

Something Went Really Wrong

By Jordan Muncz

Instead of Forward

If you're afraid of what you might learn, stop reading now - this isn't for you. Furthermore, I have no proof. It was quick and mostly quiet and by 5AM all that was left was the sound of helicopters leaving the city. Anyone that might have heard anything, gunshots, screams, sirens, wouldn't have gotten very far into it - internet searches yielded error messages, and there was nothing on TV but the usual: gang shootouts, potheads causing traffic jams on the GWB and Columbia University sprucing up their campus for graduation.

I'm here to tell you, the military dumped sick people into the Hudson River. Call the Pentagon and they'll reassure you, they've heard the rumors, but isn't it ridiculous? And they're not in the business of spreading crazy rumors. The newspapers will do the same, exactly the same...

After you read what I've written, you..., well you might think I'm crazy, or jealous, trying to take down academia because I'm not Ivy League. I have my opinions, but that's not what this is about. It's just where it happened.

What this is about: people disappeared that night. I did what research I could. I called the NYPD but when I told them I had a blog, and it wasn't the New York Times, they could neither confirm nor deny "the rumors".

Like I told you, I can't prove anything, but there are facts. Ollie Kun-He is missing. His father is owner of The Founding Father's Burger Joint, where the explosion at the center of the mayhem took place. I tried contacting his parents but Ms. Kun-He's answering machine says she's travelling in Korea indefinitely.

So, a day that won't live in history. The few media outlets that heard about what might have been happening didn't run the story. Then there's the floating head. "American Beauty" on Instagram and the story is that ISIS is claiming it. Right. They infiltrated NYC to put a hit on one guy, if you want to believe those opportunists...

Of course my book has a hero. He's a security guard. I know his family, well, I used to know them. After what happened, when I asked for news about "Tony," his job, his new girlfriend, my friend, his uncle, replied "Tony who."

Finally, don't try to find me because I'm in hiding. Anyway, it will be hard to find me because you don't know my gender, age, not much of anything. At least I hope, because there are people looking for me who know how to look.

In my book you'll meet an assassin. I've called him John Rambo, nice name, no? Doesn't matter, what does matter is that he's real and at large. General Pistone has a clear interest in him, as does Congresswoman Calder. This should be enough for you to understand what's at stake for me or my future family, if I live long enough to have one.

So, how does that sound to you? A crazy person with no evidence telling you the world you live in is worse than you thought. Still, I'm writing so I have to imagine there are readers curious enough. But if that's you, please consider this a coming of age book. Your own coming of age.

Fondly,

Jordan

Chapter 1

The door she bumped into opened, thrusting her emaciated body outside, where the fresh air and piercing sirens worsened her lack of coordination. With the next step, she stumbled over a bench on top of the rocky platform and collapsed. Instinctively, she sniffed her way around. Aside from her sense of smell, her hearing had improved, as if to replace her eyesight, which was deteriorating faster than life was leaving her behind. Slouching, she was impervious to her surroundings: a family park with sinuous paths tailored for jogging mothers and their tired nannies hired to push strollers way in the back.

On Manhattan's Upper West Side, May 1st had just arrived dragging behind a crisp dense fog blanketing the area from Riverside Park all the way to Morningside Park. Her breath formed widening circles above her head, indicating she still existed.

Perhaps emboldened by fog, or in the embrace of the moody spring, six young men stood on the rocky platform with plans to end a bitter dispute. Defying the unseasonal cold, they unbuttoned their jackets, revealing hands clutching guns. Oblivious, they defied their magnificent youth and the irreversibility of their decision.

Focused on their moment, they ignored her. Unaware of anything but noise, she waited for stimuli to direct her. She was reduced to instinct and muscle memory. She had not planned anything since her metamorphosis had occurred when that rat or whatever it was bit her. Robbed of all capacity for pleasure or its anticipation, her actions were mechanical as if without human direction. Devoid of contemplation or memory, she became the function of her senses, and tonight, she would surprise herself and her victim. As she would approach her prey, she would not seek their eyes to enjoy the lust of witnessing life's languishing last moments, right before the victim collapsed of fright. This night she would only discover she could kill. Because an unexpected urge came over her, and it provided some respite from her transforming, uncontrollable, imminent demise, she would kill.

Tall and wiry, with tattered clothing, she brought to mind nothing. In her rapid disintegration she preserved nothing from her too ordinary past. This night, the first on her own since the kind paramedic found her collapsed and brought her to St. Luke's Hospital. Everything stopped only to start anew differently.

While she was trying to steady herself against the crisp air she could neither enjoy nor ignore, a brief conversation among the young men preceded the shootout. The first two shots clarified their position, a homicidal GPS. She moved closer when the shortest, stockiest leader had mortally wounded his taller leaner opponent with a swift shot to the chest. Moved by his impending death, the tallest was kneeling in the young, barely grown grass, bleeding, dying, and shouting something unintelligible, probably in Spanish, to his gang. The shortest one was looking at the sight, frozen in place, unsure if his actions had caused so much destruction. Sensing his lack of resolution, his companions approached him, probably asking him for instructions.

She did not mean to interrupt anybody. Unable to wait until the right moment, when her energy spiked she stood up. Wobbling, she approached the stockiest one; he was the closest. He noticed her too late, while the others had their backs to her as they finally started shooting their opponents. He shot as she pulled him down but he missed. She then stayed bent over him until he became still: his eyes closed, his lips tranquil. Her teeth pierced and gripped his face, as a wild bullet stopped her mauling. It forced her to lie on top of him, entangled forever, or until her limp body would stop protecting his from any intruder's curious gaze. A laminated piece of plastic dangling on a silver chain said simply "Emmanuelle."

Fast-moving fire trucks exited the nearby station on Columbus Avenue and neutralized the gun shots. The trucks' thunderous rumblings and screaming sirens insulated the killings. All the way across the quad, not far from Riverside Park, a boiler had exploded in the basement of The Founding Father's Burger Joint -- the lunch destination of so many Columbia undergraduates, in its better days. Like a tile on a domino board, it soon affected everything within reach. It disabled various sensors, and it shook sleepy Barnard students out of dormitory beds.

Within minutes, FDNY trucks with high-pitched sirens and bright headlights came to a halt and blocked the traffic. The firefighters were taking control of the situation. Avoiding the sea of broken glass, enginemen and ladder-men rushed out and meticulously prepared their invasion of the Broadway block. Inside, the blackened walls looked ominous under their piercing lights. They climbed down to the basement and minutes later resurfaced. Success was melting frowning faces. The fire had been put out.

The good news was that the night manager had been contacted and he confirmed that he was the last to leave. Actually he left the restaurant as soon as the owner, Mr. Kun-Hee and his three guests, had left. That was around 11:28 PM. The manager remembered taking the 11:30 PM subway downtown.

The noise of the explosion woke up those Barnard students dozing off in the nearby dormitory. Half asleep, they stood still, unsure of what had happened. They would start to crawl like new flies would crawl on the windowsill passing through specks of dust without spending time to notice them, but knowing they were there, and over thick rows of dirt. They almost ran down the stairs in a remembrance of movements mastered long ago. Eventually the young women made it out of the building and the noise of the street woke them up. They opened their eyes just in time to pay attention to the FDNY trucks.

On the sidewalk they felt uncertain and furtively went back into the building, doing the opposite of what they had been told to do. The students bumped into each other and congregated in a room far away from the traffic. The young women chatted nervously and shared secrets they had never thought of sharing.

"I'm as weak as a flower."

"I have dreams, nightmares; I see things. I thought this was a dream too. What is your name?"

"I have killed a cat with my own hands, trampled it under water, beaten it with a rock and I have never thought about it. I've slept like a child in my bed. But then, when I don't expect it, I see it in my dreams. It was a cat with rabies. I never thought that possible. It bit its kitten: My favorite kitten."

Their eyes fought fatigue and clung onto gaunt-looking faces. Their breath gripped onto their faces like unspoken words hung onto a mouth.

"Did you hear what I just said?" The confessional feeling stopped, interrupted by the NYPD officer making sure everybody evacuated the building.

"Everything is fine, but we need you out of here, so we can check and double check and be sure. It will take a few minutes until we learn where you can go. Take only the bare necessities. You'll be back tomorrow."

The students giggled in a mature way, quietly. They went back to their rooms and afterwards struggled to find their way out, as if fully awake they could not function as well as when they were half asleep. The light cold breeze caressed their ears

maternally teasing them back to sleep while walking in the fog to their new temporary quarters, a large co-ed Columbia campus dormitory minutes away.

Chapter 2

In his wooden booth, with his back to the closed windowed door, a man with young small hands and bitten nails was hunched over a dirty keyboard, rapt by the music coming from his headphones. Tony, the night security guard stationed four blocks away from the damaged restaurant, was suffering his usual writers' block.

Sweating from unending struggle, and returning to his unfinished manuscript, Tony appraised his story's hero. Rescued from centuries of semi-oblivion, Vlad the Impaler, the freedom fighter from the small country of Wallachia had obsessed Tony since he first found Vlad's picture on Wikipedia. It intrigued Tony that no one wondered how Vlad, the anti-Captain America, successfully opposed the army of the conqueror of Constantinople, Sultan Mehmed. Would this be the night when Tony would finally reveal Vlad's military secret publicly? How Vlad managed to win with his army of untrained peasants?

His body aching, Tony stood up. At 5'6" and 120 lbs., he could freely stretch and yawn in the small guardhouse. His dark curly hair filled the booth. He enjoyed pushing his head back so his glasses slightly deviated from their once secured position. He fixed the problem and noticed his family picture supporting a paper roll on the shelf above had fallen over. He rushed to put it back up and avoided giving it a second thought. Tony was in danger of being swept away by his father's intense gaze. Reilly Gallant, the fearless firefighter looked valiant. In his uniform, with his long mustache and piercing eyes, Captain Gallant had his arms around his family: a younger Tony and a woman who'd looked old and weary all her life.

His stomach rambled. It did that quite often. Tony lived in a perpetual state of hunger which he took pain to preserve. As expected, there was nothing around to munch on, and he had no desire to go outside and buy himself a late night snack. He sat down, lifted his knees to his chin and pushed his elbows hard into his stomach. His maternal grandmother's words replaced the music in his ears and Tony relived his Sunday dinners' nightmare-

"Se vuoi crescere, mangia Tonino, mangia."

Instead of replying, Tony would lower his gaze and stare. He never replied "odio mangiare," and they thought him mute until they discovered he was nearsighted.

The long ignored memory shrunk Tony further in his seat. Too young for his 22 years, or maybe just too small for his security guard uniform, for a brief moment he appeared lifeless until sweat dripped down from his forehead to his cheek. His wild dark hair now damp, hung limply on his forehead. Behind dark rimmed glasses his big eyes, usually alive, looked haggard. He was the slave of a past long gone, to which his made-up hero held the key. Tony was getting ready to discover it as his fingers started typing:

"The very gale which triumphantly waved the Wallach banner has now become the draught of our serfdom," Vlad III, the Just, or the Impaler, sermonized toward his royal consort, Anastasia-Maria of Poland. "Here we are in our last outpost waiting for my brother to attack."

Tony stared at the words on his screen painfully and hesitantly. He kept still without blinking until his eyes moistened. He feared scaring his inspiration away. Then, cheating a blink, he looked down at the right lower corner and read the time. It was thirty minutes past midnight. His shift would end in six hours. Six more hours of trials and tribulations, he realized. What would they be about?

"I've been deposed so Radu, a Muslim convert, the Sultan's favorite lover can be the king of this Christian land?"

Vlad III, called the Impaler for his favorite way of disposing of unpleasant company, was pacing up and down his consort's quarters. They were enjoying family time after dinner, when he noticed a hole in the window and stopped. It covered most of the stained glass image of the Virgin Mary with baby. He thought it a bad omen and moved away.

"It is indeed a sad day, Sir," replied his loyal wife. Though Vlad's wife for almost 15 years, Lady Anastasia-Maria had barely acquired any Romanian. Her linguistic handicap, or maybe her own nature, made her seem a pliant, polite conversationalist, as she had channeled her wifely duties to a pregnancy late in coming and to a deep devotion to needle point.

His writer's block was gone. Tony whistled and swiveled around in his stool and for a brief moment he took in the

visible slice of the outside world through the small window in the door. He did not notice the lack of traffic. The music poured into his ears soothingly. Numbed by it, he stared outside until his gaze dissolved into the still night. When he readjusted his sight, he realized his glasses were dirty and their lenses greasy from finger prints.

Chapter 3

Somewhere, two hundred miles south of Manhattan, between Washington DC and suburban Maryland, a petit mustached man in his 60s sprawled across a California King sized bed staring up at a screen covering half the wall. Ratty bottle blond hair reflected a not quite successful grasping at youth long gone. The glass in his hand suggested full awareness.

Silvester Stallone's character John Rambo had distracted him for the last 92 minutes but the credits of **First Blood** scrolled quickly by and fun time was over. He started like Rambo: a soft spoken Vietnam War American officer hated by his superiors for his excellence. But he'd chosen a different path. Matthew Pistone stayed within the system and became the general in charge of the most magnificent program ever: M.A.R.T.F., the Military Advanced Research Task Force.

The first U.S. President, General Washington, signed the Executive Order approving the creation and the public financing of the Union Military Fund, the U.M.F., which was the previous incarnation of the M.A.R.T.F. When the Battle of Harlem enabled General Washington's successful retreat from Manhattan, the General knew he owed his success to two men, one of whom was a barely civilized brute, better yet, a human killing machine, sent in the nick of time by his dear Russian friend, Empress Catherine the Great. After much planning, the battlefield's wilderness proved propitious for the new military plan. An asylum for the violently insane provided the cover-up for the General's military experiments.

Pistone viewed General Washington as his direct predecessor. Two revolutionary generals aiming for the larger good: the triumph of the American Union in a world full of ignorant but belligerent enemies. He checked the time. It was past midnight.

A bead of perspiration was crawling down his forehead. He dreaded his daily video exchange with Dr. Vodă. He despised his dependence on a woman, especially one who controlled his success. Dr. Ana Vodă! She had no idea how many times he had planned her demise, how many times he visualized her skull squashed, her impenetrable brain coming out of her eye sockets, nostrils and ears. Unfortunately, over the years, that moment seemed to retreat into the unknown future rather than get closer. For twenty years he had to put up with her, a stupid

Romanian woman who was the first understand that the plague was part of the answer to his quest.

The answer had been out there for all to grasp from the beginning, since the first house for veterans of the Revolutionary War, widows, and orphans was built. Some of them became plague-infested. Most plague-ridden patients would die within days after being admitted, but some wouldn't. The Asylum books mentioned that a patient developed signs of unbridled cannibalism right before dying. They described her as a human moth of rampant violence. She infested others by biting them. But she never attacked the Hero of the Battle of Harlem. She had attacked and infested the U.M.F. managing team, but not the Russian soldier. She avoided him, and together they cohabitated peacefully, until his handler asked him to kill her, and he obliged. But the problem did not end with her. In time other human moths were housed could only be contained, and their only guardian was the Russian brute.

No one understood their plague connection, until Dr. Vodă came along. She had studied the so-called "Soviet walking dead" and was going to share the bacterial root of their cannibalistic disintegration in exchange for a Nobel Prize in medicine, when NATO thankfully stopped her. That was two decades ago, and save some generalities she still had not kept her end of the bargain: her life in exchange for a formula how to use the plague for military aims.

"Damn that woman," Pistone murmured. "Damn all useless women," he added and smiled at his imagined redundancy. Unsure where his thoughts would take him, he sipped a long mouthful of bourbon. The amber liquid was barely covering the ice rocking from one wall to the other of the heavy crystal glass. Swallowing it slowly, Pistone remembered that it used to be enough to take his thoughts away from his project, and release himself into more mundane fare, such as the Mexican help he'd kept in the basement since his wife's unexpected departure. Now, everything was becoming more complicated. The Mexican was useless without a little pill's help, taken 45 minutes earlier.

"Damn all women and men like me who need them. Why can't I be happy with my Cuban cigar and Jim Bean?"

He felt both aroused and appalled when his dead wife came to mind. She hung herself right in front of the house so he would not miss her when he returned from Bosnia. He knew from

the start that he'd married the wrong woman, but he thought bourbon would mask the mistake. He took another sip. It did for a while: until their son had come out as the sissy of the month at the Naval Academy. He could have been embarrassed and humiliated by his failure; instead Pistone rose from his ashes and arranged to be transferred to Bosnia in charge of naval maneuvers. His son had followed him shortly.

"Gosh, Jim Beam. I am getting old and emotional."

During the 1990s war, in saloons all over the Balkans, Marines would put a stack of quarters on the bar and then girls would squat and pick up as many as they could. One night, a burly Marine showed up and after drinking a barrel of whatever they served, and having soaked in it a pile of quarters, he stacked them on the bar. It remained unclear whether the General's son saw him and approached him, or whether the Marine did not care whose son was around and hunched over so no one else could see him continue his deed. He took a lighter and held the flame on those quarters till they were so hot that when he enticed a girl to come over, and she squatted over the quarters, it smelled like roasted pork. He laughed and left the bar as the other customers were coming to their senses under the girl's piercing screams. When her brother came to take her to the hospital or home, the young Pistone was the only American in sight. He was quietly crying and he refused to defend himself when the Serbian brute crushed his head with his bare hands staring him in the eyes. When the General arrived and saw what had happened, he took the Serbian under his wing and made him an auxiliary in the American army under the new name of John Rambo.

Lying in bed with one leg hanging in his sheep-skin slippers, in a large silk blood red pajama and a well-tightened robe, Pistone was finishing his large glass of bourbon on ice. His eyes were touring the wall pictures. The older shot was of him between Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev in Berlin. The next one showed him welcoming First Lady Hillary Clinton to Bosnia. He looked mesmerized at Hillary's hairstyle, as if contemplating her more recent hairdos. His gaze stopped on the picture of him chatting with Donald Rumsfeld in 2006.

"Jim Beam, we've had a good run." The words lolled out of his mouth.

His beeper vibrated. He read the message.

"I will attend Knowlton's Conference tomorrow morning at 9 AM at Columbia University. Have John meet me at the Waldorf at 7 AM."

"Roger," he replied and smiled. He grew up dreaming of Celeste. Her family had a ranch in Montana and his dad worked in their stables. Young Matthew saw Celeste when she started her first riding class but they spoke when she sought him the afternoon she came home a day earlier from boarding school. He could still remember craving to bury his face in her plaid skirt while her fragile bare arms took his head between her hands and pulled his temple-skin back and kissed his eyes with such tenderness. Each time afterwards he wished she would never stop. And they never stopped until her father, Representative Carter of Montana, summoned him to his office one day and told him what he could achieve if he didn't dodge the draft. Celeste was sulking in a nearby rocking chair nodding in approval, like daddy's little girl she was.

He closed his eyes to push away the anger and frustration and let only the fond remembrance come through. He then stretched to take a cigar from the humidifying box he kept on the night table but he failed. His late wife was staring at him with discontent from the sole small-size picture in the room. It was shot in Bosnia, when she had come to beg him to have their son transferred back to the U.S. He laughed at her request. Two days later their son would be killed in that bar. At least he did not have to put up with two funerals. By the time his son's corpse reached U.S. soil, his wife had become a human pendulum in their imposing oak tree.

"Damn you, Rosa. Come here, you bitch. How many times did I tell you to take this frame away from my bedroom?" He got up nimbly to better scream at the Mexican. Doing so, he pressed the remote and he changed its source from Amazon to C-Span.

He stood still, unclear whether he had done it or not. It took him a moment to realize it was a recording of the Congressional Hearing of the House of Representatives, Subcommittee of National Security and Foreign Affairs, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. It was titled, **The Rise of the Drones: Unmanned Systems and the Future of War**, and Mr. Theodor, its Chairperson was addressing Representative Celeste Calder, Republican of Maine, as beautiful as ever, Matthew Pistone thought and decided to watch:

"Congresswoman Calder, there are critics of your steadfast support of the military and now for its increased reliance on drones. They point out the reportedly high number of civilian casualties, yours and President Obama's drone war has caused."

"What an idiot," Pistone hissed at the TV. "The exact numbers have never been produced."

"It's not just a number. It represents a certain number of coffins, side by side, combatants and civilians."

"Celeste, tell the idiot to shut up," Pistone encouraged her when he saw her replying.

"Chairperson Theodor, when we talk about the dead, suddenly everybody is declared an innocent victim, because our brave United States of America pays for every innocent victim, \$300."

"That's my girl," Pistone sounded excited.

"Congresswoman Calder, another criticism is that strikes do more to stoke anti-Americanism than they do to weaken our enemies. A quick skim of any Pakistani newspaper provides some evidence to support this theory."

"Celeste, he is bullying you. Show him, *ma belle*, show him he's an idiot." Pistone screamed at the TV and looked agitated.

"Congress cannot vouch for that evidence. Chairperson Theodor. Do you read Pakistani because I do not and I have to rely on an interpreter's translation and his accent is very thick making it hard for me to understand what he says. I am trying to say that numbers in that part of the world are approximate. But, we do appreciate that this is particularly relevant in the era of counterinsurgency doctrine, the central tenet of which is first do no harm."

Pistone stood up staring at the TV in ecstasy while Celeste answered.

"It also may be the case that we are fighting wars with modern technology under an antiquated set of laws. For example, if the United States uses unmanned weapons systems, does that require an official declaration of war or an authorization for the use of force? Do the Geneva Conventions, written in 1949, govern the prosecution of unmanned war? Finally, we already know that unmanned pilots are showing signs of equal or greater stress from combat compared to traditional pilots. The stress of fighting a war

thousands of miles away then minutes later joining your family at the dinner table presents mental health challenges traditional pilots do not have to face.”

Celeste was good. In so many ways. But she would not be able to keep the tide from turning without some palpable support. He needed to talk to Vodă. M.A.R.T.F. was the future of armed conflicts and she held the key to his success. He beeped her.

“Not now, General,” Dr. Ana Vodă replied. “I’m cleaning.”

The womanly chores he forced her to do calmed him down. Everything in her lab was automized, but she still had to clean, to pick up after her lab specimens.

Chapter 4

In the back of a well-equipped college-like gymnasium, a shower was on. Dr. Ana Vodă put her beeper back in her jeans and started washing gym sweat from her naked body. Her pixie cut auburn hair was getting wet. She tried to relax and delay the moment she would have to get ready for her nightly report to Pistone.

"Ana!" she heard the only voice around that gave her pleasure. Her stance softened. She pulled the curtain without hesitation making herself visible to the voice owner.

Discernibly uncomfortable, a muscular, tall man in his late 30s stood staring at a point well-chosen above Ana by the shower head. With a short military cut, his blue icy eyes were piercing. He was wearing a pair of well-tailored jeans and a Tee with a presidential campaign logo **Vote 4 Donald Rumsfeld 4 President and Mathew Pistone 4 Vice President**. He pushed the headphones around his strong neck, in a visible effort to bring the mundane in.

"John!" Ana sounded provocative when she was weary. She had trained him to control moments like this, when he could easily flip his feelings if challenged, but there was no guaranteed success.

Ana searched his face. She noticed his blue vein pulsating in his left temple. Ana was playing with fire. Her own heart beat increased. She rushed to cover her body with a towel.

"So?"

But she was not able to distract herself from her own desire for John's body. Conversation would have to wait.

John swallowed and instinctively turned his head down a bit. He noticed her small white foot making it out of the shower and stepping on something squishy and slimy like a good sized frog. Ana recoiled at the unexpected tactile experience. They bent to take a closer look. It was a recently gnawed, once pink, tiny little foot.

"How did they have access to this human waste? No one listens to me? My patients are not cannibals." Ana was pulling down a dark T shirt to cover up the unbridled anger growing inside her.

"It's hard to tell."

"John, my reports are censored by idiots who don't understand anything. I tell them to stop sending discarded body parts because my patients will be rattled and I cannot use them when they are under distress." This much speech calmed her down. Anger felt sweet but it drained her. "And who is the patient who chewed on this?"

"I cannot tell one for the other. Thankfully they wear their name tags. How do you choose their names?"

"Poor soul," Ana ignored John's question, rinsing off her foot. Then she quickly slipped into her tight, dark blue jeans, buckled her belt and glided into a pair of black flats.

They both noticed the fallen body, a dehumanized small smelly bump lying by the lockers.

Ana frowned momentarily when she noted the recessed red wall lights started blinking. The clock on the wall showed 12:38 PM. She approached the body. His name tag said "Bobby." He had opened his blurry eyes and moaned. He looked lost; all expression having died away from his face as if swept clean by an unseen hand. In its place a lifeless mask had formed.

John put on a pair of gloves from the nearby dispenser and threw the tiny foot into a disposal. From there, it would be recycled into compost and delivered to the local organic farms. Looking around and satisfied with what he saw, John was ready to leave, when Ana's odor finally reached his nostrils. Emanating from her body, it reinvented perfume. Within moments, his vein stopped pulsating. His heart reached a level of containment and he patiently awaited her guidance.

The change in the lights signaled that alarms started sounding in high frequency. John covered his ears with the headphones he constantly carried around, and adjusted their feedback so he could hear Ana. It was clean up time. Everything was going to be tightly closed and a water pool of Clorox would wash it all spotless. They needed to hurry. Ana pondered for a moment unsure whether she heard something or not. It would have been a first.

John grabbed Bobby, quietly moaning but otherwise unresponsive. Bobby could not hear the alarms indicating his transition was not complete. Taking three steps, John reached the nearby golf cart Ana used to get around the compound. He sat down behind the wheel, dropped Bobby on his knees, and looked at Ana to join him. As soon as she jumped on the seat next to his, and threw her wet towel in the back of the cart, John pressed the accelerator and took off.

"Do you still work for Rumsfeld," she continued a conversation which did not need to have been started.

John's feet alternated between the accelerator and the brakes. His hands were busy with the wheel.

"You know I work for Pistone."

Ana nodded. She knew Pistone was John's "godfather" having baptized him when they both crossed the Atlantic back to America after Pistone's successful stay as a NATO commander in Bosnia. She was ready to add something when, feeling a slight vertigo, she froze. The lights had stopped blinking on the walls and had changed their colors to red, white, and blue. Could it be that her ear drum registered the high frequency vibrations accompanying the color change? More somatic changes she had tried to ignore.

"We have thirty seconds before Clorox is the last word of the day," she managed to say. Her eardrum was responding to the high vibrations she had been able so easily to ignore. Her balance was being affected.

The cart stopped: Out of gas. The entrance to safety, marked by the large words "The Farm," laid yards ahead. However, its door started to close. John got out, taking Bobby.

"John, I need the cart. It has to come with us."

John threw Bobby over Ana's shoulder. Effortlessly, she ran to the doorway, and she blocked the door from closing with her body. The alarms' sound became louder. John pushed the golf cart inside and the door closed tight behind.

Everything became quiet and still. Ana recovered her poise. From the corner of her eye she saw John's perfect body. She would have to control her hunger for him, and restrain their intimacy if she wanted to avoid other unwelcomed transformations.

The disinfectant-laden water was filling the tunnel on the far side of the entry for a moment and then, unbeknownst to them, it unexpectedly stopped. It soon started to retreat. In time to avoid draining through the door which had cracked open.

Chapter 5

Inside Tony's booth, things were heating up. The fight between the two brothers, Vlad the Impaler and Radu Bey was ready to start.

Pacing his Lady's chambers back and forth, Vlad resembled a caged untamed lion when a quick, sharp sound made him alert. An arrow burst in through the hole in the window. Vlad's hand reached instinctively, grabbing the arrow as it flew in the room. Unfazed, the Lady, strangely determined, stood up. His hand, still crushing the arrow, was shaking.

The attack started when Vlad and Lady Anastasia were crossing the secret bridge connecting their cliff to the outside world. Under the cannon fire, the bridge was shaking and rubble started to fall all around. Vlad rushed ahead of her and, jumping on solid ground, turned to help her out.

Lady Anastasia had stopped standing right in the middle of the bridge, looking down, at the cascade below.

"Pray for us, my Lord," she murmured touching her pregnant belly, as she flung herself into the stormy water.

"To hell with you God!" he screamed. Torch in hand, he found his way to a dark passage. Soon creatures appeared and flocked to him. In the light their faces looked bloated or eaten by decay. Their marching and moaning soon changed direction, for they were attracted by the noise and the outside lights. Vlad grabbed one as it passed by and whispered into his rotten ear,

"Be my impaler!"

He received an inattentive groan, and a stare into the night instead of a commitment. Still that was enough. He watched them disappearing among the enemy, dressed deceptively in the enemy Turkish outfits, and soon they were feasting violently and urgently on the thighs and arms of healthy looking Janissaries, the infantry made of young Christians abducted and forcefully converted to Islam.

Within moments after having been attacked, a previously healthy soldier started to shake. At first he had a small tremor which then became rather large convulsions, only to finish in a standstill. His new but lesser self suddenly pulled his half-eaten limb out of his attacker's mouth and, spontaneously, joined his attacker. Then, they moved on to satisfy their newly insatiable appetites out of a motionless but even younger and juicier Janissary, who stopped in mid scream when he realized the change in his Muslim convert brothers.

Appraising the situation, Vlad came out from his hideout. Radu was readying himself to bludgeon skulls when Vlad stopped him. The distraction was over. The brotherly fight would engulf the battlefield. Time would stay still. Life and death would be interchangeable.

He did it! An impish smile fought Tony's motionless lips, bloody from so much biting. Vlad's secret was out: "Impalers"! Vlad had successfully transformed the contagiously sick into devoted soldiers. Nothing could stop Tony from re-writing history and becoming famous. Instinctively, his hands curled up into fists of determination.

"That's it my boy. Show me your Rocky fist," his dad liked to call his tiny baby fists when he would refuse to repeat words beyond his years. Not now, dad, not now, Tony pleaded with his memories of his father, Reilly Gallant, still dominating him. Confined to Staten Island, Reilly Gallant had lived a heroic fire fighter's life, and when he died, he died a hero. He was rescuing a kitty cat which had refused to get off a tree branch. Staten Island kept whispering for a week:

"Did you hear how Reilly died? No, he was not drunk. I saw him leaving his brother's tavern to take the call for the kitty rescue, and he walked fine. He fell all the way to the rocky ground filled with tall and thin sharp-ended tombstones."

That half-truth produced more half-truths:

"Yes, the Irish luck had avoided him all his life. Hastily, he had ignored fastening his security harness, and some new-age non-denominational African tomb stone impaled him. Poor Giovanna, now by herself with that affected mute boy of theirs."

Everybody showed up at his dad's funeral. And for a whole year Staten Island graveyards were filled with tomb stones lying on the ground rather than sticking out into the thin air. It was the least the Borough President could do for his dear departed friend, a moratorium from death by impaling.

Tony pushed away his memories and opened his fists letting his blood warm up his fingers. His thoughts finally shaped up into words which he hurried to type on the screen, when a small screen suddenly popped up on top of his word document, the same screen he was supposed to use to monitor the quad.

What an unfortunate event, Tony frowned, irritated. It was the image of the young Kun-Hee, Ollie, the son of the co-owner of the Founding Father's Burger Joint. Ollie was sitting in his red Fiat 500 parked catty corner from his father's restaurant. Tony zoomed in. Ollie stopped reading. How long had he been reading there? Tony wondered and noticed the time stamp of 11 o'clock. Something was amiss with the campus cameras. But seeing Ollie exit the car his gaze followed Ollie's moves.

A group of gesticulating students approached Ollie as he was coming out of the car. They were returning from a clandestine tour in the underground heating tunnels. They were upset because one of them got hurt in the section under La Maison Française which was very narrow and tough to go through.

"Who cares about you, Gemma. We lost Eric under the Earl Hall section a few days ago. It is by far the creepiest."

