

Yesterdays

By Ethan Yen

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First Edition

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Disclaimer: While I do draw inspiration for some parts of the story from real life, the story and characters in no way represent actual people in my life.

Writing is my way of dealing with the big questions in life, but that does not mean everything I write reflects my personal views. Characters may be similar to people I know, but they are not those people.

Besides, would you believe me if I told you I met a spy?

In honor of Scott Schanke
Who proved that there are many forms of strength and courage
Who taught me that the loudest voice
in the room is not the most powerful
Who is, and always will be,
My friend

Chapter 1

Nathan, like so many other people, had certain expectations whenever he walked outside and interacted with society. For instance, when he went to get his morning cup of coffee, he expected that no one would come over and take that cup of coffee from him, because he paid for it. Alternatively, when he walked onto the plane that morning, he expected that the seat on his ticket, 6A, would be open for him. It was also why, when Nathan carried the funeral urn under his arm, he expected – but did not appreciate – the stares of inquisition and curiosity by those that walked by, followed by looks of surprised embarrassment, sadness, or attempted empathy. It was why Nathan was expected to give a solemn “thank you” or “much appreciated” to every unnecessary apology or condolence given once a person realized the situation. It was expected of him. These were not unreasonable expectations, they were expectations that everyone held, because if they did not, civilization would simply collapse. For instance, the taxi driver expected that when the trip was finished, Nathan was going to pay him the agreed amount of money, or else the taxi driver would have no way of providing for his family. Nathan understood these expectations, and never expected more than he expected of himself. He did not feel entitled to special privileges, he simply believed strongly in the so called “Golden Rule” – do unto others as you would have done unto yourself.

Which is why, when the man opened the front passenger side door of the taxi Nathan occupied and sat himself down with his suitcase, Nathan was both expectedly surprised, and a little bit peeved.

“What are you doing? This taxi is occupied!” Nathan closed his mouth slowly. The taxi driver had managed to speak the words first, and with more anger, breaking the silence that had lasted since the airport.

“Relax, I’m with the C.I.A., I just need you to drive.” The man said in an even tone, although Nathan detected slight labored breathing. Nathan realized that the man had probably been running, which explained why Nathan had not noticed the man coming up to the taxi, and why the man was drenched in sweat.

“What? C.I.A.? You expected me to believe that?” The taxi driver said incredulously, “Get out of my taxi!”

The man sighed, and swiftly reached into his inside jacket pocket, pulling out a leather badge wallet and flipping it open, revealing some sort of identification. Nathan did not get a good view of it, but he assumed its authenticity by the look on the taxi driver’s face.

“Now can you please drive? The light is about to turn green.” The man asked again, this time looking back over his shoulder and through the window, as if looking for someone outside. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of Nathan in the backseat, staring somewhat cautiously at him.

“Oh, sorry about this, good sir,” The man said, flashing a smile, “I expect this must be quite the surprise.” Nathan simply nodded, too dumbstruck to reply. He was still trying to process what was going on. The man appeared to be in his middle ages, ruggedly handsome with slightly graying hair. He wore a typical black business suit, slightly damp with sweat around the collar. Nathan could not help but feel even more suspicious and anxious after the man flashed the smile. The man shifted his gaze from Nathan, to out the back window, and then lingered ever so slightly at the urn resting by Nathan’s arm. He raised a slight eyebrow, and then shifted back to face the front.

“Where to?” The taxi driver grumbled, clearly upset that his daily routine was being interrupted by either a madman, or a government-trained madman.

“Oh, nowhere in particular, I just need you to drive. You can keep going to where you were headed.” The man said, attempting to calm his breathing down. He reached into his pocket and checked the time on his smart phone. Nathan could still see the man’s eyes darting out the side window and mirror.

“You running away from something?” The driver said, noticing the man’s jittery nature, “I’m not in any danger am I?”

“No, of course not,” The man said, still looking out the window. His hands grasped the suitcase in his lap a little tighter, “could you speed it up a bit, sir?”

“Hey, I’m no stunt driver!” The taxi driver said, “I’m not risking any car crashes, you think I want to get myself killed? I’m going the speed limit.” The taxi driver was taking this situation quite smoothly. He was clearly angered and annoyed, but there was no fear. Nathan wondered if the driver was used to strange situations that occurred in the largest city in the U.S. Nathan on the other hand, remained quiet, simply observing the two men as they conversed in front of him, not quite sure how to react. Should he say something? What? This was a situation Nathan did not expect, and one in which he did not know what was expected of him.

“Of course, you should be commended for your citizenship.” The man replied. Nathan could not tell if the man was giving a complement, or just patronizing the taxi driver. “Red light up ahead.” He warned.

The taxi driver stepped on the brake, a little harder than intended, sending the taxi lurching forward. The taxi fell silent as all three men waited impatiently for the light to turn green. The man once again looked over his shoulder, scanning the nearby sidewalk. Nathan slowly turned as well, attempting to follow the man’s gaze and see what the man was trying to see. Nathan could not spot anything out of the ordinary. It was still early in the day. Businessmen and women were walking on the sidewalks, heading to work. Nathan was quite sure this was what a typical New York City morning looked like, excluding the events taking place in the taxi.

Something caught the man’s attention, he squinted, and then an expression of surprise crossed his face. Slowly, he turned around once again, noticing that the light was still red.

“Actually, I think I’ll take my leave here,” The man said, “Thank you for the brief ride,” He opened the door and got out, turning around to retrieve his suitcase. He bent his head back inside the car and looked over at Nathan.

“Sorry for the disturbance this morning, hopefully you won’t see me ever again. Good day.” He shut the door promptly and headed towards the corner sidewalk, where a mass of people were waiting for the cross traffic to stop. Ignoring the mutterings of cursing under the taxi driver’s breath, Nathan watched through the window as the man walked briskly to the corner, still looking back the way he just came. The light was still red.

Contrary to popular belief, the term “jaywalking” did not originate from the letter “J” – the shape of the path that a pedestrian would take when crossing the street at an unmarked intersection or time. The term is actually a compound word, containing the somewhat derogatory word “jay,” meaning an inexperienced, rural person, and “walking,” the act of moving the legs in order to propel oneself forward. Interestingly enough, the term “jay” was used in the early 20th century Midwest – the area of the country where Nathan hailed. “Jay” would probably best describe Nathan in New York City, as this was his first time here, but it would be regarded as an inaccurate description of a jaywalker. In fact, as many would attest, jaywalking is not an easy skill to attain, and should, by no means, be practiced by a naïve person such as a “jay.” Nathan never jaywalked, not because he did not have the intelligence, wit or speed to guarantee his survival, but because he believed there was a certain expectation held when the DO NOT

CROSS sign was lit. Cars expected a clear road, and pedestrians were expected to wait their turn. It was a system that guaranteed the safety of both parties involved.

Which is why, when Nathan saw the man notice the crossing traffic light turning from green to yellow, combined with the obvious fact that the man was in a hurry, Nathan knew that nothing good was about to happen. It was a simple cost-benefit analysis. Is the chance of gaining a few seconds worth the risk of crossing the street early? The man certainly thought so. He expected that the yellow light would mean no more cars would attempt to cross the intersection.

His expectation was wrong.

Nathan had seen a few car-pedestrian crashes on television and in the movies, but he never realized just how life-like those depictions were. A blur of metal and screeching tires streaked by Nathan's vision, followed by the sounds of a muffled thump and crunch of metal denting. The car had managed to hit the brakes early, but was still going fast enough to collide with the man's side, the front bumper knocking into the man's legs and shoveling him upward and over the hood of the car. The man's suitcase flew in a slow-motion arc in the air, landing a few feet away. Nathan watched as the man's body rolled up and then back down, landing limply on the ground in front of the now motionless car. There were a few gasps and shouts of surprise at the sight. Nathan blinked. He was not sure that it had actually happened, but the cracked windshield and the body-sized dent confirmed the accident.

After a moment's hesitation, Nathan wordlessly and swiftly got out of the car, leaving the urn in the backseat.

"Hey!" The taxi driver shouted, "What do you think you're doing?"

Without thinking, Nathan ran up to the scene of the accident, reaching the man just as a crowd was beginning to form. He kneeled down to check if the man was all right. The man lay crumpled on his side, his body resting on what looked clearly like a broken arm. Blood was rolling down the man's forehead, a clump of red congealing near the temple. Nathan had taken a first-aid class when he was still in college, but he had forgotten most of it. He did know that he should not move the man, for fear of aggravating any injuries – internal or external.

"Are you ok?" Nathan said, finally speaking up. He gently nudged the man's shoulder. "Can you hear me?"

There was no response, and for a moment, Nathan was afraid that the man was dead. He swallowed, a familiar feeling rising up from inside him. It had been only recently since he looked upon a face so close to death. He felt a pang in his chest, slightly numbed by sheer shock.

Nathan glanced upwards as the car door opened and the driver got out, clearly shaken. He looked wide-eyed over the front of his car and saw Nathan kneeling over the body. The driver was just an ordinary man, trying to get to work like everyone else. Nathan briefly wondered how many people were experiencing an unusual day today.

"Wha-" the driver said, as he looked down, clearly confused. Then, realizing what he had done, he stepped back dumbfounded, pulling his hair.

"Oh my God," he mumbled, and then repeating himself louder, "Oh my God, what have I done?"

By now the police sirens were growing louder. A large crowd had grown around the site, filled with the very same businessmen and women Nathan had seen earlier, trying to get to work. Nathan was not sure what to do with himself. He nudged the man again and received no response. He then looked up at the driver, who was still delirious. He was biting his fingernails on one hand, and holding his hair back with another. Nathan barely heard it, but the man was

muttering something from behind his fingers, his eyes swiveling frantically around, looking at the mass of people who had witnessed his crime. His face was pale, as if he had just seen a ghost.

“Martha...Martha...” the man said.

The sirens had stopped and Nathan could hear the sounds of policemen shouting out orders from behind the wall of people. Finally, help was coming. A sudden realization hit him, Nathan remembered the next step from his first-aid class. Taking two fingers, he placed them under the jawline of the man, feeling for a pulse. Nathan waited, trying to slow his own pulse down so he could detect anything from the unconscious man. It was there. It was faint, but Nathan could detect a slight pulse. Just as he was about to turn around and call out that the man was still alive, he felt a hand grip his shoulder. There was an audible gasp from the crowd as the man regained consciousness and took in a deep, hoarse breath, raising his good arm towards Nathan. Nathan would have breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the man still alive, but he was too preoccupied by the man’s vice-like grip. The man whispered something weakly. Nathan bent his head closer.

“What?”

“Suitcase...” The man said hoarsely, limply motioning behind Nathan. “Suitcase...my suitcase...” And with that, his eyes rolled back into his head and he lost consciousness. Nathan turned his head and looked towards where the man was pointing, searching for the suitcase. He could not spot it at first, as the dark leather suitcase camouflaged neatly among the mass of black slacks and shadows. Thankfully, the calls of the policemen as they arrived separated the crowd, creating an alleyway for the officers to run towards the center of the scene, followed by two paramedics.

“Step back!” One of the officers shouted, waving his arms frantically in the air.

Once the crowd separated, Nathan spotted the suitcase, and made his way towards it.

But just as he did so, Nathan noticed a gloved hand reaching down from among the crowd and grasp the suitcase. His gaze followed the slender arm up and saw that it was a woman, dressed in a dark red trench coat and wearing a wide-brimmed hat of similar shade and sunglasses. She discreetly hid the suitcase behind her, looking around to make sure no one noticed. Her gaze met Nathan’s for an instant, and he immediately knew that he had been spotted. The woman adjusted her sunglasses nonchalantly, as if she did not register that Nathan had spotted her.

“Is he all right?” Nathan turned, and he realized that one of the policemen was addressing him.

“Huh? Uh, I think so. He was just awake a moment ago, but his arm looks broken,” Nathan said, turning his head away from the woman for a brief moment. It appeared that that was all the time she needed to slip away, because when Nathan turned his head back around as the policeman motioned for the paramedics to approach, the woman had disappeared. Frantic, Nathan stood up and scanned the crowd, searching for the dark red hat that would give away the woman’s position. Despite how hard he was looking, Nathan was not the first one to spot the woman.

“Martha?” The driver behind Nathan said softly, then once more, “Martha? Is that you?” He called out. Nathan followed the man’s gaze, and he realized that the driver was calling out to the woman. She had managed to slip behind the crowd and was a few feet away on the now clear sidewalk. She turned her head at the driver’s call, and Nathan met her gaze once more. She quickly turned around and began briskly walking away from the scene, one hand grasping the suitcase.

“Martha? It’s me, Martha!” The driver called out again, louder and more hysterically, as if he was becoming delirious. He made a movement to go after her, but as he did so, the police came up and restrained him, thinking that he was attempting to flee the scene of the crime.

“No!” The man cried out, struggling against the officers, “Martha! I’m sorry! Martha, can you hear me!” Nathan watched as the woman continued walking. He knew he had to make a choice: stay here, or go after the man’s suitcase.

“Hey, you! Wait!” The policeman who had first addressed Nathan called out. As all the officers were either restraining the driver or containing the crowd and the paramedics were busy caring for the injured man, no one was able to keep Nathan from running after the woman.

He sped past the onlookers, sprinting towards the woman, who by now realized that she was being chased. She gave up any semblance of acting normally and she too, began sprinting down the street, her hat blowing off her dark-haired head.

“Thief!” Nathan called out desperately while he ran, “Someone stop her!” Anyone who was still walking on the street only turned and watched as Nathan called out and the woman ran past. They were either too confused to react, or too absorbed in their own lives to intervene. Nathan gulped down some air, forcing himself to swallow as he continued sprinting. His legs were still sore from the plane ride, and he was certainly not as fit as he would have liked to be. Nevertheless, Nathan pushed through, ignoring the sharp pain in his lungs at the sudden physical activity. He had to keep the woman in his sights, and although she did not look like it, she was running quite quickly.

As Nathan chased her, he began to second-guess his decision. What was he doing? He was chasing after some woman who had stolen a man’s suitcase. A man – Nathan reminded himself – who had attempted to hijack his taxi ride. Well, it technically was not a hijack; the man had been quite nice about the whole issue, which was probably more worrying. Nathan was expecting this trip to be solemn, slow, and somewhat depressing. He was getting the exact opposite.

Nathan blinked, hesitating for a fraction of a second and nearly losing his footing on the concrete as he realized that he had left the urn in the backseat of the taxi. He sincerely hoped that the taxi driver noticed and stayed at the scene until Nathan returned. Nathan cursed himself softly for forgetting the urn, it was the whole purpose of his trip to New York City. How could he have forgotten it so easily, especially considering how much it meant to him, and everyone he knew. But, he consoled himself, there was no way he could be running with an urn under his arm. Perhaps it was best that he left it in the taxi.

The woman turned a corner and Nathan followed. She did not show any sign of slowing down and Nathan was beginning to wonder if he had bitten off more than he could chew. He had no idea where he was going, and he was far too busy concentrating on not losing sight of the woman to pay attention to any landmarks that could direct him back to the site of the accident and his taxi. Even if he did manage to catch up to the woman, what was he going to do?

Nathan did not have time to figure out a plan. He followed the woman into an alley between two buildings and stopped abruptly; the woman had stopped just a few feet away. The alleyway ended a few yards ahead, blocked by a tall, iron fence. The woman was trapped. Nathan huffed, trying to regain his breath and composure. He had her cornered.

“Damn,” the woman said, still facing the fence, “took the wrong turn.”

“Give up the suitcase,” Nathan said, albeit more breathlessly than he intended. He tried to stand up straight and strike an imposing figure, but the run was starting to get to his head, and he could feel himself feeling light-headed and fatigued.

The woman turned around and faced Nathan. Her sunglasses were large and round, taking up the majority of her face and her dark hair was tied back in a ponytail. Her expression was cold and emotionless. The way the woman postured herself, both aggressively and calmly, caused Nathan to falter in his line of thought. He could not tell where she was looking behind the lenses, but Nathan was suddenly overcome with the feeling that he had definitely bit off more than he could chew.

“Why are you following me?” The woman said, her tone of voice harsh and demanding. She was not asking out of courtesy. Nathan swallowed. This was definitely not a good idea.

“You stole that man’s suitcase. I’m here to get it back.” Nathan took a step forward, reaching out his hand to take the suitcase. The woman stepped back, taking a defensive posture, shielding the suitcase behind the rest of her body.

“It’s not his suitcase. Now leave, this is none of your business.” That should have been Nathan’s clue to leave, but instead he took another step forward. He knew something was wrong with this situation, but he could not quite place it. It could very well be the fact that he was *in* this position. This was his first time confronting a criminal, he was not sure how best to approach the situation. It was clear that the woman was not going to give up the suitcase freely. She made no movement, her cold, blank stare penetrating Nathan’s soul, as if expecting him to turn around and leave. Nathan felt paralyzed, unsure as to how to proceed. The two figures stood face to face, only a couple feet apart. Only one of them appeared to know what he or she was doing.

“Look, Martha is it?” Nathan said, making one last attempt at appealing to the woman’s sense of reason. The woman made no reaction to the name, and Nathan thought that perhaps the driver at the scene of the accident had in fact, mistaken her for someone else.

“Whoever you are,” Nathan continued, holding up his hands to show that he was not going to try anything, “I don’t want any trouble.”

“Then leave.” The woman responded quickly, in her stern, annoyed tone. Nathan shut up, clearly at a loss as to how to proceed. When it was clear that Nathan was not going to leave – either out of courage or out of fear – the woman swiftly turned around and began walking down the alleyway, towards the fence.

“Hey, wait!” Nathan said, finally regaining control of his body. He took a step and reached out to grab the woman’s shoulder as she walked away. But as Nathan’s hand came down, instead of landing on the shoulder, it met air. The woman’s shoulder had disappeared and before Nathan could register what had happened, he felt something hard connect with the side of his face, sending his head dropping to the ground, followed by the rest of his body. Nathan looked up from the floor, his vision blurry and his head still ringing from the impact with the concrete. The woman was standing over him, the suitcase right above his arm. Nathan made a vain attempt to grab the suitcase, draping his arm over the suitcase. The woman stepped back with the suitcase and Nathan closed his eyes, prepared for the worst.

“Sorry about this,” The woman said grimly, “But you really shouldn’t be messing in other people’s business. You are in way above your head, kid.”

Just as Nathan was expecting his relatively short life to end, he heard a shout from the entrance of the alleyway.

