

Trickle Down

by Daniel Arthur

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Chapter 1

I was numb yet alert – at least my eyes were alert. It seemed I could see everything that was going by, but I couldn't quite process the sounds and other sensations quickly enough. I was laying there mostly helpless strapped to a gurney as I was moved quickly from the ambulance to some sterile room ahead and around some corner I couldn't keep track of. The movements were mainly gentle with the occasional momentary jostling of my moving bed. I was fairly calm, yet I wanted to leap up and get away. The EMTs were kind and concerned saying reassuring things occasionally as we neared my temporary destination.

“Here you are, sir,” the younger EMT said as the small group wheeled me into my

semi-private room. They fairly gently transferred me to the emergency room bed. “I hope you're feeling well soon,” he said as they walked out and a nurse walked in. I could only smile and nod a bit as the conversation seemed a bit quick for me.

The nurse moved around the room to initiate some equipment and told me she was going to stick on some heart monitoring pads. I was wondering what this all meant. I have not been on this side of the hospital bed in sometime. Last time I crawled out as soon as I could. It seemed I was a bit more docile on this occasion. I probably murmured and nodded in acknowledgment.

She took my blood pressure, checked my pulse and temperature, and the doctor stepped in to check that I was somewhat normal. After the brief exam the nurse brought in a gown. “Are you okay to stand and put this gown on,” she asked.

“I think so,” I responded quietly. “I feel fine.”

“Good,” she said with pleasant professionalism, “I’ll be back in a few minutes, and we’ll take you for a CT scan.”

I fairly feebly replied, “OK,” and set out to change into the infamous, immodest, one-piece and light-weight hospital gown. I was irrationally determined to make it wear with an appearance of modesty. It took me a few brief minutes to carefully fold my clothes as I put it on and laid back down. I looked around and watched the Spanish-language broadcast on a slightly out-of-date TV. The hostesses were dressed to the T, and were talking to children about something I couldn't make out. They all nodded and smiled a good deal. I noticed a nice painting on the wall, and spent some time exploring that with my eyes. I continued to feel better, less dazed.

It wasn't much longer before two young people came in and wheeled me a short distance into another room to get the CT scan. They had me close my eyes I think and were done taking shots of my head

before I knew it. I was wheeled back to my room with the same TV show and painting to entertain me as I was again lying there waiting.

Of course I was wondering why I was here, and what was to become of all of this. I thought of my family and what they must be going through. Amidst these thoughts and the nurse adjusting my heart monitor the doctor arrived.

“Hello, Mr. Jonsen,” she said with a sense of mature fondness, “everything is looking okay right now. However, I would like you to stay for observation and so that we can run some tests to see why this happened to someone as young and healthy as you.”

She went on to explain a bit about what they thought had happened, and to ensure me that she would make sure I knew that she would get to the bottom of what happened. They were going to move me to the critical care unit, and have me stay for the night. I liked her concern and commitment, and I tried to communicate

my appreciation. I was mostly confused and bewildered. I told her that I felt good.

I spent a less than restful night with many more tests including MRIs, several forms of ultrasounds and many blood tests while being visited by several nurses and doctors. I went away leaving the medical community with a good deal of data, but not a certain solution. I decided to take a vacation to get away from it all. Stress had caused this calamity.

I woke up the next morning more exhausted from an evening and night of mostly blood draws. I can't say I felt worse overall, but I was definitely tiring of blood draws and heart monitoring pads. My left arm was mottled with puncture bruises, and my chest had circular pink marks with little red dots from those dreaded heart monitoring pads. I won't let them rip them off any more. I find it is much less painful to carefully and gently peel them off. Now they plan on more tests. I feel better and ready to go, but I am worried about more punctures and sticky pads. I wish there

was a better way to test blood and monitor heart function. I understand how important the data is to my medical team, but it seems more innovation is needed.

“Are you Mr. Jonsen?” inquired another orderly with a clipboard.

“Yes, that should be me,” I replied while getting up and disconnecting the heart monitor cables almost like a pro, and moving to the transport gurney for the long ride to the MRI facility. If I was into raves, I would look forward to the forthcoming concert as the images were taken. I guess I could tolerate the electronic sounds with changing pitch and rhythm for the data.

I was discharged late in the morning. I was really looking forward to vacation, but I needed a bit more data mining of my own body before heading out. The doctors said to go back to work. They don't understand the stress of working at my job. Well, at least I had a weekend to get rested.

I couldn't drive myself home, so I hopped a cab. I went straight to my studio apartment uptown and took a shower. I don't know why I wasn't able to take a shower at the hospital. I felt somewhat refreshed afterward, but I had to tend to my wounds. All patched up, I was ready to go.

I headed to my favorite restaurant, which happened to be only a few blocks away, so I walked on this beautiful sunny day. We haven't had too many days that you could really call sunny in Everett. I stopped a little longer at one street crossing to look out at the Navy ships in the protected harbor. I have always been fascinated by military technology, and these new Navy ships were all of that.

I was looking forward to a little grilled salmon, vegetable bean soup and a salad with a special Italian dressing at Tavali's. I noticed a small group of well dressed people standing and talking outside as I was walking near a vacant building's doorway when someone grabbed me by

the arm and shoved me in.

“Hello, Mr. Jonsen,” my attacker announced quietly as she and what seemed like three others wrestled me to the ground in the abandoned building's entryway. I offered some resistance, but I was too shocked and overwhelmed to do much at the moment. I was just glad I hadn't been injured or worse thus far.

“We don't mean to harm you,” I must have rolled my eyes as she said that, “but we will need to take you to our place for some questioning. It's in the interest of homeland security,” she finished as she showed me a badge that looked official, but how was I to know whether this was legit or not?

I offered less resistance and more or less started cooperating with my captors as they started to half drag and half allow me to walk toward the back of the building. “Is this really necessary?” I asked, “and where are we going?”

“It's about your excessive watching of the Naval yard, Mr. Jonsen. We've had a

credible threat, and you may just fit our profile,” answered the taller apparently Caucasian middle-aged male in a mid-western or Chicago accent. “Just move along and we will answer your questions shortly.”

I mused about how I had been off-guard and walked into some kind of trap. It didn't add up that I was picked up this way. There was something not right about these guys. They looked the part of federal agents, but I was pretty sure feds don't need to kidnap an average guy like myself. I was glad I had been able to activate my tablet's digital voice recording function. I had had much practice in quickly enabling it from my constant desire to transcribe thoughts, notes and interviews for my writing. It would probably record for a few hours, which could leave a breadcrumb for someone to follow. My arm was aching and I needed some air.

My escort service steered me down some stairs into a basement, which was still lit by the late summer sun to our west. They

took me through a large empty meeting area to the back door. Jane, or the one who's badge said "Jane Holland", went out while we stood and waited. I heard a double squelch from one of their hidden radios, and our group went out and into an open door of a large black SUV with dark tinted windows.

Yes, the music in my head started a variation of some horror theme music. Alfred must have been directing it. I was not liking this one bit. I was kind of shoved down and stuck between two of the bigger men with another in front with "Jane" and another in the seat behind that but with some kind of hat on my head partially covering my eyes.

"Stay down and don't try to look around," Chicago ordered firmly as the SUV shot off down the alley.

I guess I had a brief gulp of air. I was inwardly fairly mortified, but outwardly showed signs of being calm. I don't usually panic in emergency situation. I kept thinking of options and looking for

openings. None came.

Chapter 2

We drove for miles and miles. I wasn't allowed to move much and became pretty stiff and uncomfortable as a result. My best guess was that we had driven south on I-5, no amber alert for me, around the southernmost part of Puget Sound, and then we drove a good deal of the way back north on US 101 toward Port Angeles. Where had we stopped now? A while ago we took a quick break at what was likely about halfway to switch vehicles and use the restroom, and now where ever we were could be on the Olympic Peninsula close by Hood Canal and the Olympic National Forest, I was guessing. Gorgeous place. I wish I could be enjoying it.

My captors had mostly left the SUV. I had Chicago still holding me down. I was getting restless. The sun was very low by now and some street lights were turning on. That was about all Chicago was

allowing me to notice. I could smell some sea air. That must be Hood Canal or as I thought of it part of the Salish Sea. I could picture the water sparkling in the post sunset evening light – twilight.

“Come on, Sparky,” called Jane as she approached the SUV, “we're ready for him.”

With that Sparky Chicago quit leaning on me and wordlessly pushed me toward the passenger door on the driver's side. I started looking for an opening. I had no restraints, and I was getting outside.

“Don't think about doing anything foolish,” Sparky warned in his Chicago accent, “you don't want to get hurt.” I knew he just wanted his job to be easy.

I relaxed a little again and just took everything in. We were in a paved parking lot at a fairly ordinary looking building. It was getting pretty dark, but I could still see pretty well as it was clear as a bell out. The water was to my back and I could hear traffic and seagulls from that

direction, which must be east I thought. How many times had I driven by without noticing much on this the west side of the highway, except the foothills of the Olympics. There was a giant darkness beyond the building, which must be such foothills.

