

Author's Notes:

I. All of the military hardware in this novel is real or envisioned from real military tech, whether based on currently deployed parts, or on technology which is still in various levels of development and testing. The carbon nano-tube flexible body armor is being developed by the United States Army to protect soldiers in future urban warfare scenarios, which with the collapse of the Soviet Union, will be much more common than the vast theatre-wide nuclear and non-nuclear conflicts envisioned when the Warsaw Pact forces were the scourge of free Europe. The FSLB-171 is not a real plane but all of its tech and parts are an amalgamation of current or near-future combat aircraft from around the world. You will not find any space battleships, mega-joule laser weapons or personal body shields in this trilogy.

II. Royal Raymond Rife was a real person, an amazingly intelligent scientist and builder in the 1930s who was just as far ahead of his time as Copernicus, DaVinci or Tesla. The debates over his Rife Generator being “the cure” for cancer or a Hollywood sized phony still rage, there are many websites and books dedicated to

illuminating or demonizing his works. Read them if you are interested, then form your own conclusions. This is a work of fiction and in my universe the Rife Generator works, you must decide for yourself what you believe.

III. In this novel is also mentioned the work that NASA and the US military have done with treating patients who have become sick or are injured, with the application of tuned color light waves. Again, this is something that proves there is nothing new under the sun, literally, this work was started in the late 1800s based on research that actually stretches back over thousands of years. Several big names involved early on in the modern era were Edwin D Babbit, Dr Kate W Baldwin MD, FACS, senior surgeon, Womens Hospital, Philadelphia PA and Dinshah P Ghadiali of New Jersey. Again, if you are curious, start digging. There are many websites devoted to demonizing or canonizing any or all of them. You decide what you believe.

Given the history of misinformation and corruption in the US academia and government, it wouldn't be too surprising to see medical misinformation and bias purported as 'truth'. The medical bio-pharma combine is one of the biggest corporate groups in the world, generating

hundreds of billions in revenue each year and any threat to that income and status quo is not taken lightly. Scrutarii Veritas (Seek the Truth), then make your own decisions. In the meantime, enjoy another trip into Nick's universe.

**Section I,
“Sometimes We Cry,”
but we are all just prisoners
of our own memories.....**

In the near future....

Flames and dense smoke blotted out the sun and made her choke and gag. The cries and screams of the burned and dying echoed in her ears like Dante's torments. Aft, the sizzle and pop of seawater overrunning the exposed remnants of the ships nuclear cores made her fear the silent killer, deadly and invisible radiation. The great ship bucked and groaned as the sea, like an evil sentient creature, fought to claim its prize, and she looked at Nick with panic and extreme fear in her eyes. A tremendous blast behind them, probably ordinance cooking off in the intense heat, picked them all up and threw them bodily into the eagerly waiting water. Inexplicably, Nick started swimming toward the Zodiac boat that was turning lazy circles in the currents, and left her behind. Ben had already boarded. She couldn't even muster a yelp, sea water was already

lapping around and over her head as her waterlogged clothes tried to pull her down. Rapidly losing strength, she fought the pull but the overwhelming stench of jet fuel mingled with salt water choked her and she submerged for the last time. Panicking, she tried to scream underwater and exhausted the remainder of her air. In terror, her mind's last coherent thought before fading to black, was, * he left me, he promised, and then he left me. *

Sitting bolt upright in bed, she screamed, a soulless wail that could have frightened the dead. Nick sat up so fast he almost bashed his head into her shoulder, and fumbled for the light switch. Regaining a small amount of composure, she grabbed him and pulled him painfully close.

Knowing that only a tremendous nightmare would ever make her act so, and having experience with wrestling down his own personal night demons; he wondered what she had been dreaming about, but thought he already had a pretty good idea. He just held her and waited for her to speak first.

“It was horrible,” she said softly, “We were back on the Reagan again, but this time a huge explosion threw us into the water. And you left me. You swam to the boat and never looked

back. And I drowned,” she stopped and a sob wracked her lovely body, “.....and you left me.” A great spasmodic twitch shook her from the ends of her blond hairs to the tips of her toes and she started crying again.

“Sssssssshhh, hush now, you know I would never do that. This is probably something that you will fight with for a while. You know why, about your childhood what happened that day we'll get you some professional help, you know I'd never leave you.

I gave you my promise.....”

And barely above a whisper she answered, “..... and you called me baby.”

After a few minutes, she turned on the ornate stained glass lamp on her night table.

“I have to get out of here, the walls are closing in. Come with me, please lets go walk on the beach.....”

Wrestling with the idea of taking her outside near water (well, dang, why do they always build the beach so close to the ocean), he dressed quickly and followed her out. Holding hands, on the pearlescent beach of a South Seas island, she tried to walk off the terror. The stars reflected lazily off the sea and sand, and soon the moon rose. He could feel her relax, the salt air and gentle breezes not causing

the angst he had feared, but a gently soothing balm that flushed away the demons in her head. She laid her head on his shoulder and sighed, and his satellite phone rang. Kathryn Lynn Pantera-Kramer gave him a laser-beam stare, then a curt nod and a small, crooked smile. Without her having to say anything at all, he knew that meant:

- a) I can't believe you brought your sat phone along.
- b) This must be important because your sat phone is actually ringing.
- c) You just got up in the middle of the night because I had a bad dream, and have now walked about two miles at three AM just to calm me down, so you must really love me.
- d) Go ahead, you big lummoX, answer it before it goes to voicemail.

Nick flipped the phone off its clip and swung it around so he could see the display. An unknown country code and phone number showed up, backlit with a ghostly green glow, along with an 'ID unverified' message, so he almost didn't answer it. Katie arched her eyebrows in a look that he was very fast coming

to know, so he pressed the call/end button and brought it to his ear.