“Freeze! Police!” Nathan groaned slightly as he turned his head. It was the police officer who had called out to him at the scene of the crime. Evidently, he had followed Nathan after Nathan had taken off in pursuit of the woman. He was pointing a gun at the woman, but his hand was trembling. It was clear by his build that the man was not suited for running, and it had been awhile since he had actually had to take out his weapon.

“Drop the suitcase and step away from the man, ma’am.” The policeman said, his voice wavering ever so slightly. Nathan looked up and saw the woman step back hesitantly, as if debating whether to make a run for it or not. After what seemed like the five longest seconds of Nathan’s life, the woman dropped the suitcase and raised her hands in the air in surrender. The officer let out a sigh of relief and put his gun down, which immediately signaled for the woman to turn and run.

“Hey! Stop!” the policeman called, but to no avail. The woman sprinted down the alleyway. Nathan was confused, with the fence blocking her path, where was she going to go? The woman answered Nathan’s internal question by jumping up against the side of one of the buildings and propelling herself upwards. In one smooth and elegant motion, the woman grasped the top of the fence with her hands and preformed an acrobatic flip over the fence. Nathan blinked, unsure as to what he had just seen. He shook his head slightly and struggled to prop himself up, watching the woman in red disappear from sight. He groaned as he felt a pulse in his head, a large bump was forming on the side of his head. He heard the footsteps of the officer approach.

“You okay sir? It looked like she gave you a nasty kick in the head.” The officer bent down and helped Nathan up. Nathan nodded, too bewildered to give a verbal response. He dusted himself off and placed his palm up to the bump. He cringed as it stung.

“Well, at least we got the suitcase back.” The officer commented, giving Nathan a pat on the shoulder as he bent down and picked up the suitcase, “You did a good thing sir.”

Nathan turned and looked down the alleyway where the woman had disappeared. He removed his hand from the injury, seeing the blood on his palm.

“I certainly hope so.” Nathan said softly, grimacing.

Chapter 2

Despite Nathan’s insistence that he was all right, the police officer who had found him insisted that Nathan be sent to the hospital to make sure he had not received a concussion or some other injury from the woman’s kick. Looking back, Nathan had to admit the process went a lot smoother than he would have imagined. The police drove Nathan to the hospital, and Nathan realized that his health insurance did indeed cover the stitches on his head, even if it was out-of-state. He tried to ignore thinking about how his family and friends would react to the news. He supposed his friends would probably view him as some sort of hero, even more than they already did. His parents on the other hand...well, perhaps he probably should not tell them. To his parents, stopping a theft was just as bad as committing one. This was supposed to be a simple trip, there were not supposed to be any surprises.

After the stitches, two police officers who had been at the scene stopped by Nathan’s room to ask him a few questions regarding the accident. At the sight of one of the officers carrying Nathan’s urn, Nathan let out a sigh of relief. He had almost forgotten about the urn, and he was glad to see it safe and sound. He did not want to think about how much trouble he would be in if anything happened to the urn. After seeing Nathan take off from the taxi, the taxi driver realized that the urn was still in the backseat. Probably more out of superstition than kindness, the taxi driver had stayed at the scene of the accident, waiting for Nathan. When it was clear that he was not going to show, the man had the police take the urn, telling them to give it to Nathan.

Nathan could tell that the police officers were a little confused and curious as to why he was carrying an urn around. But either out of courtesy, respect or professionalism, the officers stifled their curiosity and simply handed over the urn silently. Nathan accepted the urn in similar silence, glad to end the awkward exchange by quickly referring back to the police's questions.

Nathan explained what he saw, from the man being hit by the car, to chasing the mysterious woman who stole the suitcase. The officers did not seem suspicious as he stumbled through the story. Given the man's current condition, Nathan decided it was best to leave out the part where the man tried hijacking Nathan's taxi ride. There really was no harm in what the man did, and Nathan was feeling a little sorry for the man.

The police thanked Nathan for his account, and once again complimented him on his bravery and citizenship. Nathan only nodded at the compliment. He certainly did not feel heroic. Upon Nathan's request, the Police explained that the driver who had hit the man was being held down at the precinct. The man was delirious, claiming to have seen a ghost. The police were under the suspicion that the man was under the influence of some sort of hallucinogen, probably a recreational drug. The police also mentioned that the man who had been hit was in stable condition with a bandaged head wound and broken arm. Nathan asked if they had already questioned him, and the police nodded. One of the officers said that the man wished to see Nathan in order to thank him for his service. Nathan nodded and waited for an explanation or reaction, to see if they also heard the man's crazy story, but he only noticed the two officers exchange glances. Nathan did not press the issue further; he knew something was up. The officers left, thanking Nathan once again for his service and wishing him a pleasant stay in New York City. Once they were gone, Nathan got out of the bed and gathered his stuff. He checked his watch; three hours had passed. He needed to get to the hotel before they would cancel his reservation, but first, there was something he needed to do.

Nathan reached the door of room 261, the room in which the receptionist said the man was located. Nathan felt a little uneasy, he was not sure what he was to expect when he met the man once again. He had far more pressing issues to attend to, but deep down, Nathan knew he needed some answers before he left, and this man was going to provide them. It was against his better judgment, but something was nagging at the back of his mind. Nathan reviewed the series of events in his head, starting from the man entering his taxi to his encounter with the woman. Something was not adding up, it just did not seem right. And of course, there was the issue of the whole exchange in the taxi.

Nathan took a deep breath and raised his fist to the door. He always felt uncomfortable in hospitals, the last time he was in one it had not been the best of experiences. He knocked.

"Come in." the voice was unmistakably the man who had tried to hijack his taxi. Nathan paused for one more second, trying to mentally piece together any words to say. The ridiculousness of the situation had not escaped Nathan. It was a strange world he lived in where the victim of a car hijacking was being thanked by the hijacker for saving his life.

The man looked significantly less intimidating without his suit but significantly more crazy with a hospital gown. The bandaged was wrapped around the man's forehead, covering the injury to his temple. One arm was in a bandaged sling, the other holding a smartphone. The man was busy texting with his one available hand. His face, nor posture, communicated a slight tilt in his mental state. In fact, it was the fact that the man's face was perfectly calm; his posture perfectly relaxed that unsettled Nathan. This man seemed in control, and no matter how hard he had tried to cover up the fact earlier that morning, the man had seemed nervous, worrisome, and...well, Nathan hated to use the word, crazy.

“Ah, Mr. Searing. Please, have a seat.” The man placed his smartphone on his lap and motioned towards a seat nearby, the suitcase propped up against one of its legs. Nathan looked at the man hesitantly and was greeted with a friendly smile. Once he had sat down, Nathan decided to speak up.

“Hello.” He said, and then added, as politely as he could, “How do you know my name?”

“The officer told me. Apparently, you are the one that stopped a thief from stealing my suitcase after the accident. I should thank you for that. It’s not every day that a complete stranger should help me in my greatest time of need, especially considering the events leading up to it.”

The man winked at Nathan, the action was so slight, Nathan was not even sure if he saw it. He was slightly startled by it, but attempted not to show it. Had the man told the police what had happened earlier, or was the wink a signal that the man knew that Nathan had not told the police the entire story? Nathan nodded to the man, accepting the man’s thanks.

“I suppose I should also apologize to you, it was quite rude of me to try to hitch a ride in your taxi and upset your entire day. Frankly, I’m surprised it worked as well as it did, it was foolish of me to even try a stunt like that; it always seemed so easy to do in the movies. But I guess in reality my stupidity was rewarded with a delusional driver, a bloody head and a broken arm.” The man chuckled at his joke and then leaned over the bed and extended his good arm. “My name is William Poole. It’s nice to meet you Mr. Searing, and thank you for protecting my suitcase.” Nathan leaned over and shook Mr. Poole’s hand. The man actually did not seem too bad. He had a friendly demeanor and a sense of humor. Perhaps Nathan had misjudged the man.

“Please, call me Nathan.”

“Of course. Did you know I have a son named Nathaniel? Quite the coincidence wouldn’t you agree?”

“I suppose,” Nathan said. While Poole did seem to be of middle-age, he seemed far too healthy and... youthful to be considered a father. Nathan wondered if he would still retain his health and energy when he got older. Of course, even in his young years, he could already feel his energy fading.

“*A man in whom there is no deception.*” Poole murmured softly.

“What?” Nathan said.

“Oh, nothing, just thinking out loud.” Poole said dismissively, “Oh, I almost forgot to give you this.” The man grasped his suit jacket draped on the bed railing. He reached into the inside pocket and withdrew a wad of cash. “For your troubles, consider it a meager representation of my thanks.”

Nathan looked at the cash, mentally counting the total value of the money in Mr. Poole’s hand. It was certainly a hefty sum, a sum that any normal person would not ignore. It was large enough to make Nathan wonder why someone would be carrying that amount around. Something just did not feel right inside Nathan, something inside of him was telling him that he should not take the money, even if it was compensation for his troubles.

“Keep the money, Mr. Poole,” Nathan said. Poole raised an eyebrow in surprise, and slowly stowed the money back into the pocket, still keeping eye contact with Nathan just to make sure Nathan would not change his mind. Once the money was out of sight, Nathan let out a soft sigh.

“I’m surprised Nathan, given what you just went through, I expected you to take the money,”

“Yes well, given what I went through, I’m a fool to not take the money,” Nathan said glumly. He had made his decision, but he was beginning to regret it. Poole chuckled.

“Well, that makes two of us.” The chuckling subsided and Nathan decided now would be as good of a time as any to ask the question he had been meaning to ask.

“Mr. Poole, may I ask you a question?”

“Call me William, and of course,” Actually, now that he thought about it, Nathan had many questions he wanted to ask the man. Why did Poole try to hitch a ride in the taxi? What was in the suitcase? Who was the woman? He decided to ask one that would hopefully lead to answers for the others.

“Who are you?” Poole looked at Nathan, his eyes narrowing. Nathan hoped that he had not offended the man. Nathan noticed the man’s eyes fall down to his lap where Poole’s phone lay. It appeared that the man was debating as to how best to answer the question. Nathan prepared himself for any possible answer, but he certainly did not prepare himself well enough.

“I’m a spy.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Nathan said, convinced that he had heard incorrectly.

“I’m a spy,” Poole repeated coolly, looking right at Nathan.

“A spy?” Nathan repeated, not bothering to hide the skepticism in his voice.

“Correct,” Poole reached once more into his suit jacket, this time pulling out an official looking badge. Nathan noticed it was the one that Poole had flashed the taxi driver when he had hopped in uninvited. Poole handed Nathan the badge, which Nathan took gingerly as he examined the engraving. It did not take much examination for Nathan to read the letters. In fact, Nathan was surprised he had not even noticed them the first time he saw the badge. The letters C.I.A. stretched across the top of the badge under a bald-headed eagle, followed by the letters U and S that sandwiched a circular emblem in the middle of the badge. On the last row, the words ‘Special Agent’ were written.

“Is this real?” Nathan said, instantly regretting the question.

“Of course,” Poole answered, flipping the badge over in Nathan’s hand, revealing a plastic ID card taped to the back with a picture of Poole’s face on it along with his name. It seemed real, but then again, Nathan had never seen a real badge or identification card from the CIA. There was really no way he could be sure. As he thought about it, it did make sense. If Poole was indeed a spy, then it partly helped to explain the attempted car hijack as well as the woman. It helped, Nathan was careful to note, but it did not answer anything.

“Do the police know?” Poole nodded. Now Nathan understood why the police did not elaborate after Nathan had asked of Poole. They were probably sworn to secrecy and could not reveal any information.

“Why are you telling me this?” Nathan asked, handing the badge back to Poole.

“Because you asked, and you seem like an honest man - a trustworthy and honest man.” Poole answered as he put his suit jacket down, “And frankly,” he added with a smirk, “who is going to believe you if you told them you met a spy?”

“So you were running away from someone when you tried to take the taxi I was in?” Nathan asked. Poole nodded.

“I believe you met her. She’s a lovely woman don’t you think?”

“Who was she? The driver who hit you called her Martha.”

“I’ve heard her called many names. She’s a...recent coworker. I was undercover and she figured out who I was. She works for a very powerful and dangerous organization. She was trying to take the suitcase,” He nodded towards the suitcase next to Nathan’s feet.

“So it’s not yours?” Nathan asked.

“No. It belongs to the Government of the United States. I was sent to retrieve it from her organization.”

“What’s in it?” Nathan asked, the curiosity getting a hold of him.

“You’re really going to ask a spy to reveal his secret?” Poole said, lowering his voice and eyebrows.

“Um...no, forget I asked.” Nathan said, “But if you were trying to escape from that woman, why didn’t you just kick the taxi driver and I out of the car? You could have escaped a lot sooner if you hadn’t had to deal with us.”

“I’m not a fan of using force. If I wanted to use force, I would have joined the FBI.” Poole chuckled again, “Besides, you tell me. Which would raise the bigger suspicion: the taxi that’s driving at the speed limit among a sea of taxis, or the taxi that’s attempting to blaze down a New York City street during morning rush hour?”

“Good point,” Nathan relented. This man certainly appeared smart enough to be spy, and Nathan was starting to believe that Poole was who he said he was. “So what are you going to do now? Won’t that woman be able to find you in the hospital?” Nathan’s eyes widened, he then realized the full magnitude of the question he just asked, “Am I in danger?” His eyes then wandered towards the door, half expecting the woman to be kicking her way through the door.

Poole’s jovial visage fell, his slight smile turning into a grimace while his forehead crinkled in thought.

“You’re probably right. Now that we’ve met two times in the same day, they’ll probably suspect that you might be an agent that’s working with me, especially considering you tried to take the suitcase from her.” Nathan gulped, a bead of sweat running down his forehead. This was turning out to be a horrible trip. Helping the man resulted in his life being placed in extreme peril.

“This is partly my fault,” Poole admitted. Nathan agreed, and would go so far as to say it was all Poole’s fault, but he thought it best not to voice the opinion aloud. He simply looked to Poole to continue.

“How long are you staying in the city?” Poole asked.

“Um, I leave the day after tomorrow in the morning. I have...something to do first.” Nathan said, his eyes automatically falling to the urn that still rested in his lap. As if for the first time since Nathan walked in, Poole noticed the urn. He eyed it somewhat curiously, as everyone did, but quickly dismissed it.

“Ok, I’ll tell you what. I’ll go with you wherever you go while you’re in the city to make sure that you aren’t followed, or worse.” Nathan tried to ignore the last part, “And then once you leave the city, they’ll ignore you.”

“Why?”

“Because they’ll be too busy worrying about me.” Poole gave another smirk, as if making a mental joke.

“If that’s so,” Nathan asked, “wouldn’t it be best if I didn’t have you with me wherever I went? Isn’t that just making me more suspicious?”

“Yes,” Poole admitted, “but the alternative is you alone and unprotected while a bunch of armed men in black suits and shades come looking for you, demanding answers to questions of which you’ve never heard.”

“In that case,” Nathan concluded, but hating himself for saying it, “I suppose it would be best if you came along,”

“Excellent! I’ll be your personal bodyguard; it’s the least I can do.” Poole said, his smile returning to his face. He pushed himself from the pillows that propped him up with his good arm and began shifting himself off the bed. Regret was unavoidably seeping into his mind, but Nathan could not think of any possible alternative. He was way over his head in a situation that he had no way of grasping. One thing was for sure: the peace and quiet that Nathan had been hoping for on this trip was now a far-fetched dream.

Chapter 3

“Do you mind if I ask you a question now, Nathan?”

The two men were now in another taxi, this time at the permission of both Nathan and the taxi driver involved. Nathan realized that he was extremely late for his hotel reservation and hoped that it had not yet been canceled. With some slight help from Nathan, Poole had managed to put on his roughed up suit and the two of them had checked out of the hospital, making sure to grab something to eat at the hospital café for lunch. Nathan could not help but swivel his head back and forth on constant look out for any possible “men in black suits and shades” as Poole had so described. It reminded him of the time in his middle school days when his friend goaded him into trying to shoplift the latest video game from the store. Similar to back then, Nathan was experiencing the same rush of adrenaline and sweat, which proved to be the ideal combination if one wanted to take as long as possible to sign one’s name out of a hospital. “Just relax” Poole had told Nathan as he managed to drop the pen a third time while hastily scribbling his signature, “this is far too public of a place for a kidnapping.” Nathan was inclined to believe the seasoned spy, but ever since they had left the hospital, William Poole’s eyes were not surveying the immediate environment but glued to the screen of his smartphone, on which he was constantly typing. At first, Nathan was impressed by the man’s dexterous skill at texting with only one good hand, but now it was beginning to annoy him. This was the activity in which Poole was engaged when he spoke up in the car.

“No, but shouldn’t you be looking out the window for...I don’t know? People who want to kill us?” Nathan said, frustration bubbling at the surface of his voice. The two men were talking at a normal volume, not bothering to lower their voices. The taxi driver was busy talking on his own cell phone while driving. He was speaking in what Nathan figured was Hindi.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m looking.” Poole replied. Nathan took a fraction of a second to glance at Poole sitting on the other side of the backseat. The man was still glued to his smartphone, texting away with his suitcase resting on his lap. Nathan certainly hoped that Poole had excellent peripheral vision; otherwise, the two of them would be in considerable danger. Nathan did not even realize that it was possible for a man Poole’s age to be so immersed in electronics. He always thought that the older generations shunned new technologies; at least, that is what his parents did. As much as Nathan enjoyed the opportunities presented to him through the latest consumer electronics, seeing people as young as six years old walking on the streets with their heads bowed down over their phones texting was a depressing, rude, annoying and dangerous sight. Technology had consumed so much of their young lives, and they were most likely going to be killed for it. Besides, who could Poole possibly be texting right now?

Nathan felt his pocket vibrate as the ringing from his own cell phone went off. He reached down his pants pocket and pulled the phone out, checking to see who called. It was his

friend, Ben, no doubt wondering why Nathan had not called to confirm that he was now safe in the hotel. *Because*, Nathan could not help but think, *I'm not safe*.

"You know, talking on the phone while driving significantly increases your chance of getting into a car accident." Poole called out to the taxi driver. The driver either did not hear him, or ignored him, as he continued to talk as he turned a corner. Nathan glared at Poole. But since the man was still texting, Nathan could only sigh and roll his eyes slightly, admitting the truth to the statistic by placing his vibrating phone back in his pocket, despite the fact that he was not driving. He made a mental note to call Ben once he got to the hotel; he was not in the mood to talk to Ben now. He could send a text, but Nathan always detested communicating through text messaging on a device intended to facilitate vocal conversation.

"What did you want to ask me, Poole?"

"I couldn't help but notice that you are carrying an urn. May I ask who it is?"