Just then, after I had taken a few steps toward Jane, some shouting and a commotion started up from our right or the passenger side of the lighter color than before SUV. “Officers help us!” shouted a few men or women, I couldn't quite make them out as they approached the parking lot. They were addressing Jane and Sparky Chicago, “Help us my husband's going to kill us all!” shouted one woman out of a group of three or four. “He's got a gun! Help us officers!” or something like that was said in panic.

Jane tried to put up her arms and wave them off as they swarmed around the SUV to my side. I jumped into action to let the frightened intruders know that these people could help them. More and more people started to come around;

unfortunately for me that included more of Jane's people. A police car approached the parking lot and entered from the main road like we had done earlier. Jane's people gave each other a quick nervous glance. This was getting good for me.

Sparky made eye contact with me and started making his way around the SUV as Jane was steeling herself to deal with the sheriff's deputy. I started edging my way back in the opposite direction as Sparky, saw him stop to shrug off a question from one of the fearful people, and that's when I scurried off in the direction of the alleged gunman yelling back toward the growing chaotic crowd, "I got it."

OK, I didn't have much time to think up a plan. I got it was what came to mind to act like a cop. In the light of the sparse street lights I figured I would look enough like my captors. My plan was to run toward the alleged gunman, and then detour out of there. After all, I had not seen any sign of him thus far. I ran as best I could fueled more by adrenalin than actual energy as I was famished. I could

almost taste the grilled salmon I had planned on having at Tavali's. I did notice that I was a bit weaker than usual from my health issues, but I managed to get out of the parking lot and turned past the first house being careful not to stumble on anything on the ground. It was getting pretty dark with some twilight left, but just some. This place was surrounded by bushes and trees.

I decided to cross the road between two parked cars, and looked back to make sure I wasn't being followed. Bam! I went down pretty hard after I rebounded off of something or someone.

“What the heck,” the dark figure looming over me exclaimed fairly mildly, “are you OK buddy?” he added with sincere concern.

“I think so,” I murmured. I noticed I wasn't badly hurt, just a little stunned.

“Where are you head'in in such a hurry?” the rather large man asked with no malice.

“I've got to get out of here. Have you seen a guy with a gun around here?”

“You mean this one?” he asked as he showed me, not pointed at me, a beautiful pearl handled six shooter. It looked small in his hands. “I guess I might be that guy. My wife was pissed that I bought this gun from my buddy, and just freaked out. She ran off with her friends yelling I was gonna kill 'em.”

“Are you OK?” I asked him tentatively, hoping not to provoke a change of attitude.

“I guess so, but I don't know what I'm going to do.”

“Well, let's get moving before the police or someone else finds us here,” I suggested.

“All right,” he answered, “let's head over to Ed's place.” And we started walking hard away from the parking lot, which seemed fine for the moment. It was more of the same trying not to stumble in the dark, but we made good time and we

didn't see anyone along the way. I kept a half step behind my hulking partner, and he didn't seem to really care if I was there or not. We turned down a short driveway, and walked up to the back of an older home. The back porch light was on, and we headed in. There was a light bark instantly.

“It's me, Maddy,” Hulk said without concern as he opened the door to the house proper. “Ed,” he called, “are you in here?”

Hulk kept walking through the kitchen into the living room in the front of the house and said, “I guess I better return your pistol. Jan thought I was gonna kill someone with it.”

“She sure has been paranoid ever since she was robbed at that bank in Tacoma,” observed Ed as he entered the room. He was fairly tall and thin with a full graying blonde beard and receding hairline. “Did you call her doctor, Will?”

“No,” responded Will the Hulk, “I just

came straight over here. She went running off with her sisters and friend causing a racket in the neighborhood. Here's the pistol," he said as he offered the beautiful chrome and pearl-handled antique to Ed. "By the way, this is . . ."

"Darren," I finished as I offered my hand to Ed. I had been thinking for some time how I should play my cards once I was noticed. I had let Will believe I knew nothing of his issues in his confusion, and things had not escalated such that I kept going along. I decided early on not to try to explain how I had gotten here, at least not the real way. That would make people uncertain about me. Now that I knew Will was no criminal it was more important to be believable.

"What brings you here, Darren?" asked Ed.

"I saw some women screaming as I was headed to the store, and then I bumped into Will trying to cross the street. I've just been tagging along on my way to the store," I responded coolly.

“I think I'll stay here, Ed, so Jan can settle down and I can get some rest,” Will added,” do you mind checking with the sheriff's office to make sure there's no problem? There aren't any bullets in the gun.”

“OK, I'll give Deanna a call,” Ed responded as he started fiddling with his smart phone, “you need anything, Darren?”

I responded quickly as I headed for the door, “no, I'll head on to the store. Hope things clear up for you guys.”

“Wait a minute,” Ed called to me, “I need to get a few things. I'll give you a ride. Oh, not you, Deanna, you know I like you, but I was calling about Will's wife . . . Did you let Deputy Collins know? . . . uh, huh . . . You told them Will's no threat . . . He's with me now . . . No . . . OK, I'll tell him. Make sure Jan see's her doctor. Will's going to stay here until she gets a handle . . . I'll call you later, Deanna . . . OK, I won't forget.”

“What'd she say, Ed?” Will asked anxiously.

“Don't worry, she's on it. They aren't hunting for you or anything. I'll take Darren over to the store; you grab the pillow and blanket in the closet and I'll be right back.”

With that I followed Ed back through the kitchen and out the back door where we got into his car. He turned it on and backed out, and headed down the alley drive away from where Will and I had just been. It was a nice new Chevy Impala with a premium package. Ed was doing all right, which you wouldn't necessarily know from his humble home.

We pulled up close to the small town's main grocery store. It was of modest size compared to today's mega stores in the urban areas, and it was fairly new with a few people going in and out the automatic doors. It wasn't very busy as we had moved beyond twilight. It was probably getting towards closing time. Ed parked to

one side under, in some shadows.

“Well,” Ed started as he shut down the Impala and put it into park, “I want to know how I might be able to help you, Darren, if that is your name. Let me finish,” he said quickly putting up a finger to reserve his turn in our communication, “I used to work in and around law enforcement in this area and for the feds, and I was listening to my scanner before the two of you stumbled into my home, pretty much out of breath. You must be the one our deputy called in as running into the cauldron.”

Caught. Or, at least not quite on my own, yet I didn't really have a place to go. It was going to be cool this evening, but as dry as it is I would be OK for a night of roughing it. There weren't too many options in this little town stuck between the Olympic Mountains and Hood Canal. There was one main road squished along the coast – U.S. Highway 101. I could run, but I didn't really relish the option.

“I'm just lost, Ed,” I said looking around

slowly, “I need to get home, but I'm afraid to go home. I need to see a doctor soon.” I held up my arms so Ed could see the bandages and bruises, which were visible even in the dim light against my light complexion. “I really don't know how I ended up here – where ever here is.”

“You're in Hoodsport, Darren,” he interrupted, “a small town along Hood Canal.”

“OK,” I responded, “I've been through here many times, just haven't stopped, though I always wanted to. Now I just want to leave.”

“I tell you what, I'm going to go in the store and get a few things. You can leave if you want to. I think you are harmless and in need, but it's your choice. No security cameras are focused on this area, and it's too dark to do them much good anyway. If you stay down, no one will notice you as my windows are tinted pretty dark. If you stay, I think I have a place you can stay until early morning.”

And with that Ed got out and went ordinarily into the store.

I wanted to jump out and leave, just so that I was alone with the only person I knew and trusted right now – me. But, it would be beneficial to get some help as I wasn't really feeling too strong from my hospitalization, kidnapping and all this adrenaline rushing excitement. I sat fairly low in my seat gazing around the parking lot and looking at the fairly light traffic on the highway. I did see a somewhat dark SUV drive by heading south followed a short ways behind by a sheriff's car. That made my body tense up uncontrollably. They did seem to be driving a little more slowly than most traffic, but they kept on going much to my relief.

After that I felt much safer where I was. However, I didn't know if there was someone else out there looking for me. There were some other cars and people back at that parking lot and building. Maybe they were uninvolved, maybe not. I decided that I should try to stick with

the people I knew weren't involved in my kidnapping, and Ed was one of those.

Chapter 3

Ed got back in the Impala after putting some bags in the back seat. “You're still here,” he said without much surprise in his voice.

“Yeah,” I answered without much enthusiasm, “I guess I'm wondering what you can offer a down-on-his-luck lad like myself. So, I stayed to put off sleeping in the woods for now.”

I had been observing Ed's body language the best I could. He looked ponderous, but not like he was sure of himself. He knew I was in trouble in his small sport fishing and retirement town. “Let's go, then,” he stated as he started the car and put it in gear. We were heading north fairly quickly after that. “I have a few supplies to drop off, and I would like to introduce you to some good people I know.” I could only sit there as we

started out of town on the notoriously windy road. “I texted that I would be there soon. They always have a spare room ready for unexpected guests. They've had it that way since their son didn't return from Kuwait.”