"It has no light and the vestigial wall separates the tunnel from something no one dares to explore."

"It is foreboding."

"The water drippings resemble heavy breathing."

"There, where there is no light we lost our fellow spelunker. I think he jumped over."

"Over where?"

"You don't know? Over the vestigial wall."

"Nonsense. There is nothing there, just an unfinished wall."

They did not stop to talk to Ollie. They entered his father's restaurant.

Ollie's phone rang.

"Yes, mother. I am practicing. No. I am not. I am waiting for dad. No, I do not need money. I'll be home soon. I love you mom."

Tony fast forwarded forcing Ollie to hurry back into the car. Surprisingly, it was not a live feed. Tony pressed play again when a rosso corsa Ferrari ff stopped in front of the restaurant. Tony followed Ollie's moves: he opened the door to his Fiat. The camera mike caught the tune. It was Carly Rae Jepsen "*I Really Like You.*" *It came from Ollie's iPhone. He had been watching Tom Hanks in her clip. The phrase "...really really really like you" could be heard so loud, the volume emptied it of any positive meaning. "I really really really really really really really like you" sounded like a bark or even a bite.*

Ollie stretched his legs and then pulled them back in and closed the door. Inside his Fiat, he was leaning over the wheel, looking more and more strange. A smile or a smirk was hanging painfully on his face. Tony zoomed in and followed Ollie's finger guns pointing somewhere. Following their direction, Tony noticed senior Kun-Hee kissing someone in the front seat of the Ferrari. Tony zoomed in further. Kun-Hee senior was kissing Arnold Jones, the masculine director of the Columbia University History Library, the one with his own show about leather and medieval artifacts; Tony remembered all too well his favorite midnight TV show.

"Aha," Tony murmured. "Young Kun-Hee suspected only his father's indiscretion. Now he witnessed it."

Tony felt a sudden acute pain in his stomach reminding him he was still hungry. Again in vain. Eating was so overrated for young Tony. He ignored it and fast forwarded the recording in an attempt to reach presenttime. He noticed the couple in the back seat, a woman wearing a festive dress holding the arm of a man who looked familiar. Both followed Kun-Hee and Jones into the restaurant. Then, the man who looked familiar returned outside to talk on the phone. His stylish suede jacket looked "Made in Italia" to Tony, and that detail startled Tony so much he forgot to press forward.

"Samantha, listen to me. Sam. I understand Brian is not at home, but I'm not coming to your apartment. Sam, I know your apartment is a block away. I am not coming. Never. Okay?" Then after a brief moment, he added, "Okay. We could go to our regular place." Another short silence followed. "Yes, right now I am with Lena, my fiancée, as

you know very well." Another moment of silence was broken by a taxi zipping by down Broadway. "Of course, I am addicted to your oral talents. No. Not tonight Samantha. No, don't come. Good night Sam."

Tony was stunned. He had a feeling he finally put a face on the man whose back he watched for months going into the tunnels every Wednesday at midnight accompanied by a very tall and boyish looking blond. Could it be him? Through the window Tony observed his video acquaintance taking a little box out of his pocket, and tenderly placing in on the underdressed young woman's hand, whose eyes bulged out of their sockets in disbelief.

"What?" Tony mumbled, and for a moment he looked puzzled not knowing what to think.

He zoomed in more to see her profile. Erect she radiated confidence. When she turned and looked outside the window for a moment, Tony froze the image to study her face.

"Marylyn," he mumbled. She did resemble Andy Warhol's Marilyn. Her wondrous smile, plump mouth, and moon-like face minimized the impact of the chestnut hair. Mesmerized, Tony missed her gaze at Ollie.

Tony's heart beat faster, and faster. She was being engaged to the campus womanizer. His boss, Campbell, alerted him to the professor's weekly tryst with that Sam. Tony saw them on tape entering the heating tunnel so many times.

He felt terribly hot and uncomfortable. He stood up, pushed down his headphones, undid his tie and took off his jacket throwing it on the stool. He opened the door and stepped into the fresh night as the camera continued rolling. He missed Ollie taking off, perhaps afraid of having been recognized.

Chapter 6

A door hidden behind the pedestal of Columbia's Alma Mater slightly opened; its security lock had been disengaged. The lack of noise indicated its hinge had been recently oiled. A wiry unstable figure came out and waited for something unclear to guide his steps.

His shoes squished as if full of water. Neither that discomfort, nor the bad visibility deterred his slow descent towards the quad below. The air was dark and in places looked condensed into a mournful gloom. Brooding would have been a one-word description of the pervasive feeling on campus.

Like a drunk using that muscle memory all drunks use to reach home, undeterred, the creature made it down the stairs to the lawn. There, he collapsed exhausted and anonymous in the sea of fog. His foot came out of his shoe, a size too large.

The smooth skin perfectly covering his facial bone structure made it impossible to tell his age. Only his hands, limp by his side, said it had been long enough. Their elongated fingers and dirty uncut nails were covered in tidbits of old goo, which could have been anything, perhaps even human or animal flesh dried out.

Not long afterwards a young woman, a fancy blond, in a golden leather dress, stumbled out of the same door. But she fought the fog and lost. She mumbled something, perhaps that she could not see where to go, when her high heels failed and pulled her down the stairs faster than expected. She rested quietly, and there was a good chance that she would not be disturbed for a while.

The wiry unstable figure covered in long hair and haute hippie clothes eventually managed to stand up. Perhaps he wobbled in circles for a while until musical harmony organized his moves in the midst of the sirens' cacophony. Guided by his acute hearing he followed the harmony and thus aimed for the co-ed dormitory.

When he tripped over the tent and the fornicating couple inside, it happened fast and unexpectedly for everybody involved. The intruder's eyes looked impenetrable; his smell and attire that of the homeless. In that moment most likely, the couple thought about the perfectly manicured lawn for the upcoming graduation spectacle which had attracted them to the

outdoors. How vacuous of them. Maybe they tried to blame the mild wilderness of the quadrangle. Or maybe the misty air incited the future Wall Street analysts to set their tent outside. Unburdened yet by financial success, they loved simple excitement under the moon, especially when the air was cool and the shadows plenty. The lack of stars worked as a bond holding their young hopes together. It had the effect of making the imminent MBA graduates tolerant of each other's yarns, emptied as they were of any convictions.

Then, the unthinkable occurred. What had been meant as a memorable end of innocence became the end of it all.

The sudden apparition did not mumble any excuse. It entered the tent right when the couple had finally finished embracing, and intrigued by the daring intruder, momentarily stopped to take in the view. The worldly one must have attempted to engage the stranger hospitably. Wine glasses would soon be found broken as well as some white powder terribly wasted around.

Perhaps the unsophisticated younger fellow got tired of being the last to matter and stood up brashly. He might have touched the stranger unpleasantly. While he did manage to flee, he did not scream for help. His elegant escape proved thoughtless. Moreover, a splinter or just bad luck got into his naked smooth foot. Inadvisably, but graciously, he stopped and squatted to take it out.

Focused on the task at hand, his eyes looked down. He would not record the tall figure catching up with him and finally bringing his transitory life into eternity. The fog added a *je ne sais quoi* of mystery.

Chapter 7

Not even a foot outside his booth, Tony was taken by the show of lights and noise, and ignored the nippy air. Finally, he basked in the world outside his head and had a glimpse of everything he had missed.

"What the hell's going on," Tony exclaimed. Energized, he waked away toward the epicenter of those unexpected nocturnal activities, abandoning his spot.

FDNY trucks were leaving the area, and NYPD cars were arriving. Police officers were taking over. In the absence of traffic, students carrying a pillow or two were carelessly crossing Broadway. They were being herded to the campus co-ed dormitory where they were going to spend the night.

Starting to grasp the reality, Tony stopped in the middle of the street. A honking horn woke him up forcing him to retreat to the sidewalk. Ollie was making a U-turn in his bright red Fiat 500. Tony's head turned around. The Fiat was going uptown.

"Hey, Spike, Spike Lee, have you seen the security guard anyway around?" The high heels clacking accompanied the unwelcome words.

That appellation of "Spike Lee" brought back memories he would have liked long gone. That and other similar names had been used to point out his insecurities: small, geeky, and nearsighted. Instead of beating up Ms. Gallant's son, "Tonino Fartino," and pushing him into a locker, or scaring him with drowning in the girls' bathroom toilet bowls as the other kids his side of short had to endure, the big scary young men who pointlessly repeated grades in junior high school teased him. His mother, Giovanna Gallant was the Math teacher who might have been weird like her son, an African American of Italian descent, as she liked to introduce herself, but she passed all the kids. Failing was a state of mind she did not have.

"Hey, Spike, are you trying to kill yourself," the woman physically grabbed him and pulled him from the middle of the street where he was going to run away from her. Ollie's Fiat seemed to be on a perpetual quest for direction and Tony was

baffled. He liked Ollie. Sometimes he helped the wait staff when they were busy, and once served Tony quite pleasantly.

The woman was still blabbering something while Tony let her pull him back to the sidewalk. Mindlessly he was following her when a group of workers got his attention. They were affixing a huge poster on the campus entry right across the street from Tony's booth. Tony took off his glasses and cleaned them with his shirt sleeve. Indeed it was the image larger than life of History Professor Thomas Knowlton, class of 1982, as the poster said. He was wearing Oculus Rift glasses. Below his name Tony read:

"Columbia University Presents 'TECHNOLOGY BRINGS HISTORY TO LIFE." Join us for the International Conference uniting personalities from 100 countries. Congresswoman, Celeste Calder, CGS '82, will deliver the key note speech."

Suddenly obfuscated by what he read, he felt chilly and disconnected. He went inside to recollect. Busying himself he threw on his jacket and hurriedly buttoned it up.

"Oh, it's you. Oops." The woman exclaimed having followed him back.

"How may I help you?" Tony asked staring above her at the poster.

"I thought you were a student." She continued embarrassed. "I need your help. I have this feeling that something went wrong."

"Something went really wrong," Tony repeated agreeably lowering his gaze to see her. Before he knew it, his stomach butterflies told him who she was.

"Could you please help me get in touch with Professor Knowlton?"

Tony suddenly found his muteness. It came to him when he felt out of place and intimidated. The way she pronounced "Knowlton" gave away her feelings for him. Lena, the girlfriend, cared for that man. He appraised her ridiculously looking shirt-dress, which was neither a shirt nor a dress like a brunch was neither breakfast nor lunch. What the hell was he saying? He needed to get in touch with his boss and explain himself. But first he needed to learn what happened.

"Officer Gallant," she managed to add reading his badge as Tony turned his back to her and searched the Internet for Channel NY1. He turned the volume louder to signal her he was busy. She made him uncomfortable and he did not have the desire to analyze his feelings. A student was being interviewed in NY1.

"I'm a junior at Barnard. Our dormitory is right next door. My room is...was on the third floor. The first explosion woke me up at a little past midnight... uhh... Maybe 12:12 AM. I remember the time because it was so crazy. I looked at my watch. I do wear a watch. Crazy again. It was 12:12. The second one came later. I did not check the time. Perhaps five minutes later. I had time to go downstairs and reach the street. I was staring in disbelief. The whole storefront was falling off. Black smoke came out..."

Tony remembered the security cameras were not transmitting live feeds. Their recording was developing a delayed retransmission. He needed to call his boss.

On his screen the NY1 anchor interviewed another student. This young woman seemed more belligerent.

"Something went really wrong. How was this possible at a restaurant below a Columbia dormitory? The ConEdison guy was here yesterday. How do I know that? I am the building president and let him in. And tonight we almost all went out in smoke."

"So, how may I help you Ms...." Tony finally addressed his companion.

"Officer...,"

"Gallant," Tony said so fast he surprised himself, and then added, "Tony."

"Italian?" her voice sparkled.

"Half Italian. Half Irish." And after a moment's hesitation he added "and the rest African." Why was he suddenly so chatty? "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't understand how I can be of any help, Ms. uh...".

"Vodă, V O D A pronounced vohduh, as in uh, duh," but perhaps realizing how pedantic she sounded she apologized. "Lena is easier. I'm Lena."

Lena extended her hand in an open handshake attempt. Such an affected gesture thought Tony and instead chose to clean his jacket of imaginary dandruff.

"That's a nice name. Lena Vodă."

"Romanian," she said without sounding offended by his indifference to her friendly handshake offer.

"Like Vlad."

"The Impaler," she ended his sentence.

"What were you saying?"

Lena rolled her eyes and turned around to leave. "Never mind."

"Ms. Vodă," Tony replied when the wind changed direction and her perfume reached his nostrils. Rich girls did smell so much better than he had imagined. "How can I help you?"

"Like a modern day Dante, I assume you watch those who enter the underworld on your monitors." Lena painfully explained her situation. "The truth is I was supposed to meet Professor Knowlton, and Samantha, Bowles, the TA, actually another TA of his..."

Tony sighed unsure whether she was lying to him or indeed she did not know about her womanizing boyfriend Knowlton.

"We were supposed to check out the professor's new 3D invention projecting holographs through Oculus glasses... uhhh... Tomorrow is the big unveiling ...at the conference. A Congresswoman friend with Tom will be here and we will go for a short walk in the tunnel to recreate history. Tom, I mean Professor Knowlton, believes that the tunnels know history from well before the time Columbia University was built. He thinks they were first war trenches, during the War of Independence."

Tony did not need this history lesson in the middle of the night. He felt suddenly very tired.

"Tom's book will be on display tomorrow. It's his first book in two decades. It's going to be sensational. A total surprise. His knowledge of American history and especially the War of Independence is unequaled. Through this book he will make history palatable to all. For instance, did you know that Columbia's underground tunnels were created when the Asylum for the Dangerously Insane was built?"

"No," Tony replied politely.

"You should talk to Tom. Especially because you watch the tunnels. I bet someone like you watched the tunnels when dangerously sick patients were admitted in and out."

"Not like me if the patients were white," Tony felt like adding. Instead he looked down at his shoes. She talked so much. When he finally looked at her he got distracted by her fresh-looking watery mouth. "Marilyn was a better name for her," he thought for a brief moment forgetting that it was very likely she would not remember his face tomorrow. He felt a deep panic thinking that.

"Maybe you should come. It is open to the public."

"I think I'm going to pass."

"Of course, you need to go home to sleep."

"Uhuh," Tony added with a beginning of a smile he used to shorten a conversation instead of lying that he couldn't stick around because he had a job to do. "Uhuh," he added retreating when Ollie bumped into him. Ollie's small oval face looked bloodless. Framed by long dark hair it appeared stuck between Ollie's inflexible shoulders giving him the air of a Dickensian office clerk, of someone who could never achieve anything consequential. His aquiline nose pointed ahead sniffing at possible resolutions and contradicting that first impression.

Tony was taken aback to recognize him and to notice his chosen route. Ollie entered the campus in the direction of Earl Hall. That was the entrance Knowlton and Sam used every Wednesday around midnight to access the tunnel. Tony realized he missed his chance to check on Knowlton. He felt slightly strange. What if they needed his help and he ignored them while typing? His heart started beating faster. What could his excuse be? "Vlad made me do it," he wished he could say when Lena's

voice softly pounding on his neck directed his attention to the computer screen.

"Could you turn the volume a bit up? That's me and Tom, I mean Professor Knowlton, outside the Founding Father. To think it was standing an hour ago."

And she sat down on his stool all invested in the delayed security tape rolling on in front of her eyes. From the monitor a slightly inebriated Lena was leaning away from Knowlton. She seemed to whisper "Oh, tempora! Oh, mores!" They were outside the restaurant. Tony notices the time lag in the recording and anxiously wondered what went so wrong. His worries are interrupted by Lena's earlier voice recording. She sounded like a poor imitation of the young woman so poised and so in control, occupying his entire space:

"Tom, I had enough."

"Lenny," Knowlton added as a group of students having finished their meals exited the restaurant hurriedly to return to their exam studying or join a party in the making.

"Professor," they acknowledged Knowlton and Knowlton nodded in their direction with his eyes fixated on Lena.

"Tom, let me go please. I cannot afford making a scene in front of Jones. Tomorrow I have to rub shoulders with him in the library."

Tony looked at her inquiringly, "Do you visit the library?"

"I work there."

Tony gave her a stare above the glasses.

"My TA stipend barely covers my rent, and Jones needed an instructional librarian." Lena blushed and looked away. Tony lifted his chin and his gaze lowered behind his glasses.

"An assistant instructional librarian," her moist, plum-like mouth corrected herself. Her teeth were slightly crooked. She had not been brought up here, Tony thought disbelieving he could articulate that observation.

"It was a favor to Knowlton. Happy?" She sounded hurried more than irritated. The air wave her head turning away from him hit him. With it came a citrusy floral smell. A mixture of bottled femininity unknown to him until then. He suddenly craved her presence.

The recording continued and Lena turned her crushing smile toward him and put her right index finger on his mouth, still staring at the monitor. Perhaps realizing the intimacy of her gesture she recoiled and mumbled an apology.

"Lenny," Knowlton continued defensively from the monitor, and his well-defined jaw appeared ravenous instead of meek.

"Tom, I really don't need to see your sexting to Sam!" came like an unexpected bark.

"Lenny, you could at least let me explain."

"I've listened to too many explanations from you, Professor Knowlton. It's public knowledge that Sam's head fits your crotch like a cherry fits the top of a cake."

"Lenny, stop now. You said enough." Knowlton winced, almost as if struck by thunder.

Lena must have noticed the effect her words had on him because she gathered herself and took a more proper position. She wanted to project self-assurance but she was shifting her weight from one foot to another, looking as if her stilettos were too much to endure at that late hour.

"Lenny, you know I am a pushover when it comes to bitchy blonds."

His stomach rebelled and for once Tony agreed with it. He would go outside to seek some food rather than continue watching people more foreign to him than his Italian grandparents. He opened the door ready to leave when he heard:

"Lenny, why don't you marry me?"

Again, unable to contain his feelings, Tony turned and looked at Lena. She stiffened in his chair pretending she was

all interested in her earlier reply, or maybe she was curious to hear it, as if she did not remember it.

"I'm tired, Tom. I am tipsy, and jealous, and my therapist won't text me back." And as she finished her sentence her phone rang. Distracted Lena looked into her bag and grabbed her phone.

"Hello, Jenna?" then towards Knowlton, "It's my therapist. I'll be fine." Knowlton had fallen on one knee begging her forgiveness. Lena smiled and ruffled his very short cut hair. She continued her phone conversation. "Thank you for calling, Jenna. ...Jenna, I am turning twenty-five tomorrow and I guess I'm going through a quarter-of-a-century life crisis."

Lena pressed the stop key and stood up.

"Can you help me?"

Tony felt cornered.

"Can you let me in the tunnel?"

Tony was staring at her. His neck was hurting. She was so much taller. It made him uncomfortable. As she stood in the doorway she saw her tiny frame through the dress. She looked thin she could be called Twig. He restrained his indulgent smile and felt a strong impulse to protect her. And then she talked and her words confused him.

"You must agree that the explosion could have dislodged something, or created a glitch in the security system. What if they're stuck somewhere? Let's go, please." She took his hand and pulled him slightly out behind her.

For the second time that night, Tony was shocked to notice her strong grip despite her willowy figure. Her hand was warm and dry and he imagined how her entire body would feel against his palm and a shiver like never before electrocuted his body.

Chapter 8

The wind was causing the fog to dissipate. The door in the pedestal crept opened again and for a moment a hauling noise could be heard. Then the wind was nearly calm and the shadow of a man became visible. He raised the collar of his suede jacket, and covered his eyes with a pair of sun glasses. He had to use both hands to accomplish the task. He looked around and after a moment of thorough cognizance, Knowlton stepped out.

He almost tripped but deftly avoided the fallen blond girl. She moaned and her head rose. He stopped reluctantly. Recognizing Sam, Knowlton kneeled and put his hand under her head paternally. He took his kerchief from his breast pocket. Something white, perhaps foam, seemed to have dried out at the corner of her mouth. He tried to clean it off. Unable, he asked Sam whether Brian, her husband, had been contacted.

She could not make eye contact and started shaking. He took off his cashmere wrap and covered her body. A speck of blood dripped from his nose but falling on the sleeve of his coat it remained unnoticed. He offered to contact 911 rather than Brian, and told her everything would be just fine.

Sam started moaning quite loudly. Unsure of his options, he attempted to stand up. He was unsteady. Sam moaned louder and louder. He needed to go and ask for help. She had to be admitted to St. Luke's Hospital, yards away from the campus. He took a few steps only to realize he was walking with a limp. Changing directions he walked up the stairs towards Low Hall.

By the entrance bank a crowd of women appeared from behind Low's colonnades. Knowlton stopped, understanding happenstance ruled that night. He stabilized himself staring ahead. They circled him as if smelling his odor and like dogs recognizing their ilk, they fast retreated. Confused by their retreat, Knowlton watched them as some were tripping, while others were standing and moving at uneven speed like marionettes in pajamas whose strings suddenly came loose.

Knowlton could not repress his thought that their non-choreographed moves looked at times almost Sylphidic, had it not been for the noise. Their noise was all encompassing and made up for their meek appearance. It resembled a shrill, a great

formidable cry of anger and despair, a deep, loud 'Oh-o-o-o-oh!' Then it went humming on like the reverberation of a bell. Any human heart would have jumped with terror. The noise they had made came briefly to a halt. For a brief a moment they looked lost. And when it restarted it resembled the echo of their previous racket.

Knowlton approached the door and attempted to open it, when they started banging in the thick glass panels next to it. He froze in place.

Some janitorial staff inside Low must have heard the noise and turned up the light. The harsh light attracted them as their moving hill ceased rolling down the stairs and they all came toward the light. Others adjoined. On top of the stairs, on the flat surface, they morphed into a mob seemingly unaware of Knowlton's presence.

The janitor must have also called a security guard and the security guard finally arrived. He nodded politely at Professor Knowlton. Perhaps desiring to appear in charge, the guard approached the pajama mob and aware of their sleepless plight he offered to bring them to the dormitory. Probably, he thought they had been misinformed about its location. While he was talking into his walkie-talkie, explaining the terrible job someone else had done, they surrounded him. The guard was smiling at the janitor who had opened the entrance door ajar, for him to come in. The guard did not have a chance to come through. The mob gulped down his individual energy and commenced digesting it. His bitten body collapsed momentarily only to overcome convulsions and semi-erect he joined the mob.

Professor Knowlton slipped inside Low. The heavy door slammed behind him. The janitor, paralyzed by what he saw, was motionless. Knowlton quietly avoided him and took the elevator up. A ray of light coming through the fog from the 4th floor wing indicated he was a senior university faculty member. His office was near the provost's.

There he collapsed on his leather couch. He stared at the ceiling and closed his eyes. He looked for his phone and he found it in his pants. He dialed it and then reclined until his head lay down uncomfortably on top of something hard: his book. Freshly out of print it smelled of ink. He read its title aloud:

"Anabelle Sancho: The Real Hero of the Battle of Harlem,"
and stopped. His mouth was full of blood. He forced himself to

stand up and went to the little sink he had installed in his office hidden by the refrigerator with a bookshelf door.

He spat the blood and his eyes closed for a moment as he pondered life's meaning. There was no way to express his sudden mental abyss. In an attempt to stop torturing himself he went to the refrigerator for some quick acting poisonous liquid. It was a present from Celeste, one of his many college girlfriends, but the only one worth remembering. Limping he leaned on its door when the phone rang in his coat. Not sufficiently intrigued, he took a big mouth of Johnny Walker Reserve, and then picked up his phone.

"Celeste, how propitious! Isn't this past your bedtime? How are you going to get your beauty sleep if you come here for the opening act at 9 AM?"

"I read your book."

"Skimmed it," Knowlton chuckled taking another sip of Johnny.

"I did not see it coming."

"What sweet Celeste?"

"Your lineage."

"We have the same patronymic: Knowlton."

"Which is intriguing, given the fact that you are black, and he was white."

"There is always a mother in the mix, Celeste. I know your story, but remember: mothers matter as much if not more than fathers."

"Knowlton was a local hero," Celeste ignored his words. "It's going to be big news that he is your direct ancestor. How did you learn about his affair with the beautiful daughter of Ignatius Sancho?"

"All the documents of the time had it mentioned in a footnote or other. No one paid attention to that detail."

"The book may save your sour prick."

"Meaning?"

"Brian Bowles claims that you are an unrepentant womanizer and you are destroying his family. The woman's own grandmother, the Barnard President wants you fired."

"Celeste, you know me. I am fond of blonds."

"What about your steady girlfriend?"

"She's wonderful, and I love her, but I am not a one-woman man. You are not a one-man woman either. You understand me."

"I do and am willing to help you. I like your book. Make tomorrow's conference your finest. Find the Knowlton and the Sancho in you, my friend. Fire up your audience tomorrow. Make us your Rangers. The Rangers did not disappoint their Knowlton on September 16, 1776, and we will not disappoint you."

"Celeste, my one and only love."

"Tom, stop the nonsense. You do such a marvelous job at describing the brisk skirmish which took place for half an hour in the woods in Harlem. You make us witness it. Like Washington we have the birds' view, and see the two dozen Rangers pushing back the Redcoats sent to annihilate them. I am there with the Rangers when they gave them about eight rounds apiece, killing as many as one hundred and injuring almost the same number, until it became clear the British were flank-guarding the Rangers. Colonel Knowlton gave the retreating order, which the Rangers flawlessly executed, without confusion and any loss."

"Celeste, the Rangers made those British pay for their earlier contemptuous fox chase song. They had filled the Harlem forests with their bugle horns"

*'Hark! Hark the bugle's lofty sound
Which makes the woods and rocks around
Repeat the martial strain,
Proclaims the light-armed British troops
Advance -Behold, rebellion droops
She hears the sound with pain.'*"

"Yes, Tom. I have the pages in front of me. That skirmish inspired General Washington who from the heights of his refuge, devised a plan to enable the retreat of all the Patriots from Manhattan. He devised the feint. The Light Infantry would be entrapped in what was known as the Hollow thus shielding his army while leaving the island in the hope they could reunite later in a better location to fight back."

"After the morning skirmish, the Rangers fought again that afternoon in the feint."

"And your ancestor, Tom, died a hero delaying the British army. Excellent timing. The University won't ever fire the descendant of a Revolutionary War hero."

"Celeste, Knowlton's son was a Ranger at that time, fighting under his father's command."

"And? I don't get it. What are you afraid of, the age difference? Adultery?"

"I don't know what I am afraid of right now, Celeste."

"Tom, I am sure I have ancestors who raped black slaves. Yours were freely consenting adults."

"Celeste, actually there is more to this than what you know. I found a letter from a former ranger, who wrote it as a retired Connecticut Judge. I am going to email it to you." Tom sat down at his desk and turned on the desktop. His hands trembled. His fingers could not type anymore. His head was throbbing. "I would like to read you a page."

"What's the big deal?"

"Are you taking a bath?"

"Yes, I am at the Waldorf."

"Shall I come?"

"Better not, Tom. I would not be too helpful if the tabloids got the gist of our relationship. Read me the page, please."

Water dripping in the bathtub followed her silence. Tom took a pair of reading glasses and put them on. Leaning back on his chair he read from the screen:

"September 15 had been a hot day. We were lucky to be the guests of the Jones. His wife made us a good dinner of bread and stew, and Mr. Jones let us have as much beer as we wanted.

Some of us went for a walk. The colonel was okay with us leaving him. He was talking to a beautiful woman who told us the location of the Redcoats earlier. She was from England, but a Patriot sympathizer. If I did not know any better I would have thought her Negro. But she was lodging

with the Murrays and our Colonel seemed ready to kill anybody who should have shown any disrespect.

Like most of the other rangers, I fell asleep in the forest. A man, bigger than Colonel Knowlton, woke us up. We all looked down confused and embarrassed. He did not talk much, or at all and we were happy. We followed him to the farm. The enemy must have heard us. They opened fire. The stranger fought like a tiger in charge. He killed about 100 of them. He might have not been a Ranger but he surely fought like one. When we reached the hill, I saw him approaching a foreign looking person who acted as a liaison, between him and the General, or better yet, as the foreigner's handler telling him what to do.

Things moved so fast that day, and I was soon injured in that afternoon's feint. I had forgotten about all this until I visited the spot of the battle last month and I thought I saw him. It was so real, I had to ask my companion to leave fast."

"What are you trying to tell me, Tom?" Celeste asked unconvincingly as if knowing the answer.

"The hero of the day might have been someone else. A foreigner."

"Where did you get this nonsense?"

"I uncovered it at Yale."

"Tom, burn it. Delete it. Forget about it. I surely never heard its content."

Tom felt a pang in his heart. He closed his eyes and fell into a stupor. He visualized his ancestor Arabella Sancho as Columbia's Alma Mater, the cast-in-bronze-woman so large she is visible across the campus and from a helicopter. She stood up and approached the Low building. Her marble hand broke the window to his office and picked him up sitting in his chair. She smiled at him and told him everything would be okay.

Chapter 9

Tony happily followed Lena into the street. His glasses almost fell over when she dragged him out. He felt free and childish and inconsequential and ready to scream an obscenity, when he tripped and had to stop to avoid falling down. Had he not been still he would have missed the call. His cellphone was on vibrate. For a moment he hoped it would stop on its own. Then, he freed his hands and patted down his pockets until he found it in his jacket's inside pocket. He answered absentmindedly pressing the speaker button.

"Tonino, did you call me?"

Tony recognized his mother's voice.

"No, mom. Why aren't you sleeping?" Tony replied staring at Lena. She smiled tenderly when she realized it was his mother, or so Tony imagined. She nodded approvingly and let go of his hand.

Remorsefully, Tony watched her crossing Broadway, entering the campus and, as if in a ritual, retracing Ollie's earlier steps. Soon, she disappeared walking up the 29 stairs to Earl Hall. He could have stopped her, or gone with her, but then he would have to be rude to his mother. He turned off the speaker.

"I cannot sleep when I know you are so far away, in the middle of that urban jungle."

A car zipped by and Tony retreated into his booth.

"What did you say?" His mom asked.

"Nothing mom."

"I saw the explosion at the Founding Father, where we had lunch with your boss last month. Luckily no one's been harmed."

"Uhuh."

"I saw your booth on TV," his mother continued. "That place is not for you, Tonino."

"Mom."

"Tony, you are a man now. Until you get your state license, you could be a substitute teacher. You don't have to teach at my school. Anywhere you want on Staten Island."

"I like Manhattan, mom."

"Tonino, are you still there?"

"Uhuh," Tony answered, and then corrected himself, "yes, mom."

"And where is that, sweetheart?"

"In my booth, Mom."

"How come you didn't hear the explosion?"

"Who said I didn't, Mom?"

Tony fidgeting searched the Internet for the explosion coverage. Barnard students crossing the campus were all over the news. A TV anchor could be heard explaining that the tragedy had been averted and that all Barnard students found a place to sleep for the last night of the spring exams in the various Columbia University co-ed dormitories located on campus. The camera caught happy young women strolling there.

"Tonino, Tonino." Tony put the phone away from his ear, irritated. "Are you ignoring me and writing your vampire novel? Why don't you stop wasting your time? No one will publish your book. We are just not that type of people."

"And what type of people are we, Mamma?"

"Tonino, you finished community college here in Staten Island."

Tony was quiet. He had learned that every time the conversation reached this point, the best for him was to keep quiet.

"You need a job. Like your father."

"Mom, I have a job."

"Tonino, don't get me wrong. I'm proud of you for enjoying reading history books and using your imagination. And I am happier you are not a firefighter." His mom, fighting tears, continued with a shaken voice. "God wanted you to stay alive and do something great. Dad would have wanted the same." By now his mother was crying. "I always pray to Madonna and thank her for looking out for you."

