

# THE GLASS HUMMINGBIRD

(RETURN TO DREAMLAND)

by

E.R. MASON



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## Chapter 1

Cassiopia Cassell awoke from a deep, wonderful sleep. In her dream, it was autumn, and the breeze had become almost too cool for a picnic. The leaves on the trees in the valley below blossomed with color. She stood on a green hillside, looking up at the weeping willow atop it. A cloaked figure waited there, a man dressed in the simple brown cloak of a monk, the hood shielding his face. Light seemed to radiate from him. Cassiopia climbed the hill to greet him. Clearly, he was a source of wisdom. He would expect a question. It would need to be profound to warrant his consideration. She stopped and bowed her head in respect. "Can you tell me, what is the true nature of the universe?" she asked.

"Tell me first about love," he replied.

"I'm sorry. I don't know about love," she answered.

Below the shadow of the hood, she glimpsed his smile. "You will," he said. "You will."

A sudden gust of cold wind made her turn away. When she turned back, he was gone.

She searched the landscape and the chill returned. She hugged herself and realized one shoulder hurt. The sound of howling wind broke into her dream. Her eyelids fluttered open, but her eyes refused to focus. There was a sore spot on the left side of her forehead. She touched it and found a bump. Struggling to awaken, the world became a white blur. Her eyelids felt heavy, and uncooperative. She forced them to open fully and tried to make sense of the snow-covered cliff in front of her. A twisted sculpture of metal and wire drew a frame around her vision.

Her mind began to catch up. The twisted metal was the fuselage of an aircraft. She was still strapped in her seat. Snow and a bundle of wire lay in her lap. Other drifts of snow filled the isle beside her. An icy wind cut at her face.

Memory of the crash began to force itself upon her. It began with smoke in the cabin. The right engine failed. The pilot changed course, because of something about drift-down. A slow descent began into clouds, followed by a massive impact beneath the airplane. The right wing struck something. They spun and crashed and slid, and crashed again.

Wide-eyed Cassiopia looked for her companion, Scott Markman. He was still in his seat in the isle next to her, bent over and unconscious, his head covered with a layer of snow and frost. What remained of the aircraft's front dividing wall and instrument panel was in his lap and against his chest. She thought to scream but looked around and found no one to hear. Jerking sideways, she reached for Scott, but her seatbelt restrained her. She wrestled to unhook it, and stiffly made her way to him, brushing the snow away, and gently lifting his chin. There was a bad cut and bruise on his forehead, but it was not bleeding. There was a pulse in the carotid artery. He was encased in twisted instrument panel and wreckage. She pushed forward on a section of it to no avail.

In shock, she looked again for help. There was nothing but wreckage and white wilderness. The front of the aircraft was completely gone. She was standing in an open fuselage under assault by the elements. Her fingers were numb, her breath creating mist. At the front, the aisle was blocked by more broken instrument panel and twisted metal.

Her cell phone. It had been in the briefcase with her laptop. Scrambling back to her seat, there was no sign of it. She got down on the floor and looked underneath. There was a package of energy bars that had been in the briefcase. Papers from the case were strewn everywhere. She pushed herself up and climbed around the cabin searching frantically. It was no use. Those things were gone. She looked outside at the threatening weather. Maybe out there somewhere. She clambered clumsily over the seats and ducked beneath hanging wire bundles to get out.

It was snowing. The black rock of a jagged cliff rose up in front of the wreckage. On the right, a snow-covered hill disappeared upward into clouds. On the left, twenty feet away, the ledge dropped off sharply. She leaned into the wind, pushed her way around the wreckage and staggered along the hillside. The right wing was completely gone. Behind the tail of the aircraft, a trail of snow-covered jagged metal marked the path they had taken down the side of the mountain. Aircraft parts and trash were strewn everywhere. There was no sign of the cockpit or the pilot.

Cassiopia wrapped her arms tightly around her in the howling wind. Where was the baggage? It had been stored in the rear. She made her way through the waist-deep snow to the baggage door near the tail. The vertical section of tail was sheared off, the metal skin of the back end badly wrinkled. She found the baggage door but it was jammed tight. Her fingers were too cold to try to force the frozen latch. She pushed back through the snow, climbed back in next to Markman, sat facing him in the aisle seat, and began to cry.

Markman groaned and moved his head slightly. Cassiopia sat up. "Scott?"

Nothing.

"She placed her hand on his shoulder. "Scott, can you hear me?"

Markman managed a second groan.

"Scott, we're in big trouble. We crashed. The pilot's gone. It's freezing. We're in the middle of nowhere."

Markman fell back unconscious.

Cassiopia hugged herself, and looked around. They couldn't take the cold for long. Scott was in bad shape. He was in jeans and a sweat shirt. She had only her slacks and a sweater. She stood and worked her way to the rear of the cabin, moving things aside as she went. There was a thermos and an empty gallon jug near the tiny sink at the rear. The aircraft's back panel was crushed and out of place, leaving a hole where the metal kinked outward. Kneeling on the cold floor, she peered through the opening and could see a portion of the luggage. A long red bar clipped to the floor nearby pulled free. She wedged it into the opening and with her body weight on the bar, the back panel bent further and peeled open. She crouched over and reached in to pull out a duffel bag. Inside were clothes and a jacket. She hurried back to Markman and covered his upper body and head with the jacket. There was a black hooded pull-over, and gloves for her. She wrestled them on and searched the chamber for more. A second satchel appeared to have been the pilot's and had more clothing and paperwork. Behind it, was her carry-on. Inside she found her jacket and clothes.

Cassiopia put her fears aside and continued to search. Crawling halfway into the opening, she found a rolled up canvas sack, and along with it a folded canvas tarp. She backed out and opened the sack. Tools. A treasure chest. A hammer, pliers, screwdrivers, hacksaw blade, duct tape and other invaluable items. She hurried back to Markman and blanketed him with more of the clothing. She pulled on extra socks, and a second pair of slacks, and wrapped herself in her jacket. The wind was beginning to howl even louder. Gusts occasionally slapped at the side of the fuselage. She looked at Scott. She had to free him or he would not make it. She worked her way back to him, braced herself and tried to push the twisted metal off his chest. It would not budge.

There was only one way. A lever. She had seen a piece of metal spar sticking out of the snow back by the tail. There was no room inside to place it, but there was a round Plexiglas window alongside Markman. If she could maneuver it through there, she could apply pressure directly to the panel holding him. There was no way to remove the window. She would have to smash it, then reseal it somehow.

Cassiopia climbed outside once more. Ignoring the swirling snow, she made her way back to the tail and found the spar. She wrestled it from under debris and found it long enough. With a struggle, she dragged it back to the window, dropped it in the snow and wiped frost away to peer through the window at Markman's unconscious form.

Determined, she went inside and retrieved the hammer from the tool kit. Outside at the window she positioned herself and hit it with all her might. At first, the hammer just bounced off, but with persistence small cracks began to form. Ten minutes of pounding and finally the outside layer shattered. She began the same attack on the inner pane. Another ten minutes and only jagged edges remained. She tucked her hammer inside her jacket, and lifted the spar to align it and slide it in, being careful not to bump the sleeping form. When the end of the spar hooked underneath the tangled mass, she backed away and pulled down on the end.

The pile of wire, wood, and metal holding Markman moved back and forth, but only a few inches. Cassiopia hung her entire weight on the end of the spar, but it was not enough. She stood ignoring the harsh weather and thought for a moment, then went back inside to the tool pouch. She stored the hammer, and pulled out a folding knife. At the rear-most seat, she cut the seatbelts off of their mounts and snapped the two pieces together into one seven-foot piece. She tied a small loop in each end and returned to her improvised lever. Sliding one loop over the high end of the spar, she worked her right foot into the lower loop and stood and bounced her full weight on it. The pile of wreckage moved back and forth even more, but still not enough.

Back inside, she found the debris had moved farther forward so that some of the pressure was off Markman's chest, but his legs remained trapped. The spar still rested through the fractured window, captured in place. Her weight was not enough. More weight was needed, but there was nothing nearby to use.

Cassiopia searched outside the aircraft. She waded through the snow toward the tail section. A short distance behind it an outcropping of rock followed the mountainside down. She pushed her way along, making a path as she went. The rock outcrop bordered a mountain stream frozen over with white icicles. She hammered the ice with her foot and to her surprise it broke away revealing running water beneath. She searched for loose rock, but found only large boulders.

Keeping a hand near her face to block the swirling snow, she climbed the hillside, following the trail of wreckage. A short way up, she stumbled, fell, and almost rolled back down. A wheel from the aircraft was hidden under the snow. It was too bulky to be worth dragging back. She continued up, and finally kicked something under the snow. It was a small fuel cell, the size of a suitcase. It was empty but intact, except for ragged holes where tubing had once been.

She looked back at the stream, and then back at the empty tank. Grabbing the tank by one of the open holes, she dragged it down the hill to her lever. Inside, she collected more seat belt harness and tore off several sections of duct tape, using it to make a harness for the tank. Returning outside, she suspended the tank from the end of her spar-lever.

The long hike began. Using the thermos and the gallon jug, she began to fill the empty tank with water from the stream. It was a frustrating task. A layer of ice kept forming in the plastic jug. It had to be broken up each time to pour, but with each trip the tank began to exert more weight on the spar-lever. After a half hour of mind numbing wading through the snow, it was nearly full. The wreckage holding Markman was under tension and pushed back slightly farther. Cassiopia stopped to catch her breath and gather herself. She moved into position and slipped her foot back into the original harness still hanging from the end of the spar. Bouncing slightly for momentum, she stood on the harness, adding her weight to that of the full tank.

Instantly an explosion of noise and motion filled the air. The spar sprung down and up and then crashed to the ground, throwing Cassiopia backwards into the snow. The fuel tank swung wildly, smashing against the side of the fuselage, sliding away. The spar banged down against the airframe, barely missing Markman.

Cassiopia quickly pushed herself up into a sitting position. She half crawled and half ran around to the front of the plane. The wood and twisted instrument panel lay flat in the snow at her feet. Markman, still strapped in his seat, was free.

## Chapter 2

Cassiopia climbed to Markman's side and pulled off the piled up clothing. He was still unconscious, his head turned to one side. She brushed the debris off his legs and repositioned his arms. The pulse in his neck was strong and regular. He needed to be moved away from the front. She looked back at the last two seats. On the floor beside her, a section of wooden panel had broken free. She grabbed it and dragged it back. It fit well across the aisle, joining the rear seats together. She returned and contemplated how best to move him. There had to be some impact damage to the knees or legs. She found a shirt in the pile of clothes, and gently secured his legs together.

As tenderly as possible, she pulled him onto his side, carefully steadying his head. She reached out and pushed the adjoining seat forward to collapse it. With her hands under his arms, she worked him away from the side of the aircraft so that she could rest his upper body sideways on the flat seatback of the adjoining seat. She checked his pockets and cursed under her breath that his cell phone was not there.

Cassiopia rested and studied the remaining distance.

With the seatbacks of the next row of seats in the flat position, she resumed her cautious pulling and twisting of Markman's bulky form. Somehow, she dragged him back to the rear seat and wooden platform. Standing over him, she hoisted him sideways onto the wooden panel. From there it was easy to lift his legs and feet. He was so cold it frightened her. Hurriedly, she gathered up the jackets and clothes and covered him from head to foot.

Snowflakes began to drift into the cabin. Despite how hard she had been working, the air seemed to be getting colder. She looked at Markman's wristwatch and had to wipe the frost from the lens to read it. Four o'clock. Fear surged through Cassiopia. Would they have to spend the night here? Why hadn't a rescue already come? Cassiopia suddenly became even more frightened. She had not heard or seen any airplanes or helicopters! Why weren't they searching? How could she possibly survive the night in the freezing snow, atop some mountain in the middle of nowhere? Cassiopia thought to cry, but realized her mouth and eyes were so dry they were numb. It was the altitude. They must still be at a very high elevation. That was why she kept running out of breath.

She looked at Markman. Something was wrong. There was certainly injury to his legs, but he was not waking up. Concussion. She went to him, uncovered his face, and lifted one eyelid. The pupil was widely dilated. Severe concussion. She sat on the seatback in front of him, and tried to collect herself. More snow flurries rushed in around them. She looked back at the front of the wreckage. It had to be closed off somehow. She climbed to the back, pulled out the canvas cover and brought it forward. There were torn wire bundles everywhere. Using the folding knife, she began to cut foot-long pieces. With the wind trying to blow the canvas away, she fastened it to the front of the wreckage using her homemade wire ties. Gathering junk from around her, she weighed down the bottom, leaving one side as a flap-entrance. Back inside, the cabin area was suddenly a shadowy escape from the harshness of the elements. She returned to Markman and sat. Conditions were greatly improved, but it was still freezing cold.

They needed fire. Certainly that was hopeless. There were no matches or lighters that she knew of, and no power within the aircraft. Wherever the batteries were, it was unlikely they were intact. There was no fuel to make a fire. Fuel? The left wing was still attached and intact. That was where they put the fuel. Would there still be some in that wing? This airplane had propellers, but it was a turbojet. Did that mean there was kerosene in those wings? She had a small auxiliary fuel tank outside that she had used to add weight to the spar-lever. It would hold kerosene. The seat belts would make wicks.

But there was no fire. Cassiopia thought of all the ways to make it. Rub sticks together, forget that. A magnifying glass. She did not have one, and there was nothing around from which a lens could be made. A small solar dish could be used to reflect sunlight to a single point and heat it to combustion. Not enough sunlight, no precision dishes available.

There was one other way. A Native American had taught her. It was called a fire piston. Put the right kind of tinder-particle in a cylinder, instantaneously super-compress it and create an ember. Use the ember to make a flame in larger pile of tinder. Cassiopia remembered the broken landing gear she had seen. There had been some kind of small cylinder on it. She forced herself up, went outside and searched. The wheel was easy to find. She dragged her heavy treasure back down and inside, brushed it off, and inspected it. Yes, the small cylinder was there. It was some kind of dampening mechanism. She retrieved her tool kit and began working at it. The pliers and adjustable wrench worked nicely. A few minutes of work and she held the detached piston-cylinder in her hand. The barrel was about six inches long, just right. Using the pliers and the wrench, she was able to unscrew the top of the cylinder and remove the piston. It was a hardened chrome shaft, a dry dampening mechanism, and perfect for what she needed. The O-rings on the shaft were in place and looked healthy. With a few modifications, there was a good chance it would work. She looked out the

window and partially exposed wing. Unless there was fuel to burn, it was all for nothing. She placed it on the seat next to her and stood.

Outside the wind had not let up. She went to the front of the snow-covered wing and began brushing it off in search of a fuel cap. Three quarters of the way to the wing tip, she found it. She twisted it off and peered down in. It smelled like there was fuel in there. She stuck the finger of one glove down in and pulled it back out to find it wet.

How to get it out? She replaced the cap and began digging snow out from beneath the wing, looking for anything that might be a drain valve. After fifteen minutes of searching, she found something where the wing joined the fuselage. It was some kind of valve with a small hole in it. She retrieved a small piece of wire and poked into the valve hole. To her delight, fuel began spraying out. She retrieved the gallon jug and held it under the wing. Pushing her wire into the valve, she filled the gallon jug, then went to look for the tank. It was lying on its side in the snow. Most of the water had run out of it, but icicles protruded from the ragged holes in the top. She broke them off and shook the tank. There was more ice inside. Perhaps a fourth of the tank still contained ice, but that would not matter. Water was heavier than fuel. She could add fuel and if the ice melted, the water would separate and simply sink to the bottom of the tank.

Inside, she used the hammer and screwdriver to pound three slots in the top of the beat-up tank. Pieces of seat belt fit through the slots and coiled at the bottom. Using her gallon of fuel, and a metal dish from the sink, she soaked the sections of belt, and inserted them in the slots. The rest of the fuel was carefully poured into the tank. Two more trips outside brought two more gallons, also carefully poured into the tank. Now if she could only make fire.

Tinder and kindling had to be ready in case the fire piston worked. Using the hammer and the inside of the landing gear wheel, she hammered pieces of wood and paper and pulverized them, nearly to dust. She gathered a small amount in a pile in the cap of the thermos. The fire piston needed a little more work. She pulled the piston back out of the shaft and looked at the end piece. There was a plastic tip with a small piece of rubber on the end of it. With the knife, she cut a small slit in it to hold her tinder. Finding just the right piece she dabbed it in kerosene and wedged it in place, then reassembled the piston. She tried to push the piston with her hand, but the pressure was too great. It needed a controlled leak. She unscrewed the piston just enough to let a small amount of pressure escape. Bracing the cylinder against the floor, she hit the piston as hard as she could with the hammer. Quickly she opened the assembly, pulled out the piston shaft, and shrieked with delight when a bright red ember smoked on the end of the piston shaft. Lurching for the thermos cap, still shrieking, she nearly dropped it. Catching herself, she lowered the dying ember into the pile of tinder and kindling. Smoke quickly burst into flame.

Breathlessly, she rolled up a piece of paper and wet it with fuel. She held her kerosene paper over the flame and watched it light into a larger flame. Carefully, she nursed it over to the stove and was overjoyed when the first wick lit easily. When all three were alight, she crumpled her paper out, and sat hugging herself, staring at the three flames in her kerosene stove. It needed some sort of backing to help reflect the heat forward, but that could be done later. A thin film of black smoke ran up to the ceiling and followed it out. Gathering all the remaining loose clothing, she piled it up on top of Markman, and squeezed in alongside him. Holding him, she stared at the fire, and realized night had fallen.

### Chapter 3

Markman awoke in darkness. He touched one hand to his face and found it covered. Pulling the covering away, the world became an unfamiliar space of tubular, tan ceiling and folded down seats, back dropped by a loud, flapping canvas. To make matters worse, all of it was slowly rotating to the left. His head ached. He wanted to say something but there were two problems. First, he could not formulate anything to say and did not seem to know how. Second, his mouth and vocal cords were apparently unavailable, or out of service. He looked around with all the clarity of a newborn, and tried to focus his mind.

A strong gust of wind made him turn his head. A figure stood inside the canvas, draped with snow-covered rags and clothing, the head covered completely except for the eyes. It looked like a monster from another planet. It brushed the snow from itself and stomped its feet, perhaps intending to charge. It pulled the covering away from its face, but the image was too blurry and unsteady to recognize. It tromped its way toward him.

"Scott, you're awake. Oh, thank God."

Markman wanted to ask questions but the system was still down.

"That's okay. Don't talk. You've got bad concussion. Just lie still."

Cassiopeia further unwrapped herself. Markman's mind focused enough to recognize her. His mouth answered, seemingly without his consent. "Cass?"

"We crashed. We're in the wreckage on some forsaken mountain. I can't find the pilot. He's gone. This is our second day. I've been watching and there hasn't been a single helicopter or airplane looking for us. It's cloudy. We'd be difficult to spot. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Markman's voice was dry and cracked. Cassiopeia picked up the thermos from beside the stove and poured water into the cap. "You've got to drink this. You're dehydrated. We're at a pretty high altitude."

Markman sucked at the water and nodded for more. Cassiopeia filled it and held it to his mouth.

"Why can't I get up?"

"I told you. You have a severe concussion. I suspect your legs are broken below the knee but I haven't checked them yet."

Markman drank and moistened his lips. "Well, that sucks."

Cassiopeia smirked. "Don't worry. We're leaving."

"What are you talking about?"

"There have been no search planes for almost two days. If there hasn't been any by tomorrow, we're walking out of here."

"You know where we are?"

"Yes, on top of a cold, barren mountain."

"You know which way to go?"

"Yes... Down."

Adrenaline began to flow within Markman. "Cass, you're crazy. You know that, right?"

"We're leaving!"

"I don't get it. What are you talking about?"

"Something is wrong. They're not looking for us here. The pilot must have turned off course to avoid the mountains.

We must have traveled too far from the flight plan. They're not looking for us. There have been no search planes or helicopters at all. The snow has buried all signs of the crash. There's no sense in trying to make some kind of SOS marker, because no one's looking for us here. We have to leave."

"Cass, is that even possible?"

"We'll die of starvation if we don't go. In a few days, we'd be too weak to try. We've got to try to walk out of here now."

"You're avoiding the obvious, Cass."

"What's that?"

"I'm not walking anywhere on my legs. You will have to make this trip yourself, if you can. You can send help back when you make it out."

"Nope."

"What'd you mean? How do you expect me to get up and walk out of here? Even if my legs weren't broken, the world is spinning so badly I can't tell up and down. There's no way."

Cassiopia stopped and stared down at Markman. "The only way to do this, the supplies including the stove will have to come along. Without that stuff, it's a guaranteed death sentence for you, so that's out. You're coming."

"But how?"

"There's a lot of aircraft aluminum out there. I'll make a sled. It'll be a good one. But we'll need a lot of rope."

"There is rope?"

"There's a ton of wire harness all over the place. I'll braid it together and with the duct tape make some long lengths. It will take awhile, but it's not rocket science."

"You know how to braid rope?"

Cassiopia smirked and looked at him. "Scott, all women know how to braid."

Markman rolled his eyes and rested back against his bundled pillow. His head turned to the side as he fell unconscious.

Cassiopia began. She set up a place near the stove, using a flat seatback as a table, and laid her tools out in neat order. With wire cutters from the tool kit, she began collecting wire from around the cabin. She piled it beside her workstation and went outside for more. After an hour, she had a waist high stack of broken and torn multicolored wire. She sat by Markman and began the tedious process of unwrapping and separating it.

Markman opened his eyes once more, and turned his head to smile at her. "I need to get up and do my forms."

She paused and looked at him. "What, Scott?"

"I think I missed my forms yesterday. I'd better get up and get going."

Cassiopia stopped. She stood and leaned over Markman to look closely into his eyes. His pupils were dilating erratically. "Scott, take it easy. You need to rest."

"Where are we?"

"We crashed. Don't you remember? You're hurt. You need to rest."

"Okay. Let's order pizza, though, okay?"

Cassiopia sat back down. "Okay, I'll order pizza. You try to get some sleep."

Markman's eyes slowly closed as he drifted back into unconsciousness.

When she could no longer stand the monotony of wire bundles, Cassiopia checked him once more, and headed outdoors to look for a piece of metal that might be sculpted into a sled. Although it was overcast, the wind and snow had subsided. The fog bank obscuring the steep hillside had lifted, revealing a vast ascent that reached up to the clouds. She went to the trail of debris that marked the aircraft's slide. Snowdrifts now covered everything. Studying the hill, she wondered if a climb to reach the top to see what lay beyond was worth the effort. It was a very long climb. Stomping through the snow it quickly became apparent snowshoes would be needed. Slipping and sliding, she found a jagged piece of aluminum sticking out. Working with both hands, she wiggled it partly out from the snow. Scarred red paint drew a band across it. It looked like metal from the missing tail section. She fought it the rest of the way out and found it misshapen but large enough. Dragging it downward, it slid past her and led the way down.

Near the fuselage, she inspected her find. There was a jagged, v-shaped piece sticking out from one side. She stepped on the base and pulled the v-shaped section up and over, folding it down on the main piece. That left her with a rough rectangle of metal. The sides needed to be folded up, and the front and back curled over to better plow the snow. She began clearing the accumulated snow away from the side of the aircraft, and with a large enough space exposed, she placed the sheet against the fuselage hoping to stomp on it and bend the sides up. After further consideration, she stopped and decided the pattern was not right.

Inside she found the hacksaw blade. Back at her sled-sheet, she cut two slits on either side of the front and back so they could be folded up separately. With the sheet metal braced against the side of the fuselage, Cassiopia pushed in the first side panel with her foot, until the sled had its first sidewall. Repeating the procedure on the opposite side, she had a sled with two sidewalls. The front and back were easy. With careful manipulation, she managed to curve the front wall of her sled, almost like a real toboggan. She borrowed some of the wire from inside and wrapped it tightly around the sides for added strength. As a final step, she used the screwdriver to hammer holes in the sides and front, and wound strong wire loops in them for pull-rope attachment points.

Cassiopia proudly pulled her sled by the door and parked it. She paused to admire it, and then returned to rope making. Inside the shelter, Markman was stirring. She went to him and placed her hand on his forehead.

"Scott, are you awake?"

Markman groaned and tried to raise his head.

"How are you feeling?"

He struggled to open his eyes, and finally looked pleadingly up at her. "What happened?"

"We crashed. We're stuck on a mountain. How do you feel?"

"Oh..." Markman again tried to raise his head, but fell back against his pillow. "My legs are throbbing. The room is spinning and it won't stop."

"You have a bad concussion, and I need to look at your legs. Can you help me?"

"Where are we?"

"I told you. We crashed. We're stuck on top of a mountain somewhere."

"How long?"

"Today is the second day."

"Rescue?"

"It doesn't look good. There have been no airplanes. We're in the clouds and the wreckage is scattered everywhere, and it's covered by snow. You need to drink some water. Will you try?"

"Yeah."

Cassiopia quickly fetched the thermos, opened it and held it to Markman's mouth. For the first time his hands came up and helped. He drank sips at first and then too much so that it ran down the sides of his mouth."

"How about food? Can you eat a health food bar if I get you one?"

"Give me a minute. More water."

Markman almost managed the thermos by himself. He drank and let go.

"I need to look at your legs. Help me." Cassiopia pulled the coverings down and opened his jeans. She tugged to pull them down. Markman did his best to help. As the jeans came down below the knee, she found what she had expected. Two bright red rings just below the knees, legs swollen to almost twice their size. She gently felt the wounds. There was a strong pulse in both of them, and even in the cold, there was heat. She carefully coaxed his pants legs back up and with his help got them back on and buttoned up.

"Your legs are broken," she said, and she choked back tears. He looked in her eyes and it forced her to regain composure. "There's no bleeding, so it's not compound fractures. And, the breaks do not need to be reset. They are in place and are okay as they are. All you need is to not disturb them so they can continue to heal."

Markman managed a half smile. "If you say so, Doctor. I think I'm ready for dinner. Can I have a menu?"

Cassiopia frowned. She leaned next to the stove, unwrapped an energy bar, and handed it to him.

"How many of these do we have?"

"A whole box; twelve. You can't buy them hardly anywhere, so I brought the whole box. You can also make tea out of them. You break off a little piece and boil it in water and it's good tea."

He took a bite, noticed the flames in the stove and stared at them as though he did not understand. "Where did that come from?"

Cassiopia replied proudly, "I made it."

"You made a stove? Where did you get fuel?"

"There's still some in the left wing."

Between bites, Markman laughed under his breath.

"Did you just laugh?"

"A little."

"At what?"

"You."

"Me? Why?"

Markman's dry voice cracked as he spoke. "Cass, I wake up all smashed up in the middle of a plane wreck, and this little pip-squeak of a bathing beauty has survived the crash, set up a shelter, made an oil stove, and managed somehow to make a flame. I've been moved onto a bed of some sort, and am sitting in front of a nice oil-burning stove. What are you, some kind of fairy-princess, or something?"

"Who are you calling a bathing beauty?"

"You. You're a bathing beauty."

"Am not."

"The hell you're not."

"Aren't."

"Cass, if you stood out on the sidewalk in a bikini with a cardboard sign that said 'car wash', more cars would crash than made it by."

"You're crazy, Markman."

"I might be delirious, but I'm sure not crazy. How could you have possibly done all this? Oh God, I forgot. It's the photographic memory thing, isn't it? You're one of those crazy people who remember every damn thing they see, hear, and read, like it's a photograph in your brain or something."

"Who's crazy?"

"Well, it's not normal."

"It's more normal than dancing around alone with yourself every morning."

"Those are kata's, form's, martial arts simulated fighting, not dancing."

"Looks crazy to me."

"What, you think Tai Chi is crazy?"

"No, those are exercises."

"It's the same thing! Okay, tell me this at least, how the hell did you ever make fire on the top of a mountain covered with snow, in the freezing cold, without matches? Or did you find a lighter or something?"

"Chief Chandra taught me."

"Oh my god, of course there had to be an American Indian in this story. It had to be either that or space aliens. I should have known. Please don't try to tell me you rubbed two sticks together."

"Chief Chandra was my friend. He had a gift shop with Native American artwork. It was my favorite shop in St Augustine."

"And he taught you to make fire out of thin air."

"It's the fire piston."

"What the hell is a fire piston?"

"It's a compression cylinder that creates embers."

"And in the middle of nowhere, you had one of these things?"

"No. There was some kind of dampening cylinder on one of the airplane's wheels. It was the perfect size. I was lucky to get it off of the landing strut, and then I was lucky to be able to modify it a little."

"So you made fire with a piece of a smashed landing gear?"

"It sounds funny when you say it, but yes that's sort of it."

"Cassiopia, you are amazing."

"That's nice of you to say, I think."

"Tell me something, you've spent your whole entire life learning things, haven't you? I bet you don't even know how to wear high heels."

"What? Why?"

"I'm just curious. I've never seen you in them. Have you ever worn high heels?"

"Of course!"

"Okay, how many times?"

"Once or twice."

"Can you really walk in high heels? Did you wear them to your high school prom, for instance?"

"I skipped all those grades. I didn't have a high school prom."

Markman took another bite of his candy bar. "I should've guessed that. What formal event have you ever attended?"

"Off-hand, I don't remember. Why?"

"I think you're a science-aholic."

"Am not. What's a science-aholic?"

"It's someone who needs to join Scientists-Anonymous."

"Very funny. How is your dizziness? You're sounding better."

"The room is still turning slowly to the left and it won't stop and it pisses me off."

"It's the concussion. I'm more worried about that than your legs."

"Maybe if I sat up, it would be better."

Cassiopia thought for a moment. "Okay, let's try." She came along side Markman and slid one hand under his back. Together they worked him up to a sitting position.

"I'm sorry, Cass. It's spinning ten times faster. It's gonna make me barf."

"Lay back." Cassiopia pushed him gently back down. "There can be no vomiting. We have enough problems with dehydration. That would make it really bad."

"So, I guess my job is to lay here and do nothing."

"No, it's to lay there and get better."

"Well, at least when I dream, the world stops spinning."

Cassiopia returned to making wire rope.

"Cass, what are you doing there?"

"I'm making rope."

"Why are you making rope?"

"You'd better get some sleep. I'll tell you again tomorrow."

## Chapter 4

Day three began in dismal fog. Though the sun rose on schedule, it was not to be seen. Cassiopia emerged from the shelter into a haze so thick she could not see the cliff wall a few feet in front of the aircraft, nor could she see the drop-off on the left, or the steep hill on the right. The air was freezing, but there was no wind. The fog frosted her face. The moisture left a crispy layer atop the snow that made it a little more difficult to wade through. It had grown deeper overnight.

For Cassiopia, these things were of little concern. It was to be a day of preparation, a day for the creation of tools and assets for travel. She went back inside, checked the oil level in her stove, touched Markman on the cheek, and climbed over him to the torn luggage area. There was barely enough light, but with tools in hand she crawled in as far as she could go. There were luggage tie-down rings and screw eyelets in the compartment. With patient persistence, she removed them and made them her own. A baggage net she had not noticed before came along as well.

The wire-rope fabrication was going well. One sixty-foot line had already been completed, and a second begun. Her rope was not quite flexible enough to repel with, but it was perfectly adequate to support climbing with a friction hitch. She would make several thin trip lines, and some shorter rope lengths for miscellaneous use. Other pieces of wire would be used for snowshoes. Metal rods found in the overhead could be shaped into snowshoe frames. Only one pair was needed. Markman would not be doing any walking. The satchels and bags from the baggage compartments were slated for backpacks and carry-alls. Fuel could be stored in the stove, but Cassiopia feared it would not be enough. She needed to find another container that could be stowed or dragged.

In early afternoon, the fog began to lift. It continued to conceal the mountaintops and sky, but the rest of the world came into hazy view. She left her work and went outside to appraise the drop-off. She stood as close to the edge as she dared. It appeared to be a smooth wall, covered completely by snow and ice, but it was nearly a ninety-degree drop. Forty-feet below it leveled off in a wide ledge that lead gradually downward to the right, disappearing around the dark black cliff wall. There was only one way down. It would need to be done with rope. With her makeshift climbing accessories, she would probably be able to make it. Markman would not. If there were any chance of leaving, he would have to be lowered. She guessed his weight to be one hundred and ninety pounds. That was too much. She was not strong enough. She would lose him if she tried.

But, there was a way. There was enough rope. She needed a good pulley. The landing gear wheel. Remove the

rubber tire and it was a high-tension pulley assembly. It would be anchored to the aircraft's left engine. There was one other thing needed. She would have to figure that out, and she would have to climb down first to be sure it could be done.

Back inside, she looked at her rope building and couldn't face it. She found the hacksaw blade, and sat with the landing gear wheel and tire in her lap. The tire still had air pressure. She pushed on the little valve stem and sat patiently as the air hissed out. When it slowed, she began sawing the rubber with the hacksaw blade, a tedious, messy job. After forty-five minutes, she sat in a pile of black soot, but was able to pull the shredded tire off the wheel. With her hands and face blackened, she positioned the bare wheel and spun it. It turned easily and coasted to a stop. Looking like a grease mechanic, she cleaned up her mess as best she could and stood at the stove, wiping away the tire-black.

Markman had been out all day. She made some tea, transferred it to the thermos, and gently rubbed his shoulder. He stirred, but did not wake. She slid her hand under the clothing blanketing him and rubbed his chest. He turned his face to the side and briefly opened his eyes. Cassiopia sipped the tea, and continued to massage his shoulder and chest. He opened his blurry eyes, and looked at her. He tried to speak but his voice cracked and stalled.

"How are you feeling?"

Markman tried to lift his head, but quickly gave up. "The room is still spinning. It never stops."

"How do your legs feel?"

"Better, I think. How long was I out?"

"Just last night and half a day today."

"I take it we have not been rescued."

"No, but tomorrow, weather permitting, we're leaving." Cassiopia slipped her hand behind Markman's head, tipped it up, and held the warm tea to his lips. He drank, coughed, and drank more.

"I'll stay and you'll have a lot better chance of getting help."

Cassiopia put down the thermos, and wiped Markman's mouth. "We've already been over this. You're coming."

"You're crazy, Cass."

"We've already been over that too. I need you to drink more. Tea or water?"

Too weak to argue, Markman drank. He watched as she turned her attention to the upholstery on the seats. With the knife, she began cutting the leather and foam from the nearest seat.

"What now?" he asked

"The seat foam is glued to the leather. I'm going to cut patterns and make you boots and a hat, and a hat for me. The foam is porous. It will hold body heat really well. I'll wrap them around your feet and head and duct tape them in place. The greatest amount of heat is lost through the hands, feet, and head. If there's enough material, I'll probably make gloves."

Markman slipped back into unconsciousness.

As the day's end approached, Cassiopia gathered what she needed and began packing. On debris hill, she found a small bladder-type tank that would hold additional fuel. Inside, she sealed her canvas door and sat with the misshapen snowshoe frames, lacing and wrapping wire into a webbed pattern with loops in the center as footholds. When she was done, she crawled in with Markman, and stared at the fire. Too tired to worry, she held him and slipped into merciful sleep.

## Chapter 5

Morning light brought clearing and calm. Though the mountaintops and sky remained covered by haze, the surrounding landscape was vibrantly beautiful. It was now or never. Cassiopia gathered her things and slipped out without waking Markman. She tied off one end of her sixty-foot wire rope to the engine of the aircraft, went as close as she dared to the edge, and cast the remaining coil over the side. Removing the tarp from the front of the shelter, she overcame a moment of doubt and dropped it over the cliff.

With her friction hitch fastened to the rope, she maneuvered onto her stomach, and wiggled and pushed herself backwards toward the drop off. Holding dearly to the rope, her legs gradually slipped over the ledge. Panic set in, but with a few deep breaths, she willed herself down.

Swinging free, she was careful not to look down. With the greatest of care, she worked herself along the line, inches at a time. As her confidence grew and a pattern developed, she descended more quickly, and was surprised when her feet finally touched down safely. She brushed herself off, unhooked, and looked up, wondering if the climb back was really be possible. Her wire rope swayed and bumped in the light wind, seeming to promise it could be done.

The new area seemed stable. The precious tarp lay crumpled at her feet. With one foot, she piled snow on it to secure it. The ledge was at least six feet wide but folded over into another steep drop-off. It followed along the cliff-face and disappeared around a jagged rock outcrop twenty feet away. It looked wide enough for the sled. Cassiopia let go of her line, and cautiously waded through the snow toward the corner, keeping close to the wall for security. At the turn, she continued to hug the wall. The ledge felt solid. Around the rocky corner, she turned to look out over the new panorama.

