

# Chapter 1

## ~ Dead Man Walking ~

*"Without the existence of people to acknowledge or dispute your greatness, your greatness is irrelevant. You are because they are. Without them, no matter how they treat you, you would not exist. Treat all the world as if you owe it your gratitude because even the cruel and heartless define who you are."*

### **- Jayleigh Came**

*"Always look for the obvious with the in-obvious; you're not the bad guy; we are!"*

As soon as the lunch break was over, I returned to the meeting room, along with the Colonel, Christopher Speer, General Stevenson, and Peter Emmerson. The audience had slowly started to return to their chairs. Everyone knew that this meeting was of utmost importance. Nobody needed to be reminded of that. It was obvious that we were ready to continue the meeting with the group. We walked to our seats and sat down.

Once everyone was seated and had their attention focused on the case on hand, I cleared my throat, indicating the commencement of this meeting. The room became silent and was clouded with anticipation for what was to come. Before any of the points regarding the case could be discussed, I wanted everyone to go through the files first so they could understand what we were dealing with. I began opening the files placed in front of me, as did everyone else. Everyone was reviewing the files from the beginning. We had to go through the important elements of the case to prepare for the final proceedings of the case.

A lot of new information was likely to be added to the file. The group in front of us was involved in a heated discussion, comparing notes with each other. *If new information is coming forward, then why seal the file?* I thought *That wouldn't make sense.*

Once I was done reviewing the files, I placed them aside and stood up to address the group. I took a deep breath, and after a short pause, I began, "I hope everyone made the most of the lunch break because 'we're all going to have a really long day.'" I could hear a few chuckles and see a few sardonic smiles in response. It was good to know everyone here understood how important the work was and was willing to go the extra mile to work on this case.

Peter Emmerson, who was seated next to me, to continue. Since we had a lot to discuss and not much time, I wanted everyone to get on board with the case and start working on it. The information was a lot to take in. We needed every person present in the meeting room to connect all the dots to the data we had gathered.

"Now, a lot of time and effort went into this investigation," I began, "and we need to review what we are up against. Until we are 100% sure that everything is in place and all the information gathered is correct to be presented to our world leaders or whoever reads this in the future, we need to keep working hard and make sure that everything is done the right way." The audience nodded in agreement.

I continued, "Let us review this case one more time, make sure that nothing gets past us. We need to get the facts right. We can't risk misinforming world leaders. Important decisions rely on whatever information we provide to them. We don't have any more room for mistakes when it comes to our intelligence. I want all of you to give your best and share, with each other, whatever information you extract from your analysis of this file. Gather the info, note it down, and compare your notes with each other," I instructed. I knew this method would work in our

favor. Working as a team is what had brought us this far, and this is exactly what we needed in a time of crisis.

"One thing I cannot emphasize enough is the secrecy of this work. These files will be reviewed in Top Secret, of course. However, you all need to play your part in ensuring that there are no information leaks from now on. No matter what, this conversation or whatever is discussed here regarding the case does not leave this room. Period," I said firmly, with a stern look on my face. "There is no way we can risk another information breach. If that happens once more, it will tarnish our reputation as an organization that was supposed to be responsible for defending the world.

"If you are caught talking about anything being said in this room, even a single word regarding this case, you will be charged with espionage. This charge has already been brought against some highly influential people, including a General and his wife." Having highlighted the consequences of not following security protocols, I brought their attention back to the case.

"So, starting from the beginning, let's focus on The Circle. Then we will move towards the planned alien invasion of Earth. After completely assessing this file, I'm not sure if we will need to seal it. There's too much going on, and I don't think sealing this case would make it any better. But whatever happens, we need to do our best with the analysis and comparing notes. We will review any new cases coming forward, and we will need an annual review every year starting October 18, 2022. The new information added to this investigation will be reviewed separately.

This file would be even bigger than The Warren Commission about the Kennedy assassination, which cannot be opened until October 26, 2021. As for the MK-Ultra Program, and the DEOMI Project, that information was destroyed in 1980. We are still dealing with the

repercussions of that loss, and if some outsider gets their hands on the file we are working on, it will be a disaster of massive proportions. Therefore, to avoid any serious threat to national security, we have to be extremely cautious.

"Alright, let's discuss the case now. Our main guy is Bryan Ludendorff, so here are a few important points that I would like to highlight about him. May 15, two years ago was when Bryan Ludendorff was first contacted by The CIA." I refilled my coffee.

"Bryan Ludendorff was medically retired from the Army in 2014. His family was living in Orlando, Florida, and they traveled down to Chile a lot. I believe he also has a home in Puerto Varas. So, it all began one day when Bryan was spending some time with his family. It was him with his wife, Greta, and their daughter Rita, at their home in Orlando. They were all sitting at the kitchen table, having breakfast on a fine, sunny morning." I stood up and grabbed one of the files that contained details about the people who came to Bryan Ludendorff's house to meet him that day.

"All I have read to you guys until now was gathered from the listening devices we found from his house. Mounds of recordings were saved. It seemed like the Ludendorff family knew they were bugged and were being very cautious about what they were saying; we were not able to extract any useful information from those devices."

