news banners and alerts littered the screen. A few seconds passed and the feed changed to match the monitor on the left. "Steve," Doug whispered. "You're on." The cellphone rung-out, startling many in the room. It rang three times, and went silent. "My name is Stephen Smith," I addressed the camera. "I'm here to clear up the lies being told about me and warn the public of three

hazardous operations being conducted across America."

"I joined the Coast Guard to defend my country's borders, but I was forced into service overseas in the army. As a Ranger I operated beyond the front lines, if you could call them battle lines. I witnessed many horrible things, but nothing can compare to what I discovered here at home. As you know my wife Pam died in the train derailment caused by the plane crash. Our dog Rose also perished. Due to changes in the healthcare law, Rose was no longer allowed to be buried with Pam in our family plot."

"After leaving the hospital, I snuck into the cemetery the night before Pam's scheduled burial to bury Rose in the open grave. That night I witnessed two state troopers dumping ground up medical waste into the grave. I later found out this included depleted and low grade radioactive waste. When they left the scene, I completed my mission to bury Rose in a shallow grave within the open grave meant for Pam. That's when I discovered the contents of the bags along with finding cremated remains."

"The perfect place to hide bodies is in the cemetery. An easy cost savings solution for the hospitals to dispose of radioactive medical waste is in the cemetery. It takes an act of Congress to

move or exhume a grave. In this way, legislators provide cover for the operation and receive hefty campaign contributions in return. Prior to this discovery, I collected Rose's remains in the cold room at the funeral parlor. Inside there were individually bagged body parts, including a semi-transparent plastic bag with what appeared to be a folded blanket of skin."

"I did not understand until I touched Pam's hands, my wife's, at the wake to discover her arms were replaced by mannequin parts. Pam suffered a critical wound to the back of her head. There were no limbs lost nor excessive damage. I learned the hospital uses the funeral parlor as its morgue, a common practice. Even though the complex names are different, the hospitals and cemeteries are owned by a single umbrella company. These organizations are paired across America and Canada, and are run by the same board members."

"How comfortable are you knowing the new health care act shares your private medical data, including your DNA, with the government? They are harvesting us like cattle. It is not much of a stretch to consider manufactured complications, also known as accidents, putting family members of executives and legislators in need of organ transplants. Actions, rulings, and votes can now

be controlled, bribing legislators, company owners, and agency heads."

"I also learned the cancer rate mushroomed in the States starting in the seventies, the decade after hospitals went nuclear. The rest of the world remained steady. The difference is fifty years of hazardous waste dumping, which just generates more business for the hospitals." I took another deep breath before summarizing. "Medical waste disposal. Body part smuggling. And body dumping. How can this get worse? Well, it does."

"I tracked the two State Police officers, Lynch and Mitchel. I cannot explain how. They led me to a mobile home in a clearing surrounded by heavy overgrowth. While I was reconning the exterior of the building, the two officers arrived escorting a van delivering four children to the site." I pulled printouts from my back pocket. They were folded lengthwise only, and handed them to Susan in front of me. "Hold these up to the camera. Control room don't change the view. You can zoom in on these later." With my left hand holding Susan's shoulder again, I continued. "The first image shows the children, hooded and bound being brought into the mobile home. The next shows the arrival of the President of the United States and tonight's debate moderator, Cromley."

The group on the floor produced several quiet gasps. "My attempts to upload these images and video were destroyed within minutes. That's how connected they are. I tried to contact, Susan Franim here, and within hours of three attempts, State Troopers Lynch and Mitchel attempted to assassinate me." Susan defiantly stated softly, but loud enough to be heard over the air, "I don't know those officers or anything about an underground facility." Her comment made me smile. "Who said anything about an underground facility?" She remained quiet. Several in the group sitting on the floor produced an understandable look acknowledging the slip. "I stated the children were brought into a mobile home."

I let the slip fester for a few seconds, which had to be agonizing for Susan. "Put those pages on the floor." She promptly dropped them. "I have a memory card in my front right pocket with pictures and video of the mobile home recon. I spent two days scanning the area around each hospital-cemetery pairing. I worked around the clock to locate hundreds of other potential sites. It is this information I was attempting to upload and speak to Susan about. At that time, I was confronted by the officers and managed to turn things around. I was now faced with an

environment wherein the authorities and media could not be trusted."