I rode along in silence wincing at the passing of an occasional car going the other way. Ed had the pace of a local on a familiar roadway, and no one came up from behind. I was still worried about that and being out on this lonely road. We passed many darkened groves of trees, had many views of the Hood Canal bathed in moonlight as it rose. The water was beautiful and eased my nerves a bit. Ed and I didn't have much to say. I was tired and famished. He did ask about that once, and murmured something to himself I didn't catch. I hoped it was about food being ready when we got there. He did seem to be in a hurry, so maybe getting up the road was something he thought was best to get done the sooner the better.

We passed several towns and small groups

of homes that were ever so small. There weren't too many lights, and not many cars. It was a quiet place, and the curves were many though Ed took them expertly and without causing much discomfort from the motion. I was starting to tire when he seemed to start to be more alert.

“We're just about there, Darren,” Ed spoke clearly and with a sense of urgency, “please keep your eyes alert to anything suspicious like I am. I don't want us to get comfortable and then get surprised by unwanted company.” He had slowed because we were in a town that I found to be Brinnon. We passed some small businesses, a post office and a rather large fire hall before arriving at a modest size home. Ed pulled into a driveway and cut the engine.

“Just come in with me and be straightforward, Darren. The Gates' are some of my favorite people along the Canal. They will help you if anyone will.”

“Sure, Ed,” I responded with bit of optimism creeping into my voice. We got

out of the car and headed up the sidewalk from the gravel driveway. The porch light was on, which showed the light brown siding near the entryway. It could be cedar siding, but I wasn't certain. Ed knocked and we waited a few moments for the door to come alive. Ed and I gave each other a quick look, and then we both looked around the neighborhood for anything out of the ordinary seeing nothing.

The door opened casually. "Hello, Ed, come on in," was the greeting by a tall elderly fellow with thinning blonde hair.

"Thanks, Will," Ed responded with familiarity and warmth, "this is Darren, the young fellow I was telling you about." We followed Will through the entry foyer into the living room. He didn't bother looking back as he lead us, obviously comfortable with Ed and his judgment.

"Hello there, Darren. Make yourself at home. Martha," he half shouted as he looked down a hallway, "Ed and his

friend are here.”

“Be right out,” responded a pleasant voice from somewhere in the slightly sprawling ranch-style home, “can you see if they would like anything?”

“Well, you heard the boss, what can I get for you?”

“I have some things here from the deli, and a few beers,” answered Ed as he showed Will the bags we were carrying. “Maybe we could set everything out on the kitchen table.” And, he started into the kitchen with me trailing him.

“Sure,” Will said with a sense of cooperation.

“I'm famished,” I chimed in, “can I use your restroom to wash up?” I had spotted one on the way into the kitchen.

“Oh, yeah, Darren, everything you might need should be in there,” Will answered helpfully and I put down the bag and headed off.

“I'm next,” Ed said, “hurry yourself up.”

“Sure,” I said as I went in and shut the door. I knew that would give Ed and Will a few moments to catch up, and I really needed to use the restroom and clean up. I don't know why, but I can go a good length of time without using the facilities, if necessary. Probably not if I am given a good deal of water to drink, but I wasn't offered anything until now. I was starting to get angry at my captors as well as thirsty and hungry. I have a delayed response to my needs being met. I believe that helps me to be more effective in emergencies or dire circumstances.

Using the restroom did take longer than I liked. It was clean – almost spotless, which saved me some time. However, I was somewhat dehydrated. Washing up wasn't too bad. In that time I thought of some reasons why I was in this mess. I think it has something to do with greed related to drugs and statecraft, but not American statecraft. These hoods were good and way over-confident. They

thought no one would be able to stop them.

“So what's there to eat,” I said as I re-entered the kitchen, “oh, hello, Martha,” I greeted her with my most sincere sense of gratitude.

“Well, that depends, Darren,” she said with a desire to comfort, “here's a bottle of water to start on. Are you vegan or vegetarian or something else?” she asked.

“No, not really, I do want to eat as heart healthy as possible though.”

“You're in the right place, then,” Martha observed with a note of excitement, “Ed has been helping us convert our diet for years, and I can't imagine he would include much that wasn't heart healthy in his acquisitions – aside from a beer.”

I chose a bottle of water, two really, several berries and other fruits, made a salad and had some smoked salmon. It was all delicious and eaten in silence. In fact, I really didn't notice anything

including Ed's return until I was quite satisfied. That's when I sat back from the kitchen table and looked around – all eyes on me. I knew then it was time to tell my story, no matter how implausible it might sound. This was a home crowd. They were on my side. But, of course they were striving for some clarity.

“... and I ended up in your beautiful kitchen,” I concluded my story, “with little understanding of why I was snatched away. I do write a few political blogs about how to bring about positive reforms, and I am a pretty liberal leaning person. I have some inventions that I haven't pushed out that would help to increase the amount of clean renewable energy, which would reduce significantly our demand on fossil fuels. But, these people didn't really say anything about anything but Homeland Security.”

Martha, Will and Ed just continued to eat and drink for a few moments as they looked at me, each other and considered the decor. I finished drinking some more water and downed a few more berries and

nuts as I tried to read their faces.

“You know, Ed,” spoke Martha with words unsaid, “this reminds me of how they operated during Iran-Contra.”

“Hmmm . . . ,” murmured Ed not in a hurry to pass judgment.

“Well, Mona should be here soon,” observed Will, “and she will let us know what the landscape is like.”

“Who's Mona?” I asked out of curiosity and to avoid the subject at hand.

“My granddaughter,” said Will with a hint of pride and protection.

And as if on cue we heard a few short bursts of engine revving soon followed by a car door shutting. “She's here now,” Will stated the obvious shortly followed by the front door opening with a beautiful woman smartly dressed in a light blouse and slacks coming through the door to be greeted by Martha and Will with hugs and offerings of how are you and doing

well.

“Mona, I'd like you to meet our mystery man, Darren,” Martha said gesturing toward me. I nodded gently and lost my tongue. “Come in and have something. Are you hungry? Thirsty? What's your pleasure, dear?”

“Thanks, Momma, I think I'll have some water for now,” Mona answered easily as we all resumed similar seats with our one addition choosing to sit between Will and Martha. We all broke into a common silence as Mona settled in and drank some water. There was an edge to the silence. For me there was the unknown, which I assumed would be the same for the others. Ed looked a little tired. Martha and Will looked curious, proud and concerned as they tried not to rush her.

I started anticipating hearing her voice again. What little I heard was rich and sultry without being forced, just natural. She looked everything you would expect in a Nordic woman with an angular face and blonde hair and a little taller than

average, taller than me with a nice figure. She wasn't showing it off, and she seemed more than comfortable with herself. She relished her position between her two grandparents – their love flickering around her and energizing a seeming aura around her shiny flowing medium cut hair. Ed was getting a little anxious, but gave me a wink.

Mona rose suddenly, but gently leaning on Will, she looked at me as she began to pace a bit around the large kitchen. I looked at her. She said, “we would have turned you over to the authorities, if you were in any part an outlaw, Mr. Jonsen. But, we know that these officials have not named you as a suspect or a fugitive. They have only asked for help to find a missing person matching your description, and that only off the record with our local deputies. We want to help you, Mr. Jonsen. What do you want?”

I paused to consider just that. Aside from a shower and a bed, I hadn't thought too far ahead of my just eaten meal. “We will let you clean up and sleep shortly,

Darren,” she offered with that beautiful, sultry voice anticipating my condition, “I just need to know what you choose.”

I looked at my audience briefly and then answered, “I'm not too sure what I want, Mona, I believe those people are dangerous. I don't want to be captured by them again. It's hard for me to grasp that this is happening to me in the US. I'm afraid to go home, but that's where I should be.”

“So, would you like our help to get somewhere safe for now?” she asked with a powerful sense of sincerity and strength.

“I would certainly appreciate any help you could offer as I am thankful for the kindness of Ed and your parents,” I said with a note of tiredness creeping beyond my will into my voice. Somehow I didn't want to sound so vulnerable to Mona.

“Well, then, I shall communicate with the local community watch members, and formulate a plan to whisk you off in secret. It doesn't seem like we could do

that very well on the highway as there aren't many options around here as you know. Most likely you will need to travel by boat. Do you have any travel restrictions I should know about? Do you get sea sick easily or are you afraid to fly?"

"I don't think so," I said thoughtfully, "my doctors have mentioned I shouldn't be scuba diving and they are a bit concerned about me flying in a pressurized cabin."

"Okay, then, Darren," she said as she approached, "don't worry too much and get some rest. My wonderful grandparents will let you use my room tonight, and we'll get you going at daybreak."

"Are you sure you should be risking crossing these dangerous people for me?" I asked sincerely as I looked into her gorgeous blue eyes.

"Don't worry like I said, Darren. Sad to say we've done this before for many a battered spouse. We have our own underground railroad with some very

experienced and trustworthy people. Just be ready to put on some makeup before we leave. I'll be back just in time," she finished with one last look with what I would swear was some kind of interest and turned away. "I'm off Momma," she gave her a hug, "Poppa," she gave a warm half-hug, "Ed," she nodded warmly to, "I'll text you in a bit and will be back by 6 AM. Love you all." And with that she moved quickly out the room and door with the car seeming to start before she could have possibly gotten in, but I guess that's not much of a trick these days.