Mr. Ludendorff's home was surveilled under the Patriot Act, and he was recorded before the visitors came to see him. So, whatever had been recorded in his home, we had the permit from the government to collect all that information. Remember that Ludendorff's name came up when we were investigating a deceased member of The Circle. According to what was written in that member's diary, Ludendorff had some interest in employment. He was also one of the suspects from the missing diamonds and money in Sierra Leone. I thought it was necessary to

have his house bugged back then. Now, I am going to share with you all the information we have gathered from his home. Starting from the beginning, I read out loud to the group,

"It started out with Mr. Ludendorff and his family having breakfast together and enjoying his retirement. They were having a casual conversation. Greta said to Bryan, 'What do you think we can do this weekend. Do you think we can go to Disneyworld?'" Before I could say anything else, I was interrupted by General Stevenson's sharp words.

"Come on, how is this relevant to this investigation? Who cares about him having breakfast?"

I responded, matching his tone, "General Stevenson, I do value your input. You are an important member, and that's why you're allowed to be in this meeting. But you are skating on thin ice. Remember that some people didn't want you here in the first place. This information might not seem useful, but it can help us find out about Mr. Ludendorff and what he was thinking at that time. Any small clue can help. Considering that, we 'can't leave any stone unturned.

"This report is supposed to help us find out whatever we need to know about The Circle. Mr. Ludendorff played a big role in taking it down. Not many know this, but right now, he is the most powerful person on the planet. He is a living, breathing data bank that we all need to make out of this crisis alive. For that, we must know as much about him as we can to strengthen our intelligence system."

I was interrupted again, but this time, it was Speer objecting, "Does this really have anything to do with national security? Ludendorff having breakfast with his family? This is ridiculous. 'We're wasting our time here.'"

I could not help but shout at him, "The 'Ludendorff's' home was bugged! Of course, there must be something worth listening to. Any information from those recordings could be used under the Patriot Act, which still allowed the usage of listening devices when the case involved a serious crime or a threat to national security. Since Bryan Ludendorff had a shady past, his house was allowed to be bugged. With what was recorded and said, along with the fact-finding evidence, this *is* relevant to the case. Going over this case, the evidence, along with the interviews about Bryan Ludendorff's friends and his family; it's a big help to us. I believed that they knew they were being bugged, so the recordings were mostly static. Remember, Bryan was a con artist and he smartly managed to avoid conversations that might have given off too much information.

"We need to know how Bryan thinks, and trust me, he's a good con artist, and so is his wife. What we need to do is to dot the "I's" and cross the "T's" to make sure everything is correct here. Do not forget that everything, even the smallest detail, is relevant to this case. Stop neglecting important points just because it seems irrelevant to some of you," I said pointedly and then continued.

"First, ask yourself, what could he be thinking at that time? What did he think when people showed up at his door without any heads up? It was a big surprise for him, being interrupted by a bunch of people showing up on a Sunday morning. Don't you think that's suspicious?"

"This report is supposed to help us understand and explain the resentment he had towards us for making a sudden appearance at his door." For a moment, complete silence took over the room. Everyone looked at each other in confusion. Speer was the first one to break the silence. "Go ahead and proceed. "

Nodding his head in agreement, Colonel Richardson said to the group, "I will continue to read the report to the group, or Ms. Xander can continue to read. It's her call to make. I know this is frustrating, going over everything, including every minor detail. But this is what needs to be done. Let's start where we left off, but please, no more outbursts or interruptions. They won't get us anywhere, and we need to work together to make sure everything is done right. Remember, there's much more intelligence that we have to gain from this report by doing this right the first time. That needs to be our goal."

After the Colonel said that, he gestured me to read the rest. "Starting with what Bryan said, 'I don't know, I think it would be better if we go to the beach or feed the ducks at the park instead of Disneyworld. I think Little Princess would love to feed the ducks, and we can have some family time together.'"

Peter Emmerson jumped in to address the group, "Sorry for the interruption, but this has to be added to the report. While the CIA was talking to Mr. Ludendorff, one Gunnery Sergeant with the group was taking notes. When they went inside Mr. Ludendorff's house, that Gunnery Sergeant kept writing about the house in detail: the kitchen was white, there was a gas stove, and everything was well maintained inside his house. His wife and daughter were just as surprised as he was when the CIA visited them. Bryan was ordered to go to Langley with them.

When General Olson went upstairs with Mr. Ludendorff to oversee the packing, there were no arguments, or anything unusual said that raised any kind of suspicion. They acted like a normal family. However, they were speaking in the Mapuche language. There was no sense of fear from them during the visit.

Whatever the team witnessed at his house was a normal reaction. He wasn't trying to hide anything or doing anything illegal. The only thing that alarmed the team was Mr. Ludendorff and

his wife speaking in Mapuche. Not many people knew how to speak that language. A lot of times, the family traveled a lot since Mr. Ludendorff was retired from the military. A few times, our recording devices were filled with static.

"In their conversations that had been recorded, both of them have mentioned you, Ms. Xander, by your first name in the recordings. Why is that, may I ask? What is your affiliation with Bryan and his wife?"

I turned to him and replied, "As I said earlier in this meeting, Bryan Ludendorff and his wife are outstanding con artists. They can do just about anything to manipulate us. Nothing that comes from them surprises me anymore. However, something good did come out of this whole thing; without Bryan and his friends, I would have never met Ron Clark, my fiancé.

I believe it took a lot of skill, as well as good luck, for Mr. Ludendorff to qualify for the position of Admiral of The Phoenix. Whatever it is, watch your backs with him," I warned.