"I took a chance and presented my findings to a stranger in a gang with national roots. After seeing the videos and pictures, the members of that gang came together over another two days to execute a rescue at all sites. We used tonight's debate to cover the operation. It was the most likely time no hostile force would be present. Further, news media would be delayed in presenting any breaking news during the debate." I removed a small notepad sheet from my front left pocket. It was badly crinkled, so I rubbed it on my thigh to straighten the page out. "Delivered to churches near the target sites during tonight's debate were seventeen hundred thirty-two children. They are in various levels of health, experiencing extensive physical damage. It is difficult to imagine the depth of psychological damage."

"Also recovered from the sites are eighty-one children who are unresponsive. They are completely brain locked. Basically, empty shells." I took a breath to settle my nerves. The tears of several in the group on the floor were affecting me too. "Unfortunately, twenty-two were found dead. The site I reconned four nights ago had seven alive, none locked, and one dead. I asked for stories, descriptions from all site managers as



numeric data was submitted. They are horrific, and comparable to the local site. I want to share that story so you can fully understand the evil living amongst us." I glanced at Susan in front of me, who was hiding her face with one hand.

"Two high school kids were found duct-taped together, forehead to forehead. They were forced to kneel on opposite sides of a standard size bed. Hands tied to opposite corners, their heads wrapped in tape. They were beaten, whipped, and raped in this position so that they would feel the screams of each other in turn. After two days of this abuse, the boy died. The girl was left in this position for nearly two more days. Her captives left a small light on to force her to watch the boy's face slowly decaying."

"I hope the four children I abandoned four nights ago, will someday forgive me. Delaying their rescue resulted in hundreds being saved, even though there was no guarantee that a network like this existed, nor evidence the network would feel threatened by the loss of one site. Had I rescued the four, the boy would be alive today. The girl would not have experienced," my voice choked up. Clearing my throat I continued, "While I was working to locate other sites, these kids were suffering in unthinkable ways, experiencing things that can never be forgotten. In time, I hope they will forgive me."

I changed the topic to Jim's murder. "They made me watch your broadcast of my brother-in-law's house burning. I learned Jim, his wife, and two children were bound and burned alive. They have weaponized the media against us. Using it to try, convict, and hunt me down. Now, they are forced to watch their network exposed." I needed a moment to organize my final thoughts. "Our two party system is playing the best good-cop bad-cop routine in history, dividing us, turning us against each other while they ratchet up their power. Stop rooting for your political team and get back to defending America."

"Take action. Demand prosecution! Recently it was reported Bill Clinton traveled to what is being called sex-island over forty times. While this is being disputed, the existence of the island is not. Is our moral compass so broken that we are not pursuing the closure of that island? Why are we not surrounding that island and saving those children? Is it because it's happening over there? It's happening way over there. Why should America police the world? Well, now you know it is happening here too. Today it is them, but tomorrow it might be you. Who will come to save you, or your child?"

I pulled from my front left pocket the white fragment of bone discovered in Pam's open grave four nights ago. The two rose petals were also

pulled from my pocket inadvertently and tumbled through the air to the floor. "I found this fragment of bone while burying Rose. This was someone's child." I tossed it into the pool of people sitting on the floor. "Figure out who this was. This was somebody's baby." I shook my head slowly a few times. "I want to thank the priests who discovered their tour buses missing. Instead of reporting them stolen, they prayed for their return. It allowed us to insulate the many heroes who raided these sites and save hundreds of children. They are true heroes because they put their lives at risk for others without receiving any recognition for their actions."

