A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

SEAN BELA™

M.I.B. PUBLICATIONS

New York, New York
Thank you for buying this *DOOMSDAY IS ON WEDNESDAY* eBook. To receive special content, visit

![Website Logo](www.seanbela.net)

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Drill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Revenge of Shutdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Colt vs The Useless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Running Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Massive Multi-Player Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Death Note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>A Grain of Sand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Mayor of Tent City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Group Message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>A Real Drowning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Their Eyes Were Dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The Setup Part I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The Setup Part II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Setup Part III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The Setup Part IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Release the Hounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Lightshow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Fun at Little Fitzgerald’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>The Others Conspiracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>The Nay Slayer Corp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>The Frequency Clause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>The Showrunner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Enemy of the State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Deranged Conspiracy Theorist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>The Feds Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>A Trip Up North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>The Sanctuary State of California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>The Hunt for Earl Swinger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>The Breakdown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EPISODE ONE

The Message
NO LONGER A RIGHT, life in the beloved Thirty-Nine was a privilege. There’d been too many near-deathblows dealt to their perfect Union. They’d been fears which were consumed by a former era—an afterthought held only in the minds of the Dissident Loyalists.

They longed for a future that was boundless. Many of the prodigal freedoms bequeathed by the Founding Fathers had hindered, tainting the Thirty-Nine’s perfected sense of conformity so there had to be a culling; and for a time, that thinning out of the unwelcomed was good. It reaped many of the undesirables and placed them where the governing elders believed the Dissidents always belonged; in mass graves.

The golden age of those now-forgotten liberties died with a 21st-century eccentric named Julian Mercy. Her name was generally reserved for boys, but she was the champion of both feminism and the masculine condition. Julian sagely felt those themes were waning with a new wave of oppression in the Thirty-Nine—her foresight was ahead of the curve.

Julian received her baptism in honor of her grandfather, Julius C. Fox, a prolific federal prosecutor, slain after his most triumphant trial; a trial which shattered live program records for decades; one which also ended with the conviction of Arnold Dempsey, then Governor of New York, for six counts of corruption and two counts of treason.

Dempsey went down with several hundred bank executives for defrauding the public. Mr. Fox even tried some of them in absentia; though they’d have to be arrested on their luxurious yachts in international waters. The details of Fox’s assassination remained an urban legend, much like the greats such as Princess Diana, Martin Luther King or the likes of Jimmy Hoffa.

Her government labeled Mercy R.A.T.S.: REPUGNANT, AMORAL, a TRAITOR of the STATE. She’d never worked for the state a day in her life and didn’t know which bone they had to pick with her…except for being the brassiest voice of the Dissident movement. The fact that she’d been responsible for freeing thousands of Dissidents from prison wasn’t even filed as a chief complaint in the many unenforced warrants to arrest her.
It was either that the Patriot government didn’t want to appear incompetent or it was for the fact that they’d lost so many battles against a woman who’d been gradually consumed by breast cancer. Still, a dying woman, she continued her fight against her persecutors which cost her two children, and many attempts on her life in open public. Her zealot government emboldened random people to attack her physically, but she refused to stop fighting…

Maybe Julian Mercy didn’t get the memo? They were going to win regardless of her efforts because she’d been in the minority when it came to liberty. *Liberty Whore* and *Liberty Witch* being painted on her car door and home in rat’s blood wasn’t enough of a deterrent either. She cared little for tyrants and cherished the new *Scarlet Letter* they gave her, but it was more of a mark to keep track of her wherever she went spreading her lies about the existence of the *Founding Fathers* and a written *U.S. Constitution*.

People bickered over the smallest things and some *Dissident Loyalists* found their homes set ablaze over mundane arguments such as lawncare disagreements when the argument was with a *Patriotic Movement* member.

Julian feared the Patriotic movement went too far. Some thought as she did, but with no collective, detectable movement, their power grew. It grew like the dust collecting on old library books in a town filled with illiterate half-wits—though, after a while, they’d probably make a bonfire with those books, and celebrate with jubilant dancing, wet with fits of laughter and abominable levels of intoxication.

Julian would’ve shook her head in disgust at the thought. It already begun in her time: the banning of literature deemed too sensitive or too dark for certain classes of people was all the rage. Books targeting children and young adults were, with an iron hand, scrutinized in every respect. Those the censors found wanting, classics like *Charlotte’s Web* and *Huckleberry Finn*, were removed from the public’s eye forever, to please the Patriots’ moral hang-ups.

Mercy watched as the Patriots grew to the point where honest Americans feared they weren’t conforming enough to their new society. The Patriots’ rallies, which reached nearly every town in the country, were aggressive, bigoted and violent. Those who weren’t third generation Americans were targeted first. They censured them, cut them off from all government services, especially fire, ambulance and police service, which gave the Patriots the blank check they needed to rid their neighborhood of foreign *interlopers*.

Their blood filled the streets for as far as the eye would permit…
Many stopped engaging in the process of thought altogether. Fear of reprisal was highest among the minority class, single men and women, and the Other community when Patriots began stalking the streets under the pretense of community policing. They targeted anything Other and put them in their place. They achieved this either through violence, through public shaming, or by coercion. Some Patriot Patrol Office advocates outed Dissidents as anything loathsome to gain a crowd to haunt them through sheer physical bullying. Their next phase began with internet covert mobbing, or some form of entrapment.

It was their obligatory burden as Patriots to remove all free will from the people of the Thirty-Nine. The people couldn’t handle such frightening powers; it only weakened the Greater Patriot Union’s strength against the rest of the world—the us v them war had begun. And so, they took all those responsibilities upon themselves; they were the new Guardians of the people.

Article one of the Patriotic Liberation Front said so.

The complete and total removal of one’s awareness from his nation’s global obligation and business affairs is the first line of defense from external meddling in the Greater Patriot Union’s political relations. It has become hazardous for the average joe to be too aware. To be aware is to let in tainted sources, of which there are many. The average American cannot deal with such insurmountable threats and still carry on with their day to day lives.

We are the purest source, The Greater Patriot Union. We shall be the only source for the Thirty-Nine beloved states of the Union. We aren’t the world’s police force, nor will they police our flawless base, our people. It is the basis of this Union and at the core of our solidarity. The naysayers will not deter us. If they try, they shall be trampled under our mighty feet.

Julian warned them on podcasts, she informed them at her packed symposiums. They only came for the show, to mock her and get autographs to sell online. She became their grotesque freak show, a shit disturber, a carnival, a woman who was famous only for being famous. She grew to hate the phenomenon she created.

Later in her career as a premier conspiracy theorist, her advice earned her the crown of lunatic. Her rantings became the bellows of an atheist, cultist, bent on turning every American in the beloved Thirty-Nine into a repellant whore. Her following dwindled to psychopaths who got a hoot out of mocking her or trolling her for kicks and giggles.

For years, the Patriot Patrol Office kept a close, obsessive eye on the growing Dissident Loyalist population who followed her messages on the dark web. Their news briefs only read
“Doomsday” and “Wednesday”—but which one? There were countless Wednesdays between the first day the messages started circulating and infinity. They didn’t know, and the Dissidents made sure they weren’t privy to the date. It drove them up the wall back in the Manhattan Regional Office.

Under cover of darkness, the PPO burst into the homes of millions of sleeping citizens who they’d suspected of harboring the Dissident. Their staggered screams for help smothered the air, but their neighbors did nothing, for the were already labeled “Nonconforming” by the PPO.

They were sent to rural university campuses called Second Life Centers and were never heard from again…

The PPO threw their children into random stockades throughout the state, without cause or attorney. Then, seeking blood, the PPO went farther; seeking the Dissident at the massive border Wall, The Mercy Wall, as they fled over into The Sanctuary State of California in large numbers for asylum.

Those Dissidents who the PPO captured suffered through the cold mangles of lengthy government-sanctioned torture, but they never gave in; they couldn’t, for the system Mercy assembled was constructed to be oblivious. None of the terrorists knew more than they needed to survive; a taunt of the very system she was trying to take down herself.

Mercy swore with her blood that one day she’d get her God-granted revenge on what she’d christened the “State of Fear and Mass Hysteria.” But for now, the State had its new religion, their “True Religion.” Mercy was long-gone, dust at the JFK Memorial Cemetery in Los Angeles, the details of her death as secret as a close encounter of the third kind.

Would she get her revenge? Would Doomsday Wednesday ever arrive, or was Julian Mercy another crazed conspiracy theorist hell-bent on making her generous régime look malevolent, even from the grave, to the outside world?

Back in 2030, Mercy’s critics joked that her revenge would have to come from beyond the grave.

Forty years later, it was no longer a joke.

EPISODE TWO
FORWARD TO 2070. Alana, six years of age, watched the empty Long Island street below from her screened tenth-floor apartment window. It seemed as if time itself had taken a hiatus that morning as her family waited for their instructions on what to do for the rest of the day.

Although Alana was born a redhead with gorgeous brown eyes, the Bureau of Family Affairs, which regulated birth, life, and death through genetics, determined she would be a good candidate for an augment. All her parents needed to do was earn enough points through extended Hover Droning. Each hour was sixty points—the cost of an augment was three thousand points—Alana couldn’t do the math, but she figured it meant forever and a day she wouldn’t be able to talk to momma or papa. As if their four mandatory hours a day wasn’t enough; that was a deal breaker.

Alana didn’t like the idea of augmentation at all. She loved her brown eyes and found green eyes to be alien, monster-like even, as the lizard things on Sci-Fi films that papa watches late at night. Most of the children on her block had augmentations, they didn’t call it that; the term was rightsizing or retrofitting to become more acceptable in the zone she’d been born.

Alana cherished her thick red hair the most. No other child in her class had hair like hers. She loved the way her hair refused to be tamed by a comb after a cold shower. She loved how it reached for the floor after momma conditioned it.

Momma always used a rare conditioner she had to Drone extra hours for to purchase since Alana had uncommon—what the little kids called Africanized hair—but it was more European than anything else.

Alana liked how curly it became when momma put it through a hot iron. She enjoyed shaking her hair in front of the jealous girls in her class who’d mock her as an outcast. On the inside she saw herself as a unicorn; an extraordinary thing, a relic to be cherished – all this at six years old.
“Are we close yet?” she asked momma, who didn’t reply. Momma was busy at the other end of the house near the kitchen waiting for her own commands to start the family’s next meal.

Alana tapped her feet nonstop against the air conditioner, kicking up bits of dust which flew up against the window pane, refusing the pull of gravity, just as she’d refused to lift her face against the window. Alana was anticipating the people who’d be ordered to go to work soon.

When they’d all walk out, at the same time, wearing the same monochromatic shit uniform which would look like a poorly scripted ballet to Alana who’d envision herself as a Goddess playing with strings while they were her puppets. But her thoughts veered back to the day – Wednesday–the day of the week she detested the most and the one even grownups seemed tired with.

*If this is how all Wednesdays are then why don’t people just skip them,* she giggled, *but that means we would have to go to school on Saturdays and that’s no fun either. Saturday’s game night.*

The next directive would be on what to wear. It would be color instructions. They knew it would be the color black, anything in black, but they dared not assume. They’d already been told what to eat for breakfast, at what exact time to start munching and when to finish.

The PPO micromanaged all things in their lives to exhaustion, and it didn’t matter how small the event was—a birthday, change of apartment, a legal argument, even a wedding, birth or funeral.

Their next decree would come from their local Patriot Patrol Office, as did the first. The PPO was her city and county government until the reorganizing of the Thirty-Nine had solidified. Alana didn’t understand why they controlled both governments. She didn’t care much about the governing of her nation, or her city either, only about leaving off to school for the day and meeting up with her prearranged friends.

“Momma,” she cried out of boredom. Something didn’t quite feel right about today. It was like a sixth sense Alana felt down in her gut. Momma felt it too, but she was too dependent on the machine to give a damn, and ignored her daughter’s cries, waiting to be told what to do next.

The directives came beamed through her Hover Drone, a black sphere from where all decent citizens received their commands. Alana’s floated thirteen inches over her head and followed her everywhere she went. When she boarded a train, it would collapse and enter her backpack. Every trivial event in her family, as well as their public lives, had to be in sync with their community.
Any error, no matter how small, amounted to a social catastrophe—what papa had called civic hazards.

Even when Alana’s family synced with Olympian perfection, there had still been double, triple, quadruple checks, to make sure they were the same as everybody else in every minuscule detail. This sort of mundane backtracking went down to how they laced their shoes and how they brushed their teeth. It drove her out of her mind at times.

Once a single mistake exists, it could cause havoc of unknown proportions. Parents would drop to the ground and cry like children should a civic hazard befall them. *Not adultlike at all,* Alana laughed, to herself.

“It’s about to come through,” her mother called still in her white pajamas from the night before. Alana’s mother was about forty years of age, tall, green-eyed, black hair that swung nonchalant, in complete opposite to her agitated mood. As she paced back and forth from side to side in front of the fridge, her thin build betrayed her curvy bottom, nestled under the loose pants she wore, with morning bags under her eyes. She hunched like an old lady and pouted.

Alana’s mother had been staring at the fridge for a while now. The refrigerator seemed to beckon her to open it just that one time in defiance of the law. Her mother’s Hover Drone blinked bright red with nothing yet to report.

“Come on baby,” she salivated expectant as a dog to a bell. Beads of sweat pooled at the side of her neck. Any second now it would tell her what to do; this was a promise. Inside her body; her gut lined into position. Her heart synced, and her pupils dilated; everything came into crystal clarity in the room as she was about to get her next dose of directives, which, over the decades, had become akin to a dose of opiates for an addict.

In all the years they’d lived in the apartment, momma had never waited impatiently for commands. She looked flustered. There was nothing unusual about that day. Another day of the week. Another school day. Wednesday was the most boring day of the week for Alana.

Alana felt as though she was in a herd of cattle. She wanted to free herself from the bunch, but she knew that expressing her spirit meant facing *The Drowning.*

*You know you don’t want to go through that thing, whatever it is. They did it to grandpa, and when he came back, he was not the same grandpa ever again. I just wonder what those wicked men did to him at that big campus in the woods? He never talked to us about it. Maybe they told*
him not to tell...was it a secret like with hide and go seek? He could have said something before he died. Nobody would have hurt him cause he was a dying old man, right?

She told herself that when she grew up, she’d break free somehow. Being free meant being an adult, like papa. Or like one of the R.A.T.S. who was on the run. Those folks seemed to be free-spirited enough. Well, until the Nay Slayers found them. As for Alana, she had watched papa suffer too much. She was determined not to live a life like her parents in the future. She had to be free of the unabated idiocy, someway, somehow, someday.

It was about to come in, all their daily instructions for the next hour and anticipation filled the air in the kitchen as momma bounced like a child about to get a piece of candy.

Then, as Alana and her family awaited their daily orders, which always came booming in at precisely 0800 hours without fail, something different happened. A Live Wire Tap.

EPISODE THREE
Revenge or Shutdown

IT WAS WHAT THE Patriot Patrol Office had drilled into their minds as DOOMSDAY. The broadcast of an ancient message from a distant, toxic, historical figure whom they could never name. The giveaway was the video quality, for nothing of such low quality was still in circulation, except at university libraries which were restricted to official use.

“Momma,” said Alana with stress in her voice. “What’s this on my Loci screen?”

Momma didn’t respond, herself perturbed and close to the realization that Doomsday had in fact arrived. The grainy video didn’t come close to even the least developed imagery available to Alana’s family; they had hologram pictures in their library with so much clarity that they could feel the heat generated by the projection.
There were even projections which interacted with the viewer intelligently; never a boring moment for the *Footed Drones*. The one they were being forced to watch by the unknown assailant had grains all over it. Maybe it was a premeditated effort to make the picture look authentic? Also, there were no more kinds of clothing like that worn by the woman in the image. Only an expert would be able to tell the difference upon closer inspection and Alana’s parents weren’t experts in the quality of video projections.

“I see it too,” said Pyke who came running from his room, the imagery following him to Alana. “Do you think it’s serious?”

At eight, Pyke was two years older than Alana, but a developmental disorder known as *Sostos Syndrome*, one which was given genetic-incision correction by the Bureau of Family Affairs, had stunted his mental capacity for some time. He’d uttered his first complete sentence when Alana was already speaking and writing like a toddler.

Pyke was tall for his age at five nine and well developed athletically; with brown eyes, a thin nose and lips, straight black hair and freckles, he looked nothing like his younger sibling. He’d been a star basketball center in the *Authority Community School* he and Alana attended.

“I don’t’ know,” said Momma. “What in the world is this?” she asked papa as the old footage started rolling. Papa was in the john busy pushing out last night’s steak dinner—their first in months. The whole family had to Drone forty extra hours a week when they wanted a special meal.

“She looks so grungy,” said Alana enamored by the woman, reaching for her as if she could touch the wrinkly face. Alana had never seen anyone in such a ragged condition. Besides the advances in gene therapy, no one suffered the ills of fast aging skin in 2070’s; with the oldest human, Marla Watson, at age 124, looking not a day over forty-five.

“It’s some woman,” said Momma trying to lie to Alana. “Nothing to worry about. Maybe it’s a drill. It has to be a drill, don’t you think?”

“If it were a drill,” Alana started. “The HD units would be blinking green colors, right?”

Momma scratched her ears. “Yes, darling. That was mighty observant of you.”

“Then it’s an emergency of some sort,” she continued. “They aren’t here to help us. What’re we going to do, momma?”

Alana was right; the PPO had organized countless drills in preparation for Doomsday, but they were nowhere to be found, seen or heard. Their government had abandoned them in the
gravest time possible. Momma didn’t know whether to panic or head for the hills; there was no one to issue instructions to her. Alana looked at her momma feeling her distress, but she was just a child—this was an adult issue as the PPO had drilled them to understand it.

As the woman, who was in her mid-forties, moved about searching for something, her hair bounced casually against her lavender blouse which was buttoned only to the second to last buttons revealing part of her cleavage. That bit of flesh caught Pyke’s attention.

“Don’t stare,” said momma. “You know it’s impolite. Now move your eyes away from that filth. Where are the PPO on this?”

Pyke moved his eyes away from the woman’s projection. Her skin was ashy, white as snow. She looked emaciated as if she’d been next to death, with lips as pale as a swollen moon. Her arms were twigs, reaching for whatever she’d been seeking under the desk she’d chosen to sit. With those little arms, Alana thought whatever she’d pick up would probably feel like it weighed a thousand pounds to the decrepit old lady.

“Who do you think she is?” asked Alana.

“She’s toxic probably,” said Pyke.

“Just something the PPO is showing us,” said momma with her hand on her mouth. “Probably another biopic of some sort, you’ll see.”

Alana’s eyes never left from the battered woman’s gaze. Golden sleek hair clumsily hung over a thin, worried face. Squinting blue eyes, set dreadfully within their sockets, watched cautiously through the screen they’d waited to broadcast to for so long. She had the peaceful the face of someone who’d been liberated of something, though they wouldn’t know until the recording went to the end. It was like the face of a hospice client on their death rattle, calm and satisfied with the world in the condition it was; she was at peace and that started to singe momma’s brain. Pyke, as slow as he was saw it. She must be the toxic woman.

She held up a newspaper from December 31, 2030—the *New York Gazette*. Finally, the woman didn’t seem confident with the paper, sensing that somehow, they, whoever they were, the powers that be, would surmise that it was faked.

She panned her camera to the street level outside her window, and the viewers were struck with a past sight—the video showed *Times Square* during the early twenty-first century. The cars were mainly gas operated. There was no doubt about it from the fumes being tossed in the air from the tail end of the antique vehicles.
The city was packed with people walking about heading towards a giant crystal globe which would be falling soon, once the clock ticked away towards New Year’s Day.

The billboard ads were for things that didn’t exist in 2070; cell phones, alcohol-based perfumes, laptops, internet sites, televised reality shows. The people in the crowd wore different clothes, all sorts of hats and boots, which was the biggest tell of them all.

An eroded image had a time stamp in bold yellow, below the woman’s chest, just in case anybody tried to deny that it hadn’t come from December 31, 2030. The PPO must’ve thought digital technology was available in 2030 to fake such a thing, but not all of it at once.

Alana watched with glee as the message created instant pandemonium in her parents’ faultless day. This was something new, as original, pleasant, and fresh as the dose they needed. She saw her parents get up and run from room to room like rats in a maze.

Her father came over and grabbed her. Then he shoved her with her big brother, Pyke, into their master bedroom, slammed the door shut and did nothing, said not a word, as the recording played on.

The gesture was moot for they could’ve heard it anywhere in their small apartment. Alana and her parents could’ve heard it in a house. They could’ve heard it in a villa, a mansion. It was louder than an elephant’s trumpet. A man walking a mile away would’ve heard it.

If a tree falls in a forest…

Everyone in the know, most of the PPO, had a good idea it was coming. They’d prepared many protocols for whatever “revenge” the dead R.A.T.S. had planned. They’d anticipated its arrival, knew it had something to do with a message to the masses, but here it was, bold and in their faces, and they were clueless about how to stop it.

Nothing the Patriots could do but watch the damn toxic propaganda play in front of hundreds of millions of feeble minds in the Thirty-Nine. They’d been locked out of their own system and couldn’t shut it down!

**EPISODE FOUR**
The Colt vs The Useless
BACK AT THE LIVE OFFICE in Dallas, Texas, at the PPO’s Command Center, there was confusion as well. The Center’s eleven hundred operatives, called Crunchers, clicked on their mice and struck their keypads at a frantic pace. Their collective crackling overwhelmed the voice of the Shift Commander, Travis Pinkerton, as he shouted orders to them in a desperate attempt to remain in control of the situation.

The situation had long escalated out of control, but Pinkerton didn’t realize it yet.

“Find the source and shut down the Unit broadcasting that filth,” he said running back and forth from desk to desk tapping hard on random Cruncher’s shoulders.

Travis had a short black man’s physique at five feet six inches, with dark skin and a big broad Nigerian nose. He was a made bully who wore his black hair short, trimmed to the regulation ignoramus PPO look of a military recruit who’d just lifted himself from the barber’s chair.

A skinny, anxious face was finished by a set of bulging blue eyes, set well within their sockets, watching wearily over the Command Center he’d felt disconnected from for so long.

Though he’d started out as a pleasant manager, he had built a paranoia complex over the years. The job running the Live Office was an incredibly demanding one, having seen five Shift Commanders come and go in the last decade.

The video continued streaming. Every single American citizen in the Thirty-Nine had a holographic Loci Bracelet projecting the old footage to a space the PPO had designated in their home, usually the Livingroom, from about twelve feet away from them—which was the most comfortable for the human eye. The image was rendered sixty-four inches wide by thirty-six inches high, with clarity and texture one could almost feel and dive into.

The Loci Bracelets also boosted any audio device in the home through the individual’s earbuds, which were in their heads and implanted at birth. The technology was harmless, and it allowed people to make or receive phone calls at any time, and report R.A.T.S. and the Dissident to the PPO without the fear of retaliation, but now it was being used against them.

Pinkerton was still ranting when the fragile woman had appeared in view and introduced herself as Julian Mercy. At that point, everyone lost it at the Command Center. For many of the higher-ups in the chain of command, they knew, with deadly certainty, what was to come next. It
was then that the commander had no choice—he had to swallow a poison pill. “Pull the plug and force everyone to Hover Drone until we get the system back up nationwide,” he said trembling.

“But sir, we’re locked out,” said a young Hispanic Cruncher.

“Find a way, damn it!” he shouted. “It’s your head if you don’t!” His abrasive managerial style gifted him many laxative doughnuts, deliberate bathroom floor pizzas, and spit laded coffee drinks. His underlings assisted him well, received few kind words in return, so they spread stories about him.

He ran out of the room to his office, shaking harder than before and sweating horribly as if he’d just run a mid-August marathon.

Pinkerton slammed his door, stopped to catch himself from passing out. He pulled up the digital curtains which blanketed the glass by making it opaque, shielding himself from the rest of the techs. His serfs mustn’t see him having a breakdown. He’d taken years to build that confident exterior which started crumbling the moment he saw that video of a dead woman. He had to maintain that in-control façade or die.

Then without warning, as he turned around to face the wall opposite his desk, a dark figure appeared. This new figure was a male in his late fifties. Dante Anderson, a short, mixed race, big-headed, loud and obnoxious, foul-mouthed drunkard, who’d been the PPO Governor for over a decade.

He’d grown to despise most of his subordinates in the Patriot Patrol Office for what he felt they were and went to great lengths to create a moniker for them; Unhinged Selectively Egotistical Listless Eerily Stupid & Stagnate–Useless. Dante felt much the same about his boss, the Prime Authority, and voiced it openly to his peers, but never to his boss’ face.

Dante had grey hair which refused the black die he’d applied day after day to look younger, and to stay in line with regulation. His wrinkles betrayed his gene infusion treatments too as they crisscrossed the bottom of his eyes and the crown of his eyebrows.

“What’re you basket cases doing on your end?” he asked with deeply furrowed brows and an artificially tanned face that showed he’d recently vacationed at an off-shore island or resort which he hadn’t. Stress would draw a new line of wrinkles higher and higher with each year he sat at the head of the PPO. Travis, no doubt, hoped it would one day kill him, and he’d move up to take his seat.
“We’re doing our best, sir. Pardon our pace, for now,” Travis said shuddering, pulling on his tie for relief where none came.

“Not good enough,” Dante shouted, tossing spit at the screen. “You must do better, Travis. Incompetence won’t be tolerated in my administration. Is that understood?”

Travis bowed and nodded, and as the two spoke, the message from Julian Mercy went on. It sounded muffled by the shielding but, Pinkerton could still hear it, and it haunted every bit of his soul.

*Doomsday’s arrived, Travis. What are you going to do about it?*

Julian rolled on unopposed by the Authority. “This story begins with a message sent to you from me, a victim of an international tracking program called SEAL: Search, Extract, And Liquidate. It started back in the late 2020’s as a nefarious tool to destroy individuals. Individuals labeled R.A.T.S. The meaning of which you may not know of yet. This individual took her life after completing her speech, upon which the conspiracy began to evolve. And believe me, it will evolve. And grow. Into an organized movement. Into a monolithic private corporation. A hydra, a cult running your beloved nation. You’re all slaves and need only to unplug yourselves. They own today and what is tomorrow? That word is forbidden, the very notion of it is heresy by now, I suppose.”

A knife had left a mark stretching from just under the right cheek, running towards her right clavicle marooning a gracious memory of a battle won…or lost. This was the face of a woman torn. A woman who’d seen horrors unknown. A true Dissident among the heavily conformed.

There was something seductive about her; perhaps it was her persistence to live despite her body’s constant demand to shrivel up and die. Nonetheless, she went on with her sermon in her ravaged form.

“Look at me, you scoundrels,” she shouted. “I am this individual, and I’m about to speak for all of the ones you’ve taken before and after me…”

Julian Mercy lifted a silver-tipped Colt 357 magnum pistol, with a beautiful brown wood handle, to her head and pulled the trigger. They saw bits of brain and bloody hair right as they heard the loud bang.

The screen went blackish red as the camera’s lens was covered in blood and gray matter. Her death image was seen and that loud bang heard, by over four hundred thirty million shaken
Americans in the Thirty-Nine. They’d have to deal with it, the PPO that is; the image forever seared in the traumatized minds of their sheeple.

EPISODE FIVE
The Running Man

THERE WAS A MOMENT OF static which churned loud in the background. It hissed like the sound of someone seeking a new frequency on an old radio. It hurt Alana. People everywhere covered their ears, bent over in pain, all of them, across the nation. Then the noise stopped.

Suddenly there was new and much clearer footage that showed a white male in his thirties running from a dark-colored car in the pouring rain. He was also trying to dodge men with bats. Then he gave them the slip past a speeding train; he got away!

He ducked behind a counter, telling a woman of a conspiracy against him. Everywhere he went, closed-circuit television footage seemed to recognize him and his voice, recording everything he did. It appeared to the viewers as if some sophisticated artificial intelligence was following him around.

Or maybe it was an organized group of humans—like at the Live Office. But how could that be? The viewers could only guess. The resources needed to coordinate such sophisticated surveillance was enormous, and the man wasn’t a wanted criminal, was he?

“They’re after me!” he shouted at a gas station clerk. The clerk, who was a man of about fifty years of age, tall and blond haired with green eyes, and a long Moses beard. He carried a stick to complete the appeal. Though his eyes didn’t accost the running man for its lack of symmetry—one looked the opposite direction of the other—confusing the running man every time the clerk looked in his direction.

He did appear concerned for his well-being. The clerk was cleaning his counter for the next shift, but he stopped and looked at the man who was wet from the feet up.
The AI embedded within the CCTV picked up their conversation. “Who’s after you?” the clerk asked the man, who was dripping water on his garage floor.

“Phony federal agents,” he said shaking. “They’re not with the government. They’re assassins!”

“How’d you know that? What’ve you done?”

“I just know! Please, call the real police. Before those men get to me again!”

The man raised his hands. “I don’t want to get involved. This isn’t my mess. Please, sir, you have to go. I can’t help you. I’m sorry.”

“Then can I use your phone? To make a quick call?”

The clerk looked about to see no one was around looking. He hesitated for a moment. Then he slipped him a cheap burner phone, unmistakably not his phone, he had in his pocket and walked off to the rear to do inventory. The running man dialed the emergency number.

Now the recording cut to what looked like the same Command Center in Dallas, but an older version of it. The chairs, computers, and clothing all seemed to be from 2030 or older. An operator answered before a single ring, which the man didn’t regard at all as strange.

The operator said, “911, what’s your emergency?”

“Men after me. They’re impersonating the police.”

“Okay, sir, can you describe these men?”

“Two men. A white male and a black male. Both are in their thirties. Both wearing FBI uniforms and gear. But I can tell they’re not FBI.”

“Are they armed and are you in a safe location?”

“What does that have to do with anything? Yes, they’re armed. They’re posers. Of course, they’re going to be armed!”

“Sir, what’s your location?”

“I’m at – ” And then he stopped. Surely the emergency operator would have his location on the screen, so why would she need to ask? Unless this was another poser...The operator then paused, and the footage showed a supervisor in a white long-sleeved shirt leaning toward her ear to whisper instructions.

“I can understand you’re frightened, Mr. Swinger....” she began, at which point he ended the call, handed the phone back to the gas station clerk and rocketed out of the store.
As he left, the view shifted to an aerial shot of him running diagonally across the street. To think that their government had been running such a sophisticated tracking system for all these years.

As her parents cringed, Alana peeked out of the window, saw the footage of the running man and wondered how much more freedom the people of that man’s time had, compared to her family.

*He had no Hover Drone tailing him everywhere,* she thought, *must be a nice feeling.*

“Damn, he hung up the phone!” said the fake operator at the old Command Center.

“Don’t worry Alice. We’ve got the bastard,” said the supervisor in the white shirt. He rubbed his hands together. “He’ll be caught soon.”

“Yeah,” said another tech, a black female who sat next to the woman who’d spoken to the man on the run. She’d been the Cruncher tasked with tracing him. “He’s at the Royal-Mobil Gas on Clinton and Washington.”

She clicked on her mouse and pulled up their live feed which showed him running into another establishment, then being chased by more men with bats. The men with bats had built up a large group of chasers; the goal was wearing down the running man who was unimaginably athletic. Then again, he was running for his life, he’d probably be hocked up on adrenaline.

“We’re going to put on a good show for that treasonous prick today,” said the supervisor. “You just watch this shit. Going to be Truman-esque. Oscar-worthy, I tell you!”

**EPISODE SIX**

*The Massive Multi-Player Game*

THE RUNNING MAN WISHED he could stop sprinting like a maniac and confront the men chasing him. But it was wiser to run than to prove his innocence. There was nothing as disdainful as being accused of being a rapist and a murderer by people you don't know.
This would’ve been a great time for The Consortium to swoop in and save me. But that was wishful thinking, wouldn’t it be?

When they first came near to him to rail the allegation against him, the running man assumed they were trying to pull a fast one on him, and he only smiled at them for trying to trick him. On an average day, he might have spurned them or even yell at them, but he preferred to watch them play around.

However, when they became aggressive and began to recruit the help of other people, he knew he had no option than to shout back at them, thinking it would make the people gathering around them see his innocence, but the reverse was the case.

“Your blood will spill like milk today,” one of the assailants had said.

“All the way to the white meat,” said another, which was more shocking than the first threat. Sure, they could make him bleed, but when someone expressed the wish to beat you to the white meat, the very image was mortifying.

The people began to act with so much frenzy that he had to cleverly spin and weave himself away from their reach on many occasions, like an acrobat, the running man moved swiftly. He was only lucky to find a space to escape because they seemed ready to annihilate him on the spot. Despite escaping from them, he wasn't free from their aggression which appeared to have multiplied; the horde of mindless men and women chased him as if there was a force directing them.

He fled towards the railway at the Yorker-Texan Gas Center which was a large refueling plaza for truck drivers and was filled with hookers strung out of their minds on heroin and crystal meth and the latest craze; Snuff-B57 which was a heavy mind-altering drug which made you experience an alternate reality as if it were real by merging the false reality with the user’s present time.

Yet Snuff-B57 went a step further, allowing the user to touch and interact with their false reality. For example, if the user saw a parked car, they could try all they wanted to walk through it thinking it wasn’t real and they wouldn’t be able; the car would block them, and weigh 2 tons as would a real vehicle. Even human beings projected by the powerful drug had realistic properties, which is why it was banned for non-governmental use.

This will be the best place to dip from them, till I made it to Gregg’s. unless I run into a snuff whore, then I’m screwed. They’ll do anything for their next slip card of SB-57.
As the men pursued him with their bats swinging by their sides, the running man knew he was inevitably going to escape from them because he was fast and would easily outrun every one of them. Nevertheless, he wouldn't want to assume something strange wouldn't happen to him. The center was a regular place, despite the hookers, for truck drivers to gather on their way south.

With his eyes darting from left to right like a spectator watching a Ping-Pong game, he kept running with all his might towards the railway, which was behind the center. He was very sure that the moment he got to the other side, he would lose a lot of them and might be able to tackle the few remaining in any physical combat which would ensue. They’d be out of breath no doubt, and he’d prepared himself with cardio every day.

Though the cardio in the little dungeon I locked myself in for a decade could’ve been a bit more rigorous, he thought as he panted.

Just as he was getting near the place he hoped to jump into the railway, the ground vibrated with an approaching train. That looked absurd, but he had to choose between the front of the multi-ton train or giving them the chance to catch him. He preferred the former. Everything seemed to be out to get him, and that alone seemed ominous. Although he wasn't the superstitious type, the running man still felt something bigger than he awaited him at his friend Gregg's place.

Without giving it a second thought, the running man jumped in front of the train and ran off. His car was at the other end of the Yorker-Texan Center, implying that he had to wait until he was sure no one was looking for him. Yet, he must find his way to hide and that he did. He hid under an empty van near a vacant building, which had some of its parts removed.

From his hiding place, the running man watched out for the people that were after him. They climbed to the other side of the train and looked disoriented because he was nowhere near the railroad. Some of them, who were resilient, came towards the empty house and searched everywhere for him and even looked at the abandoned van sitting next to the railroad.

“He must’ve ducked under a railcar,” said a woman striking her bat against the parked can. The rail cars were filled with goods headed to northern cities like Boston, Providence, and Portland, where there’d been a recent food shortage.

After a bit of search, some of them gave up and returned to the place they came from. One of them, a young man in his twenties, lingered behind as he tried to scout for the running man. The others left him and climbed to the other side of the railway.
The running man felt like climbing out and penalizing the lad for his stupidity. If he was indeed a murderer, he could quickly get him because he was a long way from the pack.

You wanted to catch a killer-rapist-murderer, right? What if I did do all three right here to you, asshole? Then you’d have actual real claims against me instead of fabrications.

The young man began to climb down the train. Suddenly, a fast-moving train sped towards him. The running man was so surprised that he closed his eyes firmly. As much as he hated being falsely accused, it was inhumane to wish for the death of the boy. He climbed out and saw that the man had flattened against a wall of steel. His friends helped him out and rushed towards the command center, angry at him for his carelessness. The running man wondered why they were angry, but he preferred to remain in his position.

When he was sure that they were gone, he climbed out and walked down the road, looking everywhere to be sure he was safe. He ran to his car and drove off but not before seeing someone push a man in front of a moving train. The man that pushed him looked like one of the guys at the Yorker-Texan Center. Immediately, the man died of his wounds, some other men ran out towards the place and celebrated by hitting their chests again one another.

A second group held the body dancing with the dead man they’d thrown into the train; hosting a marionette show with his body. They played with his lips while two moved his neck, torso, and arms. It repulsed the running man on another level. Murdering a man was terrible but playing with his body in a celebratory manner after the fact was beyond reprehensible.

Then it dawned on the running man that this was a sort of game to them. How can they play games with human lives? The running man wondered if they’d be as merciless with him, had they caught him, as he drove off towards Gregg’s house. He tried to call Gregg to inform him that he was on the way, but Gregg refused to pick his call. Gregg was the most paranoid person the running man had ever encountered; which was a good thing. He figured paranoia would keep him breathing for a more extended period of time and although a regular person wouldn't have seen him appearing at his doorstep as something ill-omened, but Gregg would.

**EPISODE SEVEN**

*Death Note*
DESPITE HIS FEAR OF the unknown, he and Gregg had come a long enough way that Gregg would always share vital information with the running man. Gregg was trying to become a member of *The Consortium*, but there was a kink in his application process when he refused to tell them sensitive things about his past.

The running man drove off, heading west on the Meadowbrook State Parkway, a multi-lane expressway which cut through the Long Island suburb of Hempstead, to his place and parked his car. Then, he hurriedly climbed the stairs and knocked hard, but he got no response from anyone inside. He tried again, hoping he was fearful for nothing tangible. But he got no response and that intensified his anxiety. The running man pushed the door, and it opened without any strong force.

As if he was hit with a bat on the face, he growled. Gregg's house had been dismantled, and that was beyond disturbing—this was something the old nut case wouldn’t have ever allowed to happen to him. The running man’s eyes dashed to every corner of the room, hoping he was safe. Gently and trying to be as silent as possible, he tiptoed into the house. Everything in the household seemed scattered. The living room was bastardized to the extent that the stuffing in his chairs was torn to shreds.

The running man saw Gregg's diary strewn everywhere in the room and a chord was struck in his head; Gregg must have gotten some cryptic information, just like he’d received from *The Consortium* branches based in Brooklyn and Manhattan, that he wasn't supposed to have, and that meant it was in one place only: his safe.

The running man rushed to the bedroom and traced the wall behind the bed until he felt a bulge. He hurriedly clicked the bump and pressed his code into the safe. The safe opened, and he removed the letter in it and some notes from it, which was perplexing. Gregg would never have left only a message and some notes.

```
Hi S.
I really hope you find this letter before any other. I have come to discover that the
government is using some control system on some primates and are progressing to carry out
the test on human subjects.
```
The notes are meant to direct you. I update these notes every night. I know it's not coincidental for you to be here. In all fairness, you're the only person that ever comes to look for me. So, I will always put it here till I die.

In case I die, no matter how natural it looks, there are a lot of hidden cameras in this house. I have written software that will make it synchronize with your Loci Bracelet every four hours. You will only receive this message if I don't get to correct it before the time elapses. You know the security words for it.

The running man hurriedly brought his Loci to see the file on his drive. It must have come when I was being pursued, he thought. The video file was massive at 634 terabytes. The running man would have refused to download it on a typical day, but he would do anything to be sure Gregg was alive. Gregg had little or no friend to call his own, and that was the reason he always secluded.

Quickly, the running man downloaded the video; which projected Gregg in three-dimensional form doing what he always did during the day. He followed the bearded blond haired man around the room until he got bored; and it was a treacherous breach of privacy even if he’d told him to watch the video, he didn’t want to see the man’s junk and paused the video when Gregg headed into the bathroom.

Wow, that holographic image of my friend, well, my only friend in the world, seems so surreal. It was just a few months ago when I was in this place. Look at him, hasn’t changed a bit; like he didn’t age at all for a fifty-five-year-old. I really hope it’s not the last I’ll see of you Gregg, you crazy son of a bitch.

He had to fast forward until he saw Gregg running about in the house with some men hot on his heels. One of them shot him with a Taser, and he fell flat. Within a few minutes, they poured a sort of chemical on his body, and it disintegrated. The running man didn't know when tears began to stream down his face. That wasn't his first time witnessing a murder, but this one seemed shameful and inhumane, making him wished he was there to help Gregg.

Still in tears, he searched through and began to see why Gregg was killed. He not only knew that the program was orchestrated by the government, he knew the specifics. The running man had just learned of its existence when he broke the news to his conspiracy Vlog with its 14.3 million daily viewers; he did not know the core details.
You basically committed suicide, Gregg. Didn’t I tell you how dangerous these evil men were? Why would you save anything on a public server when you still lived in a place they could access you with just a Loci breach?

The scene was too gory for him to allow it to rest like that. He had to tell someone, and the only person he could call was Darlene, who had been looking for a breakthrough in her work. She had always wanted to write a story that was ground-breaking. Now, the running man figured he would give her the opportunity. Although he wouldn't have been an advocate of using such ludicrous information, he couldn't allow such an act of evil on such a great friend to go without being investigated. The world must know. He must get justice for Gregg. He burst into tears again as he dialed Darlene’s contact number.

“Hey Darlene,” the running man said almost in a murmur.

“Swinger?” Darlene asked, surprised. “Why is your voice breaking?”

“I got something to share with you. It's big. A long-time friend just lost his life over this. Take it seriously and with utmost secrecy.”

“Will do. Are you sure you're fine?”

“Fine? I'm not fine. Just do the needful. I will send some pictures too.”

Quickly, he sent the videos and snapshots of the note. Just as he finished posting the last one, he heard a crack on the door. The running man didn't need anyone to tell him that ‘someone,’ the person(s) who was behind the door was there for him. He ran through the fire escape, and the person yelled something as if he was talking to someone else. In a matter of seconds, the running man was in Gregg's car and was being shot at.

EPISODE EIGHT

A Grain of Sand

THE SKY WAS A gorgeous blue and it kind of irked the running man that he’d probably die on such a beautiful day. As he drove, he wondered if he did the right thing by running without seeing whom the people were. He should at least have a means of identifying them another time.
But he didn't need to stay back to see who they were because in no time they had rushed out and began to shoot *Silent Darts* at him from a grey sedan.

“Who in the hell are these people?” he asked himself. “They can’t all be from the same group trying to kill me. This is starting to make no sense. How many people exactly do they have after me? And why do they have access to SI-Darts?”

The SI-Darts were a kind of deadly but silent bullet which didn’t need a suppressor. They were engineered to cut through the air without making any audible sounds, but he could hear them ricocheting against the body of the car as he swerved to avoid having his head explode in the middle of the thin traffic. Only the military had access to them.

Everything seemed empty. The running man drove off into a lonely street and was chased by the grey heavily tinted Sedan his assailants brought. Luckily, Gregg as always was paranoid: the car had been so rigged that no one can hurt the people in the vehicle unless they opened the car. He made sure that even the tires, windows and the windscreen holographic projector had their own means of protecting the occupants of the vehicle.

The running man's assailants were soon bombarding the rear window of the car with heavy-duty guns. If the vehicle wasn't bulletproof, the running man might have found himself dead in the driver's seat, lolling away to the soothing voice of death. However, he knew any other opportunity they got to overtake him would give them an edge over him. He sped off and was soon driving to a construction site.

He drove into the construction site and made a little rancor, which attracted the men who're sitting around on break. One of them slowly crept up to him, looking grim. He edged towards the running man as he was stretching to know if he had lost his assailants. “Who are you?”

“I'm so sorry. So sorry. I'm in trouble.”

“That's only natural because you wouldn't be stupid enough to drive into a construction site in such way,” the man said as other workers began to gather around them. Some of them looked as if they carried the weight of the world on their shoulder and he would have loved to extend his hands of care to them, but he was in need of a quick escape.

“Thanks. I just need to hide here for a while.”

The burly man looked puzzled. “Police?”

The running man observed the men in the yard, who looked agitated; as if they would have overwhelmed him if not for the interference of the burly man in front of him. The running man
shook him vigorously. “No. Some men. I don't know who they are. They… Sedan. I just need to hide. This crowd.”

The running man gestured at the men who gathered around him. “You’ll attract them to me.”

“Well, you might be right, but there's definitely no way you’ll escape from any damn person with this hot on the showcase car. It's fucking attractive and would pull the crowd to itself in minutes.”

The running man agreed with him. “That's right. What’d you all suggest I do?”

The man turned to the others, and they whispered among themselves for what looked like an eternity while the running man kept checking for the men. He began to wonder why they seemed delayed. There wasn't a reason for them to be suspended in time. The stout man he had been talking to turned to him.

“Nothing. You’ll do nothing.”

“What do you mean by nothing?”

“We’ll do the rest for you. We’re skilled at hiding things,” he said and glanced at his colleagues for support. Many of them nodded, and that should have made the running man happy; instead, it aggravated his fear.

“You will drive to that corner,” the stout man ordered and pointed to a direction that seemed to have a hole at the end.

The running man didn't need a nudge before he drove off to the dark place that was pointed to him. However, his fear was soon turned to horror when he noticed that one of the tractors was lifting his car with a crane. The running man screamed and held on to the handle of the door with all his might, knowing that may be the last fight for his life.

Then, it occurred to him that the reason he didn't see the men that were after him was because these men were also part of the plan. He wondered if they had been bribed or something because there wasn’t a way anyone would have known he was coming there.

The crane dropped him into a ditch. He screamed, and soon enough sand began to fill the hole. Without wasting a second, he scrambled for the door and flung it open. The men saw this and tried to stone him and pour more sand on him, but he was faster than he’d have imagined; looked like death or near-death was enough of an impetus for him to rally his quick reflexes again.
With a great leap, he reached a hanging pole, which jutted out of the ditch and jumped out of the hole. The men, seeing this began to run towards the running man and he knew he had no time to spare. He sped off into a dark crevice—that uncomfortable unknown. At least, even if he died, it would be recorded that he died fighting for his life.