Nathan took a deep breath. Well, here it was, he knew he had to answer the question eventually.

"It's not a who, it's an urn." Nathan said, "But if you are wondering whose body the ashes inside once belonged to, they used to be part of the body of my friend, Simon."

"Oh, I'm sorry for your loss." Poole stopped texting and put his phone away, his full attention now on Nathan. Nathan started to wish that Poole had continued texting; he greatly disliked this topic of conversation. Poole turned to face Nathan, his face turned solemn. "How did he pass?"

"Cancer. He had been fighting it for the past year."

"I'm sorry, a terrible way to go." Poole paused for the socially acceptable amount of time to show his sympathy before going on, "If you don't mind me asking, why are you carrying him around with you?"

"It's complicated." Nathan said, trying to end the conversation there. It had been awhile since he had mentioned Simon by name. He could still remember the funeral, just two days before, and the silence, and the crying. It was all too much, and Nathan could feel that familiar pain welling inside his chest. But Poole's silence signaled to Nathan to continue, albeit reluctantly. "It was part of his will." Nathan explained, taking a deep breath, "Simon was an architect, he enjoyed buildings. After he died, he asked that his cremated body be separated into four urns; one for each of his closest friends, and that each of us would take an urn and release the ashes into the wind on four specific buildings."

"Ah, a romantic. It's a shame I didn't get to meet this man. Which building did you get?"

"The Empire State Building."

"Ah, of course, a marvel of its time. Used to be the tallest building in the world for forty-two years. Now it doesn't even have the honor of calling itself the tallest in the states. A former pinnacle of American achievement, a symbol of our country. I'd say it's still an accurate reflection, even more so given its former glory. Have you been there before?"

"No, never really saw the point. It's just a bunch of stacked steel and glass to appease the egos of some multi-billionaire corporate CEOs who wanted to make sure that after they died they would still have something left for people to remember them by." Nathan remarked, much to Poole's amusement. The spy let out a laugh.

"You don't think very highly of multi-billionaire corporate CEOs I take it, or of your friend's wishes?"

"I respect my friend's wishes greatly, I just don't agree with them. What's the point of separating your ashes and releasing them into the wind?"

“You don’t find it poetic? Man returning to the dust where he came, cast back to the Earth from atop civilization’s greatest achievements?”

“If this is what’s most important to him, then I’m willing to do it.” Nathan said, making sure to seem like he was not coming off as an ungrateful or selfish friend. “Same goes for multi-billionaire corporate CEOs, they can do what they want with their money, I just think erecting a skyscraper is probably one of the more selfish things they could do with their money.”

“Ah, and why did you get the Empire State Building?”

“We drew straws, it wasn’t because I was closest. Most of my friends and I live in the same city now.”

“And where is that?” Nathan hesitated a moment, debating whether he should reveal the location of his home. He decided that if Poole knew his name, then it would not take too much effort to find out his address.

“Boston. After college, we all decided to live together in Boston. Simon was the only one who went off to Chicago, he had a job offer.”

“Ah, I take it you were all very close?”

“Yes, grew up together, we’ve known each other for twenty years.”

“Wow, it is quite rare to find such a long lasting and strong friendship. You and your friends are lucky people to experience such strong ties.”

Nathan nodded. He had heard those same words from many people, people he had not seen for years until the funeral. Teachers from high school, old school acquaintances, family friends, all there to offer condolences, but never able to fully understand. A wave of nostalgia washed over Nathan, despite his best efforts to keep the thoughts at bay. He could feel himself slipping back into the mindless state, unable to come up with thoughts. Poole sensed something was amiss, and he quickly changed the subject.

“It’s a wonderful city, Boston. What do you do there?” Nathan blinked, grateful for the pull back into reality.

“Um, I work in a tech start-up with the rest of my friends. We just started last year.”

“Congratulations, I hear tech entrepreneurship is the new thing these days. What’s it called?”

“Digify, it’s basically a program that lets you convert pictures of objects into a three dimensional model. If you take a few pictures of a car, Digify takes those images, as well as any images others have taken and compiles them to create a three dimensional digital model of a car. The program can tell what angles and distances the pictures are taken at and pieces them all together.”

“Interesting, sounds like you’re onto something big. I trust you have plenty of investors?”

“Well, I’m not sure. Ben usually handles our money. We have a few interested video game developers, but they’re still a little skeptical.” Nathan really did not know the status of their funds. In fact, Nathan barely knew much about the venture at all. Yes, he came up with the idea, but it was his friends that decided to pursue the idea further; they were the ones that convinced Nathan to go through with it. They decided to group and start Digify, only Simon had turned it down to pursue his own dreams, and no one blamed him. It was his friends that started looking for investors. It was his friends that searched and rented out the office space. Nathan was there just to provide the ideas, and his friends would make it a reality. For as long as he could remember, that is how it had been. Nathan would come up with the master plan, the grand idea, and his friends would figure out how to make it work. It was this relationship that made Nathan the de facto leader of the group, much to his disliking. He always felt like he was somehow using

his friends for his own benefits. It was not that he did not do any of the work; Nathan did not graduate with a degree in computer science with high honors for nothing. He just felt that he had somehow cheated the system by being able to start his own start-up without needing to know a shred of knowledge about money, or business.

“You know, I could think of a few...people who could benefit from your technology.” Poole commented.

“Really? Maybe you should give me their numbers.” It was not every day one had the chance to network with a government spy. Nathan gave a small smile at the thought. It would certainly give them a leg up on the competition, Ben would be pleased.

“It’s probably best that I don’t. But I’ll let them know about you.” Nathan nodded in thanks. The man went back to his phone and started texting once again. He was not actually expecting Poole to make any calls. From what little Nathan had gathered from his recent encounters with Poole, it was that the man took life less seriously than a man in his position should. Poole was probably just making small talk, trying to stop Nathan from lapsing into a fit of paranoia due to the current situation. Despite knowing Poole’s intentions, Nathan could not help but be thankful for them. His mind was distracted sufficiently from the certain possibility that very powerful people were pursuing him. The pain in his chest had subsided, and he pushed down the thoughts of Simon, even as he gripped the urn tightly. His thoughts wandered briefly towards the mysterious woman in the alleyway. Nathan wondered who she was, and for whom she worked. Poole had mentioned that he and the woman worked together when he was undercover, perhaps she was sent in to the same area to take the suitcase as well? She did not have an accent as far as Nathan could tell, which meant that there was no easy way of telling if she worked for some other country. Whomever she worked for, the fact remained that she was a dangerous person, and so was Poole for that matter. Actually, Nathan was not even sure about that point. He was not sure if he wanted Poole to be a dangerous person, the man certainly did not seem like one, indeed, it was Poole that Nathan had saw running away from the woman. Nathan just hoped that Poole’s generosity in protecting Nathan was only rivaled by the man’s skill in espionage, and maybe martial arts.

“Here we are,” The taxi driver said, still on his phone. The taxi pulled off the street and drove towards the portico of the hotel, where two uniformed men waited.

“It looks like a nice place,” Poole remarked. Nathan could not help but agree. If he remembered, the online description of the hotel had stated the website was a four-star hotel with plenty of amenities. The building soared up at least 50 floors, almost rivaling some of the corporate towers nearby. Nathan could only imagine the price of a room in this hotel. It probably was not extraordinary, but not something Nathan would ever dream of spending, even for one day. He was sure glad that he was not spending his own money on the stay. Nathan gave a mental thanks to Simon, wherever he was. He certainly knew how to take care of his friends.

Thankfully, the hotel had not canceled his reservation. Once arriving at the front desk, Nathan explained the events of the morning as briefly and simply as he could. The receptionist listened politely to Nathan’s hectic explanation, while Poole remained silent, texting on his smartphone. Nathan was surprised to hear that the receptionist believed his story, but he supposed that the stitches on his head and Poole’s broken arm and wrapped forehead served as proof far better than his words ever could. The receptionist explained that due to Nathan’s tardiness, his single-bed room had been given away to someone of greater influence, leaving only doubles. Thankfully, this was more than acceptable, as Nathan now traveled with another. Nathan received two key cards to the room, and the two men headed up in the elevator, Nathan

carrying his travel bag in one hand, and the urn in the other, Poole, still glued to his smartphone and carrying his suitcase by the fingers of his broken arm.

“Well, here we are,” Nathan said as he opened the door to the room. He looked back and found himself unsurprised as Poole followed with his head down. Nathan supposed the statement was more for his benefit than Poole’s. It may have only been a few hours since Nathan got off the airplane, but it felt like days since Nathan was able to relax a little, both physically and mentally. Of course, Nathan had no reason to relax, he was quite possibly in serious danger, and he was now traveling with an undercover spy.

“It looks nice,” Poole commented, making a beeline straight for one of the beds. The room was quite spacious, but populated with the typical hotel furniture: two beds, an end table separating the two, a flat screen television placed on a dark wooden drawer, a small round table with two chairs, the obligatory layout of chocolates, ice bucket, and light fixtures and mirrors of the “fancy-but-emotionless” style that often characterized hotels. A window looked out into the city – a concrete jungle of modern trees, faint traffic horns, and bustling people.

“Shouldn’t you be checking for, I don’t know, cameras or bugs or something? Make sure this room is safe?” Nathan said. It seemed like he was the one looking out for Poole, not the other way around.

“Already did.” Poole said, “Relax, you worry too much Nathaniel.” Nathan raised a skeptical eyebrow. Poole had not done anything except text on his smartphone since they left the hospital; there was no way that he could have checked for hidden wires.

“It’s Nathan,” He murmured under his breath. He sighed and walked over to the table, where he placed the urn. After dropping his bag on his bed, he walked over to the window, gazing down into the street. The sun was setting slowly, casting long shadows below. What was he doing? Nathan had not been able to digest completely the day’s events, and he was having a very hard time comprehending everything. He had to remember that his main goal was to fulfill Simon’s will. Actually, his main goal was to stay alive, but he was here to fulfill the will. Nathan was seriously beginning to regret running after the woman, his trip would have been a lot easier otherwise. Now there was a good chance that he had just made himself known to a group of very dangerous people, people that Nathan thought only existed in movies. He took another breath. He just had to remain calm, release the ashes on the top of the Empire State Building at five pm tomorrow, get on a plane back to Boston the next morning, and forget that any of this ever happened. His life would return to normal, and Poole would have gotten whoever was after them off his back. Nathan would once again be an everyday normal person, just trying to make a living. Easy.

The vibration of the phone in his pocket jolted Nathan out of his thoughts. Someone was calling him. Nathan cursed softly as he remembered that he had meant to call Ben back. It was in all likelihood him calling. How was he going to explain this?

“Hello?”

“Nathan? It’s me, Ben, where have you been? I called you before and you didn’t pick up, is everything all right?”

“Yeah, everything is fine,” Nathan said, *I’m just with a government spy and possibly in mortal danger*, “I just got caught up in traffic. There was... a bad accident ahead of me.”

“Oh, I hope everything is ok. Why didn’t you pick up when I called you?”

“Um, my phone was off, I forgot to turn it back on when I got off the plane.” Nathan could hear Ben thinking, his friend was smart, he knew that it was a lie, but for some reason, he did not bring it up.

“Ok, are you all settled in then?”

“Yeah, I’m in my hotel room now, how about you?”

“Same, Los Angeles is way foggier than I thought. It’s super polluted here, I can barely see the Hollywood sign.”

“Sorry to hear that, have you talked to the others?”

“Yeah, they all made it smoothly. To tell you the truth, it sounded like Andrew was a little upset. Seems like he just wants to get this over with.”

“Yeah, well that makes two of us.” Nathan immediately regretted the words right after he said them. He could almost hear Ben trying to keep his voice calm and level. Ever since the funeral, any conversation between the guys had been dull and muted. It was as if any expression or sign of joy was gone. Sure, they smiled, they laughed, but they were empty smiles, hollow laughs. The day before Simon passed was the first time Nathan had ever seen Ben cry, and he had known Ben since they were in grade school. The death of Simon had hit them all hard, but it seemed like it had hit Ben the hardest. Even during the year of Simon’s treatment, they had all held onto the hope that he would make it through. It was not until the last few days of Simon’s life did they realized that it would not be so. Apparently, Simon had seen the end much earlier and had the foresight to write a will, a will that contained not just words of advice and gratitude to his friends, but a will that asked them all to take one last journey with him. Nathan hated to admit it, but he was slightly annoyed by the task, he did not want to acknowledge the death any more than he had already. He did not say anything though, because he knew the others – Ben especially – saw this as an honor, a responsibility, a symbol of their friendship. Nathan felt ashamed to not be able to feel the same, just like he felt ashamed for being the only one not able to cry at the funeral, Simon was as much of a friend to him as to the others. All Nathan felt was numbness.

“Look,” Nathan spoke up, attempting to mitigate any emotional damage he may have caused, “I’m sorry Ben, it’s just that, we’ve been through a lot these past few days,”

“Yeah,” Ben said, Nathan could detect a waver in his voice, “you’re right.” Ben cleared his throat and continued, his voice lightening up, “We were thinking that when we all got back, we should go visit the cemetery sometime, you know, to pay our respects.” Nathan felt his stomach lurch. Upon hearing Simon’s radical request to be cremated and dispersed, Simon’s parents insisted that they erect a tombstone in their hometown cemetery, so they had something to remember him by. Apparently, his parents could not bear with the possibility of not being able to see their son’s name in stone, to remind themselves that he existed. They needed the physical landmark to talk to, to visit. Nathan could not blame them, but he found it somewhat silly to have a gravestone if there was no body underneath.

“Isn’t that what we’re doing now, paying our respects?” Nathan asked, trying to sound as non-offensive as possible.

“Yeah...but it will be good, to get some closure.” Nathan bit his tongue, making sure not to point out that that was exactly what they were doing now. The act of visiting Simon’s gravestone was not closure; it was hanging onto his death.

“So will you come? We’re thinking of visiting Simon sometime next week?” Nathan could feel it, the heat bubbling up from his stomach. He did not want to say it, but he had bottled it up for too long. The hesitation each time they said Simon’s name, the sacredness, the condolences, the ‘dance around the elephant in the room,’ it was all too much. Nathan was tired of playing the obligatory part any longer.

“Ben, Simon’s gone, we wouldn’t be visiting him. He’s gone, his body is ashes. We all miss him, but we’re going to have to let go.” He had said the words louder than he had meant. There was a twinge of frustration in his voice, and Nathan knew Ben heard it. Each word was a stab into Ben’s heart, but he had to say them, he had the thoughts bottled up inside him for far too long. There was a moment of silence between the two, and Nathan could hear Ben’s breathing.

“Look Ben –” Nathan began again.

“No, it’s ok, I’m fine.” Ben said, his voice stiff. Another pause. “I’ll talk to you later, after we’re done.” Nathan closed his eyes, the damage had been done.

“All right, I’ll see you later Ben,”

“See you later.”

Nathan waited for Ben to hang up before he removed the phone from his ear. Nathan stared at the screen, not exactly sure what to expect. He could feel the rumble inside him subsiding, the heat washing away through his extremities. He needed to say it; it had been on his mind too long. There was a sense of both relief and regret. Nathan hoped that Ben would be all right.

“Well, that seemed like quite the conversation.”

Nathan turned around, completely forgetting that Poole had been in the room the entire time. The man was no longer on his smart phone. He was propped up against his bed, a pillow behind him and his suitcase within arm’s reach. He had his usual relaxed smile, but his eyes conveyed something deeper – sympathy.

“Yeah, well...” Nathan said, his voice trailing. He could feel his ears growing hot from embarrassment. He did not usually raise his voice like that; he was normally quite good at keeping his cool. “Sorry you had to hear that,”

“Don’t be,” Poole said, “The death of a friend is a difficult affair. I can only imagine what you and your friends must be going through.” Nathan nodded in acknowledgement.

“Everyone deals with death differently,” Poole went on, “Some choose to hang on to every memory, afraid that they will forget. Some push the memories away, afraid of the feelings that will come by letting them in. Our society has a strange relationship with Death. We have ceremonies, erect graves, but avoid the human-ness of it all. We make perfect images of the dead, afraid to tarnish their name, to the point where we are even afraid to say the name.”

Nathan looked up at Poole. The man was far wiser than he let on. Curiosity grew in Nathan. After internally debating whether to ask, Nathan hesitantly spoke up.

“Have you had a friend pass away?” Poole chuckled.

“I’m not as young as I look,” he joked, combing his greying hair with his fingers, “I’ve had friends and family pass away, some by natural causes, one by cancer, and some from more...unfortunate circumstances.”

“Have you ever...” Nathan began, afraid to bring it up, but speaking the words nevertheless, “you know...killed anyone?” It was a valid question. Nathan needed to know what kind of man he had just helped, and who was now traveling with him. Poole’s smile vanished, and he looked coldly into Nathan’s eyes. A wave of fear washed over Nathan. He gulped, afraid of hearing the answer. Suddenly, Poole let out a laugh, a deep hearty laugh, making his bed tremble. Nathan looked on, shocked and a little scared, perhaps Poole *was* a lunatic. The laughing subsided and Poole wiped a tear from the corner of his eye with his good arm.

“Sorry,” Poole said, “I couldn’t resist.”

“Is that a yes?” Evan asked.

"I'm not that kind of spy," Poole said, "I told you, I don't like using force if I don't have to." Nathan nodded. He was careful to note that Poole had not given him a direct answer. But, as Nathan realized, he was not sure if he wanted a direct answer. If Poole had killed people before, would that make Nathan feel safer, or more in danger? He was secretly glad that Poole had not given him a direct answer. Just as he was about to ask exactly what kind of spy Poole was, there was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" Poole called out.

"Room Service. Your items have arrived Mr. Poole." A voice responded from behind the door.

"Ah, excellent!" Poole said, jumping to his feet, "Coming!"

"What?" Nathan said, back to his normally dumbfounded state when around Poole. Poole opened the door, where a bellhop stood, holding onto two suit bags and a plastic shopping bag filled with a variety of items.

"Just place them on the bed, thank you very much," Poole said, motioning for the bellhop to enter. The man came in, giving a nod to Nathan, which Nathan returned. He placed the items on Poole's bed and walked back to the door, where Poole withdrew some cash from his wallet using a combination of his teeth and hand. He handed the money to the man, who accepted it with a bow.

"For your trouble," Poole said.

"Thank you very much Mr. Poole," The man stepped out the door, "Have a good night gentlemen," and with that, the bellhop left and Poole closed the door after him. Poole then walked back to the bed, where the items lay, and began removing things from the shopping bag. They were Band-Aids, two bottles of cologne and other grooming supplies, a thin rope, and a variety of small tools that Nathan assumed came from a hardware store.