"There is only one thing left for me to say. I am the only connection to those heroes. Without me, they cannot be identified. They have families that need to be protected too. You do the right thing, not to receive a prize or to avoid a punishment, but simply because it is the right thing to do."

~~~BOOM~~~ The gun fired. Blood splattered my shirt and jeans as the hollow point round penetrated Susan's back. Scraping the spine the bullet began mushrooming while passing through her heart. By the time it exited near her left hip, the bullet tore away the flesh to create an exit wound the size of a baseball.

The shock cone traveling with the bullet generated a vacuuming effect, removing the left lung from

its place in the chest. Susan's body slumped forward but did not roll off the couch. Without hesitation, I repositioned the gun to the right of my breastbone with thumb on the trigger and left hand guiding it to the correct angle to point at my heart. ~~~BOOM~~~ The sound echoed through the small room. My eyes widened, jaw dropped. The gun slid to the left. Again, my left hand guided it to the correct angle to pass straight through my chest this time. ~~~BOOM~~~ I failed to hold the weapon. It leaped away from my chest as my body began to fall.

My left arm bent. The elbow pulled tight to the body. I reached out with my right, following the weapon. My intent was to grip the couch back near my waist for support, but my hand was reaching out closer to shoulder level. It raised above my body as I fell backward, both knees buckling. Now reaching upward my right hand followed my body, falling backward to the floor. And then, the darkness took me.



## SHOW

Behind the evening news glass desk, a well dressed man with manicured hair sat. Breaking news banners and alerts streamed and flickered on screen below him. "Good Evening, I'm John Bannet in for Phil Rothland, and this is News Watch. With me tonight are Senior Editor of the Daily Reporter Jennifer Savlace, CEO Bythian Oil Bob Weseir, and Syndicated Columnist Robert Trapper. Before we breakdown tonight's presidential debate, we have breaking news coverage of the hostage situation in Lorain, Ohio. Andrew Cardillen from our sister station WJW in Cleveland is on scene for us now with this live,

exclusive report." The broadcast changed to a young male reporter outside the WUAB building in Lorain. "Thank you John. I'm here outside the WUAB building, site of what is being called a hostage-suicide where Stephen Smith accused the President of the United States of child molestation before taking his own life and the life of the Morning Show host, Susan Franim."

He walked slowly to the left providing a panoramic view of the Environment. "Local police, SWAT and federal agents have quartered off the area, keeping everyone out. We have received exclusive privilege to approach the building to capture these images of the main doors. As you can see, Mr. Smith was able to access the building by driving his old Ford F150 through the main entrance. Fire and EMS personnel are helping to clear the building and providing medical assistance to the many victims of this alleged cop killer." He stopped walking as planned, to close his report with the truck visible through the damaged entry behind him. "We are waiting for an announcement by the Chief of Police and other officials within the hour. John, back to you."

The broadcast returned to the anchor desk. Seated along one side of the glass table are two men and a much older woman. "With us now are Jennifer Savlace, Bob Weseir, and Robert

Trapper. Thank you all for being here." John continued speaking with only smiles from his guests as the camera panned across them. "Jennifer, I want to go to you first on this. Our coverage of the presidential debate is being overshadowed by the confession by Mr. Smith. WUAB media was forced to go live with many accusations made by this confirmed cop killer. I want to ask you Jennifer what we can expect from a national news station caving to this man's demand to deliver his confession live, which resulted in the murder of Morning Show host Susan Franim? Have they opened the door to every crazy out there who wants a public stage?"

Jennifer leaned forward with hands folded on the large glass table, showing off her manicured nails and many jeweled rings. "Well, first John, I must say our hearts and prayers go out to the families of the children endangered by this man." "Endangered," the black man next to her objected. "Did we watch the same broadcast?" Jennifer ignored Bob by repeating her statement even louder. "Mr. Smith confessed to abandoning four children, which led to the death of a young boy." "He did not abandon them!" Bob repeated emphatically. "He stated it," Jennifer insisted turning to the man. "As former military," Robert interrupted, "I find his actions deplorable." "He saved the lives of hundreds of kids," Bob quickly

pointed out. "Others rescued those kids four days after Mr. Smith abandoned them," Jennifer reinforced her position. "He is a disgrace to the uniform," Robert added.