The landscape was stunning. As far as she could see, rock peaks of all sizes dotted the distance, bordered by snow covered valleys. Some peaks rose up into the cloud haze, though most were well below it. Within the more distant valleys, crests of snow hid smaller mountains. The vista was intoxicatingly beautiful but frighteningly bleak. The ledge Cassiopia had followed continued downward. It wrapped around a long, deep section of concave cliff wall, forming a large winding canyon face. In the distance, and well below, it passed back in front of her and disappeared around another corner of black rock. From her position, it looked like a two or three mile downhill hike.

Nevertheless, it was achievable. As difficult as it looked, Cassiopia could not help feeling thankful. Had this path been a dead end, there would have been no hope of getting down. The long, curving path in front of her offered a chance

at a much lower altitude, and maybe a chance at getting off the mountain altogether. There was hope.

Not far in front of her, lay something else she had held out hope for. A pile of loose rock was nearly blocking the way. Assured the ledge was safe, she began collecting as many frost-covered stones as she could carry. She trudged back to her wire rope and let them fall to the ground. Opening the tarp, she spread it out near the hanging rope. One by one, she stacked the rocks in the center of the tarp, and then went back for more. As her pile grew, she gathered up the tarp and tested the weight. A few more trips and it seemed like enough. She wrapped the tarp into the shape of a bag, and fastened it to the end of her wire rope.

Setting up the friction hitches, she began stepping back up her line, inches at a time. When she had reached the top, she freed her foot and rolled up onto the cliff top. She crawled a safe distance from the edge and stood and brushed herself off.

Inside, Markman was awake. She pulled the cloth shield from her face, went to him and sat on the edge of the bed. "How are you?"

"Room still spinning like a bastard. Pisses me off. Headache won't quit."

"We're ready to go."

"I've decided I'm staying. There's no way you can take me with you. Your best chance is on your own."

"You're going. It'll be a lot easier if you help, but either way, you're going."

"Cass, it's impossible. Don't you see that? It's just not possible."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"Have you found a trail?"

"Yes. It looks good."

"What have you done? Have you made me crutches or something?"

"No crutches. You've got to stay off your feet. You're going on a sled."

"Are you saying you've built a sled now?"

"Yes. It's a good one."

"Geeez..."

"So, it's downhill all the way?"

"It's downhill alright."

"What do I need to do?"

"We need to get you into the sled. After that, your job will be to lay there and behave."

Cassiopia left him and moved the sled outside the door, its bottom packed with loose clothes. With his legs again tied securely together, he helped with his arms as she pulled him into the isle, and dragged him outside. She pushed him in the snow almost onto his front, set the sled on its side directly behind him, and rolled him back into it. He worked himself into the best position as she covered him with clothes. With sections of seat belt, she fastened him tightly in, keeping his arms hanging out and free.

"Now, that wasn't so bad was it?"

"No, except the freakin' white world is spinning like a top now."

Using her second long wire rope, Cassiopia fastened a hand-made hook at one end and used it to lower the bags and supplies down. Markman squinted to understand what she was doing, and gradually began to be alarmed. When she returned to the sled, he looked up at her and tried to focus.

"Is that a cliff over there, Cass?"

"Yep."

"How far down?"

"I'd say about forty feet."

"You're going to push me over that cliff, aren't you?"

"Yep. Do you trust me?"

"That sounds like a trick question. Is it steep?"

"Straight down, almost."

"I'm one-eighty-eight. You're not thinking you can lower that much weight, are you?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"Yeah, I trust you."

"Then you'll see."

Markman began to summon the Tibetan Tao Chane mental exercises used to prepare for death.

Cassiopia dragged the landing gear wheel to the aircraft engine, and fastened it. She fed the hanging sixty-foot wire rope through the wheel, making sure it seated properly. Grabbing the towline on Markman's sled, she positioned him feet first toward the drop-off, then hooked the sixty-foot line to the front of the sled, making sure the line was as tight as it could be. Using a shorter line, she secured her own body harness to the engine to prevent any chance of slipping over the edge. Back at the sled, she looked affectionately at Markman.

"Are you ready?"

Markman winced. "Are you ready?"

Cassiopia knelt and pushed the sled toward the cliff edge. As she did, the sixty-foot line pulled tightly against the wheel pulley. As his feet extended out over the drop-off, Markman resolved that it had been a worthwhile life. Finally, with the line continuing to tighten, the sled dipped down and Markman slipped over the edge into a vertical drop.

Still wincing, he opened his eyes and tried to make sense of the spinning world. There was spinning but no falling. He looked around and realized he was slowly descending. After a minute or so, something large passed by him on the way up. It was some kind of large bag of something. A few moments later, the bottom of the sled touched down and Markman slid sideways onto a ledge, half on his side, facing the wall. He had somehow arrived, having used the death prayers unnecessarily. The bags and supplies lay all around him. He craned his neck to see Cassiopia inching her way down. At the bottom, she smiled at him and repositioned the sled. She gathered the packs and supplies out of the way, and pushed the sled as far as it would go with its line still attached. Staring upward, she released the rope from the sled. Immediately the heavy tarp of rocks came crashing down nearby. She dumped the rocks, recovered the tarp, and began packing her supplies on top of Markman, then coiled up her ropes and plopped them down on his chest.

Markman tried to shake his head, but grimaced from the spinning. Once again, he tried to focus. "Did you make a damn elevator?"

"Pretty good, huh?"

"Well, yeah, but you could have told me."

"Don't you trust me?"

"I just went over a cliff for you. How's that?"

"Pretty good."

"What are those hand and foot hold things you used to climb down?"

"They're friction hitches. The actual name is Prusik Hitch."

"Here I go again, how did you know about those?"

"I owe it to my doctor. My doctor was rock climber. He had two dozen climbing magazines in his waiting room. The wait was usually about two hours. I read every one of them. I know a lot about climbing, but I've never done it, of course."

"Of course."

Last but not least, Cassiopia hoisted the precious oil-stove and tucked it into the net she had attached to the back of Markman's sled. With her backpack strapped on, she hooked the sled to the front of her harness, leaned back, and began pulling the well laden transport slowly along in a test of the drag. It took more strength to move it than she had hoped, but this stretch of ledge was essentially level. The downhill sections would be easier. The sled plowed through the snow, but did not bottom out. It rode obediently atop the cushion of white. As she continued, the back end tried to slide outward. She stopped several times and adjusted her harness to correct the problem. As she approached the first corner, the setup had stabilized nicely. Markman strained to twist his head around to look forward, but turned back from the vertigo.

The sharp corner took some planning and experimentation. The objective was to prevent the back end of the sled from swinging out over the drop-off. Cassiopia worked the problem by pulling the sled a short way forward, then stopping and coaxing the front around a bit. Repeating the process several times, the sled finally lined up on the far side of the turn. There, she paused to look at the long, descending path that led down and around the huge horseshoe canyon. She leaned against the cliff face and rested. Markman could stand the suspense no longer. He forced himself up and turned to look over the landscape. Even spinning it was both beautiful and ominous.

"Still think you made the right choice," he asked.

"There was no choice," she replied.

"I mean about doing this alone."

"There was no choice," she repeated, as she came to him and tucked in the supplies more tightly.

The journey down and around the long winding ledge slowly began. Cassiopia would disconnect herself from the sled, walk one hundred yards down the pathway to check it for safety, then return, hook up, and walking backwards, drag the sled along. The downhill pull was much easier. Keeping the sled pointed in the correct direction continued to be challenging. As they passed the first turn in the rock, luggage-sized chunks of snow crashed down around them from somewhere above. To Markman's dismay, Cassiopia tried to shield him with her body, though it turned out to be unnecessary. After clearing fallen snow from their path, the trek continued. Farther along, still more snow needed clearing from a wider section of ledge. After three hours of relentless pulling, the entire loop around the canyon was behind them.

The final sharp corner of rock dared Cassiopia to continue. She unhooked, and pushed her way through the snow and around the corner to check the way. New landscape came into view. The field of jagged mountaintops gradually gave way to snow covered hills. In the direction of their travel, a wide canyon of snow offered them flatland--if they could reach it. Cassiopia turned and looked back in the direction from where they had come. She was shocked to look up and see how high they had been. A pang of excitement raced through her as she realized they were nearly off the mountain. She looked ahead to see what the ledge-trail had to offer next, and stopped abruptly. A few feet away, her worst nightmare waited.

## Chapter 6

Cassiopia returned to her patient. Without speaking she began the backwards pulling, keeping the sled close to the wall. With patience, she managed to pull everything around the jagged corner. A few minor adjustments stabilized the sled, allowing her to shuffle ahead and look at the ominous monster a few feet away.

Even in his semiconscious state, Markman knew something was wrong. Wearily, he twisted his head back toward her. "What is it?"

She started to speak, but stopped, not sure of what to say. Markman forced himself up on one elbow and twisted around, trying to focus his spinning vision enough to understand.

It was a wide crevice dividing the ledge. Cassiopia stood at the edge of it looking down at the three hundred foot drop to rock and snow. It was ten feet across. On her right, the separation in the cliff wall seemed to go on forever, disappearing in a blur of dusting snow. Above her, the v-shaped cavity gradually widened. Ten or fifty feet above her head, a huge boulder was wedged between the walls, with a portion of it jutting out overhead. It was too high to reach.

Cassiopia looked at the drop off and sat down in the snow. The wind cut past her neck forcing her to gather her face covering together. It howled a threatening warning as it passed into the crevice. There was no going back, and there was no going forward. She had brought them to a dead end, in more ways than one. It wasn't her fault. There was no way anyone could have known the only way would be blocked. They should have stayed in the shelter of the wreck and hoped for rescue. She looked back at Markman and felt a touch of anger that they had come to this.

Markman understood. "Maybe you can find a way across. You can cover me up and come back with help."

Cassiopia was angry. "Don't insult my intelligence, Scott." Markman smirked. "No chance of that."

Cassiopia stared at him, as he lay covered with the braided wire rope, and other pieces of a broken airplane. She looked at the braided wire rope, and then up at the large stone wedged overhead. She looked again at the ten-foot gap in the ledge and then back at Markman. For several minutes, she looked over and over at the dilemma plaguing her. Her mind began working the problem.

Still huddled, she rose to her feet and stood staring. Back at the sled, she hooked back up and pulled Markman closer to the drop off. She gathered up her first fifty-foot roll of wire rope and went to the edge. With it wrapped it in loops, and one end tied off to her harness, she took careful aim and tried to throw the coil above the boulder overhang. It fell short, bounced off the side, and uncoiled down into the chasm. She wound it back up and tried again.

On the fifth try, it looped over and uncoiled down the other side. Quickly she retrieved the bar from along side Markman and used it to fish the hanging end of the rope back in. She dragged it to a point on the cliff wall where a rock niche allowed her to tie it off.

At the edge once more, she sat against the rope to convince herself it would hold. She backed away as much as it would allow, braced and ran outward toward the drop off. Near the edge, she skidded to a panic-stop and nearly fell, diving backwards to catch herself.

Markman worked himself up on one elbow and called out. "You can make it."

Cassiopia cursed under her breath. She stomped back, braced once more, and ran full out toward the jump. At the edge, she swung awkwardly outward, across the crevice, and slipped and skidded on opposite side. She staggered to a stop, and grabbed the rock wall to brace herself.

There was a moment of temptation to see what lay around the next corner, but the fear of being separated was too much. She braced once more, swung back across the gulf, and caught herself on the sled, almost crashing into Markman.

Markman fell back into his pillow of clothes. "That's it. You can go on. I will wait here."

With new hope, Cassiopia disconnected herself and secured her new swing line.

"If I go, you go."

"For cripes sake, Cass. Get real. If I stand up, the world would spin so fast I'd pass out, even if I could get a running start."

"Of course you would. You can't swing yourself over. It has to be done some other way. We can't risk re-injuring your legs, either. You could go into shock."

"So you go, and come back with help."

Cassiopia came up beside Markman and looked down at him threateningly. She pulled the cloth down from her mouth. "If you say that one more time, I'll never have sex with you again."

Markman looked hurt.

She narrowed her stare and began removing items from the sled. Markman's expression turned to one of doubt. After a moment of thought, he blurted out a short laugh. Cassiopia stopped and looked at him.

"Did you just laugh?"

Markman laughed again.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You!"

"Me? Why?"

"Cause you're lying. You'll never not have sex with me."

"What are you talking about? Are you delirious again?"

"I'm the only person on Earth who has ever been able to get close enough to even kiss you. There's no way you're never gonna have sex with me."

"Well, I could shut you off for a good while, Markman."

Markman sobered up and thought about it. "Oh my God, we sound like a married couple."

"Do not."

"Do to. We could be a married couple."

"We are not a married couple."

"But, we could be."

Cassiopia stopped unpacking the sled. "What do you mean by that?"

"Mean by what?"

"You just said we could be a married couple."

"I can't remember everything I said. I'm kind of delirious, you know."

Cassiopia stared at him in wonder, and resumed unpacking. When she was finished, she returned to the crevice and stood thinking. With luck, she could use the second sixty-foot rope to suspend the sled and swing it across, but it would be tricky. When she pulled him off the ledge, the weight of the sled would load and stretch the rope. The sled would end up lower than the ledge. She could then pull him across the chasm, but on a slippery, snow-covered surface, she might not be able to pull his weight back up and on. He'd be hanging over the gap with no way to get him up. She needed to raise the sled somehow before its weight stretched the rope.

She squeezed alongside Markman's unconscious form and backtracked to a spot where she had seen rocks along the trail. One at a time, she began lugging them back to his position. When enough had been collected, she tested the sled and found she could raise the front enough to shove the first of the smaller rocks beneath it. She added others around it then went to the back of the sled and did the same. Next, a stone border was set up along each side. Satisfied with her stone platform, she went to the front and began again. As the stone platform grew, the sled slowly rose higher and higher. After a half hour of jamming rocks in place, she had raised the sled about a foot off the ground.

With great care, she fastened the swing rope to the sled in four places, and threw it above the overhang. With the loose end captured, and secured, a shorter rope, rigged to the front of the sled, provided a pull line.

The sled's swing rope had to be fully tightened. With it as taut as possible, Cassiopia began to remove rocks from beneath the sled. As she pulled them out, the weight of the sled began to hang on the wire rope. Each rock was then carefully stacked to form a guiding wall on either side. With enough stones removed, the sled's full weight finally came to bear on the wire rope. Cassiopia stood and looked nervously at the suspended vehicle she had created, held in place

only by a few remaining rocks. Adrenaline pushed her up to her own sixty-foot line, then picked up the sled's pull line and spread it out so it could follow her across.

She checked Markman's straps a last time, got set, and swung over to the opposite ledge, catching the wall to stop her slide. With her own swing line disconnected and secured, she went to the edge and wrapped the sled's pull line around her waste.

With the first cautious tug, it quickly became apparent the sled was ready to fly. It dragged lightly across the remaining rock bed, moving easily enough that it scared her. She jerked to a halt and prayed for it to stop. To her relief, it paused, half on and half off the bed of rocks, its nose teetering from side to side, as though it wanted to be turned loose.

She had to be ready. On the next pull, it would come completely free and swing out over the drop. It would need a steady pull the rest of the way and then a capture so it would not swing back. It would all happen at once, and it would happen quickly. She suddenly realized she had tied the pull-line around her waist. If the worst happened and the sled fell, it would take her down with it. Cassiopia looked at Markman's unconscious form. A new feeling welled up inside her. She could not lose him now. That was not an option. Wherever he ended up, there she would be also, no matter what. She tightened the line around her waist.

With a last look around, Cassiopia braced herself. She took a step back and gave the line a steady pull. The sled obediently slipped off the rock bed and lurched forward. Hanging only from the wire rope, it glided toward her, and out over the drop off, swinging free. The wire rope creaked and stretched from the weight and motion. The sled glided under its own momentum, past the halfway mark. Cassiopia furiously reeled in the pull-line. As it approached her, the glide slowed. She hurriedly backed up and pulled with all her strength to keep it coming.

The stretched line had lengthened just the right amount. The sled struck its front end on the rock surface in front of Cassiopia and skidded in like an aircraft making a belly landing. It slid along a short distance, turning slightly inward, the back end trying to slip out over the cliff edge. Cassiopia leaned back with all her weight and yanked it straight until she realized it was safe to stop. Her risky plan had worked. She collapsed on her hands and knees and gasped for breath. After a moment to regain composure, she stood and looked everything over to reassure herself.

Tromping around the ledge still carrying the wire rope, unwilling to accept that everything was okay, she inspected the sled, and her swing line attachments. The wind howled a conciliatory groan. At last, she went to Markman, straightened the sled further, and gently collapsed atop him. She hugged him and kissed his cold cheek, and realized she was beyond exhaustion.

Unfortunately, the supplies were still on the other side. She couldn't risk leaving them. She forced herself up, and made the jump twice more, until the critical resources needed to remain alive were safely in hand. On the last trip, she set up a release for her swing line. The sixty-foot wire rope was too valuable to be abandoned. When it had been retrieved, it was finally time to set up a place to rest, and spend the night.

Around the first corner, a slow descent greeted her. Farther ahead, it ramped down even more steeply. A shallow, shoulder-high alcove in the cliff wall was a place available for partial escape from the elements. Cassiopia somehow found the strength to clear the snowdrift from it, and drag Markman underneath. She set her makeshift oil-stove near his feet, hammered hooks into the cracks in the cliff, and hung the canvas to enclose their place of refuge. Although her makeshift fire-piston readily yielded embers, flame was much more difficult to produce here. After a half hour struggle, Cassiopia finally got a wick to light, the flame on the stove the first comforting event of the day.

With everything stored, she squeezed between the low ceiling and Markman's unconscious form, and worked herself beside him and under the covers. It was enough jostling that Markman stirred. He looked over at her and struggled to wake fully.

"Where are we?"

Cassiopia tucked him in. "We're in for the night."

"Am I on the other side of that drop-off?"

"Yes dear."

"How the hell did I get across it?"

"You swung."

"Uh-huh. Did you just call me dear?"

"You might be delusional again."

"You know, my headache is worse, the damn world is spinning faster, but holding on to you helps."

"Yes. Me too."

Markman's eyes fluttered closed. Cassiopia pulled the covers up partially over his face and rested her head on his shoulder. Cold sleep came immediately.

## Chapter 7

Cassiopia slept longer than planned. Darkness had summoned another long, impossibly cold night, but somehow in the early morning hours she had drifted off into a better sleep. Maybe it was the lower altitude. She crawled over Markman and freed the bottom of the tarp to slip out.

It was a new day. Looking back in the direction they had come, the gapping crevice seemed to salute her. For the first time, the clouds had lifted, leaving sharp blue sky in every direction. Long morning shadows from snow-covered peaks cast dark columns across the wide, white valley that awaited them. There was a new smell in the air, evergreen. Cassiopia touched her forehead, and wiped frost from above her eyes. A strange calm in the wind seemed to anticipate her conquest of the mountain.

The way ahead was steep and well-defined, but led to new challenges. The ledge headed downward so sharply, she would have to guide the sled from behind to avoid being run over and losing control. The path appeared to follow the cliff wall for about a half mile, then began to gradually narrow, ending when it became part of a very long hillside that dropped sharply down and leveled at the canyon floor. The long slope of the hillside looked like a skier's best dream, steep near the top, then gradually curving up into a fast downhill run. Cassiopia began gathering her things and packing them. Nothing seemed to wake Markman this morning. It worried her. When the sled was loaded, she pulled it from the alcove, and lined up along the ledge. She strapped on her harness but did not hook up. Holding to the front lines, she dragged the sled in increments until it bordered the steep ramp down. At the back of the sled, she fastened wire rope, and pulled on each side to be sure some degree of steering was available. Markman did not budge. His eyes did not open.

As the sled moved down the new ramp, Cassiopeia's lines pulled tight. She had to lean back sharply to hold her own. One awkward step at a time, she maneuvered down the ledge. The point where the trail gave way to the hillside was only about one hundred feet away now and quickly growing nearer. A few yards farther down, Cassiopia's feet slipped out from under her and she fell in the track of the sled. Keeping tension on the line, she regained her feet and recovered. After an exhausting battle of slipping and sliding, they neared the narrowest part of the ledge. They could go no further. The slide down the steep snow-covered hillside was unavoidable.

Cassiopia had no tricks left in her bag. She would not be able to control the sled down the hill. Markman remained sleeping or unconscious, which made little difference since he would have no control, as well. Without the sled, she could probably work her way down safely, but could she bring herself to let him free-slide down?

The hillside looked smooth. There were no rock outcroppings visible, but it was a very long, deep hill. The sled would reach a high speed, and if it flipped or crashed, that would be unthinkable.

There was no choice. Cassiopia fished her homemade snowshoes from the supplies and rotated the sled toward the downhill. She knelt beside Markman and kissed his cold cheek. She hugged him and thought a silent prayer. With gentle manipulation, she guided the aircraft aluminum over the rounded side of ledge, aimed it as best she could, and reluctantly allowed it to pull away.

The sled dove. The curled front end plowed into the white powder, resurfaced and plowed in again. The tail came around as though it would pass the front, but the hill was too steep and the snow too deep. It straightened out and picked up speed as the slope curved into a downhill run. Traveling at a good clip, it again turned sideways, kicking up a wave of white, then lined up the front end and accelerating even more. After a few seconds of straight downhill, it again began to rotate sideways, and this time did not stop. It spun a complete one hundred and eighty degrees and ran down the hill backwards, dropping off pieces of clothing as it went. As the back of the sled accumulated snow, the rotation began once more. Cassiopia gasped and held her hand to her mouth as Markman spun in circles down the base of the hillside. As the grade began to level, the sled righted itself again, and slid gently to a stop, far in the distance.

Cassiopia wanted to cheer, but found her mouth too dry. She held her throat, and stared intently to see if Markman had awakened. There was no movement. She collected herself, keeping an eye on him. The snowshoes were easy to strap on, the wire-loops closed nicely around her upholstery boots. She stood and stomped around in them a few steps to test their mobility. No problem. She went to the side of the drop off, and carefully positioned one foot over the edge in the snow. Cautiously, she brought the next shoe over to position it beside the first. She never made it.

Cassiopia flailed her arms wildly in a windmill and went over backwards. She tumbled and rolled down the mountainside like an extreme skier who had lost a ski at the very top of the hill. She continued down, sometimes rolling and rolling, occasionally head over heels, other times in a swan dive. Near the crest at the bottom of the hill, she went into a face-first slide and completed her indignant run with her head buried in a pile of accumulated snow.

With an appropriate pause for dignity, she pushed herself up onto her hands and looked around. Adding insult to injury, a snowshoe slide past her on the left and continued without her. A moment later, the other passed by, as well. She pushed up into a sitting position and searched for injury. There did not seem to be anything new. She climbed to her feet and inspected all the moving parts. Everything seemed in working order. Markman was one hundred feet ahead, still not moving. She brushed herself off and sunk into the deep snow on her way to him. He seemed okay. The supplies on the sled were disheveled, but except for a few pieces of clothes, everything was still there. She stood and looked out across the landscape. Immediately a new flush of hope filled her. Not far ahead, there were trees, and beyond the trees a river of running water. She turned to look for the snowshoes and realized she was completely exhausted. Though the fall down the hillside had not injured her, it had taken what strength she had left. She collapsed along side the sled and leaned against Markman's sleeping form. Gently she opened one of his eyes. The dilation seemed fixed and unnatural. It frightened her. She pushed herself up and staggered around to regain her snowshoes. With them securely reattached to her feet, it took only a few steps to realize they worked well. She reconnected the sled to her harness, and looked ahead to choose a path. Thankfully, it was still a gentle downhill grade. The river sounded promising. Society considered rivers to be a desirable asset. Following it downstream would almost certainly lead to civilization, if she could just keep going.

Cassiopia leaned forward and tugged on the sled. It did not budge. She lunged forward and it pushed up onto the snow and followed. It did not require any additional strength. It was just that she had grown weaker. She trudged forward, gaining a few dozen yards, and stopped to rest. The gentle slope she was traversing was cooperative. In several places, Markman's sled took off slowly on its own and coasted downward, leaving her to gradually catch up and reconnect. After two hours of pulling, falling down, and crawling along, they reached the border of the rushing water. Cassiopia wrestled the sled into alignment, and looked ahead. There were more trees, and snow capped underbrush in places.

At the edge of the thickening woodland, she dragged the sled within the forest and found a place in a clearing where branches and brush would support the tarp for shelter. There was daylight left, but there was no strength to take advantage of it. With her tarp enclosure constructed, and Markman moved in, she looked ahead at the woods that bordered the river. It looked like a trail or path could possibly be just beyond, but she did not care. She could barely think at all. She struggled to hammer her fire piston and coax its precious embers to flame, as a light snow began to fall. When the trusty oil stove came to life, she once again buried herself in covers with Markman, and prayed he would hold on. It did not occur to her that she needed help as much as he.

## Chapter 8

Day six began badly. It had snowed most of the night. Packs had been left outside and were almost completely covered. Cassiopia had to wrestle with the tarp to get out because a snowdrift had piled up against it. She was having trouble thinking. She knew it was time to pull the sled, but she did not know why. She did not understand why she was here. The sled had to be pulled. That was the only rule. There did not seem to be any urgency about it. There was no reason to hurry. Plenty of pulling had already been done, and there would probably be more tomorrow, so why hurry?

Cassiopia staggered around collecting things and misplacing them. She would gather this and that, bring it all together, and then forget why. She took down the tarp without first moving Markman, but the bumping and banging did not cause him to wake. With everything haphazardly assembled, Cassiopia wondered where to go. A short distance through the trees, there seemed to be a path. She shuffled and slipped her way to it and found a trail covered by new snow that headed downward along the river. She stood in the middle of it and forgot what she was doing. As she turned to walk away, she slipped and fell on her hands and knees. Getting up, there was something hard under the snow. She dug out a section and found it was blacktop. She looked up and realized it was a paved road. That seemed like a good thing, though she wasn't sure why.

Then a ditch along side the road held back the sled. Cassiopia had to work to gain a few inches at a time. It was well past noon by the time she finally had the sled on the road, and another twenty minutes of rest before beginning the slow trudge down it. Back at the campsite, the precious stove and its fuel remained tucked under a bush where they had been mistakenly left behind.

As the trek continued, it began to snow once more. The roadway became steep and well-covered making the pull almost easy. Through the trees, Cassiopia thought she saw a reflection in the distance, but it was of no real interest. The road became winding and less wooded, the sun just touching the tree tops to the west. A sharp turn forced Cassiopia to stop and jerk the sled around to make the corner. When she turned back, something ahead came into view.

Buildings. Here was an unplowed street, with buildings along side it. Shadows were forming from the setting sun. The light was dimming. Cassiopia lugged the sled ahead and was soon in front of the first buildings. Joe's Radiator Shop. Across from it, Ann's Antiques. There were no lights on, and no cars out front. Cassiopia kept pulling. Three more buildings ahead and then there was a house with a porch, and lights were on. She dragged Markman along in the center of the street until she was directly in front of the first home's mailbox. Lights were on in several other houses along the way. There was something she was supposed to do now, but she could not quite remember what it was. She was here for a reason, what was it? She stood staring ahead, trying to get her mind to work.

Margaret Cummings watched the evening weather and shook her head. Snow again. She pointed the remote at the set and switched it off, then went to the window and pulled back the curtain to check the weather herself. Something outside startled her.

"Oh my! Frank, you'd better come take a look at this."

Her husband put down his hot chocolate and peered out from the kitchen. "What is it?"

"It's a homeless person out in the street pulling a sled full of junk."

Frank came along side his wife and looked out with her. His neighbor's porch light had just come on. "We've got to go out there, Peg. We can't let anyone try to stay outside all night in this weather."

They grabbed their coats, and headed for the front door. Farther down the street, other lights had come on, and others were making their way outside to see what was going on. A small group of people approached the strange, cloaked figure in the middle of the snow-covered road.

The man first to arrive spoke, "Hello. I'm Reverend Harrison. You look like you could use some help tonight."

Cassiopia tried to speak, but could not get the words to come out. She stood staring blankly at the kind man in front of her, as the cloth across her face suddenly fell away.

Reverend Harrison's expression changed to shock at the sight of the young woman behind the mask. "Where have you come from?" he asked, and he reached out one hand.

Cassiopia's eyelids fluttered and her eyes rolled up in her head. She fell forward into the arms of the Reverend, and the world spun down into darkness.

## Chapter 9

Bright florescent light. Antiseptic smell. Crisp white sheets bordered by chrome side rails. A tube from the left arm running up to a clear bag hanging from a silver stand. The noises of busy people. Who am I?

Cassiopia looked over the room as the volatile memories of days recently passed flowed back into her mind. She touched her forehead where there was a sore spot, and found it covered by a big band aid. The movement alerted someone nearby.

"Oh! You're awake!"

The woman wore green scrubs and a hair net. She turned and waved through the big glass window, motioning to someone outside. "How do you feel?"

"Where am I?"

"ParissMedicalCenter in Morgantown."

"Scott..."

"Your husband is stable and receiving treatment. You're in ICU. He's in the next room."

"How long have I been here?"

"You arrived yesterday evening. You've been asleep a little more than twenty-four hours. The doctor asked to be notified as soon as you were awake. He'll be in shortly to answer the rest of your questions."

"My father. I need to let him know..."

"He's on his way."

Cassiopia clutched at the sheet with both hands and wondered if it had all been a dream. Before she could decide, a middle-aged man in a white lab coat with a stethoscope in one hand and a chart in the other came speeding in. He stood close at the side of the bed and stared down affectionately.

"I'm Doctor Palmer. Quick look in your eyes?"

Cassiopia looked up at him as he flashed his light into each eye. She could not hold back her concern. "Scott?"

"What's your relationship?"

"We're engaged."

The doctor lifted his chart, grabbed the pen attached to it, and wrote something. "I'm sure you know patient info is confidential. Under the circumstances, I'll accept that. The swelling is down in his legs. They've been stabilized with braces and will be fine. His blood count is almost back to normal. He's out of danger for the time being."

"For the time being?"

"There's still the concussion. Dr. Shauani from neurology will be in to brief you on that."

"Is he awake?"

"No, and they do not want him awake right now. But, as I've said, Dr. Shauani will need to discuss this with you. It would be wrong of me to say any more. I am not up to date enough on his treatment."

"Has he been awake at all?"

"Let's wait for Dr. Shauani. Let's talk about you instead. Besides the bruising, the hypothermia, the dehydration, mild frostbite on the fingers and toes, and the exhaustion, any other problems I'm not aware of?"

"I don't think so. My father's coming?"

"Wild horses could not hold that man back. I understand he's on a flight that comes in tonight sometime. We were hoping you'd be awake when he arrived. We also heard from a friend of yours, a federal agent named Ann Rogers. When we were trying to ID you, we ran your info through the FBI database, and got a call from her. She's flying in to see if she can help in any way."

"When might I be discharged?"

"Well, how many days and nights were you out there?"

"I'm not sure. It was four or five, or more."

"How did you keep warm?"

"I made a stove."

The doctor paused as though he thought it might be a joke. "The NTSB is anxious to speak with you, but I can put them off until tomorrow, unless you feel up to answering questions."

"Perhaps I'd better. We never knew what happened to the pilot."

"I'd like to keep you for at least a day or two, do some more blood work, let you get your strength back, and watch for any unexpected complications. But, we can talk more about that tomorrow."

"When can I see, Scott?"

"Dr. Shauani will work that out with you. He'll be stopping in sometime this evening. I'll let him know you're anxious."

The doctor made some more marks on his chart, tucked it under his arm, and smiled. "The front office will be in with some standard release forms. Nothing at all to worry about. You're both in good hands. Is there anything you need at the moment?"

"I'm starved."

"I've cleared you for normal diet, but you'd better go easy to start. We'll have something brought up right away."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"I'll be back later to check on you." He smiled once more and left.

Two NTSB representatives arrived soon after with fewer questions than she had expected. They had already found the wreckage, including the cockpit section with the pilot's body. It had come to rest at a much higher elevation, north of where the fuselage had ended up. The emergency locator transmitter had been found smashed. Having seen the location of the fuselage, they remained somewhat incredulous at how a one hundred and twenty pound girl had carried a full-grown man down the side of the mountain, and grew even more astonished as the story unfolded. Cassiopia became fatigued trying to explain it. They ended the interview by apologizing for not having found her. Trying to avoid mountain peaks, the pilot had flown farther south than would have been expected. In addition, thick cloud cover had cost the search teams several days. After a few questions about the smoke and engine problems, they asked for a second visit at some future date, then wished her well. They left shaking their heads in amazement.

As blessed sleep began to overtake her, an attendant from the front office peered through the haze, asking for signatures. Cassiopia signed without reading, and tried to explain she had no insurance card or ID. The attendant patted her on the shoulder, apologized for the intrusion, and told her it was okay. Besides, the institute had guaranteed payment in full for everything, so finance did not need anything further. Cassiopia did not understand, but was too tired to care. She drifted off while the woman was still speaking.

The morning began with a covered plate and juice beside the bed. Cassiopia found cold, over-easy eggs beneath it and attacked them like a voracious wolf. As she sucked in the heavenly-flavor of apple juice through the flexible straw, a representative from the front office appeared asking for more documentation. Having only a vague recollection of the past evening, Cassiopia once again tried to explain to the finance representative that she had lost all her ID, and again the rep explained she should not worry, the institute had certified payment in advance for all services rendered. When Cassiopia asked, "What institute?" the rep looked confused and promised to return with that information. As the rep tried to leave, a haggard-looking Professor Cassell came charging in, looking as though he did not believe his daughter

was actually there, but desperately needing confirmation that she was able to survive more than a few minutes. He dropped a beat-up brown suitcase, and equally abused briefcase outside the door and tromped in like a charging rhinoceros. His wrinkled, out-dated gray suit-coat caught on the door latch as he entered, and he had to wrestle the narrow, stripped brown tie out of the way to free it. His short, gray beard was askew, and he pushed back the thinning gray hair from his forehead as he charged in. He dove to the bedside and clutched Cassiopia so hard she had to reposition herself to breath. He remained with his head buried in her pillow, sobbing to a point that the business rep became embarrassed and excused herself.

When enough composure had been regained, the Professor surfaced, looked at his daughter, and it began all over again. Slowly, he reassured himself that his broken heart had been mended by angels, and came up for air and stared, still clutching her tightly.

"Cassiopia, I thought I had lost you."

"We're both going to be okay, Father."

"I fear it will take some time for that to sink in," he replied, as he wiped at his eyes. "Are you injured?"

"No, just some soreness and a bruise or two. Scott has two broken legs and a concussion, though."

"You said he'll be okay?"

"I think so. They haven't let me see him yet. I was supposed to talk to his doctor last night but I think I fell asleep. If anyone asks, Scott and I are engaged, okay? It's the only way they'll give me information."

"So you are okay, then?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm just here for observation. I don't think they'll keep me long."

"What do we need to get you?"

Cassiopia thought. "I don't know if I have any clothes or anything. I don't remember how I got here."

"Well, I shall go and procure the finest hotel room nearby, and garner all things possible that you may have need of. And, I need to hear the whole story, daughter. I need to know exactly what happened to you, as soon as you feel up to telling it."

"It feels like a bad dream. It just doesn't seem real."

Professor Cassell stroked his daughter's forehead. He smiled for the first time. "You are okay. That's the main thing."

"Father, you've left the TEL robot at home alone?"

"Yes. It sends its greetings. At least that's what it said when I gave it instructions about my absence. I do not know why a machine would find it logical to send greetings. I can only assume your tinkering with its A.I. continues to evolve."

"It sent me greetings? The Tel said to say hello?"

"Yes, and that is not all. I was caring for Mr. Carlial's pet beagle when this all happened. He's also hospitalized, for a quadruple bypass. I had to instruct the Tel to feed the dog twice a day through the fence."

Cassiopia laughed out loud, and then paused in surprise that she had. "You have a TEL 100D robot taking care of the neighbor's dog?"

"Yes, and believe me it worries me, but I had no other choice. As I was leaving I caught it downloading some material on canine care and feeding, 'It's the Dog or You' or something like that. I fear the thing will become obsessed somehow with that dog, but that should be impossible for a computer, I think."

Cassiopia smiled, then again became concerned. "Father, it's not safe to leave the house unguarded. You've already had a break-in not that long ago."

"It's actually quite alright, my dear. When you first became lost, I received a call from a police officer, a Sergeant Daniel Parrish. He was concerned about Scott. Said he was a close friend. When they notified me you had been found, I called him, and he promised to check on the house daily. So thanks to Mr. Markman, we now have police protection watching over the homestead."

"Daniel Parrish? I don't know him."

"Having spoken to him at length, I can assure you we are in good hands."

Cassiopia started to reply when another figure appeared in the doorway. Ann Rogers leaned in, "Should I come back in a little bit?"

Cassiopia smiled. "No, please, come in. It's good to see you, Ann."