“Nick, its Benjamin. We've got a problem. A really big problem.”

**--- Colorado, Benjamin's Underground
Compound, base of the
Rocky Mountain Foothills ---**

Ben knew there was trouble even before the sound of the Land Rover's engine stopped echoing off the nearby trees and escarpments. Something just didn't feel right, whether it was a lack of birds singing or just a 'something' in the air, it just felt weird. He reached under the driver's seat and pulled out a .44 automag, an affectation he had inherited from Nick that had kept him alive a couple of times along the way already. He placed his hand in the rock niche that should activate the automatic stair/door system but nothing happened. Sure that his local geothermal power source wouldn't have failed, he knew it must be much, much worse. * Helios and Natasha would never have left voluntarily. This is definitely bad. * Slowly and carefully circling around to the exit for the 'last defense' tunnel, he finally detected a slight odor of smoke

carried on the breeze. * Very bad indeed * The entrance to the other tunnel was slightly ajar and he knew in an instant; with full certainty, that it had been opened, something that had not happened since he had finished construction of the complex. He switched on the underslung LED flashlight mounted to his gun's barrel, and descended the short flight of stairs cautiously. He really didn't expect to find anyone here, at least anyone still breathing, but caution was never a bad thing, another trait he had picked up from Nicholas. His worst fears were confirmed. A major fire had taken place inside, rounds were buried in doors, walls and ceilings and scorch marks in several areas attested to the fact that the interlopers had used explosives on more than one occasion. Helios's decomposing body was on the floor in the kitchen, the cold preventing it from producing any major smell, but there was no sign of Natasha anywhere. * My instinct tells me Minisoft, Helios is dead, they took Natasha. I'm gonna need some help now, I guess its time to come back from the dead. *

Benjamin carefully and quietly made his way back to the Land Rover, suspecting that whoever had attacked the compound, most likely Minisoft, probably left some type or types of

sensors behind to look for 'strays' and most likely he had probably tripped one or more already. He started the truck, backed up slowly, then headed back to the highway a different way than he had come in. He felt a slight twinge, leaving behind the other four custom Land Rovers, his 'Three Stooges' as he had told Nick and Natasha; and his extensive, hand picked arsenal, but he couldn't risk any of the vehicles being bugged or trying to take the time to move them one at a time to an equally undetectable location somewhere else. After the tires hit asphalt, he picked up the satellite phone lying on the passenger's seat and hit the button for Nick's preprogrammed redial. Dusk had just started to fall.

--- The White House, Washington DC ---

President Reagan's red phone rang, a distinct and insistent warbling that would not be mistaken for any LG cell phone or disposable GE desk ornament anywhere in the world.

"Mr President, I want you to listen to me extremely carefully. This is most important."

The President appeared puzzled. The voice sounded somehow familiar, but also irritated him in a way that he could not explain.

"Who the heck is this, and how did you get through a private line? This number and circuit is restricted for matters of national security."

The voice continued,

"Mr President, do not interrupt me again. This is most urgent. Listen carefully. You have been activated. This is lotus blossom seven. Lotus blossom seven. Canary code alpha, activate operational plan canary alpha tango niner niner niner. End transmission."

The receiver went blank in his ear, and his eyes glazed for a moment, then refocused. In a voice that he barely recognized as his own, he repeated "Canary alpha tango niner niner niner. Oh my, this can not be."

Then he reached for the phone to SAC NORAD.

**--- Nick's 'borrowed' estate,
Westchester County, NY ---**

Low slung, agile, and extremely fast; the exotic, yellow two door pulled to a quick halt at the curb. The growl from its 388 cubic inch fuel injected Chevrolet engine reverberated off the surrounding buildings, then slowly faded away. Nicholas 'Mad Dog' Pantera, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force, retired, stepped out, looked around, then ran a quick finger through his close cropped, salt-and-pepper hair. He reached inside and removed his black leather satchel, then carefully closed and locked the exotic's door. He had purchased the car on a whim, a joke to go with his name. A Pantera for a Pantera. The car was complete, but had no engine and a stripped transmission when he purchased it at auction, and it had taken him years of loving work and plenty of his pension money to get it to the condition it was in now. The paint had been faded and the interior mostly complete but musty smelling from years of neglect. The paint now gleamed like a 10,000 watt spotlight and the new Recaros were covered in immaculate leather with contrasting yellow pipe stitching. Bright yellow five point racing

harnesses contrasted with the rich black leather seats. Nick thought it was funny to tweak the gomers who demanded purity, the people that thought that all the chalk marks and undercoat overspray should be photographed and replaced after a restoration was completed. He took the car to the All Ford Nationals at Carlisle Pennsylvania one year and caused about 5 coronary embolisms and a cerebral venous sinus thrombosis thrown in for good measure. He had decided to replace the missing Ford 351 with an all-aluminum Chevrolet high deck NASCAR racing block. In its current state of tune, the Pantera put out about 650 romping horses and would vault to 180 in nothing flat. Nick had hand timed it once unofficially through the quarter in about eleven seconds, so he figured it was fast enough already. He had once thought about having a supercharger added, then decided his middle-aged reflexes weren't quite ready for a JATO assisted suicide just yet. Nick did love the cosseting tan and black leather-lined interior and Recaro seats, but found himself driving his Pontiac Grand Prix GTP more and more every year. *Guess the age thing is really catching up to me,* he mused as his knees cracked.