“Where you going?” asked the burly man who stabbed him in his torso with a sharp tool. “Don’t you see I’m trying to tear me a new piece of Dissident Loyalist flesh.”

“Come back you cuckold fuck,” said another one. “We just want to rip your head off.”

The men yelled more curses as they ran after him. They kept shouting and throwing things at him, but he was sure nothing could stop him until he was caught. Soon, he was running into an empty street and was rapidly dashing into the different corners that were available. Finally, someone poked their head out of the window and gestured for him to enter their house. The running man didn't wait to thank her before he crashed into the house and as he did, the men at the construction site assembled out front.

He’d lost them, or so he hoped.

After a couple minutes, they left. The young woman who’d let him in seemed to be deaf and unable to speak as well. She gave him a hug, and the running man left the house through the back door, limping in pain from his stabbing.

---

EPISODE NINE

The Mayor of Tent City

---

STILL TRYING HARD TO stop the blade wound from bleeding and leaving traces, he kept walking off into the sunset. Either everything seemed dark or his sight becoming blurry. There was no way that little knife cut would make him feel dizzy. He staggered until he got to a highway bridge. He was too excited to look around for a comfortable spot—he dozed off immediately.
However, the running man had to be alert when someone pressed the cold muzzle of a gun to his temple. He swallowed hard. There was no way he would fight his way through the many hurdles he had encountered that day and still get killed so quickly.

“Who are you?” A grumpy voice asked.

“I just needed a place to sleep.”

The person pressed the gun harder to his temple. “And you had no other place to come than our own condominium.”

“Your condominium? I only wanted a place to rest my head,” the running man said weakly. The wound had its toll on him. Even the simple act of talking was a terrible drain on his strength, he felt weak at every moment. Whatever was happening to him was stranger than the person pressing a gun to him.

“Leave the gentleman alone,” an elder high-pitched male voice said from the dark. “He.. er… is probably another potential Tent City occupant.” The man reduced his hold on the gun. The running man would have struggled for the gun there to show the man that one doesn't just press a gun to any man's temple.

“Light and… Er… A blanket for the newly homeless man.”

The running man wanted to protest and mention that he had a home, but he saw no need for such arguments when he could just sleep and wake the next day to continue his journey. Although he was yet to know where he could find the best solution, he was sure that seeing Darlene would help him get away from the situation he had plunged himself into.

A bright ray of light sprung out from a small torchlight, and he saw that he had rested in the midst of a different group of people. There were men, women, and children; all dirty and their clothes were scraggly.

“You're… said the old man who’d been giving the instruction.

The running man looked startled, and his body was poised, ready to run away. Regardless of the way he was tired, he was still sure that he could fight his way out of the place.

“Hurt and,” the man bent near him and whispered, “you're wanted. You're that man on the lamb. You've been on the Patriot Police radar since this morning. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Sleeping I guess,” the running man said, rather he mumbled as he felt the blood drain out of him. “I was exhausted, plus this cut…”
“Medic,” shouted the old man.

The running man wasn't sure he’d be attended to before he passed out. Suddenly, he saw himself in a car; he and the vehicle were drowning. He yelled for help, but no one was around, save for the cold water.

Hitting the glasses of the car as hard as he could, the running man kept fighting for a way out, but the glass didn’t give in. Instead, he felt he was swallowed and was buried in the water. He felt himself being drained of life, making him rattle terribly and shaking as if the world had come to an end.

Just as he was about to die, something pierced him like a needle, and he woke up. It was just a dream that seemed real. His body was soaked in his own sweat. He tried to adjust his eyes to the scene before him; the running man and to comprehend what was being done to him.

The running man noticed an old man bent over him. That was curious. He tried to jump up, but he was so weak.

“Hey! Look…the dead is back to life,” the old man said with a tight smile under his thick and grey mustache.

The running man looked confused. It seemed he still wanted the old man to leave him alone. He pushed the old man's hands, which he’d interpreted as advances, aside.

“Let him help you. He brought you back to life,” one of the men said while trying to hold him down. The running man struggled again to rise, but he couldn’t.

“To life?”

“Hey daddio…you died like for,” said a boy in his late teens who wore a blue circular patch which had the title MAYOR written on it. “Um…how many was that?”

The old man laughed. “Mr. Mayor, he wasn't dead. He lost consciousness…”

“And might have died,” interrupted the Mayor.

The old man nodded. “You're right though. But he was unconscious for about thirty minutes. You were poisoned. I think the knife that was used to cut you had a bit of liquid neurotoxin on it.”

The running man swallowed hard. “How’d you know?”

“I’ve seen the symptoms before; especially for R.A.T.S. on the run like you. That’s what they always use to slow you down right before they capture you.”
“And you disappear forever,” said Mr. Mayor making a magician’s gesture to accentuate the eventual homicide and coverup that will occur when they get the running man. “Probably heading towards one of their Dissident Internment Camps. If you’re lucky.”

“I’ve given you an antidote,” the old man said, “but you still need a bit of rest.” The old man packed his bag and walked away, leaving the running man with the Mayor.

“You're very…lucky,” said the mayor worryingly. “Another homeless man would have finally gotten a house in the grave, a permanent house. I was so surprised when you passed out on me.”

The running man nodded. At the moment all he needed was to rest his head then make a better plan the next day. He should have suspected that the knife was poisoned because a regular knife wouldn't have done what he’d felt was done to him…well, to anybody really.

The Mayor took the blanket around him, spread it on the floor, dusted it with his hands and sat in it. He opened his jacket and brought a flask filled with rum. The running man wondered why some men found joy in taking such drinks in the middle of the night.

“You care for some?”

The running man shook his head. He was too tired to talk. The Mayor nodded and gulped. He raised the bottle, shook it, put it to his mouth, shook his head and covered it. There was a moment of silence between them as if he was deep in thought. The running man began to doze off.

“In the latter end of this wretch of a town, a young woman had just given birth to a baby. Our um…medic claimed that the kid will die if we begin to move it about or if there was a loud noise anywhere. I don’t know how much of that is true, but I’m no medic. Have you ever encountered such things?” The Mayor said as he opened the bottle and took a sip.

The running man shook his head. “Very unlikely.”

“I said it,” the mayor said. “This medic’s a charlatan, but he’s the best we got in town.”

“You could supplement him with a Medi-Loci,” said the running man in a sluggish manner, which was right; a Medi-Loci would solve all their problems; diagnosing illnesses on sight, taking internal images of patients and reporting what could be done in the field before the patient dies. It would’ve been a godsend for a town of 1,813, plus one new life form, abandoned people. The Patriots wouldn’t have allowed any Dissident Loyalists to have affordable healthcare.

“Even at that, the woman grew up here with us after the government made policies which affected us all the way up to now. She lived here as an orphan and fell in love…um…those girls
are wild. They can't always keep it together. She fell in love. Not with one of her own but with one of theirs; a conformist. Now, he has rejected her. So, she came back to Tent City.”

The running man was growing weaker. He slouched, and that caught the Mayor's attention.

“If we allow you to stay here in this place. This Tent City would become useless. And...um no one...I mean, no one would call this is our new home. She has built a family for herself. Her surviving son is trying to build a life for himself by living under these harsh conditions. So immediately after you're well rested, you have to leave. When any one of them come around, I want to be able to tell them you ran off but didn't stay with us. They’ve tolerated us because we’re Dissident Light, not the fighting or talking type, but with your presence, that’ll change everything.”

The Mayor brought the flask to his face and took a long gulp and pocketed the shiny thing as he rose, picked his blanket and left. Silence and snoring fought for his attention, but the running man preferred snoring. It gave him hope of tomorrow; even if he’d never lift his eyelids ever again.

He laid back and knew he had no option than to move after he’d rested in Tent city. He’d have never been able to live with himself if anything should befall those who’d given him any help against the totalitarian assholes back at the Command Center. At least they'd granted him asylum until he got better.

His eyes closed slowly, and he drifted into a dark and deep sleep stage which was near death.

Suddenly, a message made it to his Loci which vibrate on his wrist. He looked up, and it was dark outside. His Loci told him it was early morning, about 0700 hours. The running man read through it and knew where his destination laid. The Consortium had just told him to run to the city. He said, “screw it,” and lifted himself and headed away from the abandominiums and tents of Tent City, bidding them and everything eccentric within it a farewell.

**EPISODE TEN**

*The Group Message*
THE RUNNING MAN LOOKED around as he began to tighten his shoelaces. The parking garage, which was about a quarter mile south from Tent City, looked free of prying eyes. Everywhere he looked there was nothing but inordinate silence.

“Okay, here we go,” he whispered to himself. “It’s about time I had a change in luck.”

People were really worked hard not to be involved in works that would drain their energy. He looked around and folded the edge of a rope to make it look like a knot, one that the piggy finger can fit.

*This thing really better hold.*

Without wasting another moment, he pushed the knotted rope into a hole that was available and used it to pull up the lock. It popped up, and the door was unlocked. It was a good thing that old thing used ancient bolts. Quickly, he hot-wired the car and drove off the parking garage. Before anyone would discover the missing car, he would be far gone if not at his final destination.

All he needed at the moment was to find *The Consortium.* They might be hard to find, but they must have a way to solve his problem. They also might be aware of what was happen to him for them to have sent someone to him.

Yet, he didn't know exactly where to go. And the only place on his mind at the moment was Darlene’s. To visit Darlene would solve the issue he had with most of his creature comforts. But it also meant briefing her on what had been happening since he got Gregg's message—which would be a taxing event on his spirit. She’d told him not to place her in his contacts because he wasn’t an authorized user in her network. He dialed her Loci, she had an easy Loci-Tag remember SISTER8401, and soon they were connected.

“Swinger?” She whispered into the Loci.

“Darlene, hi.”

“Where the hell are you? I was supposed to send the news to the editor the previous day. Before I wrote it, I told Jude.”

“Jude…by chance, is he someone I know?”

“No, not personally,” she shot back to him with a hint of disdain for Jude in her voice. “You can't know Jude. He's my editor. He was in support of the news and was going head-over-heels on how I was about to push the paper into the limelight. I felt elated and would have jumped
from the tallest building in the world and feel no pain. But last night, just when I was putting a finishing touch to the story, he called me, babbling about how the news was unfounded and a lot. The fearful little cow just called me, Swinger…and you know what he said?”

“What?” said the running man. “Please don’t tell me it was a conspiracy theory.”

“I didn't need you to ask that. He told me we can't publish the news. And this morning he came to my office with red eyes and all to tell me we can't publish the news. It felt as if someone was threatening him because he was so into it the day before.”

The running man wished he could slap Jude for not having a decent American spine. “That means the news will die down in the next cycle.”

It must mean they have something big planned for me; to kill an entire news cycle for something bigger. This would draw focus on me, the source, and discredit me while they get to put on their show. That’s got to be what they’re up to.

“That's if I'm not Darlene. This is the news of the hour. No, Month, No. It's the news of the century, and with the might of Buddha, I'm publishing this goddamn thing. With another paper, though…”

“You can't come to my office. I think my work computer's been tapped. I'm going home.”

“Home?”

“Yes. That's the best option. Can’t meet your tagged behind in public, you know.”

“If you have any other place to use, it will…”

“Swinger, that's the best alternative for now,” she sighed. “No one else should be involved in this case. The lives of a lot of people have been sacrificed for this little bit of info alone. It will do you good to meet me at home.”

The running man swallowed, hoping that his instinct was only playing on his nerve alone. He feared that they might have discovered he sent her a message and might have been waiting for her. He sighed with anguish. She believed in Buddha, and he wished he could share her belief, but all he needed at the moment was to be able to beat the people chasing him at their game. That
would make the story go out to the public, then from there, he could easily go into hiding while they were too busy doing damage control.

*And it would make me like Teflon. They’d never try to touch me again because my sudden death would be their admission of guilt.*

What the running man didn’t know was they didn’t care about him releasing a thing. That he’d be killed slowly or quick didn’t matter at all. The organization after him was still implementing the scheme he’d caught them trying to a decade ago. He didn’t avert the independence apocalypse but only delayed it.

*Or they’d just kill me slow or make it look like an accident; just like the mob does now instead of blatant kills.*

The journey to her house felt like he was traveling around the world. After about ten minutes, he noticed an irregularity in the way the traffic light had been working. It felt as if the red light came at every junction even when no car was coming near.

A message tone alerted the running man who saw ‘Down by the Riverside’ within it which came to him as truth and safety for Darlene. It continued to read; *The water pours over the mouth of a black, cold ghost. We are of the valley and the mountains and of the great spear.*

He spurned the message and focused on the red light, hoping he was wrong again. Then, the same happened at another stop which began to aggravate his fears. He didn't wait for the countdown, sitting in the car about to explode from suspicion, before he sped off into the highway.

Nothing would stop him from getting to her, but the event around the traffic lights dawned on the running man. It could only mean one thing: his calls were being monitored, and Darlene was definitely not as safe as they both presumed.

He dialed her Loci number. It sounded like there was an outgoing call, but she wasn't picking up her call. That was definitely strange, Darlene was a two-ring person, never allowing her Loci to even vibrate for more than a few seconds. The running man wondered what he would do if something terrible happened to her. She was the only one he could talk to at the moment, who would share his desire to expose the government.

*Please don’t tell me they go to you too, Darlene. I can’t take this.*

The running man began to cry silently on the inside…the loneliness was a mountain’s weight on his soul…but he held it back though, all the tears that wanted to come out. He figured they
could all wait for a more appropriate time. Not that he was made of steel, but his safety was more important and breaking down right now was probably what the bastards wanted.

When he reached Darlene’s place, an old brick apartment at the border of Queens and Nassau County, he didn't bother to close the car’s door before he dashed to her house. Everything inside the place was white. The building and all were too snowy as well, showing that she lived in an upscale area, but the truth was that she’d secured the apartment via a rent stabilization voucher.

The running man reached Darlene’s front door which was slightly opened. Seeing this, he pushed it gently as he braced himself to ward off any attacker. It was said that most break-ins took less than three minutes, but with this sort of break-in he concluded they’d be waiting for the source, the whistleblower, to arrive to dispatch that person; and that meant him.

He had to be extra careful.

He snuck into the house and hoped to see Darlene, or anything resembling her, but he wanted a living being and expected he wouldn’t come upon a fresh corpse. The living room and bathroom looked as neat as they had always been. Nothing seemed amiss, but why was she refusing to pick up his call? He redialed her Loci and turned because the Loci rang behind him.

“What in the world…” shouted the running man as his eyes landed on an unknown man holding a bloody Loci, but before he could process what was happening, someone rushed to him, a person gagged him and suffocated him.

Just as the running man was slipping away into oblivion, someone shouted, “Always switch off a Loci that's not yours.”

He lost consciousness for a while. Then, he woke to meet himself in a swimming pool. At first, the swimming pool looked as large as a river, but soon the pool grew smaller, and that sent a bolt of fear down his spine.

The water began to increase and drown him, he fought his way to escape the water but the more he struggled, the more he discovered that he felt pressed against something. The water started choking the running man. He coughed as his body shook vigorously.

So, this is how I die? What a way to go.

Then, he suddenly woke in a van with maroon carpeting and interior. This time the running man discovered that he was in the same trailer he’d tried to hide in before. He probably had been off to a river because the car was flooded with water; the dream was a mirror of reality. The pooling fluid was indeed choking him as he coughed up some of it which were up to his neck.
As he looked around, trapped in a thick nylon seatbelt which seemed like it was manufactured to keep a person strapped to the chair instead of for protection, he saw the men who’d clocked him out walking away from the van.

The people walked by the street casually as the enormity of the situation struck the running man; their ignorance to such an obvious deathtrap right in front of them angered him, but he figured they probably thought it was another street performance. They were oblivious to what was really happening to him. He’d die right there as those drones walked by him, none would come to his rescue or even call for help.

EPISODE ELEVEN
A Real Drowning

IF ANYONE COULD DISCOVER the mystery that was behind the fishes of the sea having a stable breath underwater aside their use of gills, the running man would have loved to be tested for the program because the water had filled the van completely.

I’m not going to die in here. This is fucking ridiculous. A van filled with water. What kind of carnival they fucking think I’m a part of. I refuse to be a victim.

The only thing he could do was lift his chin with each inch the water rose. In a few seconds, he would be dead. He had to think of an idea that’ll work, but the van seemed sturdy, and he knew most windows were reinforced and was programmed to break only when the vehicle was in a controlled crash.

He tried to open the doors, but it was a fruitless effort.

That would have been the first thing they’d...you...idiot!

Ideas scampered out of his head at the moment, and he was sure if he didn't get a good one soon, he might die like Darlene and Gregg. Then it occurred to him that just like his deceased friends were two individual people, which was symbolic as the two single seats in the car. He
saw it as a sign, which meant that one of them was detachable and could be used for his Houdini-like escape from their most elaborate deathtrap yet.

In no time, he sucked a long breath, slipped around the monstrous seatbelt and swam to the seat, removed the head of the chair and floated up. The pain in his lungs was more than he would have encountered on an average day at the pool. He gasped for air.

“Goddamn it,” he shouted over the rising water in his mouth. “This isn’t happening!”

Catching his breath, the running man sucked in a more significant quantity of oxygen for his next dive, which he figured would be the last one since the van had run out of airspace. He swam towards one of the reinforced windows and began to hit it as hard as he could to mimic a sudden stop. The water kept flooding the car, making it harder to catch his breath on his next quick emergence which was only inches of free airspace. The only source of oxygen in the van now was from the roof which had a latch.

He swam there again and knew that if he didn't make it, he would die like a coward, vanishing without a fight. He swam back and smashed the car repeatedly. Even if there weren't any hope, the thudding would at least cause the alarm to start. And come to think of it, how did the electronics also function with so much water inside the vehicle? He figured they’d retrofitted the car for this moment especially.

**Monsters!**

Every hope seemed to be lost, but the running man still held the car seat with a high expectation of getting out alive. To tell the truth, this event alone would take a heavy toll on anyone unaccustomed to the sadism that was alive and well at the Live Office in the Dallas Command Center.

Now, Gregg's desire for the truth had affected him something awful. Also, his own willingness to take down the rogue element of the government for the illegal operations they’d undertaken had fallen to the wayside with the demise of poor Darlene.

*I’m really going to die in here,* he thought as he felt his lungs catch on fire from lack of oxygen. Suddenly the glass cracked. He had a shred of hope and swung harder. Then the window broke, and water gushed. He kicked the car repeatedly and began to feel he couldn't hold his breathe anymore.

*Shit, I can’t take it any longer,* he thought to himself unable to hold on, and the running man let out an exhale with bubbles coming out. But then he needed to inhale, and there was no way
he’d do that, not with the water in the van. That would be his kiss of death, a cheap ticket to the afterlife, but he knew the inevitable was soon to come; loss of consciousness and drowning.

Suddenly, the glass crashed, and a bit of water gushed out of the car. Hurriedly, he swam away as his body began to vibrate from the lack of oxygen.

*Alright, let’s go. You’ve got this.*

He swam up and took a long breath, exhaled and panted, and finally the glass gave way pushing him out to the street, where he laid for a long time to regain his energy. He saw that the people still weren’t as excited as they should’ve been from witnessing a man being tossed out of a parked van that was filled with water.

“What the fuck do you want?!” he screamed and laid on the sidewalk feeling weak. The running man knew that he shouldn't lie on the floor when he wasn't sure of who was watching, but he was out of the proverbial and literal gas as he panted to regain his composure. He didn't know where he would go next, but he was too tired to rise again quickly.

Suddenly, something began to hum above the running man who lifted his heavy eyes and glanced up to see a small Hover Drone flying around and over him.

“That could mean the bastards will soon be informed of my whereabouts.”

Knowing that time was of the essence, he lifted himself from the cold concrete and ran the words of the letter that was in haunting his mind since he’d seen it.

*Down the Riverside...came a truth and a safety. The water pours over the mouth of a black, cold ghost. We are of the valley and the mountains and of the great spear.*

The running man figured *The Consortium* was reaching out to him for only they would send cryptic messages like this. He didn't have any money on his Loci Bracelet so he couldn't flag down a cab to where he assumed he was going.

He looked around for any car laying idle and preferably unattended. Within a few seconds, he had broken into a black sedan, smashing the window with his Loci first. There wasn't time to be careful any longer. His life was at stake, and he had to fight for it by letting the truth known and then he’d go into hiding.

Speeding off to the only place he guessed the message was talking about–Cascade Caverns in Kendall County. There was a replica of it at the northern edge of Queens.
It took a long ride via the Francis Louis Boulevard, but the running man was evidently ready to weather any storm to reach his desired result. When he got to the edge of an untarred road that led to the reimagined cave, he climbed down and scouted the area to be assured of his safety.

*Man, it's been a while. I sure hope the fellas from The Consortium's really here and not sending me on another wild goose chase.*

He looked in the car to see if there was anything he could use to defend himself because it was high time he defended himself with a weapon. There wasn't a single thing that could be fashioned to a weapon. So, he opened the trunk of the car and saw a hand-jack. It wasn't much, but it could help him a bit.

*What if they bring very high Amp Tasers or SI-Darts? Well, then I guess I'm entirely and unapologetically fricken sold up a creek, or however, it goes. Fuck it. Can't live in fear forever and the odds of them knowing where the guys meet is slim to none.*

Suddenly, something began to flash in his eyes. He glanced in the direction and saw that it was a deliberate effort to catch his attention. Not wasting any time that could be used against him, the running man hurried to the place the flash was coming from which was at the mouth of the cave. Everything seemed quiet, and that compelled him to hold the hand jack firmly.

When he got to the place, a place where long on a hot evening he'd run off without dropping money after he ate dinner there, a lady climbed down. She wore a blue shirt, white pants, and a red cap. He wondered why this lady was sent to such a precarious meeting. The running man released his grip on his makeshift weapon as the lady walked towards him.

“Mr. Swinger?”

“Who are you?”

“I'm with The Consortium.”

He scanned her body well hoping his eyes were an X-ray scanner. She strolled towards him stealthily as he looked. The running man lowered the carjack in his hand, but he kept it tight and close, just in case there were others in the area.

“We've been following you for a while,” she said. “And think it was high we came to your rescue.”

The running man nodded coyly. Only a member of The Consortium would speak like this, and they had one female member which he’d never seen. Could this be her? Still, he was beginning to trust her when he knew he shouldn’t. Maybe it was the allure of her feminine charms?
She moved towards him.

“You need to follow me.”

“Okay.”

She led the way into the cave. The running man was awed by what he saw. Aside from the beautiful water flowing out of what looks like a dead man’s mouth, someone had carved hieroglyphs into the walls. The glyphs were everywhere and very professionally done. It was also apparent that someone was sleeping in the cave. It was indeed a safehouse for The Consortium, and he figured she must’ve been the designated person to monitor that safehouse. It must’ve been, they loved not only cryptic messages but hidden places like the cave.

“Why’d you choose the cave as your humble abode? It’s just a little weird don’t you think?”

She turned towards him. “Not mine. I don't live here.”

He was perplexed and stopped. “I meant why did you pick this place as your place of abode? This cave, my dear…”

The lady turned to him with a confused look on her light brown skin. “Well, Swinger…that's brand new with you. I know that abode means where a living thing lives.”

The running man stood still as he watched her. She looked disoriented. If she were with The Consortium, she’d have caught on to him already. Maybe they were testing him to see if he wasn’t infiltrated. They were paranoid this way.

“Wait,” the running man said and placed his index finger on his lips. “What happened to your soul that you won't let it soak a simple truth.”

That made her seemed even more disoriented and the more she looked puzzled, the more he felt vigilant. Her eyes rolled in her head. Everything about her began to make some noise. The running man stared at her with his mouth agape. “You're not real.”

“What are you talking about Swinger?” she shot back in broken syllables. Her voice was electronic. It wasn’t happening again, it couldn’t be?

“You're an android.”

“Swinger,” she said now with a correct tone. “You’re scaring me.”

“Stay the frickin hell away from me,” he shouted stepping back. “Damn! Damn! I should have… Damn!”
He threw the carjack at her and tumbled towards the car. The humanoid seemed to regain her senses. Just as he got to the driver seat, a big explosive struck the side of the vehicle, throwing him off into the road.

The running man yelled and groaned, making sure he crawled away quick biting his lips over the pain because he knew deep down inside that the android would aim for him next. And lo and behold, he was right; a few seconds after crawling away from the car, gunfire ricocheted around the site. He rolled on the ground and rose immediately and jumped to the back of a rock that seemed like it was imported to lend authenticity to the makeshift cave replica.

His hands were hurt, mostly scrapes, but he wasn't sure he could stand any longer. As he rose to his feet, more bullets came his way. He ran off into the empty field ahead of him, scolding himself for not seeing the signs that stared at him.

EPISODE TWELVE
Their Eyes Were Dead

THE RACE DOWN THE river wasn't straight because it was surrounded by different mountains and he had to climb his way through them. Racing through the spur of the mountain made him stagger a bit.

“I have to have gotten away from her,” he said to himself. “If not, she’d have run me down by now. Good thing they haven’t made a model that moved too fast, fucking androids.”

He injured himself, again, but he wasn't one to give up, not at a time when they were gunning for him so hard. All he had was the fond farewell to regular life, which living underground had become to the running man and the hope that one of those mighty coincidences that occurred in cases like that would suddenly rear up its head.

“Never again,” he said to himself. “I’ll screen the shit out of everyone. That’s how I stay alive.”
He clambered down the little cliff of a thin stream and found a small hole that would make him lose her. She wasn’t too far behind him and looked around for a while trying to scope out the place. The running man wondered how such a humanoid could be used against him. The most advanced model he’d seen wasn’t even able to hold a cogent conversation for more than thirty seconds.

There was no doubt about it, he was deceived by her looks and mystique, the little of it that the thing had exuded and to think he would’ve seen the sign glaring at him, a nuclear engineer who had intimate knowledge of advanced robotics; but this was no robot. He would have fought his way through the hogwash that was happening except the people targeting him were experts. They’d begun to earn his respect, if not disdain.

*This is no longer just a show, it can’t be. It’s too apparent that it’s a vendetta and there’s been an artistic form of glamour laced within it. But who’s watching this crazy shit as it goes on?*

He hid in the hole for a long time and was beginning to doze off when a thunderous voice called to him out of nowhere.

*Out with you swinger….Mr. Swinger…the running man. I know you're hiding. That's one problem. You keep disappearing, and we keep finding you. You're cornered, but unlike a cornered animal, you're going nowhere. Nothing can happen to free you from this trap we've set for you, you prick."

He hid more rooted in the hole, wondering how the technology was able to procure such remarkable sound. Suddenly, he heard Gregg's voice. He was surprised. That was something he never knew would ever happen. Gregg was asking to know who was at the door and that meant they were playing the event he had watched back at the apartment. They told him they were there to deliver goods. Still looking agitated, the running man moved slightly to his right to take a peek. Although he was about to watch Gregg being murdered, it was from the murderer’s point of view.

Gregg shouted, “They've found me.”

He screamed and ran off into the room, but the men shot at him, and he yelled in a monstrous voice. Tears streamed down the running man's face. He would have his revenge on them.

“That's the tip of the iceberg,” said a piggish voice which sounded like a microphone. “We will find you, but before I let you go, be needful, I think you need motivation.”
“The next voice you will hear is the voice of someone you know too well.”

Swallowing hard and hoping he was wrong but he didn't need to wait for too long because Darlene’s voice reverberated around the mountain.

“Talk,” the voice ordered.

“No. Fuck you and your momma, and your momma’s momma. Fuck you to ten generations, you fuck face.”

The running man wouldn't need a diviner voice recognizer to pinpoint whom the voice belonged to. Everything in him cried for him to crawl out and surrender, but only to get a go at one of them.

_Swinger. Don't you dare surrender? The truth must get out. You are the epitome of the truth. With you, the reality of this place will be born, but you need to be bold so that your honesty will pass around the world. This corrupt government mustn't prevail._

The person that was talking clapped loudly. “She’s outstanding and should be a spoke person for the dead. I will count to ten, and if you're not out of your hiding by then, she is gone and would never get the chance to hear those babyish words you’ve been hiding from her for years now.”

The running man held himself and looked about for solace or a better escape route. There should be a way he could escape and still save Darlene, but there were none. Of course, there’d be none, this was all planned out meticulously. The sons of bitches had an advanced computer back at the Command Center which would tell them his next move up to five minutes into the future.

_The fuckers must have a goddamn crystal ball._

The countdown began with the man cringing after every number and Darlene screaming for him to stay put. He was confused because leaving her to die would make him sad forever. And he couldn’t have her blood on his conscious. But she implored him over and over not to move, and that ached even more. So, he chose the latter, yet in a way, he could only work for him.

“Nine.”

He jumped and shouted at them; “This is me, but you have to catch me.”

The humanoid was perplexed at his sudden appearance. He ran like wildfire would do when it encountered a sizeable amount of gas. The humanoid stood transfixed. The algorithm back at the Command Center must’ve predicted the death of Darlene before he’d come out running.
“What the hell? Fucking shoot him. Shoot the Firefly before it causes any further harm to the human race,” the man shouted.

The humanoid turned and shot at the place he had just left, there was a lag in the transmission. They’d called HD units to hover and take control of the android, but they were late. It seemed being unpredictable would serve the running man again.

“Not there, nincompoop, brainless nothing. Chase him down, keep your distance. And for Christ’s sake, switch your SimNet to GPS mode this instance.”

The voice in the air suddenly went silent, but the droid didn't have the time to catch up with the running man, who’d gone for the extended open area outside. He was shot, but he wouldn't allow that to deter him. In a few minutes, the air was being searched by a Hover Drones. There was one that sped up in the distance, training its rifle at the running man.

As if he had been practicing the action for years, the running man rolled over into another hole in the area. The Hover Drone flew away till he couldn't see it.

*Please don’t have heat detection. Infrared would kill me right now.*

The running man ran off into the open, top speed and was bent on making sure they lost track of him. By now the evening was acting as a cover for him. But he hadn’t indeed evaded the humanoid. In a few minutes, he came to a river and gulped a part of it with his dirty, bloody hands. Then, he saw some people who he figured must’ve been homeless Dissident Light people, who had stationed their tent near the river. The night was soon overshadowing the area, he just thought that it would be the best place to hide.

The running man was not sure he had any other choice, he stopped near them and trekked tiredly to the nearest one, a young girl in her late teens, who looked at him as if she’d strip him down and take his clothes.

“Hey, guys!” he whispered bent over. “I need your help.”

He panted, weary from the race he was sure they would lend a hand of help–just to shit on the Patriots. And to sleep there till the morning when he could find his way wasn’t much to ask from Dissident Light individuals who were far beyond low on the Patriot’s radar since they’d given up the fight.

They rose and came towards him as if they were directed by remote controls. That made the running suspicious. He looked around and stared into their eyes. Their eyes were glowing, and
that made his heart jump into his mouth. The running man should’ve suspected when the Hover Drone went by without returning to gun him down that something was wrong.

Upon seeing their eyes, he ran off into the darkness, not knowing if he would make it another day until he could figure a way to break the news to the people. All he had to do was stay alive, but with each moment that passed, it was starting to look like an insurmountable task.

**EPISODE THIRTEEN**

*The Setup Part I*

ELEVEN MEN ARMED WITH metal baseball bats chased the running man through the pouring rain. Not a single civilian lent him a helping hand. They only turned away or got out of the armed assailant’s trajectory as the running man fled for dear life. A few droplets of rain seemed to bounce off him while some clung onto him as if they’d been drawn to the dirty, timeworn clothes.

“Help me,” he cried out to a group of people who seemed to want him to suffer, hostile bystanders and distant onlookers in white raincoats, some of which took out their phones to snap judgmental pictures of his freaked-out pleas for assistance which they played back loud over their phones bass for him; “Help me!” rung out over and bouncing off the walls of the wet concrete. It seemed as if they’d been paid to participate in his torture or maybe they just enjoyed it. The running man then headed towards a dark alley to his right where he tried to stoop near the side of a green, and black dumpster as the men with bats flew past him. The scent of rotting garbage was more welcoming than the eleven assailants who he faced on the other side of the dumpster.

He caught his breath for a moment safely hidden from them.

His sixth sense told him to look back and there they were. Though he felt they couldn’t see him, one of them turned around and saw where he was hiding near the edge of the dumpster and snarled at him.
“There he is,” he shouted. The one who came at him had a brown mask. He pointed a bat at him and ran towards him, followed by the ten feverish attackers, who shouted as they charged, but by the time they reached where the running man was, he’d been long gone.

Once the men with bats reached the street area searching for the man they were chasing, he’d already run into a smoke shop and ducked again. They spread out looking for him anxious and bitter, swinging their bats into the air. A silver haired woman in black sat casually in the rain with her legs crossed, smoking a marijuana cigarette and petting a grey cat. She pointed the men to the smoke shack keeping one her creepily elongated fingers on her feline companion.

The footage switched to when the runner entered the smoke shack. He was drenched with a mingle of sweat and rainwater. The store clerk, a young woman in her late teens, didn’t notice him; she’d been coolly popping bubble gum and playing a digital game of tag with her eyes as the joystick; recently the game was headed towards the banned list for being a waste of time.

She had a mohawk colored in the LGTBQ flag which was tolerable in the past. This quickly defused all reservations he’d held for her being a part of their evil movement, but she wore makeup in a business district, which didn’t seem awkward at all to the running man. This could be a big mistake, or maybe it wasn’t who knew?

There was a loud music banging in the background, an old Korean pop song which had seen a resurgence of late. He tried his best to shout over the bumping pop theme.


“What is it?” she said annoyed, not looking at him though she’d lost a few points to a friend in San Francisco who’d popped her during her loss of concentration.

“I need your…help right now,” he shouted as he slammed the door shut. “Please don’t…let them in.”

The gang of eleven were headed for the store. He tapped the coding which caused the shades to go opaque shielding them from the outside world.

“Don’t let who in?” she asked not looking up her eyes sliding side to side as she tried to get back into the groove. “Damn it, man, you made me lose.” She then turned to him and couldn’t believe the sight. “Dude you’re getting shit all over my floor.”

That was the least of their problems as a team of men came to the door snooping around. She saw them, thought that meant more business and was about to let them in. She didn’t see the bats they held in their hands.
“Don’t let them in,” he pleaded to her begging on his knees, shaking his head.

“Are you insane? I have a business to attend to,” she said giving him an ugly grin. “I don’t get paid. I don’t eat.” She was about to reach for the door release on her Loci.

The running man had a metallic taste in his mouth; a mixture of nervousness and all those near-death experiences had probably created this bitter taste.

“Not these men,” he said softly, reaching for Loci. She pushed him back. “They’re not here to buy anything. They’re here to hurt men.”

“Don’t touch me,” she shouted. “and how’d you know that?” she looked him up and down.

“Look at them. Check your security feed. They’re all gangsters. No decent people move in the pouring rain in large numbers like that.” Their footsteps and prying, at the base of the smoke shack, haunted him and he fidgeted with his lips.

Just as he’d finished his rant, the internal computer warned her of a possible or impending event. The little smoke shack’s central computer started proclaiming they weren’t so safe. She looked at the stranger and huffed.

*Warning: Possibility of breaking and entering: 73 percent. Please alert the Proper Authorities.*

She pointed at him. “You brought all this shit here with you, old man!”

“No do you believe me?” he crept on his belly towards the rear of the smoke shack. She left the console and joined him. The men were outside working their way in, but they weren’t doing it with any particular tool. All the labor was being committed by an outside source; they just stood there waiting for the door to open.

“We can’t stay here,” she said to the running man. “In about fifty seconds, whatever tech they’ve got will break through my locks.”

“But don’t you operate in a Delta block?”

She stood quickly and peeked outside and swore she saw that their eyes were slightly glowing in the rain and darkness. Then she sat in shock. “Yes,” she shrugged. “I don’t know how they’re getting through. It shouldn’t be possible.”

“Unless someone is letting them in,” he said suspiciously and turned to the computer console on her desk and cued his Loci, but it all checked out. She wasn’t in on the deception.

“We can go in the basement and hold up until the police come,” she whispered.

“That’s a terrible idea,” he said. “Do you have roof access?”
“What roof?” she whispered obnoxiously. “My roof’s under construction. Safer down here. Besides. The PD won’t take too long. We can lock ourselves in my bedroom downstairs.”

“Damn it,” said the running man. “This is not the way I wanted to die.”

This might just be it for him though. Someone from the outside was breaking the encryption holding them safely inside and, in a few seconds, they’d get through, and those eleven thugs would have him and that young woman pinned in that smoke shop it was the perfect trap: he was trapped with absolutely no exits.

EPISODE FOURTEEN
The Setup Part II

SWINGER WOULDN’T HAVE HAD the desire to jeopardize another person's life but if that was would save his life, he was ready to take it. The woman, short, slim and brunette, led him through the parlor to her basement and he couldn't help appreciating her because he was tired from running for long. He needed rest by all means.

“You have to stay here till they stop looking for you,” the woman said as she tried to arrange the place to make him comfortable. He would have loved to spend the rest of his days in that basement because of the type of peace he was getting from it at the moment and the type of relief he seemed to have. It was cozy and was a good place to lay one's head to think about one's life.

“I'm not sure they will stop looking for me,” he grumbled. 'They all seems vicious', the woman stated as she began to climb the stairs.

“I’ll check to see if you're safe for the main time before I see what to do for you.”

“Do it for me? C'mon, staying here is enough in itself I don't like to be a burden to you.”

“It's alright. I'll be back,” the woman rushed off the stairs and locked the door behind her. Swinger sat in the chair she cleared for him and felt like just sleeping till eternity but he had to be alert in case something would warrant him fighting for his life. He paced the floor, which was extremely detrimental to his being agile. For some absurd reason, if he paced the floor he would
be tired and wouldn't be able to do anything until he was fully rested. The door cracked open and he was ready for anything. But it was the woman, climbing down the stairs with a tray. She had some sandwiches and juice for him.

“Where are they?”
“Gone.”
“Are you sure about that?”
“Absolutely.”
“Good!” Swinger grumbled as he stretched. Doing that should revitalise him. He dropped the tray and climbed the stairs to go.

“Hey! Where are you going?” The woman asked, perplexed. He refused to give her a reply. He should be on his way to people he could trust. The men that had tried to kill that day were working with the government and would definitely do things to hurt him. The woman gestured for him to be calm. He looked at her as he heaved heavily. Staying there was a better choice, so he stayed back.

“Just sit till I'm sure you're safe.” He struggled to accept her offer and knew it was a better option. So, he sat.

“Rest your head. You worry too much. It's gonna be alright.” He smiled. 'I've heard that statement somewhere'.

“It's from a song.”
“Oh! Yes. Peter Gabriel. That's a wonderful song you're fond of.”
“It's my father's.”
“He must have been a man who's motivated.” The woman nodded and sighed.

“Even to his grave. He was a member of a resistant group.” Swinger nodded as he tried hard not to drift into thinking about Greg or the men that were pursuing or the crazy experiment they were about to carry out.

“That's better he murmured.”

“Better? He died fighting at the wrong time'. That statement felt like a knife on his wounded heart.

“Died fighting? You said it as if it is a bad thing. The government is the people's greatest enemy. You need to know the things they are doing. They are wrong and always wrong. I'll
expose them and would make the world see what they are doing. I will expose them'. The lady sighed as she rose from the top of the stairs.

“I'll be back. Why not rest your head?’ He sighed also and slumped into the seat she provided for him. Soon, he was deep in his thought and dozed off. After a while, he decided to sleep well. He turned his back against the entrance and would have remained there if he had not heard something move behind him. Quickly, he turned to see who it was but not before a big knife grazed his arm. He yelled. The lady suddenly looked vicious. She struck at him as if she was controlled by something beyond her. Yelling, he held her down. Like a snake, she tried to fight her way out of his reach. He made sure he held her down.

“What's the deal with you?” Swinger asked.

“You hated our government. They killed my father because he was wrong. Not because he was some wanton hero. He was no hero. I will kill you for them. I had been trying to get into their inner circle because I live for what this government stands for.” Swinger swallowed hard as he contemplated his options.

“Why did you help me?”

“Help you? Your picture is out for everyone in the organization. Immediately I saw you across the street, I knew it was my time to take the glory.” Swinger scoffed then peck her cheek.

“That's for getting me off the street.” The pain of the place the knife grazed was beginning to him, but he couldn't wait. So, he sped out of the room. It was better to die on the field, fighting than to kill a woman. He gave her a punch on the neck, one that would weaken her. She shrieked while he left her alone and sped off toward the door. He searched about for the key and when he didn't get it, he gave it a great a kick and the door flung out. He ran into the street, removed his handkerchief and tied his bleeding as he strolled down the street.

**EPISODE FIFTEEN**

**The Setup Part III**
WHEN THEY REACHED THE basement, the running man instantly noticed that she had a collection of twisted doll heads spread out across the basement apartment; they were of all races and both sexes. It peaked the running man’s interest for some of them looked too realistic; as if they were the heads of real people except emaciated, shrunken a bit. He looked away.

“You’re a collector?” he asked her, she looked off as if he’d discovered a disgusting secret.

“Don’t be shy about it,” he said reaching for her in the darkness. “I collect as well. Generally moles and squirrels. But only if they’re intact, never roadkill or anything like that. Those I find repulsive.”

“Been collecting since my folks passed,” she said. “They left me the store.”

“I figured as much,” he said. “They’re beautiful. Don’t let anybody tell you otherwise.”

“My mum would’ve thought otherwise,” she mused.

“Maybe she wasn’t as astute a student the arts as you,” he started. “But it doesn’t make her any less your mother, and it doesn’t diminish your memory of her does it?”

“You right,” she said bolting the door behind them and walking over to the other side of the living space. “Where are my manners. Do you want something to drink while we wait for the PD?”

Warning: 100 percent area penetration achieved. Law enforcement notified.

“Well,” she said with a sigh. “There’s no need to call the PD now.”

The running man was frantic. “What are we to do. We should arm ourselves…just in case, right?”

“Arm yourselves against those scamps outside?” she gulped a drink. “That’s insane. We need to dig deep and hide, buddy.”

“I hear them,” he said. They were close. The men outside were breaking their way into the basement. It seemed the Police Department, which was ordinarily swift in that specific zone, was taking its sweet time.

The two camped out as the thugs jigged their way into the smoke shop. They tried to rig their Loci to create a holographic projection of SOS symbols outside, but no one came for them. The thugs only got closer to him, and as they broke in, the two moved further down the basement.

“You must’ve done something to them for them to want you dead?”

“I never said they wanted to kill me.”
“Still,” she said. “What did you do to these guys?” she asked shutting off all the remaining lights.

“I don’t even know them?” he whispered fumbling around. “I think they work for the people who’re trying to capture me, though. Kinda like contracted bounty hunters. That’s just a guess.”

“You’re a fugitive?”

“I never said that,” he said looking back at her with a twisted face. “I never said I was a damn fugitive. They’ve contracted bounty hunters. That’s all I said.”

“By who?” she demanded stopping in the middle of the hallway. “Bounty hunters work for the GOV. If you’re not a fugitive, why would bounty hunters be looking for you?

“Best if you know less.”

“This is crazy,” she looked at her Loci. “Where’s the police? I am in C zone. They should’ve been here by now.” Just then she got a message in her Loci. She walked away to look at it. All the while, the running man kept poking his head out to watch, she read the message. When she returned, her face was different; calm and composed.

“Was that the PD?” he asked eager to hear any news. “Did they say when they were coming?”

“No,” she replied tranquility. “That was a friend of mine. He said they’d be coming to help us if the police don’t arrive in time.”

“I hope your friends are armed,” he said softly. “Because these thugs have guns, you know.”

“That won’t be a problem,” she smiled. That remark didn’t seem to work for the running man. In all the years he’d dealt with these people chasing after him, he’d never met anyone who’d gone toe to toe with them and lived to talk about it. They’d talked a good talk, but they’d all died right in front of him one after another. The people after him were top of the line professionals, and he didn’t want to hear another macho ball crap about survival that would end up getting her or him killed or worse; captured, then tortured and then slayed.

“How can you be sure,” he asked her with a bit of incredulity in his voice. “The people after me aren’t pushovers. Trust me. Look, I’m just going to leave. I’m sorry I got you into this.”

He motioned to leave, still thinking it was suicide but it wouldn’t involve her any longer. They’d probably chase him around and make noise. There wasn’t no real danger other than harassment, right?

“No, lay low,” she grabbed his hands. “They told us to lay low. They’ll take care of it. I trust my friends.”
But just as he’d received such a reassuring notice, the front door came smacking open.

“What was that?” he asked her, grabbing her right arm really hard.

“That was the front door,” she said ducking in fear. “We must go now.”

“Where do we go?” he was frantic. “They’re almost here.”

“In there,” she pointed him in the direction of a cramped space.

“I’m not going in there,” he shouted, then held his lips tight. “I’m not going,” he shook his head. She pushed him towards the crawl space, but he resisted.

“What’d want me to do?” she said to his face her eyes fierce. “I’ll leave you out here by yourself, mister!”

It was either wait for them to get to him and beat him to a pulp or risk his claustrophobia in the tiny crawl space. What was he to do? On the one hand, he’d be facing a simple phobia, but on the other, he’d be risking not only his life but that of a Good Samaritan who was trying to save his own; he had no choice; the running man went head first into the crawl space. When he was in, to his surprise, she slammed the back of it shut and locked him in.

EPISODE SIXTEEN
The Setup Part IV

HOLED UP IN A crawl space at the bottom of the basement’s floor paneling, the running man felt the footsteps of the eleven men above him as they walked over him… where he was supposed to be safe, she made noises.

“ Heard you didn’t get many bites out of this one,” she said to them. “Which team are you with?”