"... Please, Mamma... You make me feel terrible."

"I love you calling me 'Mamma'."

"I love you, Mamma."

"I love you, son."

"Thank you for calling, and please don't cry."

"I am going to bed now. Stay safe. Don't let any girl get you into trouble Tonino, promise."

"Good night mom."

"Promise Tonino." His desk phone rang loud and clear. His boss was at the other end.

"I have to go mom, please. Campbell is calling."

"Promise Tonino."

"Mom, I have to hang up, please," Tony pleaded and overwhelmed by the strident sound he was the first to hang up.

"My boy, anything I should know about?"

Tony's heart was beating full of guilt. He had hung up on his mom to hear Campbell yawning.

"Hello, Sir."

"My boy, I watch TV too so I know about the boiler explosion. Anything else I should know before I go to bed?"

"Maybe," Tony added forwarding the recording. "We lost contact with our intruders. They went in minutes before the explosion, but I have not seen them coming out."

"You are not talking about Benoit, that fucking urban shit artist? Did he break in again?"

"No, sir, no spelunkers, and no guerilla urbanists." Tony repressed a smile. "None of that, Sir." And hearing a light snoring through the phone, Tony explained, "Sir, our regular intruders, Professor Knowlton and his Samantha, Sam. They have been inside for almost two hours."

That prolonged speech seemed to have stirred some life at the other end of the line.

"Do you think they're in trouble?"

"Could be." Tony replied somewhat confused. He waited for more.

"Vampires or zombies? What do you think?" His boss finally offered and Tony stopped breathing.

"Gallant, I was asking about the novel you're writing when I'm not checking on you, making you imagine stuff no one else does." A female giggle could be heard next to Campbell, followed by what Tony pictured as cavorting.

Tony blushed and waited. When he was able to breath regularly he said:

"Sir."

"Don't deny it, Gallant. You're a bright man. Your old man was so proud of you. 'A bit different, but shines in school,' your old man told us. I know you want to go back to school and become a big shot writer." Campbell stopped to compress laughter hard to keep quiet. "Who knows, maybe you can fly too. But for now, keep your eyes on those monitors. Don't make me change my mind. Don't you dare to talk to Knowlton. He's a professor not a schmuck. Do you hear me, Gallant? Stay inside the booth and keep an eye on the students. That's all, OK?"

Tony's height shrank to 5 feet during this conversation.

"I'll do my best, Sir."

"Good. You like keeping an eye on those pretty students, don't you?" Campbell added to the audible delight of his companion.

"I like keeping an eye on the students," Tony repeated mechanically starting to hate himself.

"Who doesn't, my boy, who doesn't," his boss replied and perhaps having bit his companion who shrieked with pleasure forgot to add "Good night" and hung up quickly.

Tony hung up exhausted. He sat down for a moment, then, he unlocked his drawer, grabbed a light and a can of Mace, saved his word document and exited the booth carefully locking the door behind him. From outside he missed listening to a delayed audio recording.

"Oh, Sam, you did it again." Knowlton's voice could be clearly heard from the dark tape. "With these talents you can easily become president," he added while a zipping up noise was recorded and Sam's most likely smacking her lips with pleasure.

"Now, Tom, why would you bite me?"

"Ouch, Sam! Do you have to bite me?" Their questions overlapped and the recording mercifully stopped.

Chapter 10

The noise was minimal. The tick, tock of the clock. The temperature was just right, and the General had finally fallen asleep with the glass in one hand and a cigar in the other, when the cell phone woke him up. Unfazed, Pistone put the cigar in the ashtray next to the picture of him flanked by his dead wife and son, and hissed "Mexican bitch," before picking up the phone.

"General, can we talk?"

"Congresswoman Calder," Pistone answered the unexpected call. "Isn't this past your bedtime?"

"I've read the hearing transcript."

"The first page? Me too."

"The House does not seem taken by the President's drone wars."

"Celeste, you did a marvelous job."

"So, why aren't they relenting?"

"Oh, who knows? Election time? The bottom line is that the House and the Senate like wars more than the Pentagon does. We execute what you legislate, my dear Congresswoman."

"I don't know Matt, that is wishful thinking. I fear that when the drones are gone for lack of funding, then your Rambo project comes under scrutiny."

"I would not call John a project. It sounds so belittling."

"Psychopath? Is that better?"

"Celeste, you trust the man otherwise you would not request him all the time."

"General, I worry about our projects. This never ending hearing is a bad sign."

"You worry too much."

"How are you doing Matt?"

"What can I say?"

"Thank you for letting me have John, though I would prefer to know his real name. John Rambo sounds so pompous and artificial."

"He's as real as they get."

"I know. I will never forget my first trip abroad. How he squashed those thieves' heads until their eyes came out of their sockets."

"Luckily you have avoided the Old City since that first unlucky visit in the Arab Quarters."

"I like rugs."

"I know. You like a lot of things. You liked Golda Meir's Mercedes. A valuable antiquity others liked too."

"Matthew, I am not that materialistic."

"Of course not. Thank your lucky stars there are not many Jews in your district."

"Matt, you've always been so crude."

"Direct. In the military we like to be direct."

"Okay. I will be direct too. I worry about the survival of our pet project."

"Congress will never cut military funding. Our coffers are full and every year they get bigger. Congress loves drones! They will cut every penny from schools and hospitals before they touch us."

"What about martif?"

"M.A.R.T.F., Celeste? The Military Advanced Research Task Force?"

"Yes. And what about that scientist?"

"Dr. Vodă?"

"Yes, why do you trust her, Matt, isn't she an immigrant?"

"I'm not a fan of hers, but at least she's not a fecund Mexican." Pistone laughed at his strained joke.

"She promised us Rambos. Many Rambos. I don't think she ever made any. Can't you make her give us Rambos? You can make anybody do anything you want, Matt."

"Celeste, she gave us John. You remember, John Rambo who killed my son with his bare hands and anybody he thought crossed him."

"John still does that."

"For us, now."

"We need more, Matt."

"She is working on Aaron. The first one made-in-the-USA."

"When?"

"I cannot tell. She does not use kitchen aids."

"I thought that she studies the walking dead to make us the human drone?"

"Celeste, what an inspiring name. 'The human drone.' Excellent. Maybe you should work with Dr. Vodă."

"Why are you talking nonsense? Why can't we lobotomize our best violent criminals and make them into submissive criminals? Why can't she continue with the lobotomy?"

"Because lobotomy produces vegetables. It cures criminals of their violent behavior."

"Then we should have better surgeons. They should be more careful with the brain they cut."

"I fear that it is more complicated, my dearest Congresswoman. Vodă discovered the premise for the perfect human drone. You need to be born with a lobe atrophied very peculiarly. It needs to trigger the type of lack of empathy which is the basis of a perfect criminal. And from a perfect criminal to a human drone is a long way. You see, it is very complicated."

"Matt, I have not anybody in Congress with empathy. Can't she make them into perfect soldiers?"

"Aren't they already perfect soldiers?" The General added chuckling in delight.

"Matt, it's all flying over my head. I'm just worried that when there are no drones we have nothing to replace them."

"Celeste, Congress will never close the drone project. Moreover, M.A.R.T.F. has been well funded forever and the drones are in no danger of losing their funding. Go to bed. Are you in the City already?"

"Yes, I just checked in the hotel."

"Okay, John will be there when you wake up."

"Thank you Matt. You've always been so good to me, and ...daddy."

"Good night Congresswoman," Pistone ended the conversation before she could make a fool of herself. Last time he saw "her daddy," the old Congressman was peeing his pants asking forgiveness for his parental skills. It took a nod of the head for John to start squishing the old graying head. By the time John was done with it there were no Lolita images of Celeste to inebriate his sorry life. Celeste identified his burned body due to a terrible car accident.

The memories Celeste brought up made him aware of the world he was forced to live in, so alien and so chaotic.

"Damn it woman. Why do I still care about you?" All that bourbon sharpened his senses. Throwing the glass against the wall he takes his unfinished cigar and goes outside. Climbing down the marble stairs he avoids slipping by flexibly repositioning his center of gravity. His nimbleness takes him down effortlessly. The moonlight darkened the oak where his ex stood still in the summer day. He went under the same branch and looked at it: so beautiful in its ignorance. He caressed the bark thanking it for canceling his marital status and with his mind clear he remembered the call he had to make.

The thought of Dr. Vodă irritated him, and that was disconcerting. Why did he care so much about that female

cockroach? He could destroy her in a second. John could squash her had the General instructed him to do so.

Then he remembered that coffee took his edge off. He needed a cup of coffee.

He went to the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. He looked around and could not locate anything. Where was his coffee? Where were his cups? He saw the coffee machine, but he realized he did not know how to get it started.

"What a mess," he mumbled. Upset he walked to the curtain where he saw the cord he could pull to ring the bell in the Mexican's room. He pulled it.

"Help, come up. Mexican ...woman, I need you." He waited for a moment inhaling more tobacco. No movement. No sound.

"Por favor, I don't know your name." Pistone was trying to wake up his maid, Rosita, the live-in Mexican emigrant occupying the basement apartment, more like a laundry room loft.

Maria, a petite woman in her 50s, wearing a waitress outfit with her name, "Maria," sewn on her left breast pocket, eventually appeared minutes later. The general was pacing up and down the museum-like, spotless, kitchen. When he saw her he saw loud and clear:

"Un café ...huh.. Por favor."

He watched her nodding and going to the coffee machine. His eyes were lingering on her body. He liked her behind. It was nicely round and firm.

Maria poured water in the single mug coffee maker. Her gestures were a replica of his as they talked. Like an idiot. She put the coffee capsule inside the machine, took a mug from a cabinet and put it in its place. Then she pressed on. Within seconds the coffee filled in the cup.

"General ¿Sería esto todo?"

"Si. Gracias...Rosa."

Maria did not correct him. She nodded and hurried away. She did not wait for the General's hand to fondle her. Still rattled up by the events of the night, the General forgot to molest her,

but the night was young. He took his coffee and went to his office.

He sat down in front of his computer and opened the "Military Advanced Research Task Force" folder. There, he stored all the reports Dr. Vodă emailed him as well as information the Pentagon had on her, and his own list of questions she had never answered.

1. "How does she stay alive surrounded by all that plague?"

John was not contagious, and neither was Aaron. He discovered that on his own after having John around as an auxiliary, but John tested positive to the plague. She explained that because John was infected as a fetus, the plague had been stabilized in utero. Okay, but what about those adults bitten by a plague carrier and who took weeks to die? They were contagious. How did they survive?

2. "Is Ana one of them?"

She remained a mystery to him from the first day. Twenty years ago M.A.R.T.F. needed a scientist and she topped the list. Her work with the walking dead at the Municipal Hospital in Bucharest had been a remarkable success. She was able to control her patients behavior and delay the cognitive atrophy. On TV she credited her father, the history professor as inspiring her, especially his theory about the crusades as the result of pestis epidemics. Pistone needed someone of her caliber. He would have liked the old man too, but he died from the poison they used when trying to abduct them.

Pistone clicked on a clip showing two helicopters hovering above the ruins of Poienari castle somewhere in Romania. It was dated "July 14, 1995."

Three people were lying down on the bare ground: A woman in her 20s, an older man in his 60s, and a child, a girl, about 5 years old. Three NATO soldiers equipped against the poisonous spray the helicopters had spread over the ruins picked up the civilians. The woman opened her eyes and looked around. It was Dr. Ana Vodă, in her 20s. She looked concerned rather than agitated as she was being separated from the other two. She was brought to a different helicopter than the little girl and the older man, both momentarily unconscious. The old man, her father,

looked dead in his stillness. The little girl woke up and started screaming. "Mama, mama, come back."

Dr. Vodă turned her head away from the girl.

The General zoomed in. Ana was facing the camera. Her eyes were dry and menacing. She was mumbling something. He was happy he did not speak Romanian.

Chapter 11

Tony rushed back into the street and was almost run over by an ambulance. He jumped scared and lost his glasses. Bent over looking for them he missed the light change and was nearly clipped by a Mercedes.

"Idiot. Do you have a death wish?" an angry driver yelled.

"No, sir, to the contrary. I feel alive and tonight I'll be a knight." Tony could not stop himself and suddenly felt ready for whatever came next.

"The clothes don't make the knight," the driver laughed as he drove away. Tony was stunned but fortified by the taunt. He walked faster and faster until he was running up the 29 stairs to Earl Hall. But his mind was calm, thinking, as he thought about how parents - how they'd told him about the happy, privileged life they'd provided for him - how they were afraid he might throw it away.

It took Tony years to understand what they meant and what they wanted from him, and for him: nothing out of the ordinary, whether too ambitious or too uncouth. With each step Tony came to understand the value of those words, and how they never meant anything to him but boredom.

"To live a quiet death or die from a quiet life, that is the question," Tony mumbled and pushed through the door inside Earl Hall.

He looked up instinctively to search for a camera. There was none at the entrance and he made a mental note to tell his boss to install one. He touched his pockets for his phone. He hesitated aware of his pounding heart. Perhaps the adventure he was after was more than he could handle and the life he had something he wasn't ready to lose.

"Tonino," his inner good son could hear his mother's voice. He had hated that appellation for as long he could remember. It kept both potential friends and bullies at bay. It told them he was no regular Anthony. He was the little Italian African American boy who belonged to the Math teacher.

"Mamma," Tony heard his thoughts refusing to rebel, and his hand clutched the door handle but didn't open it. He had a sudden desire to return to his post before his boss checked on him or worse, his mother checked and then called the boss. Actually, he only wanted to do for Vlad what Michel Beheim, the minnesinger had done, only in reverse.

Michel Beheim was one of the most resourceful people who ever lived: he killed his insignificance in 1462. After hearing a monk tell the story of Vlad III the Impaler's run-ins with some Catholic messengers, Beheim decided to recreate and embellish them. He put them to music and performed the final product for his benefactor, Emperor Frederick in the winter of 1463. The show was such a success, that Beheim's story was printed months later when Gutenberg's printing machine became available. It became an amazing horror story best seller, whose main character, Vlad, was still alive. Beheim's fictionalized account recreated Vlad and established his fame forever. His defamation surpassed reality and Vlad became the Vampire in German, and "nospheratus" in Slavonic translations, a "zompire."

Now, that fake history had to be destroyed, and Tony the Valiant was waking up inside Little Tony the Security Guard. Tony the Valiant, born to undo what Beheim had done. Vlad was a warrior. He was no vampire. In Tony's history, Vlad wasn't a zombie, he was the inventor of germ warfare - using the contagious sick as what Tony called "impalers."

Tony was ready to return when Lena's face erased the thought of Beheim, and he quickly resurfaced his most valiant inner self yet: Tony the Knight and All Mankind Savior. Yes, he was going to help the lost people in the Columbia heating tunnel system. He would start with Lena. His heart pounding he went inside, then stopped.

The air stuck to him. The heating pipes made it hot and sticky, hard to breath. He closed the door gingerly so as not to disturb the lost, innocent souls that might be lingering nearby. He would have locked it to prevent other intruders but he didn't have a key. Better off unlocked, he thought. It would have prevented all escapes, his included.

With determination he attempted a step but his legs didn't move. It would have been so much easier had he been drunk. His father drank. His uncle, too. Normally timid and shy, his uncle transformed each night into a stand-up routine.

"An Irishman came out of a bar," was his favorite joke.

Tony should have kept a bottle of Scotch, or Rum, or Gin, or Vodka in one of his drawers. Maybe he should go now to buy a few of those tiny hotel bottles and come back later. There was no rush. He still had many hours before his shift ended.

He turned to exit and his head bumped a hanging light which flickered on. The bulb became a little star; dim yellow light flashing in his eyes. It woke him up and kept the shadows at bay. Tony smiled. Was that all it took to fix the light?

He looked around. It was a regular utility tunnel built to carry steam heat through heavy pipes. The tunnel started large enough to accommodate one person walking behind the other. The walls and floor were made of smooth cement or concrete.

He moved ahead carefully. After a few yards the tunnel turned left. Tony turned too and looked ahead. There were no bulbs and the light from behind faded quickly. The dank, heavy smell told Tony that he had reached his destination.

He turned on his lantern and looked around. The heavy heating pipes above his head dipped suddenly to eye level, making it hard for him to see the much talked about vestigial wall. He stepped in a puddle with a splash that announced his presence and soaked his foot.

He looked down lighting his shoes. He liked his Nikes. They gave him an air of temporal contentment. He was correct. Temporal contentment. He noticed his dirty Nike shoes and that brought back Tonino and the scolding he was likely to receive at home for making himself so dirty.

He pushed forward leaving the belittling memory behind. He walked until he touched a door, felt for the knob and turned it hopefully. It was locked. He tried again more forcefully. Same result: nothing.

"Shit-ake," he whispered afraid that he might be overheard. And, unsure, he added: "mushrooms."

Vulgarity never helped him. He closed his eyes and focused, trying to separate what was outside his head from what resided inside. He heard or thought he heard a walking noise. A steely clack, clack, clack. Hopeful he started walking toward the noise. He lifted his lantern and looked around. The lantern was

good for creating shadows but not confidence. He stopped still and listened to the silence, and feared his pants won't remain dry for long.

He was becoming hot and sweaty. He did not dare undo his jacket for fear of losing whatever protection his uniform provided. He started walking again. Slow and silent. Then a groan sounded painfully loud into his ear. A groan. Or something worse. Someone chewing? He imagined Vlad's Impalers coming for him. He terrified himself with his imagining and waited. He'd always told himself that if misfortune brought him face to face with an Impaler, he wouldn't look into its eyes. For now though, nothing. He'd forgotten that he, his imagination, was the real master of the Impalers.

Chapter 12

The music and the driving did not do Ollie any good. Everything hurt. His nonexistent beard hurt. So he came up with a plan. He would go for a walk. Where? The campus was too foggy. He would go in the heating tunnels, and from there he would enter the History Library located in the basement of Low.

There was a big leather couch in the reading room and Ollie planned to spend the rest of the night there, waiting for Jones. He wanted to confront his father's lover, to make him understand his father would never leave his family, not if he had to choose between a lover and a son. Ollie hated any public display of emotions, but this time he was not sure whether he would make a scene. He didn't much care what would happen next. In fact, Ollie doubted there would be much "next" once his filial gift were discovered: a wrecked restaurant.

The next few hours remained his, and Ollie was looking forward to being alone. He would try to sleep until the morning and with his head clear, plan how he would eventually face his parents. Could he pretend he was as surprised as they must have been when they heard about the explosion in the basement of the Founding Father? His father was such a stickler for following regulations. "A leak of gas? No way. The annual inspection just passed," His father would fight the accidental hypothesis. But he would never believe it was his son, either. Ollie was losing some of his righteousness. His father would never suspect him of wrecking the family business.

Ollie went down to the basement of Earl Hall determined to seek the isolation the heating tunnels supposedly offered. He found the door to the tunnel system easily. It had a label "Heating Tunnel Entrance," affixed to it. It could have been locked, but it was not. Once inside Ollie was surprised to find it so clean. It looked like a regular underground passage to make the janitorial staff work easier. The light was dim and the signs barely visible, but the choice was minimal: ahead.

Ollie started walking intimidated by the weight of his thoughts and ignored the scary portion where light turned to

darkness. His shoes protected his feet from the water leakage around. He became alert only when he could hear his heartbeat in his ears; the dull, persistent, quick sound of a muffled mechanical watch. His apprehension increased as he went, ever more conscious that he was the cause of his parents' downfall.

Again, the first door blocking his way did not give him trouble. The knob on it turned easily. He opened it a sliver and squeezed through. He wished he had a light, not that it would have helped much.

The stench told him he'd made his way into the janitor's closet. In the cramped space he searched carefully for the light switch, wanting to avoid knocking something over and alerting security.

Then he was still. He scarcely knew what he was doing there or why he thought this temporary flight from reality would help him.

In that cramped closet terror came to him as sound: a hellish atonal cacophony of notes like an army of children banging on keyboards.

Philip Glass' music played in his head. It reminded him of the sagacity his friends admired in him. It temporarily calmed him down. He smiled and the smile stopped the sudden tremor in his hand.

He closed his eyes needlessly. It was dark everywhere, but it helped him recall dear moments when his friends played pranks on him, or so they thought, because they never met a musical prodigy in law school. Each time Ollie rose to the challenge. His friends would bring sheet music by famous composers like Beethoven and popular artists like Marvin Gray, and Ollie, the music prodigy who settled for an M&A attorney future, played them all flawlessly. He always gave them the choice of instrument: piano or the cello. He enjoyed all music. He bathed in sound. Rock 'n roll, and punk, and Jazz and R&B. All. He used to believe he lived for music. Until that night when he mustered the courage to tell his family he could not take their arrangements any longer. His father living with a man and his mother playing happily married. To hell with all this nonsense

he said when he saw the flames taking over the building. He watched from across the street. No injuries. No human injuries. Only his family business had been destroyed.

Kaput! He was going to make the rules as soon as he would graduate. His job was secure. He would make more than enough to take care of them and they had to stop playing like naughty kids, Ollie thought and his steady left hand moved up the wall to turn on the switch.

That was not an astute move.

His eyes immediately noticed a tall and gaunt figure. Its visage was concealed by long and dirty hair the color of the grave by nature or design. Ollie was not able to engage in close scrutiny. The creature was so close yet nothing touched Ollie. Its breath was moist and heavy with a lack of smell. Its eyes were sunken in the back of their sockets. Still their dull blue covered by a hideous veil made them look blind and further chilled Ollie's marrow in his bones, shaking spasmodically. That fitful shake of his body caused him sharp pains and sudden dizziness. The figure was bending toward his face getting ready to kiss him. Or else.

Ollie stopped feeling. Or more accurately, what he would experience for the next few moments was beyond what emotions encompassed. His sensations became a profuse head ache which soon extended all over his bodily space. And as soon it took over his being it morphed into a vague perception of bleeding, which changed into a profuse bleeding with the speed of turning on a switch. And he became aware of the smallest particles of his body. The bleeding happened at the level of pores, inside every single cell in his body. Then he realized he could hear the bleeding. It was the most stunning concert he had ever attended. No, his body was the orchestra. He was every single musician. It was a concert he had heard before but he could not easily remember. Then it came to him. It was the first Shostakovich concert his parents took him to attend at the Alice Tully Hall. That was ringing in his ears. Getting louder and louder and each instrument was suddenly becoming more acute taking center stage in his hearing. Louder and more distinct. A steady increase in volume, accompanied not by violent gesticulation but by a sense of liberation. His body was getting

rid of its shape and whatever other constraints it previously experienced. The pain was also dissipating. It was liquefying in a barely holding gelatin. His life became liquid atonal music. Finally he was at peace.

Chapter 13

Inside her windowless lab, Dr. Ana Vodă looked exhausted. But her motions denoted precision and a well-known routine. A noise came through a walled-in closet. She opened it and retrieved a perfectly tailored, immaculate lab coat and a small metal box. She put it on her desk. It contained a carafe of hot coffee, and her dinner. She took a small roll and started chewing on it absentmindedly, while pouring herself a cup of coffee. Her body was starting to warm up and her face relaxed. She sat down.

Her desk was in the middle of the round white painted lab, surrounded by patients' rooms, in which she could see effortlessly: there was no door separating her lab from their individual rooms. She could see Bobby looking comatose on his hospital bed in one of the adjacent rooms which opened like petals from her lab. The lab lacked any individuality; no flag, no pictures, just tubes and microscopes and laser sources, computers and screens and 3D holograph models. A banner with the inscription "The Farm" was supposed to be a joke or maybe the unique identifier.

She turned on her desktop and noticed Aaron staring at her from behind her screen.

"Going anywhere?"

"Don't think so."

"Let me know so John can disengage the alarms."

"Okay, Boss." They both smiled.

Perhaps sensing something was not in order she looked at him exiting her lab through another one of her moths' rooms, as Aaron fondly called them, because they survived only as long as their body weight at infestation allowed them. She saw Aaron bending over one of her most intriguing patients. She called her Gertrude because it resembled Egon Schiele's *Nude Girl with Folded Arms* which hung in her bedroom all her life. When she had a bedroom. When she lived in Romania.

Aaron tenderly unfolded her arms and turned her head to face his. Under her tethered clothes lied a perfectly emaciated body which could have been the envy of any fashion run, had she been able to control her desire to bite humans. Most of them. She showed no indication Aaron interested her, but nevertheless she stood up and ,leaning on him, walked away.

Ana registering all this took a walkie-talkie. Absentmindedly she pressed the buttons while searching for her documents to input the data she needed for her talk to Pistone.

"John, Aaron and Gertrude are going out. Please keep an eye on them."

When she placed the walkie-talkie on her desk she heard a paper noise. She looked down and noticed a yellow post-it on her spotless clean desk. It said,

"I am waiting, J." She felt startled. Or maybe her imagination prompted her to imagine herself inside Schiele's "*Embrace (Lovers II)*." Her mind was racing to catalog the future moments of pleasure and how they would fit her unbridled desire to be wanted, and loved, and taken apart only to be remade better.

She ran all the way through the tunnel, missing to note that the cleaning she feared minutes earlier had not taken place and even when she slipped in Clorox-laden water she failed to understand the gravity of the situation. She reached the lodging quarters where her suite was located, among some never occupied, ready to house future assassins she failed to produce. On her door it said "Knock before you enter, and leave your fears outside."

She found the door slightly ajar. She did not see him, but she could feel his presence. She hurried to the bathroom to get changed. When she returned John was outside her door. Ana could see him standing in front of her door waiting for a while. She sat down, and poured herself some sherry. Their game was a ritual of their first encounter almost 15 years ago. And every time he managed to startle her with his light knock which stopped the music of his breathing. She believed she could hear it.

"Come in, John," she said with warmth as soft as the softest thing she has ever touched.

John was playing coy. He was still outside the door. She wondered whether her voice had touched him in ways he had never thought possible. Or maybe he was irritated. Maybe this time he would just come in thrashing the person behind the door. That was as part of the attraction he exerted over her as anything else.

She awaited. John pushed open the door slowly as though he were unsure of his actions.

"Come in. Come in," Ana encouraged. She stood up facing him and ushered him in. She had a girlish flourish. She was sure John had noticed it. He always did.

"I was just having my afternoon drop of sherry. I hope you will join me," she said realizing she had forgotten the props. She hurried to get the bottle out and approaching him she closed the door behind.

John seemed in shock. Ana was happy to see he had not lost his lust for playing. She caught him looking at the ceiling camera. John looked around for the other cameras. He had them in his room, too. They had gotten used to being filmed. Nothing was retained past 24 hours. They learned how to live with that time frame of reckless behavior.

Ana was watching him carefully. She still feared he could get annoyed and act unpredictably.

"Well, I" - John began but Ana was already pouring him out a rather nice large glass.

"I just opened the bottle as you can see."

John avoided making eye contact. Ana was correct to think he was annoyed. She had to hurry. She wanted him so badly. It was worth the risk of a broken neck. That would cure her of all her known and unknown troubles.

"Chin chin, as we say it in our new country," she smiled. She had a sip and looked into his eye, trying to measure her words' effect.

John put the glass on the table next to the bottle of sherry. He was very slow. Ana assessed that he was considering how to end this moment. He could easily bring her body out and discard it in a park so a jogger would find it unidentifiable the following morning. Not that she had ever existed on American soil.

When she arrived her obituary had been already published and the Romanian intelligentsia mourned her. . For everybody she died in 1995, in a car accident coming back from Dracula's castle, Castle Poienari. She could still recite the Romanian obituary that General Pistone gave her as a welcome present:

"World renowned historian of the Ottoman Empire, Dr. Dan Vodă, whose work is translated in thirty languages, dies in a car accident. His daughter, once a Nobel Prize candidate in medicine, Dr. Ana Vodă, and his granddaughter, Lena Vodă, also died. Dr. Ana Vodă was driving the family's Trabant. Her husband, Vlad Vodă died two years earlier in another car accident. Dr. Ana Vodă was driving then, too."

Ana was waiting for John's move. Would her life truly end tonight?

"To us," she added. "To sinful joys!"

John brought the glass to his lips. "Sip, sip," Ana could almost hear herself. John stopped before sipping. He was making eye contact. She thought she was lost. He met her piercing look. She closed her eyes enjoying her last breath of filtered oxygen. Nothing. She opened her eyes. John was drinking. He stopped when he's done.

Ana approached him. She was quite short next to his 6'2" frame. She breathed easily thinking how simple it would have been for him to put her in a bag and discard her outside.

He was standing looking at her. She was touching his fingers. No reaction. John looked at her. She took his glass away from his hand, and then put his hand under her white coat. There was no tee shirt, and no bra, just her well-formed breasts.

Ana would have liked to inquire whether he liked touching her breasts, but she restrained herself. She had a strong desire to feel them in his hands. His hand was a flask. She could not stop imagining John tearing her coat apart and stare at them, at her and every inch of her body.

Nothing. Ana had no ideas of what to do next. She let his hand go down. Resigned, she looked down like a little girl chided she had done it again.

John surprised her. He pushed her on the couch and jumped on top of her in a trice embracing her feverishly and snatching her gown at once up to her shoulders. She was quiet.

His hands closed on her pelvis. Unsure of what to expect, she stiffened slightly. She seized his hand while he desperately tried to relieve the buttoned up desire of her body.

"Oh my baby, my baby," Ana whispered stroking his head, and opened herself to him in a magic of animal sacrifice. Their hearts panted and then everything stopped, both congealed fearful of their next move. They both worried about their self-control. Then, her intercom beeped. John got up quietly and pulled up his pants. Ana answered.

"Ana, this is Aaron, something is really wrong."

"Wait Aaron, I'll be there shortly."

"The alarm is on making everybody restless."

"Can you disable it?" John nodded and left behind he could hear what Aaron replied.

Chapter 14

Aaron, or Aaron from the Bronx as Ana's records described him, was standing outside the compound, getting antsy. He had to get out fast because the noise of the alarms was deafening and he hated to wear headphones. Luckily the door was cracked open.

He carried Gertrude gingerly to one of the benches placed strategically for the solitude of lovers. He did not like being alone. He felt much too insecure to have his own missions. He knew that Ana was shagging John and John was keeping an eye on Ana. It was not his game. He stumbled upon this place and he wondered when he would have to leave it. He would hate to relocate.

He had always made friends easily. His mom, a drug addict, died before he could remember her but he still believed he looked exactly like her. That was all he could remember from his earlier life, and that he could not control his desire to make the world a better place. He was eating alone at Chipotle when he noticed some youngster making fun of an obese couple.

"Yo mama's so fat that when she asked for a water bed they put a blanket over the ocean."

"This is better, yo papa's so fat he rolls when he walks."

They continued until the big couple left in tears. Their exit did not stop the three revelers. Aaron finished eating and then approached their table and walked around them a few times then took a chair from the next table and asked them their names and told them his, and added in a very even voice:

"You, young dogs, you got such fat cheeks and big lips, you'd think you're brothers, are you?" The pale men shook their heads negatively. "Lucky me," Aaron swallowed. "Darn me if I couldn't eat them and if I hadn't half a mind to't." The revelers tried to laugh it off, but Aaron continued while checking their faces slowly committing them to memory. "Are you going to school here or visiting, because the question is whether you're to be let to live or not." And with that Aaron left them and the restaurant. It turns out that their bodies were never found, but the waitress overheard the conversation and she informed the police.

Eventually the cameras around the city got him, and he found himself in St. Luke's Hospital. After all the tests were

done he learned he suffered from some plague hybrid that no one else had and he would have to be further tested.