As soon as he opened the front door, he wondered if he had totally forgotten about something waaaaay important. Katie was waiting patiently on the other side of the door, all five feet ten and looking hotter than a CBU stick of napalm. She had picked out an amazing multi-colored silk, body hugging dress that almost brushed the floor but left little for imagination; and she had finished her hair in such a fashion that half of it was twirled and piled intricately on her head but still left half of its glorious normally waist length hanging freely behind her. Knowing that Nick sometimes was a little miffed when she wore huge stiletto heels that made her look so very much taller, she had chosen more sensible one inch heel leather shoes that he thought looked to be Italian. A simple gold necklace hung loosely around her slender throat and a matching watch encircled her right wrist. He knew his confusion must be as obviously written across his face as the inscription on the Lincoln Memorial.

“Ummm, did I uhhhh, for .. forg .. t, baby, are we going somewhere?” he stuttered.

“No, honey, but I wish I had a videocam right now. You are rarely speechless or looking out of sorts, but this is just too good.....”

“So whats with um, all, ah you look absolutely amazing. Okay, you can make fun of me, and I'm going to let you, but you look positively incredible. That dress is giving me majorly impurely carnal thoughts.” She smiled demurely and looked away for a second.

“Does a wife need any special reason to dress up for her husband? Can't it just be?”

“Sure, sure it can, baby. But are we going somewhere? Or did you have other plans?”

“Plans, no, not really, butnews, well yes.....”

“You're killin me here,” he replied, and he smiled, and she did too.

“Nick, Mad Dog, honey, you are going to have a little Mad Dog, the doc said I'm pregnant

The planet wobbled in its orbit. The North Pole became the East Pole. Nick's knees shook and he didn't know what to do, although he knew for sure that that wasn't the thing TO do. So he settled for taking her face in his hands, his palms cupped her cheeks and he kissed her soft and deep until she could only say “ooohhhh.”

“Thats it?,” she laughed weakly, amazed at how this simple action could still convert her legs to Crisco and make her feel warm all over.

“You must have some kind of feeling about this

“I never thought, I'm gonna be a dad. Oh man, I'm gonna gonna be a dad,” he mumbled, then smiled like a seven year old opening the biggest present ever, on Christmas morning. She had always thought he looked somewhat dangerous, that still thrilled her and gave her a weak-kneed gushy-stomached feeling, but positively giddy-dangerous, she wasn't sure how to cope with that. But, actually, she decided, it actually fit him okay. Actually, very much better than okay.

“But, there's more, “ she tried to go on and her eyes started filling with tears, and he again found himself thoroughly confused, he thought she should be happy but this sounded very ominous.

“When the doc was checking the baby, to be sure there weren't any abnormal signs or markers, they ran full DNA and blood work on both of us. I..... “ she thought she was going to collapse, the room started to spin slowly and she felt like she might be sick or pass out.

“The DNA sequencing showed that I have have an antigen reaction to cancer, I have, have,breast cancer. What,

..... why, haven't we been through enough yet?"

Nick had heard of people describing shocks; bad news or sights too horrible to comprehend, that caused them to fall to their knees. Even Angellina's death, as hard as that had been, hadn't gotten him that hard. This did. He fell to the floor in shock and felt his left leg go almost completely numb. His knees were splayed slightly, about the width of one leg apart, and she descended slowly, slid her left knee between his and then placed her right against his outer thigh, forming a triangle with their bodies; and she fell against him, as great uncontrollable sobs shook her body. After a few moments, she was able to speak, quietly and in a broken vibrato tone,

"I was so hard and pushed past and over so many people. Is this my penance for my previous life? Was I that evil? I have, we have helped so many people in the last six months, can it all end this way? If there is a God, is He going to keep me from this task, if He's truly assigned me this task in the first place? Why spare me on the Reagan and then kill me like this? That's just beyond cruelty, give me the true love and happiness I always longed for, and a new life inside me, then jerk it all away in one

fell swoop? It just doesn't make any sense sweetie I'm so scared, I'm just so scared, just hold me please hold me

Having no idea what else to say, and almost too numb to feel anything himself, he placed his hand on the back of her head and softly pressed it against his shoulder, then just had to settle for trying to sound much more confident than he felt, and answered,

“Katie, baby, my love, we will get through this. You and I, we didn't survive the horrors that day, and have a boat miraculously appear out of nowhere to just float by where we could reach it, just by happenstances. The Reagan wasn't even carrying boats like that and so far nobody can even explain where it came from. There has to be a plan to this, there has to be a plan for everything, or else Gina, and Summer, they gave their all for nothing, they died in vain, I can't believe that, I refuse to believe that. There has to be a reason, I'm going to be here for you, always, always and forever, don't you ever ever think otherwise I promised then and I promise now, until the last second of my life

“I know you do, I know you will, because you called you called me baby.”

Several days later, after being shooo-ed off to work under threat of much and severe bodily injury, while at his office, Nick received a videophone call from Kathryn from home. “Hi babe, I talked to Doctor Solomon again, he has made some calls, a lot of calls, and the best is going to be” she sighed heavily, exhausted already at fighting a war that had barely begun, “John's Hopkins in Baltimore. They have a new beta program. Its a genetically engineered 'killer' that will go after the cancer and leave the surrounding tissue and the baby unharmed. It won't cross the placental barrier, so they say. Or so goes the plan. Its just at the beginning stages of testing, but, what else can I do?”