“We’re with the #913,” said one of them. “Three in a row.”

“We’re getting ready for the next fight,” said one of the men who was polishing his bat.
“He’s struggling,” said another “Two weeks left in this territory and I’ll be rotating south. Going to Boynton Beach, baby. Plenty of fishing there. Lots of Jews on Sunday. Be plucking them like ducks in a field.”

“He’s about to surface,” said the girl who ran the smoke shack. “What’s your plan?”

“Seems like we got him under control,” said another bat wielding team member.

“We’ll find out in a minute,” said another one in the eleven.

“I’ve got swivel,” said one.

“You’ve got to bring him around again,” said the girl.

“Bring him easy, now,” she said to them looking around the room, but they burst into laughter.

“It’s always easy,” said a tall, dark-skinned one. “If we got enough grease.”

“Who’s casting?” she asked them.

“I’m roping,” said a short, skinny one with a blue bat.

“Boss says that’s a biggie,” said a husky voice the running man couldn’t make out the face but figured it was the one who’d caught him behind the dumpster; the short, thick-necked one.

“We’re supposed to give em the works.”

It was then he realized that they were using fishing terminology; this was a hunting game for these sick motherfuckers? Worst of all they were being paid to do it?

“Well,” said one of them leaning into the crawl space. “I’m in no mood to chase rats in to crawl spaces. So, you might as well come out and join us there buddy.”

The running man said nothing. He knew it would’ve come to this the moment the despicable little twerp had locked the door behind him. Why, oh, why did he let his guard down? The LGTBQ flag? What a silly notion; it was banned, of course, they’d use it to false flag him into a sense of security because a real rebel wouldn’t have prohibited items flying around in their homes.

_I was such an idiot! Never again, if I get out of here never again. Think, man, think!_

But it was too late to think as they’d done something horrendous to the crawl space; something began to seep into the tight little chamber he found himself caught into. Was it a noxious fume? He could smell it but didn’t know what it was. His mind ran through many scenarios and figured whatever it was, they’d probably wanted to give him a horrible choking
death and braced for the worst, but it was much worse than that; the bastards had turned the thermostat to 100 degrees.

“Come on out, now,” one of them shouted. “Or you can stay and be barbequed!” she said it with a thick country accent to taunt him.

“He’ll be finger licking good,” said one of the eleven with a green bat. “And I tell you I ain’t no goddamn cannibal…”

“I hear you,” said one of them with a blue bat, “but add a little barbeque sauce…mmm. I just might take me a bite of deepfried Dissident rat.”

The running man was sweating awfully from the heat generated by the thermostat being set so high, he started moving around. They heard his motions.

“Aw there we go,” said one with a silver bat. “Got some motion out of him. Must be feeling all that heat.”

“Let me out,” he shouted.

“Un huh,” said the girl. “Let yourself out. Kick that door down, baby.”

“Please, let me out,” the heat was smothering the running man in the crawl space. His Loci read his body temperature had risen to 101 degrees, and his blood pressure was 174 over 110 which was beyond standard parameters for a man of his age. Any longer in that crawl space and he’d die of a heat stroke, hemorrhage or something they didn’t have the facilities to treat and they’d be responsible for his death.

“Let him go,” she shouted at them

“But the boss said….”

She shushed him “I don’t have the tier coverage for that. And you fuckers, get out of here right now with those damn bats. Bring the Cleanup team. I said the Cleanup team.”

They popped the crawl space door and ran out of the establishment leaving the running man alone in the building to die. A few seconds later, the New York City Police Department arrived with flashlights and guns drawn. The man was taken out in handcuffs, but upon reviewing their security footage, they quickly realized their mistake and gave him onsite innervational medical treatment and released him back to the zone.

That wouldn’t help the running man as his hunters were waiting for him right as the NYPD dropped him out of the medic truck outside the smoke shack. He instantly recognized their dead eyes and took off running, and they followed. The hunt was back on.
HIS INSTINCTS WERE RIGHT the moment he was told he’d be released home. There weren’t any major injuries the medics told him. But they’d be waiting for him the moment he left the ambulance; he wasted no time dashing into an alley as the rain had slowed to a trickle, but the running man’s clothing weighed a ton.

He heard them behind him, at least thirteen now; two school aged teens had joined the ravenous bunch of eleven bat carrying monsters. He was quick for an old man, leading them by at least a quarter block, but then again, he was running for his life. As the running man reached the tail end of the block, a horrific event was unfolding before his eyes.

He stopped really quick, sliding in the rain…

A group of dogs had begun to assemble at the end of the alley he’d chosen to evade his attackers. They seemed very disciplined, standing in straight phalanxes as if they were troops, but that wasn’t what struck fear in his heart.

They seemed to be waiting for him; all Thirty-Nine of the thick coated Doberman Pinschers.

“They got him,” said one of the bat wielding men. “He’s not going anywhere now.”

This was the worst of events. He was required to make a most terrible decision; wait for the people who’d bludgeon him to death or the dogs…

If this was going to be his last moment of consciousness, he veered his thoughts to the face of his daughter; the one he never got to see but for a single day. She’d been born on wintry night at the New York Liberty Hospital, then the primary care facility for government employees. The running man had spent the night with her, but then the mother took the love of his life away from him; vanishing into the crowded city.

It wasn’t until sixteen months later that he heard of his child’s demise; that she died when her mother rolled over her in her sleep. The woman came to him dismantled, but he turned his back
to her. And now he too faced death, but he wouldn’t let it roll over him like a helpless child; not by the bone breaking teeth of those canines heading his way nor by mankind.

They were coming at full speed by now; the dogs and the men. He was caught in the middle with nowhere to go. Then the man on the run cursed the day he was born as he saw a fire escape nearby. This must be his way out, God was lending him a hand.

At the last minute, he jumped onto a dumpster and flung himself onto the last ring of fire escape. He looked down at the dumpster and laughed at how they, inanimate objects meant to be filled with garbage, had treated him better than his own people. The dogs brandished metallic teeth and grabbed onto the dumpster and had started chomping off parts it right as the running man jumped onto the balcony.

As he climbed, the men tried to reach him from the fire escape. A few did, but he was already up the first few steps heading to the roof. The dogs could be heard barking below him. His heart raced, he figured he’d have to run into those hounds when he reached the first floor, then what?

He ducked into the side of a corner where there was rubble in the building. It seemed the space was being refurbished. The men started arriving one by one up the balcony from the fire escape.

“Where’d he go?” asked one of the bat wielding men, “I don’t see him.”

“There,” said one of them pointing to the floor. “Footprints.”

*You gotta be kidding me, damn it,* thought the running man, *why didn’t I just go downstairs?*

They stepped cautiously reaching closer to him and as they inched nearby him, he pushed the rubble he’d been hiding under as hard as he could.

The rumble fell atop six of the eleven men, the two teens were quick to dodge the heavy plaster walls and copper wiring and pipes.

“Son of a bitch,” said a teenager. “There he goes.”

The running man took off like a jet, he bolted so fast they didn’t get a chance to catch up. He thought he’d been cleared of danger but, the moment he got downstairs, the group of Thirty-Nine Dobermans were waiting. It wasn’t the scent of wet dog that tipped him off but the pattering of their gigantic feat all in unison as they went after him.

They started to chase him in a different manner this time. It was as if they’d switched up their tactics, but how could they’ve have been so indistinctly good at it? They were just dogs, right?
The video recording switched showing, to no one’s surprise now, that the Command Center was in charge of the dogs. Back at the console, there were thirteen team members who issued commands to the Pinchers; each worked in a team of three.

“They aren’t your typical stupid dogs either,” said the running man. “They seem to communicate with each other and know and expect what I’m about to do. Got to be with them.”

Knowing was only half the battle since there was no one in the city who’d lend him a helping hand. He decided to run into another establishment. This time the fast food restaurant was filled with people, he knew in his heart of hearts that this was the perfect place.

“If you’re going to kill me, you better do it on camera in a public place, bastards.”

They were mere feet away when he reached the doors and slammed them. The people inside looked at the man as if he was crazed.

“What is your problem?” asked a barista. He didn’t answer, simply pointing out of the window, upon which the barista almost fainted. The rest of the patrons came towards the window, in a mass rubbernecking of sorts, to look at the ravenous dogs staged just outside the restaurant.

“Don’t tell me they’re harmless,” he said. “They’ve been chasing me for sixteen blocks. Sons of bitches even know what they’re doing too. Like they’re working together, like they’ve plotted this shit.”

“What’d you mean?” asked the barista. “They’re just dogs.”

“Not these,” said the running man. “Look at them. Look into their eyes. These dogs are way more aware than regular canines. Something’s not right about them.”

The barista looked, gazing into the eyes of the Doberman Pinchers who stared back at him and several customers in the restaurant. The running man was right; something wasn’t quite right with those dogs. Then, one of them sat and the act was followed by the remaining thirty-eight. It was then the barista knew he wasn’t looking at normal dogs.

He stood there watching them as they huffed at the front of the window idling; they seemed to beckon him to come out for the chase like it were just a game.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” he said to the running man. “It’s kind of weird. Probably a new animal virus going around. I’ll notify animal control immediately.”

With their keen ears, they must’ve heard the animal control part of the conversation; they got up swiftly and started exiting the front of the restaurant.
Just like that, he’d figured their weakness; groups of people. It wasn’t just groups of people but a large group of decent folks. They’d be on the law’s side. What was happening to him was clearly beyond the reach of the city’s legal system. Anybody in their right mind would see it as an evasion of their, and therefore, his civil rights or right to keep drawing breath.

EPISODE EIGHTEEN
The Lightshow

Time: 0645 hours
Year: 2030

BACK AT THE COMMAND center in 2030, the supervisor in the white shirt was munching on a cheeseburger with green slime dripping off the corner of his mouth. He had a Birdseye view of the running man with a silent Hover Drone already in place at the scene. He’d been enamored with making his mark on this new target.

“Right there,” he said pointing at a part of the street below. “Send in team number #445.”

It was like coordinating a symphony to the supervisor. He was the god of this solitary being’s life which he was about to end in a most despicable way and before he’d end it, he’d put the running man’s face through the dirt.

For the supervisor, death wasn’t enough, life needed an exquisite departure; a symbolic sendoff worthy of the sin committed by the target. This seemed to be why the Command Centers were created, in his humble opinion.

“Zoom in right there,” he ordered a Cruncher. “Now, Tracy. I need you to get him to come to the right and stop for twenty seconds before he attacks the rat bastard again.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” said Tracy a Cruncher. “On your command.”

He lifted his hand and shouted. “Hit em, hit em, hit em, hit em, Good!”
“Is he ready?” asked another Cruncher, placing another agent provocateur to attack the targeted man on the run.

“I think he’s in position, sir,” replied a dispatcher on the ground who coordinated with the Crunchers. The dispatchers often relayed visual information to the Crunchers, though they could see what was going on, to speed things along. The man about to attack only stood a few feet from the running man. The supervisor contemplated on an approach before action time. Then he pounced.

“Stop, stop, stop…no, no, now go, that’s right. See? That’s how we do it, folks.”

“He’s on the run,” said a Cruncher.

“Give him the works,” said the supervisor. They started sending team after team of people on bikes after the running man, but that wasn’t his problem; they were armed with rubber bullets. Under any circumstances, this wouldn’t be a big issue, but the sheer number of rounds which came at him, the sheer scale was enough to cause him to hemorrhage should they all land on his body.

“We’re not getting through,” said a Cruncher. “He’s hiding behind a dumpster.”

“Bastard’s got a hardon for those things,” said another Cruncher.

“Now send in the cars,” said the supervisor. There was a loud sound in the background. Then a slew of vehicles blasted by the running man; it must’ve sounded like the end of the world to him as a hundred cars flew past him, carrying off the dumpster and nearly running him over.

When the rubbery fumes had settled, the running man was spotted heading north, still on the run. A young Russian nun was tailing him on a motorcycle. She radioed his whereabouts and tried to run him off the sidewalk, but he dodged her at the last minute, and she struck a mailbox. As he continued running, she smacked a match and set the bike ablaze and lit a cigarette.

“Send in the armed Hover Drones,” said the supervisor. “We’ll dart him and bag him at some corner. Damage control team #139 will have to come in and wrangle the news media should anything get reported.”

The moment the order was sent out, an outbreak of buzzing bots came flooding after the running man. They were about the consistency of basketballs; fast and furiously loud, they tailed and came upon him with a vengeance; he ran into a parking garage for cover.

“You can’t get away now,” shouted the supervisor. “Fire at will!”
They began bombarding the running man with darts, some of which narrowly missed him by inches. He ran from parked car to parked car, they followed him around and surrounded him. The Hover Drones cooperated with one another, working as a unit, reporting his whereabouts or where they’d predicted he’d next poke his head. They were viciously accurate. He couldn’t poke his head out twice in any single location.

After attacking him without relent, he finally figured a way to fool the seemingly humanoid thinking bots; merely throw his voice. He sat up and held his hands over his mouth and shouted his name across the far end of the parking garage; it worked. They flooded the other side of the garage. But they did leave one of their members just in case, a risk management calculation.

He too had a risk management moment and decided it was his only chance to dip; he took off towards the elevator. They doubled back and were upon him in five seconds, the one next to him had already darted him seven times, but none of them landed or stuck to his clothes.

“What do we do?” asked a Cruncher. “He may get away.”

“We’ll adapt,” said the supervisor.

The drones arrive, but by the time they reached him, he was staring at the bottom of the building. You have nowhere to go, was spoken through the droned. The man looked down and gave the drones his middle finger then he jumped off the edge of the parking garage.

“The bastard did it,” said the supervisor in disbelief. “I can’t fucking believe it. Wouldn’t believe it if I didn’t see it myself goddamn it.”

They zoom down to see his corpse. It would be gruesome since the fall was way over six stories and there was nothing but concrete down there, but when the Hover Drones zoomed in, the running man was emerging from a dumpster and then running again, this time to another facility just outside the reach of the Hover Drone’s range.

“Get him now,” he ordered the men on foot and on the bikes and cars. They rode off towards the man, but he was running with determination. He ran into a place called Little Fitzgerald’s. It was filled with people that morning.

“Back down,” ordered the supervisor. “Don’t go in after him. Too many witnesses. I’ll get an extraction team. This needs to be surgical.”

They all stood outside unable to enter the building since they were told to back down – they just hung out watching him their eyes idle and blank.
DEATH WAS A ROBBERY suspect who left no clues, but in the case of the running man, his death would be the most clued-in one in history as countless people joined in to videotape his impending demise. The growing frenzy to record him *kicking the bucket* had reached a grotesque level; the folks perpetrating the death cult had kept their game concealed though, right under the guise of everyday recording.

As the runner dodged his would-be killers, a female Cruncher back at the Command Center clicked on her mouse again and pulled up their live feed which showed him running to another establishment; this time it was a corner deli and grocer, named *Little Fitzgerald’s* which was packed with customers.

Most of the clients appeared to be grabbing breakfast before a morning commute to work. Most residents of that section of Long Island worked in Queens.

A big PPO Detainment Center was being constructed in the Long Island City section of Queens, and it drew a slew of workers, meaning plenty of business for *Little Fitzgerald’s* in the early half of the morning.

“Well, thanks to the Consortium, the old team’s been made,” said the Command Center’s tracer. “What should we do?”

“Pull up the roster,” said the supervisor. “Look to see who we’ve got in there who’s a loyalist.” The Cruncher cued up a list of the clients at Little Fitzgerald’s, sixteen individuals; their names, age, address, all their demographic information showed up in a bubble. The supervisor was given a rundown of which one was a possible loyalist, but none of them was close enough to initiate a campaign against the target.

They were all labeled in bright blue on the screen, meaning low level; not hostile enough to initiate an attack against the running man. He tapped his nose thinking then he looked at Alice for a second.
“What do you think about a package?”

“A special delivery?” she said. “Isn’t he a level five? He’ll see right through it.”

Just by looking at the running man, Alice could tell he wasn’t going to be an easy fish to catch. That man had seen too many days fraught with paranoia; too many nights where he’d run to his curtain and draw them twice or thrice to check to see if somebody was outside his house. He’d spent many a night up as an owl, eyes full as can be watching, waiting for the inevitable; the end or a surprise attack. He was to hypervigilant to fall for something as what the supervisor projected. He was not only too smart; time and wear and tear on his psyche had hardened him against those primitave tactics; sane attacks cannot work on the insane.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said to Alice. “The object is to shake him, maybe make him bolt out there and get him out in the open so we can start reeling him in again.”

“I’ve never seen it work on a level five, maybe a four, definitely a three. But we could give it a go, sir.”

“Make it happen.”

“You’re cleared to send in the hot package,” said a Cruncher.

They watched and waited as a man delivered a package to the deli. The delivery agent seemed to be having an argument with the running man, and it started to get heated. Their quarrel seemed to drown out everything happening within the deli.

The supervisor was ready to cut the cord, but the deliveryman managed to drop the box on the table; he’d successfully made the delivery. Then the argument looked like it was about to turn into a fist fight; they aborted the mission.

“Recall him,” said the supervisor. “Guess you were right.”

Moments later, the deliveryman left the deli, climbed into his delivery vehicle and left.

Just then, a young girl, dressed in a judge’s outfit, took a white bucket and poured pig’s blood over it and started kicking it across the street.

“He’s a higher level five,” said Alice showing the running man’s vital stats on the computer; the way he’s reacted to the situation. His heart rate, blood flow, body temperature, breathing, pupils, everything was monitored by the embedded AI within the cameras. “We’ll have to bump him to Beta Six from now on.”

“Not just yet. Send in the local NS team #119,” said the supervisor pointing at the screen angrily. “Send the ones from Long Island City and Rye out there pronto.”
“How’s he evaded us for so long?” asked Alice.

“Had many friends in high places, prick,” said the supervisor. “They should all be gone now, spooked, you know how we do – scared them away. He’s alone and ripe fruit ready to be plucked. Just can’t wait. Just can’t wait to put hands on him.”

“The local team will be there in thirty,” she said.

“Perfect. I want that scumbag demolished by nightfall.”

EPISODE TWENTY

The Others Conspiracy

BACK AT THE COMMAND Center, year 2070. Puddles of sweat formed on the floor as the Crunchers tried to shut down the bandit video. Travis Pinkerton stormed out his office, his face tight with fury. He wanted to be told that the glitch had been fixed, but that damn video was still showing on the sixty by sixty digital projection.

Travis the Commander, Travis the god figure, Travis the level-headed gentleman, could not take it any longer.

*Get used to the taste of crow Travis, since you might to have to gobble up some very soon.*

He tossed a tech out his chair. The bewildered tech ran off as his commander threw the chair at the projected holographic image. To no one’s surprise, the plastic chair flew straight through the image.

The little man was overheating. He ripped some buttons off his shirt. His heart wanted to climb out through his mouth as he puffed frantically. He searched wildly for another chair to throw, but he knew there weren’t enough chairs in the Command Center to cure him. A young tech came over to console him. He shoved the redhead hard to the side.

“Get the hell back to your workstation!” he shouted, still bent over. Almost fully covered with shame, which he hid behind his power, he always had dark sunglasses, reminiscent of a Banana Republic’s dictator.
The video rolled on. The millions-strong audience saw the man running into the deli and grocer. “This is going to sound crazy,” he said to the patrons, “but I need your help! I’m in trouble. There are some guys after me. They’re posing as federal agents. But they’re not the law. If … I mean when they come here, ask them for ID. And ask them to call the police for backup, before they arrest me. If they can do that, I’ll go without resisting. I’m a law-abiding citizen. A veteran. I’ve lived an honest life. Never committed a misdemeanor. So why would the feds be after me…if they weren’t imposters? Think about it.”

“Seems reasonable,” said a woman sitting by a window to his left. “I have a cousin down south. Two men posing as policemen carjacked him. To this day when he sees the Highway Patrol behind his car, his heart attacks him.”

“Thank you, thank you,” said the man, leaning on a chair with a sigh of relief. “So many people think I’m crazy. Or losing my mind. I’ve been in hiding for almost ten years now. I think they’re after me because of my blog. I exposed a few of their secret experiments. Things they didn’t want people to know about. I’ve had testimonials from high ranking officials. I was a member of a group of Crunchers called the Consortium, who handed over files about an illegal experiment the government was about to go live with very soon. And I published it on my blog, and reporters picked it up. The OD-59.5 Initiative it was called.”

“I Think I heard about something like that,” said a young Asian woman at the back of the deli, the only person who understood what the OD-59.5 Initiative aspect of the tale was about.

“It was all over the news, but the DOE blacked it out. Some reporters were taken to court over it. The Consortium has since gone underground. Some went to other countries. Afraid for their lives. This was years ago. On December first of this year. They told me I was located by the goons sent by the Nay Slayer company. They want revenge for the leak. And I was told through a bunch of cryptic messages to run, so I ran. Ever since I’ve been watched and monitored – I just know it’s them. I don’t know what has happened to the Consortium. Haven’t heard from them in a while. Now I know the Nay Slayer agents and their company want me dead.”

“You’re the guy who leaked the Others Defense project?” asked the same young Asian woman, sitting at the end of the deli. She was about five feet five, slim and wore a red coat with polka dot blouse under it. She had her hair evenly cut in a bob and wore a little bit of makeup to accent her cheekbones, a touch of mascara to bring out her brown eyes. “I thought it was an urban legend? Like ufos. They said it was never a real thing.”
“Yes, I’m him,” he said to relief and mixed agitation. “Believe me it’s real. But it’s better that we don’t talk about it. Trust me. If you want to stay safe and alive. Keep your mouth shut and let me and the press do all the talking. These people are very powerful. And they don’t want it out that they’ve been caught doing the government’s dirty work.”

“I believe you, my friend,” said Oka, the store owner, a tall, fair-skinned man in his late fifties with a thick mustache which curled upward. “You look tired. Take a seat. Are you hungry? I have a few extra sandwiches that were canceled right after they were ordered this morning. Sons of bitches.”

“Watch your mouth around the clients,” said Vivian, the store owner’s wife, a portly woman in her late fifties. She was blue haired and brown eyed. She wore a white apron which had no stains on it, even though she’d served every patron at the Deli that morning.

“Sorry, honey,” said Oka.

“That’s okay,” the man said, pointing next to a chair by the front door. “I could use a glass of water.” He sat and was served by Vivian. The cold glass felt soothing in his hands, and the water looked more enticing than any dish Oka could’ve served.

“At least your friends are safe, you know,” said Vivian.

“Yeah,” he said taking another sip of cool water. “That feels good. They’ll never get their claws on them, boys. They’re too smart for those hillbillies. Those guys are the cream of the crop. Techies, you know. Billy went to the Imperial College London, Danny studied at The Royal Institute in Stockholm, Richard at MIT, Mark at Caltech. Top of the line Crunchers.”

“Sounds like some brilliant fellas,” said Oka. “Viv’s cousin’s a whiz kid. Full scholarship to Yeshiva.”

“Hardly compares to the schools he mentioned, Oka,” said Vivian.

“A school is a school,” said Oka. “It’s what you do with it after.”

“I agree with you, sir,” said the running man, nodding slightly.

“Go on, darling,” said Vivian giving Oka a dark look, she was getting interested in the attractive man’s fantasy. Not too many people come to her deli with tall tales or vivid conspiracy stories, never this convoluted at least, and he’d come in the pouring rain. It made for the perfect storm in a dull world and on a repetitious day for a woman long devoid of a sex life.
“They can be in and out a NORAD or NSA server in under a hot minute,” he said to her with wide eyes. “Wouldn’t leaving a trace. But they didn’t do it for malicious purposes. I used to work for the Department of Energy.”

“How long ago was that?” she asked leaning closer. Oka looked on with a pair possessive brown eyes which wanted to rip out their sockets and remind his wife she was a married woman. But he retold himself she was always a casual flirt, and it meant, maybe, something would happen later once the lights turned out that evening.

“About a decade ago in the sands area of Nevada. High clearance. Stuff you can’t even talk about. Spooky things, you know.” The ’sands area of Nevada’ was a codeword for none of your business, but Vivian was smart enough to figure it meant a secret government location somewhere near an Air Force base.

As he spoke, he kept looking over his shoulders as a squirrel eating a nut would. He remained agitated even with the people around him – must’ve been a long, tumultuous journey into paranoia over those ten years on the run.

Vivian had sat next to him trying to ease his anxiety, but it didn’t calm down the running man. Whatever he’d been through, it had taken its toll on his mind and soul and now hit had ventured into the Deli with him into the physical realm.

The story was intriguing enough though as a few construction workers, no doubt from the new project in Long Island City, hung around to eavesdrop on the new guy’s fantastic tale of a government coverup.

**EPISODE TWENTY-ONE**

The Nay Slayer Corp

HELEANEDINTOVIVIAN’$rightearasifther’dbeennoonetelseinthecrowdedDeliandGrocrtohearnextpieceofinformationhewasabouttodisseminate.Theplacewaussilent
enough to listen to crickets battle each other for dominance; Vivian saw through those lukewarm eyes of the running man that he was reluctant to speak.

“Must’ve been tough working for the government,” she said. “Had to keep everything confidential. Even with family and especially with friends. It was tough wasn’t it?”

“We were working on the auxiliary power units for the OD-59.5 project. We’d been retrofitting the units for the Air Force when suddenly the project was ripped from us and taken to the Nay Slayer Corporation. Some shady company in Dallas, Texas.”

“Who’re they?” she asked.

“Never heard of them back then, so I had a few of the guys on my team to look them up. That’s when the harassment started. This is none of your business, Earl. You’re supposed to keep out of these sort of things, Earl. What were you doing in Vegas on the fifth of November, Earl? It got out of hand, so I quit my lucrative career as a nuclear engineer and moved back to the city.”

“What did you do then?”

Just then a delivery man in a brown uniform came into the deli…

“Order for E. Swinger,” he said and walked up to the running man. Dropped a package at the table.

“I never ordered a thing, and you know it,” he said to the delivery man who looked at him as if he’d demanded a signature.

“It came from across the street,” he said pointing at the office next to the deli. “They said it was urgent. From your mother.”

“Bullshit,” he shouted. “My mother hasn’t’ spoken to me in years. Who sent you?”

The man pressed his ears; seemed he’d received some sort of command from someone. He dropped his pen and abruptly left the deli. Vivian looked at the box the delivery man had placed on the table.

“Good gracious,” she said reaching for it, but the running man stopped her.

“Don’t open it,” said the running man.

“What’s in it?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m not willing to find out.” He stood and took the box outside and tossed it into a garbage can. Then he came back. “Where was I…”

“What did you do after…”
“Ahh…became a blogger and radio host. But the harassment just got worse; dropped phone calls, they killed six of my pets, they stole my mail, moved into adjoining apartments and made noises all throughout the day and night.”

“Must’ve been annoying,” she sucked her teeth.

He quickly looked out behind himself again, but Vivian rubbed his shoulder to assure him nobody was coming for him and he continued his tale.

“The scariest thing happened a few years after I moved to New York. I noticed a pattern everywhere I went. People would cough at me in places I frequented, be it bars, the subway or a restaurant. Then I swore I started seeing the same colors repeatedly; cars that were white or red came passing by me in what I could swear was not random at all.”

“You knew for sure this was what you saw?” she asked leaning back in her chair. At that point, the story got too good to be true. Was he making this up? Was it all just pure stream of consciousness? She couldn’t tell from merely looking at him, and Vivian considered herself a great lie detector from years living with Oka; a master salesman who once joked he could sell tears to a howling widow at her own husband’s funeral. Her bullshit meter was on point, but it had registered zeroes sitting next to the running man. Was it the truth or was it the disturbed ramblings of a psychotic individual?

Just then a young woman burst into Little Fitzgerald’s pointing her finger at the running man. “You two-timing, deadbeat, son of a bitch,” she proclaimed and proceeded to smack the back of the man’s head with a crumpled-up paper.

“Madam,” said Vivian, pushing her to the side. “What is your problem?”

“This asshole,” she shouted at the man who looked at her in dismay. “Is a deadbeat!”

“Who is this woman?” asked the running man. “I don’t know this woman.”

“You don’t know me?” she shouted. “You don’t know me?” she screamed deliriously then lunged at him. Oka and a few guests had to restrain the woman.

“Nine years,” she shouted. “Goddamn it…Earl.”

The running man gave the lady the meanest look he’d ever had since entering the deli. “How’d you know my?”

“Watch your mouth in my establishment, young lady,” said Vivian with her arms at her side. She looked at Vivian with an angry stare then bit her lips as she glared at the running man, who still sat calmly in his seat.
“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” asked the running man, who stood and walked over to the woman. Vivian stopped him before he could get to her and pushed him back to his seat. The woman tried to lunge for him.

“What? What are you talking about Earl?” she shouted at the running man. Apparently, this Earl fellow didn’t want to respond to his name, but then he turned around to look at her with a stare that said it all.

“Don't you see?” said the running man, “She knows my name. I don’t know this lady from daylight, and she knows my name.” Could she be another in the line of fakes he’d been talking about? How could anyone find a complete stranger after ten years of hiding?

“You haven’t done shit for our baby, Earl. That’s what I’m here for. You’ve been hiding from your responsibilities. Now I’m here, and you’re going to pay up, buddy. I ain’t going nowhere till you pay me like you said you would.”

“You owe this woman for something?” asked Oka. “What is she talking about baby responsibilities?”

“That’s right,” she said sliding from foot to foot. “He’s been ducking me forever now. Ran out and left me with the kid. Been raising his seed all by myself bout a decade. Thought I would know when he came out the woodwork.”

“This is gobbledygook,” said the running man. “All from the base of her madness.”

“Liar!” she shouted pointing at him. “Sinner!”

“Then the Lord shall strike me down,” he shouted at her, upon which she took aback, seeming to buckle at the words, holding her mouth in pain. What he’d said must’ve struck a chord with the woman who fled the scene instantly. Vivian and Oka looked at each other stunned by what they’ve just witnessed; it was either a heated debate between hateful lovers or they’d just saw their first live exorcism.

**EPISODE TWENTY-TWO**

_The Frequency Clause_
WHEN EVERYTHING SETTLED DOWN, the running man took his seat next to Vivian, she went back to caressing his back, and the group around him grew again to interested bystanders who wanted to hear the rest of the alluring story about the government research laboratory.

The audience watched as the woman who’d accused him of being a deadbeat took a cab which only took her a few blocks away upon which she was taken to a mobile Operations Center where she was paid for her actions by Command Center staffers. She then left the scene in the opposite direction which she’d arrived in a different cab.

The running man continued his tale. “The frequency was uncannily coordinated to make me notice them,” he said, that time he looked her square in the eyes. “If an individual sat on a bench for an hour, he might see the same random set of cars flash by him in the city and disregard them, but for me, they made sure I saw the red and white cars through frequency.”

“How could they do that in a crowded city with hundreds of thousands of cars?”

“Everywhere I went the same types of cars followed me. Then it was people, hundreds of them in red shirts and white shirts. They’d crowd places I went to. If I arrived at a subway station that was empty, moments later there’d be fifteen people there in red shirts or fifteen people with white shirts. That was making a statement. A statement that they were watching me. And everywhere I went I could be found.” He stopped to wipe tears from his eyes.

Vivian didn’t know how to console the man. She hugged him, as he shivered crying. Oka brought a blanket and placed it over him.

“They stopped that for a while,” he said to her sobbing. “When I stopped coming out of my apartment. And only I ordered food for delivery. It tore me apart, you know. But then I had the wherewithal to come out again.”

“You couldn’t let them win,” said Oka. “I wouldn’t have.”

“Neither would I,” said the Asian woman sitting at the end. “Nope. Never. They’d have to kill me instead.”

“But then sets of random people would come up next to me and make startling conversations with each other,” he said.

“It would always contain sensitive details about my personal life. Information that I don’t have out in the open world. It’d always be something I’d have written on my computer, in my phone, or on my wall back at home. It meant that somehow they’d been in my house… but how?”

“Oh, my goodness,” said Vivian face to palm. She stood, couldn’t take the story sitting down anymore as blood rushed to her head.

“It freaked me out, too. I became a recluse and then. I had to vanish. Go off the grid. I created a bugout bag and disappeared for good. That only pissed them off, I guess. But a man had to do what I man could to stay sane. And alive.” He sipped some water.

Vivian looked at him with kind eyes as he sipped. The water must’ve tasted like sweet nectar to the runner after having been finally accepted by the other human beings. The soft, early morning aroma of baking croissants seemed like a distant memory for a man who’d been on the run for a decade, living house to house, public park to bench, moving each day to stay unseen.

Having lost his golden parachute, his backdoor, his benefactors, which the PPO had meticulously sought out and deleted one by one in order to get to him – the source of the leak – the R.A.T.S. he was an orphan.

“You’ve lived a terrible life, my friend,” said Oka. “But you are still alive. Praise be Allah.”

“If there is a God,” he said. “Then he’s forgotten me. He’s forgotten both my compatriots who are now living abroad and me. Away from their homeland. Where they grew up. Where they thought they’d be safe and happy. Where there was supposed to be a Dream. An American dream we were all told as children that we’re supposed to achieve through hard work, passion and through time. Seems like that Dream was a lie. It’s a Nightmare.”

“Don’t think like that,” said Vivian. “Allah watches over everyone. But remember. It rains on both the wicked and the good. Allah is testing you, my son. It’s up to you how you react. Curl up, decline or rise to the occasion. Just looking into your eyes, I see a lion, fierce and ready to rise to the challenge Allah has placed in your path.”

The video switched back to the old Command Center. Three Crunchers were manipulating what looked like a CSI crime scene. A map revealing the distance from the running man’s location popped up on the screen.

The crime scene was only an hour’s drive from where the man now sat in the deli and grocer. The Crunchers’ screens showed various scenes of a beautiful young college student named Aimee Belle getting violently murdered.
The old image zoomed to one of the screens. It depicted a leafy college campus, with Aimee Belle walking casually towards her dorm. She had her headphones on so that she couldn’t hear a thing. The view switched to show a tall male wearing green coveralls from head to toe, wielding a large serrated knife. He followed Aimee like a cat, careful not to be seen, stopping, moving out of sight each time she turned her head.

When she reached her door and opened it, he struck quickly. He slashed Aimee Belle in the throat, splattering blood across the walls. Aimee Belle jerked, spun around, and gasped silently before she died.

The actors and the Crunchers rehearsed this scene many times until they got it perfect. With each try, there was more gore, more screaming, more gurgling, more death rattle. Then they had an intern clean up the mess for a retake.

A quick descriptive text scrolled under the Live Office footage: “This is where falsified evidence manufacturing takes place. Digital images of individuals targeted by the State are manipulated to make it appear as if they’ve committed horrendous crimes against the American people. This serves to discredit their name and turns the public into allies for their capture.”

The audience saw the whole charade – had the inmates left the prison or would they remain dullards still and under the control of the PPO?

**EPISODE TWENTY-THREE**

The Showrunner

BACK AT THE DELI and grocer in 2070, no more than seconds after he had started drinking his glass of water, came the Breaking News. The update came with an alert. The people looked up to see the newscaster’s warning that the footage might upset some viewers. She added that if they had children, to take them out the room or at least cover their eyes. She sounded very serious, so everyone paid attention.

What the man on the run saw made him drop the glass to the floor.
It was him. He was following a young girl. It was his face; there was no denying it. The level of clarity was sublime. He was murdering a college student – someone whose journey in life had been reaching its peak. That was the worst kind of murder. There was still a bit of cold water in his mouth, and he spewed it over the table.

The woman who sat across from him, the one who had expressed such great concern for him earlier, now stood and tossed her hot coffee in his face. A few customers got to their phones to call the police. Oka looked at him severely.

“Don’t you dare leave this store!” He pressed a button, locking the door. When the man stood to leave, Oka picked up a red long-range Taser gun. “This thing’s lethal. One-seventy-five milliamps. I’ll shoot you, man. Don’t make it hard for both of us.”

“I know myself,” he said, wiping coffee off his face. “And I wouldn’t have done such a terrible thing to anybody. It’s them, trust me. They’re setting me up. If you don’t believe me, look at my Loci Bracelet. It never lies. You know that, all of you!”

Oka looked at him with uneasiness. He kept his gun cocked as he looked back at his wife. Vivian nodded.

“Viv, get this,” said Oka. Vivian had two men hold the man’s hand. She walked over to look at his Loci Bracelet which kept track of everywhere an American had ever been throughout the month. After a month it would upload the information to a government server and start over. The PPO required people to wear them always to track their Hover Droning, Mind Auditing, and, on rare occasions, for legal purposes by the Prime Authority.

The Loci Bracelet, affixed at birth, grew with the individual. With each pass-through at a collection center, it was increased in size. There were many places where they had to pass their hands over a metal hole, much like an embrasure, which added titanium to the bracelet. Over time the molecules adjusted to the individual’s arm size.

His bracelet showed them he’d never been in or around the college, only within a few miles of it. It had to be true; Loci was the one piece of technology on the planet which was un-hackable.

But they saw him do the deed. In color, no less.

“How did he do it?” asked Vivian palm to face.

“He can tell it to the judge,” said Oka.

“What’ll we do with him? We’re not cops,” said one of the men, a musclebound, mustached fellow in dungarees.
“Let him go. As you said, we’re not cops,” said Vivian.

“Thank you,” said the man. When he turned around to the door, his brown eyes landed on something worse than he’d seen on screen. Two men dressed in bold blue and yellow FBI uniforms were heading towards the door, which Oka had unlocked. “Oh, shit,” he cried. “They’re here!”

Every customer in the grocer and deli turned their heads in alarm. Did those imposters have the balls to pull off their stunt in broad daylight? Could they do it with people watching and cameras pointing at them?

“Here for you?” asked Oka, who looked at Vivian who had a crumpled face that said, *Now I don’t believe you.*

The blue tops, with the yellow ‘FBI,’ splashed over them, looked as crisp and federal as they came. They even had badges which they’d produced at the door, guns at their hips, handcuffs, and bulletproof vests.

They couldn’t have been fakes to the untrained eye since none of those items were ever issued or sold to civilians except for Tasers. No, they had to be the real thing. Oka and his wife both turned to the man and began to realize they might be harboring a criminal.

“They are posers,” he said looking back at Oka with beseeching eyes. “You have to ask them for ID. Please, they won’t listen to me. But maybe to a group of people. Maybe they’ll get scared and take off.” The two agents reached the door, upon which Oka had no choice but to release the magnetic lock.

“Freeze. Put your hands up!” said the first agent. He was a tall black male in his late thirties, with a Marine high and tight cut.

The man on the run didn’t cooperate. He put his hands between himself and them to block their advance. The two officers drew. Both held nine-millimeter Glock handguns, and both were pointing at his chest.

The store patrons shrieked and ducked under tables. “You’re under arrest,” said the second agent, the white male. He was in his late twenties, blond haired and brown eyed, and had a short buzz cut. “For the murder of…”

“I’m not going with them!” he shouted. “Please stop them. They’re not federal agents!” He turned to look at Oka, who had already put his Taser away.

“How do you know this?” Oka asked the man.
“Can’t you see through their bullshit? The FBI doesn’t investigate murders!” He had a point; the FBI didn’t investigate murders unless they crossed into many states. And there was the idea of an imposter merely wearing an NYPD uniform – no one in their right mind would dare try to impersonate the NYPD in the city of New York, that would be a free ticket to the central bookending areas in any borough of the city. Maybe that’s why they didn’t try that instead.

“He’s right,” said Oka. “They don’t.” Oka looked at the men with narrowed eyes. They must be imposters, but they also had access to ballistic weapons. This could mean they were brutal thugs who’d been funded and well-connected to the violent underworld. He lifted his Taser and placed it on the top of the counter, just in case.

The first agent took a step forward. “This guy’s wanted in six states for brutally slaughtering college students. He’s been on a rampage.”

“Can we see your ID again?” asked Vivian. They showed their ID. Vivian couldn’t believe it. They were the real deal or perfect replicas. They had the holographic insignias which couldn’t be duplicated by no one but the FBI. This was a certainty. “But, they’re real,” she said to Oka.

“Why wouldn’t they be?” said the black agent. Just then, on a full holographic screen projecting behind Oka’s Loci Bracelet.

BREAKING NEWS! Flashed on the screen in the bold red and white CNN letters.

“Authorities are looking for this man in a multi-agency manhunt which has sprawled across six states. He’s taken dozens of innocent young lives and is considered armed and dangerous. If you see this man, you’re urged to call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-ENDCRIME.”

There was footage rolling of a man looking much like him committing the same crime he’d seen against Aimee Belle. The news broadcast didn’t come from any small-time local broadcast stations, but substantial laudable, credible sources. How could they have made all of that up if not without the cooperation of the broadcasting agencies?

EPISODE TWENTY-FOUR

Enemy of the State
IT COULDN’T HAVE COME at the worst time but coming from Crime Stoppers and being broadcast from a leading agency with his face splashed on the screen made it all too apparent. There was no contesting it, the evidence was right there in their faces. Only a complete moron…

“That’s not me,” he shouted. “It doesn’t even look exactly like me. It’s gotta be fake.”

“Christ almighty,” said Vivian holding her bosom. She took several paces away from the man and looked away from him shaking her head as she heaved, but no vomit came forth.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” said Oka, bent over comforting his wife. “We let you in here. Sheltered you. We trusted you with our lives, food and…”

“It’s a gambit, I tell you.” He pointed at his Loci. “Remember. I haven’t been anywhere near the university, right?”

Oka stopped short to think. The man did have a point, but he was confused by all the happenings. “How do you explain that?” asked Oka. “How’d you explain his Loci?”

“You mean to tell me,” said Vivian with her hands at her hips and her head tilted to the left, “the folks broadcasting the news are in on this conspiracy of yours too? Please…”

The white agent spoke something through his earbud and replied with a Yes. Then there was a buzzing sound in the air. It sounded like a bunch of giant bumblebees were outside. “If you don’t believe we’re with the FBI, then you can look outside,” he said upon which Oka stepped out to look and saw eight blue helicopters approaching. They each had the white FBI label on them. When they reached the deli, they circled it in a hovering formation.

They were chopping loudly over Oka, tossing air down in every direction. A few trashcans fell and went into the street, striking cars and pedestrians. It was a freakshow just as the Command Center’s director had promised. There was no denying their authenticity anymore. The running man was cornered.

“Look,” said a black woman who’d been switching the channel on her Loci. “He’s on every other channel too. This isn’t good at all, yawl.”

BREAKING NEWS! Flashed on screen again in bold red capital letters – this time Fox News was the channel delivering the next blow.

“The suspect is known as the City College Slayer,” said the Hispanic male reporter.

“He’s the City College Slayer,” said the second agent. “You’re looking right at him.”
“Bullshit! I tell you. It’s a ploy to take me to an off-site place. Take me somewhere then kill me. They’re paid assassins. Who’s funding you, huh? Is it the Russians, China or America?”

“He’s having a breakdown,” said the first agent.

The second agent added, “Yeah, a disconnect from reality.”

The man clenched his fists to his temples and seemed ready to scream. “Stop it! I’m not crazy! Call the real police! They’ll see through their fake badges and shit.”

“You think he’s psychotic?” asked Oka, to which both agents nodded.

Then, just as Oka was finishing his sentence, the real police did get there. There were six squad cars with lights flashing and sirens blaring, twelve policemen with guns drawn – and they all vouched for the agents’ authenticity.

The deli erupted with gasps and cheers of delight. They’d never seen that many officers respond to a single person before. The man must’ve done something really heinous – or he’d gone up against some compelling people who were able to put on a dazzling show because this was very authentic in appearance. No one in their right mind would try to stop these uniformed men.

As the officers approached, they pulled out their steel batons. At that moment, things got real very quickly. The customers braced themselves for the worst.

A young girl, about eight years old, begged him to give up, but her mother snatched her from the criminal and taken back to the end of the deli. The man turned back to face the impending barrage of police officers coming to back up the agents and raised his hands–bad move.

The first few harsh baton strikes the policemen struck him with, the man fell to the floor. They tried to cuff him, but he struggled. He kicked, they struck. He twisted, they hit again. Each time he moved away from the cuffs, they beat him, harder each time. He had a fight in him that said he was doing it to save his life – maybe he thought he was.

They continued to beat him into submission, but he wouldn’t let up. The officers salivated like wild dogs. Their faces were contorted. They looked as if demons possessed them as they struck him. This was mainly the case for the rookie, a fat one whose belt buckle fell off midstride. He had to realign himself, since there were children there, and get back in action.

The man bled like he had gallons of blood in reserve. Blood flew everywhere until the deli began to resemble the staged murder scene. The store customers cringed as this went on for extended minutes. Some of them couldn’t take it and moved to the restroom to get away.
Every thud and shriek of his beating was heard over the speakers of millions of viewers. Those who covered their eyes still had to listen. Every crunch of bone registered on the recording device with a clarity that seemed divine, even as it tortured the ears of those who could not stop the show. The listeners, especially Alana and her family in their tiny tenth-floor apartment, must have felt as if they were the ones being assaulted by the police of old America.

“I didn’t do anything!” the man wailed. “This is a setup! You’ve been lied to! No, please stop! Somebody help, me, please! Stop them! Why aren’t you doing anything?”

“Shut your goddamn mouth,” shouted a young, white, heavy-set police officer, another rookie with a bone to pick, who leaned on the small of his neck. The pressure fractured a disk in the man’s neck, which was duly picked up by the recording as a popping sound.

The man went limp, but he was lucky the fracture didn’t paralyze him – yet. They kicked him with their steel-toed boots – so hard that he slithered across the floor of the grocer and deli. They kept doing this until Oka yelled out.

“STOP! YOU MUST END THIS BRUTALITY ON MY PROPERTY!”

They picked him up by his neck. Blood leaked from all over his face. His eyes were like pumpkins, closed tight from the bruises. The people looked as though they didn’t know how to feel – sickened or relieved that they’d freed their community of a criminal. Did they really help the authorities catch a serial killer, or was he as innocent as he claimed?