Both Jennifer and Robert were shaking their heads slowly while looking at John who now addressed the man between them. "Bob how do you defend the actions of Mr. Smith. A decorated soldier of two terms overseas, leaving those children in, in what amounts to a sex dungeon?" Bob commented but was pounced on by the two other guests. "I don't know how you can sit there and villainize this man." Immediately, Robert defended his character. "How can you support a known cop killer confessing to abandoning children?" Jennifer tried to remain calm but was noticeably shaken by the breaking news. Her voice trembled slightly but was full of venom for the other guest. Her comment was inaudible under the loud response by Robert.

"He had no choice," Bob began to explain, but was interrupted by Robert again, showing anger in his words and body language. "What animal would abandon children?" However, Bob realized what both guests were doing and called them out on it. "Clearly abandoning children is the talking point to deflect attention away from the President." The conversation devolved quickly into all three guests shouting over each other. By



the time the show's moderator got things under control, the computer cut them off for commercial messages. However, even these were cut short by news alert banners reporting fires breaking out across the nation. The broadcast quickly returned and centered on John Bannet again, "We are receiving reports of fire departments responding to house fires across the nation along with local police being dispatched. Reports are coming in of multiple dead bodies at each location being discovered. We are sending you back to Andrew Cardillen from our sister station WJW who is on scene at one of these fires in the Cleveland area."

"Thank you John. This is Andrew Cardillen of WJW reporting on scene outside the city limits of Elyria near the small town of Eaton. Police and firemen are on scene. As you can see, the fire that engulfed this mobile home has been put out, leaving a burnt out, smoking husk of what was. Firemen can be seen entering a charred concrete structure within the destroyed mobile home. I received exclusive information this concrete structure leads down to an underground bunker." "Move back," police warned while dispensing thick yellow tape between vehicles to fence off the area.

"John, we are being told to move back to the narrow entrance through the thick brush and trees that leads to this clearing. There are at least

three found dead on scene. You can still see them on the ground outside the building. Two are wearing maintenance uniforms from Elyria Memorial Hospital. The other looks to be a local police officer, possibly the Chief of Police here in the small town of Eaton." Andrew moved to his left with the camera following him. "I have with me Brooke Bergway. She lives in a small home across the street, neighboring the property. Brooke you called the police after hearing gunfire?" Brooke was an older woman, very thin and fragile. "Yes," she responded nervously. "Tell us what you saw," Andrew urged.

With a cigarette burning in one hand, and her pink cellphone and half empty cigarette pack in the other, she replied quietly. "I was outside on my front porch when a loud series of explosions broke out across the street." "From this location," Andrew sought clarification. "Right. It was three distinct pops, but very tight, close together. I went inside to get my phone and then heard another much larger explosion. When I got back outside, the fire could be seen over the trees. I called the fire department and walked here to see." "You were the first person on scene then?" Andrew pressed. "Right. I saw three men there," she pointed with her cigarette in hand. "The van was parked there and the police car there." "In the same locations they are now?" Andrew looked

for confirmation. "Right. Just as they are. The fire department was the first to arrive, and then police told me to wait here."

Andrew stepped away from the woman, moving right to bring more of the mobile home into view. "John. Other neighbors reported seeing the massive fireball emanating from this area. It was preceded by what looks to be a gun battle between these three men. This is Andrew Cardillen for WJW on scene in Eaton, Ohio." He stood there waiting for a response or a signal from his cameraman. "Andrew," John reacted to his report. "When we last left you, you were in Lorain outside the WUAB building." "Yes John," Andrew responded quickly anticipating the question. "The Lorain hostage location is about fifteen minutes from the town of Eaton. We got word of the fire just after signing off with you earlier. It began shortly before our broadcast. Then upon the discovery of the underground bunker, it became linked to the Lorain hostage incident."

"Andrew," John pressed for more detail. "What can you tell us about the underground structure? Have you entered the bunker?" Andrew looked down at his notes briefly while John was speaking. "No John, but I was able to speak with a fireman before police pushed us back. He described the structure as an old bomb shelter with several rooms off a central shaft. The police