She looked at him with eyes that had already started to develop dark circles under them, already almost hollow and glazed, that combat vet's 'shell-shock' look was creeping back again like an avenging dark angel. “Nick, they said if I treat now with conventional radiation and chemo and possibly a radical double mastectomy, I lose all my hair, I get sick as a dog and the baby dies. Our baby. And that would be worth an 80 to 85% estimate. If I wait to go full term and then begin treatment, 10 to

15%. I die or our baby dies, you just can't ask me to make this choice. I just, I can't, I'm not I'm notstrong enough,” her voice trailed away to a whisper, and she looked away as tears tracked down her alabaster cheeks. Nick felt so helpless and choked with rage, he just wanted to throw something incredibly heavy, incredibly valuable and incredibly breakable, or rail at somebody, Minisoft, Silvero, the US government, the implacable, unfathomable Fates, the unfair, uncaring Creator of the Universe, someone something else, but he had to settle for telling her to stay strong and keep faith, that a negative attitude or defeatism could cause actual negative physical effects. She nodded quickly and wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands, but she didn't look convinced. He wished he felt any more convinced than she looked, and he knew he was slipping toward the precipice of despair as well.

'I'll be home tonight', he promised before ringing off, and couldn't dedicate more than ten percent of his attention to anything else for the rest of the day.

She met him at the door and had him sit while she removed his shoes. Leaning in close, she whispered something naughty and

unrepeatable, then dragged him into the bedroom and kicked the door shut in passing. Their clothes came off in waves, some losing buttons or snaps in the process. They made raw violent love, animalistic and passionate, nipping and scratching, and when everything was winding down in an exhausted sweaty afterglow, he realized two things most forcefully. Katie had usually been more reserved and submissive, and this was quite out of character for her, but when faced with the darkness of mortality, the raw sexual soul sometimes only wants to be engaged, to truly feel "alive" in all facets of body and mind, touching and feeling, burning and needing. And secondly, that she was depending on him completely in so many ways, mentally and physically, to be her anchor in the gathering tsunami-force storm invading her life, check that, their lives.

The following day, Nick rolled over to Katie's office to pick up some printed files and unfinished meeting requests for her to work on at home. Saranya, her personal assistant, unlocked the office for him, which was nothing unusual. What happened next, however, was far from usual. Almost as soon as he was inside, she followed him in and shut the door. He thought

he heard the fancy brass door handle's locking mechanism scrape but couldn't be sure. He turned to look just as she spoke.

“Nick, it has been way too long since I saw you last. That makes me very sad, I've missed having you around.” she commented while licking her lips. Her long, luxurious raven hair was down and treated and combed out to an amazing luster. Her eyes looked especially large, luminous and somewhat unfocused and none of this sat well with him.

“Well, you know, with Katie being sick and all, we've both been very busy, you understand

The distance between them evaporated and he tried to step back but edged Katie's antique, heavily carved and inlaid wooden desk and found himself trapped. He also noticed that several buttons on her blouse, starting with the top one, had magically sprung open.

* What in Heaven's name is she doing? This is seriously uncomfortable and quite inappropriate. *

“Look Saranya, that's all fine and good, it was nice to see you again as well, but I need to get going, bunch of things to do, you see By the way, are you okay? Your eyes are a bit glassy and you seem to be a bit warm.”

She licked her lips again.

“I'm just fine, really, nothing to worry about. Now, about leaving so soon, why, you can still stay for a bit, can't you?”

Nick had no idea how to handle this, this situation was so far out of character for his wife's personal assistant that he was beginning to doubt his own sanity. Again, she licked her lips and her eyes appeared to dilate slightly more, then she ran her index finger along his left bicep.

* Perhaps she's on something? * he wondered as she swayed almost imperceptibly then righted herself by tightly grabbing his sleeve. “Oh come now,” she observed, “don't be cross with me, I'm just showing you the attention you deserve.”

Making him extremely uncomfortable, the distance between them vanished again, actually attaining a negative distance, and he became painfully aware of just how much woman was hidden inside her conservatively cut clothing. Her wonderfully soft yet firm points of contact incited his body to want to respond. He grabbed her by the elbows and moved her away gently but forcefully.

“Look, Saranya, I'm not sure what's going on here but I am married to your boss, please be unhesitantly cognizant of that fact.”

She pouted and then took a deep breath, her chest heaving as she did so, creating quite a display, and for a second or two he was thoroughly distracted.

“Oh, come now, don't be cross, be a dear, I've been so lonely” she added as she attempted to clumsily reengage, then stumbled and fell to the floor hard, landing with a thump that was audible even through the luxurious pile carpet. Nick immediately bent down to check what this could mean, and found her not breathing. Normally CPR and resuscitation would be called for in a situation of this nature, but his danger radar was flashing again and he felt this was quite more than what it first seemed. Her lips had appeared extremely shiny and he remembered her licking them repeatedly as her behavior became increasingly erratic. He commenced CPR as he yelled through the door for someone to call 9-1-1. The floor manager responded immediately, then unlocked the door. She quickly glanced inside and paled slightly.

“Ambulance is on its way,” she added, “what in Heaven's name happened in here?”

“She collapsed suddenly, I think she may be on something or perhaps has been drugged. Did they say how long?”

“Soon as they can get here. I'll go down to the lobby and guide them in.”

“Very good,” Nick answered, happy to have her out of his way as he furiously tried to replay and analyze what had actually just happened while also trying to keep her alive, if there was any hope left for that avenue. She seemed quite unresponsive. Nick did not see any way that this would end well, and surely he had no good reason at the present moment to explain why.

Nick got a mid-afternoon call from John and quickly made sure that Katie was otherwise occupied and wouldn't innocently overhear.

“Got the tox screen back. She was a black widow, Nick, somebody put contact poison on her lips and she was supposed to kiss you. If she had, we'd be doing two autopsies right now.”

Nick wasn't a person who rattled easily, his basic character, honed by years of dangerous operations, was at least blunted if not immune to bouts of fear, but this did rattle him more than he would want to admit.