"Okay, Darren," Ed said as he stood to go, "get cleaned up and sleep the best you can. Is there anything you need before I go?"

"I am supposed to take a baby aspirin," I remembered.

"Oh, we have some of those," Martha stated with that wonderful way a generous person seems to do, "I'll get you one and a bottle of water, also some anti-bacterial ointment and fresh bandages for

your arms.”

“Come with me, Darren,” Will said as he stood, “I’ll get you a towel and show you your room.” I got up to follow as Martha handed me a bottle of water, a small plastic bottle of 81 mg aspirin, and a first-aid kit. “Sleep well,” she suggested warmly, “I’ll get you up in time to get ready.”

“Thank you, Martha, that sounds wonderful. I hope I can return the favor someday.”

“I’m sure you will. It’s not your fault that you’re in this situation, and we are just glad to be able to help,” she reassured me.

“Well, good night. And, Ed, thank you so much for taking a risk and bringing me this far,” I told him sincerely.

“It’s my pleasure, Darren. I hope we can meet again under less mysterious circumstances. I better get going. I’ll keep monitoring things just in case until you’re in the clear.”

“I appreciate it. Do you think big Will will be okay?”

“My grandnephew will be just fine,” Will interceded, “I heard everything is fine now. Jan was just fine after talking to some deputies. Junior thought she would be comforted by the pistol, but you know the rest. Let's get some rest everyone; there's a small bathroom with a shower connected to Mona's room. Get cleaned up and get some rest. Feel free to get something to drink or eat if you need to. See you in the morning,” he finished as he headed toward his room.

“Careful driving,” Martha said as she held the door for Ed. “Holler if you need anything. Sleep well.”

“You, too,” I said as I went into Mona's room. It wasn't too girly. In fact, it was pretty much like any adults room with a few things that were obviously hers. I let down the covers a bit, checked the window to be sure it was cracked a little, and went in to a small bathroom. It felt

fantastic to wash away the grit and tension of the day in the hot streaming water. I was starting to believe that my writing was causing me some trouble. I know I am somewhat controversial. Many people don't appreciate that I advocate for creating a less criminalized drug approach that would generate a good deal of revenue for government health and police services.

Then again, there are an equal number of people that are passionately against my call to create a value-cost tax for all those activities and products that create health problems. I want to start charging all companies a tax for selling foods that are unhealthy including many fast and prepared foods, foods high in saturated fats, low in fiber and nutrients, car and truck manufacturers, tobacco companies, drug companies, the entertainment industry including TV, games and feature length movie producers, the oil industry, polluters, marketers and many more. These taxes will be used to fund basic universal health care for everyone. To avoid the tax a company will need to

change its behavior to create healthy products. Some will and some won't. But, the healthier people won't need to shoulder the costs for the avoidable health costs. Everyone will need to pay a reasonable monthly premium deducted from their paycheck based on their ability to pay, and there will be low deductibles for most employed people from this privatized insurance. These taxes can all be calculated and adjusted fairly, but not many will want to pay their fare share.

Of course there are many other industrial groups that could have it in for me including organized crime. Criminals don't need to be criminals in the vast majority of cases. Maybe we should tax jurisdictions that create criminal activity instead of creating more skill and higher education graduation outcomes. I wish I was back at my studio, so that I could write some more articles. It was a good thing I don't need to be working since my articles and books are selling right now. However, I enjoy the work and feel the need to get back at it. I can always activate my portable office. It's just that I

cannot be painting and creating clay works of art very well on the lamb.

Itoweled off and changed into my skivvies and a robe, folded my clothes, put them on the chair next to the bed, and tucked myself in. I must have dozed right way as I don't remember any thoughts before awakening the next morning.

Chapter Four

I woke up more determined than ever to write about the ills of the world and to encourage positive change. My dreams were many, but I couldn't remember many details. I did wake up briefly with a start as I had run off a cliff – the sense of falling created a startled reaction. I sure hoped that wasn't a premonition for what was going to happen today. It wasn't yet light out, so I chose to lie about in bed continuing to recover from the traumatic past few days to be at my best possible strength for the day ahead.

I realized that I wouldn't be going home to my condo anytime soon. It was probably being watched and would be for some time. How would I get my essentials? Who would feed and look after Sassi and Flash? It's possible that anyone visiting my place would be followed and questioned.

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Janell Marie Holland was thinking about the day to come. She was lying in her Brinnon motel room in her underclothes, comfortable but lonely. She had expected to be back in Bellevue last night with her children. She sure hoped her mother could manage her daughter's affairs while she was gone. Her mother wasn't too reliable, and tended to go to her room early with a bit too much wine.

Why did that crazy woman have to happen on to their meet? "Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn," she thought in wasted anguish. She was thinking that Pedro was gonna be pissed if she didn't get this guy back. He couldn't be far, but she

certainly didn't know what the hell Pedro wanted him for either. He didn't seem to be anyone of any real importance.

Why the hell was she in this situation? Why did Charles die? How did they find her weakness so easy? She didn't get it, and she couldn't go back. She was a made woman, and had to follow orders. Pedro was arrogant and she couldn't identify him. This was about the fourth detention she had participated in; she didn't want to call it kidnapping. They had let the others go after a fright, but they had not harmed them. She knows at least three of them had been killed in an accident within a month. That's what made her unable to sleep at night.

“Good morning, Darren,” Martha greeted me as she looked in Mona's room, “I've got some oatmeal and juice waiting in the kitchen. Mona's on her way; she would like you ready to head out.”

“Okay, Martha, give me a minute or two

and I'll be out there," I replied as I popped out of bed as she had closed the door. I kept working on keeping myself calm as I needed my wits about me. I was breathing deeply as I gathered my few things together and dressed in some regular clothes Martha had supplied. It was cool but almost warm this morning. It would be a nice day at sea at least.

I checked my tablet; it was working, but the power was too low to get any apps loaded. I would need a power supply to listen to the sound file I had secretly recorded. I needed to find out who Jane is. That's the key to turning this situation around, but I was far from having the where with all to investigate. I needed to find a safe haven. I headed out the door.

"How'd you sleep?" asked Will as I entered the kitchen.

"Better than I could imagine," I answered quickly.

"I made some coffee, Darren, do you need any?" Martha inquired sensing I would

not.

“No, thank you, Martha, but it does smell wonderful. I do like the smell of coffee,” I observed as I sat down and started spooning some steaming oatmeal into a bowl. It didn't take me long to be eating and drinking in earnest.

“We have a few minutes before Mona arrives. She wants you to be at the door ready. I'm afraid you won't have time to brush your teeth and all. She isn't sharing any details with us as usual; it's for our protection,” Martha informed me with a gentle, yet serious tone.

“I'm ready to go, though I will miss being treated so royally by the two of you,” I said sincerely. “I will hope to visit you again when it is safe to do so.”

“We'll be happy to have you, Darren,” said Will, “just stay safe. I'm sure Mona will let you know how to reconnect when this mess gets sorted out.”

I ate in silence, quickly downing a bowl

of oatmeal garnished with a little milk, honey and a small box of organic raisins. I read the labels. That's what I do at breakfast. I remember getting a box of cereal before I could really read, and I just had to have the battleship model you would get by sending in the order label with so many box tops or points. I can't remember which it was or what I read on my own or not, but it did help me to be motivated to read. And, I did get that battleship model and built it. I really liked it, even though I liked airplanes and jets better. Of course, that could have contributed to my current dilemma – my fascination with military technology.

“Let's get you by the door – Mona just sent a text that she's about here,” Martha said with an uncharacteristic sense of urgency and a touch of anxiety.

“Sure, Martha, I wish I could help with the dishes or something,” I lied politely.

“Come on,” she said as she led me to the door and handed me a small backpack, “I put a few snacks and things in there for

you. You be damned careful.” And with that she opened the door, gave me a quick but heartfelt kiss on the cheek and pushed me out the door.

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Jane was up just before dawn, downed a few energy bars and a bottle of juice and was with Chicago at the north end of Brinnon at a convenience store in her dark SUV. She had set up checkpoints throughout the area, and had her team coach the deputies and associated citizens about the person of interest they were looking for. She made sure they didn't use his name or a picture in case something went wrong, so she could have deniable culpability.

Besides, three of the four people she had caught for Pedro before were dead. She was still checking on the fourth, and had not found her dead or alive, yet. No, she needed to control what she could, and she was confident that this Darren Jonsen hadn't left the area. It was possible, but

not likely. She had other resources staking out his usual haunts including his condo and studio. She was certain he would end up there, if he somehow managed to slip through their checkpoints.

Pedro had called to touch bases with her a few moments before. That voice was very familiar to her. He was definitely Mexican-American or from some close Central American community. She had serendipitously run his voice through the linguists at Quantico, and they had come back with an 80% match for Vera Cruz. They thought they were screening a drug call, and there were no names attached. He had told her how he wanted the subject scared enough to start writing apologies for his previous political positions. He wanted Darren to start advocating for tougher drug laws.