are not providing any more details. Forensic investigators arrived on scene moments ago along with FBI agents." "Thank you Andrew. We'll get back to you. Stay safe out there." John held his hand up to his ear. "We are receiving more reports of similar underground structures found at mobile home fires across the nation, now numbering at least one hundred locations. We are going out to Dana Cookman in Stafford, Virginia."

"Thank you John," Dana responded. "Reports came in from neighbors of multiple gunshots followed by a massive fireball as witnesses are calling it. You can see the condition of the mobile home. It is completely burnt out revealing a heavily charred concrete bunker. When fire fighters and police arrived on scene, the home was fully engulfed. Searching for any inhabitants of the mobile home was not possible. Since then fire fighters emerged deeply concerned, their words." She motioned to the police tape surrounding the area. "Police have moved everyone back to the main entrance of this heavily wooded area."

"Outside the mobile home were two vehicles when the police and fire department vehicles showed up. You can see them there, a dark van and this state police vehicle. As you can see, each vehicle is peppered with bullet holes. To each side of the vehicles were three men and one woman shot

dead. They were removed from the scene just moments ago." The video feed switched to a recording of the bodies being bagged and carried to a police SUV. "Local Police Officer Jessica Havajer suggested they were ambushed here. All four victims were shot as soon as they all left the safety of the vehicles and approached the mobile home."

"Clear the area!" a police officer aggressively approached Dana from the left, eventually blocking the cameraman's shot of the mobile home and activity therein. "Move your vehicle back to the road." Dana began walking towards the news van parked near the entrance to the clearing. "I'm sorry John. We are being pushed back to the road by local police. We heard earlier FBI forensic teams were in route." Dana was now walking backwards and stopped by the side of the van. "It was suggested this could be one of the sites mentioned by the hostage taker Stephen Smith." The camera feed suddenly dropped, showing the grass around their feet. "Move off the property now!"

The broadcast returned to John Bannet seated at the end of a large curved glass table with his three guests along its side. "That was Dana Cookman in Stafford, Virginia. The number of reported fires at similar structures are numbering nearly two hundred, and in every State. Information is also

coming in of Republican Congresswoman Kate Coswin from Texas preparing an Emergency Action Committee regarding the earlier murder-suicide being broadcast on national television. We expect her to give a statement outside the Capitol Building any minute. Jennifer what do you think of Congress getting involved in a police matter? Shouldn't they leave that to the local authorities?"

Jennifer leaned on the glass table with her hands folded in front of her. All smiles and slightly shaking her head, she responded. "There they go again, recklessly assigning blame." "How can you say that?" Bob interrupted again, clearly frustrated by other off camera comments made by Jennifer and Robert. "You don't even know what she is going to say." "Republicans are always exaggerating issues to distract the public from the President's many accomplishments," Jennifer fired back. "How many times must we re-litigate Benghazi or the border issues." "Re-litigate?" Bob looked shocked at the term. "Committee after committee are being stonewalled by this Administration." Jennifer tried to cut in, but Bob would not yield. "The Attorney General is the problem. Both of these clowns are preventing justice from..." Robert interrupted, "Clowns? Are you calling the President of the United States and the Attorney General clowns? This is why nobody

takes you Republicans seriously." "The name calling has to stop," Jennifer stated with head held high.

John was able to break in, "I apologize to our guests. Congresswoman Kate Coswin has stepped up to the microphones outside the Capitol Building to address the murder-suicide broadcast nationally that took place earlier this evening." He blathered on, while the congresswoman had already begun addressing the small crowd of reporters. "Let's listen in."

"Two hours ago the nation learned about a series of criminal, systemic operations occurring across the United States." She paused to wipe hair out of her face and adjusted her position in front of the microphones to deal with the light breeze. "While the media is focusing on the murder-suicide that was broadcast live, a truly horrible pair of events, the FBI retrieved the memory stamp from Stephen Smith's body. It contained images. Maps of the United States locating the two hundred twenty sites currently being investigated across the United States and Canada. Further, a file contained information as to how the sites were identified and concerns that these activities could be happening globally and also within cities."

The wind picked up and she took a moment to brush the hair from her face again. "Because of