As soon as those words left my mouth, General Emmerson jumped in, saying, "Ms. Xander, I apologize for the interruption. You can continue reading the report now." He turned to the rest of the room, "Everyone, let's save the questions for later. You can ask them all after the case is reviewed. From what I've heard so far, I agree with you. Bryan Ludendorff, along with his friends, is quite the con artist. Go ahead, Mrs. Xander, continue to read."

I continued to read the mounds of notes that were in front of me, and the focus of the discussion remained Bryan Ludendorff.

\* \* \* \* \*

On **May 15, 2019**, I heard a loud knock at the door while we were eating breakfast. Another louder one followed shortly after.

"That's rude. I wonder who that could be"? I asked Bryan. As I looked towards him, he said, "I have no idea. I'll go check, but whoever it is, they need to learn some manners." I looked after my husband as he walked towards the door, and, stopping midway, he turned to say, "Well, Greta and Rita, I thought it was going to be a quiet day today." We laughed a bit as Bryan shouted to whoever was knocking on the door, "Hold on! I'll be there in a minute!"

Whoever it was knocked again loudly. Angry now, I yelled, "Hold on, we'll be there in a minute, just show us a little respect!" I turned to Rita and said to her quietly, "Sorry, my little princess. Would you go to the guest room and hide under the bed for me? Here, take my cell phone with you and get ready to call 911 in case anything unusual happens." She looked at me, confused but obliged. She grabbed the phone and ran upstairs.

Bryan grabbed his weapon, put it in his holster, and ordered me to stay behind him. As soon as he opened the door, we saw six people standing on our doorstep. We were surprised to see so many: two Officers, a General from the Army, one Marine Gunnery Sergeant, and two people in plainclothes, a man and a woman.

Bryan looked angry when he said to the group, "Where are your manners? Just banging at the door like it's an emergency. I wouldn't do that at your house. At least have the common courtesy to use the doorbell."

No one said anything as they stood there. When Bryan did not get a response, he warned the group, "Let me make this clear to everyone here! You never come to my house and just start banging on my door like that again. I have a family, and I don't like anyone disturbing them. If anyone wants to talk to me, do it in a civil manner. Come on. You've upset everyone. And here I was hoping that it was going to be a quiet day."

Bryan turned to me and spoke in Mapuche. The language originated from the Andes Mountains of Chile and was not widely spoken, but I was part indigenous Chilean so we often used it for private conversations around other people. "Greta, let me handle this. I'm not sure, but one guy in this group looks familiar."

After he said that, I calmed down a bit and went upstairs to check on Rita. I was still a bit wary of the group and wondered if Ms. Xander had sent those people to harass my husband.

\*\*\*

Once my wife went upstairs, I turned to the group. "This is quite the surprise. It seems 'we've gotten off on the wrong foot. What can I do for you, now that 'you've rudely interrupted my day? I take it you aren't here to have me reenlist or try to talk me into spending more time in the Army," I said sarcastically.

Before they could answer, I turned around and shouted to Rita and my wife, "It's alright, guys, you can come out. 'Everything's alright now, nothing to worry about." I then turned back to my unexpected guests to see what they had to say. Apparently, it was a lot.

"I'm U.S. Army Captain Dan Allen," one of the men introduced himself. "There's a case many of our people have been working on for a while. We figured you might be able to help us at the CIA headquarters in Langley. We want you to come with us for a few days."

I thought to myself, *This guy, Captain Allen, 'there's something about him that makes me not trust him. I don't know what exactly it is, but something is definitely off about him.* I thought it would be better to take this discussion inside. I didn't want neighbors to be suspicious about having six people in front of my house, questioning me like I had committed a crime, so I gestured for them to come inside. They stepped in.

"Really, that was just too weird for me," I said to Captain Allen. "Let's cut to the chase. Is this a prank or something? You guys are fooling around, right? It's long past April 'Fools' Day, and this does not amuse me at all. I really don't know what to say and I'm surprised you've come here at all. Before I can give you my answer or, in fact, even think about it, I would like to know what this whole thing is about. You can't expect me to give you an answer right away, considering how you guys basically barged in like a bunch of thugs. Can we at least talk?"

"I would like to see a warrant or something to verify this raid before we proceed. How do I know this visit is legitimate? What about some IDs first? You know, I would like to call someone immediately, a higher-ranking individual, to ensure that what you are saying is true. Do you have a phone number I can use to contact someone? I hope you understand where I am coming from. If you were in my position, you would be asking the same thing, right?" I rationalized, trying to list every reason they should not be barging into my home as if they owned it.

"Come on, just showing up at my doorstep without any proper notification?" I continued. "Is this how you guys do your job? You could have at least bothered making a phone call before coming here and making outlandish requests. Think about it; if you were in my place, wouldn't you find it maybe just a little strange?" I questioned with a stern expression. The strange thing was that none of them reacted to what I said. They all just stood there with blank expressions on their faces, as if waiting for me to finish my rant.

"What about showing some manners? I get that your job might be demanding, but you cannot just come here and bang at my door so loudly. I live here with my family. I wouldn't be as upset if it were just me," I huffed. There was no way I was going to answer any of the questions these people had or respond to whatever they had just told me.

“Just give me a few minutes. I need to call the authorities first before going anywhere with you anywhere. Forgive me if I am being a little too suspicious about this visit, but I have to take some precautions.” With that, I was about to turn and go inside, but one of them stepped forward.