Jane believed she knew why. The drug cartels made money because drugs were illegal. Any legalization would cut into their profits and projected growth. The rivalries would get more violent, and the markets for their product could dry up.

Not because they wouldn't be drug users, but because there would be safer, cheaper ways to use their drug of choice. The US would save billions and billions of dollars a year in enforcement costs with a good deal of those costs being transferred to treatment programs and health professionals. Jane would probably be out of a job, too. In fact, she had looked into some master's degree counseling programs – just in case.

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“Get in, quick,” Mona said through her open window. I quickly opened the door and slid into the sporty little Impreza. I put on my seat belt, but we were slightly under way first.

“Sorry to be in a hurry, Darren, but there are checkpoints everywhere. Still nothing official except a description that fits you, and a vague statement about you being a person of interest or possible witness,” she said calmly and matter-of-factly as she moved the car quickly and carefully along. We drove in a semi-

circle and made it back to the highway where Mona made a quick right heading south and then shortly turned left to the sea side of the highway. We drove a short ways until we were out of sight of the highway, and Mona pushed a button on the rear-view mirror opening a garage door, she turned right into a driveway and into the garage, which was closing before she could put the car into park as she had already pushed the button again. Her music was exciting and modern.

“Okay, Darren,” she said as she stepped out of the car, “let's go inside where I need you to change into some interesting outfit.”

As I followed her inside as much as I wanted to believe she meant something sexy, I knew she meant something very different. It was the eyes, her eyes and her expression said something more like “your not going to like this, but it's for your own good” kind of like a doctor. I kept following not having any better options. We went into the kitchen, past several security monitors and into a foyer.

“We're going upstairs where you will need to change, Darren,” she said my name like she liked it, “we're making you look like a woman before you get on the boat.”

“Are you sure, Mona?” I said with a bit of exasperation in my voice and a hope she liked the way her name sounded coming through my lips.

“Yes, they're looking for a male, and this will help everyone be able to say they saw a woman because they did. Here's the stuff,” she pointed as we entered a master bedroom. “Put on the outfit including the body suit as it will help you look a bit more feminine. No one should see you too close up, but I'd like you to shave with this electric razor including trimming off your sideburns.”

“Okay, Mona, I'll save my questions as I'm sure you'll let me know what I need to know.” She slipped out the room before I started undressing and redressing, but came back in before I was finished

carrying a dark, medium length wig. She had waited for me to get mostly finished before she returned.

“You look so lovely, Darren,” Mona teased me mockingly, “here let me help you adjust some things a bit.” She carefully moved things here and there to be more fitting. She brushed against me casually a few times, and I steeled myself not to show any reaction. I don't know why. I guess I'm wired to avoid escalating passion until it is unavoidable. “You will need to go by boat. There are checkpoints set up north and south of here that will make it difficult to avoid detection in addition to having the local deputies and regular neighborhood watch groups assisting with identification. There is a rumor of a sizable reward for your being found.”

“I think I know why,” I offered, “but it is not because I have done anything wrong.”

“I know that. But, let me tell you some more about what were doing. In ten minutes we're driving out of here in a

different vehicle, the old subcompact in the garage, down to the marina. My poppa's good friend Jack is going to take you crabbing on the Canal. You'll meet up with another group on the water where you will mix in for a bit rowing. Then, you'll switch to another sport fishing boat, immediately going below deck until you transfer ashore as a younger man, still dark hair, and by noon you will aboard a plane heading north. That's it for now. I'll let you know more when we talk by cell. Here's your phone. Your not to use it until you land.”

“Wow, Mona, that seems like a lot of trouble for one insignificant man. Are you sure it's necessary.”

“It is, Darren. We have reason to believe that your life is in danger, and that for some reason these jackphants won't stop. Jack's wife, Nora, usually goes out with him. She's staying at friends until he returns this evening. In fact, she'll board his boat from another at the end of the day and before he returns here to his home port. Things will look very

ordinary to the local watchers, and that's the way we want it. I dare say you would look something like Nora from a distance.”

“Well, I hope Jack doesn't get confused,” I said lightly to continue our attempt at being distracted from the heaviness of the moment. I was getting nervous despite our efforts to relax.

“I don't think we'll have a problem today, just follow my lead, keep to yourself, and call when you get back on the ground. I am starting to wonder if my underground railroad is protected enough. I want you to let me know if you notice anything that could threaten our anonymity. I don't want to endanger anyone. Don't be surprised by the voice on the other end of the call. The number to call is the only one listed, and the person answering should first say, “Hello, Doc.” Don't say anyone's name, and don't give any locations.”

Mona accepted my nod for agreement, and sat thoughtfully. I reached over and

gave her a hug. She responded warmly. Our supportive embrace lasted a few moments. We looked into each others eyes as we moved apart. I asked, “Do you have someone that you can talk to about your fears, Mona?”

“I do, Darren,” she answered with some softness as she checked her cellphone, “I’ll meet up with him at lunch.”

“Can he protect you?” I asked with a little sense of uncertainty that she could sense.

“Yes, I think so. We better get to the car,” she gestured with a nod toward the door as she started out, “I’ll be able to meet with my friend Detective Blanco. We dated years ago, and now he and his wife Helen are dear friends.”

I hoped my exhale of relief wasn't noticeable to Mona, but I just knew she was communicating positively about her availability. What I would do with that information, I don't know. “Do you have your backpack?” she asked as she picked up a thermos from the kitchen counter as

we went by, “this coffee is for you to give to Jack as you give him a quick hug upon boarding the boat – don't worry about selling it.”

“Okay,” I said without too much trepidation. I would try to be relaxed and casual.

“Jack will let you know where to sit and all. He'll give you quick and concise instructions,” she said as we opened our car doors, “as he has done this many times, but usually with a woman to escort.” She started the car and pushed the overhead door control button on the visor. We started on our way to the marina as she backed out of the garage and the driveway in our uninspiring, white subcompact.

“You know, Mona, Fed Jane may be at one of the checkpoints. If you stopped by with your detective friend you might see her, and it would give the two of you a chance to sum her up. I have her recorded on my tablet, but I haven't been able to listen to the recording since my

power is low. There may be a way to reach her. I don't believe most people want to be playing the bad guy.”

Mona was maneuvering into a parking lot near the many slips full with mostly recreational pleasure craft. “There's Jack over there in that fishing boat,” she pointed out his rather plain eighteen footer with a pedestal mid-ship. Jack was busy fixing this and that as he prepared to get under way. “I'll see about your idea, Darren, and I hope you don't mind if we get together to have a drink sometime soon,” she finished with a quick hug – like girlfriends I suppose with a whispered, “careful.”

“No, I wouldn't mind. I'll look forward to it,” I finished as I got out, waved a short farewell, and scurried to Jack's boat.

I gave Jack a quick hug as I boarded and handed him his coffee, he ordered in a quick hushed tone, “Sit on one of the benches in the stern, back there,” he finished after I hadn't responded. “Let's get underway. Be quiet a bit until we get

out a bit, and then I'll talk.”

He started the motor, and no sooner than I had I seated myself on a bench with my small backpack beside me we were slowly underway moving through the marina.

Chapter 5

Mona headed back to the house after dropping Darren off with Jack. She had watched them take off through her rear view mirror as she had left with no rush. Darren somehow had looked much like her friend Nora as he rushed to the boat. It made her smile and relieved a bit of the tension she was feeling. What was that unusual sense of danger she was feeling? She had helped tens if not a hundred people to flee to safety before, but somehow this case seemed to have an element of extreme danger about it. What was it?

Mona pulled into the garage with Nora's little Aveo, got out and went inside. She went into Jack's study, turned on the

computer, flatscreen and radio. She looked at his couch, climbed in and started napping. She would get up in a bit and meet Rodrigo for lunch. How would she approach Special Agent Jane? She knew better than to lie to a federal agent, so she would need to use her connection to law enforcement to put her at a disadvantage. She was also special counsel to a governor's task force on financial crimes that worked with the feds quite often. She might be able to use that as leverage, too. She decided to let Rod help her decide as she went to sleep.

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Jack and I slowly made our way out of Pleasant Harbor and into Hood Canal. He had quite the load of crab pots and floats. The pots were all baited with some kind of chicken. Once out a few hundred yards on this gorgeous early morning with an orange sunrise to the east, Jack pulled back on the throttle and we started moving pretty quickly with good wind. He headed toward the south but away from the shore.

“I'll have you throw out some crab pots in my usual places,” Jack shouted comfortably over the rushing sound of the wind and roar of the motors, “just don't let your hat fall off and leave your sunglasses on. We don't need to rush as we won't be rendezvousing with the canoe family for a few hours.”

I nodded in affirmation and he took out his thermos and poured a cup of coffee for himself in the lid. It wasn't long before he slowed to a stop and guided me through tossing a baited crab pot over the port side. I found it to be rather simple, and we took off again.

“Do you do this often, Jack?” I asked to make conversation, “it's really beautiful out here between the Olympic and Cascade mountains.”

“I try to get out pretty regularly. Sometimes I'm crabbing and other times I'm fishing. Nora and I visit our friends around the Canal on many occasions. I usually take a cooler or two to the Senior

Center in Brinnon, or I hear about it, especially from my old state patrol buddies,” he said smiling.