Rogers entered and paused at the foot of the bed. Her black business suit was wrinkled, her dark hair captured loosely behind her head. She looked tired but too concerned to care. She came around and stood beside Professor Cassell, resting her hands on the bed's guardrail.

"Wow, Cassiopia! From the preliminary NTSB report, I expected worse!"

"Have you seen Scott?"

"Not yet. But, how are you?"

"I'm okay. Just a few bumps and bruises. Father, this is Ann Rogers, the agent who helped us in New York."

Ann extended a hand. "Actually it's the other way around Professor. It's an honor to finally meet you. Have you heard the story of how she came down from that mountain?"

"No, and it frightens me to think about it."

"It hasn't been publicly released yet, but the story is spreading like wild fire. Some people are calling it the miracle on the mountain. Cassiopia, I'm afraid you may become a celebrity of sorts from this."

"I was told they found the crash site. Do you know if they recovered any of our belongings? My laptop was in my briefcase."

"I'll keep checking on that for you. Believe it or not, they did find your stove and fuel. The NTSB is very thorough about checking out people's stories. They retraced the path you took and found that stuff under a bush just outside of town. It's amazing."

Cassiopia stared into the distance. "My stove," she said, and her heart felt heavy at the memory.

Rogers began to add something but was interrupted by someone entering. A doctor with oriental features stopped just inside and nodded to everyone. He looked at Cassiopia and came to the side of the bed next to them. He wore a blue scrubs, and carried a clipboard in his right hand. He smiled and evaluated Cassiopia. His accent was barely noticeable.

"Ms Cassell, I'm Doctor Shauani. I'm the neurologist overseeing Mr. Markman's case. I've been told you are his

fiancé'?"

Ann Rogers' eyebrows raised, but she said nothing.

"Yes, that's right. How is he?"

"Normally we'd need more than just word of mouth to release medical information, but we haven't been able to locate any family for Mr. Markman. Do you know if there's anyone we should contact?"

"No, just me. This is my father, and this is Ann Rogers, a close friend of his."

The doctor turned and nodded to them. He spoke sympathetically. "Would you both mind if I spoke with Ms. Cassell privately?"

Rogers nodded and stepped out. The Professor lingered, not wanting to leave. Finally, he yielded and joined Rogers outside the window. The doctor swung the door shut.

"I did not oversee the fractures, but they are doing exceptionally well. There should be no lasting effects from those. The concussion is an item of concern, however."

"Is he awake?"

"No, and if he did regain consciousness we would likely need to induce coma. There is still too much swelling."

"Has he been awake at all?"

"No, and as I've just said, that is most desirable at this time."

"I don't understand."

"Ms. Cassell, has Mr. Markman had any other head injuries of any kind in the recent past?"

"Well, yes. He fell and hit his head on a boat."

"Do you know what level of concussion was diagnosed at that time?"

"Yes, they said it was a grade two. Does that affect this injury somehow?"

The doctor drew a stool from nearby and sat down. "Yes, I'm afraid it does. There's been quite a bit of study these days on repetitive head injuries. We've learned a lot. Did the injury you just described occur within the past year?"

"Yes."

"There is an accumulative effect from repeated head trauma. We've done a CT scan, and some other tests. We do not see any sign of leptomenigeal incidence, those are like cysts caused by the injury, and that's good. The hematoma is significant, but we do not see any continued hemorrhaging from it. But, clearly this is what is referred to as a complex concussion. The worrisome part is that we do not see the significant brain activity we would like to at this point."

"But he will recover. It just may take time, right?"

"In these cases, we can never be sure how long recovery may take. There just are no indicators for us to gage what level of recovery there will be, or how long it will take."

"Well what happens now?"

"Surgery is not called for. It's been too long since the accident. This will be a wait and see situation for the time being."

"Can I see him?"

"Yes, as much as you want to, as soon as your doctor approves you to get up, and I'm sure that will be later today after his next visit. He'll want you on your feet as soon as possible."

"And you will continue to treat Scott, and keep me informed everyday."

"Yes."

"I lost my cell phone in the crash. I'll get new one right away. When I'm released, I'll have a room nearby. I'll be available anytime day or night."

"Ms. Cassell, I'd say you are quite an extraordinary person. I've been told some of your story. I think you should know that the cold played a significant part in reducing his injury. That and the fact that you protected him from the elements and kept him minimally hydrated are the reasons he is still with us. He would not have made it if you hadn't been there. I have no doubt that if anyone can will Mr. Markman back to health, you can."

"Thank-you Doctor. Please do everything possible."

The doctor rose and nodded. "Be assured, I already am." He turned and blocked the door open. Outside he paused to speak to Professor Cassell and Rogers, then disappeared around the corner.

The Professor and Rogers returned.

Rogers asked, "What did he say?"

Cassiopea repeated in detail everything she had been told. When she was done, the three of them paused in silence, unsure of what to feel.

## Chapter 10

Escape from bed was not as easy as expected. Cassiopea had decreed that the nursing assistant on each arm was embarrassing and unnecessary, but when she stood, her legs suddenly abandoned her. She drooped into their grasp, then forced herself back up to find she was perched upon something akin to spaghetti. A few steps gave an excellent imitation of the rubber-legged scarecrow from Oz. Fatigue and irritation quickly set in, so she was relegated to a wheelchair, as the doctor still wished her to be up and about. She begrudgingly agreed, but only after realizing the arrangement allowed her to visit Markman.

What she found disturbed her. There were two many tubes and wires. A feeding tube came from the mouth. Intravenous lines in both arms with multiple bags hanging from each stand. A pulse sensor was on the left middle finger, and two sensors attached to each temple area. From the chest, a wire emerged leading to other equipment. Markman's hands rested at his sides, his eyes closed. He was breathing on his own, but apart from that, he looked bionic. Cassiopea's emotions ran the gambit from angry, to disappointed, to worried, to a soul search for hope. She wanted him to awake now that she was here.

She coasted up to him, and placed a hand on his cheek, just as she had on the mountain. His face was warm and soft now, recovered from the harsh, bitter winter they had escaped. She decided to adopt hope, summarily dismissing all misgivings. She squeezed his upper arm, and held to it, then rested her head on the side of the bed and fell asleep.

Her own recuperation was rapid. By morning, she was walking short distances unassisted and made trips up and down the hallway outside ICU. The Professor arrived early with clothes and other necessities. Rogers showed up at noon and had lunch in the cafeteria with them. She planned to stay a day or two in case Markman improved. Dr. Palmer finally agreed to discharge Cassiopia the next day, provided someone was on hand around the clock to keep an eye on her. Markman's condition remained unchanged.

When the time came to be wheeled out to the rental car, Cassiopia had problems. It did not feel right leaving Markman behind. She would stay nearby and return daily, of course, but that wasn't enough. He should be with her. They had arrived together. Why weren't they leaving together? With urging from her father and Rogers, she dejectedly climbed into the car for the ride to the hotel.

A number of tasks demanded Cassiopia's attention in the days that followed. She replaced her cell phone and added a second one to her account, for Markman. There had been no sign of her briefcase or laptop on the mountain, so time was invested replacing those things. Dozens of requests for interviews by news media were rejected out of hand, though her escape from the mountain was quite adequately reported, even without her.

At the end of the week, a call came from Dr. Palmer's office. Would Cassiopia meet him at the hospital that afternoon for a consultation? She went early, and sat by Markman's sleeping form. The Doctor arrived a short time later and motioned her to follow.

In his office, he shut the door and sat behind his desk. He leaned back and seemed to relax.

"How have you been?"

"I'm doing quite well, better everyday."

"Kind of a miracle after what you went through."

"I still need a miracle," she replied.

"It's time we made a change. That's why I've called you in."

"What kind of change do you mean?"

"I see no promise of Mr. Markman coming out of coma any time soon. Please don't let that get you down. It's not to say he won't awaken tomorrow, for all we know. But, at this point, we need to set him up for long-term care for several reasons. He needs to start physical therapy. Do you know what that means?"

"Exercising his arms and legs?"

"Exactly, but it's more than that. A physical therapist will manage that care and monitor it. A good long-term care facility will do a much better job of hygiene and other special needs. ICU was never intended for long-term patients. At this point, we're in the perfect position to relocate him."

"Where might we go, and how do I manage the costs?"

"I don't understand. I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"The Neila Endowment. They have already registered to cover all expenses. They have arranged an opening at the Leadstrom Institute for him. It's the premier trauma research center in this country. To be honest, I was kind of shocked that they got him in there. The openings are usually few and far between. They will even provide the transportation. State of the art. I can't tell you how glad I am that one of my patients will be picked up by them."

"I know nothing of any of this. Who do I ask?"

"Finance or maybe the case worker. That would be a start. Mr. Markman must have some kind of coverage you're not aware of. Was any of his family in the military?"

"Oh, yes. His father was a high level Air Force officer."

"Well, this may be some benefit related to that or something."

"When should he be moved?"

"You need to see our social worker and she'll help you get power of attorney. From that point on, you'll have no problems managing his personal business. Let me know when that's done, and we'll set up the transfer. You need to do that soon. ICU needs the space."

Cassiopia thanked the doctor and began a ghost hunt through the hospital to find the right people. Most of the paperwork was easy. Finding information about the Neila Endowment was not. Finance knew only that a committee managed it. They did not know who or where. There was a post office box for contact. It was in WashingtonD.C., so was the Leadstrom Institute.

Back at the hotel, she explained everything to her father, who seemed as confounded as she. She made calls to Rogers and to Dan Parrish and brought them up to date. Parrish assured her the house was fine, but he had not seen the neighbor's beagle. Afterward, she lay on the hotel bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to feel assured that the move was a good thing, finally consoling herself by promising to be there every step of the way.

## Chapter 11

The day of transfer was gray overcast and cold. The specially designed van sent for Markman looked state of the art with video monitors in the driver's compartment, satellite-linked to the hospital. The team of three EMTs handled the sleeping patient as though he were the president, their journey precisely mapped out beforehand using carefully selected routes. Cassiopia sipped coffee from a cardboard cup by the loading area, waiting to follow.

The trip was uneventful. When they arrived at the Leadstrom Institute emergency entrance, a security guard prevented Cassiopia from following, directing her instead to visitor parking around front.

Inside, the private hospital was so clean and modern it resembled an art museum. Beyond the reception area,

advanced electronics in everywhere. Staff was present at every turn. They seemed friendly but not very approachable. A receptionist wearing a blue-green collared shirt and dark slacks found Cassiopia in the hallway. Her brown hair was very short and she did not seem to have a smile. She wore a big white badge on her breast pocket. Markman would be cared for on the fourth floor. Cassiopia followed her to an elevator, and together they stood silently for the ride up. He looked no worse for wear. There were fewer attachments on his body, though the room contained twice as many electronic devices. The bed was much more modern, the room quite large. There was a window overlooking a park. City lay beyond it. After a brief wait, no less than three specialists greeted Cassiopia. They were working the case together. There was to be much testing. She should not hope for rapid results. If his condition did not digress, that would be good news. Her presence would always be considered beneficial. There were no visiting hours in these cases. She could come and go as she pleased, although at times he would be away for testing or therapy.

The days following became instant replays, each one a blueprint for the next. Cassiopia resumed her work through the internet, and spent hours trying to coax Markman awake. A week passed with no encouraging signs, although his condition remained stable. There were occasionally signs of increased brain activity, but never anything consistent.

Three weeks into the ordeal, hotel life began to be unbearable, and a routine visit with one of the neurologists left Cassiopia feeling deprived of hope. Yes, Mr. Markman was doing okay. No, there were no signs of improvement but that could be expected at this stage. No, there was still no way to gauge if this would be short or long term.

Cassiopia's mind began to work. No longer emotionally depleted from thoughts of the crash, the analytical processes in her psyche were in full swing. Markman's legs had healed almost completely. There had been no permanent damage to the brain. He was perfectly healthy. The only thing wrong was that he was not awake. She wondered if it was time to start hitting the medical books to find something the doctors had missed. She could focus on the most recent articles addressing head trauma. She could learn their language. She could speed read faster than most people could count. Still, that didn't seem like a good answer. The doctors on Markman's case were no amateurs. They were masters. If she could do anything, it would have to be from another direction, another point of view. Cassiopia went to her hotel room window and looked out at the blue sky. She glanced down at the sill where a card from her father stood. It was signed, 'The Absent-Minded Professor'.

Cassiopia froze. A radical idea suddenly flashed in front of her and dominated her mind completely. The thought of it frightened her.

The phone at the Cassell residence began to ring. In a coincidence more rare than a total eclipse of the moon, the Professor was upstairs and willing to answer. He raised the handset, suddenly wondered why he had, and spoke cautiously. "Yes?"

"Father, it's me."

"Cassiopia, is everything alright?"

"There's been no change. It's not worse, but it's not better."

"I'm sorry. How are you holding up?"

"Okay. I'm coming back for a few days. I need to talk to you about something important. Will you be there?"

"I have only a chemistry class left this week, an affair I fear more than death itself. There are two football hulks in the class who have managed to set fire to their workstation twice in the past two weeks. Once more and I fear the university will require me to have a fire marshal present for the classes. I do not know how these jocks have managed to survive this long. I can only assume that women are intervening and keeping them alive."

Cassiopia stifled her laugh. "Father, your note said the Tel was fine when you got back. Is everything else okay?"

"The robot? Oh yes, the robot. The blasted thing has opened the neighbor's fence gate and brought the dog into the house. I have told it to take the animal back, and it acknowledges, but never does. I am at a loss as to what to do about it."

"I'll help when I get there. Don't worry."

After making sure the hotel desk clerk understood that she was not checking out, Cassiopia secured a seat on the first available flight to Orlando, a red-eye that would arrive at 6:05 A.M. Her mind became so completely engaged that time-of-day and changing geography were of little interest. She did not sleep and was barely aware of her travel until the taller buildings of Orlando came into view. With her rental car secured, she headed straight for her father's.

He was sipping tea in the den when she barged in. She tossed her only bag on the living room couch, and in the den paused briefly to admire the shiny, silver Tel robot at rest in its favorite spot in the corner. She plunked down in the seat facing her father's desk, leaned forward and spoke with resolve. "Father, I want to use the SCIP doorway."

Her father had opened his mouth to greet her. He coughed, spilling his tea into the saucer, struggling and fumbling to regain control of it. "Cassiopia!"

"I know it's badly damaged. If we work together, we can bring it back fairly quickly. I've been working the problem in my head. I know what to do."

"Cassiopia!"

"We can use safeguards against the previous problems we've had. I would only need it for a short time. You would be there monitoring everything. It's exactly what we need."

The Professor stared down at his desk, carefully placing his recovered teacup down. "Cassiopia, the three of us agreed that blasted device should never be used again."

"Yes, but the situation has changed."

"Oh dear. I see where this is going."

"Yes. I can bring Scott back."

"You are grasping at straws. What you propose would be extremely dangerous, and unlikely to succeed."

"No. It is just what we need."

"You think you are going to open a door to another dimension, find a single individual, and cause him to wake from coma? That's just what we need? Someone must monitor the equipment here. It was insane that you and Scott went in there before without that. So, now you propose to go in there alone?"

"No. I would bring someone with me."

"Oh heavens! You want to reveal the existence of the SCIP doorway to a fourth person, and take the chance of the

world finding out about it?"

"No. This person could be trusted."

"Who?"

"Ann Rogers."

"A police woman? You want to tell the police about the SCIP transformer?"

"I know her. We could trust her. She would understand."

"Can you see the incredibly dangerous plan you have designed here? Do you see how many fail points there are?"

"Father, let's go look at the SCIP transformer and talk about this some more."

The Professor's expression suddenly became alarmed. "Oh, I don't think that would be such a good idea. It's such a mess down there."

Cassiopia stood as though the decision had already been made. She turned and headed down the hall toward the basement door. The Professor scrambled to get out from behind his desk, and chase after her. "Wait now. Wait just a minute."

The basement door was already open. Cassiopia charged down the steps as he caught up.

"Really, this is not a good time. We should talk about this later."

In the basement, Cassiopia switched on the lights and was surprised by what she saw. Most of the basement lab was as it had always been, chemistry bench on the far wall, work table in the center of the room, stacks of electronic equipment piled all around. To her right however, something was different. The overflowing shelves and large trunk concealing the entrance to the secret lab were gone. Now there was a new wall with three closet doors.

As her father came up behind her, she turned and looked at him for an explanation.

"You see? It's all sealed off. Just closet space now. It was the best thing to do. All sealed off. Let's go back up."

Cassiopia went to the farthest door and opened it. It was packed full of junk. She went to the middle door and opened it. Empty. The third door concealed another closet, also full of junk. With her hands on her hips, she looked suspiciously at her father.

"Satisfied? Now let's go back upstairs for morning tea."

Cassiopia gave a half smile and shook one finger at him. She returned to the center door, opened it, and stepped into the closet. She gave her father a knowing smile and shut the door.

Total darkness. She waited. Not more than five seconds passed, and a low light switched on. A small panel in the wall next to the doorknob slid open. A single button lay behind it. She pushed it, and the floor began to descend.

At the bottom, an open doorway offered the familiar cement hallway that led to the secret lab. The last time Cassiopia had seen it, the room was a burned out, charred mess. She moved down the short cement hallway, peered around the corridor and gasped at what stood waiting.

Perched atop a large, blue antistatic base, was an arch-shaped electronic doorway. It was not charred and burned as she remembered, but shiny and new. The porous white material within its frame looked almost polished. Beside it, the four stacks of the Drack mainframe computer that she knew so well, stood glistening and waiting. The breaker boxes on the wall and the large knife switches associated with them looked new and barely used. Cassiopia slumped back against the wall and took a deep breath.

"I never could keep secrets from you, even when they were mathematical," said the Professor, as he came up behind her and stood admiring his work. "The elevator had to be installed so the robot could get up and down more easily. I didn't want to leave him upstairs all the time, after the last break in."

"Father, you gave your word you would never rebuild it."

"No sir. I never gave my word. Have you noticed the arch, and how much more access there is?"

"But you said you wouldn't."

"No. I said I'd never rebuild it like it was. I said if I ever did, it would be arch-shaped like it is."

"So this is why you've been sneaking around in the basement when we've been gone?"

"Well, I didn't want anyone getting the idea they might use it now, did I?"

"Please tell me you have not gone through it alone?"

"Sent the Tel through once, just to be sure the parameters were the same, that's all."

"So it is working?"

"Definitely working, and there are improvements you don't know about."

"Please tell me."

"I can control the secondary, inner door. It can be switched on and off. That's to prevent anything from coming out that shouldn't. And, there's no more time limit for the primary door. It can stay on indefinitely. There's triple-redundant tracking devices built in to find your way back, also. So now, you can call for the door from inside Dreamland, and then locate it fairly easily, though that part hasn't been tested."

"But why? Why did you rebuild it if you weren't going to tell anyone, and you weren't going through?"

"There were sections of my formula base incomplete. They would advance string theory beyond anyone's wildest imagination. The only way to finish the equations was to reopen it. I planned to keep it and hide it forever in case more data was ever needed. I certainly never planned for anyone to risk their life entering it again, especially not the most important person in my life."

"Well your timing was impeccable, father."

"Unfortunately so."

They returned to the study, and sat without speaking for a time. The Professor knew his case was already lost. The tension in the air was finally abated when a small tan and white beagle came bounding into the room and began sniffing Cassiopia and jumping up at her.

"Well hello little one, aren't you the cutest!"

The dog raced around, greeted the Professor, and began exploring the den as though he owned it. He went to the Tel robot and scratched at one silver foot. To Cassiopia's astonishment, the Tel lowered its head and a small panel by its waist slid open. With two shiny silver fingers, the robot reached in and drew out a small dog biscuit. In a low machine voice it commanded, "Sit!"

The little beagle sat looking up at the Tel, still wagging its tail. The biscuit was dropped, the compartment door slid shut, and the robot watched as the dog quickly gobbled up the treat. The beagle, satisfied it had completed the transaction, curled up at the robot's feet and went to sleep.

Cassiopeia sat with her mouth open. She looked at her father. "I don't believe it!"  
The Professor raised his arms in frustration and shook his head.

## Chapter 12

With her father debated into abstinence, Cassiopeia garnered her confidence and phoned Ann Rogers. Rogers was quick to take the call.

"It's good news, I hope."

"There's been no change, so it's no news, really."

"Mmmm, I don't like that. How are you?"

"Fully recovered. I've come back to Orlando for a few days."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Cassiopeia swallowed and tried to hide her apprehension. "It's why I called. I need your help."

"Well name it. We Scott Markman women need to stick together."

"Could you come to Florida?"

A long silence ensued. "What do you have in mind, Cassiopeia?"

"There is a way we might help Scott. I would need you here with me. It would be about two weeks."

"I don't understand. Is this some kind of new therapy or something?"

"Not exactly. I cannot discuss it on the phone. I have to explain it to you face to face. It's the only way."

"You know my case loads are not light, right? And I'm working one right now that's a doosie. You really want me to take an unscheduled two-week absence, immediately?"

"Yes."

"It's that important?"

"Yes."

"You're asking an awful lot, but I'll start reassigning work right now. I'll see if I can get a late flight out tonight. Maybe come in sometime tomorrow."

"Text me your flight number, and I'll be waiting at the airport."

"I have no doubt that whatever this is about, it will be good."

"We'll be waiting."

Cassiopeia spent the remainder of the day organizing and planning. A text came in saying Rogers flight was 883, due in 8:45 A.M. She tried to sleep but spent most of the night visualizing what she wanted to happen. When the alarm went off, conviction had turned to doubt. Suddenly she worried that things were getting out of control.

Rogers came out the level three gateway, with a single carry-on. Her wrinkled brown suit was unbuttoned and disheveled. Her hair was tied back, but partially undone. Her makeup was slightly faded and uneven. It looked as though she had left directly from the office. In the car, she suggested breakfast. They stopped at a small diner, seldom speaking until there was nothing left but coffee.

Cassiopeia sat nervously. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Are you kidding? Slept like a lamb. I've had to do it on so many flights to so many places, it's second nature. I would miss connections if they didn't wake me. It's all part of law enforcement training; how to be wide awake at 04:30, and how to sleep on a moving camel."

Cassiopeia laughed hard enough that she had to spit some coffee back into the cup.

Rogers smiled. "How about you? Get any last night?"

"You mean sleep of course."

"It's a Fed joke. It's supposed to mean we value good sleep more than sex."

Cassiopeia smirked. "I didn't get much. Kept thinking all night."

"You do that, don't you? I know all about your IQ thing. Tested twice, both times at the genius level. You must've been a nightmare kid to raise. I'm surprised your father survived it."

"That's unsettling. I mean how much you know about someone."

"Yeah, it's a scary part of the future. We've got to do it, but we don't have to like it."

"What else do you know?"

"Well let's see, I know about your arrest record. Shocking your college teacher on the ass by hooking the spark plug wires in her car up to the seat."

"Oh dear."

"So what's the deal? Has there been no improvement in him at all?"

"It's the brain activity that's missing. It comes and goes. Sometimes it appears he is waking up, but then it fades away. It's happened so many times, I don't get my hope up anymore. It's too disappointing."

"What is your secret plan? I'm dying to know."

"Not here. My father is waiting for us. I need him there or you'll have trouble believing me. You'll have trouble even then. He's only half with me on this. There is some danger involved."

Rogers leaned back in her seat and dropped her napkin on the table. "Well, any guesses I had about this just went out the window. I'm a clean slate. Let's go."

At the Professor's, they dropped Rogers' bag in the spare room, and went to the study where Professor Cassell stood from behind his desk to greet the guest of honor. After the brief formalities were complete, Rogers turned to admire the shiny robot standing quietly in the corner.

"Wow! The famous Dragon Master TEL robot. I must admit, I am in awe. Is it on?"

Cassiopeia went to the Tel. She motioned Rogers to come forward. "Tel, this is Ann Rogers. Please open a permanent level four access for her."

"Good morning, Ann Rogers. Please state your name for voice pattern recognition coding."

"Ann Rogers."

"Voice code complete, standby for optical pattern matching." The robot's visored head moved slowly up and down.

"Optical pattern matching complete. File open and resident."

Cassiopia turned to Rogers. "He will obey your commands and will provide any information you ask for from this point on. I don't need to tell you, be careful what you wish for."

Rogers gave a short laugh. "Amazing."

Professor Cassell grumbled, "Even we do not understand it completely, now that its programming has been advanced by someone in this room. I won't mention any names."

Cassiopia ignored his remark and motioned Rogers to sit.

Rogers leaned back, crossed her legs, and folded her hands in her lap. "Okay you two home-made clandestine types. Hit me with your best shot. The suspense is killing me."

Cassiopia looked nervously at her father. He gestured with one hand. "The ball is in your court, dear daughter. This is your insanity, not mine."

"Ann, before we get into this. There's a tough spot we have to get through. You know how sometimes law enforcement agents are required to keep information classified for the protection of the public?"

Rogers tapped one finger on her leg. "Uh-oh."

"What we need to discuss with you can never be revealed to anyone outside this room."

Rogers raised an eyebrow and shook her head, "Because...?"

"Because what we have must never be allowed to get into the hands of any government or outside group. It could be catastrophic."

"Gee, you guys are scaring me a little, mainly because you have a registered IQ at the genius level, and he's your father, otherwise I would think this was a joke. It's not, is it?"

"Will you do it? Will you promise never to reveal anything about what we are going to tell you, ever?"

"Is any of this illegal?"

"No."

"I have heard the word danger mentioned. If I agree, I will still have the option of backing out, right?"

"Of course, but you still must never tell anyone anything."

Rogers took a deep breath. "Will this conflict with my job as a law enforcement officer?"

"No."

Rogers looked at the Professor, who sat mesmerized at the prospect that someone else might learn about his invention. She turned back to Cassiopia. "I guess I have no choice but to agree. This is about Scott, after all. How bad can it be?"

Cassiopia nodded. "So you agree?"

"Yes. I agree."

The Professor piped in, "Ms. Rogers, how much of a math-science background do you have?"

"My degrees are in law enforcement, but the forensic classes cover computers, medical, and optics. So I may have some of what you science types might be hoping for."

Cassiopia began. "All the time I was growing up, my father had this pet theory called the 'nothing is something' theory. He speculated that if you could create a perfect vacuum in a box, you would still have something in the box, that is; the vacuum itself. He theorized that if you could then remove the vacuum, you would have something completely new, like an opening to another dimension."

Rogers wrinkled her brow. "Oh brother..."

"My father began working secretly on this theory, secret even from me." Cassiopia paused to cast a scolding glance at him. "Eventually, he somehow managed to do it. He opened a door into another world, or another dimension. It's called the SCIP System. Spatial Corruption Interface Project. It actually works."

Professor Cassell began cleaning his pipe. "She's doing quite well, Ann. Please continue Cassiopia. I've never heard it described like this before."

Rogers looked at them both as though she were waiting for the punch line.

"We have a doorway in a secret lab downstairs, that lets us go into the world of dreams. You step through the door, and whatever is most dominant in your subconscious at that moment, forms the environment in this alternate dimension. For example, if you secretly are wishing to be on a beach somewhere, when you step through the door, you will find yourself on a beach."

Rogers pushed up and leaned forward. "I need to interject here, that of course I am no longer believing any of this. I don't know what the two of you are up to, but I still trust you because I know you. Under the circumstances this can't be some kind of practical joke, but if this is some kind of psychic experiment or reality show thing, or something, I don't usually do well with that stuff, and you should not have interrupted my work and brought me all the way down here for it."

Cassiopia held up one hand. "Please, Ann. I'm sorry. We are going to prove everything I've said to you as soon as we leave this room."

"Okay, now you are scaring me. This is ridiculous."

"Just let me go over everything, and we'll show you the door. If you want to back out, we'll understand. Just bear with me for a few more minutes."

"I'm not going to put up with this nonsense much longer, but okay continue."

"Scott and I made several trips through the door searching for my father who had become lost in there." Cassiopia cast a second scolding look at him. "We learned that if you travel far enough in Dreamland, you can find yourself in someone else's dream. For example, on one trip we came across a college friend of mine, having a party in a mansion. When we returned, we called her and found out she had been dreaming she was at a party. So, we know we can enter other people's dreams through the SCIP doorway. I want to go through the SCIP doorway and find Scott, and see if I can help him escape the coma. That's what this is all about."

Rogers looked annoyed. "I'm disappointed in you two, I thought I knew you. You don't really expect me to believe any of this, do you? It sounds childish. And, now, after talking like pathological maniacs, I suppose you're going to ask me to go down into the basement with you, right?" Rogers stood. "I'll bet I can end your practical joke right now." She

pointed to the robot. "How do I address him?"

Cassiopeia looked hopeful. "He responds to the name Tel."

Rogers turned to the robot. "Tel, is everything they've told me the truth?"

The robot's visor glowed more brightly and he answered immediately, "Yes Ann."

Rogers looked at Cassiopeia. "How about just you and I go down, and I'll follow you."

The hallway door to the basement was open. They descended the stairs, where Rogers stopped to gawk at the mess of experiments and supplies scattered everywhere. Cassiopeia left her and went to the center closet door. She opened it, stepped inside, and waited for Rogers.

Rogers stared inquisitively.

"Come on. Going down."

Rogers approached with a look of disbelief. "Oh my god. Get Smart." She stepped in and together they descended to the secret laboratory. There the huge SCIP door stood looming and inert, the consoles and electronics around it, dark and silent. Rogers wandered around, inspecting everything, looking behind consoles, impressed at the site of the huge stacks of the Drack mainframe computer. When she had seen enough, she returned to Cassiopeia. "Let's go back up."

Rogers led the way up the basement stairs, and as she stepped into the hall, almost collided with the Tel speeding by. It carried a dog dish filled with food and went gliding along the hall to the back door, where it met a small beagle. Carefully placing the dish on the floor, the dog accepted it readily. After a brief period of admiration, the robot turned and disappeared back into the den.

Rogers shook her head. These people are trying to sell me on a doorway to a new dimension, and a robot just passed me in the hall carrying a dish of dog food. I'd better keep my wits about me around these people, she thought.

In the den, they sat in silence. The Professor began loading his pipe, waiting for the adventure to resume.

Cassiopeia remained silent, afraid that saying anything further might open the door for Rogers to dismiss them and leave.

Rogers rubbed her hands together in thought. "Well, there is something down there. I know it's not a façade. There are two many wires running around for it to be a prop of some sort."

The Professor stopped attempting to light his pipe and interrupted. "Seven thousand, six hundred, and eighty, just to the frame of the door alone," he said proudly, and then sucked the fire into the pipe bowl.

"You built that all yourself?"

"A devoted undertaking," he replied.

"How could one person make all those connections?"

"Electric wire wrap gun, mostly."

Rogers squinted and shook her head. "Okay, you've earned another five minutes. Let's have the rest of it. The dangers."

Cassiopeia perked up. "We've made more than a half a dozen trips in there, but yes, there are several problems. To begin with, when you step through the door, there's a gap of sorts. My father calls it a buffer zone."

Professor Cassell spoke. "A differential quantum membrane. One of my colleagues, a specialist in string theory, has already predicted it mathematically. I unfortunately, cannot demonstrate to him how wonderfully correct his formula actually is." The Professor gestured in frustration as though he deserved sympathy. The two women looked on in annoyance.

Cassiopeia continued. "So when you go through the door, you must step across the gap to an inner door. You must be careful not to slip or misstep." Cassiopeia paused. "Ann, can I get you a drink or something?"

"Are you kidding? Interrupt this wild tale? Please continue."

"Okay, the next problem is the environmental dynamics. Where ever you find yourself in Dreamland is not necessarily a permanent thing. It can change suddenly, without warning. Once with Scott, we were at a carnival and all at once it changed to a desert. When that happens, you have to hunt around to find the doorway back. But, my father thinks he has improved that, so it may be easier."

Rogers kept a blank stare. Cassiopeia could not tell if she believed any of it, or had been lost completely again.

"The last problem is the time distortion. You can be in Dreamland for ten minutes, and when you return you've been gone for two hours, or vise-versa."

Rogers sighed and shook her head. "So can you be harmed in this imaginary place?"

"We don't think so. But, the effects can seem incredibly real, just like in a dream. Markman was shot once, and it seemed like he had a wound, but when he came back through the door there was nothing."

Rogers sat up straight. "Well, is that all? There's no space aliens or monsters in this story?"

The Professor shook his head. "I wish you hadn't asked that."

Rogers looked at Cassiopeia with raised eyebrows.

"Well, we did seem to encounter someone from another race in there once, but that was under special circumstances."

Rogers sat back against her chair and laughed. She looked at them both and smiled a disbelieving smile. "Well, obviously there's only one thing left to do. Prove it."

## Chapter 13

Rogers took time to change into her only spare set of clothes, jeans, tennis shoes, and a black turtleneck. Cassiopeia, in laced-up boots, cargo pants, and a tan, collared work shirt, hung a small belt pack around her waist and met her at the bedroom door. Without speaking, they made their way to the austere environment of the secret SCIP lab. There seemed to be a strange quiet about the place, as though the computers themselves were anticipating something extraordinary. The Tel robot stood by the large array of lever switches on the wall, the Professor watching from his swivel chair at the nearest Drack station. He immediately took notice of the leather holster and gun on Rogers' hip, and rose

from his seat and motioned at her.

"Ann, you should not bring a firearm with you."

Rogers looked down at her handgun. "It's only a little one," she said mockingly.

The Professor tried to be reassuring. "Where you are going the entire environment consists only of what we call thought-matter. The laws of physics are different there. Some of my calculations suggest that were a bullet to be fired there, it might never lose its velocity or trajectory. It might go on forever. Mr. Markman fired his weapon during his first visit and it has worried me ever since."

Rogers thought for a moment, then reached down and unclipped her holster. She placed it on the desk, and looked back at them with doubt.

Cassiopia changed the subject. "Okay, so this will be just a very short, uneventful trip to show the new door is working, and to give you a chance to experience Dreamland, Ann. I can't say where we will find ourselves, but as long as we remained relaxed and positive, we should find it a pleasant experience. Are you okay with all of this, so far?"

"It's hard to get excited about something you don't believe. I expect this charade to end shortly." she replied flatly.

The Professor came to them and handed each a small black control with two LED indicators, and a small button beneath a clear guard. "The button under the guard calls for the SCIP door, the horizontal LED meter shows you the direction to the door. The vertical LED meter gives you a relative distance from it. There are no normal standards in Dreamland, so those LEDs will not tell you exactly how far you are, they will only tell you whether you are getting closer or farther away."

Cassiopia unzipped her belt pack and put the control in it. "I'm thinking maybe a fifteen or twenty minute visit, and then we come right back."

Rogers tucked her control in her jean pocket, and laughed.

"What's funny?"

"You guys are so serious, like this is actually going to happen. I just know the punch line is coming any time now."

Cassiopia looked at her father. He nodded and resumed his seat at the Drack station. He looked over at the Tel. "Tel, S-U-S, please."

The robot obeyed without speaking. It turned and began the power start up sequence, closing the heavy knife switches and breaker box levers that decorated the wall. The heavy silence that so dominated the room was shattered by the drone and crackling of high power electronics equipment coming to life. Amber lights flashed on in steps around the huge Drack towers, and dozens of small colored LEDs raced with life around the frame of the SCIP doorway. Black light appeared around the white porous material within the doorframe and brightened to cast an eerie violet glow upon it. Florescent light came on within the stacks of the Drack columns, as data began to scroll downward on the computer displays surrounding it. The hum of the machinery phased in and out. The Tel turned back to face the Professor, colored lights from around the room reflecting off its polished surface.

The Professor, leaning over the keyboard, began entering commands. A whine like a jet engine starting swelled to overtake the pervasive hum. The Professor looked back at them, "Get ready." He tapped a key and a loud crack echoed off the walls of the lab. Lightning flashes filled the electronic doorway until the white material within it could not be seen. Abruptly, a second artificial clap of thunder rang out, but just as suddenly, the room returned to stillness and quiet, a charred smell left to mark the violence.

Rogers stared at the SCIP door with her mouth hanging open. Where the white porous material had once been, there was now a silver, flowing mirror, the most brilliant mirror she had ever seen. The Professor turned in his swivel chair to admire it with her.

Rogers began to have doubts. She looked at Cassiopia. "Through that?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Won't we be electrocuted?"

"No."

They stared in silence at the glimmering surface. Professor Cassell spoke, "Remember, the secondary door will disappear as soon as you're through. You should remain in the immediate area so that it's easier to recall it."

Cassiopia touched Roger's arm to get her attention. "You should come up to the ramp, and look through at the void we will be stepping across, so that you're ready for it."

Together they climbed to the mirror. Cassiopia motioned Rogers to proceed. Still dazed, Rogers looked back at the Professor for reassurance. He nodded.