“That was most crazy. She was all over me like a cheap suit, so okay, maybe she was carrying contact poison but how would that turn her into the super-seduction special of the week? John, she was ready to pole-dance for me, it was

majorly bizarre. I most assuredly in the year or so that I've know her have never seen any type of behavior remotely similar to this. She was a very personable, very intelligent, competent and astute team member, Katie relied on and trusted her implicitly. I'm completely baffled by these turn of events.”

“Nick, this was an assassination attempt, plain and simple. No other way to play it, straight up. Somebody wants you gone very quickly and very permanently.”

“Could she have been drugged and imprinted somehow, or brainwashed or somesuch, that she would be programmed for her last minutes on Earth to seduce me? How does that make any sense, how would she even know I was going to be in the office? I came by to pick up some papers, spur of the moment, completely unannounced, who would have time to react and get a 'sleeper' ready for action that quickly 'sleeper', whoa, that might be something, what if she were programmed waaay in advance and activated by some type of 'trigger', a phone call or phrase or something. So, that would mean that I'm being followed and she was placed months or years in advance, right here, to gather intel or whatnot, and be ready for an opportunity. If this was a 'black widow',

someone is getting desperate and sloppy. We must be getting closer to something somebody doesn't want dug up. Whoever would have to know that the poison would be detected, if she did succeed, but I'd still be dead and the primary objective would still be achieved. Grrrrrrrr, how am I going to break this to Katie? She's going to go suborbital on me. This is the last news she needs to hear right now.”

Not trusting anyone else because he didn't know for sure who else he COULD trust, Nick had asked John to help him examine the DVR surveillance footage from the cameras in the corridors outside Katie's office suite. It took a little while to get the images dubbed off and collected, so he was relieved when John finally phoned him.

"Nick, the video footage from the security DVRs at Whittaker are in. You really need to see this, there are some interesting things in play here."

Nick agreed to meet him at his lab, their usual spot to plan or commit felonies or to try to catch others doing the very same.

Rolling the playback frames, Nick watched as his car rounded the corner one block from the office complex. Slowing to allow some pedestrian

traffic to clear, he idled up to and then over the cross-walk, where another camera had captured complimentary footage from an opposing angle. They would review that later. With the cross-walk cleared he accelerated slightly then braked to make his turn into the underground parking garage. The feed from the other DVR channel, tracking Saranya, showed by timestamp that she was in her office as his car approached, then received a phone call and headed to the hallway. Another cam captured her as a tall dark-haired man passed her in the opposite direction and must have called her by name, because even lacking audio they could clearly see her pause and look toward him. Still with his back to the security cam, they engaged in a very brief conversation, at the end of which she appeared to twitch slightly and blank out momentarily. She then proceeded out of camera range as she pulled what appeared to be lip gloss from her purse. The timestamp at the end coincided with Nick's ride in the elevator up from the parking garage to the admin level floors of the building. The unknown male figure "X" proceeded at a measured pace to the end of the hallway then disappeared by ducking into a fire stairs exit door. The stairwell did not have a camera and he

never appeared in any of the other video feeds after.

"Did you see that?" John queried.

"Sure did. Looked like she pulled something out of her purse just before we lost her going into the blind corner. Was that lip gloss?"

"Yes, I believe so. Did the coroner inventory the contents of her handbag?"

"Its gone. I have no idea how, somebody should have seen something or one of the DVRs should have captured a glimpse at least, or some clue. Its like it vaporized. Whoever planned this planned this well."

"Come on, Nick, this is no surprise to either of us, these guys have been one step ahead of us almost every turn since the beginning. Its really getting old being stymied at every corner. How do we get a leg up on 'em?"

Nick knew his question was rhetorical and didn't bother to answer with anything more than a sigh.

"Okay, so what are we believing happened here? Was she hypnotized or something else crazy like that?"

"Not hypnotized. Despite what you see in movies, you can't make a hypnotized volunteer do anything really strongly against their moral character, at least not intentionally. I think this

would qualify right here, Saranya's all over you like a cheap suit. Not her usual character at all.

Nick, in the 1960s the CIA and the Russkies were fooling around with sleeper agents, command phrases and mind-control. The idea was that someone would be 'programmed' or 'imprinted' for a task that was completely outside their usual character. Or that their usual character was a ruse, an 'overlayed' phony life that they would lead 100% believably, until called to 'awake' and start doing devious or deadly things as their 'real self'. The usual route for this was a command phrase or a postcard with an unusual picture that would 'activate' them. The CIA and the Russian government after the collapse of the Soviet Union both denied that anything useful ever came out of all this research, but daggonit, they were sure very very interested in trying, and kept at it for quite a long time. Given the wonderful policy of 'truth' and 'openness' that not only Moscow but even DC has had with the American public and the world in general, do you believe that it didn't pan out, at least partially? I think we may have just seen in full colour, some very strong evidence that it did."

"So Saranya was a sleeper who was tasked with my assassination, who else could they have

out there and at what levels?" Nick queried. "Civilian authorities, military commanders, Congress, how far could you take something like this?"

"Very far, Nick. Very far indeed, and that's what's scaring the pants off me right now. It appears that Minisoft has somehow inherited some of the CIA's Cold-War fallout. A truly frightening thought indeed."

**--- Former underground Salt Mine,
somewhere in Utah ---**

"Herr Doktor, the project is progressing much better than anticipated. We have three hundred fifty thousand units ready for field trials and another two hundred thousand should be ready in about four months, when Project Lucifer goes to phase two operations. The big wildcard is what the UN and NATO response will be, we are concerned about the four month delay because of that."