He introduced himself as General Peter Olson and said to me, “We heard you, Ludendorff, and we understand your concerns. There’s no need to go anywhere to make that call. You want to speak to a higher authority? Here I am. For now, I am the highest-ranking individual here from the CIA Headquarters. I understand that our visit might seem like we are invading your privacy, but the situation requires us to act fast. It’s a matter of national security that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.”

I looked at him, trying to figure out where I had seen him before. He looked quite familiar. And then it clicked. I knew I had met him before, but it had been a very long time. He had changed a lot. No wonder I could not recognize him at first.

“It’s a small world, indeed,” I said to General Olson once I remembered him. “I thought that was you. I knew you looked familiar when I saw you at the door. I just could not remember how I knew you, and I thought that my eyes might be playing a trick on me. What a surprise to see you again. What has it been, twenty-seven years since the last time we met?” It had been a long time since we last spoke to each other, and as far as I could remember, we did not leave things on good terms.

“Yeah, but I think it would be better to leave all that behind and focus on the problem at hand. We’ve already wasted too much time arguing over a petty matter. I get that you find our unannounced visit a bit impolite, but you must understand that the circumstances require us to put courtesies and formalities behind us and get straight to business,” General Olson explained.

“I’m not even talking about what happened in the past. I’m over it and hope we can put our differences in the past and figure out what needs to be done here to accommodate everyone. Now, I would appreciate it if you guys just tell me what you guys are doing here. I mean, really, what is this all about? Does this have anything to do with The Stiletto’s group?” I looked at General Olson with questioning eyes. I really don’t want anything to do with The Stiletto, and I wanted Olson to know that.

“I hope not because I have nothing to do with them. Remember I got you out of a jam at one time in Freetown. That should count for something,” I tried to bargain subtly. “Everything that you explained to me aside let me get this straight. I am quite confused about this situation, and I don’t think that it has anything to do with the past conversations. You showing up at my house without even the courtesy of a phone call is something I find disrespectful. And you expect me not to hold any resentment towards anyone for showing up on my doorstep?”

“I respect you all but do not expect me to be okay with what you have just done today,” I was getting angry again. “I expect the same treatment and respect as I show others. At least show me some respect and do not insult my intelligence because I will never insult yours. You come here, knock at my door and just demand that I come with you all to the CIA Headquarters. What do you expect me to do? Just happily tag along without any question? Just take a moment and think about how that sounds to you. Even if I believe whatever you have just told me, why now? Why have you guys been silent till now? I am sure you don’t have an answer for that either, right?” I asked sarcastically. I knew how their organization worked. They just expected you to follow their orders without any questions.

General Olson was getting impatient. I could see that on his face. He had always been good at masking his emotions, but I had spent enough time with him to see through that mask.

“Can you please cooperate just a little so we can get this over with? We’re not here for chit-chat. We can continue this lovely conversation at headquarters if you really want to,” said General Olson, looking at his watch. He did not have time for this.

“Alright, can I at least take my wife and child with me?” I looked at Olson’s face. “The answer, I’m sure, is a big no. I don’t know why I even bothered asking,” I said with a dry chuckle.

After I said that, General Olson just sighed and said, “No, you can’t take your family with you, but Mr. Ludendorff, you need to come with us. This is not the place to talk about this in detail. I can’t express the importance of this whole thing right here and now. National security is at stake. You need to come with us. I know this probably came as a shock to you and has been an inconvenience to your family, but trust me, I would not have bothered you the way we did if we did not require your immediate assistance,” General Olson tried to reason.

“What about my family? Are you really expecting me just to leave them behind?” I asked General Olson in a harsh tone. I could not risk the safety of my family for anything.

“Be assured, Mr. Ludendorff, when you are gone, your family will receive generous assistance from the federal government. You have nothing to worry about. Your family will be taken care of. Your assistance will be paid for handsomely. We can also assign a female helper to your family if you want. She will keep your wife and daughter company and help around the house,” General Olson offered. I could not understand why he wanted to offer assistance to my family. I was not going away for that long...or was I? I think General Olson could read my confusion, so he explained.

“I will be honest with you in this regard Mr. Ludendorff. I don’t know how long you will be gone with us. That’s why we want to provide any help that your family might need in your absence. We want all of your attention on this case. I cannot even begin to express the importance

of this mission. Any information coming from you can greatly help us in this investigation and, ultimately, help the country.” General Olson, it seemed, was trying his best to convince me. I just hoped it would not get me into a mess I couldn’t get out of. I’d be damned if this was some trap.

“Now, before you start assuming the worst, I assure you that you are not in trouble,” General Olson clarified before I could say anything. I think my hesitation was quite obvious despite my efforts to keep it concealed. After all, it was my family I was leaving behind. Had it been just me, I would have left without any concern.

My wife, who had been quiet since she re-entered the room, spoke now, “General Olson, I do understand the significance of this matter, but I am concerned about my husband’s safety. And you’re telling us he could be gone for a long time without any updates about his return. It doesn’t help our predicament.”

“Mrs. Ludendorff, I understand that this is going to be tough on your family. We don’t like this any more than you do, but we assure you that your husband will be home as soon as we can get through this investigation,” General Olson consoled Greta. “When Mr. Ludendorff gets to Langley, he will stay in a hotel,” he continued, listing the perks my family and I would get. “He won’t be cut off from you completely. He can call you in the evenings after our meetings. Don’t worry. Consider this an all-expense paid business trip, like when he was in the Army. Your family will be paid very well for this trip by the US Government, don’t forget that.”