**EPISODE TWENTY-FIVE**

*Deranged Conspiracy Theorist*

AS THEY DRAGGED HIM away, the running man shouted with the little breath he had left: “Please. Look for me online. My name’s Earl Swinger. Date of birth December 31, 2001. I got a heart tattoo on my back. It’s got my mother’s name on it. Her name is Jennie Swinger. If they’re fakes, they won’t book me in any jail. You’ll know they’re fakes, and I’ll be dead by then. But at least you’ll all know I was telling the truth. I won’t blame you.”
They should’ve quieted him right there but had they; it would’ve brought up many suspicions about the operation’s authenticity. If he were telling the truth about them being armed assassins out to get him, they would cover his mouth. Though from the look of it, the story leaned more on the agent’s side is that he was a crazed conspiracy theorist turned serial killer. Don’t they always become serial killers after all?

“See?” said the black agent with a laugh. Then he added in an off-putting tone, “He’s nuts.”

The policemen shook their heads as the agents took him to a black SUV. They’d never seen such a weak man take a beating for so long and still walk out talking so much shit after. He was either high on something or clinically insane. He was so delusional that reality had parted ways with him a very long time ago.

They went to their cars and revved up thinking that it would be the end of the case. One day he’d get what was meant for him for the evil crimes he’d committed. He’d get justice. That was enough. Revenge was also good enough to set the wrongs right.

A young Asian woman emerged from the deli and started typing all the information she’d heard, after taking some pictures. She didn’t like the treatment that man had received, criminal or no, and she was livid.

A young police officer wearing dark sunglasses spotted her and came back. He snatched her phone, removed the notes, and erased her pictures before returning them. The recording camera zoomed into the officer’s lips since it couldn’t capture any audio from outside. It was, however, sophisticated enough to read his lips.

“Everything that happened here,” said the officer, “is none of your business, lady. Now be a good citizen and stay out of police work. Or you’ll be up for obstruction, you hear?”

The chastened young woman lowered her head. She walked back into the deli in tears. Her body shook as she took a chair. Vivian consoled her with a glass of water.

The two FBI agents took the cuffed man and shoved him into the SUV. They slammed the door, got in and started the engine – which was a hybrid.

The man had not received any medical attention which Oka found odd. Even the worst criminals had bandages given to them after every scrape. But this man was bleeding as they took him away without even a dressing.

_What in all the hells, Oka asked himself, was going on here?_
Oka reached for his phone to call the police, dialing 911. Vivian was by his side. She too had concerns about the man’s treatment. No American citizen, serial killer or otherwise, should receive such Gestapo handling.

The local 911 emergency dispatch answered in an annoyed voice. She brusquely told Oka that no such event was reported to their office, that no one named Earl Swinger had any warrants out or was even on their radar.

The dispatch officer went on to say that he was wasting her time. She told him that wasting police resources was against the law. And with that, she ended the call.

Oka looked around in confusion. There were no squad cars in the parking lot, and the SUV had gone. His mouth fell open, and he collapsed to the floor. His wife came running to help, he’d suffered a mild heart attack. It seemed the events were too much for the old soul who no doubt would be heading to another world from all the drama.

As Vivian administered CPR to her husband, the young Asian woman, who’d been warned by the Nazi to keep her mouth shut, grew the fortitude to make a complaint to the FBI’s New York Office…

THEY’D TOLD HER TO keep her mouth shut and look what it got her; a dying Oka splayed out on the floor and Vivian was inconsolable as the medics arrived to resuscitate her love. Those bastards had to pay, and she only knew of one way to do this.

The young Asian woman picked up her phone from her purse and dialed 911. “Hello. This is Wanda McKesson, I’m a reporter for the NY Daily Journal. Can I speak to Detective Burger?”

They patched her over to the detective who picked up amicably. “This is Detective Burger.”

“Hi, it’s Wanda. I’d like to report a possible kidnapping that just took place right in front of a few customers and me at Little Fitzgerald’s Deli & Grocer on Clinton and Washington.”
Detective Burger didn’t waste any time. Wanda was immediately patched over to the NYPD’s Special Victim’s Bureau. It seemed that the young Asian woman had her own contacts in the police department to legitimize her report.

“This is the NYPD Special Victim’s Bureau,” said an older woman’s voice.

“A man’s been kidnapped,” she shouted. “You must act fast. His kidnappers are experts. They’ve fooled us all is all I can say to you. They’re impersonating the FBI.”

“Are they armed or still in the area?”

“Thank god no,” she said with her hand over her chest. “I can give you a description of the perpetrators, but I think it’s the man they’ve kidnapped and their vehicle which is more important.”

“Alright,” said the officer. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“His name’s Earl Swinger,” she said and went on to give his information. Then she described the SUV and the men driving Swinger posing as Feds. She also gave them a chilling description of what took place in the deli.

“Thank you,” said the older woman. “We’ll relay it to the proper authority.”

From there, the information was relayed to the desk of Special Agent Nora Bridgeport; the FBI agent at the New York City FBI office. She was placed in charge of the Earl Swinger case the moment they heard about the details; Agent Bridgeport was the agent who’d helped solved several high-profile kidnapping cases before Swinger; she was the only authority since the abduction had long left the jurisdiction of the NYPD.

Back at the FBI offices in Manhattan agent Nora Bridgeport and Roberto McNamara were rushing to get things together as the clock is ticking against them; every second that passes by without them finding his whereabouts means a possible death to Earl Swinger.

“You got anything on this Earls Swinger fellow?” she asked McNamara, a tall Hispanic male in his late thirties with glasses and a silver line of hair across his head he’d refused to darken, possibly since McNamara was still in the dating pool and was still pulling tail at his age; all he had to do was show the mindless college girls the bar his feds badge.

“Swinger, Swinger,” he said thinking hard. “Not a thing. Doesn’t ring a bell.”

McNamara looked up the person of interest, and there it was; Earl Swinger; a nuclear physicist for the Department of Energy out of Las Vegas Nevada… “He’s some genius,” said McNamara.”
“What type?” she pulled up his information form McNamara’s port, and it showed Earl’s demographics. “This can’t be good. This man’s got information that could be used for all sorts of things. I can see a number of people wanting to kidnap him.”

“Yup,” said McNamara. “For all sorts of reasons. Mostly terrorism-related.”

Agent Bridgeport shot up from her desk. “We’re out in three.”

“Where to?” asked McNamara. “They haven’t seen that car in thirty minutes on the interstate.”

“North, anywhere north,” she replied. “Until the traffic cams peg that plate again.”

“They’ve probably got him holed up in some unknown place by now,” he said as he grabbed his jacket. “We should wait and see if there’s a ransom.”

“My gut feeling tells me otherwise,” she said. “I’m going to need you to go to that deli on Clinton and Washington and find out what happened, take Mack and Jean with you.”

“What about you?” said McNamara looking puzzled. “You’re not going up there are you?”

“I’m taking a taskforce with me,” she said. “Six cars. And I’ll notify Rye PD to meet me when we’ve got enough tracking data on the tags. Shouldn’t be too long. I figure it will be about thirty to forty minutes until we get a place.”

She turned around to the rest of the people in her little section and spoke at the top of her chest. “Listen up everybody. This is going to take priority over everything you’ve got for now. We just got a call at 0915 about a group of impersonators; high-level type. These men were very professional according to the report and were able to fool entire groups of people. They’ve kidnapped this man; Earl Swinger and taken him to where we believe to be somewhere near Rye.”

“How were they able to pull this charade?” asked an agent as everybody began putting their gear together in preparation for leaving the office to a skeletal crew.

“We do not yet know,” said McNamara. “We’re going to find out when we interview the people at the deli.”

“How’d they came to know, later on, that the agents were fake?” asked another agent.

“Good question,” said agent Bridgeport. “FBI New York received a transmitted call from a reporter about this Earl Swinger person of interest and the brutal treatment he’s received from the police and men wearing FBI uniforms.”

“That was enough to make her think they were imposers?” asked a young intern.
“She told them what had happened to her and how the guy was treated,” said McNamara. “And she memorized the car’s license plate and its description, none of which is in the FBI database.”

Bridgeport added. “The vehicle’s registered to a corporation called Nay Slayer Corp. It has an operations center in Rye; the vehicle was last seen headed in Northwesterly direction on I-95.”

“How’re you going to coordinate with Rye PD?” asked an agent.

“We’re going to federalize the Rye taskforce once we get up there,” said agent Bridgeport. They used this to track the vehicle with traffic cams.”

Agent Bridgeport left out the part where the city’s drones would follow the vehicle for hours. As a matter of fact, the one drone for the City of Rye could track every single vehicle’s movement in the city twenty-four hours a day from twenty thousand feet.

“If that’ll be all,” she finished. “We must go immediately.” They headed out with all but a skeletal crew of two interns and an agent in the office; eight agents total with Special Agents Bridgeport and McNamara, but would they make it to the quickly moving Earl Swinger who’d already made it to a seemingly dark and deathly warehouse in the wooded hills of Rye.

**EPISODE TWENTY-SEVEN**

**A Trip Up North**

THE OLD FOOTAGE THEN switched to an aerial view, no doubt from a drone, which showed the black SUV traveling north towards the countryside. As the vehicle drove, the foliage around it grew as did the darkness.

The trees darkened and thickened as did the blood around Earl Swinger’s face, who sat inside the dark SUV, from an extreme zoom-in, with his head slumped to the side window.

At that point, the hundreds of millions of Americans now watching or hearing the developing tale were enthralled.
Some wanted to know when this story would peak. It was like one of those old Korean Soap Operas the PPO had denounced as opiates to the masses. The ones Alana’s parents said the PPO had banned. Banned like *The Anarchists Cookbook*, *Guerilla Warfare for Dummies* or *The Handmaid’s Tale*. They’d forbidden and replaced them with patriotic lectures they were forced to watch. Those were some of the most terrible and dullest talks about R.A.T.S. infestations that would make the viewer want to eat the rat poison instead of listening.

The ride ended at a warehouse upon which the footage switched back to ground level.

“This isn’t the FBI I know of,” said Swinger as they pulled up through a thicket.

“Shut up,” said the black agent who got out the SUV and surveyed the area. “This is it.”

The scene was bushy and shadowy, so only silhouettes, voices, and footsteps made it through the recording. There were yellow triangular signs with skull and crossbones surrounded by black outlining stapled to trees. The trees were the full type which had many vines crawling up them, covering half the signs; some of the vines cast their shadows on the trees, though it wasn’t quite full night time.

The tension built up to levels that hadn’t been seen in decades, not since the first mass suicides of the dissidents. Across the Thirty-Nine, viewers wanted to know what was going on in that suspicious, supposed FBI building in that remote and shadowy location.

“You’ve brought me out here in the woods…” the black agent socked him in the head.

“Quiet you,” said the white agent, who struck Swinger in the head as well.

“You won’t silence me,” he shouted. They struck him again. “You won’t silence me!”

Why, people asked themselves, would these agents need to drive so far out of town when there was a large office right in the city? Command Center operators had better be trying to stop the movie before it answered that question, or the repercussions for the PPO government might be colossal.

***
Meanwhile, at Little Fitzgerald’s agent Roberto McNamara arrived with his detail of three real FBI agents to the disbelief of the customers remaining in the deli.

“Who are they?” asked a young woman who’d witnessed Swinger’s arrest.

“That’s the FBI,” said Wanda.

“You mean the imposters, right?” she said. “Like Earl said?”

“No,” said Wanda. “That’s the real deal.”

“No, it can’t be…” said the woman sitting to catch herself. “Then who took Swinger?”

“The imposters did,” she said as agent McNamara walked into the deli. Just outside there were fire trucks and ambulances. It seemed that Oka would make it from a major heart attack after a triple bypass; if he made it through the midday traffic. As Vivian kissed her husband goodbye, Wanda walked up to the agents to give her report.

“Hi,” she said with her hand out and a bright smile. “I’m Wanda.”

“Yes,” said agent McNamara, “nice to meet you, Miss McKesson. You saw the whole thing?”

“Clear as day,” she said. “I can compare notes if you wish. Do you GEL?”

GEL was an AI computerized interface within the Loci which allowed people to simultaneously share information through their portable devices without permission; it would sync the info desired based on presets the person had in place based on their privacy settings on their Loci.

“Yes,” he said. “I do. But departmental protocol requires me to read you your rights before I GEL with you.”

“Eh, who cares,” she waved it off. “Those asshole pretenders tried to take away my rights earlier. You can write them down on a stick if you want to agent McNamara.”

They Gelled; her notes completed his showing agent McNamara most of what she’d detailed from her own memory. “Now tell me,” he spoke up for the deli to hear. “Before Mr. Oka went to the hospital and before the false arrest of Earl Swinger. Did anybody notice anything strange about these men? Did they operate in a manner that would give them away; special forces, prior service, Leo?”

“If they had any prior type of services,” she said. “We couldn’t tell. They were very good at fooling us though.”
“There was one thing,” said an elder woman, who came up to the lead agent and his associates. “They didn’t seem like feds on the surface. They were too much like rookies if you get my drift.”

“ Anything else?” he looked at the old lady who looked into the ground and then back at McNamara then shrugged.  

“Nothing, I’m sorry.”

“ These guys were professionals,” said McNamara. “To fool every client in here into thinking they’re with us.”

“ They said there was a full squad of FBI choppers outside,” said an agent.

“I’m not buying it,” said McNamara. “How’d they be able to pull that off without NYC ATC?”

“Helos run on different systems,” another agent. “Plus, if they had helos, they had access to all kinds of other material to pull off a scam like that. But why go to that length?”

McNamara tapped his feet as he pulled on his grizzled beard. This just didn’t smell right. There was too much going on for some single man, no matter how vital his skills, to be kidnapped by anybody. The way he was taken was even crazier when told by the people who’d witnessed it.

He reasoned that whoever wanted Earl Swinger gone, they were either deep in the underground and must be taken down or something so high up, powerful, so corrupt and that he shouldn’t have messed with it, to begin with.

EPISODE TWENTY-EIGHT
The Sanctuary State of California

BACK AT THE COMMAND Center, which now had anything but command, Pinkerton was losing his mind. He paced back and forth, helpless as the old footage continued to roll on. Now it was showing the two agents wrestling with the captured fugitive.
There was no good news for Pinkerton. He didn’t even have a chair to throw. All the techs wrestled to decode the intricate algorithm that had infiltrated the most sophisticated network in the world. A system of which the PPO had extolled its power for decades, was now helpless before a primitive virus that Julian Mercy had cooked up decades ago.

How, the brains of the PPO wanted to know, could such a virus take down a system that didn’t even exist when it had been created?

Pinkerton fidgeted with his fingers. “You know what they did to him… They’re about to show that damn thing. We can’t allow it. We mustn’t!”

“We know that,” said Clinton, the deputy commander. He was a slender white male in his forties who wore a black suit, black shoes, and white tie. They all wore the same thing; there was no use describing them as individuals when they were at work.

The workplace was a sea of black. Finding a person in that office was like finding an individual water molecule. Faceless and monochromatic they were. Their hair was cut the same; even the women had their hair cut like the men.

“Now shut the fucking thing down,” he shouted at Clinton. “Right now!”

Clinton blanched. “I’ll need Omega authorization for that.”

“Then how do we get it?” he screamed, pulling the remaining hair from his face.

“The Main Office.” Not likely to come from the central office who’d have their own hands tied dealing with Mercy’s revenge, but it wouldn’t hurt to give it a go.

“Then call the frikin main office, Clint,” he shouted. “Why are you still standing here?”

“Right. I’ll call the Main Office right now!” Clinton ran to his office, which was next to Pinkerton’s. He sealed the door, tapped his console, and a dark figure appeared on the wall.

“Sir, we need a system-wide shutdown. Omega One.”

The dark figure twisted his lips. “What’d you think we’ve been doing over here, you nitwit? Playing with our cocks? You, idiots, think we haven’t tried that shit up here already?”

Clinton lowered his head. “I didn’t know. I had no….”

“You apes at that god be damned command center is only accelerating my departure from this world,” he said turning his face away from Clinton; a disrespectful pose in the PPO regulation books and one which tore at the subordinate.

“We’re doing what we can,” he started.
“You know I thought of shutting your program down many times,” he said looking back at Clinton with deep and cold sets of dark eyes, giving off a form of detachment which made Clinton shiver a bit; Clinton moved a step back towards his desk.

“That’s hardly a viable option, sir,” he begged. “We’ve delivered quite well this year until this fiasco.”

Though he wanted to continue, Clinton knew he’d lost the old man’s impatient attention just at that cold gaze in his overlord’s eyes. This was where he’d always reach a point where he’d typically mumble obscenities in anger at him, and Clinton would do nothing but nod in agreement until the screen closed in his face.

“You know, Clinton,” he started the barrage. “I often fantasize of the many ways I could kill you idiots in your sleep…”

“Yes, sir…”

“I heard there’s office babble about you being a gay men’s underwear model in Paris,” he laughed slightly. “Hope it’s only office babble, Clinton.”

Clinton nodded…

“Do you know what I really want from you Clinton?” he asked. But Clinton didn’t answer knowing the question was rhetorical. “I want to see you sweat. I want to see you bleed and then I want to toss your body off the top of the building while your beating heart pulsates in my hands.”

Clinton nodded…

“What do you have to say for yourself Clinton?” he asked, but he blasted through with another obscene joke or ramble. “If I gave you a glass of cyanide and a resignation letter which one would you choose?”

“Whichever you’d have me take, sir?”

“Like a good house pet,” he snickered then leaned into the screen, scowling. “Well, house trained. But I don’t believe you. I bet you and those little blind mice of yours are just tinkering away under the woodwork…inch…crawling towards my downfall. Don’t worry, you’ll get your day. You’ll all get your day to taste my blood. But before that day arrives, Clinton, you’re all slaves in my kingdom, you hear?”

“I hear you, sir,” he said sitting up from his desk. “Now, I’ll be sure to keep you abreast with any updates about this Mercy event.”
The dark figure flipped a hand as if to shoo him. “Don’t call back until you’ve either solved the problem or found the goddamn R.A.T.S. who are seeking permission to commit suicide. Good day!” The screen shut off, the dark figure disappeared, but Clinton still responded.

“Yes, Honorable Patriot Governor Anderson,” he said in a muted voice with a salute. He ran out of his office and let out his breath. They couldn’t do a damn thing to stop it; all they could do was watch what was about to go down. The old footage rolled on, showing the false FBI agents take Earl Swinger into the white painted warehouse and close the door behind them.

**EPISODE TWENTY-NINE**

The Hunt for Earl Swinger

A BULLET DIDN’T CARE if a name was written on it when it flew past the skull. It only traveled past brain and blood beyond the speed of sound and ended the life of its victim. Earls Swinger wouldn’t hear the click of the trigger. He wouldn’t see the flash of gunpowder exploding. He wouldn’t get to smell the metallic oils emitted from the spent round either. Though some had said revenge was sweeter than honey, death had no taste; and should there one day be an account of its flavor it would only come from the formerly deceased.

The view had switched to a New York State highway where her caravan of FBI vehicles with flashing lights were heading north in the same direction where Earl Swinger was taken.


Earl Swinger was a nobody to most who’d thrown him under the proverbial bus, but agent Bridgeport would be damned if anyone would impersonate her beloved agency at such a high level and get away with it; especially to execute an American citizen under her watch. The FBI would be Swinger’s only voice if he were to become nothing but a spent round.
“The balls,” said another agent; a young female sitting across from Bridgeport. They were moving at over a hundred miles per hour, darting precariously through heavy traffic. Hundreds of cars stopped for them out of fear over their wild speed, flashing lights, and sirens.

“The lights, cameras…actions,” said Bridgeport. “Sounded like a big shot was putting on a show. But for who?”

She was getting close; Bridgeport would make a great Command Center employee or Nay Slayer operative. Would she decode the mysterious occurrences before they put an end to her Earl Swinger, basically end her case before it started?

“We’re dealing with a desolate individual,” said McNamara from his Loc. “Who doesn’t care about the laws of this land. He doesn’t care who he effects while getting to his target either.”

“It’s not necessarily an individual,” said Bridgeport. “This is too carefully coordinated to be a single individual. You’ve already pointed that out, McNamara.”

“You’re right, Bridgeport,” McNamara had to remind himself. “But I don’t think they want us to catch them.”

“Like a brilliant serial killer?” asked one agent who sat in the backseat. “They’re playing with us you think?”

“Sounds like a sociopath to me,” said an officer over the radio.

“Not really,” said Bridgeport. “A sociopath doesn’t care. A psychopath maybe; they’d want credit for their work, but not to get caught in the act. They wouldn’t leave breadcrumbs unless it’s to taunt us and that’s why it’s more likely a psychopath than a sociopath, got it?”

“That makes more sense,” said the officer.

“They want the thrill of a hunt,” said Bridgeport. “They’re playing with their food.”

“To what end?” asked McNamara.

“We’ve got to take a look at what we’ve got,” said Bridgeport. “Pull up the files of the images you’ve gotten of the perps. They should’ve come back from NICU at Detroit.”

McNamara linked with the NICU at Detroit which was the national database which kept all facial and voice records of citizens in the Thirty-Nine for domestic security purposes.

“What’s this?” said McNamara as the pictures of the men who’d abducted Earl Swinger came back with no match. The analysis did give back a message beneath the hologram.

NOTICE: AMALGAMATED IMAGERY.
“The pictures are composites of other images?” said McNamara.

“Meaning these pictures, we’re seeing are of two people who don’t exist?” said Bridgeport.

“We’re looking for two people who don’t exist, now?” said McNamara. “Now this is starting to sound like pure science fiction.”

“They’ve got to be using some type of scrambler,” said an African-American agent. “We need to go low-tech on them. Agent McNamara must take a sketch artist down there with him.”

“Why?” asked McNamara. “Why do I need a sketch of people who aren’t in a database?”

“Whatever they’ve used,” said the black agent. “I’m willing to bet that it couldn’t have fooled the human eye. Go to the deli. Get as many people at the deli to describe the two perps in full, get a composite that way.”

“And if it did fool the human eye?” asked McNamara

“We’re all fucked,” said Bridgeport.

“How’s McNamara getting up here?”

“He’s getting his wings,” said Bridgeport. “Taking a lift with the Helo-Squad.”

The FBI manhunt had expanded to a six-helicopter squadron search for the facility and location of the site containing Earl Swinger; the fear now was whoever these impersonators were, they were too good.

“Has anyone ever had a case similar to this?” asked Bridgeport. “This is surreal, to say the least. And I’ve had my share of kidnappings. From the Russian billionaire to the mobster in Harlem. This is a new breed of crazy to me.”

“I can’t say I’ve touched anything this complex,” said the Asian female agent. “This is going to be a humdinger. But this is what we were made for.”

“I still don’t get it,” said Bridgeport. “He’s a nobody. Just a nuclear engineer. Besides the bombmaking things, which you could get almost anywhere these days, why would anyone want a recluse like Swinger?”

“He may know too much?”

“Or knows somebody who knows too much?”

“Too much of what?”

“That website was particularly weird,” said McNamara. “It outlined a project called the OD59.5 Initiative.”
“Anything pan out on that angle?” asked Bridgeport.

McNamara came over the Loci. “Looked it up, all hogwash.”

“Whatever this fella’s gotten himself into,” said Bridgeport. “We may be his only way out. It seems, and stop me if I’m wrong that there may be a conspiracy involved with either the company that owns the property in Rye or the government.”

“Wouldn’t put it past either,” said McNamara. “But what we’re saying here is acts of treason, and we don’t have any evidence to even go in that direction.”


“We’ll all be dead or out of jobs,” said McNamara.

“Or worse,” said the Asian female agent. “We could go to jail for this, can’t we? just for talking about it. It’s conspiracy…almost.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Bridgeport. “Freedom of speech alone trumps that; did you sleep through civil law?”

“Don’t speculate,” said the black agent. “We can’t afford to speculate. That begets trials and all sorts of crazy things in between that I can’t even imagine.”

“We have to go in with a game plan,” said McNamara. “Because it’s already obvious that whatever we’re dealing with, that they’re no small cookie. So, we have families and friends to think about, and we all know this.” he stopped short to let them think about it, to let it sink in for a while and then he continued. “Are we all in agreement that our duties must be weighed with the rights of our families to live a safe and secure life? Then it is our duty to pursue these criminals without fullest authority under the color of the law, but with the protections provided by the same laws, they’ve skirted. We shall use anonymity as well.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Bridgeport

“We need to go undercover,” said McNamara. “We can’t use our real names in this investigation. That’s asking for it.”

“I agree, but what about our faces?”

“You didn’t think about that?” she laughed. “There’s no anonymity for a reason McNamara. They already know who we are and that’s our strength. The whole world needs to know we’re going in there. That will be our only lifeline. They can’t kill us or depose of us if the entire world knows we’ve gone into there. That I was counting on. Going in there incognito was what they
wanted. They’d have erased us like white on a chalkboard, McNamara. No, not this agent. I’m going to go in with the lights blaring, sirens blaring high and loud, with this brigade and so loud that God Almighty will wake up from his bed to press the snooze button.”

Agent McNamara had to stop to appreciate the brilliance of his partner’s plan. There was no making a deal with the entity he’d be going up against. They’d either kill them or let them live one they entered that vast space to search for Earl Swinger. The kidnappers and would-be killers were professionals and were probably working for pros as well; there’d be a line of monsters waiting for them before they even arrived. Agent Bridgeport figured these types had contingency plans for the law which is why she brought a brigade; the Earl Swinger Brigade and they were coming with a vengeance. By the nightfall, one group would be dead; good guy or bad. It was up to fate, hot lead, and proper planning to decide.

**EPISODE THIRTY**

**The Breakdown**

*LITTLE FITZGERALD’S DELI & GROCER* didn’t seem as appealing on the outside as it did on its interior to agent McNamara; a contemporary New York subs joint converted to a deli and grocery items stacked at the rear, *Little Fitzgerald’s* was nothing special.

What McNamara figured had brought so many loyal customers to the crowded joint must’ve been the heated chemistry between Oka and Vivian whom he reasoned, correctly, were still active in their late fifties.

After he’d taken enough statements to build a perfect picture of the dramatic events which had occurred during Swinger’s public abduction, McNamara turned to Vivian and sighed with regret. “I know this is a terrible time, but may I review your deli’s footage?”

“You have my permission,” said Vivian as she held tightly to Oka’s hand. Oka’s eyes were shut tight in his comatose state; he’d been receiving life-saving treatments for a possible stroke,
but Vivian was adamant about the cause of Oka’s ailment is the phone call to the emergency dispatch about Earl Swinger.

As McNamara reviewed the video, which was more stunning than Wanda’s vivid accounts, it only lent further credibility to the tall tales he’d recently heard. “This is unbelievable,” he said as he linked with Bridgeport, who received the data and confirmed her astonishment as well.

“Beyond incredible,” she said in her seat traveling North. “Proof of some unidentified conspiracy and a coverup attempt. Whoever is behind this is high up on the food chain.”

That was right, agent Bridgeport, they’ve got to be very high up on the food chain. That was what worried McNamara; that they’d be going after big fish in that small cramped pond which was New York City. Sure, he was a ‘Fed,’ and could literally arrest the President of the United States (if s/he was caught strangling a toddler to death on live TV) but this was another beast entirely; that sinister cabal everybody feared existed – the new world order.

“This isn’t something you’d want to get your fingerprints all over,” he said to agent Bridgeport, who nodded and relished for a moment about the consequences.

“Agent McNamara,” said Bridgeport, “We can’t let that shake us. We’re doing what’s within our power, never forget that.”

She was right. As an officer of the law, should they let anything, be it their own government, stop them from protecting the American people?

After reviewing footage of the men who’d abducted Earl Swinger, agent McNamara ran to his truck and drove to the FBI Helicopter Port in Manhattan; about twelve miles from Fitzgerald’s.

Two of the FBI’s fastest copters in their fleet of twelve had been dispatched and would be waiting for him. When he got there and got ready to board the chopper, there was a blank look on the mechanic’s face. He looked and saw there wasn’t a pilot.

“Where’s the pilot?” asked McNamara. “Cause I’m not flying or driving this thing.”

“The two speedsters are busted,” said the mechanic. Agent McNamara had sensed the nauseating fumes of burnt out rotators but thought it was the natural scents of helicopter units.

“What’s the deal?” he asked stepping out the passenger area. “We had this ironed out hours ago. I was to make it to Rye by 1800 hours.”

“They tried to start the other choppers, but every single one was sabotaged beyond repair.”

“Every single…” just then it got to McNamara. “Who was on duty. The mechanic, on duty.”

“He left for lunch,” said the mechanic. “Name’s Earl Swinger…”
“Goddman it,” McNamara shouted and called Bridgeport. “Bridgeport get this; Earl Swinger’s listed as our mechanic on report at the Hilo-Port. And not only is his name being used as the mechanic on record, but it’s also being used as the bastard who signed off on the sabotaged choppers.”

“They’re taunting us,” said Bridgeport, “but that wasn’t the only thing they wanted to achieve. These people want us to know they’re in full control of the situation. That we’re only a part of the game. That we’re small pieces.”

“It’s already gotten to this,” he replied coldly. “And we’ve only just begun.”

“We’ve stepped on an iceberg,” she said calmly, sensing his anxiety and trying to soothe her partner. “You and I both know what’s at the bottom of icebergs, Roberto.”

“I’m sending you imagery of the mechanic on record,” he said after seeing for himself what almost floored him. “You won’t believe what they’re capable of doing. I mean, we’re capable of doing this, but I didn’t know it was commercially available…”

It wasn’t commercially available and had agent McNamara knew he’d been going against his own government he’d probably knew better than to pursue that case, but a good FBI agent only dug deeper, and a great one would lift the lid off the whole thing.

“What am I seeing?” she asked him loudly. “It can’t be Earl Swinger.”

“That’s because it’s not Earl Swinger,” said McNamara. “That’s the perpetrators at Fitzgerald’s. They’ve managed to use their face again, but how?”

“That composite face,” she shouted louder. “This means those two Mr. Nobodies walking around with fake faces, and God only knows how they’d get those faces, are able to copy themselves?”

“This is far beyond our scope,” said McNamara. “We simply need to find Swinger, and maybe we’ll be able to make heads and tails of this.”

She was right; it was levels above their pay grade; it would’ve behooved her to work with the NSA or another agency at that point, but there was plenty of sectionalism still within the agencies and taking something this complex to a competing agency was tantamount to an admission of incompetence. Their director wouldn’t have allowed it either way even though agent Bridgeport had made the right call.

“I agree…”
Agent McNamara and his team quickly jumped into his black truck and headed for the FDR highway. From there he’d try to get onto I-95 and head to Rye, NY which wouldn’t be a short drive given the traffic, but there were always his sirens. He only hoped that Agent Bridgeport and her team would get there before that Earls Swinger fellow wasn’t a corpse buried in some apple field beyond their reach.

**EPISODE THIRTY-ONE**

*The Consortium*

THE VIEW CUT AGAIN to the interior of the building, where Earl was taken, as the lights snapped on. On its interior, it was a vast stainless-steel warehouse and disconcertingly antiseptic and faintly unworldly. There were many floodlights spaced equidistantly apart for what looked like several hundred feet.

Between them were yellow pillars holding up the large ceiling which was made of steel, which was painted white. The floor was concrete, even, well placed and shiny – the slippery when wet type. At every wall were blue bins, each had markings which the audience couldn’t make out from the footage.

The FBI men dropped him into a chair which sat at the far end of the warehouse near the opening and handcuffed him to it with a second set of cuffs. The chair was bolted to the floor. There were blood stains near the bottom of the chair. It seemed like there had been prior visitors.

The camera zoomed in quick to show the audience and did a quick analysis of the blood splatters – 1,898 unique DNA strains registered at that one site alone.

“What is this? Where is this place?” he asked them barely able to see over bruised eyes.

“What do you think it is?” said the black agent.

“I knew it. I fucking knew it! You guys put on a great show,” he said with a loud chuckle, which bounced around the metallic warehouse’s interior.

“What are you talking about Fred? It is ‘Fred’ right?” said the white agent.
“Or should we say ‘Fred2001’ online?” said the black agent.

“So,” Swinger asked, “who sent you? A crime syndicate? Or is it the government as I’ve always guessed? They want to silence me, right?”

“We’re with the Federal Bureau of Investigations, Fred,” said the white agent.

“It’s Federal Bureau of Investigation?” said the man. “You have to drop the S.”

“You’re a cunning man, Fred,” said the white agent, with a twisted lip. His face turned red, and he palmed his gun, but he held himself back.

“Look at you, can’t even say it with a straight face,” Swinger replied, shaking his head. “You’re pathetic, both of you. Selling your souls to the devil. How much is your soul worth? How much is my life worth? A couple thousand, ten? You’re filth.”

The white agent took a position behind Swinger’s head as the black agent spoke. “You’ve done some pretty bad things, Fred. It’s all caught up with you.”

“Do I look like I was born yesterday? You wouldn’t pass as Feds anywhere, any time. Maybe at a Halloween party. Okay, the show’s over. Now please be good enough to kill me and get it over with. But that still leaves the problem of your cover-up. I told so many people to look me up. And your faces were seen by a lot of cams. Good luck with that, my friends” They looked at each other.

“Can you do me a favor?” asked the black agent. “I have just one question.”

Swinger said, “Sure, shoot.” Then he spat a mouthful of blood on to the agent’s shoe.

“Very funny,” said the black agent as he wiped his shoe on Swinger’s trouser cuff.

“Oh, please! You know what gave us away to you? For one thing, you never offered me medical help after I was hurt. Even a freaking terrorist gets that. Second, you never read me my Miranda before arresting me. And you’re questioning me at some dark, mafia-looking dungeon with no one to witness this shit. I’m shocked there aren’t any pigs here to eat the bodies. Third, your FBI badges looked legit, but God almighty! You also had the pendants, pens, rings, the ID and so much extra shit with the FBI logo. God damn it, man, you were so overdressed that you could have shouted, ‘We’re playing junior G-man!’ You were too much FBI to be the real thing.
It looked like a damned movie scene, a parody. If you stood next to real agents, they’d shoot you just for GP. The moment I saw you imbeciles, I was like, *Hmm, show time.*

“Thank you,” said the black agent with a crooked smile. “This information will be beneficial for future operations. You’ve been much help.”

Swinger had a shocked look on his face.

“Seriously? Please, I knew I wasn’t going crazy. Are you ready to do this or what?”

“You know how we got to you, Earl?”

“How’d you get to me?”

“Citizens will turn on anyone the state deems problematic,” said the black agent.

“Ones you set up,” said Swinger spitting at him, but he missed.

“Even one who plays the role of Good Samaritan on the exterior,” said the white agent.

“So, what’s all this shit,” he balked. “Your little CIA black site?” asked Swinger.

“He doesn’t know,” said the black agent looking at the white agent with a confused facial expression as if Earl was supposed to arrive with predetermined knowledge of some sort.

“Know what?” asked Swinger.

“He’s a quick study,” said the white agent. “You’d think by now he’d have arrived at a conclusion just by looking at this facility. How do you say it…through osmosis?”

“At what conclusion?” he asked looking at them as idiots, but they just looked at each other again. “You might as well be speaking in tongues, you twits.”

“Guess we should toss out that genius level IQ,” said the black agent

“And burn that Stanford diploma, Earl,” said the white agent flicking a butane lighter in his face, to which Earl blew it out.

“You two are making absolutely no sense right now,” he laughed. “Did you hit your heads too during my beat down back in the city? You should get that canine brain of yours checked out by a veterinarian.”

“I love his sense of humor,” said the black agent. “We’re talking about your co-conspirators, Earl.” He shrugged and spat out more of the darkly tinted blood at the black agent’s foot, who kicked it to the side then growled in his face.

“Oh, why didn’t you just say so,” he shouted. “What about them? You want intimate detail, stool samples? What you want…I’m…ready…to cooperate…fully…”

“Look around you,” said the white agent.
“You can’t scare me, mister. They’re beyond your reach now. That’s all I got to say. I don’t even know where they are. Even if I did, I wouldn’t tell a piss ant like you.”

“Everything around you isn’t always what they seem, Earl,” said the black agent.

“Oh, shit,” he hooted. “Look at the devil…preaching to the frikin choir.”

He wasn’t lying. What the people at the deli didn’t know was that the broadcasts were faked from a localized source and only made to look national. Just the people in the deli saw the event. Even the helicopters were fake, mere Hover Drones encased within holographic images of copters and FBI insignia.

They were pushing strong jets of air and emitting the choppy sounds of a helicopter to finish off the illusion of a search party looking for a state fugitive.

Swinger knew this trick as well, but why didn’t he tell Vivian and Oka the gimmick? He could’ve stopped them from taking him. It would’ve placed a good enough amount of doubt in the minds of the people in the store; who’d have called the real authorities and at that point things would’ve really escalated into a carnival.

Did Swinger have his ace card stored up his sleeves or was he just demented as they’d said as they carried him away? He looked up at the white agent who leaned into his face. “Nothing’s ever what it seems,” said the agent.

“Like that macho façade you’re wearing on that smug face of yours,” he said. “Uncuff me and let’s dance. I’ll wipe it right off for you. One minute, bitch. Gimme just one minute.”

“Why don’t you just shut that big fucking mouth of yours for once,” said the white agent, “and take a damn good look around you, Earl.”

“What, I don’t see anything,” he shouted at the top of his lungs twisting and pulling on the cuffs. He tried to stand, but the chair he sat in gave him nothing, not an inch. The white agent could see the veins in his neck swelling, engorged with blood.

“Yes, you do,” shouted the white agent. “Yes, you freaking do.”

“Well, then tell me what the fuck I’m supposed to see. What is it that’s so fucking important that’s got you two all riled up, huh? Tell me goddamn it?”

“They’re all around you, Earl,” said the white agent. “They’re all around you, buddy. Your eyes haven’t been open, that’s all.”

“You’ve stepped on them,” said the black agent. “On your way in here. You stepped on all of them. And didn’t even say excuse me.”
“Huh…what?”
“Your little gay all boys Consortium. It’s all around you, Earl. They’re all with you now. A grand reunion.”

**EPISODE THIRTY-TWO**

*Enormity*

THE REALITY CAME RUSHING to Earl like a hot frying pan to the side of his head.

“You frikin monsters! You’ll get what’s coming to you one day,” he said trying to lift himself from the chair. “You’ll get it bad, I promise you.”

“But truth is, it was your messages,” said the black agent. “The ones your consortium was sending you to run out your hidey-hole. That’s how we got you, Earl.”

“You lie. All lies. Trying to break me. You’ll never! Never, I tell you. Never! Just shoot me, you cowards!”

“We couldn’t find you,” said the white agent. “You were like a ghost.”

“And we couldn’t get to you,” said the black agent. “You were more like a mole. A rat, really. You dug deep. We needed to flush you out. And what better way to get you out than through the bastards who were sponsoring you…the Consortium.”

“Should’ve known there was something fishy in the last few weeks. The way the messages were changing. They started sounding like nonsense. My better judgment told me to cut the cord but no, no, no, I kept typing away. And here I am. Like a lamb to the slaughter, huh?”

“You did what human nature compelled you to, Earl,” said the black agent.

“You bet I did,” he said shaking darkened blood on the agent’s foot. “And you’re going to suckle on your master’s cock later on, for a reward, aren’t you?”

“I do this for my country,” said the white one, red as a streetlight. “I’m a patriot. You’re the RAT!”
“Patriot, right. And what’s this?” he said. “Patriot death squad? You’re Nazis, nothing more. You can put on a patriotic face, but you aren’t fooling nobody.”

“They squealed, Earl,” said the black agent. “Every single one of them. Especially Karl. He squealed the loudest. Right in this chair. He took hours to break but didn’t give your location. We figured he didn’t know where you were holed up.”

“None of them did,” said Swinger. “That was a built-in failsafe. We knew you’d try something like interrogating one of us if we were ever caught. The cell was built that way.”

“Too bad for them,” said the black agent. “Wasted a lot of our precious time.”

“And prolonged their torture,” said the white agent. “Wasn’t a pretty sight tell you the truth. Come to think of it, Danny lasted what three days? We waterboarded him as a last resort. He was a toughie, that son of a bitch. Wouldn’t stop talking after that, though. He went in the grinder. You don’t want to know what that feels like, Earl.”

“Not that we didn’t enjoy pulling fingernails, skin, bone, and teeth,” said the black agent.

“Yeah plenty of overtime,” said the white agent. “But it got old after a while.”

“Look at him,” said the black agent. “He doesn’t believe me. Make him a believer.” He turned to the white agent who walked over and pulled up a flat screen from the far-right side of the warehouse. There was a blue bin filled with flat screens, each containing individual names on them. The one in the white agent’s hand was marked Danny Tarion III.

While the white agent fidgeted with flat screen, the black agent took a salve and applied it to Swinger’s puffed up eyes so that he could see the recording better. They didn’t want him to miss any of the vivid details of what was to come next.

Then the white agent pressed play on the thin sheet of the plastic flat screen. Immediately after he pushed play, Swinger heard earsplitting noises of agony emerging from the device – they were definitively from Danny’s voice. He looked away, but the black agent took his head and forced him to watch. “Believe,” he said. “Become a believer.”

“Craven shit stains. You’ll pay for this,” he shrieked. “You’ll burn in hell. I swear.”

“Hell’s for R.A.T.S., Earl,” said the white agent. “And dissidents get a first-class ticket.”

**EPISODE THIRTY-THREE**
THE RECORDING SWITCHED TO the ten-car strong FBI caravan again, this time they were just miles from the location where the FBI agent Bridgeport believed the fakes were holding Earl Swinger. Their pace seemed to have increased to over a hundred twenty miles an hour.

“The NYPD Special Victim’s Bureau’s sent me all their remaining data on Edward Swinger,” said agent Bridgeport. “This is the behind the scenes stuff. Police intel.”

Every department in the nation had their secret police force which kept tabs on their most criminal elements. It seemed Swinger had entangled himself with a few groups along the route to becoming an online conspiracy theorist and whistleblower.

“Whatever they’d discovered, it was big,” said an agent sitting next to Bridgeport. “Can we see it?” Bridgeport pulled up the data; it was nothing more than lists of names of criminals Swinger had associated with in his dealings to secure pain medication on the black market. Then a new name underlined in yellow; Nay Slayer Corp. It blinked over and over when the cue reached to that name.

McNamara chimed in from his ride south. “The chopper sabotage,” he said. “It must’ve had to do with keeping us away from the place they’ve taken this man. The company is registered in Rye, Dallas and many other sites throughout the world.”

“Well,” said agent Bridgeport. “Short of an executive order and Earl Swinger’s testimony to his health and safety, we’re not stopping for no one.”

Every available private contractor’s helicopter have been sabotaged as well…they decide that the last spot the SUV’s been seen is close enough to drive and radio ahead Rye PD.

“Local Sheriff was dispatched to the location the SUV with those plates were last sighted,” said McNamara. “Shouldn’t be too long.”

“They’ve been ordered to wait for the rest of task force,” Said Bridgeport. “These operatives are experts. We can’t go in there half ass.”

As was the Rye PD, they too were on the way to the warehouse, but would they make it in time to save Earl? The warehouse was deep into the woods. The perfect place to conceal such an operation.
EPISODE THIRTY-FOUR
Manhandled by Men

THE RECORDING SWITCHED BACK to Earl’s point of view. The viewing, or listening, audience were given a grislier tour of the Nay Slayers demonic fall into guiltless bloodlust. A few onscreen holographic pop-ups showed them the rest of Swinger’s Consortium; the ones he’d lauded as brilliant uncatchable men, being manhandled.

The first, a thick Asian fellow in his late fifties was being waterboarded. One was starved and then fed his own body parts for days, while another a black man of about forty years of age was electrocuted from his head only.

They kept his glasses on which partially melted onto his face from the heat generated during the electrocution process. Swinger recognized everyone for they were The Consortium.

This went on until all members of his network who’d been captured were dead; thirty-six men and five women. To think he’d thought they’d all gone out of the country and were living comfortable lives on beaches and screwing pretty babes–or the women were hanging out with hot men.

They were pressed for time, so they didn’t show him all thirty-six murders, one was enough to bring him to tears, but he got the picture. “You think you’ve won,” he screamed. “This is just the beginning, you unpatriotic shit stain from a petri dish motherfuckers.”

“What’re you talking about,” said the white agent. “We’re holding all the cards here, Earl.”

“It’s you who’s being interrogated. And you don’t even know it,” Swinger smiled. “You two are just foolish and inept. Go on and shoot me. See where it gets you.”

“Oh, trust me…we’ll get to that,” said the black agent. “But we’re having so much fun with you.” He smacked him in the face, then kicked his legs fee. As Swinger doubled over, the black agent struck him with an uppercut. Swinger grunted in pain. The black agent loosened his shoulders and stepped back ready to hit again, but he was held back by the white agent.
“You can shoot me down,” said Swinger through laboring breaths, “but I will rise again.”

“Not likely,” said the white agent. “Our bullets aren’t made of rubber, Earl.”

“Haven’t you heard?” he said softly bent over laughingly, blood and saliva leaking out of the corner of his mouth, “haven’t you heard,” he said louder. This time he got their attention, though they’d heard him very well the first time around.

“Heard what?” asked the white agent, irritated by Swinger’s tone.

“Come closer,” he whispered to which the white agent leaned in to listen, which was only a gesture of goodwill since he had the enhanced ears to hear him whisper from fifty meters. The agent must’ve figured. Swinger was about to divulge some sensitive information to him. Swinger had something else in mind for the half-breed.

“I’m bulletproof motherfucker.”

“You’re wasting our time in a desperate attempt to extend your own,” said the black agent.

“Cheap tactic, right?” he said laughing out loud. “I had to try something on you goons.”