"What are those for?" Nathan asked. Poole did not reply, instead opening the package of Band-Aids and removing the bandage from his forehead. He tossed the bloodied cloth on the bed and walked over to a mirror, where he placed the flesh-colored Band-Aid square over his gash.

"That's better," He said, flashing the mirror a smile. He then grabbed one of the suit bags and unzipped it partly, peering in. He then tossed the suit bag to Nathan, who just barely caught it.

"This one is yours." Poole said, already unzipping the other suit bag, revealing a very fine looking tuxedo. Nathan could only wordlessly look on, confused at the whole sight. He held up the suit bag and unzipped it to reveal a similar looking tuxedo.

"Where did you get this?" Nathan asked, taking the suit out to examine it. "How did you get this?"

Pool chuckled, unbuttoning the suit. He raised an eyebrow, examining the suit, and then his broken arm, trying to figure out a way to put it on.

"Never ask a spy to reveal his secrets." He said jokingly. Nathan mentally groaned, his annoyance growing with each of the man's half-answers and remarks.

"What are these for?" Nathan said.

"You seemed like you needed some cheering up," Poole said, "given what's happened to you these past few days, I figured you'd want to go out, relax, have some fun." This time, Nathan groaned aloud. This was the last thing he wanted to do. He just wanted to stay safe in his hotel room and rest. "Some fun" sounded like a horrible idea.

"Won't it be dangerous, you know, with...those people?" Nathan said, unsure exactly how to label the woman and her apparent goons.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be perfectly safe where we’ll be going. Trust me, you’ll like it.”

“Where are we going?”

“A fancy party, hosted by a friend I know in the city. It’ll be nice, plenty of good food, good music, and,” He said, winking at Nathan, “pretty ladies.”

Nathan was not convinced.

“It’ll keep your mind off things,” Poole continued, “If you absolutely despise it, we’ll head back. But there are some people I want to introduce to you,” this time, Poole cracked a smile, “some investors in your little start-up.” Poole knew that he had hooked Nathan. He had given him a concrete reason to go, an opportunity that Nathan could not pass up. As Nathan thought about it longer, he did want a change of scenery; the dull emotionless environment of the airport, plane and hotel was beginning to rub off on him and his thoughts. Perhaps what he really needed was some good food, good music, and potential investors. It would certainly bring him back to Ben’s good side quicker. He could also prove that he was useful in more than ways than just the person who came up with ideas. Nathan would be a fool to pass up this kind of opportunity. Yes, meeting Poole had signaled a turn for the worst for Nathan’s life, but perhaps he could salvage some benefits. Poole could read Nathan’s reluctant acceptance just by reading his face. The spy tossed him one of the bottles of cologne.

“Good,” He said, “Now freshen up, you’ll want to look nice.”

Chapter 4

A black limousine arrived to pick up Nathan and Poole. Nathan was unsure as to how Poole ordered the limousine, but just like the items and the suits, Nathan assumed that Poole was not going to tell him. Poole had been with Nathan since the hospital, the spy had no time to make any calls. Knowing that thinking about all the possible methods would only confuse him further, Nathan let it go. And what was the man going to do with all those tools? Nathan had not seen the tools when he got out of the bathroom. Nathan decided to drop the thought.

It had only been a few days since Nathan had put on a suit for a special event. However, this night’s event was far different from the one he had attended before, both in location and in occasion. Nathan tried to ignore the images of black suits and dresses, of tears and apologies. He never was one that was good at grooming himself; his mother always chastised him for not taking better care of his appearance. He attempted to comb his hair and spray a little cologne on himself before leaving. Poole seemed to approve, as the man simply nodded when he saw Nathan and directed the two of them to head down to the lobby, where the limousine awaited. He had left the urn sitting on the table. Nathan felt as if he was missing something as he closed the door to the hotel room.

By now, the sun had set, and the streetlights illuminated the roads. Nathan was not sure where they were going, but he had long given up his anxiety about being lost in a big city. The nice things with big cities, Nathan had to admit, was that there was always a taxi waiting to take you wherever you needed to go. All you needed was a destination and the taxi driver were figure out the journey – and everyone knew the journey was the hardest part.

Looking out the window, Nathan knew that they were arriving to one of the wealthier districts of the city. The lights were brighter, the apartment towers taller and more elegant. The people on the street were dressed in the latest fashions of the fall season, and stores featured

lavish wares in the display windows. After what seemed like a 30-minute ride, the limousine pulled up to one of the buildings.

“Here we are,” Poole said, breaking the silence that had lasted since the men got into the car. The door opened and Poole and Nathan stepped out. The building was quite tall, probably taller than the hotel that Nathan was staying. The portico was made of red velvet and fringed with gold thread, and the bellhops in attendance were dressed in similar garb. Clearly, this was a high-class apartment complex. The entrance itself was roped off by velvet cord, and a large man in a dark suit with a clipboard was standing at the entrance. He looked like a bouncer at a nightclub, and probably served that purpose, as the man only let in the fancily dressed people that were on his list.

“Come on,” Poole waved his good hand. Nathan realized that the spy was carrying his suitcase. Suddenly, something clicked inside his head as he followed Poole up to the man.

“We aren’t going to this party for my benefit are we?” Nathan murmured.

“What makes you say that?” Poole replied, from the corner of his mouth. He flashed a smile at the suited guard and said his name, “William Poole plus one, Mr. Robikov should be expecting us.” The guard looked down his list and nodded, unlatching the cord and letting the two men pass. They walked through the glass door and continued through the lobby, straight for the elevator.

“Because,” Nathan continued, “You’re carrying that suitcase, the very same suitcase that the woman tried to steal from you. Why would you risk taking it out in public?”

“Maybe it’s because I want to keep it with me at all times?” Nathan scoffed as the ding of the elevator door signaled the arrival of the elevator.

“To a party?”

“Very well,” Poole said as the men stepped into the elevator. He pushed the button for the top floor marked PH for Penthouse and waited until the doors closed before continuing.

“You’re right, I haven’t been completely honest,” Poole said. Nathan felt a rush of satisfaction at being able to deduce Poole’s hidden motives, a rush far greater than the one that was signaling to him that it probably was not a good thing that Poole was hiding something.

“I had meant to go to this party, whether I met you or not. The truth is, this is part of my mission.”

“You’re mission?”

“Yes, I was to retrieve the suitcase, and deliver it to the host of this party, Mr. Robikov.”

“Robikov works for the C.I.A.?” Nathan asked. Poole shrugged his shoulders.

“He works with me, it’s complicated.”

“And you weren’t going to tell me? You had me come along on a mission? You don’t think that counts as dangerous?” Nathan said, his voice growing slightly louder.

“Like I said, you looked like you needed to relax,” Poole said calmly, “it’s still a party, the mission is only a fraction of it all, you have to look at the bigger picture. Try to have some fun.”

“I don’t like being kept in the dark. If I’m to trust you with my life, you should at least trust me with the truth.”

“The truth?” Poole turned to Nathan and raised an eyebrow, “The truth is just a way to label our subjective observations and opinions so that we never have to justify them. Truth is overrated. There is no truth, there’s just trust.”

Nathan could not think of anything to say after Poole's statement. He was too ashamed to speak up, instead letting the soft music fill the elevator. They rode the rest of the elevator in silence. Just as Nathan could feel the floor slow down, Poole spoke up.

"But to show you how much I'm willing to trust you, I'll let you take care of the suitcase and hand it over to Mr. Robikov." Poole extended the suitcase, waiting for Nathan to take it. Nathan looked at Poole, the man gave him a friendly smile, his eyes conveying the same sincerity that had convinced Nathan to trust the man in the first place. Poole was a man that certainly stuck to his ideals, Nathan concluded. There was something about the spy, Nathan couldn't quite place it, that made Nathan want to trust the man. It was more than just the man's charisma or wit, there was something that Poole had inside of him, some quality, that Nathan could not define, but knew that it was unique. He took the suitcase, unsure if he should thank the man, just as the elevator doors opened.

Nathan did not know what exactly to expect when the doors opened. He had never attended an upper-class party before. He had gone to one or two parties during his college years, but those were obviously much more different. The fact that Nathan was wearing a tuxedo instead of a t-shirt and jeans was proof of that. While college kids drank and played drinking games, Nathan had no idea what the higher echelons of society did for 'fun.' Despite his attire, he was half expecting some sort of nightclub scene, with booming house music and flashing lights.

What he saw, in as little words as possible, was "surprisingly old-fashioned." The elevator revealed an open-design penthouse, flooded with bright lights. It was as if the entire level was one giant room, with a few counters on the edge delineating a kitchen and bar. Nathan instinctively shielded his eyes from the sudden rays, looking up to see an intricate crystal chandelier hanging from the roof. Even before his eyes adjusted to the light levels, Nathan heard the sounds of classical music – real classical music. A quartet of string players were off in the far corner of the penthouse, next to the all-glass walls revealing the nightscape of New York. The floor was made of pale tile, and what little furniture existed was pushed to the sides of the room, clearing space for the many well-dressed guests that populated the room. One of the long tables carried a whole array of colorful and fancy desserts, many of which Nathan could not identify. Abstract and modern art adorned the walls of the room. Some guests were dancing in the center of the room, some sort of waltz from what Nathan could tell. As he stepped into the room after Poole, Nathan noticed that the penthouse had two levels, with stairs on the edges of two walls leading up to a balcony-level, no doubt leading to rooms.

There was a decent crowd, Nathan was never good at estimating numbers, but he imagined there must have been at least a hundred people attending. Whether that was a large number for a private party, Nathan was unsure, but it was a big enough number to make Nathan feel like no one would point him out as an obvious outsider. He took a deep breath and adjusted his collar. This was certainly a change of scenery. Poole gave him a nudge and directed Nathan to follow as the spy navigated his way smoothly through the crowds of guests, who were conversing with glasses of champagne and shrimp cocktails served by the few wandering waiters. Beneath the sound of music playing, there was a general murmur of chatting and light laughter. The whole scene reminded him somewhat of the Victorian-age dances in England, except that the women were wearing far more modernized and revealing dresses. This is what the rich did with their time - recreate the past.

"This way," Poole said, making sure that Nathan was keeping up. As they walked further into the room, Nathan's gaze went to the balcony floor, where a few guests were standing and

chatting. Large men, similar in build to the one that was guarding the entrance of the building, stood guarding the closed doors on the floor. They each wore shades and an earphone in one ear. One of the guards shifted in his spot, adjusting his suit, as he did so, Nathan caught a glimpse of something in the man's inside pocket. Nathan gulped and felt himself grow even sweatier.

"William," Nathan whispered to Poole as they continued walking through the crowd, "those men have guns."

"Of course they do," Poole said nonchalantly, not even bothering to look in the direction Nathan indicated. He left it at that, and Nathan had no choice but to accept that Poole knew what he was doing. They continued walking for a few more feet, until Poole abruptly stopped, smiled and outstretched his good arm. Nathan looked ahead and saw a short man, dressed in a white suit flanked by two of the guards, coming towards the two of them. The white suited man was in a similar posture as Poole, a smile on his face and arms outstretched as he walked up to Poole.

"William!" The man said, in a thick Russian accent. He laughed as he gave Poole a hug and stepped back.

"It's good to see you Andrei," Poole said.

"And to see you as well, my friend." Robikov said, "I'm glad you came! I wasn't sure you were going to make it, they told me about your 'incident.'" Robikov's eyebrow rose, gesturing with his head towards Poole's broken arm.

"Oh that," Poole said, offhandedly. "A minor problem, no worries." Nathan then realized that the two men were talking about the accident this morning. The accident had not been broadcast publicly, how did Robikov know about that? Who was 'they'?

"I trust everything is good then?"

"Yes, thanks to this man," Poole said, patting Nathan's shoulder and shuffling him in between the two men. Nathan was taken off guard, and nearly stumbled. As if noticing him for the first time, Robikov squinted suspiciously, eyeing Nathan up and down.

"And who is this, William?"

"This is Nathan Searing, a friend of mine,"

"Oh?" Robikov said, his face showing amusement.

"Yes, Nathan is the one who guaranteed the safety of your suitcase." Poole nudged Nathan in the back. Nathan understood the signal, and held up the suitcase, which Robikov took.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Robikov," Nathan said, attempting to hide his nervousness. Still eyeing Nathan, Robikov raised the suitcase to his nose, and gently sniffed it. Apparently satisfied, he handed the suitcase to one of his guards, staring at Nathan the entire time. Nathan was feeling more than just a little uncomfortable, he felt like he was being examined.

"Nathan is part of a tech start-up," Poole said, cutting into the examination, "I told him that you might be interested in investing, I think you may find it worthwhile,"

"Is that so?" Robikov said. Then just as he did with the suitcase, he gave a slight sniff. Nathan was quite sure the man was sniffing him, but for what reason, he was uncertain. However, just like the suitcase, Robikov seemed to approve, and he blinked, his face changing back into the friendly demeanor he had when he walked up.

"Well then, perhaps you would like to walk with me, Mr. Searing?" Robikov said, turning around without waiting for an answer. He said something in Russian to the guard carrying the suitcase, and the man left, heading towards the staircase. Nathan turned to look at Poole, who shrugged, and nodded towards Robikov.

"Go ahead, he's fine." Poole said, "I'll find you later, I think I saw some lemon tart at the dessert table." And with that, Poole slipped back into the crowd, leaving Nathan with no choice

but to walk after Robikov. He caught up to the man, who was now standing near one of the corners of the room, the one remaining guard standing behind him. Nathan did not know what to do, so he stood awkwardly beside the Russian, both men watching the dancers in the middle of the room glide around. Nathan was unsure as to whether or not he should say something, but Robikov was the first to speak up.

“So tell me Nathan,” He began, still watching the dancers, “how long have you known Mr. Poole?”

“Um, just this morning actually,” Nathan said, “He tried to hitch a ride in the taxi I was in, and then got hit by a car in front of me.” Robikov chuckled.

“Ah, that sounds like William, an incredibly intelligent man, but incredibly foolish at times. Given his occupation, I’m surprised that he’s such an idealist.” Nathan nodded, from what little he knew of Poole, the man did seem to have many unrealistic notions, and the man certainly did not act like a spy.

“Yes, he’s certainly an...interesting man,” Nathan said. Poole had told him that Robikov knew that Poole was a spy, but Nathan did not know if it was proper to mention Poole’s occupation directly. Robikov chuckled once more.

“Indeed, but I suppose in the end, I have you to thank for the suitcase, not Poole,” Robikov said, turning to Nathan and smiling.

“It was nothing. I was just trying to help,”

“And help you did, perhaps next time I should request your services?” The Russian laughed again. Unlike Poole’s laugh, Robikov’s put Nathan at unease, beneath the laughter Nathan could detect something else, something harsh and sharp. Once he finished laughing, Robikov motioned for the guard to leave. The guard hesitated for a moment, but did as he was told.

“Bodyguards,” Robikov said in mock disgust as the large man left, “the price I pay for being rich. I can’t even enter the restroom by myself anymore.”

“It must be hard,” was all Nathan could say. He did not feel any particular sympathy for the man, but he tried his best to manifest concern.

“At times,” Robikov admitted, “but it’s even harder for my son, that’s him over there, Alexei,” Robikov pointed to an older boy who was dancing with a beautiful woman. He was tall, relatively handsome, but his expression was flat. The woman was chatting to him endlessly, apparently oblivious to Alexei’s apparent boredom. His eyes were dull, and his lips pursed in a straight line. He almost seemed like a robot, mechanically dancing, but showing no emotion.

“He looks...like he’s enjoying himself,” Nathan said meekly. Robikov snorted.

“He’s always like that, ever since his mother died. I’ve given him everything a boy could ever want, plenty of entertainment, a top-notch education, father-son vacations when I’m in the country, still the boy gives me that bored look. I thought he had everything, I try to be a good father, I try to raise him right, but I finally figured out what that boy lacked.”

“What?” Nathan said, slightly afraid of what the answer would be.

“Friends,” Robikov said pointedly, “I didn’t know it until I decided to surprise him one day and pick him up from school, normally I have the bodyguards do that,” he explained, “found him being bullied by a group of schoolboys. Afterwards I asked him why he didn’t stand up for himself, why none of his friends weren’t there to defend him. You know what he told me? He said, ‘I have no friends, thanks to you, father.’ Apparently, the guards I had appointed to protect him prevented any of the kids from befriending my son, they were too afraid to approach him. I suppose in trying to protect my child, I harmed him the most.” Robikov sighed.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I suppose it was because I was afraid of losing him like I lost my wife,” Robikov went on, as if he did not hear Nathan, “Alexei has all these things, but no one to share them with, no friends. He’s bored, there’s only so much one can do by himself. Friends are an invaluable asset. Money can’t buy you genuine friendship, genuine trust, it’s a lesson I’ve had to learn the hard way.” Nathan’s thoughts wandered back to the past few days, his mind going through the funeral once more.

“There’s a word in Russian,” Robikov went on, “*Toska*, you’ve heard of it?”

“Sorry, no,” Nathan said, shaking the memories out of his mind.

“It’s a complicated word, one that I have found no direct translation in English. It is a word of many degrees of intensity. At its lowest, it is a feeling of boredom, discontent despite being satiated, like my son. At its greatest, it is the feeling of deep pain, spiritual anguish without cause. It is a longing without anything to long for, an ache that continually gnaws at your being.”

“Sounds awful,” Nathan commented.

“Indeed it does. Can you imagine it, knowing you lack something, but not knowing what it is? When you know your enemy, it is easy to defeat it, but if you don’t even know what eats your soul, how can you stop it? What is it that we want?”

For some reason, Nathan felt like he could imagine the feeling, quite clearly actually. Perhaps it was what he had been feeling these past few days, ever since the funeral. Perhaps the pain in his chest was what Robikov called *Toska*. Perhaps Nathan longed for something, something that he did not know, or was not there. Was the pain just his way of coping with the loss of his life-long friend? Was he missing something? Nathan felt pretty satisfied with his life, in fact, he was quite grateful for it, but there was that ache inside him, that gnawing, for something, something more. Perhaps he longed to feel some sort of emotional response to Simon’s passing.

“Some would say that *Toska* is proof that humanity is doomed to always want more, even when he has it all. But you know what I think?” Robikov said, not bothering to let Nathan interject, “I think *Toska* can be prevented. I think that if you know what you are working towards, you can never feel lost or lacking. I think you need to have something to believe in, something you can trust without question. Most importantly, I think it needs to be unattainable, because if you ever reach your goal, then you are back to where you started. Having everything, but always wanting something. We need a cause, something to long for. Nothingness is the greatest enemy.”