Bracing herself with one hand on Cassiopia, Rogers pushed her head through the mirror plane and opened her eyes. Three feet away, an identical mirror hung in what appeared to be nothingness. Above, below, and on both sides a strange illumination with a golden tint seemed to go on forever. When she looked down, Rogers had the feeling she might fall forever. She pulled back out, and looked with disbelief at Cassiopia, hoping for an explanation. Cassiopia understood.

"It is what it is. There's nothing adequate to explain nothingness. Are you still willing to try it?"

Rogers appeared bewildered, but nodded.

"Remember, we need to be calm and casual. Whatever we are feeling will cause an environment to form on the other side. We want this to be a short, dull visit to Dreamland. If there are people there, we can interact with them, but remember they're not real, and they can be a problem. That's it, a nice, quiet, non-eventful visit. You're not nervous are you?"

Rogers took a deep breath. "I still don't want to believe this, but I'm losing the battle."

Cassiopia looked at her father. He returned a doubtful stare. She turned back to Rogers. "We have to hold hands to be sure we both end up in the same place. She took Rogers hand and faced the SCIP mirror. "On the count of three. One, two, three..."

The two explorers pushed inward, past the emptiness, and past the second mirror to Dreamland.

Cassiopia stepped through the secondary mirror and immediately fell to her knees. The floor was moving. Rogers, more agile, fumbled and caught a handhold overhead. They looked back in time to see the SCIP mirror fade from view then panned around and tried to make sense of their surroundings. They were in the fuselage of an airplane. It was olive green framework with no seats and an open, oval rear door. The wind was howling and disrupting everything inside. At the front, through the doorway to the pilot's cabin, the pilot seats were empty. The aircraft was pitching and rolling. Cassiopia managed to climb to her feet, keeping her knees bent to avoid falling. She leaned against one wall and found a strap to hold.

Rogers shouted, "Where are we? Why are we here?"

Cassiopia looked around and shouted back, "It's a C47, a Gooney-bird."

"How do you know that?"

"They have one at the WarBirdMuseum in Titusville."

"How can we be here? We're in flight and there's no one onboard. They must've bailed out!" Rogers staggered back to the open rear door and then returned. "We're thousands of feet up! There's a beach down there and farmland."

"We've got to go back," yelled Cassiopia and she dug into her belt pack and managed to pull out the SCIP door control. Struggling to hold on, she flipped up the switch guard and hit the recall button. Nothing happened. Several more attempts produced the same result.

Rogers called out, "Uh-oh."

"I know. It doesn't seem to be working. The door hasn't appeared."

Rogers leaned closer. "That's not what I'm worried about. Look..." She motioned in the direction of the windshield. A range of mountains had come into view. They were considerably higher than the aircraft's altitude. Cassiopia stared and began hitting the button more rapidly.

"Do you know how to fly at all?" Rogers asked.

"No. I've never read about flying."

"Well, the steering wheels are up there. Maybe we should try."

Cassiopia tucked the control back in its place and the two of them lurched and pulled their way forward. They took seats by the controls. Rogers grasped the wheel and tried to turn it. It would not budge. "Try yours," she yelled.

Cassiopia fought with the control wheel to no avail. The mountain range was slowly growing larger.

"The gas lever," cried Rogers, and she tried to push it forward or back. It would not move. "This must be why they bailed out." Rogers looked through the door at the back of the aircraft. "Hey! There's parachutes back there!"

Cassiopia withdrew her SCIP door control once more and began pushing the recall button frantically. Rogers left her seat and headed for the back. Reluctantly, Cassiopia followed, dismayed that the door refused to appear.

Rocking back and forth near the exit, Rogers dug through a pile of canvas satchels and parachutes.

"You're crazy!" yelled Cassiopia as she joined her.

"Rogers looked up worriedly. "What will happen if we hit those mountains?"

"There's no way to be sure. The entire environment might change to something else, and we'd be okay."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"What else might happen?"

"Well, we crash into the mountain, explode, and fall through the air on fire, but we still might be okay."

"Would it hurt?"

"It could."

"You've never gone skydiving, have you?"

"Are you crazy? No."

"Neither have I, but I know these parachutes. They're World War two era. My father had one as a souvenir." Rogers paused to look forward at the approaching mountains. They were much closer. "We'd better put them on. I didn't like the falling through the air on fire possibility."

Cassiopia stood swaying with an expression of dismay. "Oh my god!"

"Come on, your legs go through here. I'll help you then you help me."

Cassiopia hammered on the SCIP door recall button as she worked her legs through the straps. Rogers pushed her arms through the two upper loops and turned Cassiopia to fasten the buckle at the front of the chest. "This ring here is the main chute. The one down here is the emergency. Count to three before you pull it or you could get caught on the plane."

"Oh my god!"

"Come on, help me!" Cassiopia struggled to help Rogers get her chute on. With it strapped in place, Rogers turned and began searching the floor once more. She stood back up and held up two pair of goggles. "You'll need these. The wind is ferocious. Put them on. You've got to land with your knees bent and then roll with the landing."

"Oh my god!"

Rogers positioned herself behind Cassiopia. She turned and looked. A single mountain peak now filled the windshield. It was a minute away.

"It's now or never. Should we do it?"

"Oh my god!"

"We'll hold hands. Come on. We'll go out together. Keep your hand on the handle for the main chute."

Rogers pulled her to the door. Far below, she could see only farmland. She jerked Cassiopia's goggles down, put her right hand on the release, and then with one arm around her, leapt into the buffeting wind.

The wind exploded in Cassiopia's face. Her hair whipped and tangled. She fell sideways, her legs running in a futile effort to escape the fall, and though she clung tightly to Rogers' hand, the wind ripped them apart after only a second. She could not focus. The world was turning and looping in every direction. With her clothing snapping and slapping around her, and the deafening sound of a hurricane in her ears, she yanked at the metal ring still held tightly in her hand. A fluttering sound came from behind. There was a loud pop and snap as she jerked harshly against the straps. The burning wind tapered off to a strong current against her face. The world came back into focus. Instinctively her hands found the parachute straps near her shoulders as she glided. Between her feet, the ground below looked like a

frightening drop. She glanced up and searched the sky. Not far to her left, Rogers chute was open. Rogers waved and gave a thumb up, and pointed to something. Cassiopia looked in time to see the aircraft crash into the mountainside and explode into a ball of flame.

The earth below raced upward. There were fields and a town ahead. The ride became almost pleasant. Something disturbing caught her eye. Far below, on a road that ran along the coast, a line of tanks was moving in the direction of the town. There were troops following them, and more trucks behind the troops. The path they were soaring along would take them to an empty field just west of the town. There did not seem to be any commotion on the ground to indicate they had been seen. As the earth grew closer and details more defined, it looked like something unpleasant was going on in the town. People were running about as though they were threatened. Cassiopia looked over at Rogers. She was making an exaggerated motion of bending her knees. Cassiopia remembered her warning.

Suddenly the ground struck. She slammed down and fell to one side as the chute deflated on top of her. There was tall grass, shoulder high all around. She kicked and punched her way from beneath the silk, and stood to unbuckle the harness. She stepped out of it, let it fall, and turned to look for Rogers. A second later Rogers burst out of the grass, her parachute bundled up in her arms. She grabbed Cassiopia by the shoulder and dragged her down.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"In Dreamland, can you end up back in time somewhere?"

"Yes. We were in the Old West once."

"Keep your voice down. I've got a bad feeling about this. We need to hide these chutes. There's a forest between that town and us. We can stash them in the bushes. Have you tried the door control?"

Cassiopia unzipped her belt packed and drew it out. She opened the guard and hit the button. "It's working!" She peered up above the grass, looked around and crouched back down. "I don't see it, but I have a working left-right indicator, and one distance LED is lit up. It's toward the town."

"Okay. Help me bundle up your chute and let's get going. Remember stay low. We do not want to be discovered."

"What is it? What do you think?"

"I got a good look at the town on the way down. It's a miracle we weren't seen. I saw Germans rounding up townspeople. There was a Panzer division outside of town heading in. I think this is World War II."

Cassiopia frowned. "Oh my. This may be my fault. I love history. I was just in a plane crash. I've probably caused this."

"Don't blame yourself just yet. Those parachutes were exactly like the souvenir my father owned."

With silk bundled under their arms, they weaved their way through the grass to the forest edge. A large patch of bushes nearby concealed the chutes and harnesses. Branches and leaves gathered from the ground completed the hiding place. The forest was thinly populated with tall, slender trees. Underbrush was everywhere, decorated by fallen branches and grass. The ground was uneven, a dry streambed running through it filled with leaves. Through the tree line, the neighboring township was visible. Somewhere to the left were the sounds of tanks moving through the town. Farther in the distance, repeated booms suggested a bombing was underway. There was a faint smell of gunpowder and something burning. Rogers and Cassiopia crept along until they were behind a broken down stonewall that bordered a two-story brick building near a busy street.

Rogers worked her control from her jean pocket and checked that it was operating. It showed the doorway was to their right. Of the ten LEDs on the distance indicator, only two were illuminated.

Cassiopia peered carefully over the wall. In the street, a group of civilians ushered along by men in black German uniforms had shackles on their hands. She crouched back down and looked at Rogers.

"Now what?" she whispered.

"We make our way along until we get to the door."

"Okay."

"So these soldiers are not real people, right?"

"Yes. I think so."

"And they can't actually kill us?"

"Not that we know of."

"But they could possibly hurt us?"

"Under the right circumstances, yes."

"Can you be a little more vague?"

"I'm sorry. It's the world of dreams. Whatever can happen to you in a dream, can happen here."

"So let's just be real quiet-like, and avoid all that."

"Yeah."

When the coast looked clear, Rogers vaulted the stonewall, kept low, and took refuge against the back of the building. Cassiopia watched and then followed. With her back against the wall, Rogers moved along and carefully looked around the corner at the street and neighboring buildings. The road was cobblestone with trolley tracks running down the center. The buildings were large and small bricks, with arching windows and doors. Most of the rooftops were flat, though one had a pointed tile peak with several chimneys coming out of it. A red-striped tarp hung down in front of the gray-brick building directly across the street. There were curbs but no sidewalks.

Without looking back, Rogers motioned to Cassiopia and darted behind the next building. After a quick check, Cassiopia followed. A wooden fence attached to the building, now blocked their path. Pointing two fingers at her eyes, Rogers motioned to Cassiopia to keep an eye out, then wrestled a nearby garbage barrel into place. She tipped it over, spilling the contents, and climbed atop it to look over. The way was clear. She waved at Cassiopia and vaulted over, landing as quietly as possible on the other side. With somewhat less agility, Cassiopia joined her.

At the next corner, the situation became difficult. The street opened to a large courtyard. Columns of German soldiers stood in assembly at various points around it. Some were marching away, other just arriving. Smoke was rising from a few of the chimneys. People were entering and exiting the buildings around the courtyard. German flags hung in some windows. The biggest problem was at the very center of the courtyard. There, stood a large, dry fountain with a statue of a French president overlooking the square. Below it stood the SCIP mirror, alive and shining. Rogers and Cassiopia looked away and stood against the wall.

Rogers lamented, "Well, we're screwed."

Cassiopia replied, "No, we're not."

Rogers looked at her indignantly. "What do you mean? Two steps out in the open and we'll probably end up standing just like this in front of a firing squad!"

Cassiopia shook her head. "No, this is a staging area. They have troops leaving and arriving. It's about fifty yards to the mirror. All we have to do is walk that fifty yards and we're out of here."

"You mean without being shot at..."

"Those troops out there mean there are barracks and officer's quarters set up. All we need is two uniforms and we can just stroll right across before anyone even notices."

"Not bad, for a civilian. You first or me?"

Cassiopia leaned against Rogers and dared a look around the corner. There was a side entrance to the next building. With a double check, she stepped out and moved along, keeping close to the wall. Reaching the door, she found it unlocked. She cracked it open and peered inside. It was a deserted hallway. She slipped inside with Rogers close behind.

The hallway's torn brown wallpaper and dirty wooden floor looked unused. It offered three doors on each side and ended in stairs going up. They cautiously searched each of the rooms but found only overturned furniture and destruction. The last room on the left had front and side windows. Staying out of sight, they searched through the dirty windowpanes for a prospective building. The one next door looked promising. An officer in a black uniform strolled out the front and struck a match on his boot heel. He lit a cigarette, stood smoking and admiring the assembly, then stepped it out and left.

Across the hall, they found a door in an adjacent office that opened between buildings. An entrance to the officer's building was almost directly across. Rogers held up one finger, looked carefully around and dashed across. She disappeared within and then returned to wave Cassiopia on. Inside, a map room, neatly arranged, was unoccupied. A short hallway opened to a larger chamber with a blackboard, tables, and chairs. Empty wine bottles were everywhere. A smaller office on the left was an operations area with a desk near shelves with rolled up documents, ribbed-back chairs, and a large closet with the doors missing. A full bottle of wine stood on a tray on the corner of the desk, with four glasses waiting to be filled. Within the closet were the items they were hoping for. A half a dozen officers' uniforms freshly pressed hung there.

Without speaking Cassiopia began to strip. Rogers kicked off her sneakers and pushed her jeans down and off. She leaned against the desk to get the last pant leg and as she straightened up, someone coughing startled her.

Before she could move, a German officer charged briskly into the room without looking up. He tossed his hat onto a hat stand by the wall and turned to find Cassiopia in only her bra and panties, and Rogers in only a shirt and panties. He froze. A moment of startled silence passed. Rogers laughed, casually pushed up into a sitting position on the desk and undid the top button on her blouse, smiling at the officer and wetting her lips. She uncorked the bottle of wine and took a drink from it, continuing to smile as she reached for the second button on her blouse. The officer relaxed and smiled a broad, devious smile. Rogers looked casually back at wide-eyed Cassiopia, and gestured to the officer that she was his to take.

The man strolled over, still smiling, grabbed the bottle and took a long drink. Staring intently at Cassiopia, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, handed the bottle back, and headed toward her. Without the slightest hesitation, Rogers twisted around and smashed the bottle over his head. He wavered, eyes glazed, the smile still locked on his face, and crumpled to the floor.

Cassiopia stared in disbelief. "You broke the bottle on his head!"

Rogers wondered if she had erred. "Shhhhh... Well, he's not a real person, right?"

"Well, yes, but still."

"Hurry up and get dressed!"

"Okay, okay, you're right."

They scrambled into the uniforms and put their own shoes back on. Cassiopia's uniform was too large. She rolled up the pants and sleeves as best she could, and tucked her hair under the hat. Roger's uniform fit better, but her tennis shoes stood out. She pulled the boots off the unconscious man, and slipped them on.

At the front of the building, they watched from a window for their best chance. Fearing their stilted lover would awake in the other room, they finally decided to try. They stepped out onto the porch, trying to appear casual. At that moment, a car with VIP flags came racing around the far side of the square. Two angry men in gray uniforms jumped out carrying two white parachutes. They interrupted an officer yelling commands to a unit, and a loud argument broke out. Hoping it would be enough distraction, Cassiopia and Rogers began their fifty-yard walk, staying close together, backs straight, almost in step.

The argument grew more heated. One of the men threw a parachute down on the ground, pointed at it as he yelled, and paced around nervously. Hands on his hips, he looked around the square, tapping one foot angrily. Three quarters of the way to the fountain, he noticed Cassiopia and Rogers, but thought nothing of it. As they neared the fountain and the mirror, he seemed to have second thoughts, and turned back to stare.

At the wall of the fountain, Rogers stopped and let Cassiopia lead. She stepped up onto the wall and into the dry fountain. The German officers became alert. The one who had been staring yelled out a harsh order to halt. Cassiopia took a quick last glance and stepped through the mirror-door. Rogers entered the fountain and took a position in front of the mirror. The German unholstered his lugar and took aim. Rogers turned, gave him her middle finger, and stepped through the mirror as the shot rang out behind her.

## Chapter 15

Cassiopia came down the blue anti-static ramp, pulling at her hair to see if it was really so tangled. A moment later, Rogers burst through behind her. The Professor sat up erect and called out, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" He looked up, saw Cassiopia dressed only in shoes, panties and bra, and Rogers only in socks and panties, and nearly fell out of his

chair. He sat speechless and gazing as they bumped into each other at the bottom of the ramp.

Rogers turned and broke into uncontrolled laughter. Cassiopia looked annoyed.

"What's so funny?"

Rogers tried to catch her breath. "I don't believe it! That was awesome! Let's go again!"

Cassiopia stood with her hands on her hips and rebuked her. "Ann, don't you realize how dangerous that was?"

Rogers was unconvinced. "Cass, we just went sky-diving!"

"Oh my Lord." The Professor slapped his head, and turned away in embarrassment.

"You broke a bottle over that guy's head, and then they shot at us!"

The Professor clasped his hands over his ears. "Oh, I don't want to hear any more."

"Yeah, but he deserved it. He was coming after you, you know."

"Well yeah, after you offered me to him."

"That's was just to distract him, and it worked didn't it? You know, I think he really liked you!" Rogers began laughing so hard she had to bend over.

Cassiopia thought about it, and against her will spit out a laugh. She tried to compose herself only to break into laughter once more, until both women stood nearly naked, laughing uncontrollably. Cassiopia realized it was the first time she had really laughed so hard since the crash. The Professor shook his head and mumbled under his breath, as the Tel stood idly by watching the scene with intense interest.

When they had regained their composure, they straightened up and tried to look serious, and finally recognized they were without clothes. Since only her father was present, Cassiopia shrugged it off. Rogers did not seem to care. She handed over her door control and headed for the exit. Cassiopia plunked both controls on her father's desk, ignoring his strained look, and followed.

"We've got to take a time out and get control of this if we're going to try again," she yelled as she disappeared around the corner.

The Professor rolled his eyes. "Oh boy..." He turned back to the control console and began the shut down procedure. Within seconds, the door flashed back to white and the hum of equipment faded.

In Cassiopia's bedroom, a pair of oversized jeans and an Einstein T-shirt fit Rogers well enough to get by. She pulled them on and asked, "Why don't you just leave both doors on all the time? Why bother shutting down the other door at all?"

Pulling on her own clothes, Cassiopia replied, "It's a problem I haven't told you about. It's kind of a long story. We should go over it later."

"I'll need to go into town and pick up some more stuff, anyway. I need to borrow some shoes."

"I have a pair I think will fit. I'll stay behind and get organized. You can use the van."

When they were dressed and done exchanging the more memorable moments of their misadventure, Cassiopia gave Rogers directions and handed her keys.

"This is an odd key ring," remarked Rogers.

"It's a tie-down ring from the baggage compartment of the crash. It's the only souvenir I saved."

Rogers looked at it and then back at her. "Are you getting past it?"

"Yes and no. It's why we're here, so it's not over yet."

Together they thought of Markman. Rogers gave a sympathetic stare and shook her head. "Maybe there is a chance."

"If there isn't, we'll make one."

Later that evening, they met in the Professor's study and talked seriously about the days events. Rogers, wearing newly-purchased jeans and a gray T-shirt, was now a believer. Cassiopia sat in tan, loose-fitting eveningwear, appearing as determined as ever. The Professor, finally briefed on all that had happened, looked like a man in over his head. The Tel stood in the corner seemingly indifferent.

"Father, we called for the SCIP door, but didn't get it."

The Professor nodded. "I tried to tell you downstairs. It was my fault. The software that controls the filtering for the inner door froze up. I had to shut down everything to reset it."

Cassiopia looked confused. "A filter? What's a filter got to do anything?"

The Professor smiled. "There really is no inner door, Cassiopia."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the primary door and the inner, secondary door are one and the same. The inner door is just a phase-shifted displacement of the primary door. So, by filtering out the phase shift, we can effectively eliminate the reflection of the primary door, making it inaccessible."

"Oh, wow! And so have you corrected the problem?"

"It will take another attempt to be sure."

Rogers asked, "Why do you need to shut it off at all? Why not just leave it on?"

Cassiopia replied, "We had a problem in the past with something unexplained coming out of the door while we were in there. It was serious. Things happened on this side of the door that were very undesirable."

"What kind of things."

"People kept telling us they were seeing us in places we had not been. It was as though some subconscious part of us was exchanging places and causing trouble from time to time."

"What kind of trouble?"

"There were records broken into at the University. Scott was seen in places he should not have been. It was even said that I danced at the Men's Club!"

Rogers laughed, then stopped abruptly and thought about it. "That's spooky."

Professor Cassell added, "We can't be sure shutting down the inner door will be completely effective at preventing that, and if you take too long returning to the door after you recall it, there's a chance problems could develop then, as well. You two will need to try to get back quickly once you call for the door."

"We'll keep that in mind, Father. Trust me."

Rogers pulled at her new T-shirt, trying to make it more comfortable. "Professor, can I take a camera in there and get pictures to bring back?"

Professor Cassell shook his head. "You would be wasting your time, Ann. Dreamland is made up of thought-matter. It can't be photographed. There is light, but no image, so what you get with both a film camera and a digital camera is a blurred image."

"But you guys said you take the Tel in there. How can the Tel see?"

The Professor laughed. "Good one! You could also ask how does a computer see a man in a white ski suit on a snow-covered mountainside, or how does it distinguish a real image from a reflection? The Tel uses forty-seven different inputs to create its vision, and it can modify and enhance each of those inputs as necessary, all in microseconds. It has infrared, special contrast, high frequency scanning, several types of radar, sonar, edge detection, other audio scans, and so on and so on. I'm sure the imaging engineers who designed him each understand their own contributions, but I seriously doubt anyone fully understands what a Tel sees. It is a massive jumble of digital information. He sees a lot more than we do, and his ability to interpret it is incredible."

Rogers pushed her hair aside. "So we will go again tomorrow, then?"

Cassiopia looked back in earnest. "Are you sure you want to?"

"Are you kidding? I can't wait. I don't completely understand what you guys have conjured up down there, but it's better than Disney."

Cassiopia nodded. "After a good night of restful sleep, we can try it in the morning. We should both be relaxed and refreshed. That should make for a very stable, docile environment in there. Once again, we'll plan for a very short trip, in and out. And then we can look ahead at trying to create a more targeted environment."

Rogers stood. "I am ready for some rest. I think I'll turn in."

Cassiopia escorted her to her room. Inside, Rogers dumped her packages on the floor and sat on the corner of the checkerboard bedspread. "Does the TV work?"

"Yes. It's cable."

"Sometimes I need it to get to sleep."

"Do whatever you have to for a good, restful night. We'll need it tomorrow."

"Cassiopia, I'm curious. If you don't mind my asking, why did you choose me to help?"

"I couldn't go in there alone. My father needed to be out here to monitor the equipment. The Tel travels well in Dreamland, but I needed someone trained to react to danger. I also needed someone who cared about Scott, and who I could trust. Does that answer your question?"

Rogers smiled. "I'm glad it was me."

"I hope you still feel that way when it's over."

## Chapter 16

The next morning, they hurried a continental breakfast, anxious to get down to the SCIP lab. This time Rogers wore low-cut, black, lace up boots, and black, baggy paramilitary pants and shirt. She had an empty black utility belt and black gloves with the fingertips missing. Cassiopia, in jeans and a blue, collared work shirt, appraised her with curiosity. When they reached the lab, they tucked their SCIP door controllers away, and stood back for the light show to begin.

As the electronic door's noise and lightning subsided, and the mirror glistened with reflection, they took their place at the top of the ramp, and turned to the Professor for approval.

He shook his head and said, "Oh dear. Okay. Anytime."

Together they burst through the mirror, and emerged once again into the unknown of Dreamland.

Their first vision was a hallway that led to a windowed double-door. Cassiopia turned and watched the secondary SCIP mirror fade quickly away behind her. The hallway was modern, part of a glass office building. Two gray-metallic, closed office doors were on the left, and a stairwell leading up on the right. They walked the length of the brown tiled floor and stood peering out the front door windows.

"We're okay," said Rogers. "That's a 2009 Chevy parked on the street out there."

"Thank goodness," replied Cassiopia. "Finally, a stable environment. Let's go out and have a look."

"This is

*Dupont Circle, WashingtonD.C.*

!" proclaimed Rogers. "I know this place so well. See the top of the WashingtonMonument over there?"

A mixture of old and new buildings made up both sides of the divided four-lane roadway in front of them. A tan, cement barrier between the lanes bore shade trees that appeared to be coming out of the concrete. The tallest building on the right was ash red brick, and beside it another large office building of black glass. Cars crowded both sidewalks, and many were in the street. On the left, lampposts hung over the roadway with more trees standing behind them. Scaffolding climbed the front of the office building nearest them. The sky was a milky blue, with flagpoles rising from the rooftops, their banners waving gently in the breeze. An overabundance of street signs were scattered around the curbs and islands.

But something was wrong. There were no people. The air had an unfamiliar taste to it. Rogers noticed a car had crashed into a building farther down. There were newspapers blowing in the street. A trash bin was overturned, its contents scattered on the sidewalk. In an alcove nearby, a door to a shop was open, broken, and swinging in the wind.

They stepped into the street and looked for signs of life.

Rogers murmured, "Uh-oh."

Cassiopia did not understand. "There's no one! Oh, wait. I see some people way down at the end there. They're headed this way."

Rogers looked in the other direction. A block away, there was a car parked on the sidewalk. There was a chair in the middle of the road. She thought she saw movement beyond it.

"It's time to leave, Cass."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I think it's my fault."

"What? Those people are coming. We could talk to them and ask where everyone is."

"Those aren't nice people."

"What?"

"Hurry. Let's get back." Rogers grabbed Cassiopia by the arm and pulled her back into the building. They walked briskly down the hall. Rogers kept her controller in hand. She hit the recall button and waited. The door did not appear.

"Oh no. Not now. Try yours. Hurry."

Cassiopia sensed Rogers' concern. She found her controller and hit the recall button. Nothing happened. Rogers tried her control again, repeatedly. No door.

"Those people are here. They're coming in. Eww!"

Faces outside the windows were approaching. They did not look human. They were torn, and bloody, and dead, their clothes ragged and dirty. Rogers again grabbed Cassiopia by the arm and ran toward them to reach the stairwell. They swung around and up just as the doors burst open. The windows fractured with a loud crash, and glass rained down on the floor.

The two women raced up the stairs, turning at the top of each set, climbing further upward. They could not see their pursuers following, but they could hear them.

On the fifth floor, the stairwell ended. Winded, they found a ladder leading up to the rooftop hatchway. Without speaking, they climbed, unlatched it, and forced it open. On the roof, Rogers slammed it shut, and looked for something to block it. There was nothing. She looked around for escape, but there were no adjoining buildings. She raced around the perimeter of the roof, and found no fire escape. On the street below, the agitated crowd had grown much larger. Many were continuing to enter the building.

Rogers called to Cassiopia. "Over here!"

Cassiopia sprinted up beside her.

"This is our best bet. It's only six feet, and that's a parking garage. We can find a car maybe."

"What are they?"

"There's no time. They'll be up here any second. We've got to jump."

"Oh my god!"

"Oh please, don't start that again. That roof is gravel. It should be a safe jump. You first."

"Me first? I don't want to be first!"

"You've got to go first because I can't risk you chickening out and not doing it."

"Who's chicken? Okay. I'll go." Cassiopia peered over the edge, and then at the adjacent roof. She turned back to protest, and then changed her mind. She backed up several steps and braced herself. Rogers watched the roof top hatchway nervously, and bit her lip.

With a low grunting sound Cassiopia ran with all her might. She reached the edged and leapt out over the alleyway, running through the air as she went. On the opposite side, one foot caught on the short wall bordering the rooftop forcing her to fall forward on her hands on the gravel and tar. She rolled in an unflattering tumbled, sat up and looked back at Rogers. Rogers wasted no time. She dashed across making the jump easily, landing on her feet and stopping short. Cassiopia climbed up and brushed herself off. Rogers cautiously surveyed the area.

"Let's get going. We need to find a car and get out of here."

They climbed down to the fifth level where dozens of cars offered a possible escape. Each took an isle and trotted from car to car looking for keys. Cassiopia found a late model, black SUV and motioned over the car tops. The driver's door was open and the keys were on the ground next to it. She climbed in, fumbled to find the right key, and twisted the ignition. The engine roared to life. A moment later, Rogers climbed in. No words were necessary. Cassiopia backed out and headed for the exit ramp.

"What are they?"

"They're zombies. I'm sorry. It's my fault."

"How do you know?"

"It was the TV last night. I love zombie movies. My favorite one was on, 'Vaun of the Dead'. I fell asleep watching it. I didn't think it would matter."

"I don't know about zombies."

"Haven't you ever watched TV?"

"I've seen a little of that stuff flipping through channels, but I never stopped to watch. It was too gory for me."

"Well, all you need to know is that they only want one thing. They want to bite you. That's really all you need to know."

"Why do they want to bite you?"

"It's usually a super epidemic that changes people into monsters. If they bite you, you could change into one, too."

"Ann, you may be too high caliber for this place. Clearly, you're the one creating the Dreamland environments."

"Hey, I'm no more high caliber than Scott Markman. When we were working together it seemed like he was either in a fight or in some kind of trouble every five minutes."

"Well, that's true."

"Do you know he and I even ended up stark naked in a closet together once?"

Cassiopia slammed on the brakes, squealing the vehicle to a stop. "What?"

"Oh don't get your panties all in a wad. It was an accident."

"Two people end up naked in a closet together and you're telling me it was an accident. Do you think I'm an idiot or something?"

"No, not at all. Your IQ tests registered genius level....twice!"

"Okay, explain to me how two people can end up naked in a closet together by accident."

"We were hiding..."

"From what?"

"Oh boy, you're not going to believe this part."

"I already don't believe you. I'm waiting..."

"We were hiding from zombies!"

"Very funny. If you're not going to tell me, I'll just ask him when I can." Cassiopia stomped on the gas and squealed around the turn."

"Okay, but I'd like to be there when you do. I'd hate to miss that one."

Cassiopia worked the accelerator and brakes, racing around the curving exit ramp, nearly scrapping the waist-high cement walls that enclosed it. The fourth and third levels were open and easy, but as they approached the second level, a problem appeared.

In the center of the ramp, a decrepit man in torn coveralls waited. One arm appeared to be broken and useless, the other waving erratically. The man's black hair was wet and tangled, and his face darkened and bleeding. He made no attempt to clear the road, and continued his advance toward them.

Cassiopia slammed on the brakes and stared.

"You are going to have to drive past or through him, Cassiopia. Don't screw around with him. If he gets a hold of the car he won't let go."

"But..."

"No butts!" Rogers stepped on Cassiopia's foot, pushing the gas pedal to the floor. Wide-eyed Cassiopia yelled something incomprehensible, and as they closed in on the man, she jerked the SUV to the left, scraping the sidewall, brushing past the staggering zombie. He bounced off, hit the sidewall and flipped out, over the wall.

"Oh no! Why did you do that?"

Rogers did not have to answer. As they leveled off to ground level and turned to the exit, Cassiopia stopped once more.

There were at least a hundred of them, a colorful and morbid precession of the living dead. Tall and short, fat and thin, they swaggered their way along until spying the black SUV that had come to a stop one hundred yards away. There was no decision-making process. They immediately redirected themselves in mass toward the two non-dead.

"I'd better drive."

"I think so."

"Do not get out, do not unlock your doors, do not roll down a window to apologize. Got it?"

"I'm getting it."

With an undignified scramble, the two women worked their way into each other's seats. Rogers did not wait. She floored the gas pedal and charged toward the oncoming crowd.

"Maybe they'll get out of the..."

Before Cassiopia finished speaking, the first impacts began. It was a short distance past a tollbooth, out onto a crowded street filled with undead confusion. Rogers skillfully plowed her way through the ragged, colorful wall of diseased humans, working the gas and steering for optimum passage, a look of determination etched into her face. As they turned onto

*Connecticut Ave*

, one pursuer with a particularly mangled face managed to haul himself up against the windshield, sticking like a dead bug with his cheek flattened against the glass directly in front of Cassiopia. She stared wide-eyed, her mouth agape, until Rogers swiped the car against the trunk of a roadside tree, and wiped him away.

As they cleared the persistent crowd, Rogers hung a hard left and accelerated still faster. When the street became blocked by two abandoned cars, she slowed and used her bumper to push one out of the way. With a safe distance behind them, she pulled into an empty parking space in front of a bed and breakfast, and put the car in park.

Looking in all directions, she asked, "The door will reappear back there where we started, right?"

"Yes, unless my father has had to shut it down again. In that case, when he turns it back on, it could appear anywhere."

"Try your control."

Cassiopia dug her control out of her pocket and called for the door. "No. No heading or distance indication. Try yours."

Rogers pulled out her control and pressed it repeatedly. "The same."

"The door must be off. There must be a problem again."

Rogers looked behind nervously. "Well if we're going to be trapped here for a while there's only one thing to do."

"What?"

"We need weapons."

"All-Mart has some guns."

"Nope. We need fancy guns. At least I know this place pretty well. There is one gun dealer on Connecticut Ave. Hold on, here we go."

Rogers backed out and gunned the SUV. At several points along the way, she had to cross the median to avoid wrecked cars. As they neared their destination, she found a driveway-alley intended for deliveries and pulled into it. Behind an office building, she turned the SUV around for a quick exit.

"We can't risk parking outside the store. It would attract attention. It's the next building over. Let's try not to be seen."

"Maybe I should wait for you."

"No. You shouldn't stay here alone and wait for me. Let's go. Close the door quietly."

They climbed from the car and took long looks around. Rogers went on ahead and motioned Cassiopia to follow. They crept along beside a tan, brick building, and paused before emerging onto the sidewalk. A six-lane roadway separated the two sides of the street. Trees decorated the sidewalk in both directions. There were cars everywhere, on the sidewalk, in the middle of the street, and parked all along the curb. Some had broken windows and body damage. There air smelled as if something had been overcooked and burned. There was trash blowing in the wind everywhere, but not a soul to be seen.

Rogers spoke in a whisper. "It's the next building on our left. It looks clear. Stay close."

They moved forward in a crouched position, turning to keep watch, staying close to the storefronts. At the entrance to a place called 'The Right Way', the locked front door did not have one bit of glass left in it. They stepped through the empty door, and stood to check the area.

There was no one. Rogers breathed a sigh of relief and began walking along the broken glass counter in search of her best weapon.

"What can you use, Cassiopia?"

"What? Me?"

"Come on, this is no time to kid around. What kind of gun do you know how to use?"

"Me? I don't know about guns. I don't like guns."

Rogers stopped and sounded patronizing. "You've never fired a gun?"

"No."

"Well could you?"

"I'm not going to shoot anyone."

"Not even if they're going to hurt you?"

"I'll run away."

"What if you can't?"

"I'll push them away."

Rogers slumped her shoulders. "It's okay. I'll see if I can find enough fire power for both of us."

From within the broken glass of the display case, she pulled out a chrome Smith and Wesson handgun. She tucked it in behind her and continued searching the wall displays. At the back of the store, she found what she had been looking for.

"Oh, I don't believe it! Intratecs! Tec-9s! Oh, thank the Lord." She pulled down two small black machine guns with perforated guards around the barrels. She popped out the long clips and stared down into them. "Cassiopia, come over here. You can at least help me load."

After pulling out drawer after drawer, Rogers assembled a tall stack of shells on the only remaining glass countertop. Next to it, she piled long rectangular boxes that contained new clips. She set up an empty clip and poured a box of shells out on the counter. Cassiopia watched intently.

"Okay. They go in like this." Roger inserted several shells and handed the clip over. Cassiopia reluctantly began plugging in bullets.

"I'm going to go work on the Intratecs a little bit. They're not fully automatic yet. Do you know what that means?"

"You're going to make them shoot faster."

"Yep. A whole lot faster."

As Cassiopia continued to load, Rogers came up behind her and began fastening little round metal containers to her belt.

"What?"

"They're flash-bang grenades. They won't hurt anyone, but they'll help keep them back. You can do that, right?"

"I guess so."

"You pull the pin and then get rid of it immediately. You need to be at least fifty feet away when it goes off, and don't look at it, and cover your ears and open your mouth wide, okay?"

"Okay."

Rogers packed her clips in a utility satchel and strapped it on. She slung a machine gun over each shoulder, checked the cylinder in the handgun, and went to the storefront. "I think I know just the place to hold up until we get a signal from the door. Are you ready?"

"Yes?" replied Cassiopia, but she wasn't ready at all.

## Chapter 17

Within the limited safety of the SUV, Rogers turned onto

*Connecticut Avenue*

, and headed south. The road was passable between stalled lines of traffic and wrecked cars. Periodically members of the undead took notice of their passing but were never in a position to interfere.

"Where are we going?" Cassiopia finally asked.

"I know the best place."

"Where?"

"I'll give you a hint. There's a color in the name."

"The White House? We're going to the White House to hide?"

"It's one of the most fortified buildings anywhere. If we can get in, we should be safe until your father's door comes back on."