He moved to the Asylum and he never wondered if he could leave. He liked Ana. His mother's older sister was called Ana, he told her, though she knew Aaron was lying. She started teaching him how to read and from English she moved to Spanish, then German, and Portuguese. But when she asked him to choose a foreign language he declined shyly. Perhaps sensing an irresolute nature, Ana was very careful with the drugs she administered to him, and with her words. She would have liked him in better shape.

"You should try the endorphins every gym serves. I am addicted to them."

Aaron appreciated her answer but stopped attending their conversation hour. Instead, he started spending time with the more numerous Asylum residents. Ana believed he found their ailing emaciated bodies, stung and torn, limping and shivering familiar. Also, their lack of words, and possibly, short life span.

It was quiet outside. With Gertrude silently moaning near him, Aaron could smell the terror. It was different than the small scale terror he had witnessed before. It was different than the time when his ailing friends attacked two army veterans getting ready to kill ducks in Central Park with their silenced army guns.

That night it was a clean thrill, he reminisced.

There were two boats. One with the shooter and another one with the decoy and the dog. The army veterans were chewing tobacco because they did not want to be seen. The Canadian geese and the mallard ducks were back. They would start shooting at them as soon as they finished putting in the wooden decoy.

The shooter sat on a shooting stool with his gun and shells ready. One of the men from the other boat was in the water putting in the wooden decoys. Besides him there was a dog which shifted and shivered uneasily at the sound of the wings of the ducks flying so low in the darkness. Luckily, dizzied by the ducks, the dog did not smell the stinky creatures approaching the edge of the Meer. The challenge for Aaron was to make it easy for his buddies to attack the boaters on the boat, while

they were in the middle of the lake. He had to carry them back to safety: they did not know how to swim.

Before the first boat returned having put all the decoys in the water, Aaron pushed one slimy ghoulish friend in the boat with the shooter. As soon as the decoy boat returned, he got in swiftly. He was carrying a small ghastly figure and when he placed him down, the dog wanted to haul. Probably it remembered the beating the last time it hauled sending the ducks away and it only squealed timidly. Covered by the young leaves of the weeping willows, the boaters did not need to talk to know what they had to do next. They would separate so the shooter would not harm the decoy and the dog, but they would still be closely by so the dog could help pick up the dead ducks.

They used their long oars to row the boats away from the land. The decoy was a few yards aside and waited. The boater stopped too and turned the boat so the shooter's full view of the Harlem Meer glazing ahead would not be obstructed by his head or oar. The boater steadied himself on the stool as he heard the incoming whisper of wings. He crouched and took hold of the gun next to his right hand and looked up from under the rim of the barrel. Then he stood to shoot at the two ducks that were dropping down, their wings set to brake, coming down dark in the gray dim sky, slanting toward the decoys. He calculated the shots. He would shoot the first duck to the right of where the decoy boat was, and on the second high out and to the left, letting the duck climb far up to the left to be sure his boater was out of any line of fire. He was contemplating a lovely double shot complete with consideration and respect for the position of the two boats. He went for the shots.

Behind him, Aaron was admiring his swinging the gun on a long slant, down, well and ahead of the duck on the right and marveled how the shooter, without looking at the result of his first shot, raised the gun smoothly, up, up ahead and to the left as the other duck was climbing. Light was creeping in through the night, and when the second duck became a dark spot on the lake and the dog jumped to bring them back, Aaron watched his friends attacking those hunters. They looked as if instinctively they copied each other's moves. Then, Aaron's gaze stayed on the lake watching the dog dexterously grabbing the ducks. The boater was the youngest and most tender one. His nose was hard bit and half of his face came off. The shooter, older but not much brighter, did suffer a different plight. It looked as if he believed he shot himself by mistake and for a

brief moment tried to stop his blood gushing as a mad fountain out of his neck. He was losing strength and he was experiencing sudden aches, as if he would start vomiting or be unable to control his bowels, or worse his joints would just detach. He sat down and let the convulsions take over, but the loss of blood was too much. His body soon succumbed and became cold and still. By the time the dog swam back with the ducks, all was done and the feast over. Aaron was the only one around. He caught the dog pushing a thumb and the index finger through its canine eyes, and then held its head under water for a very long while.

Somehow the boats returned to the makeshift dock hidden by the weeping willows before the dark totally dismantled. They would wait there with two disfigured human bodies. Aaron carried the two still corpses of his friends so they would be properly cremated at the Asylum.

But tonight the feeling was different. He had been able to overcome his antsy insecurity. For the first time ever, Aaron felt in control.

Chapter 15

An eternity had passed before Tony opened his eyes and dared to breathe. He finally remembered that he had chosen to be there and he had an advantage over all those previous intruders. He knew the spatial layout. True, when he watched the recording he could not discern anything. It was dark.

This part of the tunnel contained an unfinished appendix, because of the famous vestigial wall. Tunnel hackers had described it in foreboding terms. They bemoaned its existence which made it easier for water to infiltrate and destroy all electric outlets, but they also adored coming here to take a piece of it, a rock or even some dust as a *memento mori* of Columbiana.

Going over those facts Tony recovered his courage. He lifted his lantern. The pipes were large enough to block his view of the wall. He stared into nothingness until the darkness became less sticky. He had expected that the water would make the air more humid. It did not. The unfinished wall made it cooler, and unconsciously Tony had a fleeting idea why Sam brought Knowlton there: it was the only part of the tunnel where she could breathe especially with a mouth full of him.

"Gosh, sophistication is an acquired trait," Tony filled the void with his sarcasm.

He bent to get behind the pipes to investigate what made it impossible to install a security camera or even finish the structure. Perhaps too cocky, he moved too briskly for his glasses, which dropped. Rushing to pick them up his foot slipped and, attempting to break the fall, he raised his arms to hold onto the pipes. They were burning hot.

"Damn it," he managed to articulate his sudden pain, and fell into a puddle.

"Officer Gallant?" her voice reached him further minimizing the dark silence surrounding him. Tony stopped breathing for a moment unsure whether he recognized the voice,

"Yes. Is that you, Lena?"

"Officer Gallant?"

"Tony. Shorter."

"Tony. It's good to have you here."

"Where are you?"

"In the other tunnel."

"Is there another tunnel?"

"Of course."

"Wow. This is big news. I doubt that anybody knows about it."

Tony crawled out from under the pipe and squeezed between the vestigial wall and the pipes. For the first time he embraced his slender Spike Lee persona. Using his light he realized he had space to jump and glance at the other side. The wall was wet and thick, around six feet height and two in width. His 5'5" should not be an impediment to him going over. Only the edge was sharp with unevenly cut rocks.

He lifted his body on his tippy toes. He stretched and his fingers grabbed onto the unfinished crumbly wet wall. He put the lantern down at his feet and tried to find out a way to pull his body over the wall. He bruised his fingers. He could not lean on the pipes. The steam heat prevented him from using them to get momentum and throw himself over the vestigial wall.

"What are you trying to do?"

"I came to help you."

"What made you change your mind?"

"How did you go over there?" Tony inquired ignoring her question.

"I climbed over. Not hard at all. It only took me forever. You need to find a place where the wall does not simply cut through your fingers when you attempt to pull over your body."

"Did you jump with your high heels?"

"I do a lot of things with my high heels."

"I really do not need to know."

"You may like it."

"I don't think I can climb over to you, so, would you mind if you climb back to me so I can bring you back to your life and family?"

"I have no family, Tony, so feel free to go back. I will find my way out of here. There is nothing scary."

"You would be surprised. This is New York City after all."

"My dear officer, when you come from where I come from and your research is about the Crusades so you read everything I read, I think I have a vague idea of scary, and this is not scary. It's dumpy and gross, and unpleasant and a bit smelly, actually the more I think about it the more I realize this is very smelly...Tony, do not look up."

He kept looking down. The many shades of dark and mud and dirt abused his senses. The perfect place for rodents and other crawlers yet, he could not see any though his light was quite bright. He stopped when a syncopated breathing interrupted his thoughts only to be itself interrupted by a hiccup so powerful he dropped his lantern. As if the hiccup was not enough, sweat started crawling down his back and his mind did its usual trick on him, taking a leave to that night back in 1462, when the granite sky and a muzzling rain closed upon the mountains.

The air was clammy cold and the cold penetrates through Vlad's princely cloak. The saddle felt damp and the gloves icy. The nascent morning brought a wind which came in gusts, shaking the prince's body. His impalers had been all destroyed by his infidel brother, Radu Bey, lover of sultans. Vlad himself had been trapped and chained, was being sent to the Hungarian neighbor, King Mathias Corvinus, the son of his father's enemy, Jan Hunyadi.

Crossing the Carpathians from Wallachia to Transylvania was a winding path through thick forests. When the princely cortege reached an open place, the wind blew with such force that Vlad's body feebly rocked on the back of this Hungarian horse as if he were a drunken man. His eyes were closed, hope having died out in him for any ray of light. His hands chained up together on the saddle,

disarmed, and abandoned, his legendary courage gone with no trace of having ever been his single, most remarkable feature. And his Impalers? Where had they all gone?

"Don't look up, or if you do, stay calm," Lena clarified her earlier command. Tony having finally heard her, took his time. Slowly turning his head upwards, he saw a ghost-like, angular figure facing him. His head looked deformed or maybe only his bumpy forehead emphasized his bony little body barely covered by an oversized brown velvet coat eaten by moths. Age was as hard to guess but not the creature's gender whose phallic identifier was visible through the unbuttoned coat. The lantern at his feet, Tony started seeking for his can of Mace.

"Don't mace him," Lena's whispered words stopped Tony's hand. "And don't make any sudden moves. He seems like a forgotten ornament. My voice seems to escape him. Maybe he's not even real."

Tony liked what he heard. Somehow the idea that he might have been the obvious pray of that ghoul escaped him. Momentarily. Until his eyes met the dead eyes of the ghoul and he recognized him, as his mind's creation. Could it be that his vision, Vlad's Impalers, started to populate his life? Was he going mad? Tony kept looking. He could not escape the ghoul's sick gaze. Could he bite Tony? Would he could become one of them. Better run, Tony thought, his eyes turned slightly to check if the space had enlarged miraculously while he was busy examining the ghoul. It did not. The space remained suffocating and tight. His entire body was shaking. He was trapped between death by heat or death by the ghoul. He noticed its absence when his eyes made it back to the wall.

The wall was empty. His heartbeat increased. The ghoul was more than an Impaler. This was therianthropy, Tony was sure of it. He had no escape. Through shape changing, invisibility, the ghoul could come and go and surprise Tony. His heart was going wild. Would this be his end? Mamma, he wanted to scream when he heard a soothing voice.

"Tony, what are you doing there?"

"Waiting." He was getting back his groove. He picked up the lantern and arranged it as a stool. He stepped and in a balancing act looked over the wall. It was dark over there, on the other side. Water dripped over his glasses from the ceiling. Instinctively he looked up. Another drip fell into his eyes. He

was annoyed and hot and he lost his balance and more sweat accumulated on his back trickling down his skin. Nothing came easy to him. So he picked up his lantern, put it on the wall and started jumping to see what was going on.

"Would you stop that, please?"

He saw enough. The ghoul existed and Lena saved his life, although he abandoned his job to save her. That failure aside, Tony was really happy he was alive. He could not stop admiring Lena. So shrewd of her to quietly attack the enemy from behind. Those thoughts brought to mind the battle scene between Vlad and Radu Bey. He knew how Radu rid himself of Vlad's Impalers. He also had the image of Vlad immobilized on his horse, betrayed and taken prisoner by the son of his on again off again protector and nemesis, John Hunyadi. Tony was itching to go back to writing.

"Do you think I can go back to my booth?" Tony asked aloud.

Instead of an answer he heard a click, clack, click, clack noise indicating she was limping with a slight injury or maybe her broken off heel.

"Of course. I am can take care of myself. Good night officer and thanks for stopping by."

"Damn it," Tony resigned himself with a sigh. He focused his efforts. He gripped, vaulted and plummeted on top of the wall. He could not believe his success. Strangely, he felt anointed. He took the lantern and located Lena cleaning her shoes in a puddle of water a few yards away. Her back would have reminded him of a Man Ray shot, but art was not something of interest to him, and then, he directed his light to the human bump and noticed the absence. The absence of blood.

"What goes through your mind right now?" She asked without turning. "Are you wondering whether he wanted to attack you?"

"It did cross my mind."

"Perhaps, but he was dead by the time I pulled him down. He just lay down there. A walking dead," she qualified her conclusion.

"Maybe he liked you. A beast who refused to defend himself when the beauty viciously attacked him from behind."

"How did he make it up there on the wall?"

"Maybe he was a vampire, or a zompire?"

"Oh, funny. What do you know about them, if anything?"

"My friend, you are talking to Vlad the Impaler's great great great granddaughter on my father's side and his grandniece on my mom's side."

"Are you a descendant of Vlad the Just?"

Lena turned. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"No one called Vlad the Impaler Vlad the Just, except my grandfather. Everybody else calls him a vampire or worse."

"Vlad was no vampire. He used Impalers to overcome his brother's armies, but ..." As he was lecturing her, Tony put his legs over the wall, and with his lantern in his hands he jumped right next to the ghoul.

He bent and appraised the situation. And then he noticed the eye out of its socket staring at him.

"It looks like a glass eye," Lena offered. Tony wondered how long he had been staring at that eye. "I believe I read somewhere about a granny who had one watching her grandchildren as they got ready to go to bed and then made sure they stayed in bed until the morning. A deep green iris whose large pupil stares at the kids somewhat morosely. That's the way to babysit brats don't you agree?" Lena bent next to him. "The best part of the story is that the kids never dared to pick it up to see if it was damp or rather sticky, to check whether several pieces of fluff had been attached to it. They never knew whether it was alive or glass-made."

While she was talking he remembered the videos from the Parisian Catacombs at Danfert Rochereau. He wondered whether this secret parallel tunnel contained cranes and tibias adorning the walls in eye pleasing patterns.

And finally the smell got to him. The smell made him aware of the ghoul in the first place and warned him again.

The mountain of what appeared to be wasted flesh was now standing behind Lena. He had no right eye and gravity made some brains to come out through the empty socket. To make things worse, a broad smile covered his face, displaying in the lantern light teeth decayed before their time, or just never brushed.

"He is after me, not you, Lena. Duck." And she ducked without any second thought. Tony holding his lantern as if it were life itself started hitting him over the head with all the mighty force he managed.

"What is this Impaler creature doing here under the campus?" Tony's voice was begging for a word of reassurance that he was wrong that this was all wrong or better yet, this was all his imagination, but no such word came out of Lena.

"Tony. Can you control yourself? You are hitting the air Impalers exist only in your imagination. This is some troglodyte." Lena stood up and inadvertently bumped into the ghost.

"For Christ sake, can't you move out of the way? Isn't it enough that you smell like puke? Wash or buy some perfume." She pushed the creature aside. Annoyed at his lack of resistance she pushed him again. He seemed mesmerized by Tony, trying to grab him. Scared, Tony dropped his lantern and bending to pick it up, the creature jumped on top of him. Lena took off one of her stilettos she started pouncing on his crane until the creature fell off freeing Tony.

"Be careful, please, Impalers are contagious, usually infested with the plague or leprosy or a cocktail of viruses and bacteriae. I hope his bite did not reach my skin. Am I glad for these ugly security guard cloths? You bet I am."

Tony made no effort to help Lena. Exhausted, he watched her hitting the Impaler with her stilettos. There was an esthetic hard to resist in her Pollack gesture of spreading gooey liquid all over around. Some reached his shoes and that created a level of discomfort he found trivial.

Lena was standing imperiously while the ghoul was lying down, this time terminated. She looked satisfied. She had crushed his skull.

"Done. He won't bother us anymore."

"Ms. Vodă, your skills are impressive. You killed this creature like an artist. Using a stiletto the way painters use a brush. You could call 1800-Mafia and get a job."

"Oh, you are well connected. You have the direct phone number of important people. Okay. So, take notes my friend. Lena Vodă, 25 years old, doctoral student and TA for Professor Thomas Knowlton. Are you taking shorthand?" Tony nodded playing along. Lena had spunk. He became aware of his heart beat again.

"In the wee hours of May 1st, Lena viciously attacked but did not kill the creature ready to assault young officer Gallant who had recklessly left his guarding spot to seek adventure and redemption in the underworld." Lena laughed pushing her head backward and letting the drips of water fall on her beautiful, young face. She wore fake lashes, and they were coming off, Tony noticed while pushing back an impulse to fix them.

"It is hard to say whether an Impaler can be killed or just finally finished," Tony spoke and his voice registered a tremulous. A drip of water made it on the back of his neck and down his back. "The Americans regard people like him as zombies, occupying the land between death and ghost. He was dead before you touched him, you could say. Look there is no blood around, and even his brain, if you study its substance is so removed from human."

"Nice Wikipedia entry. But then, you might be onto something. Though I believe you're wrong. They are no zombies or vampires. They seem to resemble "human moths." Look how emaciated they are. Almost skeletal. They may be contagious, but certainly they die of starvation. They do not seem to consume. Just attack and bite. The real walking dead or better yet, walking while dying."

"Interesting. Any more insight?"

"This creature made me think of metamorphosed humans consuming their last drops of life in a vengeful way. They punish everybody alive by attacking and biting them, although that vengeful range cannot save them from their plight. They are already damned to die. Like killer moths."

"Wow, I call that poetry, Ms. Lena."

"It just dawned upon me."

"We can either jump back over the wall and try to escape the way we came in, or we can go the opposite way. The creature, the Impaler must have escaped from somewhere."

"I guess going back is better."

Lena jumped and pulled herself over the wall, which started crumbling under her hands. She fell back.

"Ouch." She screamed.

"There is no need to fake your injury, Ms. Vodă."

"Officer Gallant, this is not faking. I tore my other ankle. I cannot move. I will have to die next to my victim in a gesture of poetic justice."

"Okay, I will call 911." Tony took his phone out of his pocket. "No connection."

Lena lay down.

"I cannot leave you here. I came to rescue you. If I have to pull you by your hair, I will do it. We will leave this place together."

Lena smiled and Tony's frowning face melted away. She took off her shoes and let Tony help her walk. He put an arm below her shoulders. She took the lantern and lifted it up. Departing she looked again at the cranium-smashed perfectly emaciated being.

"I hate to bring it to you officer, but our victim could be any Upper East Sider socialite. A size 00 better fit for talking nonsense while sipping champagne and planning a non-governmental organization to help the poor and give meaning to her time when the partying season is slow."

"Do you always sound like a walking party slogan? You are too young to have lived through soviet propaganda, or are you a well preserved soviet witch?" They both laughed and wobbled along ahead, or so they thought.

Chapter 16

Whatever made him do things Aaron did them full-heartedly. Now, he was following Gertrude. They came across Beni who was lingering around when the music and the smell of barbecue someone was cooking in the quad guided their steps sinuously. They walked for a few minutes silently in a serpentine or maybe a circle until they bumped into a person waiting for her dog to stop digging around.

Aaron bent to caress the dog. He remembered having a puddle in his grandmother's house, or wishing they had had a puddle. The state of confusion made him antsy and he did not enjoy losing control. The young woman also looked annoyed, but she did not have time to say anything. The two wobbly figure sticks bit her. One went for her neck, the other for her face. Being of similar height and strength, the attack was executed splendidly. Then, exhausted by their own violence the two collapsed with flesh and blood dripping out of their mouths. The dog started barking, scared, and ran away. Moments later, the woman stood up straight, exposing her exquisite jaw line. Perhaps she stood the straighter ever before succumbing to convulsions.

Aaron waited patiently for his two companions to recharge. They entered the huge building--the epicenter of sound and fury. One elevator was approaching the ground floor. There were two students waiting for it. The five of them got in and two of them found it impossible to leave it when the elevator stopped. Aaron stood back just watching, as a father making sure the kids were playing safely and no one experienced any insatiable desire to harm anybody. Behind the closed elevator door, Beni and Gertrude got acquainted with the other couple, while Aaron cleaned them hastily when done.

When the elevator stopped, Aaron enjoyed being in charge of four fast decaying beings. He ignored them for an instant surprised to notice how spacious the dormitory rooms were with their twelve-foot ceilings. The floor was a deep green marble and it led all the way to a five-foot-wide walnut staircase that swept up in a sumptuous curve to the floor below. About fifteen people in various stages of inebriation were occupying the room they entered. Aaron was going to check the other exits to take a look at what was going on, when a smiling thing, starved to

perfection, looking very much like Ana's patients but smelling better approached him. Her swollen lips were moving, but Aaron did not have time to translate her words. He burned with the urge to get around to ensure their retreat, because all his instincts told him it would not be easy.

There were seven men and eight women on display, but he knew there had to be more. There was a terrace surrounding them. He felt the breeze come in through the open door. The men occupied various levels of chunkiness. One of Aaron's companions was already approaching a quiet guest chattering with another one about interiors and landscape gardening whose shanks were so scrawny and their bones so thin he could see lamplight through them, and again Aaron had a feeling of *déjà vu*. It reminded him of elementary school when the teacher let him stay in the back of the class and catch flies only to pull their wings off.

Aaron did well waiting. Soon high heels were heard on the stairs and a high-pitched scream would have followed hadn't he jumped upstairs and grabbed her hair as she was trying to go back downstairs. He pulled her forcefully until he heard a crack and she remained quiet. For a very long time.

Then he heard a hard banging as if a human head was crushed into the marble floor so someone would eat its squishy, velvety brain. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Some being with an empty stare was banging into the glass terrace door while a couple outside were hardly at work to make a saving cellphone call. They were calling 911. That was all Aaron had to tell himself to muster enough ire to ignite his strength to take a statue of a naked creature, half boy half goat, and break the glass. He went through it graciously and grabbed the little creatures by their necks. He pushed them over the edge and shook them up and down until they lost every penny they had in their pockets. Then, all chilled, Aaron put them down and left them to their own fate.

He had little time to get out. Ana's patients had collapsed covered in blood and brain. He hurried out readying himself to take the stairs all the way down, when the elevator stopped and its doors opened. A couple of indefinite gender and age sporting dark shades and black trenches came out. Seeing them, Aaron approached the elevator and held the open button until he saw the couple go in and close the door behind. He waited for another long minute to gauge the outcome of that move, but probably provincial, they decided that it was worth the time to

snap a picture and post on Instagram. Alas, they had been too slow, Aaron concluded, and pressed Lobby.

There was no one in sight. He stepped over the smashed cellphone he noticed sprawled on the sidewalk.

Chapter 17

A crowd of what looked like half-asleep Barnard students was making their way to the dormitory assigned to them. Aaron was exiting the dormitory, cleaning the sole of his shoes of warm goo. He ignored the exchange between some of the contagious people in the grip of their early transformation away from humans and the newcomers. The biting was performed in a ritual of perceived French kissing. Not understanding what was so sensual, the untouched students giggled in a fake remorseful retort.

"Oh, dear, that's so brazen."

One of them took upon herself to explain to the ones who were reluctant to come in that some emaciated sex crazed French exchange students were teaching the Americans how to have fun. The word went around about the loose French girls and good mood suddenly prevailed.

No one seemed to observe the convulsions following the encounters. A moment later the talkative bossy student was wearing a hand-written sign which said "Out of Order," and hanged it on the door of the elevator. She could not stop giving directions and explaining to passers-by about the French exchange students. Her explanation elicited giggles from benevolent students ready to walk up the stairs. With each flight of stairs the mood became more celebratory.

The exams were a forgotten affair.

Again no one noticed when the elevator started moving up. A tall being going for the bohemian bourgeois look came out of the elevator and spat something out of his mouth. The object fell into an obscure corner. In the process the "Out of Order" sign became torn apart. Behind him, the elevator door did not close properly. A leg was protruding through the door. The leg soon started shaking spasmodically. The elevator door could not close again. The elevator and its torn "Out of Order" sign were stuck.

Around the five-foot-wide walnut staircase that swept down five floors in a sumptuous curve, some people were making out. Some were moaning. Close body encounters were taking place

punctuated by minutes of solitude and followed by spasmodic individual movements as if the spring saturnalias were reigning. People came in the building but none seemed to exit.

So when the distress call reached Sebby, the library guard whose booth was only yards away from the dormitory, he was taken by surprise. Who would complain of merriment at the end of the exam period? Maybe the chill having replaced the earlier uncommon spring heat of the high 80s, or maybe the mild wilderness of the campus lawn in the lifting fog, made the guard take the call and then go out and meet the angry man upset he could not find the couple in the tent.

"I was supposed to meet them here, and they are nowhere to be found."

Sebby turned on his light to find his way around. The lit spots of grass were covered in blood and bits of flesh but they could have been dog poo, too. Perhaps a former NYPD officer with excellent investigatory skills, the library guard looked hard through the bushes for some evidence of foul play. Together with the angry caller, they turned each leaf of grass to find something meaningful. There was no human corpse around. They both breathed easily.

Not far away from the tent they found a coyote, which they did not expect to find. Its belly was torn out and large bite wounds covered its flesh. The blood trail led them back to the tent. It was the most comfortable the guard had ever seen. It was a NEMO Dagger 3P Tent. It was the lightest and roomiest ever. It smelled of money.

"Something happened. But they got up and left." The guard talked into a walkie talkie and continued to walk around talking to unknown others. A scenario was being created.

"They ran, bled, fallen face down. I see marks imprinted on the grass. After lying there for some time, they continued walking. There is very little to find out because of the grass and the night. But anything seems possible. We should be able to find two wounded people wobbling side by side."

Perhaps because Sebby could not ascertain the speed of their subjects, absent any bodily evidence, they entered the dormitory. Understandably, it was too dark to see any tracks sprinkled with fluid blood or otherwise, or crusted ooze that they could not have recognized.

The person at the other end of the walkie-talkie appeared in the dormitory entrance. His secure, young walk and athletic appearance commanded the attention of the guard and the passive curiosity of the one who alerted them all.

"Ready Sebby?"

"Ready Kelvin," Sebby replied, deftly walking up the stairs to the main landing. He stepped over what appeared to be a sleeping student in the first room's doorway.

"Don't worry about a thing, I have placed a call with NYPD officers. They are on their way and until then I have you," Kelvin continued following behind.

Sebby moved cautiously as there was no visible movement anywhere: in the hallways or in the rooms. Everything quieted down inexplicably. They reached the top floor room where the bacchanalia was happening only moments earlier. The windows, with their heavy curtains looked foreboding.

"Kelvin, since, I've returned from the last deployment, I have not had a moment's rest."

"Why, weren't you suppose to work this shift?"

"No, Larry called in sick."

Sebby kept walking slowly through the room. He went to the book-lined wall full of polished wood. He moved to the two hanging paintings, and leather armchairs. People must have stood down on those armchairs enjoying some red wine at some point earlier, judging by the shape left in the armchairs. He smells the bottle and read the label:

"Not bad. Pinot Noir from California, Coppola's vineyard."

Further away he saw another doorway and muffled noise was coming from that direction. He decided to go there. He signaled Kelvin that he was approaching the door. The door did not open. It was jammed in. He opened it slightly and recoiled.

"Sebby, what's going on?" Kelvin's voice came from behind.

"Some terrible stench. Fresh stench. Remember our last deployment? Remember that dog, that skinny brown dog lapping

blood the same way he'd lap up water from a bowl. Do you remember that dog? All I could think was about who was in that house and what're they armed with, and how're they going to kill me, you, and our buddies."

"Sebby, take it easy man. This is not Kabul, man. Some kids, man. Some stupid rich kids having fun." Kevin and Sebby apparently knew each other from way back.

Sebby opened the door. It was a small hallway which connected the rooms to a single bathroom. He used his light and started inspecting the walls. Then, he saw the bloody hand marks, of small, delicate hands trying to clean off pieces of meat, chewed fresh meat. Flies were laying their eggs on it. The summer had come early. And then he tripped. And tripping he saw what made the muffled noise. Bump! Bump! It was the gentle slamming of the bathroom door. A leg was trying to get in. Jerking about on the carpet like a claw freshly wrenched from a live crab, not just lying there but active, lashing about on its knee-hinge like a wild thing.

"Kelvin, do you remember that one insurgent doing the death rattle, foaming and shaking, fucked up, having been hit with a 7.62 in the chest and pelvic girdle?"

"Sebby, man, take it easy, there is no need to knife anybody."

"Kelvin, you were with me when I pulled my KA-BAR and slit his throat? Kelvin, this is worse. This is fucked up beyond imagination."

Kevin found the courage to look into the bathroom. It was filled with bodies in various stages of breakdown. Meat, chewed and pulped flesh was bulging from their stomachs, as if they cannibalized each other and then someone killed them all at the end. It looked as if someone saw them attacking each other, going for their thighs and faces, and then terminated them.

"Sebby, what's going on?"

"I cannot tell."

"Kelvin, the police are coming."

He got closer to the bathtub. Water was dripping in. He pulled the shower curtain. There still was water in the bathtub and a head floating and staring at him. Its teeth were still chewing on a finger stuck in the clenched jaws.

"Sebby, let's get out. This is a fucked up mess."

"Come out fast." Kevin added pulling his buddy outside. They both forgot about the young man who followed them there. He snapped a picture of the head and captioned it "American Beauty."

The picture went viral on Instagram. It looked contagious.

Chapter 18

Ana was startled. A rain drop noise came through the desktop speakers.

John moved away. General Pistone's face appeared on Ana's computer screen.

"When are you going to tell me how only some plague carriers become disciplined warriors while most of them grow into wild cannibals?"

Ana replied:

"As a fan of my work since my ER days in Romania, you know about my findings."

"Don't repeat what I know."

"When you had me abducted, I was experimenting on what you jokingly called the 'the soviet walking dead'. All I could tell you then was that after birth the host's entire brain is under attack as if the pestis smashes it up and fast rearranges it in a way which misdirects all the stimuli."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"The personhood undergoes unimaginable changes."

"I know all about your walking dead." The General bit back.

"They share similarities but also many differences because the pestis bacterium has a very primitive DNA which easily hybridizes with whatever preexisting virus has attacked the host." Ana finally stopped.

"Indeed, Doctor, that's old news." The General replied.

"In my last two decades with the Pentagon, General, I have learned a bit more, but not much: the pestis bacterium causes different symptoms before and after birth. In uterus, the bacterium eats up the anterior cortex atrophying it and destroying its empathy centers. From those infected newborns

you're free to recruit your beloved killing machines who can slaughter with no fear or remorse. No one stops you General."

"You're feisty as only someone who does not exist can be, Doctor. But let me add this: you are oblivious to the advanced state of art your lab offers. You have everything you can dream of. You have no idea who signs your checks, but I do. Since the end of WWII the Advanced Research Task Committee, A.R.T.C., your project, has eaten up \$1,000,000,000."

"I have been here since July 14, 1995."

"The bad news for you is that the Cold War is over, and Congress stopped funding dissident researchers and mad scientists. Give me something, Doctor, or the Congressional Committee overseeing you will shut you down."

Ana stopped then added,

"They don't know about me. But I thought you had them eating out of your hand as if you were John McGraw and they were the Baltimore Orioles, General Pistone? Isn't that the job of a coach to get the money? I am just the hired gun, actually, kidnapped."

"St. Luke's hospital sent you two more plague-infested losers last week, didn't it?"

Ana typed back, "Yes."

"If you cannot use them to find me a better answer, I will stop sending them down. They are a risk I cannot take any longer: Too contagious and too expensive to clean after. If I do not hear from you by the end of the next month, my FAST2 team is coming down to clean that pigsty of infected rabbles."

"You do that and you would have nothing left in your life," Ana mustered.

"Talking about life, Doctor, I would not know what to do with a mad scientist who died in 1995 in a car accident by the side of the road; would you help me write her story or her obituary?"

Pistone cut off the exchange.

"Why don't you tell Pistone everything you know?" John asked Ana, having accepted the role of confidante.