I pondered what the General said and replied, “General, I get it. The assistance and everything you have told us about, it all sounds really attractive and convincing. However, I would like to know what this investigation is about. I know that we had some history together in Sierra Leone. I thought I would never see you again, but here you are, standing in front of me and looking like you’ve been doing great for yourself since I saw you last. But you’re asking for my assistance,

and much as I am tempted to consider your offer, I can't give you my final word until you tell me what this is all about."

The General sighed. "Look, as I said earlier, you are not in trouble. But I cannot tell you much about the investigation here. It's just something you may be able to help us with or something you may have seen before. I don't think you understand the true value of the experience you have acquired over your years in the Army. If we find you resourceful in this case, there may be a good opportunity awaiting you at the end: a GS-15 slot for you, retirement pay, and an increment in your salary."

I stood there contemplating my decision. I could not deny that the package they were offering was quite attractive and it did seem that my family would be taken care of. Not that I had any choice. You couldn't really say no to these people. I knew they would keep persisting until I agreed.

I looked at my wife, who looked a bit relieved since General Olson had assured her of my safety. I had made up my mind; I was going with them. And if it were something that I could really help with, I would be paid well for it. It was a good opportunity. I looked at General Olson and told him my decision, "Alright, General Olson. I will come with you, but can I at least pack a few things?"

"Alright," he said. "We will be waiting for you down here. Can you make it quick, please? We're on a time crunch."

I nodded in response and made a request, "I know you promised to send someone to help take care of household chores, but I also want someone to help her with stuff like shopping and lawn maintenance. Usually, I do the yard work by myself."

“Don’t worry, Mr. Ludendorff, it will be taken care of,” General Olson assured. With that settled, I headed upstairs to pack with Greta, leaving Rita waiting downstairs with one of the women from the group.

She spoke to me in Mapuche, “It seems you and the General have known each other for a long time. Is there anything I need to know about? I’ve never heard you mention him before.”

Before I could say anything, I heard footsteps approaching the room. I looked over my shoulder while packing to see who it was and noticed General Olson had followed us upstairs. He tried not to be obvious, but I could tell all his attention was on Greta’s and my conversation.

“Whatever this is, it’s big,” I answered Greta. “And I have a bad feeling about it. Discreetly call Nikita in Puerto Varas if there’s any trouble here in Florida. And about the General: I haven’t seen him in a very long time. In fact, the last time I saw him was when I was in the Peace Corps, and I got him out of a huge jam there. The last conversation we had was just a small misunderstanding when I was in Freetown. So yes, we do have a history together but not a good one. I hope that this is not about the time in the Peace Corps because it was a crazy time back then, and I don’t want to do anything with that.” Greta looked at me, confused. I pursed my lips. I had no idea what to say to assuage her worry.

“I’m just as confused as you are. Trust me; this is a big mystery to me too. I think it may have something to do with The Circle, and if that’s why these people are here, you may need to get in touch with Nikita and Dr. Zana immediately. Now, tell me, has Jan called you lately? Because if she did, we might need to think of a plan B to get some help.” Greta shook her head.

“Whatever this is, let’s see if this has anything to do with her,” I continued. “If it has something to do with her, we need to know her hidden agenda. Remember, every time she calls you, she wants to know about me. We’ll wait until she slips up and falls in the trap we’ve been

planning for so long.” Greta needed to know how to handle things. If I were to work with the CIA, I wouldn't get much time to look over these things. I didn't think I could work in secrecy at CIA Headquarters anyway, and this matter needed to be taken care of in my absence.

I took out my sport coat, sleepwear, another dress shirt, travel items, and my two special shaving cream containers, which had secret compartments inside them. I put them in with my toiletries, making sure no one noticed me packing them.

“Don't worry. I'm going to try my best to just get this over with as quickly as I can,” I said to Greta as I packed.

For a few minutes, we just focused on putting things in bags, and then I spoke to her again, softly, “Be careful what you say here because I'm sure this place is bugged. I will make it a point to call you as soon as I can. Remember, if you hear anything from The Circle, Jan, or anyone who starts to ask too many questions, leave this place immediately and go to Chile. I don't know what to make of this but expect the unexpected. That's all I have to say for now.” We finished packing and went back downstairs.

General Olson followed us. I turned to my wife and said to her in English, “Don't worry, I will call you as often as I can. I also have my cell phone with my email accounts and my charger. Don't be scared. I will be back. Take care of Rita and yourself. I love you!” I kissed her.

“Can you get her so I can say goodbye to her as well?” Greta nodded and called over to Rita.

She hopped down from the couch and came to me. It was easy to explain the situation to Greta, but Rita was only a child. I didn't know what to say to her. I knew Greta knew what to say to make her understand that Daddy would not be around for a while. “Rita, honey, say goodbye to your Daddy,” Greta told her.

“Why, Mommy, why do I have to say goodbye? Is Daddy going somewhere?” Rita asked innocently.

“Yes, darling, he will be gone and working for a while with some important people,” Greta tried to explain.

“Oh, when will you be back, Daddy? I am going to miss you!” Rita said. She came over and hugged me tightly with her little arms.

“I will miss you too, sweetheart. Daddy will be back as soon as he finishes his work, alright?” I hugged her back, then stood up, picked up my bags, and kissed both my wife and daughter again. “I love both of you very much.”