The conversation went silent. Nathan could hear the string quartet changing songs. Twenty-four hours ago, Nathan would never have imagined that he would be attending a party hosted by an extremely wealthy Russian who had some unknown connection to the C.I.A. He definitely would have never imagined listening to said Russian share the man’s personal life and philosophy with him.

“Apologies for rambling on,” Robikov said, sounding a little embarrassed, “I hope I haven’t been boring you?”

“Not at all,” Nathan said courteously, “it was quite enlightening.” Robikov looked down at his watch, and grimaced.

“I’m sorry, but I must be going, I have something to attend to.”

“Of course, thank you for the discussion.” The Russian extended his hand out and Nathan took it. Robikov did not seem too menacing after the conversation; indeed, Nathan felt a little sympathy for the man.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Robikov reached into his inside jacket pocket and for a split second, Nathan tensed up. He had not forgotten that he was not in the safest of places. But the Russian only pulled out a pocketbook and pen. He flipped it open to reveal a checkbook.

“Who should I make the check out to?” Nathan was confused.

“Sorry sir, check?”

“Yes, for your... what did Poole call it? Your start-up. I wish to invest.” Nathan blinked, trying to hide his surprise.

“But Mr. Robikov, I haven’t even told you what I do,”

“No matter. A friend of Poole is a friend of mine. I trust his judgment. If he can trust you, so can I. You seem like an honest, intelligent man, the world needs more of your kind on top.” Nathan was about to point out that he was with Poole not because they were friends, but because the man was protecting him, but he thought it best to remain quiet.

“Besides, it is my money; I can do with it how I want. Now, who do I make the check out to?” Nathan was flabbergasted. Could it really be that easy? He had not even given his thirty-second elevator pitch that Ben had forced him to memorize. Did it really require this little work? Nathan was beginning to see the truth in the power of making connections, powerful and wealthy connections. He felt like he was cheating somehow, as if he was making others do the dirty work for him. He hated the feeling.

“I can tell you are astonished,” Robikov said with a smile, he placed the checkbook back in his pocket and withdrew a small white card. He wrote something down on the back of the card and handed it to Nathan. “I’ll tell you what, talk it over with your coworkers, discuss how much money you need, and then call this number, it’s my personal secretary. I’ll make sure that she books you a meeting with me right away, and then we can discuss more business, yes?”

“Um, thank you,” Nathan muttered, taking the card, “thank you,” he said again, this time louder. Robikov nodded and patted Nathan on the shoulder.

“It was a pleasure meeting you Mr. Searing. Why don’t you help yourself to some of the desserts at the table? I hear that the lemon tart is quite good.” With that, the Russian walked off, giving a short greeting to guests as he passed by. Nathan watched the man disappear back into the crowd. He then looked down at the card and noticed a number scribbled onto one side. Nathan flipped it over; it was a business card. The name read “Andrei Robikov, Executive Director of Information Systems Security”. A logo was located on the upper right corner of the card bearing a name that Nathan did not recognize, “Diosis Corp”. Placing the card in his wallet, Nathan decided to take up Robikov’s offer and navigate towards the table of assorted desserts and fancy snacks.

The table had a sophisticated spread of pastries, cakes, chocolates, fruits and combinations of the aforementioned. Nathan had never seen so many different kinds of desserts as he had always stuck with the plain vanilla ice cream bowl or brownie. Seeing as his two default choices were nowhere to be found, Nathan settled on something that looked like the lemon tart, but upon taking a bite, discovered that it was in fact, cream filled. He realized then that he actually had no idea what a lemon tart actually looked like.

As he continued to eat his mystery pastry, Nathan scanned the room once more, hoping to spot Poole. The spy had said that he would be waiting near the table, but Nathan could not find the man anywhere. The guests were all chatting away, the men giving low chuckles while the women were laughing lightly. They were all well-groomed, wearing the latest in expensive fashion, and certainly looked like they were having the time of their lives. He wondered what all these people did for a living. Nathan assumed that most of them were businesspersons, probably

working in the financial sector; others may be wealthy doctors or lawyers with wealthy clients. Although, Robikov's occupation sounded more technical in nature, and Nathan wondered if, perhaps, many of these people were in fact, despite being extremely well-dressed, computer scientists and software engineers like Nathan.

His attention then turned towards the guests dancing in the center of the room. The quartet had once again seamlessly transitioned into another song, this time playing a lighter, livelier song. As if on cue, the dancers rearranged themselves according to some unknown arrangement and began the dance. Nathan was not nearly cultured enough to be able to identify the type of dance, but he found that he could appreciate it, nevertheless. The whole scene transported Nathan to some distant time, where the culture was much more sophisticated, where etiquette and courtesy were practiced daily, and wealth was equated to elegance. Watching the dancers spin and sway, the woman's dresses twirling as the men spun them, was a mesmerizing sight. Nathan could not help but feel something that he could only identify as nostalgia, despite the fact that he was far too young to have been exposed to such times. It was a shame that today's society could not find enjoyment in such parties anymore. Instead, these celebrations remained with the upper echelons of society, while the rest of the social ladder enjoyed themselves in dark clubs with strobe lights and throbbing music.

Eventually, the music stopped, and the lead violinist of the quartet rose to announce a short five-minute break. The dancers began to separate after bowing in thanks to their dance partners. Nathan spotted Robikov's son, Alexei, still stiff-lipped and with dull gaze, give a slight nod to the ever-chatting woman who he had been dancing with. As Alexei turned to head towards the fringes of the dance floor, another woman approached him. Nathan could not get a good look at the woman, as he was too far from the scene, but he watched as the woman handed Alexei something from her handbag, saying something that Nathan could not decipher. Alexei received the object without a word. Alexei looked up from the object to find the woman gone, and just like Nathan, began scanning the guests to see if he could spot her. When the search proved fruitless, Alexei looked back down at the object in his hands. Nathan caught a glimpse of what looked like a small box. The Russian boy started to manipulate the object – rotating, turning, twisting – and Nathan realized that it must have been some sort of puzzle cube, similar to a Rubik's cube, but much more complicated. The cube was all one color, and from what Nathan could tell, Alexei was turning the object in many different angles and sliding faces of the cube in various directions. Nathan watched as Alexei manipulated the object, the boy's face showing the first sign of emotion since Nathan had seen him: puzzlement. As the boy continued to twist and turn the cube, the boy's face transitioned from confusion to what Nathan could only describe as a mix of happiness and curiosity. For the first time since Nathan saw Alexei, the Russian boy was smiling. His gaze still fixed to the object in his hands, Alexei melded into the backdrop of guests, disappearing from Nathan's sight.

“How did the conversation go?”

Nathan turned his head around to find Poole standing next to him, a glass of some sort of alcoholic drink in his hand.

“Um good,” Nathan replied, wondering how he had not heard Poole approach, “where have you been?”

“Oh, around.” Poole said, answering in his typical round-about way. “Feeling better?”

“Somewhat,” Nathan said, and he meant it. Seeing so many smiling and happy people actually had a positive effect on him, even if the people around him were extremely rich. He had always assumed that wealth bred arrogance and snobbishness. Perhaps he was wrong.

“See? Didn’t I tell you this would be good for you?” Poole gave Nathan a pat on the shoulder.

“Yeah...Hey Poole, what exactly is Robikov’s relation to the CIA?”

“I told you, it’s complicated,” Poole said, taking another drink.

“Is he a spy, like you?”

“Of course not, you think he’s good looking enough?”

“Then what does he do?”

“Why the questions all of a sudden, Nathaniel? Did Robikov tell you something?” Poole said, turning his gaze towards Nathan.

“No, I’m just curious.” An image of Robikov’s business card flashed through his mind. The words “Diosis Corp” glowed in his thoughts. Something was not quite right, Nathan did not know exactly what, but he just could not figure out why an “Executive Director of Information Systems Security” would surround himself with so many armed guards and have connections to the Central Intelligence Agency.

“Look,” Poole said, his voice lowering. He could tell what Nathan was thinking, and his change of tone conveyed his seriousness, “There’s a lot of things you don’t know. There’s a lot of things I don’t know. There’s a lot of things you *shouldn’t* know, but you do. What little you do know already has gotten you in quite a bit of trouble. Do you really want to know more?”

“I suppose not,” Nathan admitted.

“Good,” Poole said, returning back to his jovial self. “Besides, the world already has enough dark secrets, no sense in digging up the dirt. You should enjoy yourself while you are in New York, let me worry about all the dirty stuff.”

“I guess you’re right...” Nathan muttered. He was enjoying himself, and he did have Poole to thank. The man certainly had connections. Nathan was not sure anymore if he was glad to have met Poole, or still angry. After all, how often was one able to meet a real-life spy?

“Of course I am,” Poole took another sip of his drink. Just as he did so, Nathan spotted Robikov walking towards them again, once again flanked by his two bodyguards. This time, however, the Russian did not have a smile on his face. Nathan nudged Poole to direct his attention towards the oncoming Robikov.

“Uh oh,” Poole whispered, “This doesn’t look good.” Robikov and his two guards stopped in front of Nathan and Poole, Robikov looking straight at Poole, his nose slightly pointed in the air.

“Your assistance is needed Mr. Poole,” Robikov said.

“Oh? What’s the problem, Andrei?”

“It appears we have an incident...” Robikov said, his eyes narrowing. Nathan noticed that the Russian’s eyes darted towards his direction for a brief second. “An incident concerning your...former associate.” Nathan could tell that Robikov was choosing his words carefully. Apparently, whatever was going on, Nathan was not supposed to know. He could tell that some coded message was being passed between the two men in front of him, and he did not like it one bit.

“Is that so?” Poole said, his eyebrows rising in interest. “Is she here?”

“My system saw her entering just five minutes ago.”

“Then we don’t have much time,” Poole muttered. He handed his unfinished drink to Nathan and took out his smart phone. Poole pressed a few buttons and then nodded his head.

“Right, we should go then.” Robikov nodded his head and turned around, his guards following behind.

“What’s going on?” Nathan said once the Russian was out of earshot.

“A little...problem” Poole said, “It’s probably best if you head back to the hotel right now.”

“What? By myself? Won’t I be in danger?”

“You’ll be in a lot less danger than if you stayed here.” Nathan blinked. He looked at the grimace on Poole’s face, and suddenly, it all made sense.

“Wait, she’s here? The woman that tried to steal the suitcase? She’s here at this party?” Nathan immediately swiveled his head around, trying to see if he could spot her. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck tingling, as well as his stitches tightening as he reimagined the kick to his face.

“Mmmm, perhaps, but it’s best to play it safe. This doesn’t concern you, it would be best if you go back to the hotel, I’ve called for the limo to pick you up.”

Nathan looked at Poole and for the first time, he saw how serious the man could be. So many questions were running through Nathan’s head, but he could only manage to speak two.

“Who is she, Poole? Why does she want the suitcase?”

“She’s like everyone else,” Poole said, placing his phone back in his pocket, “she wants what they tell her to want.” Before Nathan could ask for an explanation, the spy walked swiftly away, weaving his way through the crowd after Robikov. Nathan watched, wondering what a one-armed spy could do to stop the dangerous woman. Nathan had seen firsthand the athletic prowess of the woman and even if Poole was just as good, he could not possibly be in his best shape after the accident. The music had restarted and the dancers were returning to the floor. The party was still going on as normal. Robikov had been discrete with his request, letting the party guests go about on their business. Many, if not all the guests, probably did not know of Robikov’s covert connection.

For the third time tonight, Nathan was left alone. He placed Poole’s half-finished drink on the platter of a passing-by waiter, and scanned the room once more, as if he would find anyone that would recognize him and strike up a conversation. Of course, he was the only non-wealthy, non-famous guest of the party, no one knew who he was, and no one would want to talk to him. He was suddenly feeling quite lonely among the crowd of people. Just as he was beginning to enjoy himself, reality had come back, reminding him that he was not where he was supposed to be. Nathan was way out of his comfort level, both emotionally and physically. He was beginning to wonder if he was feeling stress under the subconscious thought of being under the possible threat of death. But, Nathan consoled himself, he was always under the possible threat of death every day, it just so happened that starting from yesterday, he was much more aware of it. Nathan was feeling exposed. He hated to admit it, but Poole’s presence comforted him. Even if the man was only half the spy he made himself out to be, the man sure emulated a sense of calm, collected, confidence. Poole had a knack for making the most pressing and stress-inducing events appear trivial. The fact that Poole was taking this issue seriously meant that Nathan should probably take the man’s advice and head back to the hotel.

Nathan navigated himself towards the elevator he used to get up to the penthouse level. He scanned the room one last time to see if he could spot anyone he knew – Robikov, Poole, or even the woman. Just as the elevator closed, he spotted Robikov and Poole on the second floor balcony, entering one of the guarded doors.

The limousine was waiting for him once he exited the building. Nathan hopped in, and the limousine drove off. Nathan wondered if the driver was somehow affiliated with the CIA, but he thought it best not to ask. Poole was right, the less he knew about this whole situation, the

better. Ironically, the only reason Nathan had so much contact with Poole and his covert connections was to avoid having any more encounters of the espionage sort. Nathan wondered why Poole was so keen on protecting Nathan. Was it really because the man felt entitled to after Nathan risked his own life? Nathan was not so naïve as to believe that, the man must have some ulterior motives, but so far, Nathan could not see any.

As the limousine drove on, Nathan could feel himself drifting off. It was hard to believe that it was just this morning when he first met Poole in the taxi. The idea of lying on the bed in the hotel was beginning to seem a lot more enticing. The return trip went by much faster than the trip to the party. The limousine slowed down and turned into the entrance, where the door was opened for Nathan. Nathan squinted as his eyes met the bright lights shining through the hotel lobby. Nathan checked his watch; it was half past one.

Eyes nearly closed, Nathan managed to find his way to his room. He stumbled for a few seconds trying to get his keycard to open the door, but eventually the light switched green and Nathan sighed as he heard the internal locking mechanism unlatch. He pushed his way into the dark room, not even bothering to turn on the lights. Loosening his tie, Nathan walked towards his bed, kicking his shoes off in the process. He fell down face first onto the bed and closed his eyes, ready to let sleep come over him. In a few hours he would wake up, walk to the Empire State Building, and release Simon's ashes, then it would all be over and Nathan could return back home, where everything was normal. Just as his mind began to drift off, Nathan heard a click of a lamp turning on nearby, and a cold, familiar, feminine voice speak.

"Hello Mr. Searing, I've been waiting for you."

Chapter 5

Nathan's heart skipped a beat. He instinctively got up, flipped himself around to face the intruder and backpedaled until his spine was against the headboard of the bed. His head knocked against the wall, but the pain was ignored over the sheer shock and adrenaline pumping through Nathan's veins.

Sitting in the chair in the opposite corner of the room, by one of the lamps, was the woman from this morning. She was wearing a dark overcoat and high boots, her legs crossed and her hands placed on her lap in a semi-relaxed position. She was no longer wearing sunglasses, allowing Nathan to see her cold, penetrating eyes, the light from the lamp reflecting an inner fierceness. Nathan could feel the sweat running down his forehead, he swallowed, his eyes fixed on the woman.

"You can relax Mr. Searing, I'm not here to kill you." The woman said dully. Nathan tried to control his breathing and regain his composure. His mind was racing with the possible outcomes to this scenario. He briefly debated making a run for it, but he knew there was no chance he could reach the door before the woman would.

"What do you want? The suitcase isn't here." Nathan managed to say in as controlled of a voice as he could muster.

"I know that, the suitcase is with Robikov." Nathan was about to ask how the woman knew that, but he realized he already knew the answer.

"You were there. Poole was supposed to find you."

“No, Poole was supposed to *think* that he would find me.” The woman said curtly, “He will only find a very pesky computer virus infecting Robikov’s security systems. It should keep him quite busy.”

“If you were there, why didn’t you take the suitcase?”

“Too risky, not with Robikov’s drones everywhere. I may have been able to get to his preliminary systems, but the Russian is known for designing security systems. Besides,” The woman added, staring piercingly at Nathan, “My objective has changed. I’m not here for the suitcase.” Nathan knew the words that were coming next. Nevertheless, he winced as he heard them.

“I’m here for you, Mr. Searing.”

“What do you want from me?” Nathan asked hesitantly. The woman had stated that she was not going to kill Nathan, but that was no comfort to him. The stitches on his head proved that quite clearly.

“Isn’t it obvious?” The woman said, raising an eyebrow, “You are going to help me capture William Poole.”

“Why me? Can’t you do that yourself?” The woman let out a sound that sounded halfway between a snort and a scoff. Apparently, Nathan had hit a nerve.

“I looked you up, Mr. Searing.” The woman began, readjusting her posture so that she stood back straight on the chair, “you’re a civilian from Boston, 25 years of age, living with a group of childhood friends – Benjamin Canner, Andrew Langley and James Ashway. You were born in a suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Greg and Linda Searing. You graduated from university with high honors and a computer science major. You just recently started on a new technological start-up company with your friends and you aren’t here in New York for business.” As she said this, her eyes briefly shifted towards the urn sitting on the nearby table. She then turned her attention back to Nathan. “You’re a contributing member of society with no crime history or any connections to any illegal organizations. Although you are quite intelligent, you don’t fit the profile. Yet for some reason, you have prevented me from obtaining the suitcase and you are roaming about New York with William Poole, a man you have presumably just met earlier today. What’s more,” The woman paused, for added dramatic effect, “William Poole lets you roam with him.”

Nathan was shocked. This woman knew everything about him, his hometown, his history, the location of his home. What was worse, this woman knew everything about his friends and his family. Nathan could feel his body grow warmer. Judging by his inability to move a muscle, Nathan was experiencing the most fear he had ever felt in his life. He had not just put himself in danger, but his loved ones as well. The way she presented the information so coolly and emotionlessly sent shivers down Nathan’s spine. This woman was powerful, and she knew she had power over Nathan.

“So tell me, Mr. Searing.” The woman said slowly, “why *are* you with William Poole?”

“He offered,” Nathan explained, he figured the truth was the best answer, “he asked me to get his suitcase after the car accident, I was in the taxi he tried to take to escape from you. He said that you would think that I was working with him now that I helped him, so he offered to protect me from you while I was here.”

There was a moment of silence as the woman digested the information that Nathan had given her. She bit her lower lip, and her gaze lowered as she was processing her thoughts. Nathan glanced at the door, hoping that Poole – or anyone for that matter – would come in and get him out of here. The woman then got up off the chair, causing Nathan to tense up. She

walked over to the light switch and turned it on, illuminating the room and eliminating the ominous atmosphere emitted from the single light source. Once the room was lit, Nathan could see the woman clearly. She certainly seemed less threatening, but only a by a little. She faced Nathan, who was still on the bed.