“It won’t work on us,” said the white agent. “Your fate was sealed when you answered the first message from your Consortium. You should have struck the delete button, Earl. Like a good, Stanford boy.”

“Your fall will be greater than mine, you punks. You just can’t see past your fat noses. I saw through your first few schemes, what makes you think I haven’t prepared for this in some other way? Why are you so smug, so sure and so fucking confident in your mutated, lab rat, gifts that you think I’m not giving myself up for a superior motive?”

They looked at each other and shrugged having no idea what he was talking about. They figured he’d been struck too many times; he was just rambling. Maybe the running man had utterly snapped, or he’d begun to display the symptoms of a man close to death – the premorbid do tend to say things which make no sense to people who are alert and lucid.

“Yeah, that’s right, scratch that tiny dog noggin,” he said nodding his head with a big smile. “Bounce that nut around in there searching for clues. That’s how they engineered you. To sniff shit out. But this clue is too big for your pooch snouts. It’s not something you can sniff out, look for with your heightened vision, hear from a long distance. You need gray matter for that. But your bosses couldn’t afford to make you two with that part. No, they feared you’d be too powerful. That’s your flaw…your Achilles Heel. And that’s the defect I’ve taken such great advantage of over the course of this interrogation. Figure that out you hound pricks.”
“I’m tired of this,” said the black agent who then gut checked him with the heel tip of his boot. This time Swinger didn’t respond to the pain. He gut rechecked him, harder, and blood came pouring out of Swinger’s mouth. “There you go,” said the black agent. “Who else knows about the program, Earl?”

“Wait, you bozos think I’m going to tell you anything?” he said with blood popping out his lips. “You really need to pull out your CIA torture and interrogation manuals and read it again.”

“He’s right,” said the white agent. “He needs a little primitive encouragement.”

“I’m not in the mood to clean up human feces again,” said the black agent. “My nose can’t take the stench.” He winced holding his nose just at the thought.

At that point, Swinger thought they were using scare tactics on him. What could possibly… what shitty move… poor choice of words… what horrendous, gut-wrenching, agonizing thing could make a man shit his pants? His thoughts searched for an answer, none came, and that became its own torture. He scanned the room for clues and dear god there wasn’t a single thing to lend him any. Then, the white agent sighed and uncrossed his arms.

“We’re pressed for time,” said the white agent. “They’ll be here anytime. And NS #139 are getting nervous about our schedule.”

“Damn it,” said the black agent. The black agent walked over to where they kept the blue bins. Swinger’s heart thumped in his chest. Was it pliers, jumper cables to the nuts? Would they extract his fingernails too like they’d done to a few Consortium members? His thoughts raced as if he’d been on a manic episode. The black agent came back from the blue bins carrying a small white box. Swinger’s body quaked.

What the goddamn fuck are you bringing over here, you ugly, black son of a two-dollar Dalmatian whore?

---

**EPISODE THIRTY-FIVE**

This is Donna
WHEN HE GOT TOO close, Swinger leaned back as if the box was radioactive. Whatever was in that box he didn’t want to know. “You must be wondering what I have in here, right?” asked the black agent, who shoved it closer to Swinger’s face. Swinger tried his best not to appear scared, but on the inside, he was terrified – a little bit of pee slipped out, flowing to the bottom of the chair. The agents smelled the uric acid and knew then that they had him.

“You might say I’m above average curious,” he said. “Unlike you who looks maybe bi-curious, but hey, who am I to judge?”

“Hilarious…but I can smell your fear, Earl,” said the black agent. “This is Donna, she’s a Mariana Sea Slug. Very rare creature and in her estrus phase – that’s when they’re secreting a neurotoxin that does all sorts of things to the human brain. Lives at the bottom of the Mariana Trench and had to be genetically modified to survive in lower pressures.”

“You can’t imagine how many pounds of pressure this tiny little sucker can dish out,” said the black agent. “They’re very hard to find, cultivate and keep alive which is why this one was saved for you, Earl.”

Swinger looked the black agent square in his eyes. “I can only imagine how many pounds of pressure it takes for your lips to make your masters ejaculate, huh?” Swinger laughed hard enough to throw spit in the black agent’s chest, but the black agent wasn’t amused with the joke and rattled the box in his face.

Swinger cringed and shook emotionally. “Come on…that was a good one…you walked right into it.” It was then the black agent opened the box, and a hissing sound came rushing out of the box. Swinger grit his teeth bracing for the horrors within.

The black agent dipped his two fingers into the box and produced a small green and slimy slug. The creature wiggled and hissed something fierce; it wasn’t happy to leave the comforts of its dark and wet abode.

To swinger’s eye, it didn’t look harmless at all upon the first inspection. What could a freaking slug do to him? It was a tiny one too, and slugs were bigger than that little shrimp the black agent held between his fingers.

Slugs were the things little boys played with – sat next to each other and watched as they raced at a sluggish pace. Slugs were also the things boys crushed underfoot – innocuous and feeble. Slugs were safe little critters, right?
There was nothing that greenish worm could do to him that the police and those scumbags hadn’t already done. They were pulling his leg. Scare tactics. Psych Ops. They sure were some excellent bullshit artists, or were they?

“Now don’t piss it off, Earl,” said the black agent as he placed the hissing monster on Swinger’s lap. Swinger snapped his legs together tight, and as the slug repositioned, the rest of his body locked up – he felt paralyzed by fear. “It will apply pressure until you talk, shit your pants, or die, whichever comes first. But if you piss it off, it will shoot straight through the first two, and that’s not fun is it?”

It crawled slowly from Swinger’s lap to the top of his head and sat there. Swinger didn’t move an inch. Then the slug expanded over his head, multiplying to more than fifteen times its size.

It engulfed his forehead and the back of his head like a baseball cap. Swinger felt a tight pressure. Then he felt the heat on his head. Then he felt a stricter pressure.

Then the heat and pressure increased which turned into something like a tourniquet. This tourniquet became a vice grip.

Instantly, Swinger felt like someone had dropped a burning house on his head. The devil himself must’ve created this creature for God couldn’t have made something that cruel and intense and furious all wrapped into one tiny slug.

The pain was cosmic…The pain…was universal in enormity. In what he couldn’t understand as either a minute or eternity, which was only thirty seconds, he shit his pants as he spaced out from the sheer discomfort. As he came to, the agents were mocking him.

“Hmm,” said the white agent who howled slightly like a wolf. “Guess he’s not a talker after all. Too bad, means no more fun talks with Earl. Guy was starting to grow on me, you know.”

“Me too. Well, means no one else knows,” said the black agent guffawing. “That’s a job well done.”

“So, our job is done? Are we finish with this fool?” asked the white agent.

“If my own government is truly behind this,” he said deflated and teary-eyed. “Then I don’t want to live in this world anymore. Just go ahead and shoot me, goddamn it. You win, you beady-eyed, bags of hot dog vomit, pigeon puss. Pieces of rotten, shit stained, road killed, skid-marked…”
The black agent signaled to his partner who stood behind Swinger and lifted the gun from his holster. He raised the gun barrel to the back of Swinger’s head. The room became quiet. Swinger twitched nervously, as if aware that things were about to get worse. He didn’t look back.

He thought at that moment if there was a God maybe he’d intervene. He was an Atheist, and his soul would go nowhere after that endeavor was complete. What soul? He didn’t believe in a soul for that matter, he’d rot in the ground like the rest of the primates buried before him.

Though at that moment he wanted that God being to exist and to intercede. Only because there was no one there to do anything, and those bloodthirsty bastards deserved a praiseworthy licking themselves.

The FBI caravan bolted through the exit leading to the neighborhood containing the warehouse the agents had taken Swinger. They needed to hurry, time was running thin.

Earl thought the men about to take him out would no doubt get away with the act having the state behind them – this was a travesty – his blood pressure rose, and his heart exploded in pace, not because he was scared but out of pure rage; a rage that grew with each passing millisecond that inched away into eons as the gun lifted to slay him. *That was why they’d been called Nay Slayers*, he thought, *they took out the Naysayers – those who were dissident. Aww, it made sense now.*

The local police met up with the FBI, eighteen squad cars in all, they turned onto a rural area, a dirt road kicking up rocks and dust into the atmosphere and into their beaming lights. The sound of their sirens wasn’t close enough to be heard by the agents about to terminate Earl. The warehouse was too large and insulated for that.

Did it matter that their namesake made any sense to him now? He was going to be murdered by fake agents in a fake FBI location under pretenses. To add insult to injury, the information he’d given the people at the Deli were deleted by the police who undoubtedly wasn’t the police.

He then realized that fear of reprisal would cause no one to investigate further his whereabouts after what had taken place in that parking lot. People were selfish, and human nature always dictated self-preservation in times of impending calamitous intent.

Earl figured he was screwed sideways, every way, in all directions. So, he let go…

Whoever was able to create such a dazzling show out there was also able to take out anybody who stuck their noses in the wrong place – and that officer had made sure that Asian reporter knew that. She’d undoubtedly spread the message to anyone who wanted to look him up too.
Yet after witnessing the demise of Vivian’s beloved Oka, she acted, and now Karma was coming to the agents who used false pretenses to snuff innocent American lives in the name of the green dollar. Was it going to get there in time to mean anything to a living and breathing Earl Swinger? Were the scales of justice broken?

**EPISODE THIRTY-SIX**

_The Swinger Brigade_

THEY WERE STARTING TO call Agent Bridgeport’s little caravan _The Earl Swinger Brigade_ as they reached a thick bush with bold red markings on it. The area filled with dead twines which were still growing for some reason, and the markings were strange; it was straightforward the owner, a company based in Dallas, Texas did not want visitors.

“This place looks deserted,” said McNamara who’d been fed the visual through his Locis. “Am I seeing this right?”

“That’s what they want us to think,” said Bridgeport. “We’re pulling forward.”

The local police cut the chains and proceeded through the road, which was paved. There was a slew of small siloes. The facility was over a thousand acres. Another sign read:

_Nay Slayer Corp, Rye NY_

_No Trespassing_

_Violators Will Be Prosecuted to the Full Extent of the Law_
Agent Bridgeport laughed internally at the thought if this was indeed the place where Earl Swinger was being kept against his will.

Though as she drove, the complex became more inviting to the eyes; reminiscent of a bucolic university campus, there were old stables, what looked like dormitories, school buildings in various stages of wear and tear; this wasn’t as terrible a place as she’d had in her mind at all.

“What’s that?” asked a young agent as agent Bridgeport slammed the brakes. They came to a screeching halt. There was a crossing of cattle in the middle of the road; at least a good hundred was crossing from one side to the other, and they seemed unconcerned for the caravan that was approaching them at fifty miles per hour. They were cattle what was she to expect?

“Christ,” Bridgeport shouted as she smacked the horns. “In the middle of the night?” she wanted to get out the car and pop a few shots to scare the creatures, but she wasn’t a dick, plus that didn’t guarantee they wouldn’t stampede or worse; attack her, their perceived threat.

“Remember where you’re at,” said McNamara. “They don’t yield to us up there.”

Bridgeport tried to pull her car to the right, but they were going to get nothing out of that effort; the cattle had flooded every possible route. “But it’s 7:33 for Christ’s sake.”

She honked, the creatures didn’t care for a thing in the world but their crossing.

“Flash them,” said a young male African-American agent in the back seat. “That might spook them a bit. Used to work for me early mornings in Monroe, Georgia.”

“This isn’t Georgia,” she quipped, “but what do we got to lose? Earl’s a cooked goose if we sit here any longer watching cattle cross this freaking road.”

Just as she reached for the floodlights, a group of bearded men approached the vehicle. They were wearing dirty blue overalls and had reflective yellow and black hazard signs on top.

“Excuse me,” said the older of the two men. “You have permission to be on this property?”

“Agent Nora Bridgeport,” she said flashing her Loci. “FBI. Now would you please be so kind and move these fine cattle out the way. We’ve got urgent business.”

“That won’t be a problem,” he smiled and motioned to the second younger wrangler who took a laser-guided stick and aimed it at the cattle, directly in the middle of the road; the remaining animals stopped crossing as if they’d been commanded by the light.

“If I knew it was that easy,” shouted Bridgeport, who slammed on the accelerator, leaving a cloud of rubber in the man's face.
As they left the cattle behind, agent Bridgeport noticed, in her rearview mirror, that there weren’t any more cattle crossing. They’d stopped crossing them completely.

What was that all about?

Maybe she’d disturbed them so much they’d split up the cattle forever; Bridgeport didn’t know and didn’t want to know, but it was seemed weird to her that the wranglers would go through that much trouble then abruptly split the cattle up like that.

They drove on, another long stretch of road with their sirens blaring. The roadway became sort of a little highway with two lanes; agent Bridgeport couldn’t believe this place managed to exist in anonymity for so long. Then she saw something odd; something she just couldn’t believe for the pure absurdity of its existence.

“A checkpoint?” asked a young Asian female agent who had to lean forward to make sure she was seeing what the large yellow sixty by sixty holographic sign was flashing at them from five hundred feet. “It is, it is a checkpoint.”

“Are they serious?” said agent McNamara. “And it’s holographic. High-tech stuff in the middle of nowhere. Think it’s more than a show Bridgeport?”

“Maybe a warning to keep back,” she replied. “They’re making it clear they’ve seen us coming whoever they are.”

“Clever ploy but won’t stop us,” said McNamara. “Maybe they didn’t get the memo, don’t impersonate the FBI.”

As they drove, it got cloudy and dark and then, the moon appeared as if they’d been there for a while.

“What it means for our dear Earls,” said Bridgeport, “is he’s probably a goner though.”

“Who are these people?” asked an officer on the radio. “I’m starting to think we’ve kicked a mighty hornet’s nest.”

“This is private property,” said Bridgeport. “But it’s like we’ve stepped into Lala land.”

“My question is,” said McNamara over the Loci. “If they had the reach to get to our choppers and fool all those poor folks, what’s to stop them from pulling the wool over our head on their own property? I say we use our weight right here and drive right through this so-called checkpoint.”

“Agreed,” said Bridgeport. “We’re not playing by their rules any longer. It’s starting to seem a little like a distraction.”
Agent Bridgeport wanted to slow down at the checkpoint, but she blasted her siren and horn to warn the guardsmen. They drove right through the marked areas in the inspection station; the parts where the guardsmen and crossbars were, breaking the thing in half. The guard ducked avoiding the concrete where some of the larger vehicles from the Rye Sheriff’s department skidded by and tossed sideways. Agent Bridgeport and her brigade were going to find her Earl Swinger come hell or high water. Just up ahead, about a quarter mile away, they might get their wish.

EPISODE THIRTY-SEVEN
Closure

SITTING THERE WAITING TO be blown away like a cheeseburger cow in a freaking slaughterhouse irritated Earl Swinger. He wanted to diffuse the impending murder of his core self, which he’d apparently found a new attachment to at the last few moments of his life; he just didn’t want to perish in such an sterile place.

So, Earl did what he thought would infuriate them; interrogate his captors.

“What else do your people research at your little complex?”

“It’s over Earl,” said the black agent. “If you don’t have any information you can cut the shenanigans.”

“Was it mind control?” he laughed, his voice went clear across the warehouse.

“Is he serious?” asked the white agent, who adjusted his gloves.

“Let me guess, erasure of consciousness,” said Swinger. “That’s always top on the list with evil corporations. You bastards will get your comeuppance, karma’s a bitch…”

“He’s delirious,” said the black one who’d grabbed his head to look at his eyes as if it mattered to them anymore.

“Swiping of souls,” said Swinger. “What did you call it again?” he asked them, kicking his feet. “Ethereal Tele-Dimensional Transportation?” they stopped what they were doing and
“Gawked at him intently. “Shit like that sounds a bit kina demonic to me,” he laughed. “Bet you guys ran into Lucifer in there, didn’t ya?”

“Where’d you hear about that?”

“Ah, got your attention,” he said. “Good! Now I can shut up.”

“No,” said the black agent. “Now you will talk. What do you know about those projects?”

“Who told you about them?” asked the white agent. “How’d you come to gain knowledge about them, Earl?”

“I fucked your mother, she’s a talker that two-dollar Dalmatian.” They slapped him twice; one on each cheek, but he didn’t care. It seemed by then he’d grown immune to pain.

“Get your mind out the gutter, Earl,” said the white agent, who lifted him half off the chair and growled in his face.

“How about if I did her while were in the gutter?”

“There’s no redeeming him,” said the black agent who slammed his foot in Swinger’s throat fracturing a piece of his trachea. Then the white agent disappeared again. This was it. Earl knew the gun was in hand.

“Polly want a cracker? Oh, wait that’s for parrots, but then again you just bark out what your masters tell you so you’re no different from the bird-brained suckers aren’t you pooches?”

“You want to know what we do here?” said the black agent. “Yes Earl, we conduct research. But you’ll never know what type. And since you’re useless. You no longer mean a thing to us.”

“That’s what they’ll do to you when you become useless, you pooch,” said Swinger. “You’ll be taken to a fucking kennel and put to sleep. Like Old Yeller; a shotgun and a backyard.”

In those last few moments, Swinger did get his clarity, though, which was all he wanted. He got the clarity that he had demanded. The sweet taste of clarity, that’s what he wanted before dying.

Now he could die with a little closure. Was closure enough for Swinger after running from these men for over a decade? If an innocent man learned he was about to be assassinated for any reason, wouldn’t any form of closure taste bitter?

No one watching the video would ever know what he was thinking, whether he was afraid to look death in the eye or just resigned to his fate.
There’s no telling how many people they’d slew in that cold sanitized place. Hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands, who knew? They deserved a brand of karma only a God could dish out, he thought.

**EPISODE THIRTY-EIGHT**

Heard by the Nation

AGENT BRIDGEPORT AND THE rest of the brigade reached an expansive parking lot filled with black SUV’s which fit the description of the one which was used to abduct Earl Swinger. They fanned out into the lot; each of the many vehicles took to scanning the plates.

“That’s strange,” said Bridgeport. “That’s very bizarre.”

“You think that’s weird,” said the sheriff. “Come look at what we’ve got over here.”

“Guys,” said an officer from the Rye PD. “You’re not going to believe this.”

“Yes, I am,” said Bridgeport who stood outside her car staring at the license plate of two black SUV’s parked next to one another. She sucked her teeth and shook her head.

“Someone’s going to explain this,” she said to the sheriff who kicked the side of the black SUV. “And they’re going to jail after.”

“What does this mean?” asked the Asian female agent as she leaned closer to compare the vehicles. They were identical in every way imaginable; from the scratches on the bumper to the way they were parked. It was as if someone had taken a mirror and placed it on the parking lot and sequenced it a thousand times, stretching it over and over to create the SUV’s in the lot.

“It’s another massive clusterfuck,” said McNamara. “How do these people get away with this shit? They’re about to get away with murder, Bridgeport.”

“It’s not even legal,” said a sheriff’s deputy. “Is it boss?”

The sheriff looked at the plates and shook his head. He wanted to tell them that they were right but there was a statute there somewhere in the county that permitted the private corporation to do it, he knew it, but it couldn’t come to him just yet.
“Course it’s perfectly legal,” he huffed. “It’s the reason they’re doing it. These types don’t make that kind of foolish mistakes. They have *Vin* numbers to differentiate the vehicles. License plates don’t mean a thing if they don’t ever leave the complex.”

But what of Earl Swinger, they’d forgotten about him. In their colossal disarray, he was still in peril. They were only feet away from Earl Swinger…

Pow! Pow!

The white agent shot two rounds, execution style, straight into the Swinger’s medulla oblongata. Brain matter went scattering across the room.

Swinger fell limp, with his head to his chest, half his forehead missing, blood gushed out as his heart kept pumping for a while, then nothing.

The black agent covered his head with a plastic sheet to keep the blood from hitting the ground. The white agent brought a mop to clean up the remaining mess.

Later, as the white agent uncuffed the body, the black agent strolled over to a sixteen-foot-high, rectangular white machine. The agent punched in a few instructions which started the computer. As it initialized, it made a loud vibrating sound reminiscent of a lawnmower.

At this point, millions of viewers across America stood horrified at the sight, while those who refused to watch shuddered at the sounds.

All except for the people of California — they were spared this bit of fear porn, ever since they had released themselves from the Great Union eight years before the Great Divide and the formation of the Thirty-Nine. That was after the start of the Patriot Movement. Officially known as *The Sanctuary State of California*, as per the PPO, the people who lived there preferred calling their place California for old times’ sake.

**EPISODE THIRTY- NINE**

*The Meaning of Rye*
A CRIME WITHOUT A witness isn’t much of a crime at all is it? When the human eye parks itself upon an injustice and knows there were more humans like their own witnessing the same outrage, an outcry will be heard nine times out of ten. Should there be any attempt to taint such a protest in any fashion, especially with state propaganda, then there may be a revolution at hand.

Now that the damage had been done and their serfs adequately traumatized, the Patriot Patrol Office were scrambling to control the damage. The people watched in anger as the agents tossed the man’s body atop the vibrating machine.

A platform lifted the body and slid it over the head of the turbine. Then the top of the warehouse slid open, revealing the beautiful night sky.

On the side of the machine, a label read EVAPORATOR 195MJ. The letters MJ stood for megajoules, and the number 195 told how many were put out by the computer. Below it was written in bold yellow; DEMOLITION CENTER 343, RYE, NY 10528. The Rye Demolition Center was a Power Redirect Facility, meaning the energy would be used for powering an off-site government research facility that wasn’t on the power grid.

Rye was home of the oldest as well as the last roller coaster in the world. The irony wasn’t lost on the viewers. How could a palace of fun also be a place of horror?

The machine would live up to its name as they watched it perform the last verse of the night’s opera from hell. As the people across the Thirty-Nine watched, it lifted the man’s lifeless body five feet in the air, suspending him in a magnetic field. Earl’s arms fell back as did his legs; though his back remained flat as if he’d been on a gurney or table floating or suspended. His hair floated as if he’d been in a pool of water. Blood from part of his split skull floated upwards as well.

His head tilted backward, then to the right; the audience got their last glimpse of a part of Earl Swinger before the Evaporator spooled up. He seemed to be in peace now; more so than when he was alive as if now he’d finally been granted what he wanted; rest from his worries. There was no more running, hiding and scurrying from place to place and living in distress for Earl Swinger; he didn’t have to live a life underground he’d be in the ground.

Then the Evaporator began pulsating as, layer by layer, it incinerated the dead man’s clothes, then his skin, body fat, muscles, and finally his bones. Converting organic matter to energy which was used by the Hover Drones. Each layer went skyward as they were reduced to tiny black dust particles.
The chemical stench of burnt hair had flooded the room temporarily, but it fled through the roof. The scent of molten fat, a thick oily aroma, didn’t linger for long as it was incinerated and instantly converted to energy.

Even his belt buckle lifted, then vaporized and was shot into the atmosphere. The Evaporator was meticulous at taking the cadaver apart at the molecular level. Some of the viewers told themselves that it was a good thing he was dead. The idea of a person enduring that kind of treatment while conscious was too awful to contemplate.

The microelectronic sound emanating from the *Evaporator* was loud; it was surprising they didn’t hear it outside. It was a nauseating and nefariousness sounding churn.

Once the deed was done, the agents took out their counterfeit FBI kits and tossed them into a pair of large blue bins labeled ‘FBI.’ Other bins had other alphabetic labels, from ‘ATF’ to ‘SAC.’

What they did next probably upset the viewers the most. Concealment of a crime was something that Americans had always feared.

If a person could commit murder and only get away with it but have the crime itself unknown, then no one could ever feel safe. And if this were allowed to happen in America, pandemonium would reign.

The two false agents each undid a collar from their necks. When they did so, their faces changed: the black agent became a white female, while his white partner was now a black male. And this new black man looked like something not entirely human. Now he looked like some enhanced genetic metahuman, of something not of this world. His eyes were tinted yellow, catlike, and his skin looked jagged with ridges throughout.

The audience could not make sense of it. They thought they were watching a clip from another universe. If the man wasn’t human, then why was the woman helping him and why was the government backing it all?

There was a warning clarion throughout the warehouse upon which the floodlights assumed a red hue and blinked. She and *it* left the Demolition Center and climbed into their SUV. They drove off in the opposite direction they’d arrived.
THE MOON HAD BLANKETED the northern sky with a dark caroty tint which it splashed across the terrace they traveled, causing everything to assume a blood red hue. It appeared to insult them just as much as the owner of the land the brigade had traversed in search of Swinger.

“I’m starting to see right through their shit,” said Bridgeport. They were miles into what she could only deduct to be nowhere of importance since its owner had let it fall into such decay. Thick undergrowth covered every building along the route, and the road began to be taken over by plant life so severely that their smooth ride became rough. Even with enhanced vehicular stabilization control, it felt too bouncy for some agents in the carpool.

“See through what?” asked an agent in the back.

“Their vulgar cons?” asked McNamara through his Loci.

“Was it that obvious?” said Bridgeport.

“They’ve made it like bait, Bridgeport,” McNamara said in a pessimistic tone. “Could be a big ass trap if you ask me. But what are we to do? We must push forward.”

“Good thing you came with backup,” said one of the Sheriffs over the radio to which Bridgeport and her agents nodded. “Though, if they’re as sophisticated as you’ve proclaimed, they’d have figured that into the equation.”

“Still, the best defense…” said a Rye PD officer over the radio leaving the rest to their imagination. The crew nodded again.

Overhead, a solitary black dot followed them from 500 feet; it was a Hover Drone which the NSC complex had tailing the caravan the moment they’d broken through the property. It was recording their incursion into the Nay Slayer corporation’s property without their knowledge, which, of course, was the whole idea; to record them without their awareness.

The brigade was now on a mysterious property about to investigate a shadowy corporation linked to the disappearance of an enigmatic nuclear engineer who could be related to some covert government research project, who knew what they were connected to?
“Every long con has got three parts,” she said over the Loci. “We’ve seen the first two; one was the abduction of Earl Swinger.”

“The second was the sabotage of our choppers,” said McNamara.

“And now we’ve got our third,” said Bridgeport who pointed at a solitary black SUV which they were passing; it sat outside a large nondescript white warehouse. “In there. That’s the one we’ve been searching for. I can feel it. Let’s go.”

What made it different from the previous weirdly parked SUV’s they’d encounter in that huge parking lot? This one had the same plates and scratch marks; it was even parked in the same orientation as the others, which irked Bridgeport to an extent she wanted to pull out a baton and smash the windows out the thing.

What was different, in Bridgeport’s mind, was that the SUV was alone. They needed this one for whatever reason and didn’t have time to return it back to the lot. Therefore Bridgeport had determined that it must be the one used to abduct Swinger, or was it?

Bridgeport took a quick look at her Loci; it was exactly 2100 hours.

The caravan pulled up next to the SUV moments later. Agent Bridgeport led the charge for the front entrances; she signaled for the Rye PD to take the vehicle and the back of the warehouse while the county sheriff’s office would go ahead with the breach tools.

The Sheriffs crowded the doorway with a mechanical device called the Hydro; it was used to wedge a space between the door with immense pounds of pressure. It was nearly pitch black, so a torch lamp was brought to clear their way.

“Blast it,” said an officer upon which the breach team imitated the machine, which quickly wedged the door open and they were through. When they burst through the warehouse doors, guns drawn, shouting “FBI” and “Police” they bumped into a horde of cattle and the confused laborers who’d been caring for them.

“Okay,” shouted a middle-aged El Salvadorian man who made himself known as the warehouse manager. The manager, even more, confused than the laborers threw his hands up, upon which agent Bridgeport, herself dissuaded and puzzled, lowered the gentleman’s hands.

There were a few laborers who’d thrown themselves on the floor, next to the animal feces, they didn’t move a muscle, waiting with their heads down.

“What’s going on?” he asked agent Bridgeport as he tried to calm his terrified cattle staff, most of which looked similar to a group of undocumented or migrant workers Bridgeport had
detained in her first year as a border patrol agent. They were unable to fully comprehend what was taking place. “We didn’t do anything wrong.”

“FBI,” said Bridgeport. “We’re responding to a kidnapping in progress. Have you seen this man?”

After taking a good look at the image, he shook his head.

“We’re searching for a pair of men who work together,” she said to the manager, but Bridgeport didn’t show him the image of the men since it would be meaningless. “They’re about six feet tall. Two men but they could be masking their sex or race, we don’t know for sure.”

“We have over an unclassified number of employees on this complex alone,” he said. “I couldn’t’ begin to point out names or faces. But if you gave me more information.”

“It’s vital that you tell us everything you know about this facility.”

“I’m the manager here,” he said trying to shake off the anxiety. “I can tell you whatever you want to know. But there’s been no illegal activity at our site under my supervision. Not that I’ve been aware of. This I can assure you, agent…”

“Bridgeport.”

“Agent Bridgeport. This is one of the safest and cleanest families on the NSC complex. And we’re overseen by top of the line monitoring technology, which is streamlined into our hazards and material safety protocols of every NSC complex buildings.”

The warehouse laborers tried their best to go back to work, but with so many weapons trained at them, each one found it quite a difficult task, until agent Bridgeport ordered the rest of the brigade to lower their guns.

“It’s alright,” said the manager. “Back to work.” He went off to the side and whispered in Spanish to a large group of workers. They then went to the back door and entered a dark room separated by a blast door, which buzzed and then there was a flash of blue lights.

When they came back, it seemed as if they were highly energized by some unknown force; their apprehension was gone, they had no fear in the world. Bridgeport looked at them for a moment with deep suspicion. What had the manager done to those poor laborers? Whatever it was, she figured it must’ve been sinister which was why it was done behind that blast door.

“The black SUV out front?” agent Bridgeport checked with Rye PD who’d been checking the plates and the vehicle’s credentials when they stormed the warehouse.
“The vehicle’s a match too,” said the officer over the radio. “It’s the one that belongs to this facility.”

“Does it have any additional markings?” she asked the Rye PD officer who went around to look. But he couldn’t find anything upon the first inspection. But then he looked inside the vehicle, and there was a spot of blood on the seat. “Copy. There’s a fresh speck of blood in the back seat. We don’t have the time to do a quick field analysis, but I’ll take samples of the blood to see if it comes back as bovine DNA.”

He started the analysis.

“You’ve got some explaining to do,” she said to the manager. “This vehicle was involved in the kidnapping of an individual. An individual believed to have been brought to this location.”

“I don’t believe this,” said the manager. “We’ve been here all day. I can show you footage.”

“Do you know anyone by the name of Earl Swinger?”

“Never heard of him,” he said fidgeting with his fingers. “Got any pictures?”

Bridgeport showed him an analog and digital, but the manager didn’t recognize the man, squinting at both images. Agent Bridgeport wasn’t buying his act. He knew something, and he was hiding the facts for his employer, but why was he risking all this for the corporation? Was he not aware of the reach of the FBI or was the corporation’s reach longer as they’d suspected on their ride up through the highway?

Jus then Bridgeport’s Loci came back with the blood’s analysis – it was Bovine DNA. She shook her head in disgust. They were no able to manipulate DNA too? They must’ve been able to because there was no way a cow bled in the SUV.

“Do these two men work for your company?” she showed them the two men who were in the vehicle. They didn’t recognize them either as expected, but it was worth a try.

“We have an employee roster and database if you’re interested,” he said looking at the pictures like they were real evidence. She wanted to smack the look off his face; he knew they were fake.

“I’m sure that can be altered,” she replied. Of course, they’d probably been altered the moment they arrived on base, but they weren’t going to let that be known to the enemy. That wasn’t the object of the game; it was a show as she’d said. And now it seemed they’d entangled themselves into Earl Swinger’s main stage.

“Sure can,” said McNamara. “Ask them to review their coded footage. Raw. Not encoded.”
“That can be arranged,” said the manager, who walked out of the warehouse and around the side of the building. “follow me.”

They were explained that there were no men in the building and were shown footage from the entire day’s work schedule since 0800.

“See,” he said to Bridgeport. “Nothing but cattle and equipment handlers.”

“What about the blood stains?” she said pointing to the chair bolted on the floor. That they couldn’t deny; the chair was apparently a place you’d put a human. Not only was it bolted to the floor, but it was also surrounded by concrete. They’d need a compelling tale to get her to budge.

“Slain animal blood,” he said in a mocking tone. “We processed cattle here – old fashion – keeps the meat tender and our high-end clients like it that way. And the chair is left there to give the handlers a proper footing, the blood can be very slippery, you know.”

“The Nay Slayer Corp?”

“Is a beef company,” said the manager with a wicked smirk she wanted to smack right from him with the back of her cold hand.

With each of his equally ludicrous explanations, it all only angered agent Bridgeport. There weren’t any loose ends, that was just tantamount to a coverup and anyone this good just meant it was premeditated.

The brigade tucked tail and left unsatisfied with their investigation but satisfied with the manager’s perfectly scripted lies. What else could they do but take what they’d seen at face value? At least for now…

**EPISODE FORTY-ONE**

*The Swinger Files Part II*

THEY’D JUST VIOLATED HER mind toward asymmetric folly. They’d violated the collective minds of her entire brigade to a pulp. And now they were about to violate the situation as well. Bridgeport couldn’t allow that to happen. She’d rather die than let them win like that, especially
knowing an innocent victim wouldn’t be found in time. What was worse; they’d be doing who knew what to Swinger if she didn’t find him.

It wasn’t a pride thing; it was a duty. Agent Bridgeport wanted to stomp her feet like a toddler. “I’m not satisfied!”

“What more can we do?” said McNamara over the Loci. “Unless we can find Swinger.”

Deep down inside, she knew something was wrong with that Nay Slayer Corp complex. There definitely was and to try to leave the compound now, that she found difficult, was cowardice, but to stay was equally foolish. Staring at the manager’s petulant grin and knowing she’d been bested by mindless cattle, Bridgeport simply couldn’t take it.

“Something’s not right here. It’s this place, I just know it.”

When Bridgeport stepped outside the warehouse, she realized how quickly the situation had reached above her head. The only next viable step was to call in for a full shutdown of the NSC complex. To stay there any longer would be asking for trouble or death.

She scanned the area, looking at the people, the cattle, and the buildings; nothing came, but she knew it was all too perfect. It was coordinated, like a ballet or film, an opera of sorts; by a fantastic director; Mr. Oz was somewhere, and she’d find the bastard and place cuffs on him.

“He’s right,” said one of the sheriffs who walked up to Bridgeport and pulled her to the side. “This may be private property, but it’s in my county, and there’s a missing citizen, and we’ve got plenty of probable cause to stick around and poke our heads here and there if you dig me,” he winked, but Bridgeport didn’t seem interested.

“We’ll come back,” she said tapping the sheriff on the shoulder. “But in the meantime, I’m shutting it all down. Hey, you,” she ordered the manager to shut down the complex and gather the workers. He looked at her as if she’d lost her mind; this was no small task.

“Do you know how many people work here?” he asked her.

“I don’t care,” she said as she stepped away from the warehouse. “Summon all of them to this field over there.” She pointed to a field behind the warehouse where the black SUV was parked. “When we get back here, everyone who works for this company better be here, do you understand?”

“We gather you’ll have a warrant?”

“Yes,” she said curtly with her arms crossed now with a tight grin. “That’ll be correct. You can guarantee that.”
“He’s not buying it,” said McNamara. “Sounds incredulous, know what I mean?”

“Don’t really care what their pawns think,” said Bridgeport. “I’m relaying a message to their head honchos.”

“That we’ve got a Deathwish?”

“Doesn’t every agent?”

“You got me there,” he chuckled. “Now what about this guy? Doesn’t he seem too calm about shutting down business over a single missing body?”

“Came across kind of awkward to me as well,” said Bridgeport staring at the manager. “They’ve got square miles of space here. And he’s not even the biggest boss on site. We could spend weeks looking for Swinger. Gives them plenty of time to get rid of a body, don’t you think?”

“Space or no space,” said McNamara. “They’ve got to get rid of human remains. That’s still impossible without the proper technology. But then again…”

“I see you’ve come around,” she said as they jumped into their convoy. “Okay fellas this is our exit party. I’d like to thank the Rye PD and Sheriff’s Department for their indispensable assistance in all of this. When we come back. And we’ll come back with papers. We’re going to tear this place a new one. Keep the fort down for us.”

They took off, leaving the Rye PD holding the warehouse. She figured she’d just take the same route back to the front gate, that was simple; through the shrubbery, past the broken checkpoint, the highway, the dirt road and then the front entrance.

By the end of the day at 2400 hours, they’d driven for hours along the plant ridden path and still had not reached the broken checkpoint. The road seemed endless, which Bridgeport knew to be impossible, so she stopped and placed a post near one just for a test. A few more hours later at 0450 hours, they drove past the same post, which was lit up and blinking.

“This isn’t possible,” said Bridgeport who checked her Loci. “We’ve driven seventy miles north, it says.”

They’d nearly run out of gas driving around, passing the same place they’d driven just hours ago. “Mine says we’ve traveled 89 miles south,” said an agent in the back seat.

Bridgeport shook her Loci as if it would remedy the tech. “They both can’t be correct.”

And they weren’t. The fact of the matter was they’d driven one hundred and forty miles in a circle for six hours straight. The fact that it took them six hours to cover that much distance
would’ve shocked the brigade. What’s worse; they’d lost contact with the outside world the day before and didn’t know it then and don’t even know it yet.

“Can you get McNamara?” asked an agent in the back seat. “Maybe he can help us triangulate?”

“Nope,” the agent shrugged. “I’ve been trying to link with him for hours now.”

“I can’t get him either,” said Bridgeport. “The signal’s gone flat ever since we’ve hit this patch of road.”

Suddenly a massive thunderstorm approached them quickly. It then turned into a hailstorm which started pelting their convoy with hail the size of footballs; the pelts on their cars were murderous, they needed to stop, or they’d surely be killed.

“What the heck is that?” asked Bridgeport as a boulderlike hail slammed into the hood of her car damaging it beyond recognition; the lights were gone including half the windshield. She banged on the brakes.

“Right there,” shouted an agent who saw a shed deep into the valley. The caravan pulled into the metal shed for safety. As they pulled in, it became apparent the shed was used for cookouts during the summer; there were barbeque grilling pits and seating for hundreds of people spread throughout the perimeter of the shed. The hail storm continued to bombard them for hours. There were no communications in or out.

“I can’t believe it,” said one of the agents, a young Korean male. “I’m going to die here?”

“Don’t talk like that,” said Bridgeport. “Remember your training agent. We’ll make it out of this. We’ll all make it out.”

“I’ve never seen hail like this,” said the sheriff. “I mean, can it even be called hail? At that point, you might as well call them icebergs from space, right?”

“Unexpected phenomenon,” said Bridgeport. “All explained by science. Right there mister scientist?” She turned to look at the young African-American agent who’d just transferred in from the Atlanta bureau.

“Don’t look at me,” said the young black agent. “I specialized in bioscience back in college. This is weather; you need a weatherman for this shit, but I can tell you it’s screwy. Sheriff was right, this isn’t supposed to happen under any condition.”
The storm’s continuous outpour started to break their a few agents. One began to cry while another knotted up into the fetal position. It was like it had a mind of its own and it had a sole duty; to crush their spirit.

The wicked attack on the brigade went on into the night unimpeded, building up a massive reservoir of ice that was twenty-four inches thick; the hail became clear as ice. Not even one of the members of the Swinger convoy slept a wink that night.

As the morning sun rose, Bridgeport came to the horrific realization that they’d been trapped in the lowest part of the valley.

“Get up, people,” she shouted to the dazed crew. “We need to move fast!”

“What’s the hurry?”

“We’re in a death zone,” she shouted. “Get up, we gotta go.”

But it was already too late, the hail had started melting like butter when the sun rose from the valley. The river was already swelling. They’d been sitting in the lowest part of the flood zone where water began to rise with the convoy trapped among the giant boulders of ice. In the next few hours, as the sun rose, the hail would melt the remaining ice, which would turn where they were sitting at into a deathly flood zone.

“Get out,” she screamed. “Get out now!”

“Oh god,” shouted a young sheriff deputy, “It’s so cold.”

The rest of the convoy got out their vehicles, but then what? The moment they removed themselves from the comforts of their cars, and into the frigid water, a few team members felt something unfriendly between their legs; whatever it was, it had been flowing, better yet, slithering beneath the murky, bone-chilling water and judging by the wave it created, it wasn’t by any means a small creature.

**EPISODE FORTY-TWO**

*The Swinger Files Part III*
THE QUICKLY RISING ICE-COLD water had lost all its visibility, which was less than a couple inches, but that wasn’t their problem; a slithery beast now stalked the hapless Earl Swinger Brigade. It swirled through the cold water like it was searching for something. And whatever it was, it was too fast for any of them to get a bearing on it.

Agent Bridgeport drew her weapon.

“Goddamn it,” said a sheriff deputy to her left, “I think I felt something crawl past my leg.”

“Please don’t say that,” said the young Asian FBI agent. “Because I swear it just past by me too. Right there.”

She pointed, and just as she did, something swished by the water. It was big; too big and too long to be a fish. Though on second thought if it were a fish, it would be the longest fish she’d seen in her short life, and an agile one; the water by her feet felt like it was being sucked down a whirlpool. It must’ve been moving at twenty or more knots in the water.

“What the hell was that?” asked Bridgeport who shifted back and forth aiming her weapon, each time it vanished where she pointed; like the beast knew it was being targeted. “This isn’t real. This can’t be happening.”

It seemed that the flood had brought with it a few of the vile things contained in the river. The creature moved in quickly and plucked an agent’s foot, dragging her under the water. The other members of the brigade squirmed, running for high ground. When she emerged from the predator’s clutches, she ran to the top of Bridgeport’s car.

“It’s a fucking snake,” she shouted with all her breath with blood trickling from her side. “I think it’s a giant snake. I felt the fucking body…Ahh!”

The agent gyrated in disgust and was flustered, pale and felt offended; as if she’d seen the true face of the Grim Reaper with all the bones and rotting worms inside the skull. The boa constrictors rarely attacked humans, and, in any attack, they’d constrict their prey wrapping them tight to suffocate them before consumption, they wouldn’t try to drown them. That would require non-instinctive deliberation and planning; a higher order function which the reptile family doesn’t have.

The team didn’t hesitate; they soon followed her to the top of the only car which remained intact. “We need to get to the radio,” said an agent as the rest of the team caught up.

“And do what?” asked Bridgeport. “Radio the state troopers?”
Agent Bridgeport remembered the sheriff had told them that there was a nearby river with all sorts of wildlife which ran through the property. She motioned for an officer to check the stream.

“For what?” the officer asked her. That was an excellent question. What else would he find in that damn river? They’d only found themselves locked in the middle of a small valley and were surrounded by a flood zone that delivered them into the mouth of a giant boa constrictor in less than a few hours. Now, what more hell and chaos awaited in the river? He didn’t want to know.

“For the snake,” said the sheriff who instructed him to get the life raft from the trunk of one of the trucks and go over by the river. The riverbed had swelled, and it was moving quickly, but there were some trees where he’d be able to hold on. The officer’s face said it all; he didn’t want to go, but an order was an order. He swallowed spit and headed forth into the front of the unknown; the dark rising water.

“Be careful,” she said to him as he inflated the life raft. When he reached near the side of the river, where the current was toughest, the officer took out a piece of fatty food he’d had in his pocket and tossed it by the river. Not a second later a giant boa constrictor, one which, from the look of it, was at least thirty feet in length, took the food and the officer with it.

The convoy gasped and cringed.

“The fuck was that?” asked the African-American agent, who jumped back nearly falling into the water. He wanted to go after his fallen comrade but at what cost?

“That was our confirmation,” said agent Bridgeport. “We’re surrounded by boas, but how, how many and why?”

“This is impossible,” said the sheriff as his deputy was consumed. “They’re not native to New York.”

“You’re the one with the biology degree,” said Bridgeport staring at the black agent, “Please clue us into what’s going on here.”

“I’m just as confused and have absolutely no clue,” he shrugged. “They’d freeze to death up here in the winter. Unless this is some sort of biodome? But look up…no special atmosphere. This is open atmosphere. There’s no explanation for them getting this big. This cannot be.”

“But they’re natives of water,” she said looking at him with a worried face. “Aren’t they?”

“Still, not water this cold. They’re coldblooded, Bridgeport. They should be dead by now. Not even human beings, who are warm-blooded, should be able to survive this long in frigid water
like that. Someone’s made them is all I can come up with. Those aren’t boas, they’re something else completely.”

“Alright, then,” she said not dismayed. “Now how do we defeat impossibly giant anacondas, professor?”

“He just said they’re not anacondas,” said the African-American agent. “We should stay the fuck out that damn water.”

“He’s right. Stay out of the water,” he said taking a step away from the rising water. “That’s literally our only option. If we can avoid that we will survive. Otherwise…”

Bridgeport looked back at him concerned that the next answer would be world ending. “Well, otherwise?”

He looked back at Bridgeport and sighed. “Otherwise…we’re fucked.”

For the wretched hours which followed, the remainder of Earl Swinger’s Brigade stood atop agent Bridgeport’s totaled car as the frigid water around them slowly rose with the melting ice. Eventually, Bridgeport had to pop open a life raft or freeze to death from hyperthermia. The other crews did the same, but the snakes instantly knew where the body heats had pooled and started circling beneath the rafts. The brigade was then at the mercy of an orgy of repulsive and seemingly cold-water resistant anacondas who at any moment could gobble them up, and there was nothing they could do about it.

**EPISODE FORTY-THREE**

*The Swinger Files Part IV*

THEY PADDLED AS FAST as they could to get past the other side of the riverbank; it was their only chance for the riverside had an uphill bank to safety. Luckily each life raft had four study orange plastic paddles. The only bad luck of the situation was the life rafts; they were cumbersome and easy to tip to the side.
Agent Bridgeport’s raft was the largest, an orange and black one which can carry at least twelve members of the sixteen in the Brigade. Three more followed behind, paddling slowly and carefully; each had two team members with a weapon drawn just in case…

“Does anybody see anything?” asked Bridgeport looking down at the dirty water. “I don’t. Not yet at least.” It seemed as if everything down there was moving with the swelling river. Her eyes were deceiving her.