I followed the group outside, keeping my pace slow so I could have some space to say a few words to Greta. She walked me to the door, and when I saw that everyone was outside, I whispered to her in Mapuche, “I promise, I will tell you what this is about when I am back. Remember, if there’s anything suspicious, call our crew in Chile, they will help us.” She seemed to understand. I kissed her one more time and went out to join the waiting group.

We left the house and got into the cars waiting for us in front of my house. I was to travel with the General. I got into the car with my duffle bag. I was told to put my luggage in the trunk.

Once we were on the road, he explained to me how we were getting to Langley. “We are going to the airport right now. It will be more convenient to travel by air so we can get there fast. We need to get started with this investigation ASAP. A lot of people are waiting for your arrival.”

I just looked at General Olson for a few minutes and tried to read the expression on his face. Since he had appeared at my door that morning, it seemed like he wanted to talk about something – something other than this investigation. He did not say anything, though, and just kept

glancing at me now and then. This went on for half an hour until I had had enough and decided to break the silence.

“Come on now, is there anything you need to tell me? Just spill it. I’m going to the CIA headquarters for a surprise visit after the menacing group made a grand entrance at my house! I thought today would be a normal, quiet day with my family, but since it seems that was too much to ask for, can I at least have some explanation? A few words, maybe? What is it? I have a feeling you aren’t telling me something.”

The General stared me down and said, “There’s a group of people who want to talk to you. I can't tell you who they are. That’s all I can say for now.”

I sat in the car and started to laugh silently at my situation. There I was, being taken to the airport, leaving my family behind for something I didn’t even know about. My life sure was an adventure, one that I did not ask for. The General was not going to give me any answers. I had asked him enough times, but he only gave me bits and pieces that were of no help.

I decided to try one more time in the hopes that I might just succeed in getting some information out of him. Maybe he would get fed up with my nagging and tell me something of value. I tried again to start a conversation with him. “Would you tell me *anything* about what I’m going to be doing? Like who am I meeting, where, or for what? Any other organizations involved in this investigation to be questioned besides The Circle? Anyone or anything that I can expect at Langley?” He continued to sit silently as we drove along. “Come on now, you gotta give me something. I am totally confused. Why me? I get it, I was a Staff Sergeant in the Army at one time, with Secret Security clearances, but I don’t understand how I can be of any help now. I don’t know what this will have to do with me. I deserve to know. Is there a possibility of me getting arrested

for getting involved in this investigation? Could it end up in a deposition?" I blurted it all out and looked at him, waiting for him to give me answers.

The General finally replied, "Look, it's not like I'm not sharing any more information with you because I have any personal grudges. I am bound by the orders given to me. I've been instructed to say nothing to you until the meeting starts."

As he tried to continue explaining, I cut him off, "Stop right now! This whole thing doesn't even make any sense to me. You're talking to me. I am Bryan Ludendorff! Don't bullshit me! You know I saved your career once, don't forget that."

Even though we had our differences before, I ordered the Freetown Police to arrest your bodyguard, Sergeant Major Greenspoon who was on embassy duty at that time, and I am sure he owed you some favors. The law enforcement of that country they were my friends who protected me. I know it was only twenty- seven years ago in Freetown during our previous altercation. You tried to strong arm me, but I had all the connections I needed at that time. The law enforcement in that city, as well as the military in Sierra Leone, and I still talk to them today; they are good friends of mine. If I am being brought in for questioning at the CIA, think about it; you know our little disagreement wouldn't have gone down that way outside that bar if you didn't try to threaten me. Does this have anything to do with being in Africa or Sierra Leone? I will tell you right now; if that's the case, you better understand it will not only be me who will go down. If I get caught for anything that had happened years ago, I will take down a few people with me, including you. Don't forget that," I warned. I was about to continue when General Olson interrupted me by saying,

"You are not in trouble, and no, it has nothing to do with what has happened in the past. Calm down. It is just that I believe there is some information you might have that can help bring down a terrorist group. And I shouldn't be even telling you that," that's all

General Olson said. The rest of the way to the CIA Headquarters, nobody said a word. We arrived at the airport where a private jet was waiting for us. The people who had accompanied General Olson took out my stuff from the trunk to carry it to the plane. The plane took off within fifteen minutes after our arrival. Since I had nothing to do, I decided to take a nap once the plane took off.

I was woken up by one of the two flight attendants when the plane was about to land. On arrival in Washington DC, a black limousine was waiting for us outside the airport to take us to our destination. We got into the limousine to take us to Langley. The ride to Langley was the same; no one spoke a word. I thought about talking to General Olson again, but I decided against it. I figured I would get no answers anyway. He would have told me some more details by now if he wanted to. It would be better to wait until we arrived at the CIA. The only thing that I could think of was that it all had to be about the diamonds or missing money from Africa. Ms. Xander was in constant contact with my wife, she is extremely friendly towards Greta, but their conversations sometimes confuse me.

Captain Allen had joined us on the way to Langley, and we continued our journey to the CIA. It was quiet, but Captain Allen's presence irked me. There was something about this guy that I didn't trust. I couldn't put my finger on it. And I had a feeling that he didn't like me either.

\* \* \* \* \*

That's where I stopped reading the notes from Ludendorff's recording. There was more from Ludendorff's recording, but I believed that the audience needed to listen to the one we had collected from Lana O'Grady so they could better understand what was going on. So, stopping it halfway, I started reading the notes that were transcribed from Lana's recording.