“What exactly has Poole told you about me?”

“He said he was working undercover. He was working with you until you found out who he was. He was supposed to retrieve a suitcase and return it to the C.I.A. and you were trying to stop him. He said you worked for a powerful and dangerous organization that wanted whatever was in the suitcase.”

Once Nathan finished his explanation, he looked at the woman, wondering if she would refute or prove Poole’s statements.

“He always had a knack for twisting the truth,” The woman said, more to herself than to Nathan. She closed her eyes and placed her hand on her forehead, letting out an exasperated sigh. “You are way in over your head, kid.” She whispered.

“What?” Nathan said, although he had heard what she said quite clearly. The woman then looked back up at Nathan, the fierceness in her eyes gone.

“It’s all a lie,” The woman began, “well, most of it anyway. I’m not who you think I am, and Poole is certainly not who he says he is.”

“What do you mean?” Nathan said hesitantly. His stomach was beginning to lurch, he could feel a migraine coming on. Nathan could feel the world around him shattering. He felt as if the ground had just been pulled from underneath him and he was about to fall into nothingness.

“Poole isn’t who he says he is.” The woman repeated, “I’m not the one who works for a powerful and dangerous organization, Poole does. Although he is correct when he told you he was a spy. He just doesn’t work for the C.I.A.”

“Then who does he work for?”

“A global technology company, the Diosis Corporation.” At the sound of the name, Nathan felt a shiver run through him. He recognized the name immediately, he slowly reached for his back pocket and took out his wallet, opening it up and taking out Robikov’s business card. The woman watched as Nathan did so and nodded her head.

“Yes, the same company that Robikov works for, except while Robikov works in one of the R&D divisions of Diosis, Poole works for the intelligence division.”

“Intelligence division?” Nathan repeated.

“He’s a spy.” The woman said flatly, “a corporate spy.” The word ‘corporate’ left her lips with a hint of disgust.

“What’s a corporate spy?” Nathan said. He had never heard of the term before. He had an idea of what it meant, but he thought it best to ask.

“You’ve never heard of corporate espionage? How do you think large corporations maintain ahead of the competition? Sure, they employ brilliant scientists and engineers, but they need to know what everyone else is doing so they can make their own, better, version, and market it first. Large corporations like the Diosis Corp have their own set of spies that infiltrate their competition to discover experimental technology and research they can use. William Poole is one such spy.”

“If Diosis Corp is so large,” Nathan said, “Then how come I’ve never heard of them until tonight?”

“It’s a conglomerate. Diosis Corp is made up of many corporations in different market sectors. You’ve probably heard of some of them. They work in the healthcare, consumer

electronics, energy and aeronautical fields just to name a few. Diosis Corp itself maintains a relatively low profile, especially in the U.S.”

“Why is that?”

“Because,” the woman began. She stopped shortly, unsure as to whether or not she should finish her answer. She looked at Nathan, wondering if she could trust him. “Because, the government is one of Diosis Corp’s clients.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The U.S. Government has a contract with Diosis Corp. Diosis provides much of the military and C.I.A’s latest technological innovations. We tend to keep that fact hidden from the public.”

“Wait, we?” Nathan remarked. The woman sighed, realizing that she had revealed more than she had intended to with her last statement.

“Poole likes to spin the truth. He isn’t the one working for the C.I.A., I am.” Now Nathan’s head was really spinning. He adjusted himself more comfortably on the bed, itching as close to his stitches as possible without making contact with the wound.

“Okay, you are going to have to explain.”

The woman let out another sigh. She walked back to the chair and sat down, her elbows on her knees. She closed her eyes and started rubbing her temples. After a few seconds, she sat up and reached inside her jacket, taking out a leather badge, similar to the one Poole had shown Nathan. She handed the badge to Nathan, who flipped it open. It was almost identical to Poole’s, except for the picture.

“My name is Agent Kross,” The woman began, “I work as an undercover agent for the C.I.A. William Poole was my partner, we were working on a case together. At the time we all thought he was another agent from another office, recently transferred, he had the credentials, it all checked out. Our assignment was to infiltrate another technological conglomerate – Herring Technologies. We had intelligence linking Herring Technologies to an illicit arms trade with some hostile countries and we were sent into one of Herring’s buildings to retrieve any information.”

“That’s what was in the suitcase,” Nathan said. The woman shrugged.

“That’s what I thought was in the suitcase, now I’m not so sure. Herring Technologies is Diosis Corp’s greatest competitor on the global stage. Apparently, it was Poole’s plan to use the C.I.A. as a way in to Herring and take the plans to any of their latest innovations. This way, he could pin the operation on the government, Herring would sever any contracts it had with the government, and we would be forced to rely solely on Diosis Corp for tech.”

“Doesn’t the government have its own R&D program? Why can’t you develop your own technologies?”

“We do, but not nearly at a pace fast enough to compete with what’s out there. We simply don’t have the budget, or the manpower. We are in the middle of a war, many people forget. We need every advantage we can get.”

“Doesn’t seem like much of an advantage to be in the hands of a private organization.” Nathan muttered. Agent Kross flashed him a sideways glance but ignored the comment.

“Once we retrieved the suitcase, Poole made his move. He alerted Herring’s security to our presence and made a run for it. I almost didn’t realize what he had done, but he was sloppy. I was chasing him when he decided to jump into an occupied taxi and met you. After I stopped him, I tried retrieving the suitcase, but *you* managed to stop me.” Nathan could feel his face turn red. He was about to apologize, but then he caught on to something the woman said.

“Wait, you didn’t stop Poole, a car ran into him.”

Kross didn’t say anything, she just looked out the window. A radical thought went through Nathan’s head.

“You can’t possibly tell me you...arranged for that car to hit him?”

No reply.

“That’s...impossible, how could you have possibly orchestrated that?”

“It’s not so hard when you have the right information,” the woman said finally, “you just need to accurately determine which car will arrive when Poole crosses the street, determine the identity of the person driving the car – street cameras will help, look up his history, discover that he recently lost his wife in a car accident, find a hat similar in color to the one his wife, Martha, used to wear, and stand at just the right angle to make sure his head is turned away from the traffic light and street. It’s all just a study of the human psyche, understanding what makes people tick. All secrets are revealed if you just look hard enough.”

Nathan stared in horror. The way the woman explained it all so matter-of-factly was unsettling. He could not believe what she was saying, let alone that it was possible.

“You ruined that man’s life!” Nathan exclaimed. “You manipulated him!” The image of the frightened man’s face entered Nathan’s mind. Nathan now realized why the man had gone so pale, he actually thought he had seen a ghost.

“It was necessary. I needed an inconspicuous way to stop Poole without giving up my cover.”

“Inconspicuous? You orchestrated a car accident, you could have killed him!”

“Improbably, the driver was going far too slowly.” The fear in Nathan’s body was turning slowly into anger. Who did this woman think she was that she could put people’s lives in danger like that?

“If you have all the information you need, why don’t you just sneak into Robikov’s place and retrieve the suitcase and call it done, why do you need Poole?” Nathan said, trying to maintain his anger.

“I already told you, it would be far more difficult than you think. The damage has already been done. Herring already knows we infiltrated one of their buildings. We need to capture Poole and prove to Herring Tech that it was Diosis Corp that was truly behind the mission.”

“What? And give them Poole? You’re going to use him as a scapegoat? Won’t Diosis Corp sever its ties with you?”

“Unlikely. Diosis Corp realizes that the only reason they operate so freely on our soil is because we let them. We are one of their main sources of income, if Poole falls they will continue with their work. Poole is only one small cog in their machine. He made a mistake. All they have to do is claim Poole went rogue and acted on his own accord, cut ties with him, and they appear innocent of the whole dealing. The world isn’t only black and white, Mr. Searing. The government must get its hands dirty if it wants to protect its citizens. Likewise, we cannot shut down Diosis Corp, it’s technologies have saved just as much – if not more – lives than they have destroyed. I’m not asking you to play the hero, I’m just asking you to help us restore balance.”

“Why should I believe any of this? How do I know that you aren’t lying to me?”

“You don’t, and frankly, I don’t care if you do,” Agent Kross said, “but one way or another, we are going to find Poole, with or without your help. And when we do, you best hope that the police don’t discover that you tried aiding and abetting a traitor of the United States.”

“You’re not leaving me with much of a choice.” Nathan said, alarmed by the sudden change in tone of the conversation.

“You always have a choice,” Kross responded, “I’m just asking you to choose the right one, and in this case, it’s the easy one. You don’t have to do anything you would not have normally done on your trip, all I need you to do is ensure that Poole is with you when you reach the top of Empire State Building, I will be waiting for the two of you there. He’ll have nowhere to run.”

“What are you going to do with him?”

“I won’t kill him, if that’s what you mean.”

Nathan sighed. He was driven into a corner with no way out. What had he gotten himself into? He was now fully immersed in a world alien to him; a world that he did not know existed until a little less than twenty-four hours ago. He had just spent the day with who he thought was a C.I.A spy and was now face to face with an actual C.I.A. spy, asking him to lead Poole into a trap. It was all too much. Nathan needed sleep. Everything he thought he knew was being called into question.

“I just wanted to help,” Nathan said. Kross got up from the chair, taking Nathan’s comment as agreement. She turned off the lamp light and walked over to the light switch.

“Then help,” She said, switching the lights off. Nathan was left in darkness, the cold voice of Agent Kross resonating in the room. “but make sure you know who you’re helping.”

Chapter 6

Nathan awoke to bright sunlight streaming in from the window. Shielding his eyes, he propped himself up and found Poole sitting at the table, reading a newspaper held in place by his broken arm.

“Good morning,” the man said, without shifting his gaze from the paper. He grabbed a nearby cup of coffee and took a sip. Nathan gave a groan in response and checked his watch. It was almost noon. He flipped the covers off himself and realized that he was still wearing the tuxedo. The events of late last night arose within his mind, bringing with it a slight headache. Wordlessly, Nathan got off the bed, grabbed some clothes from his bag and headed straight into the bathroom for a long, hot shower.

Today was the day. The whole reason Nathan was here in the city was about to occur in a few hours, and once over, Nathan could go back to his home and remember what it meant to relax. Everything would return to normal, or as normal as could possibly be, given the recent passing of his life-long friend. All he had to do was release the ashes into the wind on top of one of the tallest buildings in the world. He was doing a service, honoring Simon’s last wishes, proving to everyone that he was a good friend, that all these years meant something to him, that Simon meant something to him. But, as Nathan briefly thought, was he really proving it to everyone, or himself? The task was simple, but carried meaning. All the logistics had already been planned out; there was nothing that could go wrong, no complications.

Except, of course, the part where Nathan had to lead a corporate spy into a trap set-up by the C.I.A. Nathan flinched as the hot water landed on his forehead, running over his stitches. The same woman who had given him the kick to the head was now forcing him to lead a man he barely knew to what could possibly be the end of that man’s freedom, the man’s life. Nathan had

no choice, he told himself. He either allowed the C.I.A. to capture Poole, or be branded a traitor of the nation, just like Poole. Was Poole really a traitor? The man worked for a large corporation that was responsible for creating the technologies that killed thousands of people. The man had gone undercover and impersonated a government operative. But the government was not blameless either. It was the military that used the technologies, that employed Diosis Corp.'s services. Poole was just doing his job, and so was Agent Kross. The woman was right; nothing was just black and white.

One thing was for certain, the man could no longer be trusted...or could he? The man had lied to him, but as Nathan realized, Poole had kept his word. He had stayed to 'protect' Nathan from the woman, even though he really had no incentive, unless Poole had an ulterior motive for traveling with Nathan. Nathan would never know. In reality, Nathan was not the one that needed protection, it was Poole. He needed protection from Agent Kross, his own company who was ready to hang him out to dry, and although Poole did not know it – he needed protection from Nathan.

However, Nathan told himself, the man just outside the door was still the same man that Nathan had met just yesterday morning, nothing had changed that fact. Nathan had to be careful to act exactly the same way he had always acted around Poole as to not give away his new knowledge. Knowing that Poole was not who he said he was should have changed Nathan's opinion about the man – and it did – but Nathan had to act as if it did not, which would be difficult. Nathan was not like Poole or Kross, he was never trained in deception.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Nathan found Poole still at the table, reading. As Nathan took a seat at the table, Poole slid a cup of coffee over to him. Nathan mumbled a response of thanks and took a sip. He felt his muscles relax as the warm liquid flowed into his stomach and the heat seeped throughout his body.

"Can you believe this?" Poole thought aloud, "These politicians can't seem to get anything done these days, what's the point of government anymore?" Nathan did not respond, instead, he eyed Poole carefully, trying to discern any traits that would indicate that Poole was corporate spy, something that he had missed the first day. The term itself sounded so bizarre, even in Nathan's head. Poole noticed Nathan's gaze, and put down his newspaper.

"Did you sleep well?" He asked.

"All right," Nathan responded, taking another sip of coffee, "How did it go with...you know? Did you catch her?" Nathan added the last question quickly, making sure to seem like he was still the clueless civilian. In reality, he still was the clueless civilian.

"Unfortunately, no" Poole frowned, "it turned out she downloaded some sort of virus, probably in an attempt to steal some of Robikov's work and get to the suitcase. Took a great deal of time to locate it and eliminate it. All it did was hop from place to place, I'm not even sure if it transmitted anything. In retrospect, perhaps I should have had you stay; you could have helped us out with all the programming." Poole chuckled. Nathan gave a faint smile in response.

"So, today is your big day, isn't it? The day your friend finally flows free among the Earth." Poole waved his good arm slowly, taking on an ethereal tone of voice. Both men cast their gaze on the urn that was sitting at the center of the table. Nathan was not sure if the man was being sincere, or if Nathan should feel offended. He simply stared at Poole. Poole realized that he might have crossed a line.

"I understand that this is a personal matter," Poole said, using his sympathetic voice, "If you want to make this journey on your own, I'll respect your wishes. I expect you'll be safe in such a public space."

“No,” Nathan quickly responded. Then, realizing he might have responded too quickly, he added “No, it’s fine. I think it’d be best if you came with. I think Simon would appreciate it, having his ashes personally escorted by a spy.” It was a shaky reason; one that Nathan himself would not have bought if he were in Poole’s place. Nathan was beginning to realize that he was a terrible liar. He quickly glanced at Poole’s face to see if the man knew that something was wrong. If he did, Poole did not show it. He simply gave a slight chuckle at Nathan’s comment and nodded.

“I suppose so. It has been awhile since I’ve been up to the top of the Empire State Building. When do you need to go?”

“I need to be at the top by five o’clock.” Nathan said.

“Great, we can walk to the Empire State Building, it’s not far. I know an excellent café that’s on the way where we can pick up some lunch. Shall we go?” Nathan nodded, finishing his cup of coffee. Poole did the same and within five minutes, the two men were out the door.

The walk was relatively silent between the two men. Nathan spent most of his time avoiding Poole’s gaze and looking around the street, focusing on taking in the sights. He followed the windows of the various buildings high up into the sky. The weather was cool, the sun was out and there was not a cloud in sight. As it was the afternoon, there were few people on the streets. Nathan could see some men and women through the windows of restaurants and cafés, no doubt taking their lunch breaks.

The café that Poole led them to was a quiet little place, tucked between a bakery and an art gallery. Nathan was pleasantly surprised to see that this was more of a casual, relaxed café. He was expecting something along the lines of upper class European dining. The waiter addressed Poole by name and the two men gave each other firm pats on the shoulder. The waiter asked about Poole’s broken arm, which Poole simply laughed and attributed it to his clumsiness. The waiter led them to one of the tables outside where they took their seats and ordered their food. Nathan had to admit, the food was quite good. The appearance of both the restaurant and food was deceptively simple, but there was just the right combination of spices and garnishes that made Nathan appreciate the fact that his stomach was currently empty and ready for as much sustenance as possible.

“You’re awfully quiet today,” Poole remarked as they men ate, “I was expecting many more questions coming from you.”

“Well, I think I’m catching on,” Nathan said, “I think I’m finally understanding what you said yesterday night, about how knowing too much can get you in even more trouble. Besides, even if I did ask you any more questions, would you give me a straight answer?”

“Probably not,” Poole admitted, “but how straight does the answer have to be? It just has to get you to where you want to go.”

“And how would you know where I want to go?”

“I don’t,” Poole said, “But how do you know that *you* know where you want to go?”

Nathan did not reply, for he had no reply.

“It’s ok,” Poole went on, “I don’t think anyone knows for sure where they want to go. The important thing is that you are sure that it’s you who is making the decision.” He then looked at the urn that Nathan had placed on the table while they were eating. “You know, we spend our entire lives bombarded with whatever is expected of us. We are told what we want, told what is good for us, told what we should do. I think in the end, a lot of us just accept it and follow orders. We’re not as free as we think. It’s easier that way, we don’t have to spend time confronting ourselves, being unsure of ourselves. I can see it in people’s eyes, the lack of

conviction. I can see it in your eyes,” Nathan looked up from his food, realizing that Poole was addressing him.

“I know that it’s a particularly hard time for you. Losing a long-time friend is something I can’t relate to, but I know what it feels to suffer loss. People will tell you that everything will be ok and you will have this idea of what it means to mourn, but these are things that we think society expects from us. It’s not for everyone. You aren’t doing this to prove anything to anyone, you don’t have to prove that you mourn. I’ve heard you talk to your friends, I’ve heard you talk about your life, you’re doing it wrong. You try so hard to appease everyone else, you forget the most important person: yourself. If you respect yourself, you will respect others. I think it’s time you start asking yourself not what everyone expects of you, but what you expect from yourself. What is it that *you* want, Nathaniel?” Poole took another bite of his food, chewing it slowly to savor the flavor. “I’m sorry to take this conversation on such a deeper and darker level, but you struck me as someone who needed to hear that. Consider it some sagely advice from an elder. You may seem like you’re alone in this world, but there are plenty of people out there that want to help.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Nathan said. Nathan was not sure how deeply he should internalize Poole’s message. The words the man said were full of wisdom, but knowing that Poole worked with deception daily somewhat tarnished the value of his words. Yet, despite all this, for a brief moment Nathan believed the man once more. He not only believed the man, he *trusted* him.

“I don’t expect you to understand what I was saying, I hardly understood it myself,” Poole said, “But do you know what the point I was trying to make was?”

“What?”