“It’s too damn quiet,” said one of the sheriff’s deputies in the second raft. Their raft was green, red and black, which the biologist on the team had assured them was the perfect color in biology; predatory animals like snakes saw mixed colors as a biothreat, but just then, something circled beneath their raft. He left out the fact that snakes were colorblind, and boa constrictors didn’t care much for toxins. The sheriff deputy made an eye contact signal to agent Bridgeport letting her know he’d seen the motion below his raft.

“We’re almost there,” said Bridgeport as they cleared the other end of the river. “Don’t fire at it unless you absolutely must.” The current had picked up as the river swelled. It was a miracle they’d made it so far from the valley, which as Bridgeport looked back, the water had swallowed all their vehicles in the shed.

“Paddle people,” she shouted as the current picked up stride. They increased their pace towards the crossing; at the other side, there was a thick brush of trees. Bridgeport figured even if they were attacked by anacondas, the thick brush would provide them some cover to position themselves and fire at the beasts.

Suddenly, a sheriff heard a loud sound beneath his raft. Their raft tipped and started vibrating. The vibration seemed deliberate, but there was nothing there which could’ve done such a thing to the float, so they looked below them. There were twelve giant anacondas blow them swimming around causing the bulky wave.

“This isn’t happening,” said an officer who then aimed his weapon and began firing into the horde of boas. The raft members followed suit, and a hail of bullets popped into the water. The water cooled. But then a solitary snake plunged through the middle of the raft splitting it in half. The remaining agents jumped out the float into the fray joining the twelve anacondas.

“Cover them,” yelled Bridgeport and without a second thought, another hail of bullets rung into the water around the four officers who were swimming towards Bridgeport’s raft. The
waterway, though murky and dark, became livelier and it was evident to the brigade that the snakes were heading towards the members of the team who’d fallen in.

“Swim faster goddamn it,” shouted an agent who tossed a lifesaver to a young woman. The moment she caught the lifesaver, she was swiftly taken under by a snake. Then she pooped back up, bleeding like a stuck pig, but she was alive. “Help me,” she cried. The frenzy only increased from that moment.

“We need to get her out of the now,” said the black agent; the one with the biology background. “With blood in the water, there’s no telling what will happen now. All types of predatory shit we’re not ready to deal with right now might start coming in our area.”

They tossed another lifesaver, she caught it, and they pulled her. But just as she was being drawn in, another snake picked her, and she disappeared beneath the water leaving nothing but bubbles behind. Agent Bridgeport’s face was red, her breathing was rapid, she was fuming.

Bridgeport jumped into the water with her knife in her mouth. She dove, swam down to the young woman and pulled her from the snake; came close enough to see the whites of the eyes of the snakes…while stabbing at the creature.

The creature went for Bridgeport as the girl went back up, but they’d split up swimming up when she got back to the raft the girl was above the water, treading; she took her to the edge of the float. Their raft mates pulled both up quickly. The young woman was happy to be in the float as they placed a towel over her.

“What got into you just now?” said the sheriff as Bridgeport dried off putting her knife away. She looked at him not quite ready to tell him the truth but did so anyway.

“I saw all red,” she said catching her breath. “I was ready to die at the moment. And that was enough to do something foolish, just this once.”

The sheriff looked up at her and shook his head. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“Keep paddling,” Bridgeport ordered. She told the other rafters to board the sizeable solid raft she was on. Their raft was indeed rickety and wouldn’t test an anaconda attack like the one they’d seen earlier and pooling together would be the best strategy to cross the river’s mighty current. They abandoned ship, jumping onto Bridgeport’s raft.

“Seems like the best option,” said the sheriff with a smile and many nods of agreement from the team. As they paddled, the current didn’t seem to be as bad with more people in the same raft.
They didn’t make it ten feet.

Suddenly out of nowhere, a bunch of twigs came plowing into their raft. Bridgeport didn’t have a moment to spare as she turned her head to witness the giant collection of knotted twigs and rotten wood, which appeared as a dislodged beaver’s nest, slam into their raft.

“Watch out!” yelled an agent, but it was too late; there were sixteen men and women on one mid-sized raft; the math would’ve predicted a terrible outcome in any situation; they capsized.

Agent Bridgeport swam like a fish; she knew there was no surviving against a creature that was both terrestrial and seaworthy, but she wasn’t going to give it a heads up. “Get the hell out the fucking water!” was all she could shout before the river swallowed her and the rest of the crew. The water swelled mighty fast like someone had pulled a drain; the entire Swinger Brigade vanished with the flood.

**EPISODE FORTY-FOUR**

*The Swinger Files Part V*

HER EYES SWUNG OPEN to a green-eyed gentleman pumping frantically over her chest, with pressure mounting and then water shot out her mouth, then air filled her lungs. Thoughts came next as oxygenated blood started filling agent Bridgeport’s consciousness with life again.

She’d awoken at the bed of the river they’d attempted to cross the day before to no avail. Next to Bridgeport stood the sheriff and his three deputies, her three agents and the eight officers from the Rye PD who’d accompanied her on the Swinger Brigade. They’d all made it across the river of death, but how?

The last thing she remembered was…

“She’s coming back,” said the grizzled man. As she flushed the fluid out her lungs, Bridgeport leaned to the side to catch her breath. The taste of that nasty river water was something to loathe for a generation. It would take counseling to rid herself of the memory of the
texture alone; maybe it was part snake skin which had snagged itself down her throat, but she wanted to gag and vomit, but she couldn’t.

“What is this, hell?” she joked, and the rest of the brigade laughed in relief; she was alive and well. That was the quick-witted Agent Nora Bridgeport they’d come to know and value.

“Well,” said the sheriff. “She kept her sense of humor,” and walked over, leaned into her and gave her a big handshake. “I’d have burned this damn place down if we’d have lost you.”

After what they went to, who would’ve blamed him? The question remains what or who placed the snakes there and how were they even able to survive in such cold temperatures? They were only happy to be alive, so the brigade didn’t even venture to ask the stranger among them any questions. Not yet at least.

Bridgeport shot him a smile. “You’re so sentimental, sheriff.”

The young woman she’d plucked from the water came over and hugged her, refusing to let go. Agent Bridgeport patted her on her back, then gently pushed her off.

“All right now,” she said. “You’re all making me want to go back to wherever I just went to,” she said blushing. Then she turned to the man who’d saved her life and smiled. “I never got your name,” she smiled wider. “I must thank you in the greatest way I can.”

“Just call me the Supervisor,” he said with a tight grin. Then he stood to his feet, dusted himself, and walked away as if nothing had happened. “If you want out of here, all you have to do is follow that trail, marked exit.”

“Wait,” asked the sheriff. “How’d you find us?”

“It’s what I do,” he said without turning back. The brigade didn’t like the answer. As officers of the law, they didn’t like that tone either. Come to think of it, they’d all awoken without the slightest memory of what happened before the catastrophe at the riverbed.

They’d also awoken without the slightest clue to how he got there and how they’d all been positioned in the places they were. It felt like they were all placed where they’d been standing; like a bunch of dolls and then the lights were turned on for them to act…it was unnatural.

“Wait a minute,” said Bridgeport. “You’re not getting off that easy. Our cars were totaled on your property, sir, what’s your name? We need to talk to your boss.”

“Supervisor…your cars are all waiting for you,” he said stopping for a moment. “Right there at the end of the trail. Nothing’s happened to them.”
Either he’d completely lost it, or they’d all had a mass hallucination. There was no way their cars were in perfect working order after just a couple hours. They’d have to have the best paint and body shop on the planet or an army of slaves to get those totaled vehicles back to working order and still they’d be hard pressed...

“Pardon me?” said the sheriff. “But we watched our cars get destroyed by hail the size of basketballs…”

“And a flood finished the rest of them,” said Bridgeport. “There aren’t any vehicles left.”

“Funny,” he said adjusting his glasses. “There hasn’t been a drop of rain in this county for weeks. You can check the forecast if you wish.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” said the black agent. “We know what we saw.”

“There’s been a chemical spill on our property,” said the Supervisor. “It’s had a massive effect on biological lifeforms, including humans. It’s possible you’ve hallucinated everything you’ve seen. Which is why there are hazard signs all over the complex warning people to keep off.”

“That can’t be the reason,” said agent Bridgeport. “We know what we saw?”

“Why you thought those signs we posted were for fun?” he shouted now. “And the roadblocks you plowed through was for our own health? Not yours?”

“And the agent who’s died?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about?” he said. “However, we found one of your team members who’d been lost in the woods. He’d been wondering for days. Dehydrated and delirious. Gave him medical attention and sent him out; front gates. You’ll find him when you exit.”

“This is the show Swinger was talking about,” said Bridgeport. “You people are somehow behind all of this, but how are you able to do all of this?”

The sheriff whispered into Bridgeport’s ear. “It’s best if we go,” he said. “This is beyond us. This…whatever this is…is just ungodly. We can come back with a bigger team.”

“No,” said Bridgeport. “They think they’ve won. Look at the foul smirk on his face.”

“I know,” said the sheriff. “We’ll find another way to get them. Something’s just not right with this place, don’t you see it?”

“You can stay in here and drive around for eons,” he smiled. “Or you can take the exit while there’s still time. I won’t ask you twice.”
Bridgeport stopped to think…

She’d love nothing but to rip that grin off his face with a warrant to search that place from top to bottom, but that meant leaving and coming back. He knew that and they, his boss, knew that. It meant they’d have time to prepare for whoever taskforce she’d bring to comb the place up and down; if she stayed any longer in such a seemingly dangerous place, risking the lives of other agents and law enforcement officers, there was no telling what the outcome would be. She had no choice; she had to leave.

“They’ve won this round,” she said and walked by the supervisor. “Tell your boss we’ll be back very soon. And thanks for saving my life, Mr. Supervisor.”

They walked down a narrow path filled with berries for what seemed like three hundred meters and ended in a parking lot.

“Get the fuck out of here,” said the African-American agent. “That’s our cars. But that’s not our cars, right?”

“I’m sure they’re duplicates,” said Bridgeport. “Our cars were under that damn flood, remember?”

“Right, but they’ve got every freaking detail.” He ran to the car he rode into the NSC complex. “Look, look,” said the black agent. “That’s my notepad.”

Agent Bridgeport was befuddled and wanted to see what they’d preserved with her car; she ran to her vehicle look-alike and lo and behold everything had been there.

She didn’t know what to feel or how to feel, but she was ready to burst from the inside as her heart sank into her feet…

“Let’s get the fuck out of here!” Bridgeport screamed as she climbed into her car.

After the Supervisor led them out the Nay Slayer complex, the Swinger Brigade finally made it out at 1200 hours arriving at the front gate; to their surprise, it wasn’t busted…not a scratch.

The supervisor unlocked the front gate, and as he did, agent Bridgeport spotted McNamara’s black SUV parked a few feet to the side of the secondary fence marked with the Nay Slayer trespasser warning. She was fearful that something had happened to her partner who she had stopped receiving transmissions from for hours.
The Supervisor told them that the situation was very hazardous and the NSC compelde even had people in hazmat suits out from the Health and Human Services department. When they’d reached the front gate, more HHS personnel from the CDC in Atlanta had shown up in special suits to do “containment,” but Bridgeport wasn’t buying it.

“McNamara,” she shouted at her Loci. “McNamara, can you hear me?”

“Bridgeport?” came back from McNamara’s SUV with slight static. Then a man plopped upright from the vehicle which automatically pulled the car out of its resting stage. “Is that you?” he asked which made her heart came back to rest.

“Dear Lord,” she shouted. “Where have you been all this time?”

“Where have you been?” he asked her as they pulled up to his car. “I’ve been trying to contact you…” she ended the call. Bridgeport was knocking on McNamara’s window.

“We’ve been trying to contact you for hours,” she said ready to give her partner the most significant grilling in the world, she investigated the car; it looked like he hadn’t bathed or shaved in days. The vehicle reeked of body odor and takeout; there was takeout in there from days ago.

“Hours,” he said laughing. “What do you mean hours?”

As they spoke, the rest of the brigade was leaving. Apparently, they were hightailing it out of there happy to be alive. The sheriff waved at Bridgeport, and she nodded as he passed.

“Yes,” she said. “You should’ve taken care of your hygiene in that time, man. We’ve been calling for back up for hours. That place, there’s something not quite right with it.”

“That’s what I wanted to tell you,” he said looking at her with the biggest eyes ever. “That’s what I couldn’t tell you until you got out. I’ve been waiting for you for three days. Not hours. I lost contact with you the moment you left for Rye, so I followed you here. When I got here, some guy called the Supervisor told me to wait for you; that he’d try to find you in there. They had a disaster and couldn’t let me in. Anyway, I got bits and pieces of comms from you and them, so I waited.”
“What? That’s not possible, we were in contact for a whole day. What’d you mean three days?”

He shook his head in disbelief.

“No,” he said confused. “I’ve never talked to you since the end of day one.”

“So,” she said shaking her head. “This was what that poor bastard was up against? They were manipulating space, time and even our minds. I didn’t know what up or down was in there. This is unholy.”

“You mean Swinger?” he asked. “You’ve become a believer, Bridgeport?”

“After that place, I don’t know what to believe, McNamara.”

“They even had military troops outside for two days…” said McNamara. “I was starting to get worried for you.”

But it wasn’t military troops. They were NSC employees playing military.

“I can get out of anything,” she said. “But in the time I was trapped in that place, I was starting to lose confidence in both my sanity and my abilities. Whatever they’re doing in there is more sinister than the devil himself.”

She started her car, and they drove away from the Nay Slayer complex. The whole time, there’d been a Hover Drone recording their conversation from a few thousand feet. It followed them to the Rye’s city border and turned back heading north back into the complex upon which it vanished into a thick cloud overlooking the warehouse where Earl Swinger was held and murdered.

**EPISODE FORTY-SIX**

*The Smoking Gun*

IN ANY SITUATION WHERE she’d found herself dealing with entities or people who she knew little about, it was always best for agent Bridgeport to keep her endgame a secret. Now, she
would reveal her grand finale to the high stakes players of the game with a single clue; and it was about time to perform before Oz again as their chopper took off.

“While you were gone,” said McNamara, who sat behind Bridgeport and had interrupted her daydreaming session. “I was working a source down at the Bowery who said she’d seen this same man, called the Supervisor.”

The Swinger Brigade had been taken for a big ride back in Rye by a seemingly tiny corporation. The Nay Slayer corporation didn’t, from financial records, clear over a hundred million in profits. It boggled Bridgeport’s mind how such a small entity could produce such a large and dazzling, wide reaching event without the help of the us government.

“What about him?” she asked angrily looking off into the wide scape of land owned by the NSC complex. “He was just too creepy.”

Creepy wasn’t quite the word. Creepy was a salute, a flirt in comparison to what they’d encountered. Might as well call those taunting eyes beautiful blues; for where they should’ve been blue they looked like endless space.

“Looks like we could have a lead,” said McNamara. A lead which could hand them over to the same people they’d encountered.

“A lead?” asked the Asian female agent who sat next to Bridgeport. She didn’t want to be too far from her lifesaver and new idol. “Then we must go after it. What’s the lead?”

“About a company linked to the Nay Slayer corporation,” said McNamara who was starting to feel like he didn’t put in his best for the team back in Rye. And this great lead would, no doubt, be a good push forward in the Earl Swinger case, but would it? They’d lost to a small company, and now they’d just found out it had a branch in their backyard; that could be two birds with one stone or pure, delicious disaster.

“Who can we get a warrant to search the facility in downtown Manhattan?” asked Bridgeport. That was only half of the story. Any connected rogue unit of the government, if they haven’t bought out or blacklisted all the federal judges, would no doubt get to peek at the warrant before they arrived. She couldn’t have that; agent Bridgeport needed a silent warrant.

“There are at least two judges but…” the African-American agent shrugged. “I don’t know who’ll touch that company after what we’ve seen.”

“Silent warrants don’t get signed until the day before,” said the female Asian agent. “We missed the deadline anyway.”
“It doesn’t matter,” said Bridgeport. “We’ve got probable cause. My Loci stopped recording the moment I went into that ungodly facility and started back up here. That’s three days of missed time. And did any of you realize we were in there for three days?

They all shook their heads. All except for McNamara who looked at his partner with a bit of hysterical nonsense in his head. How could she not have seen the sun rise and fall in the three days she’d been in the facility?

“Things like that don’t happen in nature,” said McNamara. “But I was out here and didn’t see what you saw. So, whatever they pulled, gal leak or not, they were able to contain it within the walls of the complex? I’m not buying it.”

“So,” said Bridgeport. “You’re back on board the looney train. It’s starting to sound to me like Earl Swinger, a nuclear engineer, the type of guy with the background for this sort of stuff, might have blabbed about something and they needed to erase him.”

“Nonsense,” said the black agent. “The government, not even with that idiot in charge, would do something that heinous. They’re not with us. They’re rogues.”

“We still need a warrant,” said McNamara. “And I think what we have is a silver bullet. Convincing any justice to issue a silent warrant is the problem.”

“Will it be enough for any warrant?” asked the black agent. “Because we know of many phenomena that could affect the Loci Bracelets.”

“Not on this scale though, right?” asked Bridgeport. “Not to this proportion. Besides if we can link a nuclear engineer to these events, it means we’ve got enough prerogative to go after the corporation. They might be constructing something that’s very illegal.”

“That I can tell you is correct,” replied the black agent with a grin. “So, we go in then. Again, into the goddamn beast. If this facility is connected to the NSC facility, we’re screwed.”

“Yes,” said Bridgeport. “But they’re on my turf now, and Manhattan is small and compact. No place to run and hide.”

“Think they’ll see us coming?” asked the Asian female agent. There was an HD unit recording everything and the NSC now knew their entire plan.

“Of course,” said McNamara. “The trick is to make it look normal and procedural.”

“When what we’re looking for is another show,” said the black agent.

“But will they put on a show?” asked Bridgeport. They sure did the first time, why wouldn’t they do it again?
“I can guarantee it,” said McNamara. “These types want to show us who’s the boss. And we’ll be there to get everything.” She’d hit it on the nose. But did the Nay Slayer facility want them to keep testing their equipment and technology? That would be an ill-advised move for any corporation which is handling top secret government research, legal or illegal.

“I’m not sure if anything is going to be on the up and up when we get in there,” said Bridgeport. “Yes, it’s our homefield advantage, but wasn’t Rye supposed to be the Sheriff’s and Rye PD’s home field? And look what happened to us.”

As they neared Manhattan, the skyline stretched an orange and blue haze. McNamara turned to Bridgeport and could see the worry in her face. This wasn’t like any case she’d taken before. Sure, kidnappings of this sort, done by high roller types such as the mafia or large gangs, were hard to crack, but this was a titan of a monster.

“Just in case the same thing happens,” she said. “I’ll make sure the entire world knows we’ve entered the building with a press report that’s to be broadcast a few minutes after we enter.”

“What?” asked McNamara. “What reporter would risk their credentials by broadcasting news late as if it happened in the current?”

“I got one sitting in my Loci,” she brandished a bright smile as she pulled up the Asian female who’d called in the Earl Swinger kidnapping to the NYPD. She was a reporter for the *NY Daily Journal*, the perfect outlet for their agency. This would be done by a young reporter who’d been looking for her own big case and Bridgeport felt that this would be like handing it right to her.

“Will she bite?” asked McNamara. “She’s young but not stupid.”

“She’s defiant and thirsty,” said Bridgeport. “And that’s the best type of reporter you could ask for. They coerced her, but she still called this in. do you think she won’t take the chance to further her career by helping us?”

“You’ve got a great point,” said McNamara. “Let’s hope the *NY Daily Journal*, her boss, are in on it when they see what she’s done.”

The *NY Daily Journal* had strong grip on the Manhattan news business. And it also made sure that whomever was inside the building after they entered, would get the news up to date foiling any plans they’d have concocted to thwart Bridgeport and McNamara’s search warrant.

Just then, Bridgeport received an incoming message from her Loci. It was her staff psychiatrist, Linda Bowen, a bespectacled middle-aged brunette, who wanted to check in. Linda
also wanted to give Bridgeport that first part of their unwanted debriefing. They’d get a full depth version after the case was concluded.

“Hello, agent Bridgeport.”

“Hello Linda,” said Bridgeport unamused to see her projection or hear her voice. “How goes it?”

“Great, I’m assuming all is well on your end?” Linda sort of reminded Bridgeport of her older sister, Margorie, from Stamford, Connecticut who’d call to check up on her from time to time; Margorie was a child psychologist and felt it her duty to make sure her little sister was in one piece. After all the Federal Bureau of Investigation was a dangerous and taxing occupation.

“Yes, madam. Now what’s got you calling me right as I’m about to land on top of our office building?”

“I need you to come in for a check-in,” she said calmly. It rocked Bridgeport a little. She wasn’t in the mood to have her brain picked after what they’d done to it in Rye. Would she still be listed as fit for duty after she gave any account of what they’d seen at the NSC compound? None of them, no matter how powerful or senior in rank would stand a psychological poking right now; not until Earl Swinger was found.

EPISODE FORTY-SEVEN
The Glass Kinematics Connection I

WHEN SPECIAL AGENT BRIDGEPORT paused at the door to the tinted, glass-walled twenty-by-twenty-foot room, her eyes were wide with a look of disbelief streaked over her face. This quick movement or lack of progress caused McNamara to bump into her.

McNamara did not have either the time or the thought to whisper some apology because, he, like Bridgeport, was staring in disbelief at the old man from the Nay Slayer Corp Complex who’d called himself only the Supervisor; at the far end of the room with wool-white hair and a
black patch that looked like a plaster over the white of his left eye, he stood looking like a replica.

“Am I seeing right?” Bridgeport spoke to McNamara without turning to him.

McNamara was about to answer, but his attention was suddenly drawn to a humming sound that seemed to come from a door to his left. His focus was as quickly pulled back to the old man, who stood over a desk where a young, blond lady of perhaps twenty-five was typing at an alarming speed (her fingers seemed to disappear with the fantastically rapid keystrokes) onto a digitized computer keyboard, her eyes glued to the screen while she seemingly ignored the old man.

“I’d say that’s the old geezer’s damned twin, but…” said McNamara as dismayed as Bridgeport at what had baffled his own eyes.

Bridgeport finished her partner’s brain fart. “But identical to the point of the black patch in his eye is kinda stretching it a bit thin, right?”

“Right,” said McNamara. “Why don’t we see if he’s real?”

If the old man had spotted the new arrivals, he gave no hint of recognition or even interest.

“May I help you, please?” spoke the most geeky-looking, lanky young man McNamara had ever seen in his life. Down to the geek-glasses.

“Agent Bridgeport,” snapped Bridgeport, flashing her badge. “I need to speak to your boss if that is your boss. Wait a minute, Mr….” she paused with the air of somebody waiting for introductions.

“Clark, Ed Clark,” the geekiest young man McNamara had ever seen said, fingering his tie nervously.

“How long has your boss been back here?” Bridgeport asked in a demanding tone which the young man seemed to decry internally as a trespass. Bridgeport could tell they weren’t used to outsiders giving them orders.

“Ed!” snapped a voice at the end of the room. It was the wool-haired Supervisor, whom Bridgeport and McNamara knew should be miles away up in Rye right now unless he was some clone or an alien or something. He shouldn’t be there right now because Bridgeport swore they left him at the NSC Corp complex just thirty minutes ago when they flew down towards Glass Kinematics Inc’s central offices in lower Manhattan, by chopper.
“Ed!” the old man snapped again, and this time the young lady stopped typing and glared at him, her hands covering her ears. “Do not be rude! Show our guests to some seats, please!”

“Mr. Sanders give your mouth a rest and look at this,” Bridgeport walked briskly past three desks where two middle-aged men and one elderly man bent over computer screens as if neither she nor McNamara was in the room. She stopped two feet away from the elderly Sanders and waved what looked like a search warrant in his face. Sanders’ eyes twitched as he stared at it. Yes, it was a warrant.

“We have a search warrant for this entire building, Mr. Sanders,” Bridgeport snapped. “But first things first. How the hell did you get here?”

“I may as well ask you the same thing,” Sanders said, in his somewhat subdued, annoying, severe yet mocking voice. Bridgeport got the impression that he was laughing at her behind his heavy-rimmed glasses and his serious facial expression. His habit of fingering his white goatee didn’t help matters, either.

“Mr. Sanders!” McNamara spoke this time, as Bridgeport paused in anger, her teeth biting her lower lip and her eyes flashing at Sanders. Tall, long orange, dirty blonde hair cascaded down to her shoulders. She had a chiseled masculine body, and her tanned face had a mole. Though she was a great people person, she was a real shit talker, as McNamara knew. He loved her personality. The young lady with the glasses mover her chair a foot back, her hands moving nervously on the desk. She seemed to be planning to get up and leave but changed her mind.

Perhaps her curiosity was stronger than her nervousness, McNamara thought.

“Don’t play games with us,” said McNamara. “We left you at your damned Rye complex, twenty-seven miles away. We flew here by chopper, non-stop at over a hundred ninety miles per hour. When we left, you were sitting behind the wheel of a huge black truck. There is no way you could have beaten us to this place, and you know it!”

“Well now, but I did, didn’t I?” the old man spread his hands in a gesture that seemed to mean “Isn’t that obvious, dummy.” Then he spoke in a grave manner, his fingers twisting his goatee. “Do you believe my hallucination theory now?”

The young lady at the desk smiled a little and that enraged Bridgeport to her boiling point. She wanted to snap cuffs on all of them, but the laws were the laws. Bridgeport hoped to God she’d find something, anything to lock up these assholes.
“Nobody leaves this room or this building,” Bridgeport spoke. “You are going to show us into every single room, Mr. Sanders. When I say every room, I mean every room.”

**EPISODE FORTY-EIGHT**

*The Glass Kinematics Connection II*

“OKAY, BOYS, I WANT every room searched! Assume you are looking for a needle in a haystack,” Bridgeport addressed the officers who had been crowding at the door. There were eight feds and sixteen guys from a New York City S.W.A.T team.

“Just a minute, Officer Tommy and Daniel,” she called as they began to disperse. “Get him into that office, McNamara,” she waved her head at Sanders, pointing her thumb at the nearby glass office that was empty. It had a light over desk which made it the perfect interrogation room.

Tommy and Daniel were joined by a tall man with a receding hairline that was turning to silver white. He was in full S.W.A.T team gear.

Bridgeport stopped when she reached them.

“I’m guessing your name is also Daniel or Tommy,” she spoke to the tall SWAT guy.

“Oh, no,” he seemed horrified that she should think his name was either Tommy or Daniel.

“But I’m in charge of the S.W.A.T TEAM, Ma’am, and I thought…”

“Never mind what you thought, Mister…” Bridgeport paused. Tommy and Daniel hid smiles.

“We’re dealing with hazardous people. Just keep your third eye open, okay?”

“The name’s Jason. I’m in charge of the S.W.A.T team.”

“You’ll be in charge of the S.W.A.T team when this is over,” Bridgeport said. “I’m overriding your authority right now. Your team will work under agent Tommy and Daniel until this search is over.”

Jason shook his head as he walked away.
“A little bit bitchy, ain’t she?” they heard him say as he rejoined the other sixteen S.W.A.T guys.

“I heard you,” she said. “Behave yourself. How many of your men are outside?”

“Twelve,” Jason said sorely and led his men away.

She spoke to Tommy and Daniel. “I want you to ensure this search is thorough. I want you to take away every paper that seems important, four main computer drives related to finance and operations - including that one,” she pointed at the computer the young blond lady had been using. The young lady now had her hands crossed over her chest as she watched McNamara lead Sanders into the large glass office to the right, or instead push him gently into the office.

Tommy and Daniel led the officers towards the end of the long corridor.

“Wait a minute, Officer,” Jason called in a surly tone. “My men will start from downstairs while your men start on this floor, perhaps?”

“That’s okay by me, Officer,” Tommy said.

“He wants to stay in charge,” Daniel whispered to him as they walked towards the end of the corridor. “Why are there so many doors around here? And why are some doors made of steel and other made of glass?”

Tommy said nothing. But as they were entering the room, both men stopped.

“I need two officers to check every door,” Tommy called to the other officers. “Blow the lock up if it doesn’t open!”

As Tommy and Daniel entered the last room through the glass door, both men paused and stared at each other with bewildered expressions.

“I feel light…very light,” Tommy said. He lifted his leg and staggered. Daniel found that his feet couldn’t quite touch the floor when he entered the room.

“Is this like… a zero-gravity thing?”

“Not quite,” Tommy said. “There is a loss of gravity to almost zero, but not quite zero. In zero gravity you float with every movement in any direction. Some weird things going on around here.”

“Well, let’s …” Daniel said.

After a few seconds, Tommy spoke: “Did you say something?”

Tommy began to speak back, but even though his lips moved, no words seemed to come out. He frowned.
Then he heard the words he had spoken earlier, in his own voice!

He and Daniel stared at each other. “We can’t both be going crazy. I don’t know what the hell is going on around here. There is no scientific explanation for it. Weird, huh? Giving me the jeepers.”

“Okay, boys, I want every room searched! Assume you are looking for a needle in a haystack,” spoke Bridgeport’s voice. Except that they couldn’t see Bridgeport anywhere.

Daniel moved to the door. Except that he seemed to be struggling to keep his feet on the floor and keep his balance.

He looked up the corridor and turned back, his eyes wide. “Did you hear Bridgeport speak?”

“I did,” Tommy’s voice shook a little. “But those are the words she spoke out there when we were at the office's entrance. If I were alone here, I’d phone for a straitjacket to strap me up. Do you think it’s a delayed echo or something?”

“You mean delayed for minutes? No. Just some very weird…”

Officer Mike just then came running towards Daniel as he stood at the door. “Officer Daniel… Officer Tommy with you? Something happened behind that steel door,” he was panting and gasping. “I decided to come to you before going in. Room’s as dark as night, and there’s no switch. Empty except for a tall cabinet at one end when you flash from the door. Charlie and Pete went in there and didn’t come back. Gone radio silent and vanished! So, Jackson and I went to investigate, and I stopped for a minute at the door, but Jackson went in with a flashlight. He’s gone too.”

**EPISODE FORTY-NINE**

*The Glass Kinematics Connection III*

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN they are gone?” Daniel frowned. “I ain’t going in too. We are going to speak to Bridgeport first. I’ve had enough of this. We are having problems with lost or delayed sounds or voices too, or whatever it is. I thought this was a vehicular defense company?”
“Well,” said Daniel. “They’ve got a big plumbing issue,” he pointed at the ceiling where drops of water were floating around collecting upwards into a mass of water.

The shocked expression in his eyes as he stared up the corridor made Tommy move to the door and Mike spin around to see. They stared in amazement as the FBI agents came down the hallway. The same team that had started this search. In fact, Tommy, Daniel, and Mike were part of this team! This time the team went through the steel door into the dark room.

“I think I just saw myself,” Mike gasped.

“Let’s report back to Agent Bridgeport,” Daniel spoke, his voice almost a whisper.

As they passed the steel door, the men walked even faster, bewilderment written all over their faces.

Sanders was speaking in a more agitated tone than he had spoken since they met him. “You are making a serious mistake, Officer-Whatever-Your-Name-Is. I will file serious complaints against this. This is harassment of citizens. I don’t care if you have a warrant. This is …”

“Nothing to worry about if you have nothing to hide, Mr. Sanders,” McNamara grinned as he followed Sanders into the office.

Bridgeport was turning to head for the glass office as well when Ed Clark spoke from where he sat at his computer near the entrance to the large office.

“I do not agree that even officers of the law, even with a warrant, should be allowed to storm into a company building and start carrying computer hard drives away. It’s just morally wrong. Data should be kept private!”

“Your concerns will be filed with the Moral Authority,” Bridgeport said as she walked towards the large office.

She found McNamara leaning over the desk, while Sanders sat with his fingers intertwined and his face expressionless.

“You are making a serious mistake,” he was saying. “I hope you can withdraw your troops and we’ll leave it at that.”

“Is he being uncooperative?” Bridgeport asked as she came in. “Mr. Sanders, you’d do yourself a great favor by telling us everything we want to know. Let’s start systematically, shall we? Trust me, it’s better to answer questions here in your office than back at the station. I think you’ll find that this atmosphere is much easier on you.”
“Can the sources that think we are holding Mr. Savage provide more details?” Sanders was losing his patience, and the pokerfaced appearance he tried to display had an expression between mounting anger and boredom.

“Do you realize that this is a pace of busy minds and concentrations and you are in our way right now, with a search warrant that is based on some heresy or some crazy witness who was probably hallucinating?”

Bridgeport shook her finger at him. “Don’t tell me about hallucinating.” They were getting nowhere. It had been fifteen minutes.

She walked to the door. Two agents were disconnecting Ed’s computer while two banged on the door that led to the room McNamara had heard a humming sound.

Just then, Tommy, Daniel, and Mike came running into the room. “Ma’am, we have a problem!” Tommy gasped, trying to control himself.

“What problem?”

“The other agents…entered a dark room with a steel door down the corridor, and now they seem to be missing.”

Bridgeport stared at him. “Is this a joke, agent Tommy?”

“No, Ma’am…that’s exactly what happened,” Daniel said with emphasis.

Bridgeport and McNamara stared meaningfully at Sanders. “Can you explain that, sir?” McNamara demanded. “Why would our men be vanishing in this building?” McNamara then turned to Tommy. “Did you go into the room?”

“Nothing but a tall office cabinet in there, near one wall,” Tommy said, his eyes studying the floor.

Just then the S.W.A.T team stepped back into the room, led by the man named Jason, who still looked unhappy that he had to report to Bridgeport.

“Nothing that looks criminal downstairs, except for some weird stuff and tubes and giant clocks and some scientists that seemed to be really pissed off at our interruption,” he said, finishing his sentence with something that vaguely sounded like ‘Ma’am.”

Then he stared at Sanders. “You seem to have a weird gravity thing going downstairs, sir,” he said, looking questioningly at Sanders. “No wonder your scientists wear heavy boots. At one point my men were almost floating around the damned place.”
Sanders shook his head. “I keep telling you … you are imagining things, officers. Those scientists are doing some serious research on improved fiberglass and other glass types. We are researching on next-generation glass. You and the world will thank me later.”

Bridgeport glanced at McNamara, then turned to Jason.

“Jason could you, and your men have a look at this mysterious room down the corridor?” She turned to Sanders. “What’s in the dark room…the one with a steel door?”

Sanders had a surprised look on his face. “Just a cabinet with some files, as your men said. We need to replace the bulb. There’s no window, that’s why it’s dark. It was meant to be a store.” He nodded at Jason. “Second last door on the right as you walk towards the end of the corridor.”

“Let’s check it out,” Jason led his men away.

What the Supervisor had left out was that they were doing more than simple experiments on the glass in the building. Glass Kinematics Inc was not even experimenting. They were implementing, and the thing they’d be performing would eventually rid the world of every single agent and officer who entered the Glass Kinematics Inc building if they didn’t leave as he’d advised.

**EPISODE FIFTY**

*The Glass Kinematics Connection IV*

“AT ONE POINT WE could see ourselves heading down the corridor,” Tommy said, frowning.

“Speak sense!” snapped McNamara. “What do you mean ‘you could see yourselves’?”

“Maybe Mr. Sanders can explain that,” Tommy said, his eyes on Sanders.

“I would explain, but I wasn’t there,” Sanders said coolly.

“You crafty bastard!” Tommy took a step towards Sanders, but Bridgeport and Mike held him back.
Just then there was a lot of static on all their radios. Bridgeport tried to reach Jason on the receiver, but their Loci got no answer.

“Agent Jason. Come in, Agent Jason. Do you read me? Agent Jason!”

The static died. Silence.

“Come with us, Sanders!” Bridgeport snapped, and McNamara grabbed Sanders as Tommy led the way.

“Agent Jason!” Tommy yelled as they neared the steel door room. There was silence.

“Stop!” Bridgeport commanded as Tommy, his gun steady in his hands, flashlight pressed between his neck and shoulder, was about to go in.

“Lead us in,” she said to Sanders.

Sanders made a helpless gesture with his hands and led the way in.

The room, except for the cabinet, was empty. There seemed to be nothing behind the cabinet, except that the wall was a slightly different color.

“Oh, that,” Sanders pointed out. “The last time we painted the room’s wall, that cabinet was close to the wall, and the painters couldn’t reach that part.”

“Why not move the freakin’ cabinet?” McNamara snapped. “I don’t trust any of your words thus far, Mr. Sanders.”

“Only the painters can tell us that,” Sander said. “And your incredulity doesn’t pay my bills, agent…Bridgeport.”

“Can you three see what exactly is going on downstairs?” Bridgeport turned to Tommy. “And don’t vanish too. Something weird is going on here, and Sanders is going to tell us exactly where it is if I have to call in a special interrogation team or haul your ass to Headquarters. I’m going to get to the bottom of this.”

“You could do whatever you want,” said Sanders. “It will only prolong your unintended experiences here. We’ve had leaks all over the building, might be they went into the wrong room and encountered gaseous leaks? I don’t know…do you believe my hallucination theory now?”

“So where are my men, then?” Bridgeport’s voice was filled with anger and frustration. “Where are the officers who just came in here?”

Sanders sighed. “All I can tell you is that those scientists are working on some experiments you would never understand. Even if I schooled them for a decade at a prominent university with the best scientists the world had to offer; it’s that advanced and complex. We’ll just have to leave
it at that. I have not committed a crime. It’s all a matter of perception and understanding the situation as it is. As per those computers you’ve begun to commandeer; a single one of them can hold every file, every picture, all the data of your FBI, agent Bridgeport. You better not lose any of this stuff, or we’ll own the United States.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” McNamara demanded. “Do your staff members in that office know all about it?”

“They understand some bits, here and there,” Sanders said. “Do you understand how complex this is?”

“Let’s go back there,” Bridgeport said. “I want to speak to some of them.”

As they walked back towards the office, Sanders said: “They are not permitted to tell even the little they understand.”

“They have my permission to tell now,” she glared at him.

Back in the office, they found only Ed Clark, the young blond lady Sanders introduced as Melanie, and two other people.

“You, and you... join us in the office, please,” Bridgeport nodded at Melanie and Clark.

“Please have a seat,” she said, pointing to the settee that stood against one wall of the office. Sanders sat behind his desk again.

McNamara spoke into his radio. He was trying to raise Tommy on the radio, but only faint static was heard as a response.

“Great, now the other three officers are MIA,” he growled, glaring at Sanders.

Sanders pressed a blue switch on his desk. “Mitch? Please see if there are three FBI officers searching downstairs and get back to me.”

Bridgeport turned to Melanie. “Strange things around here. You ever disappeared inside this building?”

She shook her head, staring at the floor. “I don’t understand.”

Bridgeport turned to Sanders. “You mean only outsiders vanish in here?”

“Nobody vanishes,” he said. “Just a matter of perception.”

Clark spoke up. “Don’t you think, in that case, we would already have vanished, Officer? I mean if people vanished around here.”

“It’s a full house here,” Bridgeport said. “Smart geeks, mad scientists…”
Sanders stood up. “I refuse to be referred to as a mad scientist,” he said with a trace of anger.
“People use that term because they don’t understand a thing! I have something to show…”

He was interrupted by the arrival of three guards.
“Everything okay, Mitch?” he spoke to the first guard.
“There’s a been a press report about the FBI agents and the S.W.A.T team entering the building, sir,” Mitch said. “Should be on TV Station Cable 7 right now.”

As Sanders grabbed a TV remote on his desk, he asked: “So, seen the three officers downstairs?”
“Not downstairs, sir. We checked.”
“And you say no one vanishes around here?” Bridgeport yelled.
“That will be all, Mitch,” Sanders said ignoring Bridgeport, dismissed the guards. Then he turned to Melanie and Clark. “That will be all, kids. We have things to discuss.”
Melanie and Clark seemed pleased to be leaving.

EPISODE FIFTY-ONE
The Glass Kinematics Connection V

“THE ONLY REASON I let them go,” Bridgeport said, “is because I want to hear any classified information you have. I’m sure there’s plenty, and you are going to let us in on whatever the hell it is you do around here, or we shut it all down.”

The TV screen was showing images of the agents and the S.W.A.T team as they entered the building earlier.
“OK, you people cannot just vanish. You got your asses covered, so to speak,” Sanders said.
“Watch your mouth. I still want every one of my men accounted for,” Bridgeport snapped.
“Please come with me. I have classified information, as you said,” Sanders said, and led them through an inner door.
“Steel door again,” McNamara observed. “I don’t like this much.”
“You are great strategists, is what I mean,” Sanders said as they stood in a room with no window, with a dim light that shone from a bulb on the ceiling. At one end was a chair, at the other end a metal bench. In the middle was a small desk with no drawers. “If the whole city or even country know you came in here, I would be held accountable if you just vanished, wouldn’t I? Brilliant. I could use great minds like yours around here. How much do they pay you? How about a quarter million a year?”

“We are not for hire, and we are not looking for a new job! We are government servants or agents, whatever you may choose to call us. So, get that notion out of your mind!” Agent Bridgeport’s voice was like a whip, and Sanders leaned back with a look of immense surprise.

They’d operated in many countries and had figured the rate to purchase various agents. In Sri Lanka, the price was just 9,500 dollars and $250,000 was the price for a federal agent in the Thirty-Nine States to switch roles overnight, but this was the famous agent Bridgeport, The Queen of Kidnappings, she couldn’t be bought.

“Never seen anyone turn down an offer so vehemently,” he said. “Well, then, since you definitely cannot be turned, I will have to tell you the truth. Yes, I am the man behind everything you have or have not seen around here. But as I said earlier, the whole thing is way too complex to explain. Even after explaining, you would have probably more questions than answers. We are breaking into new levels of knowledge and ability and perception far beyond the common human knowledge, skills, and powers. Perhaps Mr. Savage is a victim of this new perception. Can I be blamed for that?”

“Please don’t play with our minds, Mr. Sanders. I have been extremely patient,” Bridgeport said. “I think I will now revert into my impatient, no prisoners were taken mode.”

“That was your patient mode, Agent Bridgeport?” Sanders shook his head. “Let’s cut to the chase, shall we? See under that table? There’s a white paper with red print. It’s a non-disclosure agreement. You have to sign that parchment so you can be free.”

“Excuse me? Is this an abduction? Are we being held here? Are you planning to hold Federal Agents here against their will?” Bridgeport snapped. She turned back to the door and found that the lock would not turn.

“Do you have a key to this door?” she snapped.

“Please let’s agree,” Sanders said. There was a slightly confident or cocky manner about him now. “All you have to do is to sign the non-disclosure agreement, and you will be free. I can
open that door from anywhere. I can even open it when I’m in my car out there. I just told you a part of some explosive secrets. So, would you please sign the paper?”

McNamara grabbed the supervisor by the neck.

“This is obstruction of justice!” he roared. “Watch your fluffy head meet the table. See how you like that.”

He pushed Sanders down towards the table, but the old man seemed to shrink and slipped like an eel out of his hand.

He stood ten feet away now, near the wall. McNamara could not quite comprehend that movement from his hand to where the old supervisor now stood, near the wall. It was so effortless. It was as if he had glided across the room.

He grinned evilly at the two agents.

“That’s weird,” McNamara was frowning looking at his hands and back at the Supervisor.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Bridgeport said, with a venomous look at Sanders. “That door better be open when we reach it, Sanders.”

“You people have no idea what’s going on, have you? You are brilliant in today’s so-called brilliance, but this is out of your league. Think about it, might you piss off some high-ranking government officials by trying to put your noses where they may not be wanted? You need to think about that. Suppose you delved too deep into this only to realize that there are some huge political bigwigs who are not pleased with your efforts? Might be bad for your careers, right?”

“Let us out of here, Mr. Sanders!” Bridgeport snapped. “We are not signing your damn papers!”

“Then it’s too bad,” Sanders said, and turning around, he stepped into the concrete and steel wall right before their eyes.

“Did that really happen?” McNamara spoke scratching his face and eyes. “You know, I think I can handle this lock,” he went on, turning to the door they had come in by from Sanders’ office. Where the door had been, there was now a wall. It was as if there had never been a door.

---

**EPISODE FIFTY-TWO**

**The Deal of a Lifetime I**
THE MEN STOPPED ABRUPTLY when they came into a hall that seemed to be made of steel walls with ventilation holes near the ceiling. The reason they stopped abruptly was that they had encountered something that boggled their minds. Each one of them could see himself at the other end of the large hall, holding the same weapons to the ones they now carried.

Between the men and what looked like their doubles was a wooden partition about four feet high, one of the few wooden materials you could find in this steel and glass building.

“Okay, this is weird,” Daniel said and was annoyed that his voice shook a little.

“But it has happened before, hasn’t it?” Tommy spoke. The other men seemed to be still processing this strange sight.

“Do you think it could be delayed imaging? There could be a mirror in the middle of the hall,” Mike suggested.

“Brilliant thinking…but what the hell is delayed imaging?” Daniel inquired.

“Never heard of it, either,” Mike said. “Why don’t you take charge, agent Jason? You know you wanted to.”

“Hardly the time to be sarcastic, officer,” Jason snapped.

“We’ll soon find out if this is mirror imaging as Mike thinks,” Daniel said, and waved his hands, yelling. His ‘‘image’’ did not wave hands and scream.

“See? Those are different people,” Jackson spoke.

“Who the hell are you?” said the man who looked like Daniel’s identical twin.

“I’m agent Daniel of the FBI. Who the hell are you?”

“I’m agent Daniel,” the double said. “You must be an imposter.”

“An imposter?” Daniel growled. “Let me ask you a question. If you can answer this, you are the real Daniel, and I’m crazy. What book was I reading back home last night?”

The double smiled. “You know very well that you don’t want anybody to know the book’s naughty title.”