the obstruction exhibited by the White House on many critical issues that remain active and the accusations made by Mr. Smith, the House is compelled to waste no time and form a Select Committee. Images and video on the memory stamp identify several government officials and workers. The videos and images appear authentic. The urgency of the discoveries require swift action. Two Democrat Congressmen have agreed to be on the committee. I was hoping to have more bipartisan effort investigating this matter."

"A Bill is also being drafted to allow for the emergency inspection of the grave sites listed on the memory stamp. There are three graveyard image maps showing hot-spots," she made quick quotation mark signs with her hands. "This means exhuming graves to discover the cause of those hot-spots. The committee will also be investigating hospitals using these funeral parlors as temporary morgues. We have three important, overlapping investigations. One dealing with radioactive and other medical waste disposal. Another dealing with a body parts black market. And, another concerning underground shelters being used for human trafficking involving young children. The committee will move as quickly as possible to resolve these issues. Thank you." She did not wait to take questions. The



congresswoman turned and re-entered the Capitol Building.

"Leave it to Republicans to react foolishly," Robert commented to Bob not realizing they were live. "Welcome back to our audience on this busy night," John Bannet greeted. "We still have the Presidential debate to discuss with our three member guest panel. However, it is being overshadowed by a murder-suicide in Lorain, Ohio." "You keep wanting to go back to that," Bob injected. "But this man, Stephen Smith is a hero." "A hero!" Jennifer and Robert both blurted out. "Yes," Bob reasserted. "A hero. This one man organized an amazing rescue." "Alleged activity," Jennifer corrected him. "He murdered a news anchor on live television," Robert reminded everybody. Bob just continued his statement talking through the attempted deflections, "All the while being hunted for crimes he may have not committed."

"May have not committed," Jennifer threw her hands up. "He shot Susan Franim on live television!" "I'm talking about the two State Police officers," Bob clarified. "At least Congress is acting quickly on something," John laughed. "Finally," Robert agreed in a joking manner. "You all can laugh," Bob looked disgusted. "But the one comment made by Mr. Smith that everyone is ignoring regards former President Clinton visiting

what is being called sex-island over forty times." "That is a revolting accusation," Jennifer remarked. "I cannot believe you would repeat that obvious attack on a great man."

"It's not the accusation," Bob tried to explain. "Ex-president Clinton does so much good around the world through his foundation," John asserted. "The accusation can be debated or investigated," Bob tried to drive the topic. "This is just a backhanded attack against Hillary by the Republicans," Jennifer noted. "You are all missing the point," Bob enforced. "Nobody is disputing the existence of the island!" They all remained quiet letting Bob continue, after taking a deep breath to calm himself down. "Why aren't U.S. forces surrounding that island to shut it down? Why aren't world governments joining that effort? If there was ever a moment for the U.N. to step up, this is it."

"I'm getting word, more breaking news in this heated news night," John updated the audience. "Protesters are gathering around city halls near the locations of the mobile home fires. There are even other citizens in these townships and cities marching on the cemetery in Grafton, the burial location of Pamela Smith Reading, the wife of Stephen Smith. Some members in the crowd are carrying shovels and even pickaxes, vowing to dig up graves to verify the wild accusations of the cop

killer, Smith. We are leaving once again to go on scene," John paused as the control room spoke to him through his ear piece. "We are going back to Andrew Cardillen in Grafton covering the murder-suicide of Mr. Stephen Smith."

"Thank you John. This is Andrew Cardillen of WJW outside the small town of Grafton where local residents are gathering in the Grafton Devotion Cemetery threatening to dig up the grave of Pamela Smith Reading, the wife of Stephen Smith who was killed in the Olmsted Falls train derailment. Local police are on scene, and at the moment the protesters are only voicing their objections to the alleged activity conducted at the cemetery." Andrew held his right ear for a moment before returning to the camera. "John. I'm getting word from your control room that Democrat Senator Ted Riondel from Arizona will be addressing the public at the other end of the Capitol Building. This is Andrew," his closing was cut off.

Numerous reporters gathered for the Democrat Senator's response. Inside the small Senate rotunda, a podium was set up with several microphones attached, each labeled for the various news organizations present. A man worked intently checking the wires and making sure all microphones were working. From the opposite end of the chamber Democrat Senator

Ted Riondel appeared. He confidently walked around the balcony opening in the center of the chamber, bordered by several large regal columns. Followed by several staffers, he made his way to the microphone podium and addressed the reporters there.