"How can we get in?"

"We'll need to use the North Portico. That will be the easiest, unless security is still all over the place which I doubt under the circumstances."

"How do you know about the White House?"

"I'm on the COG response team. We're trained in some key government facilities. We need to make it to

*17<sup>th</sup> Street*

and then

*Pennsylvania Avenue*

. From there, with a little fence bashing and off-road work, we can drive right up to the front door."

"What if it's locked up?"

"There are some secret entrances. I can't tell you about them or I'd have to kill you."

Cassiopia cast a somber look.

"That was a joke."

"So watching your zombie movie last night brought us here, but I wonder why you subconsciously chose Washington."

"I thought about that too. It's because of the case I was working on when you called me. It was a very bad situation, something going on here in Washington. It's been bothering me. That's why."

"What is it about?"

"That's the real world. I can't talk about it."

Rogers slowed the SUV. Ahead, a city bus had come to rest across the road with its back end lodged on the cement island, blocking access to the opposing lanes. Rogers stopped, jammed the car into reverse and twisted around to look out the back window. Two staggering zombies had emerged on the road behind her. She jammed down on the gas pedal and zigzagged toward them. They appeared unconcerned and as she approached, paused long enough to bounce off the back of the SUV. At the end of the center island, Rogers jerked the wheel over and continued down the opposite side. Passing by the broken-down bus, she made a sharp right hand turn onto an adjacent street, and then another quick left-hand turn onto

*17<sup>th</sup> Ave.*

"We're almost there." Rogers maneuvered onto the sidewalk to avoid a truck in the street. She jerked the car back onto the road and turned left onto

*Lafayette Ave.*

"Oh my god! That's Lafayette Park. There must be hundreds of them." As the White House and the park came into view, she slowed and stopped. They stared at the zombie infestation, stunned.

Lafayette Park had become a gathering place for monsters. Some stood within the flowerbeds; others were draped upon the statues, monuments, and canon display. They waded in the fountain and leaned against trees. In the grassy open areas, there were even more, too many to count. They seemed to have no purpose other than to have gathered in force. They appeared docile, with no victims available to spur them on.

Rogers could see the nearest gate. It was half-open. The black, wrought-iron frame was intact, but the upper hinges had torn loose so that the gate hung down to the black asphalt. There was no one in the guardhouse, of course. Only a few zombies patronized the horseshoe shaped road that led to the front entrance.

"We can make it, but we'll have to be quick."

"How?"

"We'll crash through that gate, speed up to the front door, and knock down any of them that get in our way. We'll have our doors open before we stop, then jump out and make a run for it. I'll follow and take any of them down that I need to."

"But what if the doors are locked?"

"Then we'll shoot our way to a secret entrance on the west side. Are you ready?"

"Maybe this is not such a good idea. Maybe we should just keep driving until we find a safe spot."

"I know how you feel Cass, but I'm thinking we were barely able to drive this far. Driving around is like waving a flag. Chances are we're going to reach a point where we're stuck. Then we'd be on foot in the middle of them. On the other hand, if we can get in here, we can hold them off for a long time. What do you think?"

"I guess so."

"Okay. Grab my guns and clips in the back and hand them to me as we run. I'll take it from there."

Cassiopea collected the machine guns and satchel, and held them in her lap. Rogers laughed at the sight.

"Ready?"

"Better get going. Here comes three more."

Rogers hit the gas and made for the broken gate. She held to the middle and smashed through it, swinging both sides wide open so that they ricocheted off the cement barriers. She swung left, around the meandering, disheveled people hanging out in the road, and plowed through several before finally reaching the front entrance. To her surprise, the doors opened and a man in black military fatigues stepped out holding a very large machine gun. He waved furiously at them to enter. Rogers slammed on the brakes. They leapt from the vehicle and raced for the door. Halfway there, Rogers caught up to Cassiopea and without stopping grabbed the straps on her guns and pulled them on. The White House guard held his weapon ready, providing cover as they climbed the steps to the entrance. Fallen flagstaves on either side interrupted their path. They reached the doors and entered without a shot fired. The guard quickly slammed the inner doors and bolted them high, low, and center. He turned and inspected the two visitors carefully.

"Neither of you is sick?"

Rogers answered, "No. I'm federal agent Ann Rogers. This is Dr. Cassell. She's working the biology end of it. You can check us out if you call up the files."

"No need. Your timing is good. We need your vehicle. Can I have your keys please?" The man was wearing an earpiece and small boom microphone. He pinched a button on his belt and turned away to speak. "Good news. We have a ride. Get them up here immediately." He turned back to Rogers. "We have two VIPs that we've got to get to the airport ASAP. How about those keys?"

Rogers held them out and the agent took them. Cassiopea raised an eyebrow, but remained quiet.

Rogers said, "I wouldn't go out there. There are too many. You'll never make it."

The agent replied, "We've been holding them off for three days. They've evolved. They attack in mass. We beat them back from the roof and after a while they retreat. They mill around like they are now, and then all of a sudden join up and hit us again. The place is fortified like Fort Knox, but they've managed to crack some of the bulletproof windows already. They will get in here. It's just a question of time."

Rogers repeated, "You can't go out there. They'll be all over the vehicle."

The agent nodded. "Our orders are to get our packages to the airport, at all costs."

As he spoke, two more agents in black carrying weapons showed up guiding two people with jackets draped over their head to hide their identity. They moved passed without stopping and went to the door.

The first agent turned back to Rogers. "Do not take the elevator to the tunnels. They've been compromised. You

will not find any more friendly down there. The roof and all the other levels are still clear, but you'd better keep a close eye out. The bastards seem to be getting smarter. They'll scale if they can." He went to the door and looked out the windows, then began unlatching. Rogers moved along side him and waited. With a last look, he waved the others forward and opened the right hand door. They hurried out and charged for the SUV, squeezing the remote as they went. The loud bleep alerted the masses.

Rogers quickly latched all the locks and stood looking out the windows with Cassiopia. By the time the vehicle had started, a dozen zombies were banging the car windows and climbing up on the hood. As the car crept forward, a huge group rushed to the roadway in the direction of travel, so that the driver had to go onto the grass to avoid them. He swerved around and plowed into countless bodies, but the undead cared little. They gathered at the gate in such numbers that no vehicle could have made it through. The driver hit the accelerator full, carrying two dozen bodies on the hood and roof along with him. At the gate, the carnage became horrific. The driver, blinded by the clinging monsters on his windshield, clipped the side of a gate stanchion, causing the car to veer nose-first into a wall where it smoked and died. The sound of breaking glass rang out, back dropped by a brief volley of automatic weapons fire, and in moments, the SUV contained a crazed mass of zombies and their victims.

Rogers looked at the sick expression on Cassiopia. "It's not real. They're not real people, right?"

"It's a nightmare."

"We should go to the roof and check around the building." Rogers pulled out her door control and tried it. Nothing. "How about yours?"

Cassiopia checked hers with the same result. She shook her head and finally looked over her surroundings. The Grand Foyer was a stark contrast to the carnage outside. The tan and white checkerboard tile floor was so polished it was reflective. Huge red curtains with gold trim enclosed each of the windows. Crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceiling in several places. Large, colorful portraits accented the off-white walls everywhere. An elegant stairwell waited within an adjoining alcove on the left, and a small usher's area was open on the right. Ahead large columns that graced the Cross Hall rose up from the bright red carpet that bounded its limits. Through the open door at the center, below the Presidential seal, there was a hint of the Blue Room that lay beyond. Inside, tall blue curtains draped open surrounded a tall window overlooking the South Portico. An ivory covered table with flowers sat in front of it.

Cassiopia gasped at the grace of the vision. She marveled at how the detail could be so overwhelming in a dimension made only of subconscious thought. She looked at Rogers with wonder.

"How could you know this place so well?"

Rogers smiled. "They don't kid around when they train you for this kind of duty. You are required to be able to find your way in near total darkness here. The preparation is extensive."

Cassiopia remembered the turmoil going on outside, and spun to look out the window.

Rogers said, "Let's go up and see how secure we are. Any guess why it's taking your father so long to get the door back up and running."

Cassiopia looked distracted. She blinked and recovered. "It's probably not been long at all. It's the Dreamland time distortion."

Rogers smirked. "I'd forgotten that, Can you remind me?"

"You know how sometimes you can sleep for many hours and wake up and feel like it's only been a few minutes, or other times you can take a short nap and feel like you've slept for hours? Well this place is the same. We can be in here all day and when we leave, we might find we've only been gone for ten minutes. It works the other way, too. We can stay for thirty minutes and when we go back find out we're been gone for six hours."

"Jeeez..."

"Yes, and so it may be that only ten or fifteen minutes has passed for my father, while we have been here for hours."

Rogers shook her head and waved Cassiopia to follow. She led the way through several small but lavishly decorated hallways and rooms and stopped at a small aluminum door with no knob. She touched a small image beside the door, and it slid open.

"So the elapsed time thing is a bit scary, wouldn't you say?" she asked as the elevator carried them upward.

"You don't know the half of it. It is possible for you to leave Dreamland before me, and then I follow an hour later, and I get there before you!"

"What?"

"Yes. We somehow pass in the void between worlds. And, even more perplexing than that, when we first discovered the phenomena, my father immediately began working it mathematically, and he kept coming up with formulas that insisted a person could emerge from the doorway and find himself back in time, or ahead in time, but fortunately that has never happened."

The elevator door slid open. They emerged under blue sky on a walkway that followed a white wooden fence encompassing the perimeter of the White House roof. Cassiopia looked around and found a structure larger than most homes sat atop the White House. Nearby stood a gazebo-like dome, bordered by cedar trees. In the center of it all stood an unmanned, raised observation platform with a tall flagpole.

"Stay away from the edge and the fence. We don't want to advertise our presence," said Rogers. "Maybe they think they got us all." She led the way, adjusting the straps on her machine guns as she went.

As they crossed the north side, the wrecked SUV by the east gate came into view. A large crowd of zombies were still milling around it. A short distance away, fresh bodies were being dragged away by smaller groups. Across the grassy park in front of the White House, the undead had again spread out and now wandered aimlessly, waiting for the invisible signal to mass and attack the large white palace, the object of their desire. On all sides, Rogers and Cassiopia found the same, though on the south lawn the collection seemed less dense.

Rogers stood looking out over the west side. "We're okay for the moment. They seem pretty docile. We need to plan our escape route. We both need to learn it like the back of our hand in case we get separated. I can see there's no way we're going north or south across those open lawns. We'll have to figure a way east or west. There's cover all the way, and adjoining buildings to hide in."

"Why didn't the others do that?"

"Probably because they were escorting two people who were not athletic enough. Let's go take a walk through the West Wing and see what kind of exit it would be."

Rogers headed down to the first floor Palm Room and through to the Press Corps area, being careful to stay away from windows. The interiors remained untouched and pristine. As they passed by the cabinet room, Rogers paused and smiled at Cassiopia. "Let's look in here a minute," she said, and she turned left and then right into an intricately decorated office. At the back of the office, she stood along side a windowed door and peered carefully into the next room. "Ah, the curtains are drawn. We can go in." She pushed the double doors open wide and stepped inside with Cassiopia close behind.

The circular room had a large emblem on the floor in the center with rays radiating outward in all directions. On the left, a brown, neatly engraved desk sat in front of three tall windows concealed behind tan curtains. In the center of the room, a small table between beige sofas offered a bowl of apples. Two blue and beige chairs sat at each end. Rogers seemed to have a special affection for the place

She looked at Cassiopia. "You know what this is, don't you?"

"The Oval Office."

"Can you imagine the discussions that take place here in the real world? The decisions that are made here?"

Cassiopia tried to absorb the symbolism that was all around her. Colorful pictures on the wall seemed to speak. Books and plaques on shelves meant more than the messages they were intended to carry. Rogers broke the spell.

"We'd better get going. We just need to take a look from the Vice President's office and see how bad it is out there."

A long walk down lavish hallways, brought them to a building exit, a door filled with safety windows. Staying back out of sight they could just make out a portion of the west gate. It was open and populated by half a dozen particularly morbid-looking undead. Rogers studied the route intently, and spoke in a low tone. "We could make it. We could toss out a few flash bangs, and probably be across the street before they knew what happened. That's the old ExecutiveOfficeBuilding over there. A million rooms, but I'm sure it's not secure. We'd have to be hit and run, probably all the way. Let's head back and check out the east side."

A long, winding trek to the far point of the East Wing brought comparable results. When they were satisfied, they returned to the front entrance and stood looking out the front door at the growing assemblage on the front lawn.

Rogers tried her controller, and quickly gave up. "There were some apples in the Oval Office. Can we eat Dreamland food?" she asked.

Cassiopia replied without looking away from the window. "It's thought-matter food. You can eat all you want and never gain an ounce. If you don't know what it's supposed to taste like, it will either taste weird or have no taste at all. If it's food you know, it might be okay. It won't fill you up, but it might make you think you ate something. You can't live on Dreamland food."

"There's a hell of a kitchen on the Family Floor. Let's go check it out."

Trusting the elevator once more, they went to the third floor and made their way through the extravagant Center Hall to the President's dining room. The adjoining kitchen was loaded with all foods imaginable. Rogers sat at a counter eating a huge bowl of strawberries, dipping them in whipped cream. They were delicious.

"How long has it been?"

Cassiopia answered, "Fifteen minutes."

Rogers dug into her pocket and tried hers again. She lifted the switch guard, took a moment to close her eyes and hope, then hit the button. Immediately her eyes lit up. "Hey! We're on, and it's west!"

Cassiopia straightened up and tested her control. "Yes, I've got it too."

They stood and looked at each other, then without speaking headed for the West Wing.

## Chapter 18

The view from the west exit had changed. The driveway to the West Gate looked suspiciously available. They stood on either side of the door leaning forward to look. Occasionally a battered zombie would stroll by in the distance, but otherwise the way was clear. Rogers spoke softly, "I'll bet they're gathering for an attack. They're overdue. We may get really lucky on this."

Cassiopia stared worriedly.

"Let's skip the flash-bangs. No need to alert the entire army. I go first. You follow. If I stop to fire, you keep going past me and I catch up, and believe me I will. When we get to the office building next door, I go in first. You stick close right behind me. If it's clear, we take a quick reading and keep going to the next cover."

Rogers slowly pulled the door opened and leaned out for a better look. "Oh brother," she said, and lunged out so fast it caught Cassiopia off guard. In a panic, Cassiopia burst out and made up the distance. On both sides of the drive, large gatherings of the undead were milling about. As the women sprinted toward the gate, they became alert and began their erratic but determined pursuit. Some worked up to a slow run, others leaned more into their stagger, some fell trying.

Rogers passed the gate and dashed across

*Executive Avenue*

. Other malingering hopefuls spotted the escape attempt and joined in. By the time the women reached the big metal doors of the Old Executive Office building, a large crowd of predators had formed a zombie marathon behind them. Praying the entrance was unlocked, Rogers slammed into the stainless steel bar on the door, and then said silent thanks as it pushed open. To her surprise, Cassiopia stopped behind her, pulled a pin on a stun grenade and tossed it at the rush of monsters. The loud bang shook the worn doors of the building, though neither woman looked back to check the effects.

There was no time to stop, and they could not risk trapping themselves on a higher level. They could not use a vacant office to hide it. Every office would be searched relentlessly.

The exit door on the opposite side of the building opened to a huge open-air pavilion with equipment, storage facilities, and other structures spread out across it. Rogers did not pause. She ran the length of the pavilion and re-entered the building through the nearest door. At the end of a hallway littered with garbage, a windowed metal door opened to

*17<sup>th</sup> street*

. Cassiopia quickly caught up, gasping for breath.

Rogers fumbled and pulled out her door control. The SCIP door was close, slightly to the right. She jammed the control back in her pocket and looked out in the direction they needed to go. There was a large building across the street with a closed, roll up garage door, and an office beside it. There were cars parked alongside the street in both directions amid trash and destruction. In both directions, there were too many zombies. They were not alerted yet, but they soon would be.

Rogers looked worriedly at Cassiopia. "You see the big roll up door?"

"Yes."

"That's where we need to go."

Cassiopia studied the layout. "The roll up doesn't open from the outside. There's no control. You have to be in there to open it. The office door next to it has a keypad lock. We'd need the key code to get in."

"Could you hot-wire it?"

"Yes, if we can get the keypad panel open."

"There's a lot of them out there. How long would it take?"

"Maybe a couple minutes, if we can open the keypad. It needs a special screwdriver."

"I have one of those. Are you ready?"

"I guess."

"They're going to be coming up behind us any second. When we get there, make sure you block everything out and concentrate on the hot-wiring, no matter what happens, okay?"

"Okay."

"Here we go. Three, two, one...go!"

They burst out the door and zigzagged through parked cars. Halfway across the street, a second death-march immediately began. Zombies on both sides halted to look, and then began their mad rush toward the prey. At the same time, the other mass of undead came storming around the street corner, already in search of the same victims. By the time Rogers reached the office door, three separate groups were gaining on them. With the butt of one machine gun, she smashed the keypad with all her might, shattering the plastic box that held it, twisting the chrome panel and buttons. As Cassiopia arrived, Rogers turned to face the attacking army and unslung both machine guns. She emptied extra clips from her satchel onto the sidewalk, kneeled on one knee, and leveled one gun in each hand, as zombies were already crossing the street on the left and the right.

Loud explosions of gunfire erupted, causing Cassiopia to jump and fumble the panel. Rogers waved her guns back and forth, spraying bursts in both directions. The closest zombies, those that had been the quickest, fell to the street, bringing down those behind as they did. Cassiopia jumped once more at the painfully loud sound of it, but forced herself to concentrate, furiously ripping wires from their connections. The waves of undead did not understand retreat. They kept coming and falling. The bursts of gunfire lasted longer and longer. When a momentary slow down in the attack occurred, Rogers popped out her clips and slammed new ones in. She snapped the right weapon up and brought down three attackers that were too close, and then began the methodical double spread of gunfire once more. Dozens continued to fall, creating barriers of bodies in the street.

"Not going to last forever, Cass!"

"I've got to short the right wires. I'm almost there."

Rogers emptied the clip in the left gun, and let it hang by its strap. She continued using the other with bursts that were as economical as possible. The general line of attack was working its way closer and filling out even more. As her gun neared empty, Cassiopia heard the life saving click, and yanked the office door open. Rogers did not need to be told. They dove into the office and slammed the door behind them. With a sliding bolt quickly snapped into place, the two women fell to their knees and struggled to catch their breath.

"Well...I wouldn't want to do that again." Rogers gasped when she could finally speak.

Before Cassiopia could respond, a blood-curdling pounding echoed from the roll up door. The thin metal door flexed inward from the pummeling. At the same time, hammering on the office door became equally deafening. Both women froze, wondering which entrance might suddenly give way. Rogers scrambled to her feet, drew out fresh clips, and snapped them in place. She stood and raised her guns.

Cassiopia searched the room. It was a one-car garage. In the center, an antique auto with its hood up was in the process of restoration. The engine was missing, the doors absent. A tool bench on the right was scattered with stacked tools and parts. A perforated board against the wall held wire, hose, connectors, and other supplies. On the far side of the room, larger service equipment was stacked against the wall. To Cassiopia's relief, in front of the parked auto was a beat-up heavy wooden door. Rogers watched over her shoulder as Cassiopia went to it.

"Be careful what might be on the other side," she called. The banging on the two front doors grew more frequent and intense, the roll up door flexing in farther with each assault.

Cassiopia pulled on the wooden handle of the heavy old door. It would not budge. "It's locked on the other side."

There was a ragged hole by the large wooden handle where something had once been attached. Cassiopia knelt and looked through the coin-sized opening. "I see the SCIP door!" she cried. "I can see the reflection of this door in the mirror. It's an old-fashioned sliding bolt keeping us out. It's a big one."

Suddenly a tremendous crash against the roll up door made both women jump. The door bent in and did not straighten out completely. A small opening by the door slides let light in. The pounding continued. The door began to flex more and more.

"I could try to shoot it open," shouted Rogers.

"There's push-plates on it. You'd be shooting into metal." Cassiopia straightened up and looked around the garage.

She checked the open hood of the car and spied a battery in the engine compartment that looked new. Stacked on the bench were jumper cables, and hanging from the perf-board large rolls of wire.

"There's another way, I think." She went to the workbench and dug in the mess, drawing out a heavy iron chisel. She pulled down a roll of wire and frantically began wrapping it around the chisel. Rogers glanced over her shoulder nervously, but was drawn back to the pounding at the doors. With the wire wrapped to Cassiopia's satisfaction, she dragged the jumper cables over to the car battery and clipped onto it. With the other ends connected to the wires on the chisel, a steady hum back dropped the pounding. With careful aim, she dragged the improvised electro-magnet across the door at the spot where she had seen the sliding bolt. On the third try, there was a grating click, and the heavy wooden door jumped open. Without waiting, the two women charged into the adjoining room and into the glare of the SCIP mirror. They went to it, and without looking back at Zombie-land, jumped to reality.

## Chapter 19

The Dreamland explorers burst through the SCIP mirror and into the safety of the laboratory, bumping into each other and nearly falling down the ramp. Professor Cassell sat up abruptly in his swivel chair and almost fell over backwards. Catching the desktop he exclaimed, "Oh thank goodness! I'm sorry! I'm very sorry!"

The two women ignored him.

"Oh, my guns. I wish I could have kept them." Rogers lamented. "That was too close. They kicked in a space in the roll up door just as we came through."

The two women stood at the bottom of the ramp, inspecting themselves for injuries. Cassiopia looked at her watch. "Five hours!" She looked at her father. "How long were we gone?"

"All day, I'm afraid. There was an accident down the street. A power pole was knocked down. Power was out for seven hours and it took two more to reset the system. Are you both alright?"

"We're fine. We waited around in the White House," replied Cassiopia.

"Oh thank the Lord. I was so worried. There was... You waited where?"

Rogers laughed. Cassiopia joined in. "The White House. We had strawberries in the President's dining room. It was the best place to hold up away from the zombies."

The Professor furrowed his brow. "Zombies? You mean the movie monsters? You should not joke with me this way. I've been a nervous wreck, afraid that something bad was happening to you and I could not get the system back up."

"Relax. We're fine, Father. No harm done."

Rogers quipped, "Besides Professor, there are always at least some zombies in WashingtonD.C."

The two women laughed together and turned to head upstairs. The Professor shook his head and swiveled to begin shutting down. The Tel robot stood in its position by the cut-off levers, looking as though it was still trying to process the conversation that had just occurred.

When the pair had regrouped and taken time to console the Professor further, they sat in the study with pizza boxes stacked on the desk, talking between bites.

"Cassiopia have you noticed we make a great team?"

"How's that?"

"Back when we were in Germany, you figured out the disguise that got us to the fountain. Then in Zombie land, you hot wired the door, and made that electro-magnet to get us out."

"You could say I was motivated."

Rogers laughed. "Still, we make a great team. I'm the guns. You're the brains."

"I guess I did ask the right person for help, after all."

"About that. There's a problem. While we were in there, my office left a message on my cell. Things have gotten much worse on that case I told you about. I need to get back right away."

"How much time do we have?"

"I need to be on a flight tomorrow night. It was booked for me. That's how urgent it is."

Cassiopia became worried. "Well, it's time for the next step anyway. We could prepare tonight, and go back in tomorrow."

The Professor groaned with pizza still in his mouth.

"What do you have in mind?"

There's a way to control the Dreamland environment, at least a little bit. But, you'd have to agree."

"To what?"

"You take a mild hypnotic, in pill form. Then, using hypnosis, I implant a suggestion in your subconscious. When we go into Dreamland, that subconscious suggestion at least partially shapes where we end up. Scott is the only other person we've used this on, but it worked fairly well."

"Where did you learn this stuff?"

"A post graduate study group I was a part of. It was an interesting study of human behavior when the personality was limited to the same constraints as a robotic mind."

"Wow! I'll do it."

"So we'll do the procedure tonight before you sleep, and return to Dreamland tomorrow morning. I'll implant a suggestion for you to create a Scott Markman environment, and we'll hope your subconscious is somehow able to find him and bring us there."

As Cassiopia finished speaking, the beagle returned, bounding about the room, reassuring everyone that everything everywhere was just wonderful. It went to the robot and sat wagging its tail.

The robots visor brightened. "Professor, current Kimbler inventories are minimal."

The Professor gestured in frustration. "Okay. I'll order some."

Rogers offered, "Can I give him some pizza?"

The robot droned, "No anthropomorphic intake."

"What?"

"I think he means no human food," replied Cassiopia.

While they were speaking, the little door on the robot's hip slowly opened. The TEL delicately withdrew a dog biscuit and held it out. Immediately, the dog sat up and stared hopefully. The robot dropped the treat to the floor and watched it disappear. Satisfied, the dog curled up and went to sleep. The Professor stared at Cassiopia with a stolid look.

Later that evening, the process of post-hypnotic suggestion went smoothly. Rogers turned out to be a surprisingly good candidate. Cassiopia left her in what appeared to be a deep, restful sleep. On her way back to her room, she spotted her father, parting the curtain at the front window, and staring out into the night. She went to him and asked, "What are you looking at?"

He straightened up and let the curtain close. "Nothing. While you were away, on three separate occasions there was a black car parked out there with two men in it wearing dark sunglasses."

"Is that so odd?"

"Well, yes. It was at night, and yet they continued to wear the dark glasses. I do not know why anyone would do that, but since you've been back I have not seen them, so it must just have been police or something doing what they do."

"Well let us hope that there are no power failures tomorrow, Father."

"Yes, yes indeed. I will be a nervous wreck again the entire time."

"Don't worry. Ann is quite extraordinary at taking care of us."

"I know that, but as any good parent often says; don't make me come in there..."

## Chapter 20

The morning brought rain with faint thunder, making the Professor even more anxious than usual. In the lab, Cassiopia and Rogers arrived determined and optimistic. Rogers' flight departed at 10:15 P.M., leaving time enough to visit the unexplained world where time was no longer a constant.

Rogers zipped the front of her blue coveralls higher as Cassiopia tucked her controller in the front pocket of her jeans, and adjusted the collar of her tan, short-sleeved shirt. With the mirror glistening, and the ominous drone from the computer stacks and door emitters filling the room, they climbed the ramp and stood beside the liquid surface, conscious of the strained stare from the Professor.

Without speaking, they held hands, braced, and once more stepped through the silver membrane and into the dynamic world of Dreamland.

A strong ocean breeze greeted them, pushing at their hair and clothes. The crashing sounds of waves striking the beach and receding back for another try filled the air. On the right, a line of tall palms and beach grass stood guard at the boundary of a tropical forest. Ahead the apron of white sand seemed to go on forever, bending around a turn far in the distance. The blue sky held low clouds, shading the rising sun. To their delight, only a few feet away, two horses, saddled and ready stood waiting, picking at what grass there was near the edge of the clearing. Their saddles were lightweight western, brown leather, heavily engraved, and their bridles bore no bit, only a heavy cotton band around the nose. The nearest was snow white, with a long mane, and a tail that touched the sand. The other had a sleek, jet-black coat with a black mane that hung below the neck, a tail that dragged, and feathered hooves.

Both women took too long to turn and look for the mirror. It had faded away in midair, leaving more pristine beach in the other direction.

"This is more like it," remarked Cassiopia, as she turned to admire the horses.

"Everyone remember where we parked," joked Rogers. She searched the ocean for signs of watercraft, but saw none.

"Have you ever ridden, Ann?"

"Oh yeah. My uncle's ranch. I even went in horse shows, mostly equitation classes. How about you?"

"Yes. I took riding lessons starting when I was twelve. My father thought I wasn't getting out enough."

"Imagine that," joked Rogers, and she pushed Cassiopia on the shoulder.

"Well, I guess that explains why there are horses in this Dreamland. I wonder how close we can get before the chase begins."

"Only one way to find out." Rogers began a slow walk toward the black, stopping at points along the way to talk to him, backing away when he raised his head too quickly.

Both women cautiously approached a horse and slowly managed to hold one rein, Cassiopia with the white, Rogers beside the black. There seemed to be an instant amity. Cassiopia bent over and then stood back up. "Uh-oh. Stallions. I hope there are no mares nearby."

Rogers stroked her black stallion on the neck, cooing to it in a little voice. Without warning, she positioned herself facing sideway and slipping one foot in the stirrup, pulled herself into the saddle and collected her horse. The animal responded by flaring his head and sidestepping, but stopped at the first gentle tug.

Cassiopia laughed. "You are a brave woman, Ann."

"What, are you chicken?"

"Who's chicken?" Cassiopia moved into position and swung herself up and on. The animal backed around to face its companion, then stood waiting for commands.

"Which way?" said Rogers.

"You know, I really just don't care at the moment," replied Cassiopia. "This is just too good."

"They are long-legged. I bet they have nice flat trots. Roger made a "chic" sound and her horse broke directly into a

slow trot, raising its front feet high. Cassiopia neck-reined in their direction and caught up along side.

The two women trotted along the most beautiful beach they had ever seen, looking for any signs of life, finding none.

"I don't get it, Cass. You said this was supposed to be our best chance at finding him, but I don't see anyone anywhere, not that I'm complaining."

"There's a lot more beach to cover," countered Cassiopia.

Rogers laughed. "Yeah, maybe we should go faster," and with that she gave the "chic" sound again and leaned forward. Her horse needed no further coaxing. It shook its head from side to side, lowered it, and bolted out like a charging bull, tail straight up, head extended into the wind. Cassiopia shrieked with delight, gave a short tap with her heels and took off in pursuit. To her surprise, she caught up quickly, and in a flat-out gallop, they raced along the sand, splashing through the tips of the waves, jumping-stepping along when it became too deep. At one point Cassiopia's center of balance shifted to the left so much so that she nearly fell off. She hung on and began to laugh hysterically trying to pull herself back to center. Her right leg was hooked over the saddle well enough, but every time she tried to pull back up, the bounce set her back down, causing even more hysterics. Rogers glanced over long enough to see the dilemma and joined in; laughing so hard she nearly lost her own balance. Cassiopia's struggle to regain her seat seemed to go on forever, and the longer it lasted the harder they laughed. Her horse did not seem to mind in the least and never broke gate. With her face buried in the horse's mane, Cassiopia finally managed to wiggle back onto the padded seat. Ahead, a barrier of black rocks blocked the way so that they had to pull up and let their panting horses dance around to shake off the adrenaline. They laughed and laughed, and pointed at each other until their faces were red, and they could barely breathe. Rogers bent over the horn of her saddle, trying to catch hers. Cassiopia wiped tears from her eyes and struggled to stop. Each time they paused, a single look from one to the other and it would start all over again, until exhaustion finally overcame hysteria.

"Oh jeez, my stomach hurts," declared Rogers. "You looked like an out of control trick rider."

"Oh please. Don't start. I can hardly breathe," begged Cassiopia."

"You should have just gone ahead and fallen off. It would have been much more graceful," suggested Rogers, and with whining and wheezing they again lost control in uproarious laughter.

"Boy, it's awful when you're crying from laughing so bad you can't see where you're going at a gallop!" said Cassiopia, and again they started up.

"Oh, no more, please. I can't take it."

As their rides calmed, both women dropped their reins and continued to wipe their wet faces with both hands, slowly regaining a little sobriety. Cassiopia looked around as she collected her hair.

"Cassiopia, let's stay here forever."

"Ask me again if we find Scott."

The rock wall blocking the way descended from the forest edge and out into the ocean. Black rock, constructed of large and small boulders, formed a natural seawall. A wide tropical trail opened in the forest along side it, wide enough to canter. With a nod from Cassiopia, they turned their mounts toward it and urged them into a gentle lope, following the twists, turns, and upward slopes that led to deeper, more tangled jungle.

As the trail progressed, it became steep. In several stretches, they had to lean forward to help the horses climb, a task that both seemed to enjoy, despite the grunting and deep breathing it brought.

When the trail finally opened to a wide, dirt-stone plateau, a flowing stream crossed in front of them, and without being asked, the horses accelerated and easily jumped it. Not far from the stream, a new clearing decorated by a large Tibetan alter came into view. Three cloaked figures, their faces hidden by hoods sat in a circle around it. Cassiopia and Rogers brought their horses to a halt, and sat wondering if it was appropriate to continue.

The monks did not pay them any attention. They sat facing each other in silent meditation. Cassiopia dismounted and wondered if she should approach. She took a few steps toward them and spoke hesitantly. "May I intrude?"

"Too late," was the reply, and one of the three looked up at her.

"I'm looking for someone. It's very important. Perhaps you might know where I could look."

The monk who had spoken slowly rose and gathered his wrap. He waved Cassiopia to follow. She looped the reins over her horse's head and led him along side the man, as he slowly made his way up the path.

"What has brought you to this place, my young seeker friend?"

"Oh, a special doorway my father invented."

"And does everyone own such a thing as this where you come from?"

"No, it's the only one, actually."

"And who is this you seek that you would come so far?"

"His name is Scott Markman. But I don't suppose the name would mean anything to you."

"He is here, but he is not."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Complete your journey on this path, and on your way back I will have something for you." The monk pointed further ahead.

Cassiopia did not understand, but she did not hesitate. She pushed the reins back onto her horse, mounted up, and cantered along the narrowing trail. Around two turns and up a steep incline, the path ended on a cliff overhang. She twisted in her saddle to look out over the wondrous landscape of Dreamland. A man sat in the lotus position at the edge of the cliff. Cassiopia pulled her horse up and stared from behind. He looked very familiar. He turned and looked up at her.

It was Scott Markman.

"Wow! An angel with white hair on a snow-white horse! What a site," he said, as he stood and turned to face her. She immediately climbed down and went to him.

"How did you get here?" he asked and he hugged her and then held her away to look. "You are a site for sore eyes."

"We have to talk. There's problem."

"Something's bothering you? What is it?"

Cassiopia checked her horse. It would be a very long walk back without him. He seemed to be napping after the long run. "Let's sit."

They sat down on the ledge overlooking the Dreamland forest and distant ocean. Cassiopia studied him, wondering exactly who she had found.

"You are ill. You are in the hospital unconscious. We need to find a way to wake you."

"News to me. I feel just fine."

"What's the last thing you remember before being here?"

Markman thought. "I was investigating your father's disappearance for the university."

"No. That's from way back. What else do you remember?"

"Oh, I know. I was diving for an old friend named Dan Parrish."

"No. That's mixed up. You weren't"

"What else?"

"Okay, we went through a mirror or something, and ended up in a Federal agent's apartment in New York."

Realization and disappointment came to Cassiopia. It was not Markman. It was a distorted recreation of him, a composite personality based on her knowledge and experiences with him, combined with Rogers. She had felt that right away. She climbed to her feet and he stood with her. She hugged him.

"Go back to your meditation. I'll see you again."

"Okay," he replied, and he sat back down as though things were as they should be.

Cassiopia led her horse back down the trail. Fear began to seep in. She was not sure if there was a real way to reach Markman's subconscious. Seeing him made her realize how all-important it was. This should have been her best chance. What was left? The only thing certain was that she would never give up. A tear escaped one eye. She wiped it away and cursed at herself. She looked up and found the monk standing in front of her.

"He was there, but not there," she said.

The monk bowed and smiled. He held out a closed hand to offer her something. Cassiopia reached out. The monk opened his hand and dropped it in hers. She looked down to find a silver, heavily engraved ring, one that she knew well. It was a ring that had once helped catch her in a lie, and she was grateful for that.

The monk spoke. "Keep it close to you. You will need it."

Cassiopia tried to appear grateful in her sadness. She knew that thought-matter never left Dreamland. The ring would be gone the moment she stepped back through the mirror. The real ring was in the box of Scott's valuables she had brought home from the hospital. But the monk represented kindness, and kindness deserved to be treated with love. She forced a smile, thanked him, and tucked the ring in her jean pocket. She climbed onto her horse, wished him a heartfelt farewell, and turned to head back. The monk waved as she rode away.

Back at the altar, Rogers was still mounted and waiting. "Luck?" she asked.

Cassiopia shook her head and tried not to appear disappointed.

They worked their way down the trail and reached the shore. With the beautiful waves crashing along side, they sat a slow canter and made their way back to the spot where it had all begun. Dismounted, they took time to stroke their trusty steeds and thank them, regretting that it was time to leave.

Cassiopia dug in her pocket and found the door control. Rogers looked on.

"Here's hoping," she said.

Cassiopia lifted the switch guard and hit the button. To their surprise, the SCIP mirror beamed suddenly into view. They went to it, and with a last loving look at their horses, stepped back through the mirror.

## Chapter 21

Rogers sat on the side of her bed trying to get organized for the 10:15 flight. She could not decide which clothing should return and which should remain behind. She would stuff her choices into the only carry-on bag and then pull them out again in a change of mind. Some things were most appropriate, others had ventured into the cosmic world of Dreamland and so were now valued mementoes. She shook her head and sat on the bed in frustration.