“There was nothing naughty about the title!” Daniel snapped.

The double leveled his gun at Daniel. “How about we say the real Daniel is the one who stays alive?”
“How about I kick your ass all the way to wherever it is you came from?” Daniel leveled his gun too.

“How about I go to your home tonight and be the real Daniel when your ass is dead?”

“Do you even know where my freakin’ home is, you bloody fake?”

“I am you, remember.”

“Not anymore!” Daniel yelled, and his finger moved to the trigger.

The next thing that happened was agent Daniel was lying on the floor, temporarily knocked out by the impact of the bullet hitting his bullet-proof vest and his head hitting the floor as he fell back.

Tommy fired at his double and seemed to knock him to the floor, not sure if he was dead. He had no time to check anything, as two bullets wheezed so close to his head he could literally hear them swish by before they hit the floor behind and ricocheted off the steel wall.

There was hardly any time to check whether he was alive as more bullets began to rain on the officers. The “real” officers responded with a vengeance as it turned into a game of survivor of the fittest.

“Hey, hold your fire! We are calling for a ceasefire!” the man who looked like Jason’s twin brother on the other side yelled.

“Oh, I have a sensible twin,” Jason observed.

“We are not scared of you, just brighter than you,” the Jason double snapped. “We thought we might as well have a fruitful talk with you and find out what improvements we can make to be better than you.”

“How about I improve you with a bullet?” Jason snapped and fired. This was the cue for the gunfight to start again.

Jackson spun to the side as a bullet hit his shoulder, and then another hit him on the bottom of the head, and he went down. Tommy was doing a great job and managed to kill off two doubles before three bullets his vest and knocked him back. As he went down, he was able to register the fact that there were only three doubles still standing, and there seemed to be more on his side standing than on the doubles’ side.

Actually, out of the Six Feds and sixteen SWAT team members and their doubles, there were five dead doubles, three doubles on their feet and three either knocked to the ground or injured.
Of the real officers who had been led by the real Tommy and Daniel, there were four Feds standing, plus two SWAT team members. Three SWAT team members were dead, and one was injured. Only Jason was on his feet among the SWAT team members.

Among the Feds, the real ones, only Mike was down.

Tommy then passed out.

**EPISODE FIFTY-THREE**

*The Deal of a Lifetime II*

SPECIAL AGENT BRIDGEPORT SAT on the chair in the dimly-lit room, while Agent McNamara paced to and fro, a big frown on his face.

“Think we can suffocate in here? If so, we’ll suffocate faster with you pacing and breathing like that.”

McNamara looked around. “There’s some sort of six by six-inch ventilation above you, probably leading to that big office. So, what do you think we are dealing with, agent T B?”

He felt he was allowed to refer to agent Bridgeport as agent B sometimes, especially when they had a severe problem to figure out and were not in front of company.

The black haired, blue eyed, tall and slender McNamara had a way of getting lost in his thoughts sometimes when pondering over a problem.

“Got something on your mind?” said Bridgeport. “Besides that, we are trapped, and we are hardly any wiser after that half-assed explanation we got for all the weird things happening in here.”

McNamara glanced at his watch. “Been three hours. It’s one P.M. No wonder my mind’s overflowing with broccoli, pizza, coke, spaghetti and…”

“You need to check out other cuisines, McNamara,” Bridgeport said with a smile looking at the room, examining the walls. “Yet it won’t be Italian food that’s going to be your end as it looks is it? I always thought you’d go after choking on an extra cheese pizza.”
McNamara looked at her accusingly. “Says my Chinese-food addict partner. Let me read your mind…hmmm, beef stew and rice.”

“Don’t talk about it. Only making me hungrier. What the hell do you think is really happening here?”

McNamara grunted. “Hmmm. Besides the technically impossible crap, we were listening to? First, we checked and agreed that the glass manufacturing thing is a front. Apparently, they buy plain glass, modify it and sell it. Glass Kinematics Inc only sold a hundred thousand worth of treated glass in the last three months. With sales that low, why would you need a company this big? A building this big? All those employees? I don’t buy their research either.”

“I believe their focus is on research and whatever else they might be doing. I didn’t even get to talk to one of the scientists.”

“I doubt you’ll be getting much out of them. So where do you suppose the rest of the officers are? Our officers? The S.W.A.T squad? No way could they really have disappeared.”

Bridgeport shook her head. “These things are beyond the rational mind’s limit. Maybe we should start thinking beyond the normal reach. No explanation that was given explains why men would vanish into thin air.”

“Let me tell you something that happened to me that seems to prove that you can believe in your mind that people have disappeared when they haven’t. In that experience, I imagined that I must be dealing with an invisible person, but at the end, you will realize the person may have been visible, but unseen to me.”

“This should be interesting.”

McNamara began to narrate.

The tea was gone. Vanished. Vaporized.

In other words, the tea had disappeared into thin air.

“Are you kidding me?” he frowned, looking around frantically. Was this a severe case of amnesia? No, he had never had problems like that. Naturally, he had been absent-minded once in a while. Something…is…wrong.

_No! I moved it away and forgot about it. That’s it._

He tried to recall his movements around the room. He had sipped the tea and had enjoyed the taste of it. Then he had stood up, walked around to the bookshelf, and pulled out a novel. He intended to read today. Kate had gone to work.
Kate. He had been unkind to her this morning and had pressed her neck and pushed her against the wall for saying she was sure he was cheating. Yes, he was cheating, but he didn’t want her screaming at him every morning.

She had chosen to stay with him and would have to put up with his ways.

But first things first. He was totally puzzled. Maybe he was getting terribly absent-minded.

He walked out to the kitchen, now searching for the cup of tea. If this was amnesia, it was a severe case of it! It wasn’t there. He even looked into the fridge, getting more and more baffled. Hot tea in the fridge? Madness. But where the hell was the tea he had been drinking a minute earlier.

“I don’t remember leaving the living room. What am I doing in the kitchen?” he grumbled to himself and went back. He walked over to the bookshelf and began to scan the room, even the window-sill.

The wall-clock striking nine A.M. nearly made him faint with shock. Then he smiled ruefully.

Just then he heard a door close softly. It sounded like the bedroom door, hidden from him from where he stood near the bookshelf. His heart skipped a beat and then began to race. He stood rooted on the spot, trying to gather the courage to go and check. A burglar? A burglar who stole even cups half full of tea?

“I’m losing my mind,” he growled and grabbed a long metal rod from beside the bookshelf.

He grabbed the TV remote and switched off the TV, which had been on at a low volume. Now he listened, so keenly his ears almost hurt. He moved slowly to a place where he could see the bedroom door. It was open! And now he heard a movement.

“Kate?” he called. Of course, it was Kate! Playing games!

There was silence. And now the radio in the bedroom was on. Kate, of course! He moved to the bedroom door and in one glance realized that there was no one in sight. There was no other adjoining room, not even a shower within. She would have to come out of the bedroom to go to another place.

“Kate!” he yelled and switched off the radio. The silence was deafening…and frightening.

Just then he heard the sound of footsteps in the living room, then the front door shutting with a click.
“Interesting so far,” Bridgeport said. “But it seems to me that you could be more absentminded than I ever imagined. Actually, your story only reinforces the invisible person story rather than discredit it.”

“You can’t make a fair judgment without hearing it all.”

“If the Supervisor, Sanders, was able to go through that wall, then we can. I’m just being rational here.” She walked to the wall and pressed her hand against it. She hit it with the butt of her gun. “Somehow it feels as solid as any other part of the wall. And harder than most walls. Steel and concrete.”

McNamara sighed.

“You know we’d probably be out of here if we had signed the bloody agreement? I do believe we’d brainstorm better outside of here than locked inside.”

“But the answers are here!” Bridgeport insisted.

“But how can we find the answers when we are locked up? The thing is, we should get out so that we can have the movement, the resources, and everything we need to figure this thing out!” His voice was unusually high. He hardly ever raised his voice or argued with her. It was a sign that he was losing patience and was getting frustrated.

**EPISODE FIFTY-FOUR**

*The Deal of a Lifetime III*

IT WAS DANIEL, MIKE, Jason another FBI agent they called JT. Beyond the now badly-mutilated wooden partition was only one S.W.A.T double and two Feds, Mike’s and Jackson’s double.

The next thing that happened was the doubles seemed to have left. There was absolute silence beyond the wooden partition.

“If they were real,” Jason said.
“Of course, they were real! You have to be real to kill our men,” Daniel pointed at the men on
the floor. “And when those bullets hit my vest, they stung like hell.”

“They are probably hiding beyond the partition, or whatever is left of it,” Mike said.

There wasn’t much left of the wooden partition. It was like a sieve, with hundreds of holes in
it, and completely gone in some places. It seemed impossible that three men could hide behind
them without a trace or sound.

“I’ll crawl to the wall,” Daniel said. “We should have brought something besides guns. Like
some pineapples.”

“Pineapples?” Jason frowned.

“He means grenades,” Mike said.

“We had some hand-grenades back in the van,” Daniel said. “We thought you SWAT guys
were armed to the teeth in this offensive.”

“Most of our arsenal is in our van and truck,” Jason said. “Why don’t you just try this martyr
thing you are talking about?”

Daniel snorted. “They teach you nice jokes at the S.W.A.T school, don’t they? Cover me, you
all.”

He began to pull himself forward on the floor, towards the wooden partition. There didn’t
seem to be any sound or movement from beyond. He crawled right to the corner.

He signaled to the other officers that he was about to peep over the partition, and they moved
closer, their fingers on the triggers. They began to fire into the wall away from where Daniel
was, to create a distraction. Mike stayed ten feet behind Daniel, his gun pointing above Daniel’s
head.

Daniel held his .40 mm caliber Glock in his hand as he raised his head. He saw a four by four
opening on the floor from which a staircase descended into darkness. Nobody took his head off.

There was nobody behind the partition.

“All clear!” he yelled.

They moved forward.

JT moved closer to the staircase.

“Careful there, JT,” called Mike.

Just then something came hurtling up the staircase and landed at JT’s feet.
“Grenade!” yelled Daniel, and he and Mike threw themselves to the floor. Jason couldn’t reach the partition in time and felt the full force of the blast as the explosive went off with a blinding flash and a deafening bang. JT was slammed against the wall in a bloody mess. Jason grunted. There was shrapnel in his legs, and his legs were bleeding.

In a fit of anger, Mike leaned over the staircase entry and let off a barrage of shots into the basement below.

“They seem to have an arsenal down there,” he said bitterly.

Another grenade was thrown to the top of the stairs. In a moment of utter madness, Mike ran forward, grabbed it and threw it back down the stairs. They heard it go off like the fourth of July fireworks below.

The team waited. They heard a bump and some grunting.

“Hopefully one or two of the bastards got it in full force,” Mike said.

“That was pure madness, Mike,” Daniel tapped him on the shoulder, “but you pulled it off.”

“You want to see if anybody’s breathing down there? They had to be on the stairs somewhere. I’m sure we did some serious damage.”

“Not feeling incredibly brave right now. You can keep the stunts.”

Mike moved over to Jason. “You okay, buddy?”

“Bleeding too much,” Jason gasped. “Will not survive.”

“Don’t say that. You will.”

“I know they got plenty down there,” Jason gasped. “We can’t win. Why not…get more weapons. They are trapped down there.”

“You are a genius,” Mike said. “We aren’t thinking straight. We can go get some explosives too.”

Just then, a voice came up to them. “I’m all alone down here now. But I can take you all out. It’s a freakin’ arsenal down here. Let’s see who wins this.”

“He sounds like he’s on the stairs,” Daniel said softly to Mike.

Just then two grenades landed on the floor, near the stairs. Again, Mike jumped forward, grabbed one and threw it back.

The last thing he saw, he ever saw, was the grenade on the stairs exploding and sending a person that looked exactly like Mike flying down the stairs with a scream before the other one blew in his face just as Daniel reached for it.
Agent Jason was the last to die.

**EPISODE FIFTY-FIVE**

The Deal of a Lifetime IV

BRIDGEPORT WAS BEGINNING TO realize that her relationship with her partner was becoming extremely strained. She was an obstinate person and didn’t like to give in to any situation, and the strain of the day’s events had, understandably, strained him.

“We are getting out of this and getting this bastard for everything he’s done,” she said.

“But what evidence can you give? Supernatural crime?”

“It’s on record, even on the news, that our men and we came in here, isn’t it? If we don’t get out, this bastard will go down in flames.”

“You are right,” McNamara frowned. “But they’ll find it pretty hard to arrest a guy who goes through walls.”

“So how does your story end? You seem to have some experience with vanishing stuff and people,” she said with a trace of sarcasm.

“I didn’t imagine those things,” he said with heat. ‘Here’s what happened next.”

***

HIS BREATH WHISTLED THROUGH his lips and his muscles tensed. Somebody had switched on the radio in the bedroom, taken the tea away and brought it back, and may have left through the door.
He walked gingerly towards the cup of tea as if walking on eggshells. He peeped into it as if it contained something dangerous, and now he noticed that it was empty. He was confident that the cup had had tea in it when he left it for the bookshelf.

Suddenly he panicked and ran to the door, scared to remain in the house. He opened it and looked out on to the lawn and the hedge. And the short driveway to the gate. No sign of anyone.

Just then he saw a brown, torn envelope near the door that sent an alarm into his confused mind. He gaped. The black writing on the envelope in his writing confirmed to him that this was the envelope. The jacket with fifty thousand dollars that he had hidden so well for a year. He would invest that money in a surefire deal that would not fail.

It had taken him three years to save it. He would never touch it until he knew the deal would not fail. He had his reasons for not wanting to bank it, and one reason was that he actually had this case going on in court where he had been sued for forty thousand by his former employer. He was the money’s custodian when it disappeared, but he had not saved that money.

He had not learned to save until he found himself jobless and having to do short contracts with his interior design portfolio. He didn’t want to own any known assets. What if the court ordered the bank to hand over the money?

His panic overcame his fear of the unseen visitor. A thought flashed through his mind as he ran towards the bedroom. Kate! Who else? But how did she know where the money was?

He grabbed his cell phone as he passed the coffee table and dialed furiously as he entered the bedroom.

“Hello! Kate! Have you just been here in the house?”

“In the house?” she yelled. “Aren’t you in the house? You’d have seen me if I had come back, wouldn’t you? Have you seen me leave the office, Claire?” He heard her ask a colleague.

Claire’s voice spoke. “She’s been here in the office since eight A.M. Are you half asleep? Better check around...you might have had a visitor.” As she spoke, he heard the odd sound of the printer that reminded him of Kate’s office. It made a low whirring sound.

He frowned. No way could Claire lie, and apparently, she and Kate were together.

He pushed away the sideboard near the bed and pulled up the carpet near the corner of the bed and pulled away the loose tile. No way could Kate move that massive sideboard, anyway.

The envelope with the money was gone.
“MY GUESS IS, YOU were drunk or sleepy, and a thief was creeping around your house. Besides, I sense some exaggeration in that story,” Bridgeport said.

McNamara was annoyed. “You know what, suppose I sign the damn paper, and you stick around like you want to!” he snapped. He began to walk towards the desk, his breath coming in short spurts and his eyes blazing with anger.

She grabbed his hand from behind and jumped in front of him. “Don’t you dare sign those papers without my permission!” Her face was six inches from his face, although at six feet one, he was four inches taller than her.

But he was beyond caring now. He pushed her out of the way and tripped her up. She went sprawling. When she sprang to her feet, her eyes were flaming with rage.

“You son of a bitch!” she screamed. “I’ll have you fired!” Her foot came up in an arc as she kicked him in the nuts, and he went down with a groan of pain. Bridgeport was steaming mad. She grabbed him by his tie and tightened until he began to choke. Her palm smacked his face.

It was then she seemed to come to her senses. What the hell was she doing? What the hell were they doing? They had been partners for three years and now this?

She loosened the tie and pulled McNamara to his feet.

“I’m really sorry. I think this room … this place is driving me nuts,” she said. “I’ll sign the paper. Let’s see what happens when we do, anyway. We’ve already seen what happens when we don’t. Damned if I’ll be tied down by a simple signature on a maniac’s paper. Let’s sign and see what happens.”

They walked over to the table and grabbed the non-disclosure agreement and signed it.

The door that Sanders had gone through appeared again and the old supervisor appeared, a look of triumph on his face.
“Don’t look so smug!” Bridgeport snapped. “I’m done playing your games. Unless every one of the men who came in here is accounted for, you are in serious trouble. The media, the citizens, the law enforcement … everybody knows we are in here. So, you’d better let us out.”

The old man smiled.

“Do you realize, Officer, that if you walked out that door, nobody would believe your story and everyone who heard it would say you are crazy?”

Bridgeport walked over to Sanders and glared at him. “Listen, you sick bastard. Let us out of here, and things may not be entirely bad for you. I don’t know what you are doing around here, or what you did to our men, but I promise you if you don’t let us out of here, you will be sorry you ever set your eyes on us. You will have the whole law enforcement out to wring your bloody neck.”

“You came here seeking a Mr. Savage, and did not find him …”

“Isn’t that because our agents and the S.W.A.T team are missing?” McNamara snapped.

The old supervisor smiled again.

“Go out through that door. You’ll find yourselves at the top of a staircase that leads to the ground floor.”

They walked out.

EPISODE FIFTY-SIX
The Deal of a Lifetime V

“WAIT A MINUTE, AGENT B,” McNamara said, as they stood on the stairs. “Everybody’s out here. Those agents who had supposedly disappeared are all out there.”

“That’s weird,” Bridgeport spoke.

Just then Officer Daniel yelled to them from below. “Agent Bridgeport, Agent McNamara! Are you okay?”

They walked to the ground floor.
“Ma’am ... Officer!” a lady in a navy-blue blouse and a microphone in her hand was moving towards them. A cameraman followed her. “Is it true that you went in there to search for a possible hostage? That there is a Mr. Savage held hostage in there?”

“No comment,” said Bridgeport.

“Wait a minute … it was twenty to three, wasn’t it?” McNamara spoke as they joined the other officers.

“Now it’s one-twenty-four…no, it’s moving back to one-fifteen…”

“My watch has gone back from twenty to three to four minutes to one. One hundred and forty-four minutes,” she frowned.

“You are a genius. So, has my watch,” McNamara frowned.

Bridgeport turned to Daniel. “How did you get out of there, Officer Daniel? You, Officer Tommy and the others? Last thing we knew, you had vanished.”

The other officers exchanged surprised glances.

“We haven’t left this place, Ma’am,” Daniel spoke. “You have been gone for only twenty-two minutes and told us to wait while you spoke to the Supervisor. You said if you weren’t out in thirty minutes we should come up with guns blazing. We still had eight minutes to go.”

Bridgeport and McNamara stared at each other, dumbfounded.

“Is this a joke, Officer Daniel?” she snapped.

“That is exactly what happened, Ma’am,” Officer Mike spoke. “We have been waiting for you out here.”

“Well, according to Mr. Sanders, Mr. Savage is nowhere in that building. For some reason I was of the notion that you searched all over the place,” Bridgeport said.

Officer Jason of the S.W.A.T squad came over.

“Ma’am, glad to see you safely out here. We were waiting for a signal but getting none. But you said half an hour.”

“Didn’t I tell you to search the ground floor of the building, Officer?” Bridgeport demanded, looking confused.

Jason looked dumbfounded. “Ma’am, my men and I have been down here all along.”

“Let’s go,” Bridgeport spoke. “I need to file a report. Apparently, Mr. Savage is not being held in this building.”

There were questioning looks in the other officers’ faces, but they didn’t object.
Bridgeport stared across at McNamara as they waited for the waiter to bring over their meal. It was two P.M., and they had checked in and out of office. They would be file a report later.

“You are the only witness that some weird things happened in there, McNamara. And you are the only proof that Special Agent Bridgeport is not insane, but that those weird things really took place.”

“I’ll say the same for you,” McNamara said. “You are the only proof that I’m sane and was not dreaming all that stuff up.”

“So, what do we do?”

McNamara frowned. “I feel like this is a lose-lose case. Who will believe us, unless other officers go there and experience the same things? Why didn’t you have the other officers and the S.W.A.T team go upstairs to check after we seemed to come back to reality?”

“I just felt stupid. That even the time-frame we were working on was non-existent, and that all those things could not have happened in twenty-two minutes. We were even hungry because it was lunchtime,” she said. “And here comes my beef stew and rice.”

“Please tell me my order is ready,” McNamara said to the waiter sternly. “I can’t wait anymore. Spaghetti sauce and meatballs.”

“Right away, sir,” the waitress said.

“That’s what you said ten minutes ago,” McNamara said unhappily.

“So, do we officially agree to drop this? What will I say in the report?” Bridgeport frowned. “On what grounds have we concluded that Sanders has nothing to hide and how do I convince my superior to close this case?”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” McNamara said. “But if you mention the things we experienced in there, it will be hard to close the case.”

“That’s right,” she said. “We’ll just ask to take a break from this case. But I’m curious as to what would happen if different officers went in there, and we can try to figure their experiences from outside.”

“The problem is that weird things are going on, yet no evidence of that. Even the clock was working against us.”

“Okay, then,” Bridgeport said. “We’ll try to keep the weird experiences to ourselves, file a report that sounds sane, but keep our eyes and ears open. In the meantime, let him believe he’s outwitted the Feds. Might help make him let his guard down and make it easier to outwit him.”
“Ah, finally,” McNamara said as his meal arrived. “For now, I want to focus fully on my lunch. At least there’s nothing weird about it. I suppose my lunch would disappear and leave me with an empty plate if I was in that weird place.”

Bridgeport laughed. “Please don’t say that. I can’t bear the thought of disappearing lunch when I’m ravenous.”

EPISODE FIFTY-SEVEN
The Swinger Files Part Addendum

WHAT DID HAPPEN TO Earl Swinger? He was a real person when the agents had first looked up his records. When they went back to file their reports, their records for Earl Swinger did not exist. All of it was wiped clean. Every digital signature of that specific Earl Swinger was gone as well. Agent Bridgeport had a moment of tantrum which

“Get me those records, McNamara!” she shouted. “They better have them at that facility, or we’ll subpoena them to death.”

“We’re better off closing this case,” he said trying to calm her down with a backrub. “You know that, Bridge.”

The only thing which had remained was a post by a blogger named Earl Swinger; a nuclear engineer, and former D.O.E. employee who ranted about a project called The Others Initiative, and how they were probably among us now.

“It was tripe and sounded crazed,” said McNamara. “So, they never followed up on it.”

“That was it?” asked the Asian female agent. “No more Earl Swinger?”

“Somebody or an unknown but very influential organism has decided to erase an entire individual?” asked Bridgeport who stood casually at the window gazing out at the Harlem River.

“And their family,” said McNamara. “This has implications for our family and us too.”

“Who else but the president can do this?” asked the African-American agent. “Maybe the NSA and CIA working together.”
“That’s a serious accusation,” said Bridgeport. “We need to keep this conversation in this room.”

“But it isn’t a far-fetched one,” said McNamara. “Take out all the other possibilities and what do you have left? Our president is petty, but he’s not stupid.”

“Still,” said the African-American agent looking out the window as he spoke. “I want to sleep at night without thinking I’m the next Earl Swinger.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” said Bridgeport. “But this is way beyond even his pay scale, methinks. Whatever’s going on needs decades of continuity for it to survive. No single president, administration can oversee this monstrosity. This is global in scope.”

“Let’s not beat around the bush,” said the African-American agent. “Our own government smacked us on the wrist here, okay. It’s them let’s face it.”

“How’d you know that,” asked McNamara. “It could be the Nay Slayer Corporation.”

“It’ just too obvious,” said the black agent. “No single corporation is that powerful.” He looked outside again. He didn’t notice, but there’d been s squadron of Hover Drones monitoring them from outside the building, each one trained on an individual agent collecting all sorts of data.

“What do we do about Swinger?” asked McNamara.

“The only thing we can,” she said turning to the group. “We give him a proper burial. For now, at least. Until something comes up in the future.”

They decided to keep a top-secret, among themselves, file on the nonexistent Earl Swinger, as a person of interest. The case remained locked in a sealed file marked ES-123101; his initials and birthdate.

EPISODE FIFTY-EIGHT
From Useless to Useful
BACK AT THE COMMAND Center, Travis was finished and devoid of all hope. He looked around for support, but his minions had already given him a vote of no confidence, turning their backs to him busy pretending to solve the problem at hand.

They weren’t going to stick their necks out for the man who’d been walking on theirs for so long. The reaper was calling; the PPO wanted blood, this was his call alone. He had to walk over those coals all by himself this time. They watched him silently as he deteriorated by the second; it wasn’t a pretty sight, but the Live Office enjoyed every bit of the karma.

Travis had tried to seal the plugs on a sinking ship with a million tiny holes; it was a moot effort as every single move he made only accelerated the catastrophe.

“Unit #445 report,” he shouted at a Cruncher from another unit in Akron, Ohio. The unit had prior reported they’d tried something different and were about to try again but were silent for some time. Travis wanted to know for better or for worse what they’d found. Their silence; it was killing him with each second that ticked away at that holographic clock hanging over his head.

“#445 reporting,” said the Cruncher. Travis heard silence then. “Breached.” His world ended once, but he had to continue. There must be hope at the end of the tunnel as his mentors had told him; never give up. Giving up is for losers; Travis Pinkerton was a winner.

“Unit #5332 report,” he shouted at the Cruncher in Savannah, Georgia. That unit was one of Pinkertons’ favorites. They’d always given him crisp and clear data. Need to track a dissident to the farthest reaches of the Thirty-Nine? Call up Savannah for a quick ping.

“Unit #5332 reporting,” said the Cruncher. “Breached.” Travis slammed his hand on a console, but he wouldn’t be deterred. A few staffers started leaving the Live Center; seeing the bloody writing on the wall, they probably didn’t want to be a part of the looming end of days.

“Unit #346 report,” Travis shouted, his voice cracking from the mounting pressure. The next Cruncher he’d asked for an update was based at their center in Middletown, Connecticut; one of the most prestigious Cruncher bases the Live Center operated, known for less than 1 in a million errors over the time they’d been running. If anyone could catch a problem in their large system, it was the 148-member Cruncher center in Middletown.

“Unit #346 reporting,” said the Cruncher. There was momentary silence, but he heard the response he was supposed to hear, which was “breached,” and Travis fell to one of the consoles.
“This can’t be,” he shouted looking at the screens all reporting that the system had been completely breached. There was no way to reboot it, and a reboot would mean something worse than a complete system failure.

It would mean a total system shutdown and their massive program wouldn’t be able to reboot ever again. They built it that way, and whoever breached their system knew to take advantage of that poison pill when scripting their attack.

Their attacker was an insider all along, but who?

“Goddamit, it’s all over!” he shrieked and dropped to his knees, both hands clasped over his head. The dead woman defeated him. They’d all been struck down, conquered by Mercy. Travis was no help with the totalitarian winner takes all prison he ran at the Command Center.

“What are you all doing just looking?” he shouted and pointing at the Crunchers, who started pretending they were doing anything to help, but really what was there to do?

The PPO would rule this as what failed them – that they were genuinely useless. All 1,100 of them as Useless as Dante had said they’d been. Maybe he was a prescient being?

“What are we going to do?”

We?

There wasn’t a we anymore. They were waiting for Travis to take his unlucky behind into that office of and be brutally, verbally mauled to death the boss anytime now. Everyone with earlobes knew it would come and only waited with profound silence for the office to light up signaling the end of Travis Pinkerton.

Suddenly, they heard Dante calling him; the hail was anger filled one. It could be perceived all the way from the center of the Live Office’s floor. The Ides of March haunted Travis Pinkerton, for he knew what would be asked of him the moment he stepped into his office. He marched in with his head down. The Live Office watched him go with mixed feelings; sort of like watching their enemy fall off a cliff with a bag filled with their most sacred things.

His office went opaque and maybe for the last time.

Dante stood next to the Prime Authority; an old white male, who’d been the taskmaster, overlord who exercised the supreme executive authority over the Hover Drone program, the Public Reporting Office and the Patriot Patrol Office.
Dante looked into the screen at Travis Pinkerton who looked back with disgrace in his eyes. “Travis,” he said with a hoarse voice almost choking on the words. “It’s about time you make yourself useful.”

It wasn’t a joke, but it was said as a jest, as a shaming of Travis Pinkerton before the Prime Authority – meant to demoralize him. Travis, a loyal fool, reached into his desk, pulled out a package marked Code Blue and did as he was commanded.

Dante wasn’t shocked with the ease at which he was able to dispatch his subordinate as Travis convulsed on the floor dying. That was the official code at the PPO. Failure was never an option and payment were due in blood and fire.

Travis Pinkerton’s death was immediately announced by the Prime Authority to thunderous applause at the Live Office. And as his body was carried away as if nothing had happened, the stench of his failure was erased with new screens and a new acting commander, Travis’ own protégé, Clinton Jacobson.

EPISODE FIFTY-NINE

Julian’s Dark Opera

JULIAN MERCY’S DARK OPERA had ended with the deathly obliteration of an innocent life and a most ravenous and cunning entity seemingly taking a stranglehold of a most beloved and almighty Thirty-Nine; all the while, four hundred and thirty million citizens were held captive. They had to watch or listen to the affair in awe.

The captive audience, though, was not happy with what they’d seen. Around America, people began to riot inside their own homes, and tempers flared at PPO Regional offices all over the Thirty-Nine as angry mobs amassed tossing Molotov cocktails at their windows demanding an inquiry. With each uprising, the hordes were instantly Hover Droned or sprayed with a sleeping substance and returned to their homes by teams of local Red Shirts.
When the old video stopped, the audience heard Julian Mercy’s voice again. This time there was a thematic tune in the background; a colonial one called the *Star-Spangled Banner* was being played via trumpet and saxophones. She had one last message before she cut the connection but they’d perturbed Alana. How could a dead woman still be talking after splattering her brains over the screen?

“I recorded this before my grand act which was probably seen across the Nation to show you the light,” said Mercy. “Don’t judge me too harshly. I do this for you not because of some mental illness. To wake you up, not to become a martyr.” Her face had a conviction that was slightly morbid, like a woman who’d been tired of her condition but refused to keep on living a once lovely world she’d come to revolt.

“I don’t condone suicide,” Mercy continued. “My father used to say that it was a permanent solution to a temporary problem. But in my case, I had no other recourse. My problem had become permanent, my persecution complete and annihilating. This was an act of a desperate Dissident Loyalist. Like all revolutionaries our acts must be bold and strike fear in the hearts of the current powers that be. I knew I couldn’t achieve this in my own time, so I had to wait to reap the fruits of my madness in death…”

Alana was the only one in the family who’d been paying attention to the sermon as the rest of her family cringed and hid in shame and maybe a bit of fear. She smiled looking at their despair and having caught a glimpse of the decrepit woman, she saw the face of a true Dissident Loyalist and wanted to, at that moment, to be one of them.

“Remember what they’ve taken from you, my fellow Americans. Your lives are no longer a right; they’ve become only a privilege. That’s the greatest sin ever inflicted on humanity. And now you’re living it. Your children will live it. Your children’s children will live it. Is that what you want for yourself? Is it what you want for them? Is that what you want for your country?”

A retired agent McNamara and Bridgeport (who’d been forced into retirement a decade later for the poking around at NSC) were talking to each other about this and how the files they’d left actually did something…They asked each other if they had any regrets; McNamara said no even if it meant that a terrorist would strike down the regime they now lived under, they’d done the right thing, this was their duty because they worked for the former DOJ which was nothing but a half-occupied building now.

Mercy ranted on…
“Tonight, I’m giving you a gift. The greatest gift ever given. Tonight, I’m giving you what they’ve slowly stolen from you. Tonight, I’m giving back what you’ve taken from yourselves through infighting and bickering.

Alana couldn’t take it any longer. She snuck out of the bedroom to see what the commotion was outside. Though she was on the tenth floor, the sounds being made outside was loud. When she got to her favorite window and looked outside, she got an eyeful.

“Momma,” she screamed. “The people are doing crazy things on the street.”

She was right but crazy things was an understatement. Some of the citizens of her coded area were rioting and breaking things. It was a moment they’d never seen in public before. The expectation was that the system was about to go down; and that meant more chaos. That must’ve enough to agitate some of the drones loose. No one likes to have their comforts taken away; the little there was left to be had in the Thirty-Nine.

“Doomsday is on Wednesday, and that my people is tonight, but it’s meant for them. It’s not the apocalypse, it’s their apocalypse. It’s not the end of days; it’s their end of days. It’s a beginning, like when Prometheus stole fire from Mount Olympus and gave it to humanity. It is they who will live in darkness. Have faith, for you will suffer to learn what perseverance is and what it means to be free really.”

Commander Clinton looked at his deputy, a young Asian male and gave him a lecture. “When I am in charge,” he said looking at his former boss’ blue corpse. “I’m changing all of this.”

“You think that will happen this lifetime,” said the Asain deputy.

“I don’t believe in other lifetimes,” he smiled looking gain at Travis on the floor curled up in the fetal position. “I don’t believe in that mombo jumbo. I believe in the now and I intend to seize it.

“What a mess,” said the deputy commander. “We’ll have to start from scratch.”

Clinton looked outside at the Live Office. “Travis wasn’t prepared for her arrival, but now that she’s here, I’ll rebuild.”

“For a man once said. “Give me liberty or give me death.” This gift is only a taste of what you could become again. Goodbye, Godspeed and God bless America!”

“What does that mean momma?” asked Alana staring at the woman who seemed to look back at her
“It means we’re going to be fucked,” she said then covered her lips in shame. “I mean it’s not good, I think. Where are the PPO?”

Pyke repeated the slogan like a parrot. “We’re going to be fucked,” three times until Momma stopped him physically with her hand over his mouth.

Then, all monitors went black. Everything in the country went dark. For days afterward, total darkness fell over the nation – no electronic device was able to function as they’d been intended to, though they initialized and seemed to boot as they were supposed to.

“Momma,” said Alana, tapping her mother who’d been staring at her Hover Drone unit. But momma didn’t respond, only staring at the device as if it was about to speak to her.

The HD units and all high-level electronics just looked back at their owners in silence. People could not Hover Drone anywhere. They couldn’t communicate with their local Patriot Patrol Office. Julian had freed the people, but had she? Alana’s mother gawked at her lifeless HD unit into infinity waiting for a command…

“Pyke…likes this,” said Pyke unable to understand the consequences ahead.

“You won’t like it soon,” she said pointing outside. Pyke came to the window with glee on his face, but only saw the chaos had increased since the falling of the Patriot infrastructure. The bold people were getting more angry and violent by the minute.

“Why are they doing this?” he asked his little sister since the two adults in the home were useless at the moment. But Alana looked at him like he was crazy.

“How am I supposed to know,” she said half angry and half sad. “I’m only six. This is government stuff. They need to deal with it cause I want to go back to school to see my friends.”

The PPO responded swiftly. They brought out the Red Shirts: young men kept in reserve to shout out commands through bullhorns and word of mouth. There were millions of these little, but well trained, boys in red, who went about forcing people back into a sense of normalcy.

These brainwashed teens were nothing to play with. Red helmeted, black shoed, and armored, they carried a five-foot, lightweight but electrified silver baton for the occasional rabble-rouser.

**EPISODE SIXTY**

**Pandemonium**
THREE MONTHS LATER, THINGS, didn’t seem to have gotten better for the family. Alana once again found herself the only adult in the family. With Pyke’s help, she took the reigns of the family and whipped her mother and father back into shape.

“It will be okay,” she told them. “You’ll see.”

Thought-based panic still gripped the country and spread like wildfire. For many citizens, including Alana’s parents, things were turned upside down. They yearned for their Hover Drones. Many wanted nothing more than to be told what to do electronically.

Alana tried her best to keep the family into a collective unit, but she was just six, and Pyke wasn’t much older. Without the electronic institutionalization they’d lived under, and the detached structure, momma, began to experience some of the symptoms of a mental collapse.

“Momma,” said Alana, as she brushed her mother’s hair. “Why won’t you speak to any of us?” Alana’s mother had suffered thought-based panic. She too yearned for commands from her Hover Drone. She’d watched the lifeless machine for days without end, waiting for a command, any command to come from it.

“Momma,” said Alana with tears coming forth as she brushed, but her mother cared only for the drone; the state-sponsored electronic nationalization she’d become accustomed to more than family over the course of her life.

Alana couldn’t understand it yet. She had not become an adult, but her mother had grown up under the system she was only a child.

“Momma, you’re going to have to say something.” Alana finished combing mamma’s hair. Her mother said nothing for the next few weeks.

Agent McNamara and Bridgeport met with the old crew “The Swinger Brigade,” who are still alive and have a powwow about the details of what’s happening. They came to the conclusion that it was time to pass on the conspiracy to the next group of FBI agents. They’d been watching a team that were doing very well in the kidnapping detachment and sent them the files. Then the “Swinger Brigade,” disbanded forever.

***
SIX MONTHS HAD PASSED since *Doomsday on Wednesday* and life hadn’t gotten much better for Alana’s family. Alana only watched her mother’s deterioration with anger mixed in with a little bit of fear. She had felt the raw angst of a teenager trapped in the frail body of a six-year-old, unable to act out appropriately.

“You’ll be okay,” said the lady in the white uniform with the PPO red hat. She had a cross on her hat signifying she’d been a Sanitorium Maiden. “We’ll take great care of your parents from now on, my little dears.”

Alana didn’t know what that meant, but she knew they’d take her parents to a place where they’d get better, and she and Pyke would be able to choose their friends from now on; well, until their parents get better, then it was back to mandated friends picked by the Bureau.

“How long will papa and momma be gone?”

“It won’t be long,” she said. “A few months in the cerebral detachment chamber and they’ll be fine.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a place where they’ll find tranquility, my little darling.”

She knew mama and papa would be sent to a place similar to where grandpa was sent for The Drowning, but it wasn’t as bad, the lady in white had told her. They’d bet the best treatment there, and she’d come back the same as she’d known her. Alana and Pyke would get her momma and papa back. It would only take a little bit of time and a few spoons full of the yukky stuff.

In the meantime, she’d be sent to a foster group home, but she felt free from their grip on stupidity, though. Pyke didn’t care much. He was playing tag with himself more than anything these days, now that papa wasn’t around to interact with him.

“Where?” she asked the lady in white.

“The unrestricted zone.”

That meant the wasteland of Las Vegas, but at least for once she had new friends. It was only temporary. She knew she’d reunite with her parents – when they got their shit together again. Alana watched as her mother, still holding onto the dead HD unit talking to it, as they took her away in the ambulance off to the sanitarium. Papa was right behind her in his pajamas, dragging his Hover Drone unit, he’d christened it Puppy, his new pet; he was waiting for it to talk back to him as well.
Agent McNamara and Bridgeport met up at a supermarket to get their quota/ration and talk of the old days and their condition now; which is really good in comparison to most because they’re former FEDS.

“You don’t look a day over seventy,” said McNamara to Bridgeport.

“You know,” said Bridgeport. “I would’ve married you when your wife left, but I couldn’t get along with the thought that you’d be a dog and I’d have to castrate you.”

“People can change,” said McNamara. “People do change.”

“Then you should’ve changed earlier,” she winked and took her supplies. Bridgeport’s tending nurse took the food in her hand and escorted agent to her waiting LiftVan. As she left, she looked at McNamara and smiled. He came to her car and made a kissing sign with his hands and she caught it and held it over her heart. The car left and when it did, agent McNamara’s nurse started removing tears from the corner of his eyes before his car arrived and he too was escorted home.

**EPISODE SIXTY-ONE**

**Bedlam**

AGENT MCNAMARA AND BRIDGEPORT met one more time before they never saw each other again. It was at a beach in Brooklyn; Howard Beach it was. They were there to get their quota/ration of seafood, the only place that issued it were in Howard Beach.

It’s ironic you chose the same place twice to pick up

“Why’d you never called,” he asked her looking expectant to hear something profound.

“I’ve been sick,” she said looking away. “It’s terminal. Brain cancer.”

“My,” he said. “Have you taken cared of all your affairs?”

“A month ago,” she said. “I wanted to Loci you, Rob, but it was too much on me. I didn’t want to burden you with your own troubles.”
“Bridgeport,” said McNamara with his eyes locked into here. “I know I came across as a monster sexually and relationship wise, but I would’ve moved the world for you. I don’t really know what happened to make us drift over the years, but I want you to keep me updated every day on your condition.”

“That’s so sweet, McNamara.”

“I mean it,” he said as she wiped tears from his eyes. “I’ll come see you every day until you go. That’s what a partner does. And maybe my visiting you will make

“You’ve always been the superstitious one,” she smiled now with tears of her own. “But I guess it’s about time I need some of that enchantment.”

They held hands and sat at the beachside as the water ebbed and made casual conversation of the past, present and future until their nurses arrived to take them home.

The sun rose again on nine months of uneventful living. A type of living Alana had quickly become accustomed to after relating to her foster family in Las Vegas. There was great anticipation in her young heart, mostly concerning her and Pyke’s upcoming reunion with momma and papa. It had been too long, and Alana’s new friends wore her spirit out each night with tales of the system being overburdened and parents never being reunified with their offspring.

For Pyke though, life in the City of Lights was starting to feel like paradise in comparison to their former lives back in New York City. Las Vegas was in the lower zone; meaning less regulation for the jovial inhabitants of the slums. It also meant running water, electrics and he and Alana could roam all they wanted; the children played outside at night which she found strange.

The one thing that bothered her was the Great Wall she kept hearing about.

“You want to cross the wall?” asked Corbin Lesner, one of the foster kids “You’ve got to be crazy. That wall is a mile thick and a mile high, and I hear they shoot anybody from both sides who try to even look at it.”

“Liar,” said one boy.

“No, they don’t,” added another child. “The Californians let every refugee into the Sanctuary State of California. It’s the land of milk and Honey. Daddy used to hear there are gold-plated highways and nobody goes hungry or thirsty there.”

“What got you up here?” asked Corbin.
“I’m gonna make there,” she said. “When I get my parents back.”

“We never get our parents back,”

“I will.”

“Then you’ll be the first, Alana,” said one of the girls who shot her a tongue.

“Momma had gotten her master’s degree years before they went into the sanitarium,” she said, “and daddy had a science degree. The sky would be the limit for us really.”

*If we pulled ourselves together,* she thought.

“California’s into that kind of stuff,” added Pyke. “Scientists.”

“I heard about it,” said Corbin. “They can’t get enough scientists. Something they’re building down there. Something big.”

The children seemed to know more than the adults in the Thirty-Nine. As the proverbial shit rolled effortless downhill in the Thirty-Nine, one group of people were unbothered by the mayhem. They were the only people who were not panicking, living in the sunshine and sandy beaches. They were the ones who’d seen the bloody writing on the wall and bailed out before things got too silly. This is where a gravestone of a long-dead woman read:

> “Everyone fought so hard to limit everyone else’s rights and freedom to choose that over time... we had none left to spare for ourselves.”

_ Julian Mercy _

They were those living in *The Sanctuary State of California.*

*One of these days,* Alana figured she’d move there. She’d pack her bags and sneak across the border, and if she had to, she’d break a bone to get across. No one who got in her way would live to see the light of the next day. She’d get to California. When she got old enough, she’d get there and live free. *One of these days...one of these days.*
IF DEMPSTER DIDN'T HAVE the IQ of a cockatoo,” Rozita started, “maybe his debater wouldn’t seem so impressive to the audience.” Fox, who seemed to be shooting bullets out of his mouth, wouldn't have come across as so brilliant had Dempsey come to the debates equipped for combat with a mastermind.

Rozita watched as the audience wowed and oohed, leaning on every syllable Fox hammered over Dempsey's grizzled head–a few Dempsey supporters did heckle him from the back, but their heckling was stifled by the audience’s overwhelming appeal to Fox.

Fox had charmed the viewers with his conversational voodoo. Jerel couldn’t stop himself from munching on his blistering-hot popcorn, chomping through the pain as the kernels seared the roof of his mouth. “Fox is a disgraceful pig,” he said through his teeth.

It would be the final special election ever held in the Thirty-Nine States. Julius C. Fox, of the Dissident Party, was ahead in the polls. He wore the gloomy Dissident outfit: an all-black suit signifying the pessimism they'd witnessed consuming their beloved nation.

The white tie represented the light at the end of the tunnel as did his white podium with the giant $D$ for Dissident—a moniker their movement adopted from the Patriot opposition; it was their badge of pride since the Patriots had thought of it as an insult, but the Dissidents wore it to mock the Patriots.

Fox's opponent stood across from him behind a red podium with the Greater Patriot Union emblem in eye-shredding bold colors: an American eagle with thirty-nine stars; the stars were trapped in three rings of thirteen which were bound together, clutched in the eagle’s talons.
Arnold Dempsey stood proudly in his lovely blue suit, black shoes, and red tie, signifying the Greater Patriot Union, a growing Patriotic group which had captivated the Thirty-Nine through massive rallies that showcased their flamboyant leader.

"I wonder...." mused Jerel, then paused to collect his thoughts. "I wonder, what would Fox be like if he were alive today?" He’d slouched on the couch in his mother's Brooklyn apartment while watching the authorized documentary roll on, his fiancée Rozita next to him fiddling with her Loci Bracelet.

Rozita was the opposite of Jerel who was ordinary despite his sturdy frame; he had big hands and short black hair awkwardly hanging over a thin, time-worn face. Woefully green eyes set deep within their sockets, watched her anxiously.

A slight dimple occasionally complimented his cheekbones, leaving an intriguing memory of Jerel’s adventurous love life. There’s something odd about him, perhaps it’s merely a feeling of regret, but however, people tend to keep their distance, while thinking of ways to become his friend, Rozita had pushed through all of that to find love in a lonely boy from the inner city.

"He'd be a righteous prick," said Rozita, who cared little for the partisan documentary. She preferred to watch war films. "And there’d be a very hawkish litigator looking at his background. Just my opinion, though."