"Why? Why shall he know that in uterus the plague's DNA can also be hybridized and changed? Why shall he know the plague symptoms would differ from one newborn to another because a virus, as trifling as the flu, can compensate for the anterior cortex atrophy by swelling the brain's cognitive functions? What good would it do him knowing that cognition can replace the pleasure produced by harming, torturing or killing others?"

"I am your best work, and I take no pleasure in killing." John corrected her.

"I know, John, you kill only when your frustration level is so high it becomes unbearable, and sometimes it looks like torture because you abhor leaving fingerprints on guns or other arms."

"You think you are better than me, don't you Ana?"

"No. John. Just different. My mom had contracted both the plague and some virus, possibly the flu when dad impregnated her. Your mom, I believe, had been totally healthy when you're your dad impregnated her with sperm carrying the plague and a different type of virus. I think that is the difference between us, but I need time to find out who between us is the beauty and who is the beast."

"You won't have time if you don't give Pistone what he wants."

"What Pistone calls infected losers, I call 'human moths'. They may help me find the answer," Ana said and her voice had an inflection John never heard before. Maternal? He wondered.

"You have changed Ana, since those last two ... 'human moths' came here."

Ana seemed to ignore him; fixating on a point on the wall behind him.

"Ana, I made up their first chase, how they waited patiently for a couple to sit down on a bench right in front of the Morningside Park exit. There was no planning while the

lovers exchanged a few pleasantries. They never postponed their attack while the youth leisurely undressed each other protected by the night and a closed-to-the-public park. They could never understand pacing the attack so it came after a few moments of erotic pleasures, and they never devoured the lovers. You are correct. They are no cannibals, and neither are thy zombies or vampires. I regret I told you that nonsense. I made it all up because I was jealous of the time you spent on them. Yes. I am jealous. I never thought I would feel anything like I feel for you Ana. So, you got two confessions. They attack and spread the disease, but that's it, like the rest of them. Please, give Pistone what he wants. I don't want to lose you..." John stopped in mid-sentence and then added, "this place. This place is home."

"John," Ana finally spoke. Her eyes were teary. To cover up her emotions she pretended she needed to pick up paper for the printer. "It has nothing to do with you. Or not directly. Their dying, their youth and modicum of spunk, or what I read as it, suddenly hit me and connected me with my past. I fear that our prolonged interaction is taking its toll on me. I'm shedding my robotic, insensitive self for something I never imagined possible. Did you know that I used to have normal life?"

John came to her, dried out her tears, and hugged her.

"I used to wake up with the sun shining on my face and stare at a small Schiele sketch hanging in my bedroom. Egon Schiele is the name of a painter whose art the Nazis called degenerate. My father, perhaps the most eminent historian of the Ottoman Empire, the original Dr. Vodă in our family, adored his work. He loved telling me that one day when I was not yet one year old, I screamed for hours and nothing could soothe me. He finally picked me up and brought me to his office. He put me on his desk, while searching for the book he needed to review by the next day. Catching a moment of silence he started reading the book under his desk, afraid to move, thinking I was falling asleep. After a few minutes he checked on me, afraid I might roll off the desk. He could not believe his eyes. I was staring at that Schiele study for his later painting of his master, Gustav Klimt. He swore I was smiling and gurgling at it. My father had auctioned the foreign rights to his opus, The History

of the Ottoman Empire from the beginning until the Fall of Constantinople, for that sketch, but he had it moved into my room afterwards.

John, since I saw them, all I could think about was Egon Schiele, Wally...and then, Lena."

"Wow," John said. "You are becoming nostalgic. I thought you incapable of it," John added with something close to ardor. "You only exuded the present moment and the task at hand."

"John, I am proud of you. You have been taking your meds. I have not heard you talk this poetical ever."

"I blew my cover," John replied.

"The past never mattered for me. I have always been project oriented. And then, these two Sylphides bit a bite off my present, with teeth made of memories, and their bite proved contagious. I reminisce!"

"What is to recall? I lived through the Balkan intifada. Can you beat that drama? Take it. Take my past and satisfy whatever urge makes you talk like this. I don't want it."

"John, it is beyond the point. I am becoming someone I never suspected I could be. Suddenly I remember that by the time you came here, in 1999, I had already been abducted for four years. By 1995 I had a marriage, a lover, a dad, a house, and a daughter, Lena, and I was taking care of her, although in a handicapped way."

John looked at her searching whether she intended to add something else, something about him, perhaps.

"You're right. I can barely recognize you."

"I am being bulldozed by my past. My daughter's image has become as big as the Sphynx's."

"So, find her. Where is she?"

"I don't know. I have scoured the Internet for information on Lena Vodă. Nothing. She was still a baby. She was 5 years old."

"That's strange coming from you. I mean. You never give up, Ana. You may not have any maternal instincts, but you are a scientist. Find a solution. That's your shtick."

"Shtick?" Ana repeated opening Chrome and staring at its search box.

"What else do you remember from your past? What about your dad?"

"I have checked. Nothing."

"What about her father. You told me something about that didn't you?"

"Dr. David Soare? I have checked. Nothing"

"What about his children. Did he have any other children?"

Ana started typing.

"You are a genius yourself, John," Ana added and she seemed luminous in her enthusiasm for finding a solution.

"Claudiu Soare was the reason David and I remained married to different people. His wife adopted Claudiu as soon as I gave birth to Lena."

Ana was going through various Google search results.

"Look, he is an Assistant History Professor, and doctoral candidate, Claudiu Soare. He is going to attend the Columbia University international conference on The Use of Technology to Promote History Teaching, organized by Columbia History Professor Thomas Knowlton.

"Click on the link to the conference," John encouraged Ana, which she did.

"The two-day conference starts today, Thursday, April 30, 2015," Ana said. Behind her John summarized the information provided by the web site:

"Knowlton and his doctoral students and associates will enter the famed Columbia heating tunnel system, which is located below the basement of each building and used to connect them to

central boilers. Knowlton is bringing his party underground through the Earl Hall entrance, located at 117th street and Broadway."

John looked impenetrable. He was expecting an assignment for tomorrow, guarding Celeste Calder. She only came to New York to see this Knowlton. John continued:

"Knowlton apparently chose that entrance because, visitors could see a vestigial portion of the original 1800s tunnel, probably built with rocks from the time of the Battle of Harlem, during the War of Independence."

The website updated as they were reading its content.

"Professor Knowlton's software brings to life scenes from the War of Independence, especially the battle of Harlem Heights, where his ancestor, Commander Thomas Knowlton played a crucial role. More information is available in Professor Knowlton's new book, 'The Battle of Harlem'."

The clock in her lab showed 2:00 AM.

"John, let's make sure everybody is around?" Ana added.

John did not need to physically go to their rooms. He went to the two way mirror which connected each zombie's room with Ana's lab and turned the switch and looked inside.

Ana found Claudiu's blog, The Historian from Romania.

"He arrives in New York City in a few hours. He has a room reserved at the Waldorf Astoria. Apparently the Columbia students association paid for it because he always dreamed to visit the hotel where President Franklin Roosevelt stayed while visiting the city on 21 October 1944 to address the Foreign Policy Association," Ana read.

"The presidential train stopped on the upper level of the underground train yard directly under the hotel," Claudiu's blog said, "His aides carried the paralyzed Roosevelt through a special door and then by elevator directly to his room, avoiding the public altogether."

Ana did not blink for a moment. John took the break to look in the adjacent rooms.

"Ana, everybody's gone."

Ana ignored the information desperately seeking something most probably illusive.

"Ana, there's no one around. Are you going to follow the protocol?"

"I am going to meet Claudiu. Maybe he knows something about Lena, but then, why would he?"

"Ana, first things first. Call Pistone, and then come up with a better idea. Your GPS transmitter would signal your position within minutes."

"Yes, I thought about it."

"And?" John was searching her face for clues. "You know I have instructions if you try to remove it."

"First you'll have to catch me, won't you?" Ana replied jokingly, a first for her. Her smile warmed up her face into a perfect tulip, John thought. He nodded acquiescing and touched his beeper and then his cell phone.

Chapter 19

"We both need some cheering," Lena couldn't stop talking. "How many more strange creatures like that do you think are hiding around?"

"Hopefully none. I don't have the nerve to survive another encounter."

"I see your point. I never suspected I would have so much anger bottled up. Did you see me hitting that defenseless creature with all my might? Understanding who I was actually hitting will take me another year worth of sessions."

"You were great. I wish I had your presence. You saved me, you know."

"Oh, you've done the same. Actually, you already did it. You came to save me. I want to thank you somehow, but I don't know how."

"Just say, 'Thank you.' People do it all the time."

Lena did not answer. They walked for a while quietly trying to make sense of what had been said, or perhaps of their surroundings without looking around.

"I think you'd like my present."

Tony stopped walking.

"I don't mean I am giving you a present. I am going to show you my present." She stopped to search inside her shoulder bag fashionably large but unnerving, a gift from Tom Knowlton: a Gucci Soho brown leather bag. She was not a hobo so why wear a hobo bag, Tony thought, a bit irritated and clearly hungry. He was afraid he might faint. His stomach became so weak it stopped making any noise. "Tom proposed tonight and he gave me this velvet box. Open it. I want to see your face when you open it."

"You want to see my face when I see a fancy ring? Why, do you think security guards don't dream of Macy's?"

"Oh, cut it out. Macy's is so downtrodden. You know I'm not a rich bitch. I'm on scholarship. I have been all my life or since I've landed at Columbia some 7 years ago, still wondering

how it happened. I was brought up by my grandpa's secretary. I still don't remember when I sent in the college application, but that's history. So open the damn box, officer."

"Bossy, too."

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Give it back to me. He proposed. Tom proposed, again, tonight. He gave me this amazing coin. If it's an original, then the one in the Museum of National History in Bucharest is a fake."

She grabbed back the little velvety box from his limp hand. Tony lifted the lantern. Lost for words, they admired the coin.

"Don't tell me this is THE 1456 small silver coin Vlad issued to commemorate the beginning of his illustrious, though controversial, reign and, the prophetic view of Halley's comet?!"

"Impressed? So you, too, believe it was Vlad who issued it."

"Vlad was the only small time warrior with the guts to tell both the mighty Hungarians and threatening Ottomans he did not need their currency anymore."

"Also, the thug Vlad killed for the throne was a meek Henry VI type who willingly paid the 'tribute,' the heavy taxation his neighbors demanded, in exchange for him occupying the throne."

"Like the uncle Richard III had to dispense of to start his own reign? I applaud you, my friend." Lena bowed, and Tony clapped in admiration of her knowledge and his ease in engaging with this strange, beautiful creature. He bet his mom wouldn't call him "Tonino" once he brings her home. Oh, how he excelled at daydreaming.

"Vlad was a leader. I can see how he would become a popular hero. You know that in Romania he is a popular hero and not a stupid vampire or worse, zompire."

"Maybe that is why he is my hero. My book is about him." Tony felt giddy uttering those words he never dared share with another being. He was happy, and his stomach starting rumbling. Lena heard it and smiled. Oh, Lena, Lena, Lena. She was the new constellation in Tony's sky.

"That's cool. My ancestors are sort of my inspiration too, only in a more oblique way. I don't admire them. But their idiosyncratic behavior made me connect dots others have ignored. I started with them and the last Crusade and went backwards."

Tony completed her sentence:

"Nicopolis, 1392, was the last Crusade. John Hunyadi, Vlad's on and off benefactor, shined there."

"Did you know that it brought the plague to Eastern Europe?"

"No, but I thought the plague had been around since the Romans."

"Yes, but it took centuries for its DNA to be cannibalized and thus become the cause of unbridled cruelty. Tony, I am going to tell you how I noticed that something was amiss. Or maybe I should help you see it too. Shall we play?"

"It may be the only think we can do here, so I don't see why not."

"Good. Let's start with the first crusade. Okay?"

"Okay."

"The Crusades were meant to work as a defensive mechanism against foreign elements. In a Christian world those elements were Jews and Muslims. Economically the world had finished a developmental cycle: it was the beginning of a new millennium. What was emblematic for those times? Three things: too many people, filthy poverty and religious bigotry. To refuse being a Christian meant you became an easy target when surviving became difficult. Pope Urban II, like a general, preached military action as a way to survive. Europe was overpopulated so he roused the rabble with places of Christian pilgrimages outside Europe. In 1096 Christians started their pillage war, aka, the Crusades. Fearing god, those educated labeled them as religious wars: no one had to justify the participants' behavior. Also, it is my theory, that by Middle Age standards up to a point, the Eastern European one, the Crusades displayed normal levels of violence."

"I guess I am lost. I am not following. Where are you going with your theory?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Why not? Beats Wikipedia reading."

"You think you're funny but you're not."

"Go on, please. I want to hear it."

"Everybody knows the first crusade started as a popular uprising. Some tens of thousands of poor, uneducated, hungry peasants followed another peasant - Peter the Hermit - who displayed a letter he claimed was written by God and delivered to him personally by Jesus. Others in the Rhine valley followed a goose which they believed to be enchanted by God as their guide. All this was done because a life of humiliation and want dehumanizes to the extent that people lose all rationality."

"What's loss of rationality?"

Lena lifted his lantern to see his face, seeking for clues.

"At Jamestown, fathers killed their most plumb 14-year old daughters and ate them for dinner. The girls lasted through the winter."

"Are we going to joke or talk seriously?"

"Both?"

Lena started walking with a limp. From behind she did remind him of the sparrow he saved one fall.

"Instinctively those peasants knew that less people meant better survival chances for those remaining. So, killing thousands of defenseless Jews in Mainz and Worms, chopping, burning, and slaughtering in any imaginable way men, women and children looked 'reasonable' to the rabble: less mouths to feed meant more food to go around."

"I am still lost. This is madness. Do they give doctoral degrees in this nonsense?"

"Tony, bear with me. In 1096, this madness was contained along religious boundaries. I call this 'normal cruelty of unbelievable dimensions.' I agree with you that now, one thousand years later, all communities should avoid torturing and killing their 'external elements.' My doctoral dissertation argues that when cruelty reaches unreasonable levels, then it stops being natural, and it is caused chemically. "

"And when did that happen, Dr. Vodă?"

"You are referring to my dead grandpa and mom, Dr. Ana Vodă. I am not yet Dr. Vodă, but within a year I hope to become one."

"Let's go on."

"Sure. I mean torturing and killing everybody within the same religious community and family bonds is 'unreasonable cruelty.' Do you see the difference? It is not normal. It serves no practical purpose."

"I guess so. You want to distinguish between unimaginable cruelty which served some purpose, thus containable, and cruelty which knows no boundaries."

"Yes, I wish you were on my dissertation committee. It took them ages to see the difference."

"And how did you explain the difference?"

"How else? Germ warfare."

"Oh, do speak English, please. Per favore."

"I would rather use Italian. Voresti?"

"Capisco solo poco Italiano. English please."

"Viruses are strange little bridges between living and non-living, floating around in the air alive as a rock, waiting to come into contact with the right cell. When they find the right host cell, they trigger the cells to engulf them, or fuse themselves to the cell membrane so they can release their DNA into the cell. Viruses override the host cell's normal functioning with their own set of instructions that shut down production of host proteins and direct the cell to produce viral proteins to make new virus particles."

"English, please!"

"Viruses might inadvertently take up a bite of their host's DNA and have it copied into their progeny, and when the offspring viruses moves on to infect new cells, they might insert that bit of accidentally pilfered DNA into the new hosts' genome -- a process called transduction. Viruses, or even prions, renegade protein which could capture healthy proteins and use them as agents of illness, could change the hosting cell's DNA and if the cell was a bacteria infected cell, then that virus could copy a bit of the infested cell DNA and transfer the copy into its offspring which would change it."

"Bingo. I got it."

"I doubt it. Because I did not tell you what I had in mind."

"And what germ did you have in mind?"

"Actually, it is a lovely bacteria. The one that the Middle Ages seem to have particularly enjoyed."

"The plague?"

"Indeed, the pestis bacteria. It has the advantage of being pliable and extremely prone to virus cannibalization. I argue that a specific hybridization happened with the last Crusade, when the plague was brought to Eastern Europe. Something in the hosts made that viral bacterial cannibalization produce mass madness."

"And?"

"I believe there were many hybrid versions. I assume that some were genetically transmitted while others mere chance infestation."

"Wow!"

"Do you think your ancestors suffered of it?"

"Yes. Both brothers, Radu Bey and Vlad the Impaler, as well as other so-called local heroes would be considered psychotic killers by today's standards."

"Please, don't attack my hero."

"Okay, Vlad was totally sane. That's why we have so many folk stories about his sanity."

Tony touched her shoulder. Lena shivered and turned.

"Sorry. I just had an epiphany."

"What?"

"Do you think it possible that someone else could have had your insight?"

"Possibly. Why?"

"What if someone is trying to recreate the Vlads and the Radus."

"Okay, let me be explicit. I meant germ warfare, but I did not mean someone planned it. It just happened."

Lena stopped and they both realized that it did not have to remain a natural happenstance.

Chapter 20

John and Ana were standing on the cliff overlooking the steep incline, and multiple playgrounds nestled at the bottom of the park's hillside. The fog caused by the brief fall in temperature was still lingering. She was shivering. Having left her white lab coat behind, from under her short-sleeved T-shirt her bare arms became filled with goose bumps.

"Where now?"

"You coming with me?" Ana seemed surprised but chose to skip the next questions. Instead she offered suggestions. "Times Square? Coney Island? Let's be tourists! I've been waiting twenty years for this moment."

She climbed down the rocks nimbly. John followed her keeping an eye on his pager. He did not know whether she had extracted her GPS transmitter or not, and that was going to set or not to set off his private alarm. His hand checked his beeper again. It was not vibrating.

They followed in each other's steps, taking the popular winding paths bordered with trees barely covered in leaves. The trails passed by playgrounds and the sound of children giggling could have been easily imagined if either one of them had been so inclined.

When they reached Manhattan Avenue, they had to stop and assess the wisdom of their actions. It was so crowded it looked like a massive traffic jam.

"What's going on?" Ana asked. "Is it always this crowded?"

John became sufficiently concerned to hold his pager.

A car on the outer lane rolled its window open. A woman of unidentified age, looking at them behind Ray Ban sunglasses took a cigarette out of the glove compartment and asked them for a light. Ana wanted to say something, but John gently went ahead and offered to light the woman's cigarette. Ana looked surprised.

"What does it all mean?" she whispered so low that nobody else would have heard her. "We have been asked to evacuate. The

military is knocking at doors sending us away. Do you know where? To New Jersey." She started laughing and then coughing.

That was how Ana and John first heard about the order to evacuate civilians.

"No one says it but they believe there is an epidemic, like the Andromeda strain, but frighteningly too real, which causes people to go insane." She continued. John approached her and looked her closely.

"Would you like to go insane with me, Mr.?" She asked. "I would like to die with someone next to me, even if I have to end up like that floating head," she inadvertently added.

"Don't worry," John added "ma'am" when the light of the cigarette made her complexion visible. He noticed it had lost its flexibility around her now colorless lips covered in a strident red in a hurry. She shook her head as quietly as she spoke and pulled up the window.

John took his phone out and started searching the Internet. He handed it to Ana when he thought he had found what he's searching for. Ana's face whitened.

"How did this happen? I cannot leave. We have to call Pistone."

"Shall we jog?" John gently pushed her ahead; his way to tell her they needed to run but in an inconspicuous way.

Ana started walking fast through the maddening honking and whistling and cursing and just about every type of human interaction. There was very little to say if they wanted to stay alive.

A few cars ahead, the occupant of the dead man's seat made eye contact with them through the rear side mirror: A mistake, if he wanted to get Ana. He looked the part of the obvious drunkard, a cowboy showing off to his driver's companion what he could do.

"What are you folks doing? Cruising for victims?" the cowboy said. He looked weird for New York City, but not for John and Ana who were unused to the city's fashion. The wiry assailant wore jeans and cowboy boots, with a checkered shirt covered by a much used denim jacket.

"Back to your car! Back" he continued and his voice reached screaming levels. "Back or..." he stopped searching for the appropriate threatening words suited to express his strength and will to produce that result. "I'll flatten you into a pancake," he added and his companion laughed. He was a man in his early 40s with a mouth full of rotten teeth, laughing at the cowboy's wit.

Ana decided to reply when she noticed the badly camouflaged rifle standing between the seats handy to be picked up by any of them. She finally looked ahead. They had lost the fear of being stopped by the police and asked about their arms and whatever permit they might or might not have. It was a modular AR carbine, a Colt, the arm of choice for war veterans. They seemed to be in a barely controlled state of senseless, tipsy rage when a man did not know what he said.

"Kind..ly, let us pass," John carefully chose his words stretching in such a way, without moving his hands but making his T shirt sleeves move up so the cowboy could see his army tattoo USMC 0331, as if he were a Nazi camps survivor. Ana saw his move in the car lights. The driver recognized the tattoo, and the recognition worked magic.

"Mike, let them go," he called at his buddy. The cowboy looked back confused and following his buddy's chin move discovered John's tattoo too. He nodded and let them go by.

"Good night," Ana said and quietly went ahead. A baby crying being shushed by his mother was taking over her attention.

"Did you call Pistone?"

"No."

"Did he contact you?"

"No."

"So who is giving the orders here?"

"I don't know."

Chapter 21

"With 17.5 miles of corridors and a total floor area of 6.6 million square feet, the Pentagon is a military complex like no other," General Pistone liked to tell himself every time he entered the building. This was the only place where he enjoyed smiling at people randomly. He liked them all. They were his brethren.

But this morning did not start well. He arrived before 3AM. Surrounded by three minions he went into his office, easily identifiable by the pictures of him shaking hands and smiling with various presidents and their wives at different points in his personal history. They seemed duplicates of the pictures hanging on his bedroom walls.

When the door was closed, the four of them sat down and General Pistone started screaming at the two people sitting right next to him at the table. Further away from the two high ranked officers, a man and a woman, a quiet stenographer was ready to either start crying or taking shorthand.

"I was on line instead of sleeping. Thankfully someone was paying attention. That's how the head floating in the Columbia dormitory bathtub made it on my screen."

The general stood up and paced up and down his sumptuous corner office.

"I work with morons." He looked at them, and they returned the stare. "Sue me for being rude."

"General, sir, the situation is under control. FAST2 members have been deployed," Colonel Florence Meat, as her tag indicated, interrupted him.

"I have to wake up my staff to tell them that we have a situation at our M.A.R.T.F. site? Why does the government pay you if I do your job?"

"Sir."

"Not now Colonel. It is our job to shield the world from psychopaths and we let them loose. How did this happen?"

Everybody was silent.

"Why haven't we killed those fucking plague-ridden creatures?"

"The zombies?"

"Stop calling them that. This is not Hollywood. They are not zombies. Zombies do not exist. These are highly contagious cannibalistic humanoids. I want them all exterminated. When any hospital identifies them, give the order to exterminate them!"

"The lead scientist has insisted that she could manage their behavior and reduce their cannibalistic tendencies. She needs them to study the effect of bacteria-virus hybridization."

Pistone was looking out the window. He stopped pacing. General Brigadier Cornelius Babel, as his tag stated, gathered his courage and added to what the Colonel said:

"Dr. Vodă has been able to use a cocktail of medicines to sublimate some of the somatic and behavioral changes which afflict the people infested with a cannibalized pestis DNA, so the cannibalization is delayed. She increased their survival from a couple of days to almost 40 days."

"Bullshit. The lead scientist is fucking with us. Contagious psychopaths are contagious psychopaths, and having them around for 40 days is crazier than anything I have heard. I want them exterminated. NOW!"

"General, she discovered that in uterus, the cannibalized pestis DNA eats up the anterior cortex of the fetus atrophying it and destroying its empathy centers. Most such infected newborns don't survive. Those who do are the real psychopaths, but under her supervision they adapt." the colonel could not stop eulogizing Ana.

"Colonel, I know you vote with the pussy league. Is that why you take her side? Colonel, I don't give a shit who you fuck, just don't try to sell me bullshit. This lead scientist is terminated."

The general continued his pacing up and down.

"What's the prognosis?"

No one dared to reply.

"People, are you both deaf and incompetent? What is the prognosis? What are we facing there?"

"They are very contagious. Doctor Vodă reported a few years back that one could easily infect one hundred people in a few hours, and 75% of that population could survive long enough to infest others with the same potential. Basically, 75% of those 75 people could infest one hundred each in another hour, so within two hours there are 6075 infested people who could each infest 100 additional people in the next hour, so we can easily talk about 80 million people having been infested by now from only one of them.

Barely containing himself Pistone asked:

"How many are missing?"

"All."

The General went to his desk. Unlocking a drawer he took out a cigar. Everybody was worried. Last time he tried to burn them with a cigar.

"How many?"

"All, but most of them were on their last legs." Babel smiled. "No more than ten."

Pistone opened his mouth to ask about what he was afraid to ask. He checked his pager. John had not replied yet.

"Let's clean the pigsty," the general uttered his words in pain. He did not have any news from John. Somehow he remembered that he never contacted John. He told him he needed to be at the Waldorf at 7 AM to pick up Congresswoman Calder.

"That's standard protocol. FAST2 are one their way. They should arrive within minutes. They will check the compound and then close it down. The campus will be evacuated and then the isomer applied."

"What happened with the alarm? Why did it not work?"

"We are working on that General. It could have been that we made it too sensitive to certain sound waves, and a nearby explosion destroyed some sensors," the Colonel explains.

Pistone looks happy. He was ready to dismiss them.

"What about Dr. Vodă, Sir?" the Colonel finally asked.

"What about that cunt, Colonel?"

"Her GPS is non-responsive."

"She's a liability."

"For the love of Christ, what do you want me to say?"

"Find her. Dead or alive," Babel added.

Pistone was amazed how wrong he had read his subalterns. They were going for the kill.

"Let's try to find her alive. I want to talk with her. Now all of you go," he dismissed everybody and whispered to the stenographer.

"We don't need any of those notes transcribed, you do understand, yes?"

She nodded in tears and he slapped her on her back. Lower back.

Chapter 22

Tony and Lena managed to walk ahead, whatever that meant underground with no sense of direction, when a door barely ajar appeared ahead. Bright light can be seen coming out. They looked inside and noticed a rather spacious spotless tunnel.

"Ever seen Star Wars?"

"Yes and no."

"How is that possible?"

"I went with Tom to see one of them but I fell asleep."

"Actually, I meant to say the opposite. Someone has tried hard to recreate the vibe and failed." Tony turned off his lantern. He kept the door open for Lena to go in first.

"Uh, whatever you say. It is brightly painted in white and shining." She slipped and fell down. She smelt her fingers. "Smell."

"Clorox."

"Freshly cleaned I might add. Have you ever been in Paris?"

"Is that a diner?"

"No, Dorothy. I don't mean Paris, Kansas."

"I thought it was Paris, Texas?"

"Let it be. It's hard to communicate with you," Lena stood up and went along the tunnel until another door left ajar guided their steps. Tony followed shortly.

They found themselves in the middle of an immense room which could have been used both as a gym, and recreation center. It had a basketball court, track and all the equipment any college gym would have, including rowing machines and treadmills and steppers.

"I have never found exercising of any use," Tony commented moving fast from one machine to another, "but I cannot say I do not admire muscular men." He sat down on a rowing machine and pretended to row and watched his moves in the various mirrors.

"If our attacker escaped from here, because I believe he did, then we should be ready to find whoever uses this space."

Tony moved to the weights section and attempted to lift one. He could not.

Lena lifted her finger to her lips with a librarian's elegance, "Shhhh, you are making too much noise. How do we know we are alone here?"

He went to the bars trying to pull his body up. He failed. He saw his puny himself in the mirror. He gave up and followed the willowy figure of Lena.

"I have a strong feeling we are alone. Maybe the open door and the escaped guy, gal or whatever that creature was gave it away."

"So what's the plan? What shall we do?"

"I don't know. I will lie down. I am wiped out. Exercising on an empty stomach is not the best idea."

"Let's find the kitchen. Every gymnasium comes with a kitchen nearby."

"I won't trust anything served on these premises. What do I know about Impalers? Maybe they get sick by eating stuff they should not touch."

Tony lay down on a yoga mattress and invited Lena to join him. She nodded in approval and lay down next to him. While overcome by fatigue, they found themselves staring at the ceiling.

A slide show was being projected on the ceiling. Instead of the Sistine Chapel, a more historically inclined and less talented Michelangelo decided to put together a slide show of how a particular geographical area had been transformed through time. Mesmerized, Lena and Tony forgot to breath. They had missed the first slides. Then, luckily the next slide was from the present. They recognized the Low Library building and La Maison Française.

"That's St Luke's Hospital," Tony added. Then, superimposed they saw a picture of another building whose frontispiece said

"Bloomingdale Asylum for the Mentally Insane," with people hoarded in a corner replacing Low Library, and then another picture of a smaller building identified as an Orphanage filled with pauper children replacing La Maison Francaise. A picture of an old farmhouse with a banner 'Jones' Farm,' replaced St. Luke's Hospital.

They stayed still while the slides went by a few times. When nothing helped them comprehend what was going on they turned on their sides to stand up. Doing so they saw the banner reading "The Bloomingdale Asylum for the Insane" was affixed right above the entrance they used to come in.

"If this is a joke with a remote connection to the past, then we find ourselves in an asylum built right beneath Low Library."

"I don't know I could call what I see here a joke."

"This is no Asylum."

"No, but where Low Library exists, there used to be an Asylum. Actually, I have a feeling that I have already researched it. Here it is."

Tony started reciting while walking along the gymnasium, but Lena soon took over. She was reading from a book which she found lying down next to the rowing machine Tony attempted to use minutes earlier.

"The military started its underground complex when the Asylum cover-up could not continue any longer: the real estate the so-called Asylum occupied was now pressured to be repositioned. As soon as the military project moved underground, Columbia University's President Seth Low was encouraged to bid on the property and easily won it. He was also encouraged to have a massive building erected on top of the military project, so while differently, the smokescreen would continue. Low happily donated \$1 million and the Low Library building resembled the Acropolis in Athens and the space around it, Piazza Navona in Rome. Visitors felt welcomed to access the campus through a low flight of stairs which run along 116th street. That open court became an inviting public space in which the academic community and the general public mingled, shared marble benches, lingered by the fountains and sometimes disappeared unobserved."

Lena and Tony eyed each other.

"Tony, what do you know about this place?"

"I don't know anything more than what I have just read about it."

"Tony, how can we get out of here? I am feeling very uncomfortable."

Tony checked his phone.

"No coverage. Bummers."

"Hey, look at those doors. We need to find out if any of them lead to the outside world."

Lena took the lead and moved closer to the closest door. It had a sign which said: "Site Director. Knock before you enter, and leave the door open." Something else had once been written under "Site Director." They could make up a "dr."

"Shall we start with the management?" They looked at each other and nodded. "After you, my lady," Tony pushed the door and made space for Lena to get in.

It was an apartment rather than an office as they had expected. They noticed the sofa and a huge book shelf. Near it there stood a small bar with a bottle of sherry, almost full. Lena opened the bottle and took a sip.

"Sorry I really need it. Would you like a sip?"

"No, I do not drink, and yes, I live with mom, and yes to the next question and the following." Tony added to his prohibited and permitted list, approaching Lena and taking the bottle out of her hand. He took a large gulp.

"It's tasty for something absolutely disgusting."

"Hey, no disrespectful comments. We are guests here." Lena half joked.

Tony took another gulp while Lena moved next to the book shelf. She noticed another copy of the book she just read from earlier, "**The History of Columbia University**". The book seemed

to have been read a lot; its spine stuck out. Lena took it out of the shelf and let it open wherever it had been most often opened.