"Moments ago we heard a reckless speech by Congresswomen Coswin. The sole purpose of which is to stir up the Republican base in the coming election. While the actions of Mr. Stephen Smith are horrific, we must wait for all the evidence to come out before drawing rash conclusions. Establishing a Select Committee hours after a murder-suicide and accusing the President of the United States of things that should not be repeated, is unconscionable! Congresswomen Coswin and Presidential candidate Megan Holgers are nothing more than grave robbers." The well dressed and distinguished old man pointed at the cameras. "That's what the Republicans want to do. Dig up our loved ones laid to rest in the nation's cemeteries. Democrats in the Senate are prepared to filibuster the Republican backed Bill designed to desecrate the resting place of our families, our children!" After a short pause the Congressman concluded, "These insidious attacks against the American people by the Republican party cannot,

will not be allowed to continue." He turned and proudly walked back to the Senate Chambers.

"Wow," John declared. "Before we get to all the peaceful protests going on across the country, I would like to get the reaction by our guest panel to the comments made by Senator Riondel." Jennifer was first to reply in a very calm and even tone. "The Senator is clearly upset by the overreach of the Republican controlled House. Digging up graves? Is that really what the Republican Party has become, a bunch of grave robbers?" Robert was next to pile on, "Defiling the dead is not the answer. Buried throughout the country are true heroes; firemen, police officers who gave their lives to save others. Military and family members should not be treated with such contempt. Rest in Peace should mean something." The emotion in Robert's voice could be felt in his carefully chosen words.

Bob was sitting tall in his chair, hands pressing on the table edge. He took a deep breath before calling out the other panel members. "It looks like Senator Pavlov rung the gravedigger's bell." Both gasped and presented outraged looks back at Bob. "It is amazing how quickly a talking point can be inserted into the discussion. We went from abandoning children to grave robbers in under three seconds. That has to be some kind of Republican bashing record." Jennifer asked,

"How can you sit there and condone the exhumation of graves?" Robert began to speak but was cut off by John. "I apologize to our guests, but we have breaking news from Ferguson, Missouri. This was the location of the Brown shooting last year. Alison Myerton is on scene for us."

"Yes John," the youthful lady responded. "This is Alison Myerton for WYFX in Ferguson, Missouri. We are showing you the Ferguson Walmart. Its front doors and windows smashed. Dozens of looters are steadily streaming into the store. What began as a protest against City Hall quickly turned into the all out riot that you can see here. Two police vehicles were overturned and set on fire. During the protest march, many chanted that now famous line — hands up don't shoot. But I think they should adopt the more appropriate — hands down don't loot." "Get that camera out of my face," a hefty young black man ordered. He dwarfed Alison, and continued to charge the cameraman, knocking the camera aside. The video feed froze on an image of the side of the Walmart building looking down at the concrete walkway. Higher up in the still image, Alison's blurred legs could be seen bent, suggesting she was also knocked aside in the assault. The news broadcast returned to John behind the large glass desk. "We appear to be having technical

difficulties with the feed from Ferguson. We'll have more from our guests after these short messages."

Throughout the night pundits dug in, protecting political interests. Arguments raged on with stations presenting exclusive video coverage of the hostage scene and the many homes set on fire soon after. Many in the local communities began to assemble outside city hall buildings demanding answers. As the protester numbers grew, police, dressed in full riot gear, were deployed in front of public facilities. Soon after, protesters turned to local businesses in underprivileged areas. Store managers attempted to close security gates. Many were not successful. Protesters streamed into breach points and looting became rampant.

The disorder raged throughout the night. The morning show of station WUAB, location of the hostage event the night before went on the air at its regular scheduled time. "Good morning and thank you for waking up with us this morning. We have continued coverage of reaction to the hostage event that took place in this very room last evening after the Presidential debate. First, it is with great sadness Susan Franim was taken from us last night. Our hearts and prayers go out to her family members." The black cohost from the night before, now centered on a new curved couch, began the show.



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# Cemeteries

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# White Rose

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