Cassiopia peered in the open doorway. "Everything okay with you?"

"Nothing a trunk wouldn't cure."

"I'm glad it won't all fit. It means you'll have to come back."

"Would anyway," Rogers replied. "I just had the most intense three days of my life, and my life's generally not that dull, as it is. But the real question is; are you okay?"

Cassiopia came to the bed and sat next to her. "Maybe."

"What will you do?"

Cassiopia looked towards the open door and spoke in a low tone. "There's another way I haven't told you about. It's almost guaranteed to work."

"Another way? What?"

"Shhhh, keep your voice down. I don't want my father to hear."

"Oh brother... I'm listening."

"I need to create the true environment where Scott is right?"

"Yeah..."

"If I was to bring him into Dreamland his subconscious would do that automatically."

"Are you talking about moving his body into Dreamland?"

"Yes."

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

"He's in a hospital with a feeding tube down his throat. How could you do it?"

"I could use your help."

"It's sounding a bit illegal. It would take a court order to remove a comatose patient from a hospital, even if you were legal family, which you're not. You don't even have power of attorney yet, do you?"

"No, I don't. I would tell his doctor that I wanted a second opinion and was having him transferred temporarily to a different hospital, just for some tests. I'd forge the paperwork, have him transferred down here and then intercept him at some point and bring him home. The Tel could carry him through the arched doorway easily, and at that point, wherever Scott's mind is, would be the next Dreamland.

"Wow! That would really work?"

"Pretty much guaranteed. A sleeping person is the perfect candidate to create a Dreamland environment. Their conscious mind is already turned off. They're already in Dreamland, in a sense. How long will you need to be gone?"

"No way to tell except if we don't get a big break on the case in the next three or four days, something real, real bad is going to happen."

Cassiopea stood. "While you're gone, I'm going to begin planning. I can always change my mind and back out, if I need to."

"Well, if I can get back, I'm in, but keep me out of the forging and other illegal crap, okay?"

Cassiopea leaned over and embraced Rogers. "Thanks."

The ride to the airport was quiet. Cassiopea escorted Rogers to the security area and hugged her goodbye. "It's not actually a personally dangerous thing you're working on, is it?"

"You know me," replied Rogers.

"Yeah, you're right. It's dangerous for the bad guys."

"You'd better say a prayer, though. If we don't get a handle on this something unimaginably bad will happen, and believe me my imagination has grown considerably in the past few days."

"I'll be waiting to hear from you. Be careful."

"You too, Cass."

To the Professor's relief, Cassiopea agreed no further trips into Dreamland made sense, for the time being. The random chance of finding Scott was not worth the risks. Instead, she secretly went about creating her clandestine plan, charting routes, calculating costs, laying out a timeline, and listing needed resources. The OrlandoTraumaStudyCenter was the perfect candidate for a fake transfer. She pulled admission and transfer documentation off the net, and modified them to her needs. She collected the names of doctors, front office personnel, and assistants, and kept a running record of their job descriptions. The air ambulance service turned out to be a breeze, although it would leave a notable dent on her credit card. The ground ambulance service was a bit trickier. There was no way EMTs would deliver an unconscious patient to a residence without asking the wrong questions and informing the wrong people. It would have to be a fake ambulance crew. After only a few minutes of searching, Cassiopea found a leasing service that would provide an emergency medical vehicle as a movie prop. It would add another spike on the credit card, but that was to be expected. ID badges for the two medical technicians were easily created, C. Cassell, A. Rogers. Uniforms would need to be acquired and modified.

After four days of work, Cassiopea had most of her requirements laid out and ready. Dr. Cassell would not be told anything, until the day Scott arrived. She would then beg his forgiveness for the wrongness of it, and hope he would go along. The most worrisome item was that there had been no word from Rogers.

By 10:00 P.M., she had finished the last of it when the doorbell rang. She went to the front window and looked carefully out between the curtains as Markman had trained her. A lone figure stood at the door, but she could not see his face. Breaking all the rules, she switched on the outside light and opened the door. There stood a nervous Ann Rogers, in a dark trench coat, and brimmed hat.

## Chapter 22

"Fantastic, you're back!"

Rogers looked tense. "It's not what you think, Cass. Come take a look."

An unmarked black van waited in the driveway, backed up to the front door. Streetlights reflected eerie swirls off the side and black-tinted windows. She led Cassiopea to the double back doors, and opened them. Inside, a heavy tarp covered something. Rogers grabbed a corner of it and flipped it back. Beneath lay an unconscious man. He had dark hair, a short beard, and wore loose-fitting gray silk clothing with no shoes. He did not stir.

Cassiopea stepped back abruptly. "What...who is it? Is he dead?"

Rogers carefully covered the man back up, and shut the doors. "Let's go inside and talk. Is your father here?"

Cassiopea was too stunned to speak. They walked inside with Rogers looking nervously over her shoulder. Cassiopea shut the front door and locked it. In the den, the Professor looked up from his reading in pleasant surprise at the sight of Rogers.

"Ann! Welcome back."

Rogers remained somber. She motioned Cassiopea to sit, and took a seat facing them, then leaned forward with her hands folded. She glanced at the shiny Tel standing inertly in the corner. A heavy silence followed.

"Do you two remember how I was to tell no one at all about the doorway?"

The Professor sat up straight. Cassiopea looked anxious.

"No, no. It's okay. I would not break a promise. Your secret is safe. But, I must now ask you to do the same for me. You must never reveal what is happening here tonight, to anyone, ever."

No one spoke.

"The case I have been on is highly classified. I am violating the law big-time by telling you, but it is necessary, and I need to give you all the details so that you understand."

"Terrorists are not wealthy people. They are always financed by others who enjoy lives as legitimate citizens, though they are actually some of the worst scum of the Earth. Many times, the financing of terrorism is for the purpose

of making themselves even wealthier, while at the same time, the terrorists have their own agenda, which usually involves political power. So what you have, are two kinds of people, the greedy and the violent, working together to achieve two separate goals. That's what this case is all about. We have been tracking a certain terrorist cell for several years. They're up and comers, if you know what I mean. They seem more intent on hurting the U.S. than actually overthrowing any particular mid-eastern government. Some of the plant explosions and fuel storage explosions you've seen in the news have been their work, though cover stories have been used to avoid adding to their notoriety.

"Something changed about a year ago. A group of financial backers suddenly jumped into bed with these guys. We now know it wasn't out of a desire to oppose U.S. policies. It's much uglier than that. These financial backers suddenly converted everything they had in U.S. currency, into Euros. They began shifting their holdings into investments that were all based in Euros. At the same time, they began funneling money into this particular terrorist group, kind of like a rich person suddenly hiring a hit man."

"We had a good line on the communications within the terrorist cell. It was an elaborate crypto-system. Their messages were in plain text. Within the text was a simple algorithmic code that would yield a meaningless jumble of letters. Those letters were then converted into math, and from there, decoded by a machine that reminded me of the German Enigma decoder. But, even the decoded messages used code words. The single word 'nuclear' was the most difficult to verify, but fortunately they slipped once, and that combined with the stuff the group was buying, and the places they were buying it from, made it clear these people had parts of a nuclear bomb, and were fabricating the rest of what they needed."

Wide-eyed, the Professor could not hold back. "But the fuel source? How could they...?"

Rogers sat back. "It was the first thing they got their hands on. It started the whole thing. One of those slimy investors I mentioned owned the security company at a breakaway nation from the old USSR regime. It was no problem to walk off with it. They did all the monitoring. They kept the records, or at least what there are of them. And, it's enough, by the way. Have no doubt about that."

Rogers paused to breath. She looked in earnest at them both. "So you now know where I'm going with this, and it only gets worse. We know the bomb has been planted. There was no way to absolutely verify where, but we strongly believe it is WashingtonD.C., downtown. We have some very elaborate detection systems, airborne and terrain scanning, but we have not been able to pick it up. There's a good chance special shielding has been used, and it's blocking us just enough."

"When?" asked the Professor breathlessly.

Rogers wiped her hand across her mouth. "Three days."

No one spoke. They sat staring at each other in frightened silence.

Cassiopeia said, "But, you're up to something."

Rogers nodded. "It's time to break every rule in the book. If they put me up in front of a firing squad, that wouldn't be as bad as what's about to happen. The unconscious man you saw in the van is Kammadad Alaman. He's one of them. He was my assignment. He's been just jubilant the last few days, buying drinks for everyone in bars, dancing the day away. The ass-hole even got up and sang karaoke. He knows. He knows everything. But, there's no truth serum or water-boarding in the world that's gonna get it out of him. We are out of time and there's only one way I can think of to stop this thing from happening, and that is to get inside his brain and find out where the bomb is.

Cassiopeia understood. "Was there violence involved in bringing him here? Did you fight with him, or argue, or anything like that?"

"No. I knew better. It was an old trick, completely illegal, but very slick. Old Alaman drank himself to sleep after another celebration. That's why he's dressed in sleepwear. I let myself in, and gassed his room to be sure I wouldn't wake him. Then a good stiff injection of the right stuff and he'll be out cold for several more hours. When it gets near time, I'll stick him again. He will not wake up while we have him. When we're done, I'll make the twelve hour drive back to his place, put him back to bed, and he'll wake up thinking he drank too much and slept for a couple days. Of course, if we are unsuccessful, none of that will matter much. The financial backers of these people are hoping to disrupt the U.S. government and its financial structure so badly, that the dollar crashes and the value of the euro goes sky-high and becomes the world standard."

The Professor sat up straight. "You two have lost me. Bringing who, where?"

"The man she is referring to is outside in the van, unconscious, Father."

"This is a plot to give me heart failure. Cassiopeia was bad enough. Now the two of you together have elevated the effort to a global level. Of all the insidious things that could happen to an old man..."

"We shouldn't move him until we're completely ready. How long will he remain unconscious?" asked Cassiopeia

"Another two hours. It should be plenty of time to get in there. Then I'll dose the bastard again."

Professor Cassell interrupted. "I see what the two of you are thinking, that if you bring this man into Dreamland, his subconscious will create an environment in which you might see what he has been working on, but there are problems with your proposal."

"Well, you guys are the experts. Can we do it?" asked Rogers.

"There are no experts, Ann. There are only we amateurs," answered the Professor. "But let me ask you something. How did you come up with this? Where did you get the idea of bringing an unconscious person into Dreamland to create a specific environment?"

Cassiopeia winced. She wondered if her father had already guessed. Rogers squirmed in her seat, trapped between being dishonest, and betraying Cassiopeia's secret plan.

Cassiopeia interceded. "I mentioned the possibility to her, Father."

The Professor took pause. He raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair. "A very interesting hypothesis, Cassiopeia. I think you and I should discuss it more later."

Rogers tried to refocus. "What will happen? What will we find in there?"

Cassiopeia replied, "There is no way to know. We can only say that whatever he is dreaming or feeling will be created in Dreamland. Machines like the Tel, do not affect it, only humans, and possibly animals. When we enter, it will still be his dream, but our knowledge and experience will be added to it, enhancing it. That is all we can say. Ann is right though, Father. This may be the only chance. What other concerns do you have?"

"Time, my dear. To follow someone, or eavesdrop on someone, you may need to remain in Dreamland much longer than we ever have. We don't know what new effects that might bring. We've already seen how dynamic the time

association is."

"You remained in Dreamland for an extended period once, Father. I don't see any other choices in the logic table. Do you?"

The Professor sat stalemated. He had no argument to offer. He looked down and shook his head. "What have I gotten myself into?"

Cassiopia turned to Rogers. "He's right about the time it might take. We'll need to bring some extra things like food and water. We can use backpacks, and then maybe find a place to set up."

Rogers said, "I've brought some surveillance things in case they work in there, and since we can't use photography, we'll need to keep a record of what we find."

"How long before you will be ready?" asked the Professor.

"We need to go now," answered Rogers. "We're already out of time."

Professor Cassell stood and came out from behind his desk. "I shall leave the ugly side of this to you two anti-terrorist terrorists. I will begin setting up in the lab. ...Oh, my lord." He glanced at the Tel and left.

Rogers retrieved her bag from the van and changed into athletic shoes, black stretch slacks, a black turtleneck, and a black lightweight jacket. She bundled up her collection of support items and placed them in a satchel. Cassiopia, in jeans, a tan sweatshirt, and short lace-up boots, met her at the door with a carryall under her arm. Together they went to the Tel.

"Tel, please open a new program file, Alpha-Xray.

"File is open."

"Create a program to translate a human form from this floor level to the SCIP laboratory. The human form will not be ambulatory and will not be available for auditory input.

"Cassiopia, please enter load factors."

"The form is approximately six feet in height, and weighs approximately two hundred and twenty pounds."

"Cassiopia, please enter orientation constraints."

"Tel, there are no orientation constraints other than those required to protect typical human anatomy."

Cassiopia leaned over and whispered to Rogers, "That part worries me a little. The Tel has been unexpectedly creative sometimes."

Rogers stared back blankly.

"Cassiopia, Alpha-Xray translation program complete. Discard program when resolved?"

"Tel, no. Save program and additional data acquired during execution for later use in translation reversal."

"Cassiopia, program ready for implementation."

"Tel, open a new program file, Alpha-Yankee."

"Cassiopia, file open."

"Tel, create a program to translate the Alpha-Xray program objective through the SCIP Transformer."

"Cassiopia, Alpha-Yankee translation program complete, ready for implementation."

"Tel, standby for Alpha-Xray execute."

"Cassiopia, file open."

Cassiopia looked at Rogers. "We're ready for the guest of honor."

They went outside, being stealthier than was required. After standing around looking guilty for a short time, Rogers opened the back of the van and pushed the cover out of the way. Alaman remained unconscious and showed no sign of waking. Together they pulled the limp body from the van, and dragged him long ways through the front door, kicking it shut as they went. They braced him against the wall, and called for the Tel.

The robot ambled up to Alaman and took a position facing him. It positioned its arms like forks and inserted one under each shoulder, lifting the dead weight and pulling it in so that the body rested against its chest, his face and head on its shoulder. The robot turned slowly and motored to the basement stairwell, adjusting its center of balance and stepping down more easily and faster than Cassiopia had expected. She nodded to Rogers, who replied with a shrug, and they followed the machine down to the basement elevator.

In the SCIP laboratory, the command for Alpha-Yankee was given, causing the Tel to reorganize its objective until it stood with one arm under the knees, and the other under the shoulders, carrying Alaman like a bride over a threshold. Cassiopia called "Pause", and the robot stopped and waited.

The two women strapped on their backpacks and took positions behind the Tel and his charge. Cassiopia commanded. "Tel, pause at the primary door. Continue"

"Understood," was the robots reply. It marched deftly up the ramp, and stood waiting at the mirror's sparkling surface.

"Any last instructions?" she asked.

Her father replied, "There is one other concern."

"What is it?"

"The ghost effect. That man is a murderer and a monster. If anything from within him manages to exit Dreamland, we may be letting an even worse terror loose in the world. You must not call for the door until you are absolutely ready to come back through. It must not be open a second longer than necessary. We've just been lucky so far."

Before Cassiopia could reply, the robot unexpectedly interrupted, "Professor Cassell, the canine support program must be executed at 16:30 hours."

The Professor raised one hand in exclamation and shook his head. Cassiopia stifled a laugh. Rogers thought about it and coughed over hers.

"We'll keep the inner door closed until we are standing at its coordinates. Anything else?"

"Yes. Be careful."

Cassiopia nodded. Standing behind the robot, she held a portion of Alaman's silk nightwear in her left hand. Beside her, Rogers did the same. With a deep breath, she commanded, "Resume," and the foursome passed through the mirror, and into a terrorist's Dreamland.

They found themselves in the hallway of a run-down office building. The SCIP door quickly disappeared from the dirty brown, bare wall behind them. Afraid of what they might find, they stood gawking like Dorothy, Tin Man, and the Scarecrow, hoping the hostile environment would give them a chance. To their relief, the place seemed abandoned. Cassiopia quickly whispered instructions to the Tel, and the group quietly shuffled along and found a door on the left that was open. They hurried in and latched it behind them.

The room was a collection of overturned chairs, tables, and trash. It was large and extended to the opposite side of the building, where dingy picture windows looked out at a city. There were newspapers and piles of garbage on the dirty wooden floor, and gaping holes kicked in the walls. Storage closets lined the right side of the room. The rest was an open work area.

"Lucky, lucky, lucky," whispered Rogers.

"Tel, auditory levels minimum, hold position."

"Yes, Cassiopia."

"How long before we need to inject him again?" whispered Cassiopia.

"Now."

"This building and these rooms must mean something."

"The power is still on. Want to guess what kind of people own this building? I think we're on the fourth floor."

Alongside the door was a large storage closet. Cassiopia gently pushed the sliding panel open. It was a wide, empty walk-in. She leaned close to the robot and spoke softly. "Tel, translate here and put the objective down so he is sitting on the floor with his back against the wall."

The robot rocked back and forth and complied.

"You will stay here and guard this man and not let any harm come to him. You will not let anyone else have access to him. You will protect yourself at all times. You will accept no input from anyone except Ann Rogers or me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Cassiopia."

Cassiopia turned to Rogers. "We'll need to keep him here, near the SCIP location in case we need to make a quick exit."

"Understood," replied Rogers. She kneeled by the sleeping form, dug in her satchel, and withdrew a small plastic case. Snapping it open, she removed a small syringe, cleared it for air, and injected it into the Alaman's arm. When it was done, she stood and nodded to Cassiopia. "That gives us another six before he'll need more."

Cassiopia bit her lip. "No way to tell if Dreamland pharmacy parallels reality pharmacy, but he's real and so is the drug, so it should be okay."

"A chance we'll have to take."

They cautiously searched the dusty room. Rogers went to the windows and stood back out of sight, studying the surroundings. After a moment, her eyes lit up. She picked up a newspaper from the floor and read the cover. She went to Cassiopia, pointed to it and spoke in a hushed tone. "I don't believe it! It's Washington D.C.! Intel was right. This must be the target."

To Cassiopia's surprise, chills ran up her spine. The reality of what they were doing suddenly set in.

Rogers moved quietly over to a second closed door that opened to the hallway. The window in the door was glazed but scratched enough that she could see through it. Across the hall, a door was open. Beyond it, blueprint drawings were spread out on a long table. There still did not seem to be anyone around.

Rogers scanned outside the windows once more. "This is a rundown section on the outskirts of D.C.," she said, and she turned to face Cassiopia. "They must be using this place to operate out of. We'll have to hang out here out of sight and hope they return. I hope it's not a long wait...."

The room suddenly lit up as though someone had switched on a giant spotlight. Rogers and Cassiopia spun around to look in time to see a massive blossoming white light rise up in the sky in the distance. Rogers screamed, "Oh my god, we're too late!"

The first concussion hit a fraction of a second later. It blew out the glass windows spraying shards of glass all over them as they twisted to turn away. The concussion drove them both to the floor and pushed them along it through the rubble. It covered them with dirt and debris and did not let up, pressing them into the piles of shattered wreckage.

A second wave hit before Cassiopia had time to breath. Through the haze of dirt and wind, she watched the upper floors of the building peel away and disappear leaving a hazy gray sky overhead. Waiting for it to subside, she could see the mushroom cloud rising up in the distance, expanding outward like a monster surveying its territory. The air crackled with electricity. Waves of heat and wind continued to pass over. It seemed like it would go on forever.

The blast abruptly ended, though angry wind and a rumbling from all around continued to fill the air. Cassiopia pushed at the wood, dirt and glass covering her and struggled to get up. Her skin felt as though ants were crawling on it. She stood and found Rogers already on her feet. The world had lost all color. Everything in every direction was a dull shade of brown. They had been on the fourth floor of an office building but now it seemed like they were at ground level. In every direction, there was nothing but colorless debris, a flatland of trash and dirt. The sky was a sullen darkness with the mushroom cloud continuing to grow. Trash rained down from it all around. Fires were burning everywhere.

Rogers looked at Cassiopia but was unable to speak for a moment. Partly composed she stammered, "Shit! We were too late. Are you hurt?"

Cassiopia stood bewildered. She looked down at her torn, discolored clothing, and then back at Rogers. "I don't know. My skin is tingling pretty bad."

"Radiation. Shit! Is this real?"

"I don't think so."

"We've got to get out of here. Where's Alaman?"

They both turned amid the garbage and looked. Standing amid a particularly tall pile, the Tel robot had remained in place. They stepped over the debris and found Alaman's body beneath the rubble. He was still unconscious.

"Let's get out of here, Cassiopia. We won't find anything in this place now. Let's hope Dreamland radiation isn't real, or we're really screwed. This was a bad idea."

Cassiopia dug in her pocket for the control to the SCIP door. She pulled it out and was about to press the recall

when another wave hit them.

But this time it was different. A vortex of thunder suddenly surrounded them. The world went into a spin and became a speeding blur. Cassiopia held out her arms to keep her balance. Rogers bent at the knees and took a ready stance, unable to comprehend what was happening. A loud clap like thunder ended it. Instantaneously they were again standing in the office building just as it was when they had first arrived. Their clothes were clean and not torn. The feeling of radiation was gone. Rogers turned to Cassiopia to suggest they hurry and leave but was interrupted by chanting coming from across the hall.

Cassiopia raised one finger to her lips and quietly went to the door to look. Through the scratches in the door window, she could see Alaman cross-legged on the floor praying and chanting. She waved Rogers to join her. Rogers peered through the window, looked around at the restored surroundings and stared at Cassiopia in silent puzzlement.

Cassiopia whispered to her, "You see what's happening? He's playing the bombing over and over in his mind. We came in right at the end, and now it's starting over. We still have a chance."

Rogers was clearly shaken, but as she thought back to why they had come, her composure quickly returned. She whispered back, "Son of a bitch. Let's hope we don't get that far again. Some of it hurt. Let's get these bastards. How much time do we have before it goes off again?"

"No way to tell."

Cassiopia went to the closet door and opened it to check the robot and Alaman's unconscious form. Both were in place and undisturbed. She returned to the door to watch the Dreamland Alaman. He was moving around, spreading out papers on a long table. Beyond him, there was a mattress on the floor with blankets.

Cassiopia whispered, "I think we have some time. If the bomb was about to go off, he would have left. We may be in a good place."

Rogers leaned over and kept her voice low. "Okay, if we're staying I'm going to have to leave you and run some errands real fast."

"You're going to go? Where?" she whispered back fearfully.

"One of two things has to happen. Either Alaman is waiting for his associates and he'll be leaving with them, or he'll leave on his own, walk a few blocks to his car, and take off. They never park near their hideout so they can tell if they're being followed. It's for sure he'll have a weapon somewhere. We'll need a car to tail these guys, and I need a gun."

"How can you get those things?"

"I'll either steal a car, or rent one. I can walk in any gun store and buy a weapon using my Fed ID. Hell, I'll bet I'm even in the system in this place."

"But what will I do if he leaves, or the others show up?"

"Just stay quiet, and keep an eye out. Can the Tel protect you if you're discovered?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"So, if they look like they're going to come in here, hide in the closet with the Tel. I saw a rusty old fire escape on the south side of the building when we came in. I'll use that to come and go. It's for sure they've got the entrances set up to tell if anyone's been here. Don't leave unless it's life or death. I won't take long. I know my way around this town."

Rogers went to the windows on the far side of the room, and found one that wasn't painted shut. With coaxing, it opened. She looked back at Cassiopia, gave a thumb up and stepped out onto the catwalk. A moment later, she was gone.

Cassiopia turned back to the closed door and watched her suspect through a scrape in a pane that was just the right height. The man was excited and busy. He was not wearing the same clothes as the sleeping Alaman. He was dressed in gray mechanics coveralls and work shoes. Through his open door she watched as he sat on the floor in a lotus position and began bending forward and back in prayer. At one point, he stopped, drew a cell phone from his pocket, read something on it, and then resumed his prayer along with chanting and waving.

After forty-five minutes of bowing and chanting, the Dreamland Alaman suddenly rose and headed right at her, causing her to jerk aside from the window. To her relief, his footsteps turned to the stairs and faded. She went to the front windows and staying back out of sight, watched the street below. Alaman emerged onto the sidewalk and headed off to the right, looking around constantly. Moving along the windows, she followed his progress. The city was deserted. There were only a few cars parked along the street. Alaman crossed at a corner and continued a half a block, before stopping at an old, unwashed brown foreign car. He studied his surroundings before opening the trunk and digging around in it.

Cassiopia realized this was her chance. Rogers was not here to ask. It was up to her. She slowly opened the door and checked the dingy hallway. There was no one. She stepped out and entered the room where Alaman had been working. It was similar to the one in which she was hiding. Being careful not to disturb anything, she checked the closets but found them empty. There were folding chairs scattered around a single long table at the room's center, and another near the mattress on the floor. A couch with holes in it sat beneath the opaque windows at the front. She went to the table and began studying the documents on it. Some were in blueprint, others in pencil with a few printouts attached. None of it was English. The drawings were some kind of detached schematics, portions of a larger assembly. There was nothing to show the entire device, whatever it was. Some of the blueprints suggested hydraulics or coolant of some kind. There were wiring diagrams that showed thermocouples, probably for measuring temperature. There was not enough information to be sure.

Fearing she had taken too long, she hurried back to the door and looked out. The hall was deserted. She crossed over, quietly opened her door and slipped inside. At that moment, the sound of footsteps reverberated up the steps. She cursed herself for having cut it so close.

Through the small spot in the glass, she watched Alaman return. He resumed his nervous milling about, now frequently looking at his watch. He kept disappearing from view as though going to the windows. Another half-hour of restless pacing, and the answer became clear. The sounds of a fresh set of footsteps echoed up the stairs. Alaman heard the approach and came out to meet his associate. In the hall, they embraced and bowed to each other and talked excitedly in a language she did not understand.

A hand suddenly touched Cassiopia's shoulder. She jumped back violently and almost cried out. Rogers stood behind her holding one finger against her lips and dangling a key. She shifted carefully beside the door and peered through the window. Nodding, she backed away and spoke in a whisper. "We're parked in an alley, one block away, that

way." She pointed to the southside of the building. "I bought it with my credit card! It's an extra key. Take it. It's a dark blue sedan."

Cassiopia took the key and stared in amazement.

Rogers bent over and dug in the satchel on the floor beside her. She drew out a small earpiece and boom mike wired to a belt transmitter. She whispered, "Put this on. I'm betting if the door controller works, these will too. We can stay in touch."

Cassiopia worked hers into position over her ear and clipped the transmitter to her jeans. Rogers' subdued voice immediately squelched in. "How's that? You got me?"

"Loud and clear."

"How long has the other guy been here?"

Cassiopia held up five fingers.

"Did I miss anything else?"

Cassiopia lowered her chin and kept her voice down. "Alaman went to his car. It's the foreign one a block to the north of us. I'll bet he went to get a gun. I snuck over and took a look at their papers. It's sections of something that uses water or hydraulics, or coolant, or something. It doesn't look like a bomb."

"You went sneaking around over there while he was gone?"

Cassiopia shook her head.

"Wow. You never cease to amaze me. You have balls, girl!"

Cassiopia smiled.

They returned to the door in time to see the two men gathering some of the paperwork and getting ready to leave.

Rogers clicked on her mike, "Oh crap, here we go."

The men exited the room, shut and locked the door, and headed for the stairs.

"Okay, Alaman's buddy must've got dropped off, because I saw no other new vehicles out there, and I made it a point to check. So, they'll be taking his car. You go get ours and bring it around but keep out of sight until I call you. I'll follow them on foot until they're on the road, then you pick me up fast so we stay with them. Got it?"

"I guess..."

"We'll follow on the stairs. The fire escape is a bitch."

Rogers led the way, moving softly down the stairwell, pausing at each level then continuing down until they had reached the main floor. She motioned Cassiopia out the back door, and ran to the front just in time to pick up Alaman and his associate heading along the sidewalk toward their car. They were two men walking slowly, but in a hurry, trying to appear calm in a nervous, eager sweat. The deserted sidewalk and street made their act less than dramatic, almost comical. Rogers would have found it laughable except she had experienced their real intentions.

When there was enough separation, she slipped outside and took cover in a storefront alcove. They opened the trunk of the small gray car and milled around looking guiltier than ever. Finally, Alaman slammed it and they climbed in. A squealing U-turn on the empty street put them on their way.

Rogers pinched her transmit button. "Cassiopia, move out. Hurry!" She looked back and to her relief the sedan pulled out of the alley and skidded in the loose dirt up to the curb. Rogers jumped in and pointed. The chase was on.

## Chapter 24

Surprisingly, Alaman's driving seemed almost relaxed. It made the task of staying inconspicuous easier. Rogers allowed the bomb-makers to lead by a block and a half to keep out of their rear view. When a light ahead turned red, Cassiopia pulled into a parking space and waited.

Rogers' knowledge of the city gave her the upper hand. This was a downcast area on the East side, where business and residential had not done well, a stark contrast to the glamour and glitz of the government show places. The dark alleys were like a macabre version of the SCIP doorway. They led to another world, another reality, one in which lawlessness was a way of life and shady deals facilitated unlikely alliances. It was a stark irony that money and power ruled here, just as they did in the subdivisions of aristocracy, only here the world was terrifyingly, overtly physical, rather than hidden in bureaucratic and corporate structure. In a way, it was a more honest version of what went on daily behind the closed doors of boardrooms and government chambers.

When the light changed and enough distance separated them, Rogers signaled Cassiopia out and they continued the chase down the sparsely traveled four-lane roadway. Few of the businesses servicing the sidewalks were open, most boarded or locked up. A few old signs hung crookedly in the glass storefronts. The high-rise buildings between them were intact but tarnished from neglect. Weeds grew where broken sidewalk allowed light. The few cars parked along the way, were in poor condition.

After several turns, Alaman and his associate reached the border of a healthier city. They parked in front of a garage-styled building with a tall roll-up door. Cassiopia pulled into a side street and parked. Rogers hopped out and watched from behind a corner. Cassiopia came up behind her, but dared not try to look.

"This is good," said Rogers. "There's an empty glass high-rise across from them. We'll get into it and see what we can see."

The two women waited for their prey to unlock and disappear into the garage, then sprinted across the street. A dirty, blacktop alley behind the buildings brought them to the correct place. Rogers did not hesitate. She picked up a loose brick from a tipped over planter and smashed the glass in the back entrance. They raced down an empty hallway to the stairs and climbed to the second floor. The offices were unlocked and deserted. They choose one directly across from the garage, and found positions out of sight where they could watch.

The garage was a two-story stained-white cement-block structure with a single front entrance next to the roll up door, windows on the second floor, flat roof with exhaust vents. Rogers moved beside Cassiopia. "You keep an eye out. I'm going to tag their car, then I'm going to scope out the rest of the building, see if I can see inside. If they come out, or you see anything else, warn me, okay?"

Cassioxia nodded and re-adjusted her earpiece. She clicked the transmit button clipped to her waistline. "How's that?"

"Perfect. How me?"

"Got you."

Rogers took a long, last look and stayed low as she slipped out the door. Cassioxia scanned up and down the street as far as she could see. There was no activity. Ten minutes passed before Rogers voice squelched in over the headset.

"Can you see me?"

Surprised, Cassioxia scanned the garage, finally noticing Rogers hiding against the left corner of the building. "How did you cross? I didn't see that."

"That's good. Tricks of the trade."

"Scott calls it professional sneaking."

"I need to get underneath their car. Is it clear?"

Cassioxia checked up and down the street once more. "You are clear."

Rogers dashed quickly out into the open, looking in every direction as she went. At the back of the car, she lay down and scooted underneath it. A few silent minutes passed.

"Okay. They're tagged. Am I clear to come out?"

Cassioxia started to say "All clear," when a vehicle approached from the right and pulled over. "Hold your position."

Two men got out and went into a defunct building farther down the street. "Okay, you're clear."

Rogers pushed out and up, and disappeared behind the garage. A moment later she spoke. "I can't see inside through any of the windows. They've been blocked. But we're in luck. We can get in. There's a dumpster on its side, and a ledge on the second floor near a broken window. I don't think it's a set up."

As Rogers finished speaking, Alaman and his associate suddenly emerged through the front door, talking intensely, and gesturing with their hands as they relocked it.

"Stay low. They've come out. They've locked up. They're getting in the car to leave. What do you want to do?"

"Lucky, lucky, lucky," Rogers' replied.

"But we'll lose them."

"I don't think so. I want to see what's so important to them inside here. If they locked up I doubt there's anyone else in there. Besides, they're tagged. They can't get away."

Alaman and his associate climbed into their car. It started and slowly pulled away.

"As soon as they're gone, get yourself down here. Try not to let anyone see you cross the street."

When the car was out of sight, Cassioxia dashed downstairs and out through the broken glass. At the side alleyway, she squeezed sideways through a narrow opening in a broken chain-link fence, pausing at the front of the building to look. Across the street, Rogers was waving her on. She darted across the street, and took cover alongside the garage. Pausing to catch her breath, she glimpsed Rogers disappearing behind the garage. By the time she caught up, Rogers was pulling herself atop a dumpster. Standing in precarious balance, Rogers grabbed the corner of a second floor window and pulled up onto a narrow ledge that ran beneath it. Through a broken pane, she unlocked and pulled up the weathered window frame. She turned and looked down at Cassioxia and pointed inside.

It was an awkward climb for Cassioxia. She pulled herself up onto the dirty green dumpster, and had to lie on her stomach to swing her legs over. She pushed up onto her knees, teetered a moment, and grabbed the ledge. Rogers looked down and smirked, and disappeared through the open window. With renewed determination, Cassioxia worked her way beneath the window and onto the ledge. Climbing in, she bumped her head on the window frame, and ended up standing amid a cluttered of old, greasy auto parts, and tools. Rogers was peering out a door she had cracked open. Without looking back, she waved Cassioxia to follow.

A short corridor offered another door on the left and beyond it a gray metal gangway that overlooked the large open garage area. Metal stairs led down to the work floor. Rogers entered the hallway and stopped at the closed door, opening it just enough to see. There were so many stacks of parts and supplies, the door opened only halfway. The way in was not worth the climb.

They went quietly to the hallway's end and peered around the mechanics work area. The large service bay was nearly full. In the center, a white panel truck was backed in, its rear slide-up door closed. The advertisement painted on the side read 'United Industrial Services'. In the foreground, a bench with tools and supplies appeared recently used. Overhead, a small loading crane hung directly over the back of the truck, its hook lowered part way down. A forklift sat behind the truck, the forks resting on the floor.

To the left of the metal stairs, an office was partly visible. There were no signs of life. Rogers paused to study it further, then holding to the rail began slow, calculated steps down. Cassioxia followed.

The office partition was a dingy yellow, and had a double door with small safety glass windows. Next to it, a huge picture window looked out over the work area.

Rogers dared to look through a window in the door, but saw no one. She relaxed, motioned Cassioxia to search the office, and headed for the panel truck. Cassioxia twisted the dirty knob on one door and slowly opened it, peering in hesitantly. Next to the door was a coat rack with two freshly pressed blue coveralls on hangers with tags over the breast pockets that read 'United Industrial'. A large standup scale stood alongside. Two yellowed chairs with torn cushions sat beneath the picture window, and a table covered with papers ran along the adjoining wall. Dirty brown linoleum with triangle designs covered the floor. In the center of the room, paper, coffee cups, an old box of donuts, and a worn out multi-line telephone sat atop the main desk. On the left, a windowless door led outside, and next to it, a small bathroom with no door at all. A large closet made of unpainted pressed wood joined it.

Cassioxia tried to open the rickety closet door, but it dragged on the floor and would only move a foot or two. Inside, in the shadows, she could see the pull chain for an overhead light. Carefully squeezing her way in, she began feeling her way along the closet wall trying to reach it, but tripped on something and fell. Flailing wildly in the darkness something spongy broke her fall; a pile of something. It was wet and slippery. With a short yelp of fear, she pushed herself up and grabbed for the light cord. She snapped it. Wide-eyed, she back pedaled into boxes and fell backward into them. She opened her mouth to scream but managed to catch herself. She clamped her hand over her mouth only to find she was wiping blood on her face. It was two men, both dead, wearing nothing but underwear. One had a gaping head wound that had covered the back wall and floor with blood. Cassioxia looked at her hands and shirt. They were smeared

with blood. Trying not to scream she burst wildly out of the tomb and raced into the bathroom, spinning on the water valve to wash. With paper towels, she wiped furiously at her clothes, and stared into the broken mirror to be sure no blood remained in her hair. She sank forward against the dingy sink and tried to catch her breath, then turned suddenly to see if anyone was coming. There was no one.