It showed a picture of the Bloomingdale Asylum for the Insane, built to house widows of the Revolutionary War. On the next page there was a another building The Leake and Watts Orphan Asylum for Children whose lives had been destroyed by the same war. She started reading aloud:

"During the 18th century, people became aware that the war produced a lot of victims. Some were still alive and needed to be separated from the population at large. They could not be controlled. They were beyond help by church and charities. Even prisons proved inadequate: they spread disease and then insanely killed others. Local New York luminaries arranged for the private funding and constructions of such buildings: one for adults and one for minors. Eventually the New York State Legislature started to fund it promoting the advanced idea of caring for the mentally insane in a humane way, and incorporating nature as much as possible in their treatment."

She stopped and looked for Tony. He was sitting down on the sofa with his eyes closed.

"Are you asleep?"

"I should be, but I'm not. Could you please continue reading? I have this feeling of déjà vu all over again"

"Little development occurred to change the region's rural character or threaten the isolation of the two asylum buildings. In fact, a shantytown was soon encouraged to encroach as a way of discouraging urban developers' having an interest in the area. All would have continued undisturbed within the 19th century, had not two institutions decided to move into that area: Columbia University under the presidency of Seth Low, an ambitious rich man immune to blackmail and extortion, and the Anglican Church."

"Stop. That's it. That's the reason the military project moved underground. It needed privacy, and as I guessed, the only privacy modern times offer is underground. Do you remember "The Little Prince?" Dad loved to read it to me. Essentials are only visible with the heart, not with the eyes, be them even in 3D

Glasses, Miss Vodă. I would append that by saying that we imagine first and then we see. We cannot see what we cannot imagine."

"You are a poet, my friend. May I call you that?" Tony nodded in fake embarrassment. "But what is going on here?" Lena wandered as she moved to the other room.

"Something scary which needed to be kept away from any inquisitive eyes?"

She looked back smilingly.

"You're crazy in a very inventive way. I think I like you."

Tony bowed.

"Do you notice something weird?"

"Everything?"

"No. In this apartment. Look around. It offers no clue about the person inhabiting it. No pictures. No dirty dishes. No dirty towels."

She moved to the bathroom. Tony followed her. Nothing in the bathroom. Spotless.

"I really need some privacy." He closed the door behind him. Lena excused herself and went back to the bedroom. She looked under the pillow. He appeared next to her.

"Do you expect to find what?"

"I don't know. I had this weird recall of my mom telling me to always put my pajamas well folded under the pillow."

As she uttered the words, Lena looked under the pillow only to find nothing. She kept searching. She looked in the drawer under the bed. She found a few identical pairs of jeans and various Tee shirts. One was a large size and had a picture of the president and vice president, "**Vote 4 Donald Rumsfeld 4 President and Mathew Pistone 4 Vice President.**" She threw that shirt to Tony. He caught it, read it, made a grimace and threw it back to her.

Lena chose one of the black jeans and a Tee shirt. She smelled them. Channel 5. She took off her Gucci gown and her broken tights. She looked at the size of the jeans. 27. She put them on. They fit her perfectly. Tony was staring at her beautiful back. His glasses suddenly fogged and needed to be clean. He could not care less. He kept on staring. Lena's was the first naked back he had ever seen.

All done, she turned and saw him. She smiled indulgently. He did not catch that. He was finally cleaning his glasses.

"Now, shoes. Would you help me find some?"

They both looked around. Tired they sat down. At that point they finally noticed the cameras blinking.

"We have been under surveillance. Let's leave." Tony stood up to go.

"Not us. Whoever lived here had been under surveillance. But she did not seem to care. She entertained."

"The man size T-Shirt I gave you."

"How do you know she is a she?"

"I am wearing her clothes, female clothes." Lena continued looking for shoes. She found a few pairs of identical flats under a drawer of more folded jeans. She slipped into a pair. They fit her perfectly.

"Cinderella, come, what if WE are being watched, too? Or, I should say, we do not have too much time before those who watch us get us, too."

"If we have, then we have been watched from the beginning, and we are still alive although whoever keeps this place could have exterminated us fast."

"Maybe we were just lucky. What if something went really wrong if they're all gone and we are inside?"

Lena neatly folded her Gucci gown and ragged tights and put them in a drawer behind the other clothes. She put a lot of effort in making everything as neat as possible denoting a lack of habit. Tony smiled imagining her messy surroundings as she

pushed back the drawer. She grabbed her bag and was ready to leave. Her chin was up and her entire face was smiling.

"Okay, so let's follow the directions."

Tony looked pensively for a minute. "You don't mean the exit direction?"

"There must be one even if we cannot see it right now."

Chapter 23

Ana was shivering walking slightly ahead. John, having changed his clothes after their earlier interlude, had the presence of mind to wear a sweater on top of a freshly washed Tee. Comfortable, he was worrying about his pager being quiet. Luckily, a diner's big sign illuminated the next block and they hurried towards it. They looked inside as they approached the door to appraise the clientele, when they recognized a patron. It was "Aaron from the Bronx." Ana stopped. The window was cracked open to let the smoke come out.

"Do you have a cigarette to go with that silver lighter?" She whispered to John. "I have not smoked in twenty years, but I have a feeling it will calm me down if I had one now."

John took a Marlboro package out of some pocket, opened it and handed it to her.

"I carry one," John answered her unasked question and unhappy with the implied clarity of his answer added, "Just in case."

Watching Aaron through the window Ana felt a pang of maternal feelings for him. She remembered his file. An orphan, he lived from foster home to foster home. When he finally found a foster family who could afford having him permanently, their apartment collapsed when an explosion caused the entire building at Park Avenue and 130th street to fall slowly but completely to the Manhattan ground. Ana inhaled and she almost coughed. John covered her mouth. His hands were sweaty too. She was full with emotion and anticipation. What did John feel? She looked furtively at his profile. She had changed so much since John came into her life. When her coughing spasm was gone, John let her breathe and took her cigarette away and put it out with his foot.

"It's not for you." Ana nodded with embarrassment. What else would she discovered was not for her? Did she have time for that? Slowly, slowly was dawning upon her that Pistone might soon contact John to terminate her. Would he do it?

Inside the diner Aaron had ordered a burger and the waitress slapped down a smudge-marked glass of water, and a cheeseburger plate that looked more like a shrunken head on a

serving platter than an edible meat patty. He looked at her and nodded. She looked away.

Aside from him there were three other people sitting at a table. One guy was staring at him. The girl was texting with her head on the shoulder of the other guy who was wearing dark sunglasses. The guy who was staring at Aaron bent his head and kissed the girl on her mouth and filled her breast with his dirty hands, still looking at Aaron. She giggled.

"Dough-boy, want a piece of the action?" The guy with the sunglasses screamed at Aaron loud enough John and Ana heard it. Outside the window, they made eye contact wondering whether that was their clue to go in.

"Shall we?" John asked. Ana shook her head "no."

"He might have been the artist behind that floating head you saw on the Internet."

"John, the time has come for Aaron to live on his own. He may kill today, but maybe the threshold of frustration would just become a little higher and enable him to survive. Let help him if he needs us. For now let's keep watching."

Aaron was chewing his burger avoiding eye contact. He was chewing it very slowly.

"Hey Dough-boy, you know you want these tits on your face," the guy with the sunglasses continued. The girl giggled without stopping her doing whatever she was doing with her phone.

Aaron looked for the waitress. She had disappeared. Probably in the bathroom.

He took a menu left on the table and read it. It turned out he wanted to know the price of the burger. He took a \$20 bill and went to the counter. He pressed the bell. No one came. Eventually the cook came out. He gave the bill to the cook, an oily guy with an earring and a bandana on his head.

"Okay," the cook nodded and disappeared to his greasy grill where he was frying bacon, eggs and a toast.

"American breakfast does smell good. Can we go in and order some fried eggs and bacon?"

"Not yet," Ana replied without moving. "I assume they serve breakfast all day and all night."

When his change arrived, Aaron took it, tipped and aimed for the door. He passed by the table and suddenly stopped. Aaron lifted his hand and looked at it. Blood was coming out. The sunglasses guy was smiling with a knife in his hand.

"Got you attention, Dough-Boy?" He had time to say before Aaron pulled him up by his collar to straighten him up in his chair and still mesmerized by the thin cut, without looking at the hoodlum, Aaron pulled the guy's head backwards until its vertebrae snapped on the back of the chair. Without looking behind, Aaron left the diner and passed by a livid Ana, ignoring her.

The young woman started making out with the other guy. Probably they found death arousing. John hugged a quietly sobbing Ana. Was this the prelude to her own vertebrae being snapped, Ana could not stop wondering.

Chapter 24

Tony and Lena finally exited the space labeled "The Asylum."

"Feeling better?"

"Definitely less insane," Tony smiled. Lena returned the smile and took his hand out of his pocket and held it in hers. Tony shivered but did not take it away.

They were back in the white spotless tunnel and two yards into it the white walls were covered with blinking colorful lights.

"What's going on?"

"A show of light and sound."

"But there is no sound." Lena stopped. She looked ill.

"Sorry to bring it to you: the doctor is not in."

"Funny. I need a few minutes. It comes and goes."

"What comes and goes."

"My claustrophobia."

"What's going on? Is this a joke? You came here on your own will, knowing that you are claustrophobic? Are you that crazy?"

Lena squatted and folded her arms on her knees and put her head on her arms.

"Sorry."

"Okay." Tony sat down next to her.

"How can I help?"

"Talk to me."

"How did it happen?"

"I was five. It was the last time I saw mom and grandpa. Grandpa brought us to these ruins. He said they were our castle. It was 1995. July 14, 1995."

"Bastille Day. What better way to celebrate it than in a ruined castle?"

"As a five-year old kid I thought giant bats came over the ruins and sprayed a white rain. They came closer and from their giant tummies giant insects climbed down a rope. One such giant insect approached me. I was crying next to my mom and grandpa. Mom was only looking around but could not move, while grandpa looked asleep. The insect came to me on its two heavy legs wearing what later I understood were army boots. Its face was that of a giant fly. It looked at me. It was holding a can and when it opened it, smoke covered everything.

My insect gently put its hand under my very heavy head. I was lying down. Mom closed her eyes. Another insect took mom away. I closed them too. It was all dark and instead of insects and bats, pigeons started fluttering above my head. I could hear their soft, complacent call, so comfortable and cool on a hot summer's afternoon.

I woke up in our apartment, in Bucharest. Next to me was grandpa's secretary, Ms. Pop. I tried to minimize her by calling her Ms. Pop, here goes the weasel. It did not help. She was the bearer of the bad news. She told me that my parents died in a car accident on our way back from Poienari Castle, but I should not worry about anything, that everything would be okay. I wouldn't go to an orphanage because she knew I would be a good girl, and she would take care of me, and she did."

Lena stopped as abruptly as she started. "All better now. Thanks for staying. Let's go." Tony knew better than make a comment about how weird her confession sounded. He followed her content they were back on track.

The lights were changing with increased frequency.

"Shall we run?" Lena suggested and took Tony's hand running. Only a few yards ahead of them they saw a door starting to close. Above the door it says, "Jones' Farm." Tony pushed Lena ahead. She got in and turned. Tony's glasses flew off his nose and he instinctively stopped to search for them. Lena fast blocked the door from closing with her body. Tony grabbed his glasses and ran in. The door closed. Water was heard hitting the door.

"We reached the end of the yellow brick road." Both said forgetting about the close escape. Laughingly and perhaps embarrassed to say "jinx," they missed the water retreating behind. As they were walking away, the door started to open due to a system malfunction.

"All these YA literary references are remarkable in light of the fact that you have not grown up here, in the U.S. I am impressed. You must read a lot."

They were walking around a circular hallway. There were door openings all along the smaller wall.

"Who says I've grown up? Look at the mess I am in searching for dad."

"Dad? I thought it was Knowlton and Sam you were, oh...okay."

"You're fast."

"You confused me again."

"Not for long."

They put their head through the doorway and looked. They saw another banner with a name on it: "Bobby." The room had another opening, smaller on the opposite wall which was also circular and like a pistil connected all the dormitory rooms.

"This is so strange."

"What?"

"These rooms. They are like a hybrid between jail and hospital rooms."

Tony had to admit they looked strange. Inside they noticed a nailed-in metal toilet, a bed which could become a surgical table, a sink with not visible faucets, more like a place to disgorge; a dumbwaiter, and in the back a two-way mirror and a passage to the central room, probably the Laboratory.

"And to think this is called 'Jones' Farm,'" Lena thought aloud and stepped into Bobby's room, all white, spotless and brightly lit.

"Government humor."

"Like the Asylum we visited earlier."

"You know what? There was a Nicholas Jones' farm above the ground right here during the Revolutionary War. It started north of McGowan's Pass occupying part of today's northern end of

Central Park. It contained a buckwheat field. It extended from today's 106th street to 110th and then it ended with an orchard, brush and woods at today's 116th Street and Broadway, then Boston Post Road."

"It sounds very informative. So we know that the Government likes history. But something else must have happened in Jones' Farm to keep its name alive, don't you think so?"

"Beats me," Tony replied going ahead of her through the partition separating the dormitory room from the central room, the Laboratory. "Until tonight I thought I was the most imaginative historical fiction writer, but obviously am not. My most beloved superhero, Vlad, used contagious sick people as soldiers, and what we found here seems to be some very sick people too. So, what if during the Revolutionary war Jones' Farm saw some special mercenaries, some contagiously sick people? I'm improvising here, but everything I have imagined pales compared to what I fear this place has housed. I imagined Vlad's soldiers as highly contagious zombies. But, I never thought about their life span. How long do zombies live? And that seems to be their main deficiency: each individual cannot survive too long."

Tony stopped and slapped his forehead. "I got it, what if this is a nursery of sorts where Impalers, or whatever we saw is called, live?"

"It sounds interesting. I should do some reading about Jones' Farm, so I can understand the military nostalgia from commemorating the place. Not bad guess work. Let's search Farm Central, then," Lena said starting her investigation.

The Laboratory looked like a lab they both saw in many sci-fi movies, except it did not have the heavy doors which clang shut heavily and sealed with a hissing sound airtight were missing.

"No heavy doors in this secret lab, though I do detect a peculiar odor, a faint woody smell of disinfectant."

"No steam room to have your body covered in god knows what, either."

"I cannot find any drying rooms."

"Could it be because the only people who needed disinfectants lived outside?" Tony joked and Lena approached

him. Tony retreated to a slightly scared state of mind which caused his stomach to rumble and his glasses to fog up. Holding her stare he backed up until a desk located in the middle of the room stopped his retreat. His hand quickly found a tissue box. He took one out and desperately cleaned his glasses. He tumbled onto the seat and restrained by the desk he put his glasses back on his nose. He turned on the desk top. The screen was so bright. He loved that cold electronic light.

"No holographic keyboard here."

Lena cataloged the furniture pieces pensively and very slowly. There were cabinets filled with tubes where various cultures were taking their time.

"It's not easy to decipher secrets seems to be the motto of this place," Lena thought when started she could control the tremulous in her voice.

"Hey, take a look! I have not seen such a *Pinguicula vulgaris* since mom ...let's say for ages."

Tony came closer.

"Are you making this memory up?" Tony said approaching and trying to touch the plant.

"Don't touch it! It would pinch you," Lena slapped his fingers.

"A carnivorous plant reminds you of your mother?"

"Better than nothing."

Tony chose to go back to the desk instead of making any additional comment. While she was mesmerized with the plants, Tony started playing with the buttons on the desk.

"Is that wise?"

"Don't worry. I am not banging on buttons which look carnivorous," Tony had time to say, when a bang was heard, and simultaneously some containers slammed open and shut.

"What the hell," Lena said and ran back into Bobby's room.

"Gross." She was staring at human organs lying inside dumb waiters as if they were someone's dinner. "Tony, dinner has been served," she said running to a sink to vomit. "Help!" she added and collapsed. "Help please," she could whisper before collapsing. Her 1995 vision revisited her.

She became the 5-year old Lena, who saw her mother being taken away while closing her eyes as if pushing the vision of baby Lena away. Lena had never forgiven her mother for having closed her eyes in that moment of existential panic. Why didn't her mother keep looking at her child? Why didn't her mother fight back her oppressor to save her baby child? Why did her mom reject her and then abandon her to the piggish Ms. Pop, her grandfather's mistress?

"Why mom?" Lena heard herself scream with the mouth full of vomit. Angry at her own impotence, Lena turned on the faucet and washed her face and hair. Thinking she could stand up she leaned against the sink only to face the daily schedule affixed above the sink:

1. Wake up - 6 AM
2. Toilet and Exercising - 6:10-6:30 AM
3. Reading or story telling 6:30-7:30 AM

"Story telling" sent Lena again to nightmare land. Soon after she had arrived at Columbia University, still mesmerized by the revolutionary change in her life, a mere high school graduate from some unknown high school in Bucharest, she received a letter. It was the last ever Ms. Pop wrote. That missive further changed her life, as improbably as it seemed.

Dear Lena:

It took me a long time to decide whether I would mail you this letter or not. I had promised your late grandfather I would never talk to you about the past. You were supposed to know that you survived a car accident.

I have a feeling that something is amiss. I have the same feeling I had thirteen years ago when I lost your grandfather. So, here I am writing to you to tell you that you come from illustrious parents, and you are destined to go places, my child. Whatever else you might hear about your mother, remember that she was

supposed to receive the Nobel Prize in medicine the year of her death.

No one knows this, but before your apartment was ransacked and her journal stolen, I was able to read some of her entries. She talked about curing the "living dead" at the Municipal Hospital. I did not understand what she was saying about DNA sequencing, but I learned from her journal that your father was not her dear husband, Vlad, whom she loved very much, but a colleague of hers. I want you to know that your mother wrote Dr. David Soare as your father. That is terrible news because your grandfather was fighting him for the Poienari Castle. David is the descendant of Vlad III the Impaler, and the Poienari Castle had originally been his, not his brother's Radu, your mother's ancestor.

I hear a car approaching the house. I better go downstairs and ask Ms. Cora, my neighbor to mail it to you.

When she stopped recalling the letter, Lena started whaling. She collapsed on the floor all curled up as a little baby. Why did her nightmare revisit her twice today in this horrid place? What was she doing here? She wanted to go home to her mamma, but she had no mom.

"Tony!" She whaled a few times. "I cannot breathe."

"Stop the nonsense. You're fine. Try to find me."

Lena stopped and listened to her heartbeat until it became clear that it was normal. She uncurled her body and sat up normally. She looked ahead but did not see him. She noticed more space in the lab though.

"Can't see you. Where did you go?"

"Look down. I'm deeper."

"In your thoughts?"

"There too. I'm serious. Look down the hole."

Lena approached the middle of the room and looked into the hole created by the desk and the chair, which she noticed one flight down.

"What's there?"

"A storage room of some sort. I don't know what they grow here. It is quite cold."

"Open a cabinet."

"I'm highly impressionable."

"It goes away in time, I am told." Ana smiled and added, "But it also tends to come back,"

Tony opened a drawer. More cultured tissue in various tubes. Some containers were bigger than others.

"Could this be a cloning center?"

"You watching 'Black Orphan'?"

"You too?"

"Hold on, there are some scientific papers here. They are signed. Oh, no, it cannot be. Come down. You won't believe your eyes. Lena?"

Lena could not hear the last part. The lights around started blinking and Lena pressed against her ears.

"Tony, I cannot take this noise, what is it?"

"What noise?"

"I don't know."

"Come down, I don't hear anything here." Tony went to the desktop and typed a name in the password. It worked. "Lena, come down. You won't believe your eyes." The screen saver was a ruined castle. On the lower right bottom it said: Castle Poienari. "Lena, are you coming? Have you heard of Castle Poienari?"

Lena tumbled down.

"That is where Vlad's last battle against his Muslim convert brother Radu Bey took place."

"Exactly. I am writing about it, and you mentioned that as the place you last saw your mother, correct?"

"Yes," she admitted having reached him. "Tony, something went really wrong with this place. My ears are bleeding pain. I don't know what you are talking about, but I have a strong feeling we have to leave. Please, we need to hurry. Another claustrophobic attack is making its way through my current anxiety and when it hits me, I will be catatonic. Damn it, if I only could get in touch with my therapist! Please, help me get out of here."

"Lena, calm down and please sit down." He noticed a pair of headphones and handed it to her. "Take them and cover your ears. Lena obliged. "Look, I am logging out. Now, you try to log in this computer."

"Tony? This is childish. How on earth would I know the password?"

"Try your name."

"Are you crazy? Why would my name be the password?"

"Because this is your mom's lab. Remember when you told me you are not Dr. Vodă, not yet, because that was Dr. Ana Vodă? Look at this." Tony slammed a research paper signed "Dr. Ana Vodă" in front of Lena. Lena, her ear pain gone, typed her name in the password box. She got in. The screen saver was Poienari.

The alarm's sound intensified. Tony could hear it too.

"We are being locked in." He said.

Lena fished something from her bag. It was a flash drive. She quickly saved the contents of the computer.

The walls were making the space around them smaller by the second. Their 3D rectangular space was aiming for a two-dimensional recreation.

"Tony, I'm scared." She took the drive and put it back into her bag.

"Lena, hold on. We just found your mom. We need time to celebrate. It would be stupid to die now. So, let's think fast. There must be an exit somewhere. Your mother must have used it not long ago. Think Lena. Think like her."

"A switch. I remember her room. She liked having a switch for everything."

They were seeking nervously and banged on every single switch, until they found one under the desk. They were saved. The last book shelf remaining on the opposite wall collapsed when Tony touched that single purple switch. As they threw themselves through the collapsing wall they found themselves back into a dark dirty tunnel. Lena lost her headphones in her rush to fly over the shelf.

"Could you please turn on your lantern?"

"I don't have it."

"What are you carrying in your left hand then?"

"Let me walk ignorant of my surroundings."

"Give me the lantern, please. I want us out of here."

Tony turned on the lantern. In front of them another open door was clothing.

"Hurry!"

"It seems that we came right before the grand closing, doesn't it?"

They both ran. Lena was grateful for her flats. Tony pushed her outside and through himself out. Cool air and a breeze welcomed them.

Chapter 25

A taxi zoomed by. Its light indicated it had no passengers. John went in the street, whistled and stretched his hand out in an attempt to stop it. Ana looked quizzical. She stopped short of running after him. The desire to go and stop him from doing something crazy was intolerable. She opened her mouth to call his name when the taxi did exactly as John directed it to do. It stopped right next to him. John opened the back door and invited Ana in.

As she got in, the cab driver looked at a shivering Ana through the rearview mirror.

"Where to?"

Ana returned his gaze through the mirror.

"No idea."

"We have a few hours. Around Manhattan."

The cabbie started his meter, changed gears and took off. He looked at them again through the mirror and inquired:

"You from here?"

"Nope," Ana half-truthfully replied.

"I run all over town, but I don't want to end up in Brooklyn."

"Let's run all over town and avoid Brooklyn," Ana concluded the exchange conciliatorily and leaned back on her seat.

"Have you noticed any traffic problems in the city?" John inquired.

"In this City?" The cab driver laughed. "Not at this hour. The bad drivers are all at home driving. I love the night shift." He turned downtown on Broadway.

"Good news." John offered. "We saw some traffic jam a few blocks north."

"Oh, then I won't take you to Harlem."

"Okay, then. It's only Manhattan below Harlem." John agreed and leaned back in his seat too.

Minutes passed by. The cabbie was quiet. They were both quiet. Finally, Ana started fidgeting with the back seat TV.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

Instead of replying, Ana turned up the volume.

"I bet it is a bit too loud. For your ears' sake," John turned down the volume a notch instead of finishing his sentence. Ana ignored him. She was mesmerized by the City. Like a child her face was glued to the window.

They were approaching Times Square.

She pulled down the window. Cool air came in. She turned off the TV, as images of Columbia University mayhem made it on the screen. She addressed the cabbie through the glass-like divider.

"Where can I get a jacket at this hour, do you happen to know?"

The cabbie did not answer right away. Ana waited patiently with her head near the money slot.

"At this hour? On Broadway?" The cabbie finally looked at her in the mirror. "We will stop in Times Square. You'll find something in any gift shop. Something."

"Thank you very much," Ana added and retreated in her seat. As they were approaching 50th street, in an afterthought she approached the money slot again and says,

"Could you bring us there?"

Ana noticed his eyes getting a sense of her, and of John, through the rear-view mirror and she understood she was scarily ignorant. She decided fast that it was to her advantage to better make friends with the driver. She needed him. She had no idea of what she would do.

"You love Manhattan?" Ana went back to her small talk strategy. As she asked that obvious question, John turned toward her and smiled indulgently. His teacher was using her old tricks. She was afraid of failing. He patted her. Ana recoiled. She did not understand this role reversal. John was turning into her protector as if she did not know what she was doing.

"At this hour? What is not to love? No hustle. No bustle. No traffic. No crazies."

Ana nodded approvingly. The car stopped at the light and she to him talking. She's noticed a gift shop right outside.

"Could you wait for me, while I get a jacket, and then you choose a good spot for us to admire Manhattan? Maybe I end up like you one day, and I'll love it, too."

Ana got off and went shopping.

John's beeper finally rang. It was Pistone. John's cell phone received an SMS. He had an assignment for tomorrow morning. The details had been delivered. He could only reply from the designated destination. He had 30 minutes to reach the destination once the location came through.

Nothing.

John asked the cabbie:

"Is your cell phone working?"

The cabbie checked his phone and answered:

"Yes, sir. Do you have problems with yours? I heard it beep."

Before the conversation continued, Ana came out of the store with a cute leather jacket. She was so happy she sprinted rather than walked.

The salesperson came out waiving.

"Have fun, Ana!"

"You make friends fast," John noticed. There was no sarcasm in his voice.

"Thank you Sonja. Thank you for the jacket."

"Did you buy her jacket?" the cabbie asked with new found respect.

"There was nothing else I wanted."

"Oh. Good for you," the cabbie managed to say.

Ana looked at John. He was checking his messages. He received his SMS.

"The Waldorf Astoria, 413."

The cabbie turned toward them and asked them when the car stopped at the next light:

"Where now?"

"To the Waldorf Astoria," John replied instead of Ana. She looked at him inquisitively.

"Please," she added jovially.

Relieved she did not ask any questions, John eagerly complied:

"Please," and in a change of mind showed her the text.

The driver smiled taking it as banter old couples engage in and took off but less dramatically. Less "vroom, vroom" noise.

"Could this be a trap? Ana asked.

"No. I was expecting this when I read in that blog about Knowlton' conference. Celeste meets him every time she's in town."

"Big wigs always stay at the Waldorf," the cabbie added.

"Oh, don't say it," Ana replied absent-mindedly.

"You folks have no luggage." The cabbie wouldn't stop talking.

"No," John took over the conversation.

"And you're not from here."

"No." John agreed openly.

"And you're going to the Waldorf."

"Yes."

"And politicians go to the Waldorf."

Ana and John contributed a simultaneous, "Yeah."

The cabbie looked at them in a scrutinizing manner.

"We pay cash," John put it out there for clarification.

"That's great news."

"But that's none of your concern, is it?" John continued.

"No."

"That's great news for me too," John concluded and Ana sighed relieved. Now she could admire again New York.

"Maybe I will stay in the cab and do more sightseeing while you check in?"

"Not a bad idea." John agreed. At the next stop he ceremoniously offered to walk the rest of the trip. "I can get off here then."

"Shall we continue around Manhattan as I first wanted? It is my first time around here."

"Dear lady, my shift ends at 6 AM."

They were driving away and looking at Ana in the rear-view mirror the cabbie continued his questions:

"Husband?"

"Cousin," the reply came without any hesitation.

"Ah. Married?"

"Widow," Ana added and sadness came over her. Indeed she was a widow, though she never mourned her husband. He had passed away months before her kidnapping when survival removed all her connections to the past.

"Damn it all," Ana finally articulated her feelings under her breath. Her lover's face, yet another warlord descendant, the only direct descendant of Vlad III the Impaler, would not efface itself. "David," she whispered as she did every time he took her in her arms. And then, it just dawned upon herself how fabricated her life had looked from afar. She had been married to warlord descendant, as her patronymic Vodă, warlord indicated, and having an affair with another warlord descendant. Farfetched and insanely dangerous for her peace of mind. Perhaps she should thank General Pistone from taking her away from that maddening situation. She had been wasting her life away, all her thirst for knowledge, her experiments on the walking dead, all ...

"I too am a widower, and feel very angry at times." Looking at her incessantly and annoyingly, oblivious to his effect on Ana, the driver continued. "We cannot do anything to get them back. God chose them."

With her last effort she mustered, "Sorry." She looked out the window trying to stop the torrent of uninvited memories which were threatening to put on an appearance.

The cabbie started crying. He stopped the car. Ana offered by way of making herself helpful:

"I don't know how to drive."

"Oh, don't worry. I will be okay. It's just I cannot think about Mary, my sweet Mary, without crying."

"I'm really sorry. Shall I get off and take another cab?"

"Oh, no." He blew his nose and took off.

"Kids?"

"One." Ana wondered whether she should make up a reason to have the car stop. She could pick up another taxi. Luckily she saw John doing it. How did he know how to hail a cab?

"Five. What?"

"uhhh... I don't understand."

"Boys. Girls. I have five girls and none is as beautiful as Mary was." He cried again, but he did not stop the car this time. He kept on driving until Ana asked.

"Do you mind if I walk? I would rather be by myself."

"Oh, don't be silly. I'll bring you to your hotel in five minutes. You'll see, and I won't ask you any more questions."

Chapter 26

Tony and Lena were sitting on a bench in Morningside Park. The door behind them closed fast and forever as it retreated into the rock erasing its presence and making their earlier experience doubtful. Even they could not have located it.

Finally the fog was retreating and the moonlight was guiding their gaze. They spotted the path to the campus.

"Care to take a food break?"

"Yes, as far as possible. Let's go." They were too far away from Morningside Avenue to notice the exodus below the rocky hill.

"Nice move finding that secret room below."

"Banging on switches."

Lena looked at him and took his hand into hers.

"You proved to be very brave. I misjudged you, and I am sorry. I thought you were a joke. Thank you Tony. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Same feelings here." He squeezed her hand in return. Lena took hers back.

"Did you think I was a joke of a security guard?"

"Worse. But that's ages ago. Let's get going. We still have to find Knowlton."

They walked slowly. Within reach of the campus it became apparent that no one seemed to be studying for exams.

"Is everybody partying?"

"Partying is a way of looking at what is probably happening on campus. Do you think that the inhabitants of the Asylum below are mingling with the students?"

"I hope not, but they must have gone somewhere. The rooms indicated that there were more residents than the only we encountered."

"Lena, here's a student let's ask him what he knows." Tony walked toward the student and stopped with a friendly, "Hello."

"Tony, wait," Lena had time to say as the so-called student continued his crazed walk bumping into Tony and attempting to grab his face and bite it. Alert, Tony hit him with the lantern so powerfully the student fell down.

"Good work, sir," Lena congratulated Tony, and placed her arm under his. She was shivering, denoting an opposite state of mind than her words has indicated moments ago. Scared and weary, they continued walking along 116th street to campus. The Law School building was all lit. Some students were quietly studying at big round tables in the lobby.

"Law students are a security guard's dream come true." Lena nodded absent-minded.

As they were approaching the 116th Amsterdam entrance, police cars were arriving and military forces were running to cordon the area off.

"Hurry," Tony took Lena's hand and pulled her away from the law school toward Low, across from Amsterdam. As they entered the campus, soldiers closed the quad.

"Is this wise, Tony? We got out of an inferno to get into another?"

"We did not find Knowlton."

"Sorry, Knowlton who?"

"Oh, Lenny."

"Tony, please don't Lenny me. I bet I'm actually older than you."