\* \* \* \* \*

I **was** at the NSA Headquarters early in the morning. It was my routine to look at the assignment board before I began working. So, as usual, I looked at the board, looked for my name, and work assignments at the start of the workday. I found my name with the date written above it. It was May 15, 2019, with a note on the board written for me. The note said,

*'Mrs. Lana O'Grady,*

*It is Urgent! You have just been called in at the last minute to interrogate someone that may have some information about The Circle.'*

So, that was my assignment for that today. I picked up my purse, my work cellphone, and the laptop to take with me. *This will be a long day*, I thought to myself. I read the instruction written just below the note that told me where I was supposed to go and what I was supposed to do. I walked downstairs and out of my office. There were two sergeants and their assistant waiting for me just outside the building along with a driver for me to take me to Langley. The Sergeant said to me, 'Hello, Ms. Lana. We are here to drive you to your destination. We may leave now if you are ready. Also, please let us know if you need anything.'

"Hello. No, thank you. I would just like you to drive me to the headquarters ASAP," I said. He nodded in acknowledgment and opened the door for me to get in. One of the sergeants sat in the front seat with the driver while the other one was in the car behind us. As we drove towards the headquarters, I took out my notes to review before the meeting. I also needed to see the file that had information about the person I was going to investigate.

"Sergeant, Can I see the file? I just want to go over the information we have on the person I am going to question today", I said as I was writing some points in my folder. The sergeant nodded and handed me the file. I took it from him, and my eyes fell on the name that had been written on it in bold, red letters; Bryan Ludendorff's name in red letters. For a moment, I just said

there, frozen with the file in my hand. My mouth was dropped open in surprise. I hadn't seen him in years, and there I was, on my way to question him about a very important case of my career. *My God, it is him*, I whispered to myself as tears started to form in my eyes. Luckily, I was wearing shades, and no one saw me on the verge of crying. However, my shaking hands gave off my pathetic efforts of maintaining my composure.

The sergeant might have sensed it as he turned around to ask, "Are you alright, Ma'am?" I was quick to reply, "Yes, Sergeant, I am. Can you stop at the Starbucks at the drive-through? I need a large cup of coffee," I asked, trying to change the subject. The driver nodded and stopped by to get my cup of coffee. As he went out to bring my coffee, I began to read about the coincidences of Bryan Ludendorff, Suture Washington-The Stiletto, John Riccardo-The Brain, Mohamad Omar Aziz, Zayed Dubuc, Steve McDowell, and Adam Heart – who tried to make a name for himself and wanted to be known as The Ghost.

*This is a small world*, I thought to myself. *I knew most of these people. I would not be surprised to see my name popping up later if this investigation continues. I couldn't understand how my name could be missed if they were talking about Sierra Leone and the Arabian Express, now known as The Circle. I need to watch my back. I have read some top-secret files about the members of The Circle before, but why would the CIA suddenly have an interest in Bryan Ludendorff?*

I shook off the thought and focused on what was written in the file. I turned the page and began reading about one of the Interrogators at the CIA who was assigned for Bryan's investigation. His name was Brigadier General William Elson; another name that caught my eye, and my heart stopped.

“Sergeant, can you park this car here in the parking lot for about fifteen minutes while I read this case and finish my coffee? Fifteen minutes is all I need to collect my thoughts and go over this case. I need to relax before the meeting,” I asked. The sergeant nodded and parked the car in the parking lot of the Starbucks. The driver came and handed me my coffee. I thanked him that he acknowledged with a nod, and went back to his driving seat.

I took a sip of my coffee and thought to myself as I read the files, *this is going to be a long week*. I continued to read and noticed that I would be one of the interrogators for Bryan. He was to be questioned about The Coup that took place on April 29, 1992, in Sierra Leone. I knew how Bryan would feel about I; he would be angry to know that people would think that he is associated with The Stiletto’s Group as well as with Adam and Steve when he was a corrections officer. If this case reopens, this investigation can incriminate me as well. I was getting anxious by all the information. I needed some space to process it.

‘I need to use the restroom. Can you wait here a few minutes?’ I asked the sergeant, and he nodded in response. I hurriedly went inside and walked into the restroom. I needed to call Dr. Zana on my private cellphone, and I could not do that in the presence of that driver and sergeant. I dialed her number, and as soon as she picked up the phone, I filled her in all about what I had just comprehended from those files,

‘I have to interrogate Bryan Ludendorff at the CIA Headquarters today. This is an unusual circumstance, but after all these years, I still harbor feelings for him. There’s a lot of stuff regarding this case that can potentially incriminate Bryan and me. I need to give you the heads-up about Bryan Ludendorff: he is about to be interrogated, and I need you to warn him and his wife. Can you help in any way or pass the message to him?’ I said it all in one go. I didn’t have much time.

If I took too long, I knew that the sergeant would come looking for me. I didn't want them to get suspicious. Dr. Zana replied to me,

‘Yes, of course, I will, Lana! Remember your friend Nikita? She’s here and will get Greta in Florida and bring her back to Chile. Bryan’s family has a house here in Chile, and we get together with his family when they are here. If you like, you can come here to be with us. We stay at the house sometimes, and Bryan also comes here a few times a year to spend some time away. That’s where he met Greta. He plans to move here permanently after selling his house and taking care of a few finances.