Jack was dressed in khaki shorts and shirt with multitudes of pockets. He had on a vest that doubled as a life jacket. He had a kind of floppy broad-brimmed hat that matched his outfit and his deck shoes. He was clean shaven and a little weathered with silver hair. He wore a watch on his left wrist, which he looked at quite often. He sat on a seat behind the bridge, which was covered by a T-top. He had some kind of sonar depth finder that was changing with our progress on the sea or fjord.

“I want to thank you for helping me, Jack. I am really amazed and thankful for the help Mona has found for me.”

“Anything Mona asks for, I'm happy to help with,” Jack responded humbly, “we think the world of her, and she makes our life interesting. Nora and I always feel useful because of her.”

“I can see why,” I agreed as I took out a bottle of water and drank a good gulp.

“You be respectful, that's all we ask. She's a big girl,” Jack requested firmly. He didn't go on and on. But, left it at that. Another subtle clue that Mona may have some feelings for me. A few crab pot drops later we turned toward the east and toward the far shore. The weather was just beautiful if you like calm, clear skies and warming temperatures. It had been a bit cool earlier, but I was quite comfortable now.

The time had passed pretty quickly, and I could see Jack looking to the south quite often. I looked there, too, not really knowing what I was looking for. We finally came within a few hundred yards of the eastern shore when Jack throttled us down. He turned the bow toward the south and let us drift in the very light swells of today's Hood Canal. It was hard to imagine any danger in these fairly blissful conditions.

“Here they come,” said Jack matter-of-

factly.

Mona woke up from her nap and slowly got her bearings. It was still a bit more than a half hour before lunch. She got up from the couch and settled in Jack's office chair in his office full of State Patrol memorabilia. She turned up the regional cable news channel broadcast a bit, turned up the radio sound and woke up the sleeping computer.

She was going to check her messages and survey the news to be sure all was quiet regarding Darren. She thought of him with more feelings of affection than she had had for anyone in some time. She didn't know too much about him except he was thoughtfully liberal, vulnerable and deliciously cute. She calmed herself, found a bottle of water in Jack's office fridge, took a drink and checked her mail client for messages.

Nothing unusual so far. Just a few reminders about this evenings dinner

meeting in Seattle with her fellow task force members. Maybe Rod could take her to the ferry. He occasionally had business in Bremerton. She would check with him. She did have an email from Dr. Lee with the subject line saying appointment reminder. That was a good sign that Darren's next leg on his journey was ready to go.

Mona shut everything down, and headed out the door. She got in her car, headed out of the garage and driveway into town. Rod liked to eat at Shirley's restaurant in Brinnon on Sunday's. Sometimes he had his wife with him, but not as often since they had their son a few months ago. She hoped he was alone today.

As she pulled in she noticed Detective Blanco's rig and an assortment of other vehicles, some she recognized and some not. She primped her hair and looked in her make-up mirror to make sure she was presentable. It was an old habit that she had lost at one time due to her feminine beliefs, but had revitalized to catch an edge in many situations. Looking good

had its advantages, which she didn't discard unless she truly wanted to do so.

She went in and found Rod seated at his usual spot in the back near the kitchen. She smiled at the hostess as she took a seat across from him. “Hey, Rod,” she greeted him, “I'm glad to see you.”

“I can imagine that this passenger is a bit more difficult than usual, these feds are looking for someone, but their checkpoint approach is a little weak to say the least.”

“I suppose they are over-confident that someone will find their mark for them,” Mona speculated, “I think they are parked north and south waiting for their quarry's location.”

Rod said, “I'll bet they don't realize that someone could hide out for weeks this time of year. And, there are dozens of ways out besides the highway. There's something that just doesn't make sense about these guys. I've never known feds to operate this way before.”

Mona agreed softly, "You're right. Our package thinks I should make contact with Jane, and try to find a soft spot. He thinks her heart isn't into whatever their doing. What do you think?"

"I guess that could be worthwhile. I think she's parked up by the senior center with a partner. I could get him to the side talking about certain hypotheticals."

"I've got to tell you, Rod, that something's really sinister about this op. I just get the feeling that there's some deeper more violent force behind what they are up to. I think we need them to get some false leads, or they might start scaring the locals."

Rod thought about that and they kept silent while the waitress brought them their usual water, beans and rice and a nice tossed salad. Rod wasn't a vegetarian, but he supported Mona when he was around her. That's one of those little things that helped them stay friends after they quit being a serious couple.

“What makes you skittish, Mona,” Rod asked with renewed concern, “you're not one to scare easily?”

“I've come across some information about some people being found dead within a few weeks of possibly being abducted or questioned by some official looking people and changing their political beliefs. A fourth person is missing.”

“Crap, Mona, why do you think that information is connected to these feds?”

“Number one is their behavior toward their mark, and two is that the source is associated with our task force. I've been asked to look into some possible financial irregularities of some feds. You know that's my specialty, and that makes me a possible mark. I may need protection.”

They kept silent a bit as Rod mulled over this new information with some hearty eating. His face was less relaxed than it had been. Mona let him be alone with his thoughts. She was planning how to deal with Special Agent Jane. She suspected

that Jane had been compromised by some kind of debt problem. Debt, especially from medical or legal bills, the high cost of education for private and overseas education, spending and gambling debts have led to the corruption of many public officials. Jane was likely to have such issues.

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The ocean going canoe was accompanied by two boats of similar size to Jack's. One had a more extensive closed cabin, and it was staying out front. The other was a little sleeker with much more speed obvious in her design. As they approached both relief boats were moving ahead of the canoe. Set off on her own the canoe of traditional Coast Salish design was a marvelous site to behold. I never could get enough of watching one being powered by the steady strokes of her paddlers.

As the chase boats neared us, Jack had me stand on the starboard side of his craft. The cabin boat moved in gently and one

of her crew lashed us together. Jack handed me a cooler and had me hand it over to the other crew, and one of them, dressed almost identical to me, switched places with me in what seemed like a flash. I was spirited into the cabin with a window seat. The canoe pulled up next to us and some pullers held on as they were given some water and food.

As they were eating and drinking I could see a middle-aged native man gesturing and speaking with great vigor to the young paddlers. At one moment he had his hands together high in the air with his fingers moving in discord back and forth; the next he was extolling them further as he used the same gesture except this time the fingers went up in down in a magical rhythm. The young people were smiling and laughing and started chanting something I couldn't quite make out as they released our vessel and started pulling in concert. It was a beautiful sight to see them go.

That's when an elderly woman opened the cabin door and said, "Nora, here's your backpack," and closed it again as I

took hold of it. She never met my eyes and I could hear the motors throttling up as we moved away. We didn't lurch off or start heading out quickly, but just settled into a steady, slightly rolling pace. I wasn't sure what was next except I would be transferring to a car at a dock. I was supposed to call the speed dial number on the cellphone I was given, say "Hello Doc" and wait for instructions.

I enjoyed watching the slowly nearing shoreline with a variety of homes, docks and trees. We eased around a point and moved into a more urban setting. Eventually the boat ended up docking starboard side at a small pier connected to a fairly large home by about thirty yards of wooden walkway. My door was opened and a woman, presumably the same one that had not seen me earlier, said, "We're here Nora, please get off the boat and call your party for assistance," after which I went on deck, climbed over the railing to the dock, the boat headed away with the crew not paying me any mind, and I pushed the speed dial option on my smartphone.

“Hello,” the unknown party answered with a flat female voice – maybe with a slight Asian accent.

“Hello, doc,” I greeted the mystery voice as directed.

“Please walk up the pier and steps to the house, and come in the back door. I'll meet you there,” the same voice instructed me and hung up.

I started walking up the pier having looked around and admired the view and the lovely weather. It was a strange feeling being in a strange place so dependent upon strangers that I trusted. As I walked up to this lovely home, I hoped that something good would come of all this trouble people were going through.

Chapter 6

Mona approached the car as Rod kept Chicago preoccupied near the store's

entryway. She knew he would be telling a captivating tale, and he would be looking for tells that might give him insight into Chicago's knowledge. The agents had moved into Brinnon's small business hub on Highway 101, and were parked nose out ready to pursue Darren. Jane looked bored, but she was alert and aware of Mona's approach.

“Hello Agent Holland,” Mona greeted Jane through her open window. “I've heard you guys might be looking for a fugitive in our midst. I'm Mona Gates, one of many concerned citizens in Brinnon.”

“Hi,” Jane made a barely audible retort, “What do you want?”

“I'm just curious as to why you are running this official, unofficial roadblock. Should we be afraid?”

“Oh, no,” SAIC Jane responded sitting up a bit with a renewed interest, “just a witness we were protecting that is missing. We're concerned for his safety,”

she continued with a kernel of truth.

“Well, that's good to know,” Mona said feigning some relief, “must be a long way from home for you.”

“Not really,” Jane responded a bit easier, “although I hate being away from my family overnight.”

“That's awful,” Mona sympathized, “how do you manage?”

“My mom helps some, but that's getting hard on her. I worry about my daughter.”