“Don’t accept the rules, challenge them. Keep asking me questions, even if you’re expecting a roundabout answer, you never know when I might tell it to you straight.” Poole gave a quick wink before taking another bite. He smiled and then turned his gaze to the street, watching the scene before him. Nathan looked back down at his food, it did not look as appealing as it did just a few minutes ago.

Chapter 7

The rest of lunch was conducted mostly in silence, save for the few times that Poole commented on the quality of the food and Nathan followed up with a short agreement. Occasionally, Poole would make one of his half-philosophical observations, but Nathan was far too distracted to give them any thought. After the men paid for their meals, they once again began walking, getting ever closer to their destination. The streets were slowly filling up with people heading back home from work. Some people walked eagerly, others took their time. Nathan and Poole were in the latter group, as they still had awhile before Nathan would fulfill Simon’s last wish. Although, Nathan realized that the moment the men reached the top floor, Poole would be in Agent Kross’s hands, hopefully with relatively little resistance. Nevertheless, the event would take some time, so Nathan tried to make sure that the two of them were going at fast enough of a pace to reach their destination somewhat early. It was a strange pace to set – on one hand, Nathan wanted to get this over with as soon as possible, but on the other, Nathan found himself walking slower and slower, as if attempting to deny the inevitable. The occasional glances from pedestrians at the urn in his arm made Nathan feel even more uneasy, but was he

really so eager to get this over with? For the past twenty-four hours, his mind had undoubtedly said yes, but now, even if his head had not changed its opinion, Nathan's heart was hesitating.

Once they turned the corner, Nathan could see the Empire State Building looming up ahead. It was certainly a marvel to behold. Nathan had seen pictures of the architectural wonder before, but there was nothing quite like craning one's neck to see the top. It was during that moment that Nathan understood why Simon had desired to be an architect. The idea of creating something so grand as to occupy its own place in the sky was both a gratifying thought, and powerful one. Nathan had never labeled Simon as one with an inflated ego, and he had always wondered why his friend so desired to design large man-made monuments. At first, Nathan had thought it was just a vain attempt at leaving a mark upon the world, but now he understood. The act of creation was not an attempt at rivaling the works of nature – the divine, the act of creation was an attempt at appreciating the divine. Even though Nathan had to crane his neck to see the top of the Empire State Building, he had to crane his neck even higher to see the sky, the stars, space. The fact that this building rose higher than the ranks of its brethren was not an act of arrogance, it was an act of ultimate appreciation. That building made him look up, and when he did, he saw the vastness of the sky. Simon was not an architect because he wanted to prove to the world that he could make something beautiful to look at, he was an architect because he wanted to show everyone that beauty already surrounded everyone. Nathan imagined the view at the top where he would release the ashes. A sudden calmness washed over him as he envisioned the cityscape, sky and water form a panorama of serenity.

"Ah, a toy store," Poole remarked as they walked, "I still need to get my son something from this trip, he's expecting a souvenir. Do you mind? It'll only be for a few minutes." The toy store was a small little shop just a few stores ahead.

"No, of course not," Nathan replied, "Take your time, I'll wait out here."

"Excellent, I will return shortly." Poole walked ahead, disappearing into the store. The ringing of the chimes reaching Nathan's ears as the door opened. It was then Nathan realized that the street they were currently on was barely populated. Only two or three people were walking on it, giving the scene a peace that Nathan did not expect in New York City.

As he stood there, a woman passed him by. She walked briskly and with purpose. However, the moment she passed by the sidewalk bench, she abruptly stopped. She stood still, almost as if she was frozen in time. A few seconds passed and then the woman slowly retraced her steps, walking backwards. It was a surreal sight, and reminded Nathan of a rewinding movie. The woman walked back to the bench and then turned her head, peering over the backrest and looking down on the seat. She bent over and picked something up off the seat. Nathan could not see what exactly the woman picked up, but it seemed to be some sort of origami animal. The woman examined the object and suddenly, without warning, she burst into tears. Nathan took a step forward, unsure as to whether or not he should approach the woman. He took one more step before he realized that the woman was not crying out of sadness, but out of happiness. While the tears streamed down her face, the woman's lips curved up into a smile. She sat down and bowed her head, her tears falling down onto the paper object in her hand.

Nathan did not know what to make of the scene. He looked around to see if anyone else was watching. He spotted someone on the bench located on the opposite side of the street reading a newspaper. The person folded the newspaper down to reveal a head and a pair of sunglasses. It took a fraction of a second before Nathan realized whom it was. He shuddered as Agent Kross pulled her sunglasses down, her eyes glaring at Nathan. Nathan received the message through her gaze. He sighed, and crossed the street, taking a seat next to Agent Kross.

“What are you doing here?” He said, making his annoyance clear.

“Just wanted to make sure you were on your way.” Kross said, avoiding eye contact. Nathan turned his head to face the street, making sure to avoid eye contact as well. He had to make sure that if Poole looked out the window, he would not see anything suspicious.

“You didn’t expect me to follow through?”

“I was concerned.” She said, “I know that Poole has a charismatic personality, he has a way with words.” Nathan nodded in agreement, despite knowing that Poole was lying to him the entire time, Nathan could not seem to harbor much disgust or hate for the man for very long.

“How well do you know him?” Nathan asked, genuinely curious. “You said he worked with you for a while, how long was that?”

“Long enough,” She said stiffly, “long enough to know how dangerous he can be.” Nathan tried to contain his scoff. Dangerous was probably one of the last words that Nathan would describe Poole, even if the man *was* a spy. Poole had said he was not the kind of spy that used force or violence, and Nathan guessed that the man was actually telling the truth.

“Poole doesn’t carry a gun, he hasn’t used any force at all since I’ve met him.” Nathan declared, “On the other hand, you’ve nearly killed him, and you gave me this head wound.”

“Danger takes many forms besides violence. I wouldn’t have kicked you if you would have minded your own business. I gave you a chance to leave.”

“Yeah, well...” Nathan tried to think of a retort, but nothing came to mind. “I’m not going to stray from your plan. Lucky for you, I actually have respect for people’s lives. My friend wants his ashes cast over the Empire State Building, and I plan on doing that. You can have Poole, as far as I’m concerned, the two of you deserve each other. You both work for the same corrupted system. Poole may be a liar, but at least he doesn’t manipulate people.”

“As far as you know.” Kross said. She nodded towards the woman on the bench across the street. “See her? Her name is Wendy McIntyre, born and raised in the city. She’s been married for 10 years, and has two children – Harry and Penelope, one named after her grandfather, the other named after her husband’s grandmother. She works at the bank down the street and does quite well for herself. She goes to church every Sunday, and the only bit of trouble she’s been in with the police was the time she was caught drunk during her college days. On the outside she seems like a perfectly normal citizen.”

“Wonderful, why are you telling me this? You going to make her do your bidding like you did to that man yesterday morning?” Nathan said sarcastically, he crossed his arms and leaned back on the bench.

“When Wendy was younger, while she was still in high school, she had a boyfriend. One night, due to a lapse of judgment and a young, naïve and open heart, she gave herself away. Before she knew it, she discovered that she was pregnant. Scared, ashamed and now alone, she did not know what to do. Luckily, her parents were both understanding people, and supported her through her ordeal. She took a year off from school, had the baby and gave it up for adoption. She saw her baby and held her first daughter in her arms only once. A few years later, she decided to track down her daughter in order to see if she was doing well. She found her daughter, and against the foster parents’ wishes, Wendy revealed her identity to her daughter. You can imagine what kind of reaction the girl must have experienced, realizing that the people who raised her were not her biological parents. Wendy and her daughter met secretly for the next few weeks, getting to know each other and becoming fast friends. However, just a few days ago, the foster parents found out, and forbade Wendy from seeing their daughter any longer, or they would file for a restraining order. Wendy complied; she hasn’t seen her first daughter since.”

Nathan remained silent as Agent Kross paused in her story. He watched Wendy on the other side of the street still sitting on the bench, her head bowed over and her hands clasping the paper object.

“During one of their meetings - at the zoo - Wendy’s daughter pointed out a Cuckoo Bird. Do you know what’s so special about the Cuckoo Bird, other than its distinctive call?”

“No, can’t say I do.” Nathan replied.

“A Cuckoo Bird is a brood parasite. They lay their eggs in another bird’s nest. Birds have a hard time telling which eggs are truly theirs, so the bird of the nest will raise the Cuckoo’s offspring as if it was its own. The strange thing about it all is that it’s an inherent quality of Cuckoo Birds, meaning that even though the offspring was not raised by the Cuckoo Bird mother, it will still grow up to be a Cuckoo Bird, with the exact same behaviors as it’s biological mother. Interesting isn’t it?”

“Yes, quite,” Nathan said. He then realized the connection and spoke again, “Is that what the origami animal is that she’s holding, a Cuckoo Bird?” Agent Kross nodded.

“The Cuckoo Bird is Wendy’s daughter’s way of telling her biological mother that she understands what she did and why she did it. It is the daughter’s way of saying that even though she has grown up with different parents, she acknowledges that Wendy is her biological mother, and that because of that, they will always have a certain connection. In short, it is forgiveness for Wendy’s abandonment. It is the apology that Wendy has always been looking for, but never dared ask. It is closure.”

“But,” Nathan began, “Wendy’s daughter didn’t put that bird there, did she? There’s no way that she could have known Wendy would walk this way, unless she knew what route Wendy would take to go home.” Another spark lit in Nathan’s mind, his deductive skills were increasing at an exponential rate these past few days.

“You put the origami bird there, didn’t you?”

Agent Kross did not reply at first. Nathan was about to turn her head to make sure the woman had not left. She spoke up right before he did so.

“The important thing is that Wendy thinks that her daughter put it there.”

“But she didn’t, what if her daughter really doesn’t forgive her?”

“Oh, she does.” Kross replied simply. Nathan was about to ask her how she knew, but he already knew the answer: she was a spy. The thought was still just as chilling as the first time he heard Agent Kross recite her seemingly endless knowledge about Nathan. He was beginning to understand just how much knowledge these people had at their fingertips. Knowledge was truly power in the hands of people like Agent Kross.

“This is what you do, isn’t it?” Nathan said finally. He did not say the words in a harsh tone, but calmly and simply, as a statement. “You gather all this knowledge about people, their pasts, their behavior, and use them as a way to predict how they will react when you present them with certain situations. You manipulate people by influencing their environment just enough to spark off the right chain of thoughts that lead to the right chain of actions. You did this to that man last morning to cause that accident to stop Poole. But you don’t do it just to make people help you, you do it to help others as well. You helped Wendy, and you helped Robikov’s son last night.”

Agent Kross stiffened. Her muscles contracted so quickly that Nathan could see the newspaper in her hands quiver. He had made another correct deduction, one that Agent Kross was not expecting him to make. The corner of Nathan’s mouth curved upward into a slight

smirk. He enjoyed getting the better of Agent Kross. She may work for the government that protected him, but that did not mean Nathan had to like the woman.

“You saw that.” She said quietly.

“Yes,” Nathan responded. “You gave him the perfect gift, a puzzle with no possible way of completing it, an unattainable goal.” The words that Robikov shared with him last night flashed through Nathan’s mind. “What I don’t understand is why? Why do you hurt people, and then help others, even people related to the very people you despise? Does it give you some personal satisfaction? Are you doing this as an attempt to appease the guilt you have for what you do?”

“And what do you know of what I do?” The woman retorted. Kross nearly turned her head to confront Nathan, but managed to control herself at the last moment.

“Nothing,” Nathan admitted, “and I don’t think I actually want to know what you do. If I’ve learned anything from Poole, it’s that the truth is overrated. But if you think showing me that you help people is going to make me see you in a better light, or make me feel better for what you want me to do, then you are wrong.” Nathan then turned towards Agent Kross, giving up any semblance that the two of them were just strangers sitting on the same bench.

“You may tell yourself that what you do is for the greater good, and maybe it is, but the fact remains you probably do just as horrible things as Poole has to do, if not worse. The only difference is that for whatever reason, Poole seems to accept the reality of what he does, and he’s ok with that. Poole doesn’t care much for the truth, that much I know about him, but he seems to be the only person I know who realizes how things really work. For one who seems like an idealist, Poole manages to speak the truth, maybe not in the way you or I expect, but he does. I may not like what either of you two do, or really know who either of you are, but I can tell you this: I trust what Poole says, even if it’s not the truth. Poole was never going to tell me who he really was, and I don’t blame him for that. Poole is one of the few people I know who seems to know what he wants, and doesn’t care what others want of him. Neither of you are defined necessarily by what you do, but by why and how you do it. So I’m going to ask you Agent Kross, do you know why you do what you do? Do you know who you are trying to help? The Government, the people, or yourself?”

The two of them sat in silence. Nathan watched as Wendy finally picked herself up off the bench. She placed the origami bird into the pocket of her coat, wiped the tears from her face, and smiled as she started walking down the street once again. The sound of her heels clacking against the concrete echoed among the street, accompanied by a faint breeze blowing by, rustling the newspaper in Agent Kross’ hands. Both of them were contemplating on the words Nathan had just said. Nathan was not aware of where the words came from; he was just as surprised by his speech as Kross was. He had never imagined himself lecturing - even scolding - a government operative. What little courage Nathan had swiftly blew away along with the breeze. He turned himself around so that his back faced Kross, who had not moved since he spoke.

“I’m sorry,” Nathan said sheepishly, knowing that no amount of words would erase what he had just done. “I didn’t mean to say all that.”

“Yes, you did,” Agent Kross said, her voice surprisingly calm, “I don’t blame you. I knew what to expect when I took this job. Trust is no cheap commodity for a spy, and I am surprised that Poole gives and receives it so freely. Perhaps I have underestimated you, Nathan Searing. Perhaps you have something that none of the records show, a quality that I cannot define at the moment.” Kross folded her paper and placed it under her arm as she rose.

“You’re leaving?” Nathan asked, confused, “even after what I said to you? How do you know I’m not going to follow through with the plan?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Kross said, “Despite the fact that I have never lied to you, you still trust Poole more than me. It appears that truth and trust are not necessarily linked. So I’m going to trust that Poole also taught you that a man is only as good as his word. You may not believe me, but we will not harm Poole, it’ll be best for everyone if Poole is in our hands.” Kross took a step away, and then stopped, turning her head towards Nathan and saying one last thing.

“I don’t expect you to like me, Mr. Searing, but I hope that you will trust me.”

Nathan watched as the woman walked away, taking a turn up ahead and disappearing around a corner. He was not sure what to make of the conversation. He could not escape the feeling that Kross was trying to tell him something more. But what?

Nathan shook his head free of thoughts. He took a deep breathe, looking up in the sky to find that the Sun was slowly starting its descent. The shadows on the street were slowly lengthening, prompting Nathan to check his watch. He still had time. Nathan felt a mixture of anticipation and hesitation. He realized that the end of his trip might end with the final farewell of two friends, one he had known for years, the other, for days.

It was at that moment that Nathan realized what he was truly telling Agent Kross, and himself. Poole was a friend. It was hard to admit, but Nathan knew that it was what he considered the truth. Despite his expressed disgust at Poole’s occupation and deception, he had told Kross that he trusted Poole. And trust, logically, accompanied friendship, or at least, Nathan had thought so. Agent Kross’ parting words sowed seeds of doubt in Nathan’s definition of friendship. What exactly defined a friend? Nathan was beginning to think it might not just be trust, but something more. Nathan looked down at the urn held in his hands. Was Nathan really someone who would turn in a man who had shared just as much truth as deception?

The door of the toy store across the street opened up with the light jingle of bells. Nathan turned his head to see Poole exiting the building, carrying an enormous stuffed teddy bear under his good arm. The teddy bear wore a red shirt with the words “I [heart] NY” emblazoned in white on the front. Nathan could not help but smile at the comical sight. The very action of smiling helped calm Nathan’s mind and he could feel his muscles relaxing slightly. Learning from the events of yesterday morning, Poole made sure to look both ways before crossing the street. As Poole approached, Nathan raised an eyebrow, eyeing the gift skeptically.

“What?” Poole said, repositioning the teddy bear under his arm, “my son is still young, he still believes that the bigger things are, the better they are.”

“And you’re going to let him keep believing that?” Nathan asked. Poole attempted to shrug his shoulders.

“If it makes him appreciate his old man, I’m not going to say anything. Besides, he’ll figure it out eventually. Shall we go?”

Nathan nodded and the two of them headed down the street, towards the looming silhouette of the Empire State Building, one man holding a funeral urn under his arm, the other, a stuffed teddy bear.

Chapter 8

These past few days had shown Nathan that one of Simon's most underappreciated characteristics was his incredible foresight. Like with many funerals, Simon's funeral consisted of many loved ones delivering eulogies and praising Simon for his intelligence, humor and cleverness. Nathan had grown somewhat tired of these speeches, not because Simon did not exhibit these qualities, but because these were the only qualities that people chose to focus on. As his friend for two decades, Nathan had experienced both the good and bad of Simon, and knew full well that Simon was no saint. But now, Simon's death made Nathan recognize the subtle characteristics that made Simon truly unique and gifted. These were traits that Nathan would never have realized before, but upon great reflection, could now see so clearly. It was a shame that such revelations about friends and family occurred postmortem, Simon would never know how truly he was valued. Indeed, Nathan did not realize how truly he valued his dear friend until now.

Once Simon's will was revealed, Nathan was expecting the entire journey to be full of logistical complications. However, the journey, aside from the obvious, was quite hassle-free. The flight and hotel room had already been booked and paid for, and the lawyer assured Nathan that all the necessary legal paperwork had already been taken care of long before Simon's death in order to permit the release of Simon's ashes from the top of a private building. All Nathan needed to do was to walk into the lobby and tell the lobbyist who he was; everything would already be prepared.

Everything occurred as planned. Nathan and Poole were directed to the elevator and were informed that the entire 86th floor was vacated for the next hour in order to allow privacy, thirty minutes before the release of the ashes, and thirty minutes after. The Empire State Building possessed two observatory floors, one on the 86th floor, and one on the very top – the 102nd floor. However, the highest floor observatory was indoors and completely closed by large glass panels, there was no way Nathan would be able to release the ashes at the very top. A portion of the 86th floor was open to the elements, allowing Nathan to complete his task. Nathan assumed that Simon already knew this when he chose this location, but nevertheless, Nathan could not help but feel as if he was letting Simon down by not being able to spread his friend's ashes at the highest point of the building.

Nathan briefly wondered how much money was required for one to reserve the entire observation floor of the Empire State Building for an hour. Especially considering the fact that the Empire State Building made more money from ticket sales for its observation decks than it did from renting office space. As a budding architect, Simon could not have made much money, how did his friend manage to pay for all these expenses? Some answers would remain hidden.