"Yes, I understand your concerns, I wish we would have had six more months to prepare, but when that fool launched 'Market Garden' without authorization and destroyed the Ronald Reagan, he well nigh started World War III far

before we were ready. How did he get the power to authenticate that order package without the council's consensus?"

"There were errors made. Definitely precipitous, foolish and almost disastrous errors, but he paid for his lack of vision. The fish in the Bahamas these days are well fed. Fool indeed, Herr Doktor, but a sushi fool now. Just around the bend here and you will be suitably impressed, I am most convinced."

Lit by massive multi-element LED lamps spiked into the salt mine's ceiling, ranks of soldiers drilled with superb precision, their rows marching away far beyond the distance the eye could see or the mind comprehend. As they neared, a platoon turned to look, always alert to pre-programmed threats, and the observers shivered. One hundred twenty pairs of identical eyes sized up the interlopers, recognized them as cleared personnel, and resumed their mixed martial arts training.

"The effect is most unsettling, Doktor, even though I know they are clones, to see it for real, and so many at once, it is like something from a Hollywood film."

"Ironic you should phrase it quite that way, the donor was an actor and a former fighter. Excellent genetic material and base stocks. He

was “the Prototype” for all of the original clone work, and was a former WWO and UFA star before his untimely demise in an auto accident.”

“Yes, untimely indeed.”

“They have enhanced skeletal, neuromuscular and intelligence systems, and have been trained in mixed martial arts, hand to hand deadly combat with just about any tool or equipment that could be conceived of as a weapon, military hardware training on all common forms of hand or shoulder fired weapons and missiles in common use by any army in the world, and basic aircraft repair and navigation. We have a separate pilot corp for fixed and rotary wing aircraft, all major hardware in the US inventory and most allied air forces. The specializations were A10C, F22, F37, Apache, Cheyenne and Blackhawk. These men can fight and kill with anything from a paper clip to a Hellfire missile, and they are unthinkingly loyal and obedient. I believe that perhaps in some way the Third Reich lives on.”

“Indeed, indeed it does. But where they failed, we shall succeed. We will control the government, the populace and everything they buy, see or hear. This time, we shall triumph unconditionally. Observe.”

He turned to the closest two troops and barked an order.

“You, and you, front and center.”

Without any hesitation, they double-timed up, saluted, then stood at the ready like 6 foot 3 inch, 265 pound slaving Dobermans.

“Trooper, show me your knife,” he ordered.

The first soldier drew his razor sharp 8" stainless steel Bowie knife and presented it.

“Kill him.” he ordered with no hesitation.

With an equal lack of hesitation and a complete lack of expression or remorse, before his comrade could even express surprise, he plunged the eight inch blade through his cohort's heart and twisted it thirty degrees. Almost soundlessly, the other trooper dropped in a heap, blood pooling under him and immediately soaking into the salt rimed floor.

“Very impressive indeed,” was his only comment as they both turned and walked back up the access tunnel.

--- Baltimore, Maryland ---

Nick wheeled his GP down North Broadway following the one-way, the Magnaflow sports exhaust and 420 HP V8 echoing off the surrounding buildings; to the rotary at Jefferson Street, then turned left and made a half round through, then pulled into the McElderry parking garage. Leaving the car on the second level, he took the elevator to the street and rapidly crossed to the Kimmel Cancer Center/Weinberg Building north entrance, directly across from the Wilmer Eye Institute in the center of the Johns Hopkins campus. He passed through security, signed in and submitted to the retina scan and metal detector sweep, then took the first available elevator. Located on the fifth floor, Katie had been moved to one of the 62 treatment rooms on the top floor of the cancer tower. Carefully positioning his cargo, he hid behind the gigantic bouquet of multi-colored fragrant flowers he had gingerly toted all the way down from New York City. He hoped he wouldn't run into anything or anybody before he could put them down. He sneaked up to the entrance of her private room, which was open, and sneaked a quick look around the door frame. She was reading, a black wire-framed Benjamin

Franklin spectacle set perched on her perfect, perky nose.

“Anybody home?” he asked sotto voce.

She didn't hear him for a second or two, then looked over the bridge of the glasses and saw nothing but an enormous grouping of flowers, with legs.

“Well, I wonder who that might be?” she replied. “A wise guy maybe, nyuk, nyuk, nyuk.”

Long ago, Nick had decided that any woman with a near genius IQ, a body like hers and actually liked the Stooges was a keeper in any universe.

“Definitely a wise guy, nyuk, nyuk, nyuk,” he answered while placing the flowers on a table near her bed, that immediately threatened to collapse under the additional load. He kissed her on the forehead and then long and soft on her full ruby lips, then sat and took her free hand. He noticed she had an expensive looking leather bound book propped in her lap, and that her skin was so pale against the colored sheets.

“Baby, I'm so glad you are here. I missed you so much, and there are things I really really need to talk to you about.”

“I know, I missed you too, this sounds really serious?” he inquired, arching his eyebrows.

She never felt he looked less than a little dangerous, but she almost had to laugh because this was one of his expressions that would make him look almost like a muscled librarian with a MAC-10. Almost.

“Actually, I'm reading about Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Saranya sent this to me, its a Red Letter, first edition, leather bound. That was very thoughtful of her, its beautiful. Do you believe any of this, that God got personally involved with people here on Earth, one to one? Do you think He still does? It says here that Saul heard a voice personally but no one else did and an incredible light shone around the whole caravan. I don't know what to make of this.”