Mona could hear the concern and fear in Jane's voice, and moved in for the save, “Here's my card, Jane. If you ever need a friend look me up.” And with that Mona turned and walked to Rodrigo's cruiser. He managed to meet up with her within a minute.

“Ready?” he asked Mona hoping for more information, but not pushing.

“Let's go, Rod,” Mona answered, “I think

she'll look me up pretty soon. My card is a lifeline she knows she needs. She knows she's in over her head.”

“Well, I hope they leave my people soon,” Rod said casually as he headed north on 101 toward the evergreens of the Olympic National Forest and on to the Bainbridge Island ferry terminal.

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I walked up the stairs of the pier on this glorious day. The sun felt so lovingly warm with light breezes dancing away the heat that was starting to build up. The sea water was a beautiful deep blue with bright, sparkling little waves all surrounded with the emerald green of the mostly conifer forests of the Pacific Northwest. I stopped and soaked it all in before continuing on into the house. This was a paradise moment. I was thankful for that. I turned and walked up to the sprawling multi-level home, opened the back door and went in.

I went through a larger than average laundry and mud room into a clean

spacious kitchen with a hearty dining area. That's where I first laid eyes on Dr. Lee. She was a knockout, short and slender Asian-American woman with long wavy jet black hair.

“Hello, doc,” I repeated as Mona had programmed me. Gosh, I missed her. It seemed like days since I saw her; it was only this morning.

“Hello, Darren. I'm Doctor Lee,” Dr. Lee responded with an energy and certainty that surprised me, especially as she approached me quickly full of confidence, “I hope you don't mind if I give you a once over as I was able to see your recent incident records.”

“Sure,” I said.

“I practice internal medicine and have a good number of patients,” she continued as she proceeded to check my blood pressure and listen to my heart, “just sit here a minute,” she pulled out a well lacquered moss green high-backed kitchen chair and I sat down, “I just want

to make sure your ready for our travels, that's good," she ripped the Velcro apart and proceeded to listen intently, "take a deep breath," pause, "now let it out, again," as she switched positions with her stethoscope.

"That's good," she observed with a hearty, pleasantness. Then, she proceeded to have me stand and balance a few different ways as she observed me. "You seem very healthy compared to what one would think from seeing your records," she declared with that huskier than you would expect but very feminine voice, "I'd say you are as ready as anyone. Don't forget your backpack," she ordered with ease and proceeded to pick up a larger one from the table. "I think we should head out of here, Darren. We'll find a quite place to eat."

I had placed my backpack on the counter, so I picked it up, "I'm in your hands, doctor."

"Call me Anne. I think you're trustworthy. Let's head out to the garage

and get going,” and she put her right hand on my back and steered me toward the garage door. I opened it, and we stepped into her spacious two car garage. She tweeted her keys, and opened the back of her darker green Outback Sport. She put in her backpack, taking out a water and handing it to me, and closed the hatch. We climbed in, put on our belts and she started it up with the garage door going up with the quick push of the mirror button.

“I think we'll head over near the mall in Silverdale, Darren. There's a local restaurant there my family has eaten at for years and years. The owners are some of my most loyal patients. They eat right and have the best, healthiest food anywhere in the Seattle area,” she finished with a quick look and smile as we drove down her long driveway.

“That sounds great to me, Anne, I'm famished,” I said with as much support as I could. I had also uncapped my water, and I took a long drink or three.

“Good,” Dr. Lee observed, “hydrate as much as possible. Are you single, Darren?” she asked out of the blue. “I’m not asking for me, though I find you very attractive. I told Mona I would give you the third degree.”

We turned onto a nice, near two-lane highway like roadway, and headed to the east. I closed my eyes, and sat back and contemplated my answer. “I’m definitely available, Anne. I like you, too, but I already miss Mona. Both of you are everything a person would want in a human. I just wish I could stop this running, and settle down.”

“It might not be long before you can rest easy, Darren,” Dr. Lee tried to reassure me, “Mona is working on some angles, and we haven’t noticed anyone following you. Maybe they have given up.”

“I sure hope so, Anne,” I said easily.

“Well, we’ll keep our eyes open just in case,” she continued not looking at me as I had opened my eyes, “and, we’ll see

what happens.”

We continued in to Silverdale, and Dr. Lee eased us into a parking space near the entrance to the cafe. As we got out of her Outback and looked around, neither of us noticed anything unusual. We proceeded inside and Anne was given a grand greeting. We were moved quickly to a nice table with a young waitress eager to please. Our order was taken, drinks were at hand and we were well into our meal arriving before I took a moment to consider what was next.

“Are you excited to be heading out, Darren,” Anne finally found time and privacy to ask a question.

“I'm probably more anxious than excited. I kind of get an eerie feeling, like I'm being watched,” I said pausing from starting a pretty good meal.

“I understand. We won't be here long before we head out the area. Don't worry. They've probably given up at this point,” she surmised before taking a drink.

I thought a bit and looked around. I wasn't hungry anymore. I had a strong urge to run or hide. I felt silly, but I couldn't make the hair on the back of my neck lay down. "I hope you are right, Dr. Lee," I finally replied, "but, I think we should get moving. I don't think this disguise is going to do any good." I stood up and gestured with a nod toward the door.

"You're not kidding are you Darren?" Anne asked without expecting an answer. She stood, too, and took her purse off the back of her chair. The waitress came over.

"Is everything okay, Dr. Lee?" she asked pleasantly.

"Oh, yes, dear," she replied as she led me toward the door, "just take care of the bill like usual, please." And with that we headed out the door as we were headed to a normal Dr. Lee emergency. I could imagine she didn't finish her meals in peace very often. But, this wasn't a normal emergency as I noticed a man in sunglasses staring at us across the street

from what looked like a rental sedan.

“There's a menacing looking fellow behind us, Dr. Lee,” I said with alarm as we were fastening our seat belts.

“Where?” she asked with alarm.

“Don't look around,” I ordered casually, “let's just proceed as we planned. Can you pull into a convenience store or gas station in a block or two?”

“Sure, Darren,” she said with strain that wasn't there earlier, “I shouldn't have brought you here.”

“No, Anne, It's probably best we are where we are in case we need help,” I said trying to calm her and help her regain her confidence as she started driving.

“Stopping at the store will give me an opportunity to verify if this guy is a threat or part of my imagination.”

“Okay,” she replied with a sense of evaluating the circumstances, “I'll think of a plan to get rid of him, if he's really

following us. Damn, I was hoping you wouldn't have any more stress.”

“I'm fine, there's a place over there. Pull in and park as close to the door as you can. I'm pretty sure he's still following us. I'll get some water. Try to think of a way to lose him without getting us stuck somewhere,” I finished as I got out and moved quickly into the store. The sedan had followed and stopped short of the filling station in a store parking lot. He had pulled into a position ready to get going again. I found some water and went to the front counter. The clerk was friendly, but detached and uninterested. I said “thank you” and headed back to the car mindful of our tail.

Anne was on her phone, using the car's Bluetooth feature, as I got in. The tail was still in position to enter the roadway at a moments notice.

“Sure, Robert, I hope you can be ready. We'll be driving by the hospital in less than two minutes. Yes, will do. Damn, I'm glad Burt is there. You have my

number. You know my car. Right. Okay, Robert. Damn, I hope this works. We'll need about three minutes at the most. Okay. Thank you. I'll owe you," she finished with sincerity as she hung up.

"What's up?" I asked hopefully.

"I think we'll shake our tail, but let's get going," she said as she started backing and heading out of the gas station.

"How are we going to do that?" I asked somewhat skeptical.

"There's going to be an emergency, and someone's going to be interfering," Dr. Lee responded coolly as she continued driving. "It will be a little further, just make sure you're ready as there's going to be a little excitement."

I checked my seat belt and had my right hand gripping firmly on the arm rest.

"I'm ready, Anne, do what you need to do," I said with a sense of resignation. I took a peek back and noticed the rental sedan following a good bit behind like a

shark stalking its prey. We continued at normal speed approaching a t-intersection, stopped and turned right. Our stalker not making a move at this time kept a bit of distance, but turned behind us and seemed to close the gap.

As we headed around a curve beginning to head south Dr. Lee began to reduce speed gradually and said, “here we go,” with a bit of concern but like a pro that had experienced this situation before. The sedan closed the gap fairly quickly, but had slowed a bit, too, as if unsure of his move. Anne stepped on it just as two emergency vehicles popped out of a driveway on our left and a half block ahead. There was a gap between them, which she shot through. I looked behind to see the fire truck and ambulance close the gap and block the road. The sedan stopped quickly and started to back. I thought I saw a few police cruisers enter the fray with lights going just as we turned left at the light.

Dr. Lee kept going and turned onto the highway ramp going northbound. There

was no sign of the sedan behind us. I took in a breath and said, "There's no sign of him now, Anne."

"I hope they got him," she replied only to be interrupted by a voice, "Dr. Lee, we have a guy trapped and he had a gun, but he hasn't resisted and the deputies are taking him into custody."

"Thanks, Robert," Dr. Lee responded quickly as we merged into northbound traffic. "I will let you know if we have any problems. Please let me know if you have any problems."