Rozita was out of Jerel’s league; curly blonde hair tight in a ponytail revealed a round, jolly face, glinting blue eyes, set sunken within their sockets, a thin nose, and buxom boobs accented her curvaceous body.

Smooth skin graciously complimented her cheeks and left a compelling memory of her Good luck. There’s something unusual about her; perhaps it’s her presence, or maybe it’s merely her personality, but even so, people tend to take pride in knowing her, while wishing they were more like her.

“Babe, I agree with you for once,” he said over popcorn teeth. “Just this once.”

Fox seemed to rip the words out of Dempsey's mouth before he could speak them.

*Was he prescient?* thought Jerel as he gave Rozita a cuddle.

Rozita continued fidgeting with her bracelet. The Loci seemed to contain more entertainment than the drama unfolding in the living room's holographic projection.

She'd seen enough Patriot propaganda to sniff one out as soon as they started rolling the opening credits. This one would be another in a long line of glitzy and tortured attempts to make the Thirty-Nine appear as a compassionate state.

Rozita had viewed enough publicity campaigns. She'd seen them as triggers, indoctrinations masked as Patriotic biopics and knew what was happening.
What a good little sheep you are, Jerel, to fall for something this obvious. But if I told you the truth, what would you say about me? Would you call me an intellectual? I don't have permission from the Bureau to teach, so I better keep my mouth shut unless he asks a direct question.

Rozita wondered why Jerel didn't pick up on it. Instead, he'd gobbled up the picture as if it were some kind of art. Kind words from a crocodile with a mouthful of teeth didn't appear very soothing to a thirsty gazelle at a river in Africa. Why would this lie be any different?

"It's like he studied Dempsey before the debate even started," said Jerel kicking his feet on the couch. "Knew him more than the guy knew himself. It's a crazy mindfuck I tell you, babe."

"It's what's called casing your opposition," she said. "An old tactic. Still used by marketing companies. Ever get a package you didn't order, but you need on that day? And it's already charged to your Loci? Without your permission?" She winked, then smiled and turned back to the film.

"Uh, all the time," said Jerel nodding at the revelation. "Fricking Co-ops! Hate them and love them." He put an arm around her waist and drew her closer to him, as if afraid she would want to get away from him for some reason.

Dempsey shook a fist at Fox, who ignored the Patriotic taunt. The fist pump in the air had become their rallying cry and a way to not only terrorize their opponents but to make fun of them as well;

**Knock a Dissident in the head. If he’s not dead knock him again.**

They began the debate about the Thirty-Nine's overreach on minority and women's rights. Dempsey soon turned the debate into a call to end everything he personally felt was debauched.

"The children of the day are becoming addicts," Dempsey started. "I say sex counseling should be mandatory in all schools. Our children are going haywire with internet pornography. It’s time we teach them about the right way before they learn the bad way’s the only way. And do you know, each time our innocent boys visit those sites of ill-repute, it increases the chances for a mass school shooting. It’s either that or forced abortions, I tell you."

"There’d be an act of violence every second in every school in the Thirty-Nine based on your false statistics," Fox blasted Dempsey. "Stop the fearmongering and get to the facts…we can’t afford forced abortions of people you label “nonconforming” just because they’re not born citizens of the Thirty-Nine."

"If the damn breeding R.A.T.S. can’t pay for their own offspring, I say forced abortions for all of them."

"It is the right of every American to have a fair shake at life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness without the state’s intervention. Forced abortions are cruel and an abuse of the state’s right to regulate population."

"Why should we have to pay for a problem we’re going to take down the line anyways?"
“You honestly believe forced abortions are a preemptive strike against the inner city and suburban crime epidemic?”

“If there were a law,” started Dempsey, “I’d drag them out their infested living places and abort them myself.”

“What’s next,” said Fox. “I suppose a broader ban on religion since the GPU have no real sanity left among their leadership?”

“Never, but I was considering increasing my martial law authority as governor, increasing the ban on all guns; especially in places where the R.A.T.S. breed.”

“The insanity of the GPU knows no bounds folks,” said Fox bowing to the absurdity.

They continued debating about many items; from the legal ramifications of taking random people out their homes to force them to get abortions to which one of the two had the biggest penis and was the better rebel. Fox had the last laugh on the rebel portion when he tossed a can of compressed diesel at Dempsey; it seemed nothing was off limits in the debates.

The first phase of their debate then descended into a series of shouting matches between Dempsey, the moderator, and Fox. Security had to be called in to separate the two men, who seemed ready to punch each other's faces. The live audience in Buffalo stood up and gave the men wild applause for the incredible showmanship they'd displayed. The freak show ended with high ratings.

"I know what you're thinking," said Rozita. "I'd definitely put my money on Fox."

"Heck no!" Jerel laughed as he rose from his slouching position, shooting his girl a wild glance as if she'd gone out of her mind. "Dempsey would wipe the floor with that Dissident twerp."

"Dempsey's all talk," she pointed out. "Look at Fox. He's an action man. Bet he'd kick Dempsey's ass. And drag him backstage. Then feed him breakfast just for shits and giggles."

To the shock of the lovers on momma’s couch, the two debaters concluded their mutual assassination by shaking hands, embracing, and congratulating each other on a job well done. Then their bodyguards escorted them through separate exits while they waved each other a cheery goodbye and wished each other good luck.

Jerel and Rozita stared at each other with a strange feeling that they'd been hoodwinked. He couldn't get his money back; the New York Lending Library had charged his Loci for the documentary. But he didn't want his money back, he wanted more… more of that preposterous political fantasy.
IT HAD BECOME ADDICTIVE. The two lovers were spellbound, glued to their couch, yearning for more of that absorbing political opera they'd witnessed the night before.

Rozita and Jerel wanted to know where the fantasy would end. Fox’s and Dempsey's charade had been a bold one. What were those two men up to now? They'd played their audience for chumps. Jerel and Rozita felt like idiots as well, after seeing those adversaries roar like lions battling for control of the pride only to shake hands at the end.

Rozita was out of breath after rushing to Jerel’s home from her job at the Hover Drone maintenance facility in Queens. "You didn't start without me, did you?"

"I tried," he smiled feebly. "But I knew the consequences would be fatal."

She grinned and jumped on the couch next to her man, who wore his mandated white sweatpants as did she. Her eyes told him she was beyond ready to see the next episode. She clapped her hands like a little girl. "Come on, let's go!"

“I know you didn’t want to watch it,” said Jerel.

“True but now I’m dying to see which one’s behind that charade!”

He gazed passionately into those beautiful blue eyes and wondered for the thousandth time why she'd chosen him, a boy with so little to offer. Then he searched for the next episode. "This is going to be good," he said. "Can't wait to see how it ends up." All he had to do was look at his wrist and flip through the historical figures. They weren't redacted like the Founding Fathers were. The government didn't consider them as toxic to the delicate senses of its citizens.

"Me too," he said. "I was getting fed up with docs. But this one has a certain intrigue."

"Don't judge a book by its cover, baby." She flashed a wicked smile which Jerel didn't notice as the old footage rolled on. "You'll be left holding your little wood in your hands looking mighty stupid."

"A leopard can't change its spots," he replied with no shame in his voice. "While you're throwing sayings at me." She ignored the old proverb and watched the film. He wanted to repeat it, but he knew it would only land him in relationship prison.

The second phase of the debate began as expected: a noise contest. Fox tore into Dempsey, calling him a corrupt son of a bitch.

Dempsey came back with obscenities which were blocked both vocally and visually, making his mouth look twisted on screen. Then, without warning, it became verbally ferocious. Dempsey called Fox a venal liar.

Fox said Dempsey had no sense of humor and that when his party stopped telling lies about the Dissidents was the day he'd stop telling the truth about the GPU. The audience roared.
Dempsey called him a cockroach and said his mother should've used a coat hanger on him.

Fox, seeing the direction the debate was heading, retorted with a crushing personal insult. “Dempsey is living proof that some people are so brainwashed that they’ve become impervious to the effects of both our public school system and an Ivy League education. And that was a shame because I was starting to think there was hope for Dempsey,” he said to a hysterical crowd.

At that point, the audience turned to Dempsey who started choking on his words. He ran through his holographic projection and found something. “You're one to talk,” he said. “This coming from a man with more family issues than a hillbilly porn star.”

Fox said if they're going the ad hominem route, then he might as well do it too. Fox then told Dempsey that if he fell down a well, that would be bad luck. And if the fire department freed his lard ass out of that well, that would be a total disaster.

The audience went crazy; they stomped their feet on the floor and cheered out Fox's name. Rozita rolled her eyes; she’d heard most of those comebacks from her illegal history searches on the dark web.

Arnold Dempsey was feeling the pressure and went back to what he knew: obscenities. The screen blocked a series of curses that would make a drill instructor cringe. After he was finished, Fox sighed.

“Are you finished?” Fox asked Dempsey. “This guy played too much college football with his helmet off, huh people? How much did your parents pay the admissions committee? It must've been a king's ransom because when I attended, they weren't admitting morons.”

Dempsey tried the populist route. He said he was a man of the people, that he had massive rallies while Fox spoke to crickets, but Fox cut him off midstride.

Fox laughed in Dempsey’s face, saying he shouldn't play the humble man. “That’s a picture no one’s going to buy, Mr. Dempsey. You’re noting but a brown-nosing phony playing king in a court filled with jesters who mock you every time you turned your fat ass to them. They aren’t in love with you…they’re only using you…useful idiot. They wanted to set the world on fire, and you’re the matchstick to their gasoline, nothing more.”

Dempsey grimaced and dropped his stylus. Then he walked, no, ran over to Fox's podium and flung it aside. Then he landed Fox a sharp right hook to the jaw.

Fox returned the favor with a lefty. The mayhem spiraled out from there, spilling into the audience, the bodyguards, and out on the streets.

Grown men and women pummeled one another. Blood and spittle and bits of torn clothing flew around the studio with abandon. Children ran to teenagers for protection, while adults lashed at parents.
By nightfall, the state police had the situation under control. The brawl had caused millions of dollars in damage. The studio had to be closed, and both debaters were hospitalized.

Dempsey had caught the worst end: six broken ribs and a collapsed lung. It seemed Rozita was accurate in her prediction, as actual security footage showed an enraged Fox standing over Dempsey and stomping his head, neck, and ribs repeatedly as his aides tried desperately to separate him from the moaning GPU candidate before he fell unconscious.

***

THEY DIDN'T GO TO work the next day. It was an absolute must to watch the outcome of the mess which had become the New York State Special Gubernatorial Election. As soon as they woke up next morning, Jerel turned on the show, and the lovers settled back to watch.

As the episode commenced, Rozita's Loci showed an incoming call. Jerel looked at her with a bit of reserved suspicion. She'd never received calls from outsiders in the year and a half they'd known each other. Who was this stranger and why was he calling at six in the morning?

"Don't look at me like that," she snapped at him. "It's just my girlfriend, Lana from work. You'll meet her at the wedding." He couldn't stay mad at her for long, but he still wallowed in self-pity. He hadn't inspected her Loci to see if the Bureau of Links and Associations had approved this Lana friend of hers, but she was a coworker so that could be why the Bureau permitted her calling at all.

"Why’s she calling this early?"

"Girl topics you wouldn’t understand, Jay."

Jerel commanded his Loci to continue as Rozita talked to her girlfriend, but he still watched her with a bit of suspicion. He'd never heard of any Lana, but he had to take Rozita’s for it. They were getting hitched in a few months, and if he couldn't trust her now, they were in for a hell of a lot of trouble later one. I hope to God she's not lying to me through that elegant nose of hers.

The third episode showed Julius Fox on the campaign trail. He complained to his staff that he was being stalked more than usual for a politician. Most of his bodyguards, who were appointed by the State of New York, didn't show much concern about the recent blizzard of hate mail. They said they'd keep an eye out. Some had contacted the Inspector General, who'd notified them he'd initiated an investigation.

"What's an inspector general?" Jerel asked. "Sounds like a powerful position. Like someone in the military."
"He was like our Prime," Rozita began. "Instead of running everything, he just investigates stuff. Big crimes. I think whatever he finds must be acted on by law enforcement. And no one can stop them once they start their investigation. They were important people back then."

"Oh, really? Sounds like the Task Force. But without the dog bite."

"Precisely, a little bit like the PPO… without the dog bite." She giggled and grabbed his hands, taking them to her belly.

The documentary was being narrated by a raspy-sounding elderly woman. In crisp tones, she stated that a few of Fox's bodyguards had been planted by the Greater Patriot Union to keep track of his movements and strategy. They couldn't allow him a victory. He'd only plague the Thirty-Nine with dissident bills once he became governor.

The GPU didn't yet gain a majority in the Senate or the House. Fox had to go, but they needed a final solution, said the narrator.

The documentary cut to the next day, in Fox’s campaign office; this time a reenactment. There was a package addressed to Fox from a foundation in Charleston, West Virginia called R.A.T.S.: RALLY AGAINST TRAITORS of the STATE. When a young female staffer opened it, she got an eyeful: a white lab rat with its head surgically severed. Next to the rat was written a note in what the narrator said was the rat’s own blood. It said, “All dissidents will burn in hell!”

It didn't bother Fox, who knew Dempsey was from Charleston, but he still beefed up his security detail. When word reached his desk that GPU members were bullying and taking out revenge, and torturing, people who didn't believe in their movement, he demanded to meet Dempsey in person.

Cut to next day, and Dempsey and Fox were standing before the cameras while Dempsey categorically denied any involvement in the rat incident. Fox looked into the camera and assured the people that Dempsey was an honorable man. He added that Dempsey would never condone the torture of any American citizen and that the wicked people committing those terrible crimes would be found and prosecuted.

"Sounds like paranoia to me," Jerel said. He turned to see Rozita reaching for the hot popcorn in his lap. "Fox is starting to lose his damn mind, babe."

"If you had that shit happen to you while you were running for office…” she started, speaking around a mouthful of popcorn. "Know what…? Never mind, it’s like talking to a wall with you." He balked at that statement and flung a few popcorn chips at her. She caught a few and tossed them back at him, and they started laughing as they threw popcorn in each other's mouths.

"I get it." He leaned towards her. "But listen, it was a cheap scare tactic. Nothing would come of it. Both men knew that. They were playing around. Doubling security was a waste of money. It's also what they wanted him to do. When you give in to the opponent, they win."

"You have a point, but my mother always said better safe than sorry."
The next day, the video showed Dempsey at a massive 50,000-person Revenge Rally in the wooded hills of Charleston, West Virginia. The GPU had pre-screened every attendant. They even went so far as to impose a loyalty test to each attendee, with questions only GPU members could answer. But their precautions were in vain.

A young reporter had gotten through, said the narrator, by acting like a rabid Fox hater. This reporter said she wanted to “Slit his throat myself and watch him die as I curse all those demonic seeds he's brought to this world back to hell!” She also carried with her some salacious dirt that no one else had: a racy video of Fox in bed with his wife. The reporter was admitted without further question.

It was later discovered that Fox had sent her into the rally with the video as her ticket. She also carried a hidden camera to make some new incriminating videos.

The next day, people saw on their news the smuggled video of the hate-laden rally that exposed Dempsey as the die-hard leader of a growing crowd of bigots. “We fight a war against a very gifted, cunning enemy. That’s what R.A.T.S. are. And I tell you, they come in all shapes, colors, and sizes these days,” said Dempsey to thunderous applause and cheers of:

*Cut their throats...cut their throats...cut their throats...*

“We’ve been betrayed by the system meant to protect us, the real citizens. A system which was created by us for us and now...now they’ve outbred us because they hump like (the audience shouted out R.A.T.S.). And everything we’ve worked for has been given to the fucking R.A.T.S. who will one day rape your children’s birthrate, stealing their land, while pissing on your graves.”

*Gut all the rats...if that don’t work...grab you a steel bat...*

“This we cannot have. We can’t let them taint this beautiful motherland any further. We’ll burn it down to the ground, my brothers and sisters.”

*Burn it down...burn it down ...burn it down...*

“Then, we’ll rebuild our country as it should’ve been, as it once was from the very beginning; looking like you and me; free of the R.A.T.S. infestation.”

*All rats burn in hell...all rats burn in hell...all rats burn in hell...*

“And those who love them; are one of them, no matter. They’ll feel the burn too.”

For her efforts, the reporter was punished by the GPU most uniquely, one which no human being but she would see, though the punishment was designed to be out in the open. They gave her the works, said the narrator.

For months her local police, fire department, medical professionals, neighbors, landlord, tailor, dentist, phone company, telemarketers, random people she’d never met before, all harassed her using the sensitive information they’d gathered about her from the GPU. Her phone never
stopped ringing, the hate mail never stopped coming. Whatever way they could they got to her, twenty-four hours a day, without letup.

The week before the election she jumped off the roof of her apartment building. She was survived by her mother, father, and three children. Fox attended the funeral and gave a fiery eulogy denouncing the Greater Patriot Union. Again Dempsey tried the denial route, but the tide of public opinion had turned against him.

***

ON THE NIGHT BEFORE the election, Julius C. Fox was twenty-one points ahead of Dempsey, having widened the gap from thirteen points the month before the reporter's suicide. All news outlets predicted a landslide victory. Polling stations throughout the state were filled with New Yorkers eagerly waiting to cast their early votes for Fox. No one appeared for Dempsey; his supporters quietly sent their votes through the registrar.

At precisely 0904 hours, Julius Fox’s caravan was heading south from Albany to New York City towards the large audience that awaited his victory speech. The GPU figured there was no chance in hell their toxic candidate could defeat the caring and charismatic Fox.

As the five-car convoy rolled down I-87, hopes were high in Fox's limousine which cruised in the middle of the fleet. They crossed from the middle lane into the speeding lane on their left.

From a GPU embedded camera, Fox’s aide was seen using a roller to rid his black suit of lint. Then suddenly a group of men and women on black motorcycles came roaring past them. There appeared to be hundreds of them from Fox’s point of view though it were just a few.

Fox chalked it up to another GPU stunt and told the frightened aides to ignore them.

All at once there was a series of bright flashes, followed by a loud rattle and the crash of bullets shattering bulletproof glass.

The bikers knew exactly which car to hit. Fox’s driver didn’t have time to react. The limousine swerved as it was struck with bullets, then it struck a few bikers, as the limos behind it approached to shield it, but they were sprayed with bullets.

Fox’s car struck the divider and then careened into a ditch on the other side of I-87.

The rest of the convoy lost control behind Fox’s vehicle. Then a helicopter with a gun mounted came from the treeline. It lit up Fox’s limousine.

Bang...bang...bang...bang...bang...bang...bang...bang...bang...bang...
The vehicles in front of Fox’s backed up to shield his car from the new attacker. The assassins got off their motorbikes and kept firing into Fox's limousine; the men had .50 caliber Barrett rifles. The armor piercing rounds ripped through the reinforced windows and the steel protecting Fox.

He was killed instantly. His aide-de-camp was severely injured while the driver survived with a light head wound.

When they were done, a massive cleanup crew emerged from the forest. The cleanup crew members had biohazardous suits, facemasks and were cleaning I-87 and the surrounding mess.

"What a precise hit," said Jerel. "They timed it perfectly. And on motorbikes? Who were those guys?" Rozita looked at him with a blank face, as if to say it was so obvious who they were.

"Wonder if I could ride one of those?"

"It's not hard," he said making the hand gesture. "Ron's father has one. One of these days we could borrow it and go upstate."

_You have never worn revealing clothes around me_, he mused. _I know, you're leaving something for the imagination. For after we're married. I wonder how you'd fit those lovely jugs into a skintight motorbike outfit like those assassins were wearing._

The cars behind Fox's came to a screeching halt as the bikers remounted and continued along the highway, effortlessly disappearing into the traffic.

Fox's body was riddled with bullets. As his bodyguards dragged him out of his limousine, it was clear he was dead. There was nothing they could do for him except cry.

The next hour, his assassination was announced on every news channel in the Thirty-Nine. There hadn't been a political hit since RFK. The people wanted answers; not only New Yorkers but those in the remaining states. The people in New York started rioting minutes after Dempsey became the default Governor of their state.

"Think he'd have lost if he didn't order the hit on Fox?" she asked Jerel.

"How'd you know Dempsey was the one who ordered the hit?"

"It's so obvious," she said, amazed he didn't make the connection. "Who else stands to profit from his death?"

"The GPU," he said, offended that she'd implicate such an upstanding gentleman in such an evil conspiracy. "They could've ordered the hit for Dempsey. Plausible deniability and all. Keep Dempsey's hands clean."

"So what? He is the GPU," she reminded him. "He's their lead candidate." Jerel brushed off her reply and focused on the show.
The alarming footage came next; bands of Patriots were shown tossing incendiary grenades into the lavish home of a high-ranking Dissident Party member in Albany. The mansion was in a rural area, and it was pitch black outside. They carried flaming monster hunt torches to light their way for effect instead of carrying electric torches or using the lights of their vehicles to flood their target’s home.

When the target refused to leave his burning house, he was dragged out and pulverized with steel baseball bats as his wife, daughter, and two adolescent sons watched in horror.

"Serves them right," he said nodding. "Should've made him watch them burn."

"Christ, J. How can you say that?" She looked at him awkwardly. This was a side of her future husband she'd never seen before. She knew he hated the Dissidents but hating their children was crossing the line. "They're just kids!"

"Children who would've grown up to become R.A.T.S.," he said crossing his arms. He tried to cuddle, but she threw his arms off her.

Realizing they were next, the man's family ran to the rear of the mansion, toward the blaze; they were probably hoping they’d make it to the backyard and off to the woods. At the backside of the house, the remaining family members were met by a horde of drooling GPU followers.

They taunted them and menaced the kids with bats and axes, chasing the frightened family back into the burning house.

The woman begged them to release her innocent children, that she would take their place and die in the house for them. But they never responded to her pleas. And as the family coughed from the fumes that were slowly killing them in their own home, the Patriots watched, chugged on ale and cheered.

The mansion finally went silent as the fire spread to the last room. The GPU mob roared their approval at the grand finale. The woman and her three children had finally succumbed to the smoke.

"I can't believe them," said Rozita. "Monsters!" she struck the couch. Jerel was satisfied with the results, but he held back his feelings.

***
IN A THEATRICAL AFTERMATH befitting the bizarre opera they'd been watching for days, Julius C. Fox performed a world-class magic trick that Dempsey wouldn't have thought The Orator of Brooklyn could have concocted so easily.

And he had done it without the press finding out. Usually, the papers would get wind of significant cases like his, but Julius C. Fox had kept things under wraps for he knew the cost of a mistake would be high. As it turned out, he was right.

Before running, Dempsey had called for the GPU's to take over all news, education, publishing, arts, and entertainment industries. People thought he'd lost his mind, but he meant every bit of it.

Their members intended to achieve this takeover scheme by selling everything they owned and handing the proceeds over to the GPU. The GPU would then have bought up the entities which held control of the besieged trades.

Fox saw this as a breach of state and federal anti-trust laws. He had initiated an investigation against Dempsey’s backers. They were a syndicate made up of over a hundred bankers, some of whom were overseas. As the state prosecutor, Fox figured he'd be a prime target, so he kept a low profile.

The GPU's next blow would be a religious mandate, which couldn't be gotten from the federal government. Dempsey would need the Thirty-Nine states, already aligned with them, to achieve the GPU’s plan for this.

The resolution was passed through the GPU machine in secrecy. The Thirty-Nine states banded together and ratified their status of a formal religion that was acceptable to all of them. The GPU bylaws never admitted to belonging to any particular recognized belief; only that it was a religious entity on paper. This permitted members to bring holy relics and pray on public property.

The narrator added that they wanted to hold vigils on state capitols. It also permitted them to ban all other religions that didn't fit the definition they'd carefully concocted for their own organization. Since no other organization could pass this litmus test, no other religion could exist. Dempsey was organizing this for months before the elections.

And that’s when Fox’s trap was sprung from beyond the grave. As soon as he was sworn in as Governor, Arnold Dempsey was arrested by the New York State Police, thanks to the Inspector General of New York, for treason and corruption. Although the murder charge couldn't be connected to him, he went down for the first two, as did every one of his co-conspirators in the banking syndicate.

"They played that man!" shouted Jerel as he stomped his foot on the mat under the couch.

"He played himself," said Rozita. "Shouldn't have killed his opponent. That's like, Rule Number One in the playbook."
"You keep insinuating that… sounds like you wanted the dirty Dissident to win," he said through tightened teeth. She turned to him with a flash in her eyes, ready to do battle like the debaters in the film.

"I wanted to see a fair election," she spat out. "I saw what appeared to be a demagogue murdering a better man and then getting his comeuppance. Is that wrong?"

"I'm just saying." He shrugged and looked at her questionably. "Don't get defensive, hon. It was just a movie."

But it wasn't just a movie, it was history. And it changed the course of things in the Thirty-Nine. Was it for the better or worse? The answer depended on who you asked.

Shocked that a dead man had done him in, Dempsey wrote a disclosure book in state prison: *My Fight with the Devil*. It couldn't stay on the bookshelves in the city.

As the story closed, Jerel's Loci notified him that he'd received an urgent message. His message was like Rozita's, from a new source. A secret source, no less. It called itself The Handler. That seemed interesting, so he peeked at his Loci and was stunned at what he read next:

YOUR PRECIOUS ROZITA LEVIN: SHE'S NOT WHO YOU THINK SHE IS, MY FRIEND. YOU HAVE A POTENTIAL R.A.T.S. INFESTATION. ACT NATURAL. DO NOT PANIC.

***

HOW COULD HE ACT NATURAL? An unknown source had told him that his Rozita was a Dissident. The girl he'd planned to join in matrimony within a few months. He'd given her his heart on a silver platter, and now she was stabbing it with a steak knife.

Jerel's Hover Drone hummed and blinked its red distress signal. Rozita saw this and moved closer to him. The HD unit freaked, echoing his sorrow, oozing his mental SOS.

"What's wrong?" she asked caressing his neck with both hands. Her soft and soothing hands should've felt exquisite, but now they were like jagged talons scraping away his skin.

Did this Handler fellow have it right? Was he, or she, or it, talking about his Rozita Levin? The five feet nine, curvaceous bombshell, who had sat next to him watching the documentary, eating popcorn like there was no tomorrow? Rozita?

He had to act natural, but how? It would be the deception of his life—as she had done so dazzlingly to him for so long. She was a traitor, a R.A.T.S., and he wasn't exactly an Oscar actor.
What he wanted to do was rip out her throat and stomp it into his mother's gorgeous purple Russian carpet.

Jerel pulled out the only instrument in his toolbox: he lied. "I'm just thinking," he said in an unsteady tone. "That documentary got me all riled up, you know."

Did that work, or could she see through him like glass? They'd told him the R.A.T.S. were trained in the art of deception and could walk into a room, put on a show and leave everybody mind-fucked without suspecting a thing.

Had Jerel been mind-fucked? Had she cut through his mind like a hot poker through paper? Were they already playing a cruel game of cat and mouse right there on his mom's couch? This woman, sitting next to him caressing his neck, now a stranger thanks to one anonymous message?

Then again, why should he believe a stranger's note? Primarily when it concerned a woman he'd grown to know, to love and care for? He had to test her, but how?

"Is there something you're not telling me, J?" she whispered as she looked at his HD unit blinking relentlessly. "Your drone doesn't lie. Tell me what's the matter, baby."

"It's nothing," he said, more nervous than before. His eyes searched the room for something to concentrate on as a reprieve from Rozita's inquisition. She took his face into her hands and looked into his eyes. He stammered, "If there if there were something, you know I'd tell you."

"It's just that after you got that message… you started acting strangely. Did you get any bad news? You know you can tell me anything." No, he couldn't, not this time. He looked her square in the eye and said what he thought she wanted to hear.

"It's nothing, babe," he squeaked out. Then he searched for something new to watch, but his heart was racing. He waited with dread for the Patriot Patrol Office's confirmation which the Handler had assured him would come soon. But why should he believe someone who didn't even show his face…?

He'd been told they'd apprehend her the moment she opened her door back at her Manhattan apartment.

Where the hell are they with the confirmation? I don't know what I'll do to this woman if they don't confirm this story in the next second.

He couldn't make eye contact with his former love; she was deader to him than Julius Fox was to Arnold Dempsey.

At that point, Rozita sat upright thinking to herself. Her feminine instincts kicked into overdrive as Jerel played with his Loci and looked back at the widescreen projection, trying to play it cool.

He's never that casual, that son of a bitch.
She thought it might be another woman but then dismissed the idea. He’d been fine before he got that Loci message. Maybe he owed money to someone, and the news was a not-so-friendly reminder. Whatever it was, she knew that sometime, perhaps later in the week, he'd come running to her, and she'd have to deal with the mess. Rozita, the problem solver. Rozita, the mother with a walking fetus for a man. She sighed and leaned her head on Jerel's lap.

He didn't move an inch.

His Hover Drone vibrated more strongly now. Jerel couldn't take it any longer. How could she have deceived him so completely? Now she was lying against him like some pillow. Who the fuck did she think she was? He wanted to burst into tears or wrap his giant Russian hands around Rozita's delicate throat and squeeze the rotten life out of her.

***

AS SHE RESTED HER head on him like a trusting puppy, he imagined holding a sharp knife in his hand. He'd look around to make sure nobody was watching. Then he'd somehow make his Hover Drone collapse and place it in a room where it couldn't record. He'd have to do the same for her HD unit as well.

Then, sliding the serrated knife under her jugular, he'd slit her throat with a quick motion, and put the knife back in his pocket. As her life leaked out, he'd call for emergency assistance from his Loci which he figured would exonerate him.

His sweet retribution fantasy was halted by the sound of hearty laughter to his right. His mother, Maria, erupted from her bedroom with Ron Livingston close behind her. Both were laughing for reasons unknown.

"J," said Ron, unable to contain himself, "you gotta see this!" They were watching a Telenovela about the Oregon Trail. It seemed Ron and Maria had gotten a hoot out of watching early American settlers die from gunshot wounds, snake bites, typhoid fever, and dysentery.

"Mother, please," Jerel shouted. "Don't you see I'm trying to have a private conversation with Rozita?"

"Your loss, man," said Ron. "Docs are a snooze fest. Isn't that right, Rosie?" Rozita shrugged and kept focusing on her Loci.

"Ron," said Jerel, "when's the Housing Bureau going to reassign you quarters?" Ron and Jerel had gone to high school together and were lifelong friends. After Ron’s house had burned down,
it had been the most natural thing for Jerel to offer him a bed at his and his mother’s apartment, for as long as he needed. That had been three months ago.

Ron stopped laughing and threw his hands up. "Don't know man," he said and went back into the room. Maria gave Jerel a mean look, as if to say, I thought I’d raised you with better manners than that, Jerel. She followed their house guest and slammed the door behind her.

“You should be nicer to your mother," said Rozita as Jerel played with his Loci bracelet. "What are you doing, Jerel?"

He didn't reply. He was looking at the latest message from The Handler: THEY R COMING TO UR APT. KEEP HER BUSY. "Nothing, babe. What would you like to watch next?"

"Uh," she said, yawning. "I'm tired. I'm gonna head back. Next time tomorrow, okay?"

"But you just got here," he said disappointedly. "Come here. Give me a kiss." Jerel's Loci received another message. GD JB, KEEP HER DISTRACTED. She looked into his eyes with caution.

Why so frisky all of a sudden?

“I really must go," she said and began collecting her things. Jerel stood in her way. Then he looked at his Loci again. When she walked around him, he grabbed her and gave her a robust hug, kissing her neckline, refusing to release her.

Now she was starting to get concerned. Jerel had never been that warm and touchy. Not that she minded his newfound affection, but it was not the Jerel she knew. Something was wrong, and he had better tell her.

"What's going on?" she asked him as she pushed Jerel away. "You're going to tell me right now, J. What has gotten into you?"

“Honey, it's a surprise, okay?" He had the brightest smile he'd donned since they'd been together. And he knew it wouldn’t work. There was no deceiving Rozita, the fantastic human polygraph.

She looked deep into his eyes again, searching for the truth and finding none. Only his lying words came back at her.

Are you insane Jerel Kingwood, or do I have the word DUMBFECK tattooed on my forehead?

“What sort of surprise?" she asked with a tight smile. Then she paused, straining to hear.

There were footsteps, many of them, right outside the apartment door. Voices talking over radios; it was about their apartment number: unit number 1228.

Then another sound, too faint for normal ears to hear: fingers touching the keypad that unlocked the apartment door. She concentrated until she could make out the numbers being tapped. Five. Seven. Seven. Five. The entry code. But the only people who knew that code were in this apartment.
If this was Jerel’s surprise, then he was welcome to it. They had two friends, and one of them was already in the building; who the heck was outside? He was hiding a terrible secret and behind the front door was the grand reveal.

Rozita grabbed Jerel by his left wrist. Surprised by the gesture, he tried to pull his hand away, but she showed incredible strength. He winced at the searing pain, felt her fingers digging into flesh, bending bone...

"Ow!" he shouted. "What’re you…"

Just then a PPO Strike Team, fourteen of them, burst through the door. Rozita gawked at them and then turned to Jerel. Her face had turned red and her eyes catlike. "It doesn't matter," she said, and then hurled him clear across the room. "It's already begun!"

The PPO Strike Team went for her, but she was too fast. Her motion was a blur to them. She ran towards the window and vaulted through the reinforced glass, leaving not a single shard inside the apartment.

***

HIS BETRAYAL WAS COMPLETE and total. Jerel had slept with a monster for over a year and hadn’t a clue. As he staggered to his feet, he felt as if his soul had been smashed as thoroughly as his body by his former fiancée.

Ron came bursting out of the bedroom with Maria in tow, then stopped at the sight of the wrecked living room. Jerel’s mother looked ready to collapse, her face as white as paper.

"My baby," she said running to Jerel. "Who did this to you?" Jerel didn't say a thing. The white wall showed the clear imprint from his body being thrown against it.

Ron looked at the imprint. It was clear that Jerel's head had struck the wall at a downward angle. It reminded him of chalked-out murder scenes he'd seen in noir films.

"What's going on?" Ron asked as he gave Jerel an arm for support. "Are you okay? How did that happen?"

The PPO Strike Team leaders were still leaning out the window and talking to Rozita. She'd fallen several stories and was gripping a balcony rail. Inquisitive tenants poked their heads out of windows to gape at the jumper. The PPO men ordered them back into their apartments.

"Come back up," they shouted over bullhorns, but she didn't reply. She was calculating her next move. It would have to be a good one since there were still plenty of floors between her and the ground.
Ron went to the window to get a peek. "Oh my God," he shouted as an agent escorted him back. "She's hanging on to...I think it's the fifth floor, Jerel."

dusted himself off with Maria's help. "Who the hell cares," he said. "I hope splats all over the pavement." He cradled his head, then looked at his hand: blood.
daubed at his face with alcohol. "Your Rozita did this to you?" she asked in total disbelief.
"Yes, momma," he said flinching as she applied more alcohol. His Hover Drone went wild. It had witnessed the vicious beatdown and had called emergency services which were already heading up in the elevator.
"That can't be," she said, fighting back the tears. "She's such a sweet woman. What did you do to her, my son?"
"What?" asked Ron. And he thought they'd just been fighting. "Your fiancée was a R.A.T.S. the whole time?"
"Yes, Ron. And now she's going to pay for it!"
Ron shook his head. It couldn't be. He would have known it long ago. He would have seen the signs. R.A.T.S. gave out all sorts of symptoms, signs they were told to look out for in grade school. Everyone knew that. Ron walked up to Jerel. "Don't beat yourself over it. They're smart, those R.A.T.S. And she must have been the smartest of the bunch. Smart enough to fool you, trick you into getting engaged..."

Jerel cut him off. "She wasn't my fiancée. Not yet. Not officially anyway. Our relationship status wasn't updated with the Bureau. Okay, so I only dated a R.A.T.S., never had one for a fiancée. That's my story, got it?"
"Got it, J."

The PPO Task Force started moving around again. "She's on the move," said one agent. They repositioned themselves to get a good shot at Rozita with their high amperage Tasers.

Six new agents went onto the balcony to join the fourteen that were already trying to reach her on different floors. She started swinging on the balcony like a monkey. "What's she doing?" asked an agent who leaned over the balcony to get a better view. Just as he looked, there was a loud cry from the spectators below. "Oh my God! No!"
"Did she fall?" asked an agent who couldn't see what happened.
"No," said the first agent, still looking down. "She jumped. The crazy woman jumped!"
"The augment just leaped the rest of the way," said the second agent into his radio.
"This is why we need a Repo Drone Unit in the field, people." He stomped out of the apartment.

A Repo Drone Unit, a specialized Hover Drone made for capturing humans, would indeed have been useful, but they couldn't have bought one because Jerel lived in a restricted zone. The
RDU's were confined to commercial and industrial zones where criminal elements were highest and hardest to catch.

Sirens began to wail throughout the district, meaning there was a R.A.T.S. on the run. Had she just been a Dissident, there’d be no alarms sounding for Dissidents could be caught later sent for The Drowning and brought back into the fold; but all R.A.T.S. must be terminated on sight.

"Is that possible?" asked Ron. He was looking out the window with Jerel. To their astonishment, Rozita had landed on the ground safely.

A crowd of forty PPO officials blocked both sides of the street. Rozita plowed through them as if they were traffic cones. Three went flying through car windows while others went sailing through the air, to land on the pavement with sickening thuds. Their armor might as well have been made from wet cardboard boxes.

Rozita was gone, leaving behind a tangle of moaning men and women.

Suddenly, Jerel received another message from The Handler:

THE R.A.T.S. INFESTATION IS STILL A GROWING PROBLEM IN THE THIRTY-NINE, MY FRIEND. DON'T GET ANGRY, GET EVEN. JOIN THE CAUSE, BECOME A DEMOLISHER. GAIN THE ADVANCED TOOLS NEEDED TO FIGHT THIS RISING MENACE. AND YOU'LL BE HANDSOMELY REWARDED. DEMOLISHER JOURNEYMAN SALARIES START AT 1,000 POINTS A WEEK. YOU'LL BE DOING YOUR COUNTRY A GREAT SERVICE, JEREL.

Ron stood next to him reading the message, then looked at Jerel who stood frozen. He saw a dead, cold look in his best friend's face, one he'd seen only once in their lifetimes. It was when they were in the sixth grade, and Jerel was being bullied by an older boy named Tommy Dangerfield.

Tommy, a tenth grader with an unfixable speech impediment, had run into difficulties with the Child Education Commission, which ran the Thirty-Nine's school system. He'd received his latest infraction for putting his hands, and feet, on many kids half his size. Now he was warned that any new violation would mean The Drowning—a first for an adolescent.

Jerel had refused to let Tommy copy answers from his English and French tests reasoning that their HD units would’ve caught them, which was a shrewd guess. Tommy found a blind spot in the HD units as they crossed their boy’s urinals and repeatedly thrashed Jerel for his lack of cooperation; Jerel spent weeks without talking to anyone.

That was until one day when Jerel walked up to Tommy, said "Hello," and then poked out Tommy's left eye with an ice pick in the same blind spot. Then he disposed of the weapon in a
nearby trash can. Tommy, blinded, in pain and terror, never reported Jerel. To do so would have meant *The Drowning*, which was far worse than getting a simple eye replacement.

That was the kind of guy Ron knew Jerel to be. The type of person who turned cold when he felt he'd been trespassed upon and could be counted on to find some brutally simple way to retaliate. It was one of the reasons he'd remained on Jerel's right side.

He saw that look in his friend's eyes: the look of a man who wanted not only justice but vengeance. It was the opportunity Jerel and Ron been waiting for years. It was now in the palm of their hands.

"Damn," said Ron. "It's enough to move out of here and get my own place."

"Your own place?" said Jerel. "It's enough for a new house, a new car and two months' worth of groceries. But who's this Handler guy?"

"Look at the bottom. It says it in the fine print: Nay Slayer Corp. They're a government contractor, so it must be legit, right? And he knew about her." He pointed at the broken window.

Jerel looked out at his mother's shattered window and sighed. "Let's do it," he said. "Let's get the training, find that augmented Dissident whore, and pay her back."

Jerel grinned at Ron and nodded. Then together they said the word “Apply” and watched their applications go through.

The Handler sent them a message that he was expediting their application; it would only take a moment. The two men waited impatiently as their futures were decided by a faceless and voiceless person they'd met on the dark web.

Their application status came back within five minutes with the word ACCEPTED. They whooped and clapped each other on the back. Momma shook her head, wondering what all the fuss was about. She hadn’t heard when they’d applied.

Jerel showed her the great news over his Loci, and she joined in the festivities, forgetting the mayhem that had taken place in her home. As the extreme wind tossed the curtains about, they hugged each other with glee and cheered their new beginning.

The new Demolisher candidates each received a per diem of 900 Points, and two round-trip tickets to Washington D.C. Jerel transferred half the money to his momma, but Maria would never be wise to their real last stop. The Handler had prohibited them from telling.

That was because Jerel’s and Ron's final destination, their actual training camp where they'd learn to seek out and destroy R.A.T.S., was tucked far away from inquisitive eyes in the wild and frozen wastes of inner Siberia.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SEAN BELA pronounced Sedook-el-Beselaekis in Dexus (which, according to Sean, is a written psychotic anagram language), is a 370-year-old time-traveling Martian. He was hatched in 2599 out of a test-tube only six weeks before the arrival of his generation ship from Dexus Omega. He grew to adult size during the following six weeks and was recruited by the Alliance to liberate Mars from Earth during the first of six wars of Liberation between the two planets.

After the wars of liberation ended, which went poorly for the Martians, he was forced to move to Earth to hide among humans but was quickly revealed to be an extraterrestrial. Sean was conscripted into the Marine Corps as a military counterspy – for the highly-demanded skill sets he picked up while serving as a double agent in the Martian Alliance’s Navy.

He soon became interested in creative writing to express the distresses he witnessed with humans and their Martian cousins in conflict. After receiving an accolade for a writing contest at his alma mater, the University of Connecticut; where he majored in Molecular and Cell Biology, Sean requested to be released from the military. Realizing his request would be denied, and having learned a bit about human history, Sean created a two-part time machine with the help of his three brilliant friends, and they disappeared from the 26th century. He arrived in Roswell, New Mexico on July 1947 and has been traveling throughout the states since his release from the government detainment camp in 1979.

When asked why he writes in the science-fiction, thriller, and fantasy genres he says “Because they are among the most awkward and thought-provoking genres and I just can’t get enough of them… when I turn off my television or put a book down, I still want to live in those worlds I see on the screen or read in ink, for good or for bad. They give me a potential glimpse of my world of origin, Dexus Omega. A world I will never know.”

Sean's interests lie in the economic and political ramifications of scientific and technological advancements because where he lived on Mars, this was all that the locals discussed. “It had run amuck… we had psychometric weapons that were capable of tracking and destroying you based on what it picked up from your thoughts… we had to take desperate measures to survive. Some people had their memories wiped every time they went to sleep, reliving the next day as if yesterday never happened.”

His general focus is on the variant aspects of futuristic probabilities, and potential outcomes where technology begins to run out of the control of its maker; an allegory for the relationship between a creator and mankind; a concept which he says is new to him. “On my world, I learned, we never had a concept of a creator. We ‘Dexusians’ are taught that the universe had always existed, all on its own."
His inspiration comes from the works of Frank Herbert, Ray Bradbury, and Isaac Asimov – who he claims were the travelers who built and accompanied him on his trip from the future. Although they have all passed, he says that they will remain dear to his heart for inspiring him to become a fiction writer. "I can never fill their shoes... they were great pillars of sci-fi fantasy... I only wish to walk in them someday."

Vivid images also inspire Sean, who struggles with a form of bipolar disorder he picked up from his long exposure to humans and human concepts. These images further fuel his curiosity and desire to express himself on paper. Sean Bela now lives in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, New York where he awaits the second time ship’s arrival for his planned return trip to 2599. "My arrival here is a paradox in and of itself, so I must return eventually. I will miss this place dearly when that inevitable day comes."

For more content, visit www.seanbela.net
Twitter: @SeanBelaAuthor
Facebook: Sean Bela – Author

**OTHER WORKS BY SEAN BELA**

**Gunfire Samurai (The Mikasa Yamakazi Chronicles Book 1)**
Dec 2, 2016
by Sean Bela

Kindle Edition

$0.00
Subscribers read for free.
$0.99 to buy
Get it TODAY, Jul 8

**Paperback**


In Stock

2.8 out of 5 stars

![Gunfire Samurai (The Mikasa Yamakazi Chronickes Book 2)](image)

**Gunfire Samurai (The Mikasa Yamakazi Chronickes Book 2)**

Sep 7, 2018

by Sean Bela

**Kindle Edition**

$0.00

Subscribers read for free.

$2.99 $2.99 to buy

Available for Pre-order. This item will be released on September 7, 2018.

![The Nay Slayer](image)
The Nay Slayer: A Hypnotic Suspense Thriller (The Swinger-Mercy Conspiracy Book 2)
Jun 30, 2018
by Sean Bela

Kindle Edition

$0.00
Subscribers read for free.
$3.99 to buy
Get it TODAY, Jul 8

Agents of Fire: Origin (The Omni Defense Agency Book 1)
Oct 2, 2018
by Sean Bela

Kindle Edition

$0.00
Subscribers read for free.
$0.99 to buy
Available for Pre-order. This item will be released on October 2, 2018.
A Requiem Annual: A dark fantasy you won't be able to put down
Sep 29, 2018
by Sean Bela

Kindle Edition

$0.00
Subscribers read for free.

Available for Pre-order. This item will be released on September 29, 2018.

Angel of Blood: A Novella
Sep 22, 2018
by Sean Bela

Kindle Edition

$0.00
Subscribers read for free.
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locations, and incidents are either the productions of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

DOOMSDAY IS ON WEDNESDAY

Copyright © 2018 by Sean Bela