He let the Saranya reference slide for the moment. * Not opening that can right now. *

“I don't know K, I used to believe in military tactics and the right of overwhelming force, but now, I just don't know anymore. Summer asked me the same thing once, on the way to the Moon. It seems so unreal that I can actually say that. I've seen more death than I ever wanted, sometimes I think more death than I ever should have, ever should have had to, maybe, and yet, now, now I

“I know baby, you can say it. It doesn't call the boogeyman, and there's no evil hex that's going to jump out if you say it out loud, I'm so scared too. I used to be so in love with the power, the rush of winning, the rush of the camera indicators turning on and you knowing that millions of people had your face floating across their plasma TVs, waiting for you to deliver the 'truth' to them in a neat twenty two minute bow-tie wrapped package. Gotta leave space for those all-important sponsors, right?”

Nick didn't know where she was going with this, so he just nodded assent.

“And in one afternoon, all that vanished. My realization of true love was that fast, I really had it all wrong, so very very very painfully wrong, turned upside down on its head and folded-spindled-and-mutilated-wrong. The sacrifice you made, the sacrifice those people on the Reagan made, you have got to promise me something.”

Her eyes had that same hard edged glow again that she'd had that day, muted slightly by drugs and fatigue, but just as hard edged and determined none the less.

“Nicholas Augustus Pantera, I'm not foolin' here,” he knew that granite edged look and the fact that she used his full name, like a kid busted

for stealing cookies before supper, told him for sure that he better stay quiet.

”Two things. If I don't make it and our baby does, you must remarry. Ahhhht, ahhhht, ahhhht, don't. I know that look, just don't. Our baby needs a real family, he or she needs a mother too, and you, you don't do well alone. You still haven't even learned to press your own collars correctly. You can't run a multi-billion dollar foundation having a bad shirt day. That's number two. You have to stay. I know we had talked about what came after, what would be after the foundations could run themselves and we could step back and have 'us' time. You can't, if I'm going to to ahhhhhhh,” she had to stop briefly as unchecked tears flowed down her cheeks and she looked away, some tiny part of her iron will still unable to let her husband see and acknowledge her weakness. Then she continued,

“I need to know that what we've started won't be perverted, turned into a money making scheme for greedy soulless snake oil salesmen. You've gotta promise me, or so help me, I swear I'll come back and haunt the armour. You know the episode. Nyuk, nyuk nyuk, nyuk.”

He just couldn't help but laugh, in some ways she reminded him too much of Benjamin,

waaaay too smart and able to take anyone nearby along for a rocket propelled train ride, jumping from the serious life and death track to the Stooges track in just under two seconds. He could also see the tears again just behind the laughter, and he knew how much she was truly rattled. He gave her a mock two-fingered eye-poke and she playfully blocked it with the standard 'hand-up blade-in-front-of-the-nose move', and chuckled quietly. He took her hand and kissed it, then held it as she slowly dropped back off into a drug induced fog. Her head tilted to the side slightly as she nodded off, and he tenderly, slowly and carefully removed her glasses, placed them in their black leather hard-bodied case, closed her Bible and then placed the Bible on the side table with the glasses on top. He hadn't realized his fatigue was running so close to the surface either, and in moments, despite the uncomfortable contours of his chair, he followed her into dreamless slumber. She awoke first, it was now almost dark and the dim light filtering in through the curtains revealed him uncomfortably folded up into the standard issue hospital chair, snoring quietly. She reached over and brushed his hand; and he awoke with a start, instantly military-ready and pawing for his weapon.

“I'm sorry baby, I should know better than to do that, so sleepy, wasn't thinking, you were snoring and looked so uncomfortable. Gotta remember your hair trigger. I didn't get to tell you before, what the scans showed.”

“Go on, I'm listening,” he answered and took her hand again.

“Two of the masses are decreasing, good news, two are the same, not so good, and the last one is, still growing slowly. They want to to place a,” she yawned mightily and tried to continue,

“They want to put an isotope 'seed' in the center of the mass, hit it with radiation from the inside out. Ironic, isn't sorry, baby, I'm just so very very tired, ironic isn't it that wasn't it radiation that got us into this fix to begin with?” and she tried to smile.

He could only nod and try not to think too much. That was the path that led to despair he couldn't allow himself to feel. He had rarely seen men in combat stare death down, eyeball to baleful, ravening malevolent yellow-irised eyeball like she had, and still was, and not flinch. He didn't know where she summoned the courage, but he didn't know if he could, were the tables

turned. Again, eerily almost knowing his thoughts, she completed the train for him.

“I can get through this. You're my rock, baby, you're my rock. I can get through this with you, but theres another Rock, that book over there is more than just black and white, text on fancy velum paper, there's something in there, and something in here,” weakly and slowly she lifted, moved and placed her free hand over her breast, covering her heart, and continued,

“You are in here, always, don't ever doubt that, but, somehow, I know there's

there's more, more we can't see yet, can't explain but there is a Rock, another strength, I feel Him, He He is here, baby, He's here with me. I just don't feel that we've come this far for me to die now, there's more to do, more people to help, too much more good works to to be done for it to just end like”

She yawned mightily again and her eyes unfocused for a few seconds, then she fought to continue,

“Should I let them do the 'seed'? I just don't know, I used to think I was sure of everything, now I doubt myself more often than

I'm sure, so tired, baby, so tired and so scared, but yet I feel a peace as well. I know what you're thinking, its not the drugs, I feel different, its something new, something different."

She yawned hugely, a sound like a feral cat, then seemed to perk up some and become more focused.