"Sure, thing, Dr. Lee," Robert affirmed, "take care." And with that we exited off the highway and headed back toward the west for the most part. "We're headed to the airpark, Darren. No more dallying. We've got to get you out of here."

With that I started drinking some more water, spent a moment's thought lamenting over not getting to eat and looked ahead as the road went by and we turned toward our destination.

“Apex Air. How can I help you?” asked a voice over Dr. Lee's wireless connection.

“Hello, Lillian,” Dr. Lee answered, “can you get the Cessna ready? I'm almost there.”

“Sure, Anne,” answered the voice with a sense of familiarity and helpfulness, “it should be ready to taxi in ten minutes.”

“Thanks, Lillian, I'll see you in five. The hanger door's open as usual, right?”

“Yes, doc.”

“Cool. See you,” and with that Dr. Lee hung up and continued concentrating on the light traffic on the two-lane roadway.

“Darren, we're going to make a quick change once I drive into the hangar. Just grab your backpack and I'll lead you into the plane.”

“Sure, Anne,” I agreed quietly. It was more excitement and I was feeling like some quiet reflection time. When was

this roller coaster going to end? It did seem like we were doing the prudent thing by getting out of Dodge while we can.

“The weather's still looking like the beautiful forecast they made this morning,” she observed getting into pilot mode I supposed, “I think you will be in a quiet place to get some rest in much less than two hours. Just catch your breath and enjoy the ride.”

“I'll keep my eyes peeled just the same, Anne. I hope we are able to shake these guys, but I don't want to be caught in a bad situation again,” I said with conviction I wasn't feeling.

“I think I know what you mean,” she sympathized, “we run into some persistent spouses in our operations, but maybe these guys have organized capability we haven't experienced before.

The alternating scenery of trees, fields surrounded by trees and homes and outbuildings rolled by as we approached

our destination. I noticed no strange behaving cars, but I wasn't feeling relaxed. I seemed to be becoming hyper-aware of my surroundings and circumstances. I was feeling paranoid, but I wasn't too concerned about it. I started thinking about an organized criminal enterprise and what long reaching capabilities it might have at the ready including surveillance, communications and operational support. Have we unwittingly created monstrous social media networks in our war on drugs?

“We're here. Be ready. The sooner we're in the air the better I will feel,” Dr. Lee stated as we rolled up to a hangar and in.

The interior was well lit and spacious enough for the car and two planes with an office near where we parked. Dr. Lee jumped out and led me over to our plane, which was just outside the building. She opened the door and had me get in the front. I put my backpack behind the seat.

“I'll be right back,” she stated flatly as she

shut the door securely and headed in to the office.

She didn't come right back. I felt like we were burning up time after what seemed like five minutes and a few more sips of water. I started to get agitated and knew something was wrong. Just as I was going to get adventurous and get out she appeared with three other people just in view of the plane. She signaled for the others to stay where they were and she approached the aircraft alone with a clipboard. After a few minutes going around the plane and touching some surfaces here and there and marking things on her clipboard, she got in the other side.

“Damn,” she said with a sense of dread, “we've got complications, Darren. I think your drug guys found a way to reach us and send a message.”

“How's that, Anne?” I asked with a tiredness in my voice.

“I happen to have a new client that needs a ride. Ron and Paul, two very

trustworthy members of my group, dropped them off just before we arrived – a mother and her son. She's got a black eye and looks scared,” she finished as she checked some controls and gauges before writing on her clipboard.

“Hmm,” I responded in a barely audible tone.

“I need to take them, but it changes our plans on the fly, Darren. I need you to put on this wig, light jacket and sunglasses before I bring them aboard,” she ordered as she handed the items to me with a cellphone. “I need you to call Mona, now, while I get these guys settled in on board. Let her know the situation and that I need to stop at Boeing Field with two packages needing very careful handling in about thirty minutes. Tell her I'll need to switch at our next stop – she'll know what I mean.”

And with that Anne was out the door getting her other two passengers. I put on the disguise and touched 'Send' on the screen of the phone. A moment or two

later the line started to ring.

“Hello?” was the answer on the third ring.

“Hello, Mona,” I said a little too eagerly rolling my eyes into the back of my head in annoyance at myself, “Anne needed me to call you as we have complications.”

“Are you alright?” Mona asked with a sense of unease.

“Sure, look she's bringing two clients on board so I will need to speak a little vaguely,” I informed her.

“That's okay,” she returned crisply.

“She wants me to let you know that we are taking two packages to Boeing Field that need careful handling,” and with that Anne opened the door and helped her two clients get in and get fastened into their seats. She put a small bag in with them, and I hoped she had searched it. “She'll have us there in about thirty minutes,” I continued, “and she wants to switch at our next stop.”

“Okay,” Mona answered quickly, “I miss you, Darren. Be careful. Tell Mona they have the private eye in custody, but it looks like they'll need to let him go very soon.”

And with that she hung up. I waited for Anne to get things settled as she hurried around the plane checking things, got inside and got strapped in. She signaled to her ground crew, started the engine and began taxiing slowly into position to take off. It was still a lovely day with the sun only just past its midpoint in the sky toward the west. I could see a few clouds to the west that had not been around earlier. Anne was still monitoring her planes performance, checking in with ground control and keeping her focus. I occasionally glanced back at the other passengers to make sure they were okay, just as I had after they had been fastened in to their seats. The three of us seemed a bit pensive about this adventure that seemed out of our control.

I knew I couldn't really speak openly

with Dr. Lee, so I kept my thoughts to myself. Anne had already not so subtly shared her suspicions about these clients. It wasn't that the clients weren't in real need of help, but that their situation most likely had been manipulated by more sinister forces than even the spouse or boyfriend that had caused the black eye to the mother client knew. Most certainly these two were being tracked, and our underground railroad had been penetrated by superior organizational capabilities than the otherwise dependable members were close to being prepared for. Anne and Mona were not so innocent and had something planned to not only help these two victims, but to also to out maneuver the drug lord's organization regarding me.

“Ready for take off,” Dr. Lee stated and we turned out onto the runway and began our take off roll.

I turned and tried to reassure our other passengers with a smile. They seemed not too upset with the transportation arrangement. I started thinking of the

ways we could be being tracked. They would certainly know where we were headed prior to landing. Modern technology was our enemy. It wasn't just the authorities that had the means and training to use all the devices available to their advantage. The good news is that airport security is actually pretty good these days, and Boeing Field would be a safe stop. I don't know what the next stop will be, but I'm sure we need to switch either airplanes, the type of transportation or both.

I dared not bring it up with the two new clients present. I don't think we would be too worried about mom, but children are notoriously used by crime lords for intelligence gathering purposes. And, it will be a while before he is processed by the child protective services. I should just be quiet, but I really want to be reassured by Anne.

Fortunately the beautiful scenery of the Olympics, Salish Sea and Cascades is unfolding on this glorious summer day. I became mesmerized by it all as it went by

or under us. Landmarks upon landmarks just before we entered approach as the Space Needle and Seattle skyline went by on our left. It seemed like moments, and it hadn't been too long in fact.

“Everyone prepare for landing,” Dr. Lee announced, “it should be smooth but you should have your seat belts snug and buckled.”

There was a slight jostle as we touched down moments later and began taxiing toward the Museum of Flight. Anne had been communicating over her radio a bit, and then we pulled up next to an older model biplane that was easy on the eyes. Anne stopped the engine, shut down a few things and hopped out her door. She ran out to meet someone, came back and opened her door, motioned to me to stay where I was with an open hand and helped the mother and child to disembark. She turned them over to a few people that had been waiting outside the gate, ran back around the plane as they were led to a waiting light colored SUV with dark windows and buckled

herself in.

“Ready to head out?” she asked looking around and checking instruments.

I looked around and noticed they had taken their bag before replying, “Ready, Captain.” And, then she started the engine and we started to roll again. A bit later after a few exchanges between pilot and tower we were rolling down the runway – plenty of distance behind the wide-bodied commercial jet that had taken off in front of us.

No sooner than we were airborne and clear of the taller buildings below, Anne had us turning slowly but surely to the east over the Tukwila, Kent and Renton urban area south of Seattle. It was a busy place with highways full of cars and rails with trains. I glimpsed SeaTac to my right and behind as we turned away from the Olympic Mountains toward the Cascades.

“We're making a switch of planes at Renton Municipal in a very few minutes,”

Dr. Lee conveyed to me hastily, “I think we can shake these guys after that.”

“I hope so,” I responded quickly not wanting to break her concentration as she moved us into position to land on the large runway at the south end of Lake Washington next to yet more commercial aircraft manufacturing facilities, where many a 737 rolls out on any given day. The view was still breathtaking on this gorgeous of days with landmarks from SeaTac to Mount Rainier to Lake Washington on this very short hop as we bumped and then rolled down the runway.

We touched down smoothly like one would expect from an experienced pilot on a beautiful day with light, steady winds. We rolled to an easy turn into a typical grouping of small hangars and small aircraft. I was getting a little tired, not of flying with Dr. Lee, but of the whole two days of constant worry and the neverendingness of it all.