In the main work bay, Rogers was standing next to a painted-over front window, checking through the scratches when Cassiopia rejoined her. Stains remained on Cassiopia's shirt, but her expression alone was enough to alert Rogers something perverse had occurred.

"Uh-oh. What?" she asked as she stared.

"There are two dead men in the office closet. Their clothes have been cleaned and are on hangers."

"Jeez, you get all the good stuff. Are you okay?"

"Yes, except for having lain with them briefly."

Rogers understood. "We'll at least they're not real, right?"

"But you realize this all must have actually happened in the real world already though, right?"

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"You said your intelligence indicated there would be a terrorist action in the next few days, so all of this is Alaman's dream record of what has happened so far. In the real world, in this building in Washington, two men are laying dead in that closet, right now."

Rogers left the window and pointed to an aluminum box the size of a compact car. "And this is what it's all about," she said, and she placed one hand on it.

Cassiopia understood. "An air conditioning unit?"

"This one is," replied Rogers. "But there's one in that truck exactly like it, that will hook up and pretend to function like one, but is actually a nuclear bomb."

"So do we get out of here, and tell someone?"

"No way. We need to know where it's going. Even if my people knew about this, it could take too long to locate. We've got to know where. I've already tagged this truck with a tracking device. We'll have to wait for them to make the delivery. That's what the dead men's uniforms are for. This was their delivery truck."

"I'll be glad to get out of here. This place gives me the creeps."

"I've been careful not to leave any traces that we were here. But I'm assuming you washed up in the restroom. We've got to make that look untouched. We also need to make sure everything's the same near the bodies."

Reluctantly, Cassiopia led Rogers back to the office. They covered their tracks as thoroughly as possible, and left through the upstairs window.

## Chapter 25

Returning to the second floor of the office building, they found chairs and sat concealed near the window, watching and waiting.

"So how did a book worm like you, meet a Tibetan orphan?" Rogers asked.

"It was that time my father was missing. I knew nothing about the SCIP door or his research. The university wanted to keep his absence quiet because he had embarrassed them several times before. They had used Scott in the past to help with confidential affairs so they sent him to me to help find my father. I couldn't stand him at first. He seemed so arrogant. I accidentally discovered my father's secret lab, and Scott caught me there. I talked him into keeping it quiet and helping me, even though I didn't like him. It was the only thing I could do."

"Aren't you the persuasive one!"

"We made several trips though the mirror. I would have been in trouble had he not been there."

"No kidding?"

"It got really crazy after that, really crazy. But when it was over, I had changed my opinion of him."

"Changed your opinion? You love him. Don't you?"

"Maybe. I think so."

"I'll let you in on a little secret just between you and me. I love him, too."

Cassiopia looked up apprehensively.

"Oh don't worry. I'm not the type to get hooked up. You'll have no competition from me."

"Won't you ever let anyone love you?"

"Maybe someday. They'd have to be able to keep up, though."

"It's your work? You are dedicated to it."

"Close enough."

"Why? Why did you become an agent?"

Rogers leaned back and sighed. She looked at Cassiopia and fidgeted with the tracking device in her hand. "These things are accurate to sixty miles in the real world. It's not a GPS-based unit. I wasn't going to take a chance on Dreamland satellites. They're strictly digital radio emission. I hope they are really working here. This one says our friends are parked somewhere only about ten miles away."

"So you don't want to tell me why you became a Federal agent. It's okay. I understand."

Rogers hesitated and squirmed in her chair. "Scott once asked me the same thing. It's an ugly little story. Short version is, a terrorist murdered my father. After complaining until I was blue in the face about the investigation, and getting continually told the file was classified, I went into law enforcement and eventually reached a level where the info was no longer classified to me. I got to see everything, including the photos. A terrorist named Katalia murdered him for

information. I've been looking for him ever since."

"I'm sorry. If I can ever help I will."

Rogers smiled. "Like I always say, we do make a great team." She looked down at the tracking readout and her eyes widened. "Uh-oh. They're on the move. Let's hope they're on their way back."

They waited anxiously, watching out the windows as the little green tracking indicator moved closer and closer to the center of the round screen. Finally, to Rogers' glee, the car pulled up in front of the garage. Alaman and his associate emerged, as nervous as ever, and to their surprise a third figure climbed out of the back. It was a balding man in loose fitting gray clothing and sandals. He turned and looked up and down the street, seemingly more at ease than the other two. Cassiopia looked at Rogers and found her staring wide-eyed at the new arrival. She seemed in shock, and unable to look away. She stood frozen in the moment, her expression locked in astonishment. As the men went to the office door and unlocked it, Rogers gaze remained on the third man. They entered and shut the door behind them.

Cassiopia spoke. "An accomplice."

Rogers did not speak. She continued to stare as though hypnotized.

"Ann, are you okay?"

Rogers turned to look at Cassiopia, but the frozen stare remained.

"Ann?"

It took a few moments, but Rogers finally snapped out of it.

"Ann, are you okay?"

"What? It's nothing. I just got distracted."

"Are you sure? You seemed completely out of it."

"No. We're good. We just need to wait for the step van. I'd guess it won't be long. It'll take us where we need to be."

How much time before you-know-who wakes up?"

We have a good three hours left. Let me show you this tracking device. See the green circular readout. We're at the center of it. Down here at the bottom, this slide switch that says 'channels'. The 'A' channel is their car. The 'B' channel is the truck. You can select both, if you need to. Got it?"

Cassiopia shook her head. As she did, the office door opened once more. They watched the third man exit. He looked around casually and climbed into the car. Rogers again became transfixed on the man. She was so close to the glass of the window, Cassiopia had to put a hand on her shoulder and pull her back. The car made the same U-turn in the street and drove a way.

"He was brought here to take the car away," said Cassiopia. "They must be getting ready to leave."

Once again, Rogers had become unresponsive. She stared into the distance as though still watching the car, though it was long out of sight.

"Ann?"

Rogers leaned back and focused. "That's it. The truck will be pulling out any time now. You drive in case I have to get out and run. It'll be the same deal. Keep at least a block and a half behind them. They can't get away now. We'll be tracking them."

No sooner had Rogers spoken than the garage roll-up door partially opened.

"That's it. Check your intercom, Cass. Go have the car ready. I'll update you from here."

Cassiopia squeezed her transmit button as she headed for the door. "I'm on it." She pushed her way out and jump-stepped down the stairs and out into the alleyway behind the building. She weaved her way through the garbage cans and discarded office furniture toward the spot where they had parked. The street was just ahead, but as she approached it, a dark figure emerged from behind a building. Cassiopia slowed her pace but continued toward him. He wore a grubby, torn overcoat with black sneakers that had holes. His hair was long and dirty and his beard unkempt. He stopped and eyed Cassiopia with an invasive stare and turned to face her. His hands were soiled, and he gave a half-smile as she neared.

Cassiopia looked around for a weapon. An amber, empty whiskey bottle lay on the ground near a gutter. As discreetly as possible, she scooped it up and concealed it behind her back.

"Well hi there," he called in a condescending tone.

Cassiopia did not reply.

"Got any money you can spare for an injured vet?"

Cassiopia stopped. Rogers' voice cut in. "Door's all the way up, Cass. They'll be rolling shortly. Get ready."

"What branch and what unit?" Cassiopia asked.

"What branch a' what?" was his answer.

"What branch of the service did you see action in?"

"That's bullshit. You upper class snobs are all the same. Why don't you just give me what you got and be happy 'bout it."

Cassiopia started to go around him, but he sidestepped to block her.

"How 'bout a little you and me then? How 'bout that?"

Cassiopia suddenly realized this was the first time she faced real danger without Scott or Ann by her side. All those times Scott had hounded her to learn self defense now became irritating reminders that she had not. At least he had forced her to learn a few things. Always keep out of arms reach of the assailant. Circle so that you are not a stationary target. Look around you and use your environment as a weapon. She had done that one! She clutched tightly at the bottle hidden behind her. If you cannot run away, go for the knees. It's hard to grab someone when they are kicking at your knees.

The man took a step forward. Cassiopia backed one-step away. The intercom squelched on. "Cassiopia, they're backing out, be ready."

The man began a slow, determined advance toward her. She crouched, bent at the knees and got ready. He reached out one arm expecting to grab her and as he stepped with his right leg, she swung the bottle and hit him squarely on the side of the right knee. His eyes went wide and he swung back around yelling at the top of his lungs. He hopped and stumbled, and bent over holding the offended leg, yelling and cursing as he went.

Cassiopia charged by him, and at the sidewalk darted around the building. She barely stopped to look and crossed over to the waiting sedan. She pitched the bottle and fumbled the keys, but finally turned the lock and climbed in, and in

one smooth movement twisted the ignition and started the car.

Rogers' excited voice blared in over the headset. "I'm on my way. They headed west. I'll be there in a second." Her voice was breathless and distorted from running.

Cassiopia clicked the unlock button on the armrest just as Rogers yanked the passenger door open. Without speaking, they pulled out and turned in the direction of Alaman's panel truck. Rogers stared down intently at the tracking unit. "Straight on," she said without looking up. Cassiopia pressed on the accelerator until they were traveling as fast as she dared.

"Was there some kind of trouble back there?" asked Rogers as they settled into pursuit. "I heard some yelling over the intercom."

"Some guy was blocking my way."

"A big guy or a little guy?"

"A tall guy."

"So what'd you do?"

"I whacked him on the knee with an empty bottle."

"What? You?"

"Well, what else could I do?"

"Cry and whine?"

"Come on."

"Let me get this straight. A guy attacks a teeny-weeny girl who looks like an angel, and she smashes his knee with a soda bottle?"

"It was a whiskey bottle, and I do not look like an angel. Geez, you're starting to sound like Scott."

Rogers began to laugh uncontrollably. "That poor man. He thought he was about to screw an angel and he ends up minus a knee. What a let down."

Cassiopia cast a look of dismay and kept driving.

After a few miles, they began to pick up traffic. The city was becoming more alive. People began to populate the sidewalks. Stores and offices were open. The roadway was alive with landscaping. After several turns, Rogers began to get excited. "I see where this is going," she said, shaking her head in anticipation. "They're going to get Highway 29 and head east next. I'll bet you anything."

They began to draw too close to the truck. Rogers cast an apprehensive glance at Cassiopia, but a red light solved the problem. Just as Rogers had predicted, a sign ahead read '29 NEXT RIGHT', and in the distance they caught sight of the truck making the turn.

"Where?" Cassiopia finally asked.

"Don't you recognize this place, girl? You need zombies on the sidewalk to remind you?"

"The White House? They're trying to get to the White House?"

"No way. They'd never make it. But they only need to get close, and not very close, either. Wherever they're going, it's been all set up in advance. I guarantee you they went in somewhere, screwed up an air conditioner unit so a replacement would be needed. They waited for a service request to be put in, and then intercepted the drivers and substituted their own air conditioner. Now somewhere ahead, some office is expecting them to show up and install the new unit, which they will, and then be merrily on their way, outside the blast radius. It's a nice plan. No red flags. Everything being done routinely."

The light changed. Cassiopia turned off onto Highway 29, weaving through traffic to get closer. The truck was nowhere in sight. Rogers stared down at the tracking unit. "It's okay. You're still closing. They're going to turn off somewhere ahead, though. We'll need to watch them unload and place the unit. It should be easy. There should be a crane and a large forklift waiting."

Cassiopia spotted the truck. It had moved to the far right lane. She cut in too close to get the lane and a driver hit his horn to confirm his displeasure. Neither woman paid any attention. Finally, the truck signaled a right turn.

*Fourteenth Avenue*

. Rogers was beside herself. "I don't believe it."

Up ahead the boom of a large crane rose above the buildings. At the intersection with

*F street North*

, the truck turned off and pulled into a sectioned off area with cones and caution tape. "Cruise right on by and pull over at the gate up ahead. Let's get out and watch to be sure."

Cassiopia pulled into a reserved parking spot by a guard's station. A uniformed man inside stepped out to admonish them, but Rogers flashed her badge and yelled, "Just a couple minutes." The guard waved and returned to his post.

"Do you know which building?" asked Cassiopia.

"See that big building on the left? That's the Department of the Treasury. What better place to destroy, if your backers are wanting to harm the U.S. dollar. I'm betting they're using the office complex just south of

*F Street*

. Not only do they set off a nuclear device next door to the White house and Treasury Department, that thing is going to be put on the roof. They'll set it off several stories above ground. The radiation cloud will have ten times more range. People that aren't killed by the blast will get a big dose. It's a perfectly hideous plan."

They watched as the truck was unloaded and the crane brought around to lift the unit. At the same time, the old unit was loaded into the truck. Rogers guess had been correct. The crane lifted its cargo, swung over the south building and lowered away. She took a deep breath and touched Cassiopia on the shoulder. "Let's get out of here. There's one more quick stop I need to make."

The ride back suddenly had an air of optimism. Rogers switched the tracking device to the A-channel and began guiding Cassiopia toward Alaman's car without explaining. When they were close enough, she asked her to pull over. "I need you to wait here for me. I'll need to move fast and stay out of sight on this. It won't take long. I'll be on the intercom, but don't call me unless you really need to. If I get into trouble, I'll let you know."

"The bomb isn't enough. You want this guy, too."

"Too much to explain. I won't be long."

Rogers looked around in every direction, climbed out and closed the door quietly. She went to the nearest corner, briefly looked beyond it, and took off. She walked briskly along the deserted sidewalk and spotted Alaman's car a block away. She stopped and stood in the recessed entrance of a closed shop and watched the car from the shadows. Ten minutes went by and no one showed up. Another ten minutes passed and Rogers cursed under her breath. She could not wait much longer. Finally, to her relief, the third accomplice appeared from a small side street carrying two suitcases. He went to the car, looked carefully around, then raised the trunk and loaded them. He closed it and headed back the way he had come, trying to appear casual, but this time seemingly in a hurry. He disappeared around a building bordering a side street.

Rogers bolted and raced to the corner. She peered carefully up the street in time to see him turn into an alley. She waited as long as she dared, crossed over and went to the alley's entrance, standing with her back against a building. She had not been able to procure a weapon, but this was Dreamland. Bullets might not harm her. Nevertheless, that was a theory best left untested. Once again, she dared a look around the corner. There was no sign of him. The alley ended at an intersecting street. She moved cautiously along, pausing once more, sheltering herself behind an abutment. With calculated care, she peered up and down the next back street, in time to see the man disappear down into a basement apartment. When she was certain it was safe, she went to it and leaned over to look down into the well at the steps and front door. A light came on in a yellowed, curtained window below. Rogers took her bearings carefully, and hastened back.

"Did you get what you needed?" asked Cassiopia when Rogers was back in the safety of the sedan.

"I hope so. I really do. Let's get the hell out of Dreamland."

"With pleasure."

They made their way back to the abandoned office building where it had all begun. This time they broke in the back door and jump-stepped up the stairwell to the empty room where they hoped the robot was still waiting. Cassiopia opened the closet door just in time to see one of the Tel's mechanical hands bang Alaman's on the side of his head. She gasped and stepped back.

"Tel, what did you just do?"

"Preservation of subject cataleptic relative to Alpha-Yankee program requirements."

"You were keeping him unconscious?"

"Affirmative."

"How did you know to do that?"

"Data input memory block 876374, file 785432, line 1009."

"Who input that data into your file?"

"Ann Rogers."

"What data was that?"

"Alpha-Yankee subject status to remain unchanged."

"What did she say to you, exactly?"

"He'll remain unconscious for another six hours, then I'll stick him again."

Cassiopia stared in disbelief. "Tel, that wasn't in the original Alpha-Yankee program. How did it become part of that program?"

"Program direction to retain Alpha-Yankee file, and acquired data during execution."

"So while you were executing Alpha-Yankee, you decided data from a previous conversation was relative to your objective?"

"Affirmative."

"But wasn't there supposed to be protection of the human anatomy in your program execution?"

"8.4 foot-pounds applied to the left hemisphere, frontal lobe. No violation of anatomical integrity."

"So you didn't hurt him, you just made him unconscious?"

"Affirmative."

Cassiopia stood dumbfounded. She looked at Rogers and placed one hand on her head. "I don't believe it."

Rogers said, "I don't get it."

"He started to wake up, so Tel conked him on the head to keep him asleep because upstairs you said the plan was to keep him asleep."

"Sounds right to me. I'm on his side" Rogers knelt and pulled a syringe from her satchel. Quickly she injected Alaman.

"No. No, there's no way a Tel could recall a previous conversation and add information from it to a current, closed program. I am just stupefied."

"How would he know how to disable a person like that?"

"I am beside myself. It could be something left from the military or something, but it's just unbelievable."

"Well, I'm sure glad he did it, and we don't have time to figure it out. Let's get going."

With instructions from Cassiopia, the robot carried Alaman back to the hallway. With the first click of the SCIP recall button, the silvery door reappeared. When Alaman was safely through, the two women took turns passing into the silver membrane and back into the SCIP lab.

When the Tel emerged carrying the limp body of Alaman, Professor Cassell nearly fell over himself as he hurried

around to the front of the SCIP doorway. Rogers emerged next, digging in a pocket for her cell phone.

"Did it work?" begged the Professor.

She ignored him and dialed as she came down the ramp, staring at the floor as she listened. Cassiopia came through and in a pleading voice he asked, "Did it work?"

"Yes," she replied excitedly. "Everything. Everything worked."

The Professor held one hand to his forehead, stunned by their affirmation. He placed the other hand on his desk and leaned against it as though the intensity of the moment was too much.

Rogers was already in a forceful discussion. The others turned and tried to hear but only caught the end of it.

"I'm heading back to the office now. I'll give you the details when I get there." She hung up and looked up at the others. "It gets tricky now. They're all distracted going after the bomb. I have to get bomb-boy here back to his apartment and into bed so my story will hold up. We'll be okay as long as they don't check the cell phone location records. Cassiopia, care to take a fast ride in a van with a blue light? It's a long haul. I could use a second driver."

"Let's go."

The Professor was beside himself. "But where? How?"

Cassiopia sympathized. "It's next to the Department of the Treasury building, in a big air conditioning unit."

"My god!" was the Professor's only response, and he stood dazed by the thought of it.

Rogers added, "Remember Professor, we were never here. You don't know anything about this except what you hear on the news."

Without stopping to take anything extra, they returned Alaman to the back of the van, and covered him. The two women headed out, leaving the Tel and the Professor behind. Still dazed, the Professor realized the SCIP door should not have been left on. He hurried to the lab and shut the system down. Exhausted from the excitement, he went to his study and sat uneasily contemplating how he should spend the remainder of the day. He wondered how the authorities would handle a crisis of this magnitude. Would they keep it quiet? How would they keep it quiet? In a rare moment, the Professor checked the new cell phone Cassiopia had given him, placed it on his desk, and sat staring at it. He studied the seldom-used remote control, and switched on the television to a news station, muted it, and sat waiting.

Less than two hours later, 'breaking news' appeared on the screen. A major gas leak had been discovered on 17<sup>th</sup> avenue in WashingtonD.C. The area was being evacuated and closed off. A storage tank had ruptured. Repair crews were already arriving on the scene.

Twelve hours later, an unconscious Alaman was back in his bed, still heavily drugged. They had carefully washed him, cleaned his clothes, and tucked him in like a precious child. Rogers took Cassiopia to the nearest airport after making sure a flight back to Orlando was available. With a nervous, heartfelt hug, she promised to return as soon as the depositions were complete, and left her at the gate entrances.

But back on the road, Rogers did not head for her office. She headed for the west side of WashingtonD.C., where empty office buildings bore plans for a nuclear bomb, and old garages had bodies hidden within.

## Chapter 27

The depressed west side was even more foreboding in the real world than it had been in Dreamland. As the crowded areas of the city ebbed, the streets became less kept. The red brick buildings looked rustic, but with a touch of deterioration. The sidewalks lacked maintenance. The few trees still decorating the roadway looked dead. Steel bars guarded windows on the lower floors. More storefronts were boarded up.

Having taken only enough time to change into a gray business suit with a Glock 9mm accessory, Rogers bypassed the terrorist's garage, a place she knew would soon be overrun with forensics. The families of two hard-working air-conditioning technicians soon would be receiving the worst news possible. Engraved within her memory was the ten-mile trip to the basement apartment of the third man, a man she had searched for much of her young life, a man who had casually left her an orphan. She brought the van within two blocks of his parking place in Dreamland. She parked around a corner, checked her Glock, drew her agency radio out of the glove box and clipped it to her belt. With a last look around, she climbed out and gently closed the van door. The street was as deserted as it had been in Dreamland. She headed for the parking spot, hoping against hope that the vehicle would really be there. A block away, she could see something parked, the color was different, but it was a foreign car. She paused in the shadows of the nearest building and searched the street carefully. Far in the distance, a delivery truck was parking, but otherwise there was no one.

There was something about the car. Rogers could feel it. It had the aura of death about it. Agent instincts had come to full alert. The impression was so strong it was impossible to ignore. Rogers unclipped her radio and called in.

"Dispatch, Agent Rogers."

"Dispatch receiving you, please repeat."

"Agent Rogers, Ann Rogers."

"One moment. ...Oh, Ms. Rogers. We don't have you on the roster."

"I've been on travel. I have an unexpected lead on a most-wanted, alias Katalia. I think you'd better send some back-up. My location is the intersection of

*Parker Street*

, and

*Amber Ave.*

"

"We can send you Baker and Collins. All other agents are presently unavailable."

"Do it. Tell them to run with lights. I'm proceeding. Rogers out."

She waited, hoping her suspect would return to the car. If she checked out his apartment and he was off somewhere with his terrorist buddies, he could return for the car and she might miss him. If she stayed with the car, he'd

be back for it sooner or later. After twenty minutes, she could stand it no longer. Scanning the area, she crossed the street well away from the vehicle. She walked along the sidewalk to the side street and dared a look around the corner. In the distance, a man was working under the hood of an old car parked against the curb. She stepped out and headed for the alley that led to the basement apartment. At the alley's entrance, she looked carefully around and found it clear. She entered, took three steps, and froze. A man in dark, loose-fitting clothing came racing around the corner. He entered the alley with his head turned as though someone might be following him. He carried a suitcase in one hand and a bag slug over one shoulder. He looked around, spotted Rogers and became alarmed. He stopped abruptly.

Rogers' gun was already in her hand. She held it low and behind. The two stood facing each other for a long, tense moment. Both understood. The man put down the suitcase and let the bag slide off his shoulder. He narrowed his stare, slowly raised one hand and slid it behind the loose clothing draped around him.

Rogers waited.

Abruptly, he relaxed and held up one hand. He smiled and waved off the tension. He raised one finger and opened his mouth as though to speak. Without changing expression, he jerked a handgun out of his clothing and shoved it in her direction. Rogers drew and fired, hitting him in the left hip. The loud crack of gunfire echoed off the narrow alley walls. He spun off-balanced and crouched over, clutching at the wound.

Rogers began a slow walk toward him, her weapon hanging carelessly at her side.

Once again, he straightened up and whipped around to shoot. Rogers drew and fired again hitting him squarely in the other hip, knocking him sideways so that he fell to the ground in a sitting position, bracing himself with his empty right hand, the gun resting on the blacktop in his other.

Rogers continued her slow walk, weapon down.

A third time he twisted around to shoot. Rogers fired once more, hitting him in the left side of the chest, sending his gun flying behind him. It spun along the ground and bounced off a nearby brick wall. Wide-eyed, he stared up at her, unable to move.

Rogers squatted next to him, holding her handgun loosely between her legs.

He looked up in confusion and spoke with a thick accent. "But how is it possible? You are a woman!"

"How did I out-gun you? Oh, thank-you for asking. A murdering bastard skilled in the use of firearms goes up against a poor, lowly woman and gets his ass kicked. Bullets aren't prejudice, Mr. Katalia."

Gasping for breath, he asked, "How did you find me?"

"You could say it was in a dream." Rogers drew a picture from inside her jacket. "Do you remember this man? You should. You murdered him."

Katalia paused to look. "I did what was needed."

Rogers smiled. "Me too. That was my father."

"You must help me. It's your duty." He slumped down into a prone position on the blacktop.

"The one thing I don't get is why you risked coming back to the states. You know you're top of the hot here. Why would you take such a chance?"

"I want a doctor," he said, weakly.

"I know what it was. You wanted to see it, didn't you? You wanted to see the bomb go off so bad you risked coming here. You were gonna get far enough away so you'd be safe, but you just had to see all those people die, didn't you?"

"You must call doctors or I could die." Blood appeared at the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah, you're bleeding pretty bad there. Do you remember how you killed him? How you killed my father?"

"I demand you call help."

"He bled to death on the metal table where you were torturing him. You do remember don't you?"

"I know my rights. You will call the ambulance."

"Well, you do have a right to remain silent, in fact forever, but I wouldn't go any farther than that."

"You must call. I am dying."

"Yes, but none too soon."

His eyes closed and his head turned slightly away. Rogers touched her fingers to his neck. The pulse was gone. She pulled her radio off her belt and keyed the transmit button. "Agent Rogers at Parker and Amber. I'm in a side alley. Suspect is down with a gunshot wound. We'll need an ambulance."

She stood, tucked her gun back in the holster, and returned the photo of her father to her jacket pocket. She turned and walked back down the alley as two other agents in dark suits, guns drawn, came running to find her.

"He's back there, but there's no rush. It's all yours. I'll be on temporary suspension for a while."

Without speaking, they resumed their sprint.

Rogers walked to her van, stood for a moment at the driver's door, then climbed in and sat. She did not know where to go. Life had just ended and was now starting over. There had been no way to prepare for this. Half a life spent on a single ambition and now that was gone. Rogers suddenly realized she did not even know who she was. She was no longer the hunter. She needed something or someone to hold onto. She needed a friend to look her in the eye and tell her about Ann Rogers, someone who might know that person. It wasn't a tear she was wiping from the corner of her eye, because she had never cried since her father's death. She looked down at her waist, unclipped the holster from her belt, and placed the handgun under her seat. For a moment, she wondered if she was in Dreamland or reality. With her hands shaking, she found her cell phone and booked a flight to Orlando, Florida, the only place she knew to go.

Rogers leaned back in her seat and fidgeted with a spot on the armrest, trying to appear her usual brash self. Her well-fit gray suit was wrinkled and unbuttoned in the front revealing the pale-blue blouse beneath it. Her dark hair was tightly captured behind her head, and her make up freshly applied with the precision of a master. Though her expression was terse, she eyed her boss with appropriate respect.

"I'm just having trouble getting my head around some of this, Ann. The whole damn thing is just too much to take in. So you bugged this guy's apartment without authorization?" Her boss sat behind his desk in a starched white shirt and dark striped tie, his black hair parted at the side, his skin indoor white. He wiped at his glasses and tried to appear relaxed, but failed at that.

"Not exactly. It was a window suction-cup transducer on the outside. We never bugged his place inside at all."

"And this guy was talking in his sleep enough to figure out where the device was located."

"He was talking and walking in his sleep, actually."

"What? He was moving around in his sleep?"

"He was plastered. The asshole had been celebrating day and night. I felt like I was wasting my time. I didn't think we'd get anything."

"I don't understand why you were working alone. Where was your partner?"

"Collins got called back in for a deposition on some other part of the investigation. I was supposed to ask for a replacement, but I was so sure we were wasting our time, I didn't want to side track another agent, so I sat it out alone."

"And you didn't set up recording? We didn't get any of this down?"

"Like I said, it seemed like a waste of time to bring in the tech guys and run that stuff twenty-four hours a day. The truth is, all that surveillance and you only would have gotten a few mumbled words anyway."

"What did he say, exactly?"

"He was speaking in English and sleep-talking to someone on the phone. He gave them the garage address, and then acted like he was writing down the address for the basement apartment. While I was scribbling that stuff down, he raised his voice and began giving directions to his driver, as though he was on the road making the delivery. That's how we got the location. He was so excited I couldn't miss it. The words 'air conditioner' and 'crane' came up a bunch of times. The guy was so drugged up I'm surprised he didn't walk right out of his place."

"And this all happened in a matter of minutes, you say?"

"Yeah. All those hours of surveillance and the whole thing falls in our laps in the space of a couple minutes. Sure woke me up. So, what have you done with him, anyway?"

"He's in deep isolation. That's another thing. He says he lost a day or two. Doesn't remember anything."

"Not surprising."

"Well he sure as hell isn't cooperating. If this were a civilian case, we'd probably be in deep. I can't imagine sleep-talking making an adequate prosecution."

"But he had all the right answers..."

"Yeah, yeah, and what about the Katalia thing? That was just a lucky shot, too? You bagged a most-wanted by accident?"

"I didn't bother checking out the garage. I knew forensics would be pissed. I figured the basement apartment would be cleaned out by then. I went there just to take a look, and by sheer luck ran into our Mr. Katalia in a hurry to leave. You know the rest."

"You know you should have called in first."

"Well, I did as soon as I sensed something was up. But, I couldn't take a chance on him slipping through our fingers again. I had to go in."

"What about the alley? It took you three shots. He didn't get a single shot off. You're in the top four down on the range. Why three shots?"

"It was a quick exchange, kind of."

"And the report says you gave him his rights before he dialed out?"

"Yes. I thought he was entitled to that."

"And he said nothing?"

"Just that he wasn't feeling well."

"Well, this is all damn awkward with you father's connection and all, but I don't see anything that should raise any real flags. Have you checked in your gun and badge?"

"Yes. The clerk has them."

"You know it's just routine. It won't be long. By the way, we have word that the President may want to speak to you. It will all be confidential. They don't want your picture on the news anywhere. You'd be on every terrorist bulletin board in the world if this went public."

"God knows."

"The word is, that bomb would have eliminated most of D.C. for decades. They say when they're done, they'll know everything; where the fuel came from, where the parts came from, and who designed it. The bad guys lost some valuable resources this time, never mind the enriched uranium. But it's damn unsettling that we just lucked out on this."

"It wasn't all luck. You had the right people under surveillance."

"Yeah. I guess. Can you imagine if that thing had gone off? Can you?"

"Actually, I have a pretty good idea."

"So, what about you? Are you handling it?"

"I have friends in Florida. I'm heading there for some time on the beach."

"They'll need to know where you are in case there are more questions, and I have no doubt there will be."

"No problem. I'll contact you from the hotel after I check in."

The approach into Orlando was made anxious by a pounding rain. The turns seemed steeper and the landing gear extension noisy. The passenger cabin became sullen, though a certain loyalty to optimism remained. When the world was finally seen speeding by in the windows, and the thumps of touchdown signaled Earth, conversations quickly

resumed.

At the gate, Cassiopia was waiting. Rogers' embrace was longer than usual.

"Everything okay?" asked Cassiopia.

"Long story," replied Rogers. "But never mind. Let's go get Scott."

The ride from the airport gave Rogers a chance to bring Cassiopia up to date on all that had happened. At the end of the dissertation, the story of Katalia left Cassiopia wide-eyed and speechless. She pulled into the driveway, put the car in park, and stared over at Rogers as though waiting for a punch line. They shared a heavy minute of silence, and then without speaking went inside.

The Professor was waiting at the front door. Rogers dropped her carry-on at the foot of the couch and hugged him.

"We watched the news. It was all true?" he asked.

"Yes. It would have been Armageddon."

"And they've secured it all?"

"Yes, and they will learn everything. All because of your SCIP door."

"But you managed to keep that out of it?"

"Yes. As long as my story holds up, you guys are not a part of it in any way."

"I fear I shall never get over this," the Professor remarked.

"I could say the same," answered Rogers. "Imagine what the world would be like right now if you hadn't invented the SCIP doorway. We had nothing to go on."

"I think I'll lie down for a while," said the Professor, and he wandered away in a daze.

Cassiopia picked up Rogers' bag. "Let's get you checked in. Do you need something to eat?"

"What'd you got?"

"Come on. We'll explore the fridge and the cupboard."

Together they created huge chef salads, then regrouped in the den, where Cassiopia took a moment to wipe a spot of dried dog food off one of the Tel's legs.

Rogers stabbed at her salad and wasted no time. "Has there been any change at all in his condition?"

"No. Nothing."

"So if I know you, there is a devious plan ready. Am I right?"

Cassiopia took a seat next to her and tried to appear innocent. "There is indeed, such a plan, Ann."

"And what character has been written for me?"

"You are a professional ambulance driver."

"I see."

"It's a complex chain of events that starts with me calling the resident specialist to tell him I want Scott moved to a facility in Orlando, just for a day or two for a second opinion. I'm sure that will go over like a lead balloon, so I've got to have everything in place to make it all look legitimate."

"What's that involve?"

"I have to break into the OrlandoTraumaCenter's computer system and set up a phony transfer request. I've got a long list of all the people who work there, so it's just a question of time before I hit on a password. Someone always uses the name of a relative or pet. When I get in and that's set up, I'll fax a copy of the phony transfer request to Scott's hospital, and have an airplane ready for the transfer. The hospital should deliver him to the airport for me after that. Then, it's just a question of having the movie prop ambulance and medical technicians waiting at the airport to receive him. From there we bring him home. They'll remove the feeding tube for transfer, so we can only have him for a day or two, but that should be more than enough."

"Sounds like you're going to get a nice fat bill out of this."

"Which doesn't matter much. It's the only chance we've got."

Rogers paused with a fork-full of lettuce near her mouth. "I can help greatly with the password thing."

Cassiopia looked up hopefully.

"My office. You would not believe what the computer group can do. It scares me. You have to sign 'until death do us part' paperwork just to take the classes. They can get anything they want off a hard drive. They can get into just about anywhere they want to. I'll make a call."

"I don't want to get you into trouble on this."

"Hey, the President wants to see me. I'm pretty much bullet-proof since the terrorist thing."

"Wow!"

"Yeah, one good turn deserves another." Rogers pulled out her cell phone and began texting. When she had finished, she tucked it away and smiled. "It'll be a few hours, but they'll send me the link, user name, and password."

Cassiopia looked back appreciatively. "We can pick up the ambulance tomorrow and park it behind the house. That way we'll be ready when the paperwork goes through. Then I try to calm the raging Doctor when I get him on the phone. I'll have to get the private air service ready, too."

"Does your father know about all this yet?"

"I think he was on to us before the last Dreamland trip, but so much has happened he's been distracted and has forgotten about it, for the time being. If we pull this off, I'm hoping when he sees Scott, he'll understand."

"Well, it's a good thing we're not going in tomorrow. I'm exhausted, but I doubt I'll sleep tonight."

"You lead a dynamic life, Ann."

"Yeah, it was only exciting until I met you guys."

In the morning, Cassiopia looked in on Rogers and found her sleeping soundly. She brewed coffee, ate pastry, and scanned the newspaper, waiting for the day to begin. Rogers appeared in the kitchen rubbing her eyes, her hair disheveled, her makeup not yet applied. She looked at Cassiopia for sympathy and let out a short laugh at the platonic stare being given her. When they had gathered themselves, they climbed in Cassiopia's car to begin their next wily scheme.

The ambulance was easy. A short overweight, balding man sat behind a trashy desk that was under siege by rental equipment. He was grumpy bordering on rude, as though he did not believe the two women would really rent his fake

ambulance. When Cassiopia pushed some of the clutter aside to make a bare spot on his desk, and began counting out hundreds, his eyes suddenly lit up and he became a charming fellow indeed.

They parked the ambulance behind the Professor's home, luck having allowed them access without neighbors present. Rogers' cell phone beeped text a short time later, and she held up the screen for Cassiopia to admire the web address, user name, and password that were displayed there. They made a quick access to the site to print out the necessary forms for study. They filled them out with the right people's names in the right places, and made the supplemental information as boring and routine as possible. When they were satisfied, they went back into the destination hospital's site and placed a transfer pending in the correct queue, then faxed the fake file forms to Markman's hospital. Cassiopia had expected to jump through hoops to get Markman's doctor on the phone, but to her surprise, he called within twenty minutes of the transfer request fax. He was not happy.

With the skill of a diplomat, she talked him down to the nearly-normal neurotic level most doctors exist at, and by the time she was finished she had convinced him he was the most celebrated neurosurgeon on earth, as well as an extremely desirable hunk of man. So persuasive was Cassiopia's innuendos that the Doctor thanked her for the attention to his case and invited her to discuss it over dinner on her next visit. When it was over, she fell face first into the pillows of her bed and without looking up handed the cell phone to Rogers, who was laughing so hard she had to sit down.

With Markman's delivery scheduled and the air ambulance ready to receive him, the most difficult phases of the plan were complete, or so they thought.

## Chapter 29

Markman's air ambulance was set to arrive in Orlando at 3:45 P.M. Cassiopia and Rogers sat at the tiny yellow kitchen table drinking coffee, rays from the morning sun beaming through the kitchen window behind them. Despite the promise of a new day, they shared a feeling of discontent. Although Cassiopia had tried to think of everything, something was missing. They looked at each other, contemplating the ruse in quiet presentiment.