"If you call a couple of years, older, than yes, Ms. Lena Vodă, you are older than me."

"Tony, let's stop. I really don't feel well. Both my ankles are bothering me."

"Lena, I have so many things which bother me. I bet my boss has called me tonight, or if he has not, mom must have woken him

up. I am sweaty and probably smell like a pig, not to mention that finally am willing to eat. I could eat an entire roasted pig Lena, but we cannot stop now to search for one."

"Sorry Tony. I cannot go any further. I need to rest."

She stopped and a student bumped into her from behind trying to reach Tony.

"Girl, you could say sorry," Lena replied only to face another student smiling with desire to bite Tony who was moaning and blindly reaching for him. "Oh, so there's an epidemic of, what do you call them, Tony, Impalers?" Lena hit her with her bag. "You are right, Tony. We are in this together. Let's find Tom."

Another group of students approached them. As if guided by smell they turned toward Tony and started moaning while pulling at Tony's jacket.

"By the way, do all these creatures adore you and ignore me?"

Tony was too busy hitting them with his lantern to answer Lena. They seemed so feeble that they simply fell down when pushed away. Tony and Lena could effortlessly continue their walk.

"Let's go to Low. Knowlton was begging Sam earlier in the night to cancel their tryst because he needed to go to his office and prepare for" after checking his watch, Tony added, "today's conference."

"So you do listen to the tapes."

"I am paid to monitor the live feeds, but tonight something went wrong with the cameras. I was able to listen to delayed recordings."

"Knowlton's office is on the 4th floor in Low."

A death and murder mood floated in the air. Occasional screaming, and moaning, but mostly running, faster and faster running took over the campus. Lena and Tony tried to move on without disturbing anybody: Both the U.S. military and the contagious students were equally bad news. Lena had to fast swallow a scream of horror when she witnessed an unlucky

studious student who managed to escape a first attacker only to be bitten by a Sylphide-like woman and then be executed in a mercy killing by a US soldier. His brains reached Lena and Tony yards away from him and splashed them with the student's last earthly remains. Tony recovered first and managed to pull her behind up the stairs towards Low.

A few steps up, Lena collapsed and started crying. Tony sat down and pushed her near a colonnade.

"Let's get some cheering. Tell me something cheering. I bet your family has a fantastic history." Lena was sobbing quietly with her head on her knees. Tony caressed her beautiful heavy hair.

"You're so twisted. I bet your family's the same."

Like a schoolgirl, Lena recited,

"Apparently my roots start with Vlad II, founder of the Drăculești faction of the Basarabs royal dynasty. We are talking Wallachian dynasties, famous for being unknown. As the patronymic indicates, "Drăculești" means dragon, and not Satan, as mistakenly many translated the identifier. Vlad II fathered four sons, among them Vlad III called the Impaler and Radu, called bey. I am related to all his sons, to the first two by blood, to the others,.. it does not really matter. Of all the sons, only Vlad III remains connected to the patronymic 'dracul,' probably because of the dragon on his knight shield."

"Stop. I found what I needed. Vlad's my hero because he was a dragon."

"Not, really, he was part of a 'dragon club', which was similar to the Masons or a Rotary club.

"Please let me dream big." After a while he added. "What can I use from your dissertation for my novel?"

"My dissertation is about finding a connection between the bizarre, mad behavior that the Romanians suddenly exhibited in the 15th century, and the acts of foolish bravery Vlad III engaged in."

"Go on."

"As I started telling you, abrupt behavioral changes spread all Eastern Europe after the last Crusade. Certainly there are

many reasons for that. One could be that the Ottomans had taken over Eastern Europe and brought in new habits. For instance, they ordered their vassals, the kings of those little states, to send their sons as hostages. Murad, Sultan Mehmet's father, had the sons of King George Brankovic of Serbia tortured and killed because of unfounded rumors that the hostages were plotting an escape. There was no proof. Nevertheless, they had red-hot irons jabbed into their eyeballs."

"But for you that would be normal violence, correct?"

"By the Middle Ages' standards, yes. Remember, the Ottomans did not share the cultural values of their vassals. The Ottomans were Muslims, their vassals Orthodox Christians."

"What was the bizarre behavior you were talking about?"

"Let me give you an example. When Vlad II left his younger sons hostages, Vlad, the future Vlad III, and Radu, the future Playboy, Radu bey, the Transylvanians depicted Vlad II as an Ottoman tool, and incited the Wallachians's landowners to replace him. The Wallachians did it willingly. They captured Vlad II's heir to the throne, tortured him, blinded him with red-hot irons and buried him alive. Then, days later, they entrapped Vlad II, their king, and decapitated him with an axe."

"I think I see a difference in madness quality: local, religious and family bonds did not matter. There was a new social order taken place: capitalist individualism."

"You are laughing, but the truth is that in the span of the next two centuries the two Romanian kingdoms, Moldova and Wallachia would witness a plain regicide every other year and a deluxe one every leap year. Is that what you want to here?"

"And what do you believe made it all possible?"

"I don't know. These were little countries filled with ambitious people." Lena stopped. "Germ warfare, though not necessarily that sophisticated."

"If I understand you, you are discounting courage and bravery."

"Sorry to interrupt you. Courage is a perception, a label affixed to those who have used every single means to reach their goal."

Tony looked amused. Lena continued,

"Courage to kill and torture? I don't believe in courage. It blame the plague, a primitive bacteriae whose DNA can be easily cannibalized producing inexplicable behavioral changes."

"So a germ warfare theory is the cause of Vlad's bravery?"

"Yes. It works along those lines. In the Middle Ages soldiers became infested with something which affected the empathy neurons, destroying them. Vlad the Impaler was one such sick man. He impaled because it did not affect him in any way. He could not see the horror in the fact of enjoying dinners served in the middle of fields of men, women and children suffering in tremendous pain having been impaled through their rectum and slowly approaching..."

"Stop please."

"Stop or stop it?"

Tony was next to Lena. She side stepped Sam.

"Tony, Sam is right behind you. I think she's alone. I cannot see Knowlton."

"You're joking."

Lena shook her head. He turned and looked at Sam. He saw her lost but somehow agitated. Lena kneeled down next to Sam.

"Sam, what are you doing here? Why are you alone? Where is Tom?"

Tony took out his cell phone. "Shall I call 911, or is it a waste of time?" Tony dials it but it cannot connect.

"Sam, where is Tom? Can you hear me?" Sam was trying to stand up. Lena helped her up, then she ignored her for a moment seeking her phone in her bag. Behind Lena's back, Sam was reaching out for Tony, trying to grab him. Like the others before her, Sam accompanied her desire to bite Tony by moaning.

"She's trying to get me," Tony complained.

"Oh, Sam does that, but you are no Knowlton, or are you?" Lena replied when she suddenly understood the situation.

"Hit her with the lantern. Don't let her bite you. She's infested, obviously."

"Why don't they ever attack you?" Tony replied hitting Sam hard enough to make her fall down. They both ran up the stairs towards Low Library.

"Beats me."

"What do you have I don't have?"

"Perfume?"

"Do you smell like them?"

Lena reached the door to Low and pulled it with all her might. Military elite forces were patrolling the building. She froze.

Chapter 27

The City reminded Ana of the Woody Allen movies she watched at the Movie Theater "The Seventh Art" located near her home. "Her home," how foreign that sounded. It was an apartment in a villa located on a hill called "Dealul Mitropoliei". Right now she missed it as it sat on top of that idyllic hill right in the heart of Bucharest, Wallachia's capital during Vlad III's ephemeral reign. Many early mornings while drinking her coffee, Ana looked down the hill, and though buildings had replaced forests, she could still see the river Dâmbovița, by 1990, cleaned and beautified, pushing its waters down to the planes bellow joining in forces with other Danube tributaries.

Until 1995, she had lived all her life in Bucharest, and her home was always that villa. First, as a child, she lived in a one bedroom apartment on the top floor, and when she married Vlad, she moved into the apartment next door. The freedom lasted a few months. She mistakenly caved in to her father's plea to convert hers and her parents' apartment into one luxurious apartment with a large living room, two bedrooms and an office. Her father, the Dean of the History Faculty at the Bucharest University, could be overbearing with his interest in their direct ancestors, but Ana made it all worthwhile.

Now, twenty years later she was reacquainting herself with urban living. She could not do it solely by letting it be. She needed a movie, a postcard, a picture to mediate the overbearing reality. With her face glued to the window, Woody Allen's black and white postcards of heavenly lit Manhattan sky-scrapers remained accurate.

Ana's face was lost in memories of a past she thought all but forgotten. For the first time in decades her past weighed in. As long as she remained in the cab she still had some control over her life. She had nothing planned for tomorrow. Tomorrow suddenly felt unimaginable, unreachable.

"Sir, I don't have any batteries left in my phone," she lied smilingly facing the rear side mirror for visual inspection. "May I use yours to make a hotel reservation? The driver was looking at her through the rear mirror. You dial the number. It's an 1800 number."

The cabbie handed her his cellphone without taking his eyes off the street ahead. Ana found his sudden carefulness a refreshing change.

"Thanks," she took it and dialed a number and showed it to him before pressing call. "Just for my piece of mind. Could you please look?" She sounded as polite as she imagined polite people sounded. She was not the boss of anything anymore.

"Okay," the cabbie agreed without looking.

"Good morning," Ana said ambivalently unsure if a 3 AM phone call qualifies as a morning call. The relief came within a second, when she was cut off.

"Good morning, this is the Waldorf Astoria, how may I be of service?" A feminine voice responded.

"Good morning. I am calling to make sure that you have a suite reservation for Ms. Raisa Gorbacheva. I will be arriving there within minutes."

A few minutes followed. Finally, the receptionist replied.

"I'm very sorry, Ma'am, but there is no reservation under that name. May I try a different name? Maybe your husbands'?"

"You may, but that won't be my boss's name. I must have screwed up and she will arrive in 10 minutes max."

"Oh, I'm sorry." A few moments passed by. "We do have a few guest rooms with one king-sized Waldorf Astoria bed with triple sheeting, would you like me to reserve one for her?"

"Would that be possible? It would be lovely." A few moments passed by. "And do please tell her nothing of this last moment reservation."

"Of course not. For how many nights would you like me to make the reservation?"

"She will be in town for an entire week. For seven days."

"Okay." A few more moments of silence passed by. "How would she pay for the room?"

"Cash. She only carries cash."

"We need a credit card."

"She will pay in advance. She will be there shortly," Ana looked outside and saw the Hotel. The taxi stopped.

"Our rules are that we cannot take reservations without a credit card. So, I cannot book her room." She sighed and continued. "Nevertheless, if she comes in less than an hour I will be here."

"I could not ask for more. Thank you." Ana ended the conversation and handed the phone to the driver who was miffed.

He turned and opened the mouth to say something. Ana looked at the meter and saw \$113. She hands him two bills of \$100.

Ana walked fast. The porter opened the door greeting her and she beamed confidence as she nodded and smiled. She approached the receptionist. A young woman wearing a CUNY college ring smiled at her. Ana assumed a world leader's look.

"Good morning, ma'am. How can I be of service?" Her teeth were very white and their perfect porcelain quality contrasted with her college ring. Ana scrutinized her further. Good hair, and pleasant scent.

"Good morning. I have a reservation for seven nights."

"Under what name?"

"Raisa Gorbacheva," Ana replied assertively.

The young woman took her time. Ana noticed her impeccable manicure and smooth hands.

"Yes, Ms. Gorbacheva, will your husband join us?"

Ana was taking aback by the question. She still expected to be called on her bluff. But it seemed the news of the death of Raisa had not crossed the ocean though her husband was the Russian president who led the charge against the Berlin Wall, the symbolic partition between two capitalist systems: the individualist and the state one.

"We are divorced, Ms. Dezmela," Ana explained.

Ms. Dezmela avoided looking at Ana.

"And, what credit card would you like to use today?" Ms. Dezmela went into automatic pilot mode.

"Cash," Ana reminded herself that they had already covered that area.

"We don't accept," the receptionist started and caught herself quickly. She smiled. "Of course we accept cash."

Ana smiled at her indulgently and patiently.

"Ms. Gorbacheva, uhh, you, uhh, not you, your secretary, has requested one luxury guest room with one king-sized Waldorf Astoria bed with triple sheeting. It would be \$499 per night. This is a wonderful room and it comes with a wonderful package. You may refresh in the marble bathroom with exclusive Salvatore Ferragamo bath products. As a guest you enjoy complimentary access to the 5th floor Fitness Center, opened 24 hours, and our individual treatment rooms at our Guerlain Spa." Dezmela stops to take a breath. "May I have your passport, Ms. Gorbacheva?"

Ana had had her hands in her pockets getting ready to pay, the question confused her. She never carried a passport. Looking up at the young woman, Ana noticed her gaze had turned slightly to her right at a higher point than her face. Afraid to guess wrong, Ana turned. It was John. Oxygenated blood flushed down her veins and sudden relief took over her.

"Ms. Dezmela, it is obvious someone has made a mistake. I, who work for Ms. Gorbacheva, have had my room waiting for me, while, as I uncomfortably notice, our most famous former First Lady has to wait for hers. I will call the Russian embassy when they open this morning and they will send you everything you need."

"I am so sorry, but rules are rules," Ms. Dezmela mumbled.

"Can Ms. Gorbacheva, who just arrived from Moscow, go to her room and use the Salvatore Ferragamo products you mentioned earlier? It will mean so much to us and to the still incipient Russian-American relations?" John continued unperturbed.

Something John said touched a chord in Ms. Dezmela. Maybe she had a major in international relations, or maybe she just understood that rules were there to be broken.

"Absolutely. It is the third room on your right as you get off the elevator on the second floor," she completed her well memorized speech and smiled as professionally as she could. She handed the key to John, who swiftly left \$1000 on the counter.

"That's only for tonight's charges and taxes," he said.

The transaction had gone smoothly and lasted less than the threshold required for the night manager to look at and listen to the digital recording of the transaction, but John lingered a moment longer while Ana took the elevator. John watched the receptionist's next moves and seeing nothing amiss, took the stairs. By the time Ana reached her room, John was waiting for her with the door unlocked. She went directly into the bathroom, took her clothes off and swiftly started drawing a bath.

John closed the door behind.

Chapter 28

It was beyond dangerous to wait there in plain view for the soldiers to pass by. For the moment, the dark and their silence protected them. When the hallway was empty, Lena followed by Tony got in and quietly took the stairs. They were both happy she got rid of her noise making stilettos. Walking as fast as two people afraid of being caught can they end up on the 40th floor landing, the magnificent marble-made spiral stairway behind. Lena led the way to Knowlton's office. The door was open. A lamp, an original from the New York Public Library Reading Room sent light across the room.

Knowlton was looking asleep on his leather sofa. He had a kerchief pressed against one of his nostrils. Lena appraised Tony's reaction. He seemed relieved.

"We worried for nothing," she whispered taking Tony's hand and squeezing it. "Tony, I was thinking about something."

"What?"

"What if my ancestors were sick and I inherited some type of immunity, do you think I could have given it to Knowlton?"

"Like a sexually transmitted ...immunity?"

Lena nodded. They looked at how peaceful Knowlton looked and quietly knocked in the door. He opened his eyes. They both entered.

"Hello, Tom."

"Hello, Lenny. Isn't this past your bedtime? Who's with you?"

Lena approached him, let go of Tony's hand, kneeled down and caressed his head. He was feverish, and discovers he is bleeding. Almost teary, she added:

"You look well but a bit hot. You may be feverish."

"Tomorrow's our big day. Congresswoman Calder is in the city. She is coming. The whole world will watch our subterranean conference."

"Let us bring you to the St. Luke's Hospital."

"I cannot go to a hospital. I am still rehearsing my presentation."

"Tom, stop the charade. You know very well that nothing will happen tomorrow."

"You will be presenting from your dissertation about the Crusades as the first germ warfare. Unbridled cruelty, which is the fabric of all heroes, often is a disease."

"Lena," Tony interrupted. "I hear noise out on the stairs. Let's hurry up, please."

"Have we been introduced?"

"Sorry Tom. This is Tony. He is a Security Guard at Columbia. He saved me and now will save you too. I am sure."

Tony comes closer. He hands out his hand.

"Professor."

"Happy to meet you, savior. Take care of my girl. She's special." Then, taking out his phone he sends a text. Lena looked intrigued, because she knew it was not Sam. She was able to read upside down. "please take care of Lena Vodă if anything happens to me." When he finished typing he gave her the phone. "Take it, Lena, and answer it."

"You're breaking my heart, Tom." Lena said turning her back to him so she could dry up her tears.

"Professor, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"What's up, Tony, yes?"

"Yes. You are related to Colonel Thomas Knowlton, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"But then how come you are?"

"Black? Oh, Lena, could you help me satisfy this young man's curiosity?"

"Tom."

"Lena, could you read something aloud?" Tom gave her the book he had opened on his chest.

"Your book, **The Battle of Harlem** by Thomas Knowlton is out!"

Lena hugged Tom and kissed him.

"Take it easy tiger. I may be contagious. Open it."

Lena opened it beaming. The first page featured a close up of someone she never read about, a man called Colonel Thomas Knowlton. He was depicted in a painting of the Revolutionary battle of Bunker Hill. Lena shivered speechless. Tom had never mentioned his heroic lineage. Generations apart the two Knowltons shared the same face, eyes, forehead, and firm chin. Tom's started below the most deliciously soft lips had ever touched her body. She read aloud:

"The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775, by the American artist John Trumbull. The characteristic figure in the group is the hatless and ununiformed Knowlton. He suggests the yeoman or the farmer from the plough. In his shirt sleeves, with powder-horn and flint-lock musket, he is braving the regulars at what seems to be the danger point in the fight. He was thirty-six year old."

"Oh, Tom!"

Knowlton nodded but having problems swallowing he froze with his head above the couch. Lena looked at Tony. Finally, Knowlton said.

"Lena, go to the end. Your friend wants to know why I am black if Knowlton was white. Don't sweat it. That's fine. That's tomorrow's revelation brought to you today. Lena, go to the appendix. It contains a few relevant letters. Make sure you will read them later. For now read the first one."

Lena was getting ready to start when noise outside the window comes through. The campus was suddenly all lit up like a public housing courtyard. Military troops were running back and forth barking orders invading their space through the open window.

With her voice slightly trembling, Lena read:

"To be delivered to John Murray. Personally. To John
April 1, 1777."

She stopped. Her voice was quivering. Tom blinked for her to continue. She started sobbing silently. Tony approached her and read over her shoulder.

"What Reason warrants, and what Wisdom guides, All else is towering frenzy, or rank folly," Tony lifted his gaze and explained.

"That was a quote from a poem. The letter is from A. Sancho, and it starts now:

"It has been too long since I last saw you. Almost six months? I had not landed long when the fight started all over us and your Mother with her wit and wine saved my retreat so I can tell Thomas the battle would not happen for another day.

Thank you for sending the books. And so well knoweth my once beloved and now just friend. Well, and what then? Why it follows of course - that, instead of feeling myself oppressed and melancholy I shall feel gratefully thankful, for - I will and must speak out. For innate goodness of heart - greatness of spirit - urbanity - humanity - temperance - justice - with the whole sweet list of Heaven-born manly virtues - I do, without flattery, give thee (and with pride do I avouch it, though only a woman) credit - I respect thy person, and love thy principles - but, my good J, I am heavy with child and you must know it. [...] Tell Father that if I have a daughter I would call her Anne Osborne Sancho Knowlton and if I have a boy he would be Thomas Ignatius Sancho Knowlton. He would be lucky to have both Sancho's and Knowlton's blood in his veins. With much of the same love but much more friendship, A. SANCHO."

Tony stopped. Lena could not contain her feelings:

"This is a wonderful letter. Oh, John!" She took his handsome face into her hands and kissed his forehead tenderly. "Tell me everything about her."

"Her name was Arabella. Arabella Sancho. She was the oldest child and only daughter of Ignatius Sancho, African composer and

author who grew up as a house slave in an aristocratic household in England and would die four years after my ancestor would be born. She and John Murray, son of Ms. Robert Murray who saved Washington's troops from being decimated on September 15, had been active supporters of abolitionist causes in England. As you saw, Arabella crossed the Atlantic to meet John's parents, and gather their affection."

Tom stopped. Blood dripped from his mouth but he took care of it swiftly. Tony noticed it. Lena was looking outside the window.

"Do you have any liquor here?" Tony asked.

"What do you think officer? Of course I do. In the bar right there," Tom indicated and Tony executed, pouring some more whiskey into a glass he found discarded on the desk. He brought it next to Tom's lips and lifted his head slightly helping him take a sip. Tom grinned gratefully.

"Arabella did more than make John's mother like her. Arabella started working with Mrs. Robert Murray to promote the Patriots' cause. Apparently, like her father, Ignatius, Arabella played the harpsichord divinely. During those soirees Arabella met both George Washington, other high ranked officers including Tom Knowlton, a famous Ranger. They fell in love. He was married, and his son was a ranger too. Mrs. Robert Murray approved of the affair for her own political gain. On the D Day she had Arabella run to tell Knowlton to alert General Washington that the Redcoats had landed in Manhattan, and she, Ms. Robert Murray would do anything to delay their advancement to Harlem, so the American troops located in the south of the Manhattan Island could retreat.

When Arabella was meeting Knowlton, Ms. Robert Murray invited all the officers to tea at her mansion, and the story goes, through feminine wiles and a lot of wine, succeeded in delaying the British troops for two hours sufficient to allow a successful American retreat. This detention saved 4,000 men, who otherwise would have been cut off and captured. Also, that was the time Arabella used to conceive my ancestor."

Tom stopped exhausted. He unbuttoned his shirt more.

"Colonel Knowlton died that day."

"So, I was right. Someone else lead the Patriot troops on September 16th."

"Young man, not many people are privy to that information. How do you know?"

"I don't. It dawned upon me looking at the painting whose copy opened the book. There is no painting of Knowlton from the Harlem Battle. And that was his most heroic battle. I wondered why. Also, it fit with my other guess work. The Patriots used mercenaries."

"You have amazing insight. You should come and talk to me tomorrow, if there is any tomorrow. Indeed, I have a letter proving that an impersonator led his Rangers in the skirmish the following day."

"Who killed him? Arabella? Was she a British spy? Who was the impersonator?" Lena suddenly asked while Tony interfered:

"May I see that letter?"

Knowlton tried to reply but more blood filled his mouth. He spat it into his kerchief.

Ruckus came from the hallway outside his door.

"Brian," Lena called the name of the man coming inside - a wimpy bi-spectacled young man, with bushy sandy hair, wearing well-ironed kakis and loafers. He pulled Sam behind him. She looked awful, and shivery, and weak, but also mad and ready to bite.

"This is the last straw, Professor! She was supposed to visit the tunnels to prepare for the conference and this is how I found her. What did you give her? Is she high? Is this how you get her to do the things she does for you? Talk to me professor."

"Brian, the cuckold husband wants to talk while I was afraid all this time that you wanted revenge. For that you were a tad too late. Life worked faster than you, but for talking, that I can still help you with. Tell me my boy, what would you like to know?"

"What did you do to her?" Sam fell down and Brian was pulling her up by her hair.

"I would not make her mad, if I were you," Tony warned him.

Brian ignored his advice and kept pulling and pushing his wife inside Knowlton's office.

"Who are you?"

"No one to you but again, listen to my advice: don't make her mad."

"Who are you to give me advice?"

"No one. A Security Guard."

"Good move Professor. Get all the help you can before the disciplinary committee meets tomorrow morning."

Lena looked at Brian in horror. He kept dragging her until Sam was near the sofa.

"Say goodbye to your harem, Professor. Tomorrow you will be packing your bags and go to prison as a serial date rapist."

"Brian, I have not heard of anything that stupid ever. Why are you doing this? Did your dad fire you as the imminent heir?"

"You won't have time for goodbyes tomorrow." Brian ignored Lena and continued to address Knowlton. As he spoke, Sam turned and bit Brian's hand. He hit her. She pulled his leg and bit him. He kicked her. Tony hit them both with his lantern. The fight died down. All was momentarily quiet. Tony kept hitting them when they started moaning.

"To quote a brilliant historian: "Such depravity and enjoyment of cruelty and torture makes me think of psychotic behavior, of madness. And I do not mean unexplained sudden madness provoked by the end of adolescence." Lenny's am I quoting your dissertation correctly? To continue: "Madness produced by an epidemic."

Lena looked smitten by a thought.

"Tom, your symptoms are totally different than Sam's" and, pointing to Brian who started shaking, "Brian's." Tony hit them again and they both fell down. "Good job," Lena smiled at Tony. "Tom, I believe that I have a strain of the same bacterial-viral

infestation which struck Brian and Sam, and maybe I was able to immunize you, because look," Lena approached Sam who was regaining her conscience and kneeled next to her, "Sam is searching for Tony, totally ignoring you and me. She bit Brian and she seems to be fascinated with Tony." Tony hit her again with the lantern. "On the other hand, you, Tom, are lucid and rational and have no desire to bite Tony."

Tom started coughing. Blood was coming out of his mouth. He pointed to his book, which Tony left open on the sofa next to him minutes ago.

"Tom, I think this is not a good time for reading." Turning toward Tony she added, "Let's take him away. Maybe we can save him."

Tony came closer and looked at Knowlton. There was foam forming at his mouth.

"You may be right and you may be immune to this madness, but I doubt that you immunized Knowlton sexually. It sounds interesting, but I doubt it worked. Look at his symptoms."

Lena touched his forehead with the back of her palm. Sweat was already forming. She looked at Tony and nodded.

"I don't think the dose you gave him was enough, but why not, let's take him down."

"I have the key to the office. I will lock it behind us at least we won't have to worry about giving lantern concussions to these two," Lena continued helping prop Knowlton up. Once they had him sitting up, they held him up in a big brother embrace, from underneath his shoulders. Knowlton's presence towered over them. In the hallway, Lena locked the door behind. Then, they put Knowlton's arms over their shoulders and walked away from his office. The door banging was less and less audible, but moments later boots stumping resounded menacing in their ears. The elevator bank was in sight.

"To the elevator," Tony said and they schlepped along. Knowlton was hard to maneuver when he was mostly still, but when they convulsions started they stopped.

"We cannot drag him like that," Lena said dashing out from supporting Knowlton and entering an office with an open door. Tony struggled to handle Knowlton alone. "Come. The President's

office is empty." Lena invited Tony and rushed back to help carrying Knowlton. The three of them, engaged in an exhausting dance, barely made it in.

The office was more spacious than Knowlton's or perhaps looked so without Knowlton's reclining sofa. It had a small anti chamber and the secretary's small office behind a locked door. Then a large oval table surrounded by six chairs and further away inside the room appeared the Presidential desk with a comfortable imperial chair. There was a refrigerator in sight, and upon letting Knowlton slouch in an armchair Tony ran to the refrigerator. It had a plate full of tea sandwiches. He started eating them ravenously.

"What's the plan?" Lena asked sitting down in the armchair next to the one where Knowlton was going through his spasms.

Knowlton managed to fall off the chair and doing so he bumped his head on the ground. He stopped moving. A letter came out of his inside pocket.

"I hope it did not hurt," Lena said. Tony picked up the letter.

"You are itching to read it."

Taking the invitation seriously, Tony started reading the neatly folded paper. It was a facsimile.

"Recollections of Judge Oliver Burnham, Cornwall, Conn., One of Knowlton's Rangers." Tony stopped. "I guess we could verify whether his claim of being a ranger is legitimate."

"Since when accuracy is of interest to you?" Lena added jokingly.

Tony did not know what to say.

"So, what are you waiting for? Go on."

Tony obliged.

"Soon after the retreat from Long Island, Colonel Knowlton was ordered to raise a battalion of troops from the different regiments called the Rangers, to reconnoiter along our shores, and between the armies. He asked me to join them. Being invited by a favourite officer, I

volunteered. The atmosphere was so dreadful and forsaken that the Colonel brought us all to Jones' farmhouse.

We had been camping further north and thought we were on our way out of Manhattan. But a woman whose face was covered by a hood and who rode the horse like a man delivered him some news which agitated him wildly. He went and met with General Washington, and shortly after he sent the woman ahead and we followed suit.

I find it hard to talk about that day and I doubt I would have done it had the colonel did not die that night and hadn't the mercenary survived the battle the next day. Most of us died in November 15, when General Howe took over the fort. Those who did not die were taken prisoners of war and died in due course. I am the only one alive and I feel ready to tell my story.

"What did you say? A mercenary?" Lena asked. Tony nodded and continued. Tom was still inert on the floor.

September 15 had been a hot day. We were lucky to be the guests of the Jones. We had a good dinner of bread and stew, and Mr. Jones let us have as much beer as we wanted.

The woman we saw delivering the news earlier came back and shared food with us. The colonel introduced her as Ms. Ignatios, a British citizen and a Patriot sympathizer. If I did not know any better I would have thought her Negro, but she was lodging with the Murrays and our Colonel seemed ready to kill anybody who should have shown and disrespect.

The following day we fought bravely in the morning but lost our steam in the afternoon.

Tony stopped. "Did you hear that Lena?" She nodded encouraging him to continue.

An imposing man, bigger than Colonel Knowlton lead our fight in the afternoon. He fought like a tiger. He made us remember how Rangers were expected to fight, and that day we made ourselves and our country proud. He killed over 100 Red Coats.

I never saw Colonel Knowlton during the battle. I heard he died though heroically. He must have died in the morning battle and we were never told."

Done reading, Tony folded the paper and put it inside his pocket. Suddenly phone Knowlton gave Lena started vibrated. Knowlton opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"Tom, I am going to see who is calling. Are you feeling a bit better?" Lena caressed him tenderly and Tom closed his eyes peacefully.

By the time Lena replied, the call from the unknown number stopped.

"Lena, let's close this door behind and get out. Soon. If we are safe we could help him. If not we will be a walking fly trap. Only these flies are the US military and they kill. All three of us."

Lena acquiesced. With teary eyes she followed Tony and absentmindedly she put Knowlton's cell in her bag.

Chapter 29

Alone in his office, General Pistone was smoking his cigar next to an open window, when his Blackberry vibrated. It was a call he had to take. The ID said Virginia Big Tits, as the General called the Virginia Senator in charge of the Military Appropriation Committee. He answered.

"Congresswoman."

"Pistone, did you cause this mess? I have been waiting for this moment for ever."

"I don't know what you are talking about, Congresswoman."

"You have sent FAST2 troops down to New York City, at Columbia, and the Mayor has declared a state of emergency in the City."

"I had to protect our investment, Congresswoman."

"There is no more M.A.R.T.F. funding, Pistone. There is no investment to protect. Kaput. Basta. Do you get it?"

"Now, now, Congresswoman, let's not rush." The General stopped and inhaled. "Congress cannot do too much. We have our steady funding. A.R.T.C. relies on a trust fund set by Andrew Jackson during the 1812 war, and reapproved by President Nixon during our melee in Vietnam." Pistone smiled and wrongly inhaled smoke. He coughed at his own joke, in front of the open window. A nearby helicopter took off forcing him to come in and close the window.

"You are not smoking in a federal building after closing the window, General, are you?" The Senator's comment was thoroughly ignored by Pistone.

"This is not to say that we are not grateful for the little something the Appropriation Committee always threw at us. A bone, is a bone, is a bone, isn't that what your favorite poet says, Congresswoman? Or is she the favorite poet of your secret partner?"

"You won't see anything anymore. You caused the City's closure. You did not check with the mayor before forcing him to

shut down the northern part of the City. You cannot deny forcing the note."

"I did not do such a thing."

"I don't know whether I should laugh or I should cry that I am blackmailed by the likes of you. How do you explain the exodus to New Jersey over George Washington's Bridge? All Harlem is now practically in New Jersey."