"They are also doing a full regime, I have a hyperbaric oxygen chamber treatment tomorrow, for six hours, and they have taken away all meats and most of my cooked foods. And you know whats funny, I haven't even craved one of those horrible greasy burgers since I've been here. They've also got me on IP6, and anti-oxidant and mineral/vitamin supplements as well. But I will tell ya, when I get out of here we are getting off 95 in Philly and hittin Pats. Cheesesteak, you've gotta give me at least one vice, and I need something besides honey sweetened green tea. Its not too bad, but it does get old, just a small coffee, double creams, just one, pleeeese?"

Nick didn't yet quite know how to answer, but as he was attempting to formulate some type of coherent reply, his danger radar told him that someone had entered the room very quietly. He turned slowly, to use the window pane as a

mirror and size up the threat when the lights came on dimly. He turned slowly and froze.

“I know you from somewhere,” he queried, “yes, yes I do. Angellina's funeral, no, I know, the minister, you were at that church that day.....”

“Yes, Mr Pantera, I was. I remember the weight of your heart that day, the Lord showed me your grief and you were quite astounded. Did that message help you any?” Pastor Jeremy Jones inquired.

“Well, I guess so,” he answered, still somewhat caught off guard.

“I am the minister for the cancer wing this week. We rotate, for the benefit of those of different faiths. Next week is the Muslims, then the Jains, then the Hindus. My home church is here in Baltimore. I know who you and your lovely wife are, and what you are doing. Fear not, I will not tell anyone else, I know you value your anonymity. Only a few of the doctors know the truth and they aren't going to tell anyone either, and not because of money. I think that some of them are secretly jealous in a way, of course what they do is great for the people they help as well, but I think that they are in awe of what you have accomplished so quickly. I see God's Hands moving in your work even if you

don't yet, but have no fear, if he can convert someone speaking through a mule, he can use you anyway.”

Even if his words were somewhat chiding, his smile revealed that he meant no disrespect and Nick chuckled quietly. The preacher continued,

“I have had opportunity this week to have a few brief conversations with your lovely wife, and she has questions. Many many questions, many that I have no answers for. But her heart and her mind are open and I believe in time she will find answers for many of those questions. How is your heart, Mr Pantera? Does it look like that Bible on the table over there, closed; or is there room for some faith inside or beside the logic and tactical strike logistics plans? That's okay, I've left you with enough to think about for one day. I'm going to go, if you have nothing further that either of you would like to ask me right now. I'm sure you'd like some alone time.”

Nick nodded, then thanked him for coming. Katie watched him leave, then turned back.

“You two have some history.” she observed, arching her too perfect eyebrows.

“Yes, yes we do, and he manages to knock me off balance every time we meet. It's uncanny.”

“Well, do I have to borrow a team of Clydesdale's to drag it out of you, or are you going to spill?”

So spill he did, every sordid detail, not omitting anything to candy-coat his failure, just the truth of how he tried to cope with an unutterable loss that drinking didn't solve, just temporarily dulled. The only part he couldn't recount was the former President calling him. Even mentioning it would technically be a breach of the confidentiality waiver that would cover the whole case for decades. She could sense he was dancing around something but also knew that they had complete openness in their relationship so she knew that it must be because of a serious secretive reason and didn't try digging any further. She also wasn't too sure what to think about Nick's previous meeting and how the Preacher seemed to know things that he should have absolutely no natural way of knowing, but she kept that to herself for further future reflection.

“Baby, I'm so sorry but I am so tired. You aren't going back to New York tonight, are you?”

He took her hand again and rubbed the back of it across his already gritty stubble. For some unfathomable reason she enjoyed that, and he never bothered to ask why, just accepted it as

one of those quirks that all people have, even the woman you love. She knew exactly why but would never tell, a woman's heart is a deep place, sometimes harboring secrets never to see the light of day.

“You kidding?” he answered, “I just got here. No, I have a suite in the hospitality building, I'm staying until this round is over. I'm taking you home, but I think we may skip Pats on this trip.”

“Okay, I can live with tha.....” she never got to finish before she fell fast asleep.

Nick went back to his suite, but wasn't yet ready to sleep. He accessed his personal encrypted remote storage location through the TV interface and streamed some video files to the local terminal. First he pulled up the interview file from the Bunker Hill, where he had talked with the SecDef after the Reagan went down, something was still bothering him about that, but about three minutes in, he decided he needed to recall something else first. He took off his shoes, propped up the pillows a little better, got comfortable then pulled up his wedding video. He was always still astounded how she could still take his breath away. He knew that he had loved Angellina, and that loss still pulled at him slightly, but what he had

found in such an initially unlikely pairing still brought him to a sudden stop. Remembering vividly their first meeting and how he had dismissed her as a high maintenance, arrogant, spoiled 'rich-kid' reporter looking for a fast story to advance her career; he was still happy to have been proven so amazingly, incredibly wrong. Or so seemingly at least, he really didn't get to know her much before that horrible day on the Reagan, but what she had turned out to be, or perhaps turned into instead, made him so proud that his heart ached. The images advanced and finally arrived at the scene where she turned the purposely 'blind' corner and came into view of all the assembled guests and the cameraman, as their chosen wedding song started to play. He could hear all the murmurs and 'ooohs' and 'ahhhhs' captured by the camera's on-board mic. His heart caught in his throat, she was so achingly beautiful, that day and every day that had followed it. And yet here he was again, faced with again losing the one thing that was most dear to him on the entire planet Earth.

* Sometimes, things really just aren't fair or just. Well, bud, who told you life was? If they did, they were selling something compressible, and wet n stinky, weren't they? *

Finally, he turned it off after the bouquet toss and went back to the SecDef interview. About 4 minutes into the replay, when he found his 'smoking gun', he dropped his notepad and pen in sheer amazement, then 'rewound' it and played it again, twice. * I knew there was something rotten in Denmark. Now, who do I tell? *