Rogers broke the silence. "We haven't got it, Cass. We're not ready."

Cassiopia lowered her cup and stared. "What have I missed?"

"You've been your usual high IQ about everything, but you don't know enough about Homeland Security and Airport Security. We'll never get that truck through the gate at the airport. As soon as they pick up on something unusual or missing they'll pull us aside and that will be it."

"What do we need?"

Rogers pulled out her cell phone, paused for a breath, and then dialed out. She glanced at Cassiopia as she waited and then spoke casually. "This is Agent Rogers, G040579. I'm not on duty but I need to check out a hunch. Can you get me all scheduled ambulance services to Orlando International this afternoon? ...No, it's an unofficial request. I'm on leave, but I need to check this out. ...Oh great. I appreciate that, Mark. Can you text it to me at this number? Great. I owe you one."

Rogers hung up and held up crossed fingers. "If this works, we're going to need some water-based paint and stick-on lettering for the truck. We can't screw with the airport computer system, so we'll need to look like a scheduled service that's already in it. The ambulance colors are okay, but we need to change the name and the ID number."

By the third cup of coffee, Rogers' cell phone beeped message-received. She opened it and nodded. "This is good. There are six schedule medical pickups this afternoon. We need one that's a patient transfer, not medical cargo and there are two. Both of them are TriCare Systems. One is at 4:15 P.M. Truck number 4127. We need to become TriCare Systems, truck number 4127B. The 'B' will be enough to mess with their heads for a long time. Chances are they'll end up thinking both entries were the same truck, just logged in twice. We'll paint over the name on our truck, stick on the new name and number, and when we're done wipe it all off. Shall we go visit the hardware store?"

When supplies had been procured, it took three hours of painting and lettering for Cassiopia's fake ambulance to become TriCare Systems truck number 4127B. Rogers remained discontent. They returned to the kitchen table, their hands and clothing spotted with paint, wondering if the effort was enough.

Rogers tapped one finger on the tabletop. "The gamble is that they won't run our driver's licenses. We can't show up with fake ones. I can't set any up through my agency. That's too big a flag there. So, if they ask for it, we'll have to use our real licenses for the photo ID. It'll be a bitch if they run them, because we sure won't come up as EMTs."

"Maybe I should have had the flight come into a smaller airport."

"I doubt that would have helped. Nobody transfers sick patients using a longer route than necessary. It's just that airport security has become so tight these days, it's like robbing a damn bank. This is just a chance we'll have to take."

"What do you think will happen if we're discovered?"

"It'll be a giant mess. They won't know what to do. They'll have an aircraft waiting to leave with an undelivered comatose patient in it. They'll probably have to bring in a real ambulance and have him sent to the nearest hospital while they sort it out. Then we'd get charged with some kind of misrepresentation or something. I don't know what. I don't think anyone has ever done anything like this before."

"Well, if we get caught, I'll do my best to take the blame."

"I'm not that worried, partner. We just saved the world. I doubt they'll really do anything to me, and then I'll protect you. We'll tell them you just wanted some alone-time with your fiancée'. You thought maybe being alone with him might help bring him out of it. We'll appeal to their heartstrings."

"I need the SCIP door plan to work. I really do."

"You don't have to convince me. How you came down off that mountain was a miracle."

At 1:30, they cleaned up, donned their medical technician suits, and headed for the airport. Back roads provided the best concealment from unwanted attention. A few miles from the airport, Cassiopia pulled over and they reorganized their phony paperwork.

Cassiopia said, "We're Airside 2, Wing 7. The document I copied said we use the contractor's service entrance, bear left to the Special Disembarkment zone. It didn't say how many security checks. I'm hoping for just one. The air

ambulance posted their own arrival docs. I have a copy."

"I'm betting two checks, and if we get through the first, we'll be okay."

"Okay, help me navigate. We need to look like we know what we're doing."

Back on the road, they reached the airport perimeter early. The path to the special vehicle entrance was easy to follow. At the outer checkpoint gate, they were third in line. The first vehicle went through quickly, the second directed off to one side. A security officer approached Rogers' door and stopped at the open window. Without speaking, she handed him the clipboard. He took it and looked them both over, then flipped through the pages. "It'll be just a minute," he said and walked back to the guard station.

After a minute of discussion with two of his counterparts, he returned. "Would you please pull over into that spot there? We're trying to get a confirmation."

"Any problems?" asked Rogers.

"The air ambulance office didn't specify who would meet the aircraft. It happens sometimes. They probably didn't have the info at the time of filing. It should be just a minute."

Cassiopia pulled into the designated slot. They waited tensely as discussions continued at the guard shack. Five minutes passed before the officer returned. "Can I ask the two of you to step out of the vehicle please?"

Rogers looked at Cassiopia and rolled her eyes. They climbed out and gathered around the officer.

"I need your driver's licenses. It should be a quick check."

There was nothing to do but comply. The slightest hesitation would set off all the hidden alarms. The two women retrieved their licenses and handed them over. The guard returned to his shack.

"Well, it was a good try," whispered Rogers.

"Crap," replied Cassiopia.

They watched as two of the guards typed at a computer terminal and kept looking up through the glass at them.

"What will they do?" asked Cassiopia.

"I'm guessing they'll wire-tie our hands behind our back and call for a golf cart to take us to the security office.

From there it will be interrogation and if we're lucky they'll charge us with something, and turn us loose to appear later."

"Crap," replied Cassiopia.

"Here he comes..."

The guard approached without speaking and reached behind as though to bring out handcuffs or wire-ties. Instead, he brought out their driver's licenses and handed them over. "Sorry about all the delay. We've been on an elevated alert for more than a week. Nobody seems to know why. You guys can go ahead in. Your flight is on schedule."

Cassiopia was too choked to say anything. Rogers haughtily replied, "It's been a pleasure hanging with you officer. Have a good day."

With a wave from the security man, the gate swung up and Cassiopia backed out and drove through.

"What the heck just happened?" she asked in disbelief.

"You've got me. We were screwed. I thought for sure we were going to get a free lunch in a holding cell. I can't explain that one. Here's the next gate. Slow down a little."

The swing-arm gate to the aircraft parking area swung open as they approached. A single security officer waved them through. They pulled in, found the pick-up zone, and shut the ambulance down. Cassiopia sat back and sighed.

"I hope I never have to do that again," she said and she looked at Rogers with an exasperated stare.

At 3:35 P.M., an airport attendant showed up and stood at the aircraft parking area. He was studying a small notebook taken from his back pocket. Within minutes, the sound of jet engines droned in from the right and the man began raising his arms to signal the pilots. As the jet taxied in, the reality that Scott was on the plane suddenly charged Cassiopia with so much excitement she had to struggle to regain her composure. She held one hand against her pounding heart and remembered the near miss at the checkpoint. It snapped her back to sobriety. With engines still idling, the side access door of the jet swung up and open. A gurney bearing a sleeping form was lowered to the imposter technicians. With a few awkward moments causing curious stares from the plane's crew, they loaded their patient into their movie-prop ambulance and pulled away.

## Chapter 30

To Cassiopia's surprise, the Professor did not bother to feign surprise at Markman's unorthodox arrival. Instead, he assisted in moving furniture to get the gurney through the house, and paused at the foot of Markman's bed in silent greeting. He caught Cassiopia's eye as they stood together, and in those few moments of silence, she knew he understood completely and had been expecting this.

With Markman securely tucked into bed in his specially prepared room, she brought a chair alongside and sat silently with her missing man. He looked pale but not weak. The IV catheter was still in his left arm, but taped down, out of the way. His hair was longer and there was a darkness around his eyes. His breathing was slow and regular. She felt his pulse. It seemed strong. She thought to talk to him but was interrupted when Rogers peered into the room and motioned her to follow.

They went to the den and sat on the small sofa. Rogers leaned forward and spoke with compassion. "There's been a change of plans."

"What?"

"I have to be at Orlando Executive Airport in an hour and a half. A chartered jet is already in the air on its way to pick me up. It's a request that can't be refused. I'm to be met by a limo in Washington and taken directly to the White House. The President wants to talk, and you know the old saying, 'you must not keep the President waiting'. Apparently the terrorists came so close to being successful it scared the hell out of everybody. They say this is just so the President can extend his thanks, but the Secret Service is also asking for an interview. I get the impression I'm going to be dragged through every security department they have."

"Will they find out about us? It's such bad timing."

"No. You won't find out about the SCIP door. As long as they don't check my cell phone location records, my story is solid. Even Alaman himself has no idea what really happened. We were lucky. They mostly are going to walk around wringing their hands, wanting to make sure they have the whole story. There's going to be some real action from this. I'll bet there's already SEAL teams secretly training for assault missions around the world on some of the people who made the air conditioner possible."

"This is so bad, though. I only have him for a couple days. I needed to go through the door tomorrow morning. It was the best chance."

Rogers took a deep breath, and looked earnestly into Cassiopia's eyes. "Listen, about that. I've gone over this in my head a thousand times. No matter what happens, you need to go through that door alone."

"What?"

"It's as plain as writing on the wall. You love Scott. You're out here. Scott loves you. According to weird Cassell science, Scott is in there. You step through that door alone and the only thing on your mind and in your heart is finding him. Combine that with his love for you and it's got to be a sure thing. There would have to be a connection. If I went through with you, the only thing I would do is complicate the chemistry. So, it doesn't matter that I have to leave. Either way, you need to go through that door alone."

Cassiopia reluctantly considered the logic of it. It was difficult to argue, but she had never entered Dreamland alone. That thought was frightening. Scott or Ann had always been there for back up. She would be completely on her own and could possibly find herself in a Dreamland nightmare.

Rogers saw the doubt in her eye. "You underestimate yourself. You brought him down from a snow-covered mountain alone. I couldn't have done that. You're my best friend. I'd never tell you to go in there if I didn't believe in you."

"Self doubt is rearing its ugly head."

"If you get stuck, I'll come looking for you. I'll find you, somehow."

Cassiopia smiled and hugged her. "I just wish you didn't have to leave."

"I'll be back the moment they're done with me. You'll need me to get him back to the hospital. They're probably expecting me to show up and ease their fears a little. Truth is, I'll only finish scaring the hell out of them. And one other thing, Cass. When you get in there, you need to tell him."

"Tell him what?"

"That you love him."

"He hasn't said that to me."

"I don't care. You need to tell him."

Cassiopia stared blankly at the floor and suddenly realized that prospect frightened her more than entering Dreamland alone.

Reluctantly, she drove Rogers to the airport, secretly wanting to protest and turn around the entire trip. At the drop-off, she made Rogers promise once more to return as soon as possible. The ride back alone seemed wrought with doubt and fear, so much so that she took a wrong turn and had to circle back to the expressway. Back at home, she entered the front door and found her father peeking out the curtains.

"You're up late."

"They were here again."

"Who?"

"The two men in the black sedan wearing sunglasses at night."

"I didn't see anyone."

"They left as you turned onto our street."

"It must be nothing."

"I am not convinced."

"Well, I need the SCIP tomorrow morning, and then it won't matter, either way."

"What? Just you? Haven't we discussed this at length on more than one occasion?"

"Ann and I agree it's our best chance."

"Ludicrous. Impulsive. Irresponsible."

"We don't have much time, Father. I'll be okay."

"You must take the Tel, at least."

"No. I don't want the false sense of security he would give me. My mind must be solely on Scott."

"Even if you survive it, I may not, simply from heart-failure. What the two of you have put me through the past few weeks is more than mortal man can bear."

"We'll all be okay, Father."

"We shall see, daughter. We shall see."

Sleep did come easily for Cassiopia. The shallowness of it left her wondering if she had actually slept at all. When sunlight began to glow against the curtains, she began to wonder what items might be needed to for this return to Dreamland. It suddenly dawned on her that she had no appropriate clothes. Too many pressing items had precluded menial tasks such as housekeeping or cleaning. Her laundry was a small mountain in the utility closet. Despite the urgency and importance of what she had planned, some things needed washing. Perhaps it would help ground her a bit in advance of the lunacy she was attempting.

She wrapped herself in a robe, went to the washer and dryer, and began choosing items from the waist-high pile of dirty clothes. It would need to be jeans on this trip. There was no way to tell what the environment would be. She needed to be ready for anything. She began pulling jeans from the pile and checking the pockets, wondering what she might say when and if she found him. What would his attitude be? How much would he know and remember?

Three pairs of jeans would be plenty. She only needed one pair. She picked up the third pair and dug into a front pocket. There was something hard in there. She worked the pocket around and pulled the object out. It was shiny silver. She held it up in the light and froze.

It was Scott's ring.

At first, she felt relief that she had found it. It could have been lost in the hamper, or in the washing machine. What a tragedy that would have been. It meant so much to him. It was given to him by one of his most beloved masters in Tibet, and earning it had not been easy. Thank goodness, it had not become lost.

But, as Cassiopia considered it, there was a problem. How could this come to be in the pocket of her jeans? At the hospital, they would have removed it from his finger and placed it with his other valuables. They had given her the box of those things to take home, but she did not remember the ring being with them. Hurriedly she placed her clothes in the washer, and went to her bedroom. She drew the box of valuables from her dresser and opened it. There was his watch, wallet, a few documents, and nothing else. She went to Scott's sleeping form and looked at his hand. No ring.

Dumbfounded, she went to the den and sat. Over and over, she went through the events since leaving the hospital. There was no way for the ring to have been in her jeans. Then she remembered something else. On the trip into Dreamland with Ann, as she was leaving, one of the monks gave her a ring and told her to keep it close. She had accepted it graciously but expected it to disappear upon leaving Dreamland. Dreamland matter was thought-matter. It did not exist in the real world.

Once again, she mentally struggled through all the timelines. Once again, the only way the ring could have come to be in her jean pocket was when she accepted it from the Dreamland monk.

Cassiopia sat dazed. Markman was not wearing the ring. The ring was not in his box of possessions. How could this be the real ring? How could a Dreamland monk have come to be in possession of the real ring? How could the ring have found its way into Dreamland? Cassiopia went over and over the chain of events. The equation was missing a proof. The pattern was incomplete. The monk had been in possession of the real ring. That was the only way she could be holding it in her hand now. Markman was wearing it when the plane crashed. How could the ring have gone from a frozen mountaintop, directly into Dreamland?

The mystery would have to be put aside. There was nothing else to do. She looked down at the silver, engraved designs and wondered about the monk who had given it to her. He had said to keep it close. She slipped it over her thumb, and promised herself she would.

## Chapter 31

Cassiopia stood at the base of the inclined ramp, her reflection staring ominously back at her from the activated SCIP mirror. She did her best to hide her fear. Professor Cassell, looking even more worried than usual, swung his chair around to face his daughter.

"Are you sure, Cassiopia?"

"I'm sure, Father."

"The last time someone went through alone, they were nearly lost forever."

"Yes, but we've learned a great deal since you did that, Father."

"Like father, like daughter?"

Cassiopia dismissed his concern and walked up the ramp checking her satchel. She turned Markman's ring on her finger nervously, and nodded to him. Without looking back, she stepped through the archway and into the unknown.

Immediately, she found herself standing in lush, green grass. In every direction there were rolling hills and patches of dense green forest. A well-worn trail led down the hillside, to a forest entrance that was both beautiful and intimidating. In the distance a herd of wild horses grazed on a hilltop, back dropped by blue sky and thin strata clouds. The horses were wild mustangs, and the alpha stallion standing apart from them raised his head and stared back at her as if inviting a visit. A gentle breeze carried the smell of jasmine and lifted Cassiopia's ivory-blonde hair as she turned.

She hiked the strap of her satchel higher and followed the trail down. As she approached the entrance to the forest, the musical sounds of birds and insects began to fill the air. The passageway was shadowy and cool at first, but soon light within the forest made the way clear. The treetop canopy completely blocked the sky, but colored light from somewhere reflected off its surface. Towering tree trunks were heavily knotted and naturally engraved with shapes and faces. The ferns and plant life were vibrant with color, and the flowers luminescent. The air was strongly scented.

As she made her way along the path, she realized the ground was covered with sand that looked like crushed crystal. Ahead, brick-sized gemstones were partial submerged within it, and beams of colored light radiated upward from them to light up the canopy. Cassiopia stopped, dazed by the beauty of it. She turned in a slow circle finding new beauty with each step. The faint sounds of a thousand bells seemed to be coming from somewhere ahead. As she completed her turn, something glistened and caught her eye. Ahead on the trail's edge, a transparent bird hovered above the pedals of an iridescent flower. It looked like a glass hummingbird. She stood mesmerized and watched it move, changing color with each new flower. When it advanced further along the trail, she took a few steps, hoping to keep it in sight. As the procession continued, the sounds of the musical bells grew more distinct. It began to sound like musical running water. The hummingbird continued to lead, and around a corner, Cassiopia found the source; a waterfall of tiny colored diamonds flowing like water, carving a path through the forest, disappearing into the woods.

The hummingbird crossed. It paused on the opposite shore as though urging her to continue. The brook was too big to jump. She would need to wade through it. She tested the flow with one foot and stepped in. The diamonds tickled at her legs as she chose her footing carefully. She stepped out on the opposite side in time to see the hummingbird farther ahead. But, the trail did not go on forever. Ahead a wet-black cliff face rose up overhead. Vines dangled from it, and tiny streams of diamonds trickled along its uneven surface. Where the trail ended, an ominous, dark opening in the cliff waited. It was only waist high, and little more than shoulder-length wide. To Cassiopia's dismay, the hummingbird disappeared inside.

She went to the entrance and tried to see within the blackness. She looked back in the direction she had come, and at the forest around her. There were only two choices; back track out of the forest, or enter the cave. The idea of returning to the door was unacceptable. There had been no other trails and no other leads to follow. She could not consider a subsequent trip through the door. It was now or never. Cassiopia took a breath and ducked into the darkness.

The shallow ceiling lasted only a short distance before opening up to a much larger chamber. As she straightened up, she realized there was a fluorescent type of blue light reflecting off the wet-black walls, though she could see no source for it. The passageway bore a very high ceiling, probably thirty feet or more in some places. The walls were jagged, but beautiful, and wide enough for a car to pass through. As she scanned the cavern, she noticed something else. There were statues carved out of the rock at various points along the way. They were life-size, and extremely detailed. The first one was on her right and seemed to be of a scholar, a man in robes holding a large, fat book.

As she followed the diamond dust trail, the next figure appeared on her left, a Roman Centurion in full battle gear holding a long sword with the tip resting on the ground. Next, what appeared to be a Native American on the right, in modest Indian apparel, but clearly a chief. On the left, a very large carving of a man on a horse, a lieutenant from the civil war in the full uniform of the North. After that, a man in a trench coat with a brimmed hat pulled down over his eyes, holding a short machine gun with a large circular ammunition clip.

Cassiopia noticed sunlight ahead. She hurried along and as she approached the exit, one last carving on the rock wall appeared to be unfinished. There were no details, just the formed shape of a man. With a brief glance at it, she bent over a low spot in the cave and stepped outside.

A mystical panorama lay beyond. It was a colorful ravine with mountaintops looking down on a slow moving river. Though the river was wide, a decorative, covered bridge crossed it below. Along the way on the far shore was an L-shaped dock with a small wooden boat tied-off. Pine trees hung out over the river. Where the bridge ended, a well-worn path led up the mountainside to a quaint home surrounded by a garden and decorative stonework. On the river's nearside, by the bridge, there was a small temple with Burmese-styled turrets and well-kept flower gardens. A trail led from them to a second home designed like a small temple, higher up the mountainside. Near it, an arch-shaped entrance seemed to lead into the mountain, its heavy wooden double doors deeply carved and locked by an oversized metal shield.

Three mountaintops were visible on the far side, and a single large one on the left. The river snaked in front of Cassiopia and turned sharply to the right, disappearing around the green forest slope. A figure in a brown hooded cloak waited at the entrance to the bridge. Cassiopia choose her footing carefully and followed the trail down toward him.

As she approached, his face remained hidden within the shadowed hood. "What has brought you here, my seeker friend?"

"You asked me that the last time I was here, but that was in another Dreamland. I have come through a secret door my father invented."

"Yes, but what brought you here?"

"I came because I'm searching for someone...someone special."

"Are we not all?"

"Oh, yes. I meant special to me. I'm searching for a real person, rather than a Dreamland person. They're not actually real."

"Walk with me. I am going the same way. And tell me, what is real?"

"The people here in Dreamland are not real. They only exist as long as I'm here."

"So where you come from, do people only exist as long as you are with them?"

"No, no, that's different. I mean Dreamland people are created out of my mind."

"And from whose mind were you created?"

Cassiopia laughed. "You ask questions in riddles. Some people say we are all a product of an automatic natural process called evolution. Others insist there is a great mind behind it all."

"Ah, I would then ask, can a garden grow in a desert completely void of water?"

"No."

"Can a universe with no mind, give birth to billions of intellects?"

Cassiopia stopped. "How can you be teaching me such things? I've never thought about it that way. You should not know any more than I do. One of my Father's best sayings was that no one could create an intelligence greater than their own in Dreamland. How are you doing this?"

"What brought you here?"

"A glass hummingbird. I followed it here."

"What is the glass hummingbird?"

"I don't understand. I don't know what you want me to say."

"What brought you here?"

"I told you."

The old man smiled. "What is real then?"

Cassiopia stopped once more. "You're talking in circles. Are you a real person?"

"What is real? Answer that correctly, and I'll tell you."

"Will you help me find the man I'm looking for?"

"Look upward and you will see the way."

"Look upward? You mean to God?"

The old man laughed. "Ah, there is wisdom in youth. No, up there," and he pointed farther up the mountainside. "Do you see where the rainbow meets the falls? That is where he practices. Any higher and the ether is not dense enough. But fair warning. It is not far, but the climb is not easy."

Cassiopia stared upward. "It's okay. I know about climbing. I had to climb down a mountain after our plane crashed. Scott was badly hurt."

The monk paused and clasped his hands together. "Tell me seeker, would you have anything from when he was injured."

Cassiopia thought. "Yes, I do." She dug in her pocket and pulled out her keys. She twisted them off and handed him the chrome ring. "It's from the airplane we crashed in. I saved it for a souvenir."

"May I keep it?"

"Yes, but why would you want it?"

"Physical objects are bookmarks in time. Be careful on your climb. Do not give up."

"Thank-you. I won't." She turned and left him and followed the trail upward.

The climb was easy at first. Loose dirt made it slippery, but the incline was easy to manage. When the plateau above began to become visible, the path suddenly turned vertical so that she had to find her way using hand and foot holds. One sharp turn had been washed out by water, and the brush along side the trail offered little help. After slipping back down, she finally managed to round it and stabilize herself in front of a vertical wall that was the last of it. The footholds and handholds were well used. She scaled the short section of cliff and finally was able to look over the top. A large clearing, with a waterfall and basin-pond waited. A man wearing loose-fitting silk pants and no shirt stood with his back to her. As she climbed up, he drew a small throwing star from a packet on his waist and threw it at a wooden target

by the falls. It spun through the air and struck the target's center with a deep thud.

Cassiopeia stood and called to him. "Scott."

He turned with one hand still reaching into his pocket, but stopped when he recognized her. "Wow! I guess I'll never stop dreaming about you. This is the fourth time you've appeared here."

"It's not what you think, Scott. I'm really here."

"Gee, the imposters are getting better every time."

"No. I came through the SCIP doorway to get here. I am the real Cassiopeia."

Markman shook his head and took a position to throw again. "This is a mean trick I'm playing on myself."

Cassiopeia persisted. "You were in a plane crash. You had two broken legs and a bad concussion. You have been comatose for several weeks. I'm here to take you back."

Markman paused, wondering if she could actually be real. He stared apprehensively. "A plane crash?"

"In the mountains. We were barely able to get down alive. You gave me a hard time. You wanted to be left behind. You made fun of me and said I couldn't wear high heels."

Markman's eyes opened wide. "I had forgotten those things, but I remember now. You made a stove."

"Yes. We huddled together by the stove to keep warm."

Markman came to Cassiopeia. "My god! Is it really possible? You have entered my mind and found me?" He clutched her in a tight hug and kissed her cheek. He released her and stared affectionately.

"I've brought you something," she said and she pulled his ring from her finger and held it up.

Markman turned away. "How did you get that?" he asked without looking back. "I threw it in a pile of Yak dung."

"One of the Monks had it. He gave it to me and told me to keep it close. Don't you want it back?"

"Those guys will never give up. No, I don't."

"Why not? Why did they give it to me?"

"They are my Masters, my teachers. They are displeased with me, or so they say."

"Why?"

Markman laughed under his breath. He turned and faced her with a smirk. "To put it in their words; because I am not here, there, and everywhere. I am only here."

"What does that mean?"

He waved to her. "Come and sit. We should talk." He led her to a flat outcropping of rock near the pool. The waterfall was loud. Spray drifted by.

"Life is better here. Watch." Markman found a small polished stone and held it in his open hand. He concentrated a moment and the stone levitated over his palm. He looked back at Cassiopeia and it fell back into his grasp. "There is much more control here. The possibilities are endless. It's not like the physical world where you can get whacked on the head from behind at any damn moment when you're least expecting it. You don't take a chance losing something you care about here like you do there. There's a good balance here."

"But you're still a part of the physical world. You're asleep in bed at my Father's. I had to kidnap you to bring you there."

"You mean my physical body is still there. I am not. This body is much more advanced."

"What body are you talking about?"

"Oh yeah, that's right, the backward people of Tibet actually know more than the modern world, but the modern world hides the truth or avoids it. You don't know you have more than one body because that knowledge has been withheld from you. What if I could pretty much prove to you that you have more than just a physical body? Could you handle that?"

"It won't change why I'm here, but I'll listen."

"Okay, you do believe that when we pass away, we go on living right?"

"Yes. I do not believe we cease to exist."

"So, when you die, you leave your physical body on the bed and never return to it, right?"

"Yes. That must be true."

"So if you go on living as you've said, what body are you using then?"

"I guess it would be some kind of heavenly body."

"So then we've already proven that you have two bodies, a physical body, and at some point a heavenly body. Two bodies, right?"

"Okay. It's sort of a Plato logic, but okay."

"So, either your heavenly body forms instantly at death, and you instantly know how to use it, or you've had that heavenly body all along. Those are the only two choices, right?"

"I guess that must be true."

"Have you heard about people who have been clinically deceased, and brought back, and they have stories of seeing their deceased physical bodies and they are not in them, and some even talk with relatives, or move toward a bright light, stuff like that?"

"Yes, we've all heard that."

"So if their physical bodies were pronounced clinically dead, what body were they using to visit past relatives, or travel to bright lights? Obviously their consciousness did not evaporate, it remained in one place."

"Maybe it was a dream."

"Okay, but all brain activity had ceased in those cases. Could a brain that was not alive in any way, dream?"

"I admit, it is a mystery."

"Isn't it possible that the heavenly body you say we use after death, has been with us all along, and that is the body the great Tibetan masters use for astral travel, and to make themselves sometimes appear in places where they are not?"

"I can't say it's not possible. I have no scientific data to dismiss the idea."

"Cass, I am presently in my heavenly body. The Tibetans call it an astral body. I am not using my physical body at all."

"We need you to come back."

"That's why those three down there are displeased with me. They agree with you."

"One of them has been teaching me. It's confusing."

"Your meeting them was no accident. They were waiting for you. That's Master Norya. He can bend your brain into a pretzel just with his words."

"That's another weird thing. Somehow, he had your ring, your real ring. He gave it to me on the last trip and I brought it back from Dreamland. How could he have gotten it?"

"That ring was designed and created here in Dreamland by the Masters. I'm not a scientist so don't ask me to explain everything. I know that all matter is made up of physical matter and astral matter. You call the astral, thought-matter. We don't see the astral matter properties because in the physical world we are seeing with physical-world eyes. They don't operate on a high enough level. That ring came with me into Dreamland. It coexists in both places but its basic properties reside here, not in the physical world. Is that confusing enough for you?"

"He asked me for something from the crash where you got hurt, too."

"Oh yeah, a bookmark. Those guys can go back through time and look at stuff. They can't change anything, but they can visit the past like it's a movie and see everything that happened. They probably want to go back and look at exactly what happened to us. Thanks for the warning. Who knows what tricks Norya will come up with from that."

"Can you do such things?"

"I haven't tried since I've been here, but I used to get strong images when I touched antiques and things like that."

"The Masters want what is best for you, don't they?"

"Any one of them could force me back to the physical world, but they won't do it. They want it to be by choice. The physical world was designed to be a realm of free will. That's why there's so much pain and suffering there. They want me to face it on my own terms."

"I'll face it with you."

"Tell me something. If I had two broken legs, how did I get down off the mountain?"

"It's a long story. Come back with me and I'll tell you everything."

Markman squirmed in his seat. "It's the yin-yang, Cass. It's screwed up, no matter what they say. I love the combat. I hate hurting others. There ought to be a life and a future on the other side of those. There isn't that I can tell."

"Everything you've ever done has been to protect the innocent."

Markman stood and walked to the forest edge near the drop off. He touched a leaf on an overhanging branch and looked back without speaking.

Cassiopia came up beside him. "Maybe your life is still unfolding."

"It would take a leap of faith to believe that. I need more than hope. I need something to hold on to." He turned and walked toward the falls.

"Then hold on to me," called Cassiopia.

He stopped and looked back at her affectionately.

"I love you," she said, and was surprised to hear the words.

Markman seemed paralyzed. He looked at her for a moment and then turned his eyes away. There had been fear in them. It was the first time she had seen that. "Come here," she said. He looked again.

Hesitantly he approached her, insecure for the first time in his adult life. She reached out one hand, took his, and slowly kissed the back of it. "You go around protecting everyone. I'll protect you," she said.

"We don't have a plan."

Cassiopia smiled. "That will be our plan; not to have a plan."

Markman perked up. "I could do that. To be honest, I've felt like I'm kidding myself all along."

Cassiopia held up his ring. She took his hand and gently slid it back on his finger, and they kissed in a long embrace.

"Come with me through the door."

"Okay, but only if you promise to be waiting on the other side."

"I'll always be there on the other side. I won't leave you," she replied, and she kissed him once more, and led him to the climb-down point.

At the base of the trail, the three monks were still sitting at their places around the shrine. As they neared, Master Norya rose up and came to Cassiopia. He motioned Markman toward the others, and waved her to join him. Cassiopia looked at the beloved monk who had so unexpectedly become her teacher. "I know the answer," she said.

"Brought something down from the mountain, have you? Oh please let me hear it?" he answered.

"The Hummingbird was my love for Scott. My love brought me here. Love is real."

"As am I," he replied. He smiled and clasped his hands within his long sleeves, and she smiled with him.

"Love may be the only thing that is real in my world," she added.

"And what is the mountain," asked the Monk.

Cassiopia stopped and looked back the way they had come. "The mountain is God."

"Time for you to leave, my little bright light."

"All along you weren't really trying to help me, were you? You were trying to help him."

"He had lost sight of the path. You are the light that showed the way."

"And now we have both learned."

"All is as it should be."

Cassiopia led Markman to the cave entrance. She paused to look back at the teacher, standing on the bridge. She waved and he waved back. They ducked into the cave and held hands to the other side. In the enchanted forest, they walked the diamond studded trail and out into the clearing. At the top of the hill, she called for the door. It appeared instantly. Without waiting, they stepped through together.

Cassiopeia burst into a SCIP mirror, and did not pause. She raced down the ramp and headed for the upstairs. Her father stood at his console and called out, "What happened?"

She did not acknowledge him and rushed to the elevator. There she hammered on the control button all the way up, then charged out without waiting for the full stop. She lunged up the stairs, out the hallway door, and ran down the hall, knocking a small table out of place in her fury. At the bedroom door, she pushed against the molding to slow herself and stood in the doorway staring at Markman.

His blue eyes were open. Cautiously she approached the bedside, never taking her eyes off him, afraid that he might shut them and be lost again. To her astonishment, the ring was back on his finger. He blinked trying to better focus and spoke in dry, raspy voice. "Cass, what the hell happened? How did I get here? I don't feel so good. What a freakin' nightmare I had."

Shaking, Cassiopeia poured water from a vase beside the bed and held the glass for him to drink. When he had finished, she placed it gently on the nightstand, and crawled onto the bed beside him. She wrapped one hand around his chest and buried her face between his neck and shoulder.

Cassiopeia wept.

The Professor appeared in the doorway. He stood paralyzed at the sight of Markman awake. He went to the foot of the bed, placed one hand on Markman's leg, and wiped a tear from his eye. The three remained in silent gratitude, their miracle beyond words.

On a small plateau encircled by low hills on the south-eastern side of the Himalayas, some distance from the frontier of Nepal, and roughly two hundred miles from Lhasa, three Tibetan Masters meditated in the lotus position around a butter carving dedicated to the One-Good. They opened their eyes as one monk raised his hand to reveal a shiny chrome ring from the wreckage of an airplane. He reached out and spun the ring on the flat shale stone beneath the shrine, and together they laughed out loud.

Markman's recovery progressed at lightning speed. His use of mediation and Tai Chi exercise seemed to surpass the physical therapy prescribed by the doctors. Cassiopeia spent much of her time untangling the web of phony paperwork and resources that had brought him back to her. It took Rogers days of reassuring all the major security agencies that only sheer luck saved them from nuclear disaster, and having accepted the President's emphatic gratitude, she was finally allowed to return to Florida.

On the first evening that all were present, they gathered in the den and sat around the Professor's desk drinking their choice of alcoholic beverage, except for the Professor and his tea. Markman held his cup of customized pinyin in one hand while tilting a plastic mind-bender maze game in the other. The little silver ball was not behaving. Cassiopeia stabbed at the cheese on the end table, nearly spilling her red wine as she did so. Rogers sat slouched back, watching them with amusement, taking swigs from an amber beer bottle.

"So, haven't you guys ever thought of going in there just for the fun of it?" she asked.

The Professor looked up warily. "It is too dangerous, Ann. No one should ever go through that blasted thing ever again. You have all just been lucky."

Cassiopeia spoke with cheese still in her mouth, gesturing with one hand to make up for it. "That could be considered a legitimate experiment, Father. We have never entered Dreamland without being motivated by stress or need."

The Professor was not swayed. "Oh, for Pete's sake."

Have you thought about what you could do and see in there?" continued Rogers. "How can you resist?"

Cassiopeia turned to Markman. "I want to know about the ring, Scott. I still don't understand how it did the things it did."

Markman looked at the silver ring on his right hand. "I only know that when I die I will leave my physical body behind, but this ring will come with me. That's all I know."

Cassiopeia tapped a finger on her lips. "I wonder what metallurgical testing would show on it."

Markman held it close to his chest. "No way. There's not enough insurance in the world to cover this."

"That's another thing, Scott. Where did you get your medical insurance? It's incredible. They covered everything. I booked that air ambulance for you and I guess the hospital must have sent them copies of the transfer request and they even paid for that. Is it something from your father's military coverage or something?"

Markman continued playing with the plastic game and did not look up. "I don't have any insurance."

Cassiopeia sat dumbfounded. "You must know something about it. The Neila Endowment. You must be familiar with them?"

Markman glanced up briefly. "Never heard of 'em."

Cassiopeia sat stunned. She looked to her father who responded with only a shrug.

Rogers persisted, "Don't you wonder what the future would look like in there? Who knows what you might learn."

Before anyone could respond, the Tel came speeding around the corner and into the den so quickly it made the Professor rattle his teacup and saucer.

"Cassiopeia, the containment perimeter has been compromised. My dog is absent."

"Your dog? Your dog..." Cassiopeia glanced at her father. He bowed his head and slowly slapped one hand against his forehead.

"Tel, when did you see the dog last?"

"I am monitored to establish status on the hour."

"You check on him every hour? Who told you to do that? Oh, never mind. Have you repaired the place where he got out?"

"Affirmative."

Markman looked amused. "Well everyone, there's never a dull moment when your with the Cassells. I suggest we all join in a search for their robot's dog."

Professor Cassell moaned and pushed himself up from his desk.

Rogers stood but continued her solicitation. "You realize we could go back to the dark ages and visit knights and castles. Or, we could live with Native American Indians before the Indian wars."

The group ignored her and crowded toward the hall.

Cassiopia called to the robot. "Tel, you are to remain here and monitor the backyard and contact us if the dog shows up okay?"

"Cassiopia, there would be an eighteen point five percent gain in search efficiency if...

"No Tel. You are to remain here to watch for the dog. Comply."

"Yes, Cassiopia."

And so, a professor of quantum physics who had created a portal to another dimension, a martial arts master trained since childhood in the hills of Tibet, a beautiful young woman with the IQ of a genius, and a federal agent who had recently saved the world from a terrorist nuclear bomb, all ushered themselves out the back door to search the surrounding neighborhood for a small tan and white beagle, asleep under a blanket on the living room couch.