Nathan and Poole stepped into the elevator and pressed the button to the 86th floor. His thoughts transitioned from Simon to the man standing next to him. As the elevator slowly began its ascent, Nathan glanced at the numbers flashing above the doorframe, advancing towards 86. The time was coming. Nathan could feel his stomach churning and his body heating up. In just a few moments, the doors would open, and Agent Kross would be there, ready to take Poole hostage, and she would have Nathan to thank. Nothing was sitting right with him, but he had no idea what to do.

"You must be experiencing quite the mix of feelings," Poole said, breaking the silence.

"Hm?" Nathan said, pulling himself out of his train of thought, "Yeah, I guess so."

“You’re doing a good thing, Nathaniel,” Poole said, “Your friend is lucky to have known you. I only hope I can find someone as loyal as you one day to fulfill any wild request I have after my death.” Poole chuckled to himself.

Suddenly, something in Nathan clicked. He could feel the rumbling in his stomach rising, turning into words. Nathan tried to stop the words from erupting from his mouth, but he just could not find the strength to keep them down. Before he could bite his tongue, the words escaped. Nathan had no time to think about what he was about to say, he simply said what was on his mind.

“Poole,” He began, his voice wavering, “It’s a trap.”

There was a moment of silence as Nathan’s words settled upon the two men like a heavy blanket. Nathan slowly turned his head towards the man, afraid of what kind of reaction he would find. Poole’s face was calm and composed as normal, his eyes looking straight ahead. For a second, Nathan was not sure if the man had heard him.

“Poole?” Nathan spoke up again, this time louder, “did you hear me? I said it’s a-”

“I heard.” Poole said, cutting Nathan off.

Nathan knew that he probably should elaborate, but the words were no longer rising. The feeling in his stomach was starting to subside. The words had been his release. He could only hope that Poole could connect the dots.

“Thank you for telling me,” Poole spoke up, still staring straight ahead. The man’s calmness was unsettling. Nathan could not decipher the man’s emotions. He had expected some sort of surprise, or anger. Nathan would not even be surprised if Poole suddenly attacked him in order to escape. But the man simply stood there.

“I’m sorry,” Nathan said hesitantly, “Agent Kross was waiting for me last night when I returned from the party. She told me who you really were and wanted me to take you up to the top so that there would be nowhere you could go. I wasn’t supposed to say anything.” He knew he sounded pathetic. Nathan felt ashamed for even trying to give an excuse for what he was doing. Poole nodded.

“It’s ok.” Poole said. Nathan blinked; those were the last two words he was expecting the man to say. Poole turned around to face Nathan.

“I appreciate your honesty, Nathan. Frankly, I’m quite surprised you told me the truth, given what you know about me now.” A slight smile began to grow on the man’s face, “But don’t beat yourself up over it. I already knew.”

This time, it was Nathan who had to process three short words in order to discern their meaning.

“You already knew?” Nathan repeated, “You knew this was going to be a trap? How?”

“Well, when you were talking to Robikov last night I went to his personal storeroom and ‘borrowed’ some of his toys. I slipped a microphone into your pocket. Agent Kross must really like you, she doesn’t normally explain herself to people she uses.”

“If you know what was going to happen, why didn’t you say something? Why didn’t you leave?” Poole’s deception did not bother Nathan as much as it should have. He was more annoyed with Poole’s apparent calmness at the whole situation. Poole shrugged.

“I was curious. I wanted to know whether or not you were going to go through with it.”

“You what?!” Nathan exclaimed. He could feel the annoyance turning into anger. “Was this all a game to you?”

“Hardly,” Poole responded, “I wanted to know what kind of man you were. And something tells me, so did you. Well, now you know.”

“And that is worth giving up your life? Do you know what they are going to do to you?”

“I have a few ideas.” The spy said, “They can’t do too much, Diosis Corp only tells me as much as I need to know. All Kross wants is some sort of confession that the break-in was my idea and I work for Diosis in order to absolve the C.I.A. of any guilt.”

“And what? They’ll let you go?”

“Probably, although I’ll have a large target on my back. I’ve stolen more than my fair share of Herring Technology.” Poole chuckled.

“They’re going to come after you.” Nathan said. It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes.” Poole said simply.

“Diosis Corp isn’t going to help you out, they’ll say you went rogue. There isn’t anywhere you can go.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t expect them too,” Poole said, “I’m just one of their many corporate spies – one of the better ones, I admit – but only one of many. They’d be fools to affiliate themselves with me once I’m captured and my identity revealed. I wouldn’t be surprised if *they* sent someone to silence me.”

“Then what are you going to do? Let them take you, all just because you wanted to see what kind of response I would have, to help me realize something?”

“Well, that’s not the only reason.” Poole said, his voice lowering and taking on a serious tone.

“Then what else?” Nathan said bitterly. He glanced at the numbers above the door frame, now hoping the elevator would rise faster. Poole sighed.

“I’m getting far too old for this kind of life. I would have quit long ago if the money wasn’t so good. I think it’s time for me to retire. Diosis Corp can take my surrender as my two weeks notice.”

“That’s it? You actually think that you can walk away from all this after you give them what they want? You’re signing your own death warrant.”

“Perhaps, but they’ll have to find me first, I didn’t just take a hidden microphone from Robikov,” Poole replied.

“What about your family?” Nathan said, glancing at the stuffed animal under Poole’s arm. Poole also looked down at his gift.

“They’ll be safe. I haven’t talked to them in years. They don’t know what I do.” He said. Nathan could detect a trace of sorrow in the man’s voice, mixed with what Nathan could only identify as regret.

“So that’s it.” Nathan said softly, “You’re going to turn yourself in, just like that.”

“Well, to be honest, I’ve been thinking about it for some time. It just so happens the opportunity has now shown itself. I’m sorry that all of this has involved you, Nathaniel. I know it must have put an unnecessary amount of stress on your already troubled mind.”

“Yeah, well, it may not have been all too unnecessary.” Nathan mumbled, looking up as the elevator finally reached the 86th floor. The two men faced forward, ready to confront whatever scene lay in front of them. Nathan swallowed, clasping the urn in his arms tighter. Everything was about to unfold. He could feel the emotions inside of him expanding against some invisible boundary, stretching his insides. He forced himself to take a deep breath as the doors opened.

Nathan could see the outdoor observation deck through the windows, wrapping around the entire floor. The setting sun illuminated the interior in a soft, warm, yellow-orange glow.

Nathan and Poole simultaneously took a step forward into the room, letting the elevator door close behind them.

Three figures stood in front of them. Agent Kross stood in the center, wearing the same shades Nathan had seen her wear earlier today. She was flanked by what Nathan presumed as other C.I.A. agents, each wearing shades and dark suits. One was a large, muscled man, the other, an athletic woman who was slightly shorter than Kross. The three agents stood cross-armed, feet slightly apart in stances of authority. The scene must have looked quite dramatic from a bystander's point of view, but the floor was entirely empty save the five.

There was a moment of silence as Nathan and Poole took one more step towards Agent Kross and her associates. Kross was still as stone-faced as ever, her lips pursed in a tight line. The man and woman behind her wore similar expressions, and Nathan wondered if government spies had to take courses in expressing zero emotion. Nathan kept his gaze straight forward, afraid to upset the delicate situation by turning his head and glancing at Poole. Even without looking to his side, Nathan detected a smile on Poole's face.

"Why, hello there Katherine. What a surprise, it's a pleasure to see you again." Poole said smoothly. It was then Nathan realized that this was the first time he had seen both Agent Kross and Poole in the same room, directly addressing each other. The two spies had each talked about the other with Nathan on many occasions, but this would be the first time Nathan would see the two interact directly.

"Save the charm, William." Agent Kross said coldly. Poole feigned shock.

"No need to be hostile, Katherine. I'm just surprised to find you here."

"You know why we're here." Agent Kross said simply.

"Yes, I'm just surprised you would stoop so low to capture me. I thought I had convinced you not to use innocent civilians in missions? Especially after Burma?" Poole nodded towards Nathan, "I'm not sure if I should be flattered or hurt that you would be willing to return to your old ways." Agent Kross snorted.

"You're not as special as you think, William. Besides, you were the one that brought Mr. Searing into the game, not me."

"Game? Is that what you think this is?" Poole asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, cut the bullshit, Poole, we both know you aren't some modern-day Robin Hood, as much as you like to think it. The only person that you're fooling is Mr. Searing."

"Actually, I don't think so." Poole said, "He brought me here, didn't he?"

Nathan could feel his face turn red as he listened to Agent Kross and Poole talk about him as if he was no longer in the room. He wanted to interject, to make his presence known, but he knew it was best to avoid involving himself. The fastest and safest way to get it all over with was to let the situation play out.

"You've been quite the nuisance for the government and you've put Herring Tech months behind on their cancer treatment research thanks to the theft of their information. You're company isn't going to save you now, William, you've made too many mistakes. Are you going to come quietly, or are you going to make further trouble?" Kross said.

"What makes you so sure that I made a mistake?" Poole asked.

"You blew your cover too early. You revealed who you are before you got away. You involved a civilian who has now led you here, and there is nowhere you can go to escape us. I'd say you made quite a few mistakes."

"Hmmm, perhaps you are right. Maybe I should be like you and value the mission above the life of a human being. It would have been – as you say – necessary."

Nathan looked over at Kross for a reaction. The woman made no movement, but the room went silent for a moment. Nathan knew enough about Agent Kross to tell that the woman was formulating some sort of response. However, when she spoke, she ignored the comment.

“Are you coming quietly or not?” She said again, slowly and more purposefully. Poole shrugged again, repositioning the stuffed teddy bear under his arm.

“You’ve caught me. Well done, Agent Kross.” Poole stepped forward. Agent Kross nodded and the three operatives stepped towards Poole, Kross’s associates flanking Poole on either side. Poole handed the teddy bear to the larger man.

“Do you mind? It’s for my son.” The man hesitated and glanced over at Agent Kross, who nodded her approval. The man took the teddy bear and Poole raised his one good arm in surrender. Nathan watched as Agent Kross withdrew a pair of handcuffs from one of her pockets and brought it closer to Poole’s wrist. Nathan held his breathe as the manacles approached, he was sure that Poole had some sort of trick up his sleeve. He expected the man to suddenly twist around and engage in some sort of combat with Agent Kross, some way to resolve the tension in the air with action. Closer and closer, the handcuffs approached. Nathan found himself mentally screaming at Poole to do something, but the man remained calm as always, his gaze fixed straight forward, not flinching a muscle. Then, it was done. Nathan could feel the tension release from the atmosphere as the final clicks echoed around the room. Agent Kross locked the first handcuff and then brought the other to Poole’s broken arm, locking the second. Nathan let out his breathe, and he could tell that the C.I.A. agents likewise relaxed in their posture. William Poole was finally captured.

“Well, shall we go?” Poole said, as if nothing major happened, “I believe that Mr. Searing has an important obligation to proceed with in a few short minutes. I’d hate to delay him.”

Agent Kross nodded, looking over at Nathan for the first time since the encounter. She motioned for the other two agents to take Poole to the elevator. She then approached Nathan. Nathan swallowed, unsure of what to expect. It appeared that Agent Kross also did not know what to expect, as she stood in front of Nathan silently, not making a move. Finally she extended a hand out, almost mechanically. Nathan hesitated before taking the hand in his own.

“Thank you for your service, Mr. Searing.” She said curtly. Nathan assumed that this was her attempt at being sincere and appreciative, “And my condolences for your loss.” The two of them shook hands briefly. Agent Kross gave a nod, more to herself than to Nathan and walked passed him to the now open elevator. Nathan turned around and watched as Poole was escorted into the elevator and turned around. Poole’s face was still calm, as if unaware of the danger with which he had now sealed himself. Nathan watched as the doors slowly closed, signaling the end of any more contact with William Poole, the spy that surrounded himself with lies but knew more truth than anyone Nathan had ever met. Nathan wanted to say something, but did not know what was appropriate to say. Instead, he simply watched. Poole’s eyes briefly met Nathan’s and for a short moment, Nathan noticed the corner of the man’s mouth curve up into a smile. Then the doors closed softly.

Suddenly, Nathan found himself alone.

It was as if the last few moments had disappeared from time. Any evidence of the ordeal had dissolved. Nathan blinked. What had happened? Nathan tried to convince himself of the occurrence of the events passed. Despite the dream-like quality of the past events, Nathan was confident that all that had passed was real. Something changed in Nathan, but he was not sure what. If not for that change, Nathan would have thought that he had made the last thirty or so

hours up. He would have believed it had all been a dream that he experienced while asleep in his hotel bed. No matter how he had arrived, he had reached his destination, although the journey was far from the one he had expected.

He glanced down at his watch, realizing that he had just a few minutes before the time of release. Nathan took a deep breathe. So much had happened in the past two days, he was having trouble calming his mind in order to concentrate on the task at hand. The importance of this event had not passed him, he was here to fulfill a friend's last wish, and while he had originally felt annoyed at the task, Nathan was experiencing a different feeling now. He pushed back the thoughts of the past few minutes and brought forth feelings from deep within. What had passed, had passed, it was time to focus on the now. The sanctity that everyone had tried to convey during the funeral and days surrounding it was now genuine. As the sunlight streamed in through the windows, Nathan could not help but appreciate how surreal the scene was. Warm yellow and orange rays bathed his face, the silence echoing each footstep towards the entrance to the balcony. Nathan closed his eyes slowly, reached out for the handle of the door and opened it.

An immediate rush of cool air washed over Nathan's face, he took another deep breathe, savoring not only the freshness, but the sweetness as the air passed through his slightly parted lips. His muscles relaxed and Nathan opened his eyes, taking a step over the threshold into the outside. The wind gently passed by his ears, whispering secrets that Nathan could not understand. He lost himself in the sounds and sights around him, letting his feet step softly upon the concrete balcony as he approached the iron bars on the edge. He gazed out over the city, admiring the concrete obelisks against the amber sky. It was as if Nathan was observing himself from outside of his own body. He was a lone figure, standing on top of the Empire State Building, funeral urn in hand. The focus was not him, but his surroundings. Nathan felt like he had melded in with the air around him, with the rays upon him, and the concrete under him. He experienced the feel of his feet as they stepped on his concrete body. He weaved his way through the iron bars and around the human body that stood in his path. He radiated heat from his burning mass that was setting in the horizon, his tendrils reaching out into every dark crack and corner. Nathan as a physical being constrained by social regulations was no more. Nathan as a mind, as a collection of thoughts and experiences, as an intersection in the vast web of intricate relationships, emerged. Nathan allowed the elements and his thoughts to wash over him. He did not think, he simply breathed, and reacted to the elements that moved him.

His grip tightened on the funeral urn in his hands. For the first time Nathan actually felt the object through his fingertips. The sensation of running his fingers over the simple circular etchings that surrounding the dark vase traveled up his arms and to his spine, nudging at a corner of his mind. It was time. Nathan could feel it. The weight of the vase grew heavier as Nathan reached for the top of the vase and slowly removed the lid. He did not look inside. He knew that the ashes of Simon's body lay inside, but that was all. Nathan moved slowly not in respect for the ashes, but in respect for his friend. The ashes were simply remnants of the physical body in which his friend once inhabited, nothing else.

Once he removed the lid, Nathan prepared himself for the final act. He breathed deeply one last time, filling his lungs with as much of the chilling air as he could. In the moment right before he exhaled, right before he began to move his arm, Nathan felt a low rumble from underneath him as the thought at the corner of his mind came to the forefront. Simon was not gone. Simon was here, with him, he was there, with Ben, with Andrew, with James. Simon was everywhere, occupying the spaces of the ethereal and mental realms. Simon's body was simply a vessel, now cast off. Nathan could not explain it, but he could feel his friend's presence for the

first time in a long time. A smile crept onto his face as Nathan cast the ashes over the balcony and watched as the ashes dissolved into the air and were swept away. At that moment, all of Simon's ashes were cast into the wind from all corners of the country. Nathan could hear the rustle of the grains rubbing against the container as they escaped. Nathan felt a burden lift from his being. He could feel the weight of the urn grow lighter after the release. The sacredness that had surrounded the urn evaporated, and for the first time, Nathan realized just how long he had been carrying the urn. He had grown so familiar and connected with the urn without knowing it. Now, its purpose was fulfilled and the urn's connection with Nathan dissolved, leaving Nathan feeling alone. But he was not alone.

He placed the lid back on top of the urn and tucked it gently under his arm. Nathan imagined that this was what serenity must feel like. He had nothing to prove to anyone, not even himself. Poole had asked Nathan what he wanted, but in truth, Nathan did not know, but he felt it. He felt a connection to something beyond, a connection that he had felt nudging at his being these past few days, but was now amplified. A sudden feeling of peace washed over Nathan, of acceptance. Simon was now a part of the something beyond, and their friendship made Nathan's connection with the beyond even greater. Nathan could now say he knew someone *out there*. He was no longer plagued by purpose, but content with the existence of greater forces beyond his control, forces that connected everyone together and with the beyond. Nathan could feel those forces strengthening.

"So long, my friend." He whispered.

Nathan turned as he heard a set of footsteps quickly approaching. His thoughts quickly disappeared as he encountered Agent Kross, running breathlessly towards him. Her hair was slightly disheveled and her shades slightly askew. She stopped in front of Nathan and coughed. Nathan detected what seemed like black smoke emerging from her mouth.

"Did you see him? Did he come up here?" She said, practically wheezing. Nathan blinked before processing the image before him.

"See who? What happened?" He managed to say.

"Poole!" Agent Kross gasped, "gone...damn bear...smoke...gone...elevator...up..."

The woman was bent over, still coughing up smoke. Nathan attempted to piece together Agent Kross's fragments. Once he realized what had happened, Nathan could not help but smile.

He turned around and gazed out over the city, a feeling of anticipation mixed with satisfaction coming over him. So Poole did have a plan. He had somehow managed to escape Agent Kross right from under her nose. The man was planning to escape all along; he was never going to turn himself in. As long as Agent Kross did not have Poole, Diosis Corp would not help the government implicate one of their best operatives and Poole would continue working as a corporate spy. Poole never intended to give up his way of life. Nathan knew that he should feel somewhat disgusted at the fact that Diosis Corp had won, but he did not. None of it affected Nathan's world. Agent Kross would continue to keep the balance and chase after people like Poole, people who knew how the world worked and exploited it. The funny thing was, they both were fighting for the same thing, they both wanted to maintain the status quo. They were all players in a game constructed by society, running around doing what others told them to do. Nathan knew that he did not want to be like them. He expected more of himself.