"Cheap tourism? Boredom? Your choice Madam."

"You are not funny, Pistone. I will see you in Congress during a long, protracted hearing looking into what exactly M.A.R.T.F. does with the millions it receives. Good night," she added, but Pistone cut her off.

"Not so fast, Madam. M.A.R.T.F. benefits women worldwide, and if you deny us money, you deny it to them. Imagine if we can use human drones to replaces the need for untrained, brutal, mediocre soldiers," the General had not time to finish.

"I am going to fuck you old bastard. Soon, very soon, and I am going to be on top of you and I'll crash you with my big tits. Don't you think I know how you call me, Virginia Big Tits?"

The General could not restrain his smirk. He liked the old bitch and was ready to acknowledge it. But that would not score with the old hag. Instead he said.

"You are both old enough to remember Vietnam and its brothel problems. As you remember, in the first few years of our stay in Vietnam, the command organized monthly trips to town, and everybody would get crazy and start a shooting frenzy. In the coming years, the command worked with the local businessmen to move their brothels closer, in an effort to cut down the collateral damage. It worked. That is it worked until some Marines disfigured some whores who serviced the Black men when they were supposed to stick with the milky boys. Do you remember how fast Congress agreed that something had to be done? Do you, Madam?"

The Congresswoman was quiet. Pistone continues. "That's when Congress discovered us. You heard that we did some thing or another and fewer soldiers needed to be deployed for precise, discrete operations. Suddenly, we received a large increase of

funding, until Congress had no reason to fund us and the money faucet dried out. But then, the Balkan war came in, do you remember that one? And our boys did it again. Do you remember the story of the dancer who had a trick to make a little extra money? Customers would put a stack of quarters on the bar and then the girl would squat over and pick as many quarters as she could. One night, this burly Marine showed up and after drinking a barrel of whisky or whatever they served, takes a stack of quarters and puts it on the bar. Then, he soaks them in whisky and somehow hunches over so no one could see him or maybe everybody was too drunk or they were all fucking and no one pays attention to another American weirdo. And this weirdo takes a lighter and holds the flame on those quarters till they are so hot that when he entices a girl to come over, and she squats over the quarters, it smells like roasted pork."

For a few long seconds they both kept quiet. "And this is why Congress loves us. The human drones don't fuck whores. They don't fuck. So, is it fair to say that M.A.R.T.F protects whores without borders?"

Satisfied with himself Pistone inhaled again. He sat down on his armchair, and put down the cigar, watching it burn itself out.

"You've always been a bore Pistone. I hope that you are not snubbing your cigar. It's painful to watch a nice stogie getting its face crunched. But while you watch your cigar burn itself out, think about what I would like to do to your face. The opposite of what I suggested for your cigar." And she hung up.

Pistone smirked. He liked the old bitch. His phone rang again. It's Celeste.

"Baby, you are missing your beauty sleep."

"General, I just heard from Knowlton."

"Celeste."

"Did you know about the mayhem? He is in danger and so is his girlfriend."

"I thought he had an army of girls," Pistone added.

"Matt, be serious. Her name is Lena Vodă. Can you imagine the coincidence?"

Pistone ejected himself from the chair. Unbelievable. It could not be possible.

"Did you say Lena Vodă?"

"Yes, she is a Romanian graduate student. She's been at Columbia University for nine years and most of them she's been my friend's wonderfully devoted girlfriend. They both need to get out of that hell."

"Celeste, she's the scientist's daughter."

"I don't know what she is. She is with Knowlton and I want him out. If she gets out of that hell, I could not care less. Are you going to help Knowlton? Are you?"

"Celeste, calm down!"

"You will send John to help them, won't you?"

"Celeste, does he mean that much to you?"

"Matt, please, let's not go there. Please."

"Celeste, I have to know."

"Why because you killed the wrong man in my life? Did you really think I loved that sick man whose sperm produced me?"

"Celeste!"

"Matt, you thought I did not know who did it? Matt, I was glad he was gone. Thank you Matt for doing it. Now, would you help Knowlton?"

"Of course, Celeste."

"Thank you, Matt."

Chapter 30

Outside the President's office, Lena was sobbing in Tony's arms. He wanted to believe he was slightly taller than her, and he was not going to let that observation go away too soon. Peeking above her good smelling head he noticed the campus lit up as if it were daytime. Hovering military helicopters suddenly stole their attention. If the military presence had tried to be rather discrete minutes earlier, now their presence was meant to intimidate and keep everybody in place.

A menacing voice came through speakerphones inside and outside campus buildings. It quickly quieted Lena. They both paid attention:

"I am General Pistone. The campus has been taken over by foreign terrorists. I am in charge of cleaning the campus of these criminal elements."

Pistone's voice continued telling everybody that FAST2 officers were going to check the premises for undesirable intruders. Lena listened and when she had enough she further leaned her head on Tony's shoulder.

"They don't want to stop the bullshit."

"No, they assume there are still some students who have not been affected and for the sake of the appearance call their contagious human lab rats foreign terrorists."

"The lead scientist is foreign."

"Yes, like you."

Their conversation was cut short by another announcement,

"The countdown for the campus closure starts now. You have thirty minutes to come outside on the lawn before we start the chemical disinfection."

Lena and Tony froze. They could hear the soldiers' heavy boots marching up the stairs. Their monotonously increasing sound took over Lena. She became the 5 years old who, in July 1995, was squatting next to her mother while Ana was lying on the ground looking sick.

She saw herself caressing her mother with love. Suddenly there was noise and Lena saw helicopters approaching.

"Mom, you are saved. We have been discovered and we will go to the hospital."

And then she got hit by a dart and fell down next to her mother, as she saw her grandfather being airlifted by a huge, giant insect like man, hanging from a ladder coming out of a helicopter.

"Mom, they took grandpa," Lena cried and tried to hug her mother but she could not move.

"Don't worry, Lena. I need to stay still next to your mama." Lena calmed down until she heard boots bouncing on the ruins and running towards them.

Lena opened her mouth to scream, but Tony understanding her living nightmare covered it quickly,

"Lena, you snap out and talk to me girl." Tony took her hand and nodding, Lena followed him down the stairs. She was quietly sobbing.

"Sorry. I confused the military invasion. I remembered how they took over my family. I still don't know why exactly."

"Lena, this is not the time to understand your past. You do that tomorrow with your shrink. Now we need to run away. Fast."

"Sorry Tony, I cannot help it. It's just coming back to me. Please, give me a moment, please." She stopped and held her throbbing head with both her hands.

Helicopters were using lights to see if there was any movement inside or outside the campus buildings. Passing by a window, they both squat. Lena closed her eyes and relived that day of July, 1995. She remembered what her grandfather told her mother before he went down the ladder to the sacrificial chamber they located inside the Poienari Castle.

"Ana, I have to go and see what you saw. I need to see the walking dead. Stay with Lena."

"Dad, you have no immunity. You are not one of us."

"I need to know. Tell Lena I love her, and everything will be okay."

"Lena, snap out of whatever this is." Tony dragged her up and pulled her gingerly down the stairs behind him.

"Tony, they have a nursery in Romania. The walking dead. What you call the Impalers. You are a clairvoyant. In Vlad's castle there was or perhaps still is a nursery of the walking dead, of the guys surrounding us. That's why they abducted mom, because she was the scientist working with them."

"Lenny, what are you talking about?"

Lena and Tony heard heavy boots approaching. They ran fast toward the third floor elevator shaft. The boots were approaching behind them. They called the elevator.

"Stop. I need to seem some IDs." The voice behind them ordered.

"Of course, Officer," Lena replied facing the elevator while Tony continued to bang on the elevator button.

"Just a moment officer. It's been a long day," Lena replied and without looking back she started searching for her ID in her shoulder bag. She took her time. The elevator was approaching. It finally arrived and opened its doors as Lena was still searching for her ID.

"Officer, your ID, too, please" the FAST2 special force member was right behind them, addressing Tony. Tony reached for his pocket with one hand, and with the other grabbed Lena and threw her and himself inside the elevator as the elevator doors closed.

The elevator stopped at the 2nd floor. They walked out warily. No boots seemed to follow them.

"Let's take the stairs to the History library downstairs. I have the entrance key."

"Why isn't that officer on our trail?"

"Do we care?"

Lena stopped and looked up at Tony. Yes, Tony thought, she was shorter than him. He felt so happy that his stomach confidently revolted and asked to be fed and his glasses fogged. He had to clean them. Lena handed him a tissue. He smiled.

"You saved me again there, when you pushed me inside. Thanks."

"Hey, we are in this together, have you forgotten?"

Lena nodded. She had tears in her eyes.

"Are you crying?"

Lena nodded again. "I never cried before tonight, and now I am making it up for all that time."

"Go on." Tony hugged her.

"Do you know something?"

"No, unless you tell me."

"I know it's silly, but I just remembered how I first learned about Tom and Sam. Do you care to know?"

"Do you really feel like sharing that much? I just started to like Knowlton."

"What?"

"I like his story. His ancestors." Lena looked discouraged. "Go on. Maybe, I will like him more afterwards."

"Two years ago, when Sam just joined the ranks of Tom's graduate students, I paid him an unannounced office visit. I saw his door ajar, and slowly and quietly appeared behind it. Not seeing him at his desk, I looked through the little window at the top of the door to see if he were in, and saw Tom's face flushed as he was standing squeezed behind the door and the bookshelf. He noticed me, smiled in pain, you know a meek smile when your mom catches you hiding a Playboy under the pillow. He looked down, indicating with his eyes that I looked down if I need an explanation. I stood up on my tippy toes and that's when I saw the top of someone's ash-blonde head bobbing at his groin.

I felt a desire to flee in disgust and a deep need to be cruel and punish him. I stood there watching his face. I alternated between watching his face and the bobbing head. I think I was mesmerized by her faultless technique, the immaculate timing, and her precision with which she picked up the rhythm and brought the whole scene to a satisfying conclusion. She milked the moment dry, until flushed, Tom quietly exhaled, and she stood up. Then I saw Sam's petite feminine tongue licking her lips as if she really liked the taste. She smiled, and I recognized her, Sam, Tom's new doctoral student, whose husband was one of Tom's older graduate students, Brian."

"Yeah, I like the guy. Classy," Tony added and Lena kissed him. Just like that. Out of nowhere. She found him attractive enough to kiss him. And Tony returned the kiss. It felt strange but refreshing. It felt like a new beginning.

"Now can you tell me why Spike? Why Spike Lee?"

"I like his movies. I love Mo' Better Blues."

"So, you did not mean I look like an old dude."

"No, I meant you are a small-looking petite dude who is very attractive in a bizarre, unexpected way."

Tony would like to do something crazy right then and there, but he had no idea what.

Chapter 31.

Taking her bath at the Waldorf, Ana experienced the perfect union between her surroundings and her feelings. At home, in Bucharest, she lived surrounded by the harmony between the architecture of the building and its interior design, perfect according to her father's taste for Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art.

That Wednesday in 1995, Ana was setting the dinner table, all exhausted after a long ER shift. Her father came home out of breath.

"Hello, father, is everything okay?" and she squatted to find the table cloth to set the table.

"Oh, Ana!"

He took a chair and sat down next to her. His head, full of brown-dyed hair, topped a well-developed chest, especially when viewed next to his Sylphidic looking daughter. His peasant stock was evident in his muscular arms, and strong square-fisted hands, more suited to break a chicken's neck, than hold a Mont Blanc fountain pen. With age, the joints of his fingers remained covered with the same heavy tufts of hair only now it was white and when he shook hands it did not scratch any more. His face was furrowed by wrinkles and there was certain hardness about it, in spite of his insinuating manner. His bass voice made people pay attention to what he said,

"Ana, I have such marvelous news. Ana, we got his Castle."

"Whose castle, dad?"

"The one Vlad left to Radu, our ancestor."

"Dad, he left nothing to the brother who usurped his throne and caused his first wife heavy with child to kill herself. Do you hear yourself, dad?"

"I have proof, and the courts spoke. The Supreme Court just issued its decision. The Castle is ours and we are going to celebrate. Take Lena and let's go."

"Dad, I have to be back at work at 10 PM, not even 6 hours from now, and I am in no mood to drive four of them back and forth over the most dangerous highway across the Carpathians."

"I'll drive. You and Lena can nap in the back seat. I'm so happy. We snatched it from the Soares. Come. We will have a picnic."

"Room service," came through the doors stopping Ana's daydreaming. She got out of the bathtub.

"Just a second, please." She grabbed a bathrobe and came out of the bathroom.

John had already taken care of all the arrangements. She smiled gratefully. When they were alone, John lifted the covers and Ana could see breakfast fare for two: eggs, coffee, orange juice. She would like to ask what was going on, but she felt he would tell her when the times comes. She sat down and stared at John inquiringly. John was eating with gusto.

"Going somewhere?"

"Yes. I have to go, and I thought we share breakfast before I go."

"It's ...still early," she said.

John nodded while chewing a piece of toast. He looked confident. His hair was wet too. He must have showered. A fast shower, with warm water falling down his face.

"What happened within the last hour?"

"Turn on the TV," John said and used the remote to do that while Ana was obviously having problems keeping her eyes off him.

There was an aerial view of George Washington Bridge. It was packed. No one could move. It was filled with sedans, trucks, vans, Hummers... Car bump next to car bump. Like a stage setting. The cars were tightly packed. People could not open their doors. Drivers and their families were trapped inside. Their doors were shut and locked. Their windows were rolled up in their safety tempered glass vehicles. Nothing could get in, but nothing could get out either.

Then, the camera zoomed to a man on a BMW. He was covered in biker's gear and talked to the camera on his bike handle. Unlike everybody else he was trying to get back into the City.

"These people are buying themselves a few hours in there, or maybe a chance to escape, if we know what is going on," the citizen journalist spoke up.

He left the main road. He wanted to go inside a house. He sought an emptied house, something he could film and send to his viewers instantaneously.

"Would you please tell our viewers, Luke, what are your intentions now that you made it back into the City?"

"I need to go back to that house and see if his hunch was correct. Whoever massacred those people had to be still inside."

"For those of you who had missed the last segment of our show, here is a reminder."

Ana saw again the picture entitled "American Beauty," showing the head of a Columbia University security guard with a finger protruding from between his clenched jaw with a grimace looking like a smile and blood shot eyes floating in a bathtub filled with what appeared to be human blood. Then there were images of the Mayor calling the incident the result of wild coyotes making it into the city from New Jersey. Other images focused on the Columbia campus taken over by the military. The writing at the bottom of the screen said,

"the military forces were taking care of the foreign terrorists who infiltrated our superb academic institution because the lax visa rules for students." Then there were images of the campus lit up like a Christmas tree. Moments later, people could see scores of being airlifted in what appeared to be fish nets.

Then the screen reverted to the citizen journalist who spoke to a woman wearing Ray Ban sunglasses. She rolled her Sedan window open. He stopped next to her.

"What does it all mean?" she whispered so low that nobody else would have heard her. Why did they ask us to evacuate?"

"Ma'am, no one asked you to evacuate. The Mayor asked you to stay inside and not let anybody out. It was a mistake to leave."

"No one says it but they believe there is an epidemic, like the Andromeda strain which causes people to go insane."

"Ma'am, that's a book and a movie. Ma'am, do you have anybody in New Jersey?"

"I'm finally going to California. All my life I wanted to be an actress in Hollywood. That's where I am going."

"It will all be alright," he added and pressed the gas pedal to go away as fast as possible, which is mostly at a jogger's speed.

He finally reached the house he was looking for.

"This is Luke, a citizen journalist, and we are now on 134th street and I am revisiting this house, because this is the first 911 call neighbors made to report suspicious activity."

He left his bike in front of the house, at number 300. He got off, took out a heavy light and turned it on. He noticed the mound of canisters next to the house. An oily fluid had leaked and formed a puddle. He approached it, narrating his steps.

"A strong, unpleasant odor fills the air. Boot prints marked clearly in the sticky substance lead in different directions. Among the cans lie rolls of paper towels, as if someone's tried to absorb the mess, but stopped realizing it does not matter anymore." He went past the jumble and continued to narrate,

"Here's another entry door. It is ajar." He entered. Inside, there were numerous open drawers around the walls and shelves with broken china and topsy-turvy knickknacks and a few books. Further away there was a pair of armchairs which looked deflated and sagging and another further away not clearly visible. He approached that chair. Its backrest faced him.

"The position of this chair is intriguing. It looks as if it has a fuzzy pillow rest on top." He approached it and turned it around. In it sat a small scrawny man with a sunburned face. So badly that the skin was peeling from his nose and cheekbones, only that could not be possible because it was only May in New York, and the man's skin was still hanging. Looking closely, it

appeared it has been cut. Or it looked as if it had been cut or it had just broken apart. The man's hands were bloody.

"Probably, he must have felt itchy and he has scratched so hard he's started peeling his skin off. And he has not felt any pain," Luke whispered maybe scared or maybe out of respect for the dead or dying man. The man in the chair wore a mesh shirt, and tufts of gray hair covered his flat chest. He held a rifle in his right hand. A jar of cheap moonshine had fallen on his lap, and liquid spilled on his trousers. The man's gaze looked as if he had been dazzled. He had a huge grin on his face.

The blood drained slowly from Luke's face. He felt taken aback and he acknowledged fear encompassing him. His knees were wobbly and his ears felt they had been stopped up with cotton wool. He did not know why, but the only thought came to his mind was Polytherian, and he whispered it as if to give himself courage,

"I have not expected this. Butterflies flutter in my stomach." He is retreating. "I feel fear and if there are any other Sci-fi lovers out there, I am with you, it looks like an extra-terrestrials invasion, yes, Polytherian!"

He stopped to take a deep breath in. He looked around and liked a hound trying to smell anything living.

"You have all heard that woman. It does not look like an epidemic. It does look like an attack. You don't use a gun against an epidemic. On the other hand, we did see the self-inflicted wound, so I don't know what to say."

"Luke, can you hear us?"

"Yes?"

"Can you tell us if there is any conclusive proof of an attack? We heard you, but maybe he just went bonkers. People do go bonkers"

"That is what I am trying to ascertain."

"Also, be aware of coyotes. Very wild coyotes. They killed some security guard in a Columbia dormitory."

"Coyotes?" Luke asked. "What is that nonsense?"

In the studio a journalist explained that the connection had been compromised and they will move now to the Mayor's office.

John turned off the TV.

"Had enough?" he asked Ana.

"Is it my fault?"

"They were all gone by the time we left."

"I am losing it, John. How could that be so? I was in charge."

"Not totally. I believe there had been a glitch in the security system. By piecing everything together it seems that the boiler explosion affected both the sensorial alarms and the security system, compromising both. In other words, through high frequency sound bites your patients were encouraged to leave and when they lined up the doors opened miraculously."

"You cannot be serious."

"Do you remember when we picked up Bobby outside the Farm?"

"Yeah. Minutes before a high frequency alarm had been so irritating that no one was able to stay still."

"Do you think this was accidental?"

"Maybe."

"What's going on with you? You seem pensive."

"I have to go."

"Where?"

"I have a new assignment."

"Did it come from Pistone?"

"No from Celeste."

"What does she want," Ana asked with jealousy barely masked.

"Her good friend, Tom Knowlton, a History Professor there apparently has been bitten." Ana is not interested. "Anyway, I have to pick him up and also to pick up his girlfriend."

Ana focused on her internal changes. For the first time in decades she seemed to have developed an appetite. She put the fried egg on a piece of toast and then covered it with another piece. She bit it. She smiled filled of pleasure. This was her lunch when she was a little girl wearing a pioneer uniform, a short pleated dark navy skirt, a white shirt, a red tie, and a belt with the national emblem on its buckle.

"Ana, can you hear me?"

"Sorry, I was daydreaming."

"I've figured that out."

"Knowlton's girlfriend is called Lena Vodă."

Ana stopped chewing.

Chapter 32

Tony and Lena were going down the spiral stair case, hoping to find the entry to the History Library without much ado, and noise. They were careful to make themselves as invisible as possible.

They might or might not be a couple, but they surely behaved like one. They gauged each other's needs and abilities before stepping down. Lena's hand slid down the rail while Tony was holding his lantern ready to smash whatever wobbly appearance made it their way. They took each step slowly and looking around, until they noticed a crowd forming at the bottom of the stairs and a tremendous shout of voices, which sounded like high pitched women voices.

The noise had suddenly burst and it was earsplitting. It appeared to be a great formidable cry of anger and despair, a deep, loud 'Oh-o-o-o-oh!' that went humming on like the reverberation of a bell. Lena's heart jumped.

"It sounds like a riot," she whispered, though she had never attended one. They stopped and watched the crowd. They banged their way out while horrible menacing noise filled in the surrounding space to saturation, squashing everything painfully into submission.

They banged into the doors and happenstance made it happen. They managed to exit Low. Lena and Tony hurried down the stairs and freed when they got a glimpse of their whereabouts. Outside the building they climbed down the stairs and mostly tripped and then stood up and went down again, moving at uneven speed. The noise they made was echoing. The harsh light did not seem to bother them as they formed a moving hill rolling down the stairs. Others adjoined. Soon they reached a flat surface. They morphed into a mob. Some students ran toward it and the mob swallowed their individual energy digesting it. There was something tragic and doomed in this gathering, and Lena would have liked to share her observation with Tony. She would have liked to turn but they were both squatting on the stairs and every move was a chance to make themselves noticed, and that was highly inadvisable.

She accepted her isolation and she stoically endured the thrill of her observations. She battled this intellectual selfishness with much unease until she realized that everybody

approaching the mob disappeared with a moan and reappeared with a humming high pitched sound. To her it seemed doomed because neither the people nor the sound seemed well thought or even rehearsed or minimally planned or desired.

There was no real movement in that mob: Only sound and terror-inflicting shakes. There was no cohesion of action because the action was only apparent. They were not moving. They were trapped.

The U.S. military rough and ready soldiers, the FAST2 elite force outmaneuvered the revolutionary ladies, as Lena imagined them, and put them all together into a net. Their moaning remained steady, interestingly. They did not seem aware of what was going on, or that a helicopter picked them up. Floating bubble heads over Manhattan, Lena thought and again she would have liked to turn and whisper her funny thought to Tony but rationality took its toll and she staid still watching the show.

Relieved, she wanted to stand up, when Tony pulled her down by her T-shirt. She remained still and looked outside. She saw others, probably once pajama wearing Barnard students walking around, wobbling up the stairs while others attempt to walk steadily across.

Lena sighed. A sense of dread and impotence was taking over her. Perhaps detecting it, Tony squeezed her hand and hugged her. They continued their walk down the stairs and reached the lobby. There was no one around. No hum, no echo, no thud. Every living thing was confined to the outside. Lena pointed out the entrance to the History Library, with her chin: below the ground one more flat of stairs. They crossed the lobby reversing to their normal walk.

"Stop or I'll shoot," a screams came so unexpectedly. It felts like a massive vibration inside their hearing drum.

They stopped, but not the scream.

"Stop or I'll shoot," the acoustic guillotine came for their heads. "Stop," the male voice shrieked again and again and shot and missed and kept on going shooting. And he started walking and shooting, and he walked past them. Glass fell down and Lena closed her eyes and covered her ears for a moment as if to make the chimera, if it were one, disappear. Tony pulled her away. She followed him without looking. Then she squatted and he pushed her down. When she opened her eyes she saw a small crowd

surrounding the shooter. The crowd stepped through the hole in the glass and stampeded all over the fast departed elite soldier.

They walked around the lobby in a dance lacking choreography when the automatic entrance doors opened and they all fell outside rather than walked outside. The doors closed and pushed out the rest. They could come back through the whole in the window but that did not seem to be choice. Not at the moment, anyway.

"You're coming with me," Lena heard behind her and standing up she saw an insect. And she stood up and her body shook.

She suddenly remembered the giant bats which flew over the ruins of her castle, over Poienari Castle. She remembered the white spray, and then how giant insects climbed down rope ladders and took her mother away. Another giant insect, its face of a giant fly approached her. And Lena, the five-year old kid, was crying. Now, twenty years later she felt crying again, because she finally understood who stood behind the heavy legs wearing army boots: the US military.

"Don't move and especially don't scream. We may not be the only ones here." He held one hand towards her. She could see his gun, but she's sure he had one.

"Where is Knowlton?"

Lena wanted to talk. She wanted feel more comfortable. This was no ordinary kidnapper. He had the identity of his victims clear and was sharing it with them. But why did he want Tom, and why did he call him simply Knowlton, and not Professor Knowlton, or Tom? She remembered Tom. Maybe she should send him to save Tom. What happened to him? She squeezed Tony's hand.

"Tom is upstairs, on the 4th floor, in the President's office, the only door on the right as you go upstairs. He is not in a stable condition. He needs help right away. We will wait for you here."

The insect-man seemed unsure about its next step. Taking that fleeting opportunity, Lena pulled Tony behind her and quickly pressed the button which automatically opened the Low entrance door. When the door opened, they jumped outside. They found themselves surrounded by a passing mob wearing little or no clothes, as if something happened in the common bathroom and

they had to leave fast. They both remained still and let the mob pass. Their bobbing heads reminded Lena of dolls. Lena focused and finally got it. The replacement revolutionary gals were hard at work: they moaned while busy biting whoever passed by.

Her stomach was in revolt. It growled because it had nothing to throw up. Tony was quietly cleaning his glasses. Lena wanted to laugh at his infallible way of showing discomfort, but she was catatonic.

From the corner of her eye she saw the door behind her opening again. There was no way to hide. If the U.S. military wanted to find her they would eventually. She had no place to hide so she wanted to close her eyes. She could not. And she was terrified.

But this was no officer. This was an ordinary rich young man. He looked like Brian, Sam's husband. The same dumb confident look about himself. The same fitness. He was wearing Nantucket red chinos and a wool sweater thrown on his shoulders and knot around his neck on top of a perfectly ironed shirt, off-white. He came out ignorant of his surroundings or sure he could master them. He had books under his arm and an umbrella in his hand, as if that would have helped him if it rained.

He passed by Lena and Tony without acknowledging them.

"Hey! Hey, wait a second. Be careful," Tony managed to tell him at an audible level. He did not turn neither did he slow down. He kept walking. Maybe he thought he was cool or maybe he thought that was the way to behave in case of a monster attack.

Where had he been? Then Lena remembered the libraries were open 24 hours during the exam period. He kept going straight down the stairs. Successfully ignored by the ladies of the carnivorous Revolution, he bumped into a FAST2 officer who out of nowhere had appeared right in front of him. He stopped the Brian-look-alike with his hand and faced him with his legs slightly apart, arm visible in his other hand.

"You're a student?" The soldier asked pointing the gun toward the outrageously brave or dimwit guy, whom Lena decided to call "Dim" in the mental video she was developing on his last moments of his life on earth. She would like to scream something to support his cause, that of the lonely lunatic, but she still could not move.

"These are library books, sir," she heard Dim talk though she probably imagined it. A helicopter was airlifting another group of rounded up former students. When the helicopter left she hears the conversation going on. "Only students can check them out. Ergo, I am a Columbia student."

Dim enunciated clearly and tried to get his ID out of the pocket. Something did not go well with the U.S. FAST2. Lena feared that had been caused by the "ergo" Dim used. If she learned something from her years at Columbia, in the heart of Harlem was not to use fancy words in the street. Use them in the classroom but why aggravate people who sell you a cone of ice cream? Gosh she was right. Lena saw the final of Dim's video coming soon. Too soon if you were to be Dim's mom or someone close.

As Lena would have predicted, the elite officer started shooting and Dim just discovered that he must have been put on earth to either meet God in his early twenties or just start rotting purposelessly. Lena bit her lip to mask a scream of terror. Dim had probably taken her place in the unexpected encounter with the US law and order.

While the FAST2 elite force member kept shooting afraid that even at close range he would have missed, Dim's books, actually Columbia's property, were flying into the air, and being badly bound, because all things those days were made not to last, the pages came apart in handfuls of snowflakes. The big snowflakes eventually covered Dim's Nantucket red all over.

Finally, the officer stopped and touched Dim's body with his boot. That gesture produced another shiver of remembrance of that past moment when Lena lay down at the boot of a Marine, and dark became the only color around. She turned her head slightly left. The moans from the table were quietly subsiding proof of the ladies' digestive satisfaction or poison.

Further to her left she noticed the seats the university was mounting in preparation for the graduation extravaganza. Then a voice came through the speakers.

"The attempt to impose upon man, a creature of growth and capable of sweetness, to ooze juicily at the last round the breaded lips of God, laws and conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation." Lena looked at Tony in disbelief. She stopped squeezing his hand. Tony whispered a thank you. He smiled encouragingly at her. The voice stopped though with a

loud muffled noise. A crack or a fall. And then nothing but silence, until another voice is heard:

"This is General Pistone, US military forces, talking. If you hear and understand what I am saying come out to the lawn in front of Butler Library. Our military will protect you from the terrorist infiltrators. We will airlift you to a secure place."

As he spoke about 200 FAST2 officers came out and encircled the lawn. Suddenly a few dozen people appeared out of nowhere and started running to the lawn. The revolutionary ladies wobbled after them. Their lack of speed made it easy for the FAST2 officers to shoot them.

And the symphony started. Screams and shooting and circles. Then helicopters started to come and go. One at a time. Lena was carefully watching. She was mesmerized. Everything was going on in slow motion.

"Let's go Lena. Move," Tony encouraged her. She smiled and got ready to run when she noticed a flood of late students coming out of Low.

Lena and Tony went up the stairs and found retreat behind a column. They did not block the entrance and they did not blockade anybody's escape.

"Coming, Lena?" a student fellow asked.

"Oh, thanks. Not yet. I am waiting for a friend."

"Bad day for friendship, wouldn't you say?"

"If you can understand my message you have five minutes to come to the Butler lawn. After that we will spray Hexachlorocyclohexane. It is deadly on contact," the general's voice was heard again.

Lena registered that but missed its meaning.

"Lena, we need to move," Tony yells at her and taking her hand forcefully pulled her down the stairs toward the lawn in front of Butler. As she followed him she looked behind and saw the six foot insect man coming for her. The same outfit. The same boots. Only she was perhaps older and wiser.

She let off Tony's hand and ran down faster. The last helicopter airlifted the last marine, and a smaller one getting ready to spray the poison was approaching. She had had a nice life, Lena thought.

She kept running away from Low when a second helicopter was approaching the campus. They could collide and the poison just spill rather than being sprayed, Lena reasoned, and instinctively she looked to find Tony when she tripped.

The first helicopter was bringing General Pistone and his poison to the campus. He was instructing his pilot to start spraying when a message from Celeste reached him.

"Hold off the spraying. I am on my way to the campus."

The General did not need to read the text. He had recognized the man bending down to pick up Lena, or better said, he recognized his feline moves, his running, and squatting and the effortless way he picked her up. It was John, his real son.

As a second helicopter was approaching the campus, Lena was kicking John in the groin. He retracted avoiding attacking her. Tony materialized himself swiftly. He helped her up. The noise was deafening. Still he managed to be polite.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Thank you," she nodded.

Turning toward the office, Tony screamed. "Professor Knowlton, do you still want to find him?"

John nodded.

"Follow me," Tony told him, and to Lena,

"Go home. We will catch up tomorrow. Same place same time?"

Lena smiled as she cleaned herself up and tried to figure out where she should go.

"Lena!" The noise level was too high for Lena to register voice differences.

"Lena," a woman ran to her from the helicopter.

"*La Multi Ani!*" Lena heard and she stopped. "That's Romanian for Happy Birthday, Lena" a once-upon-the-time familiar voice explained to a teary Lena.

Tony and John were looking back as the two women embraced and then rushed to rescue Tom or whatever was left of Tom Knowlton.

The End