And I can understand where you are coming from, Lana. Thank you for informing me, I will let Greta know and try to get Nikita to bring her to Chile. I love him too. Since we all were in Sierra Leone together a bond was developed that can't be described. Like the feeling you have with Nikita. I was rescued from that White Slavery organization from my supposed to be husband Adze d; while he was in the Peace Corps, Bryan and his police officer friends from that country saved many people's lives, including mine. I was dating Bryan Ludendorff in Sierra Leone while he was trying to keep you and Nikita safe. Remember he got both of you out of the country. You along with your good friend Nikita were able to get out of that country instead of being held hostage by the Arabian Express. Besides Bryan's wife Greta: she is great friends with Nikita as we feel a sense of a bond towards eachother. To let you know, Greta and I are related; she is my niece. Nikita and Malina are here in Chile with me, and when you come here, you can stay with us. We don't keep secrets from eachother. Nikita, Greta, and Bryan are planning something with Ms. Xander, soon you will know more about it. We all had a long history together. Bryan and his wife can be with us. We will be with him; you will be family. He came a long way from living in the Philippines as a guerrilla, from a hustler, from a bouncer, a con-artist, and out of the army

living in Orlando, Florida. I know you two have a history together. If you decide to be with Bryan, it's alright. His wife knows about us. When you see her, don't be shocked. I will hang up now. You need to go before anyone gets suspicious of this phone call. We will inform Greta after this phone call. Make sure no one sees you talking on the phone. We will talk soon, goodbye."

After the conversation, I grabbed my phone in tightly and left the restroom. As soon as I stepped out, I noticed the Sergeant inside the coffee shop with two coffees in his hands. I hid my personal cellphone in my pocket and waited for him to leave. He went outside and got in the car. Once he was out, I followed and got into the car. Luckily, the sergeant didn't see me on the phone.

"Shall we leave, Ms. Lana?" The driver asked. Yes, you can proceed to the destination. I will continue to read this file and finish this cup of coffee on the way," I said as I began reading the file. The driver nodded and started driving towards the CIA headquarters.

My mind, once again, went back to the time I had spent with Bryan years ago. It had been so long since I last saw him. I was wondering what Bryan has been up to all these years. I opened another file and flipped through the pages, and stopped at the page that had a small note on it. It read: *Information on Bryan Ludendorff.*

Turning the page, I found some more information on him. He was in The Battle of Operation Long Streak, and then he participated in the initial stages of The Battle of Fallujah. There was also one house raid Sergeant Ludendorff participated in. It was with the Third Infantry Division in 2003 that provided them with some useful intelligence on The Arabian Express. This bag of documents found information leading to arrests of many members of people working for the Arabian Express later known as The Circle. One source of information inside that bag was in the back of Jeb Smith's diary that said,

*'Bryan visited Mauritania in 2002 to look for employment according to Jeb Smith's Diary. Bryan wanted to meet with some members of The Arabian Express.'* That's why the CIA took a special interest in Mr. Ludendorff. Also the missing diamonds along with the money was taken from the Arabian Express, while Bryan Ludendorff was in the Peace Corps.

I know Mohamad, The Brain, and Dubuc wanted Bryan dead.' When he lived in the United States Mr. Ludendorff was a Corrections Officer with The State of Virginia, an undercover police officer, other Law Enforcement agencies as well as The Army. Bryan's real name is Billy Youngblood Cornick, aka Little Wolf. His mother died, and his real dad bought him a bus ticket From Tuba City, Arizona, to New York City when he was five and put him up for adoption. His adopted father was a missionary who worked in the Philippines and was killed in 1971 at The Malili Massacre. There are many rumors about Bryan Ludendorff participating in a raid at a police station with Morro Gorillas, killing ten Philippine militaries along with twenty police, but no proof was found against him.

There were some additional files on Bryan that were marked as pending. There was this one titled as *'Top Secret Y-2Y, a need-to-know basis.* This file only mentioned that Billy Youngblood Cornick, that he legally changed his name to Ludendorff, to hide from his past in 1984 in Madison, Wisconsin. Somehow his records were destroyed to try to cut ties with his past since he was wanted in the Philippines. After he got his name changed, a lot of the files carrying information on him were destroyed in a fire. He was considered a security risk until he went into the Peace Corps and in law enforcement as a corrections officer working for the state of Virginia. Since his arrival from the Philippines, he never caused any trouble that was ever known, participated in illegal activities and proved himself as an outstanding citizen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Putting down the file that had notes on Lana's recording, I grabbed Bryan's file and continued from where I had left before reading the notes from Lana's file.

\*\*\*\*\*

We reached the headquarters in about one hour after they picked up Captain Allen. It was early afternoon on Wednesday, May 15, 2019, a warm sunny day in Virginia. I walked inside the CIA Headquarters with my escorts. I looked around but did not say anything. I had made peace with the fact that nobody here would disclose any information until I was taken to the interrogation room. Till then, it was just me and my wandering thoughts. I hoped to see someone I knew from the Army during my time as a Combat Camera and Video Productions Sergeant because many of my colleagues ended up working here in Langley. They were all transferred here, and if I were still a 25V, I could have been stationed here.

*I sent a lot of my work here when I was in the Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). I was far from the Joint Combat Camera Center (JCCC) office, where I used to work at the CIA's entrance. Maybe now I can ask the question: why was I here?* I thought to myself.

"Can someone please tell me what this is about now? You dragged me out of my home, away from my family and I haven't even had a chance to check into a hotel yet," I said to the group escorting me. No one said anything for a while.

*Well, I guess I'm not getting any answers today,* I thought. Then I heard someone yelling, "Attention!"

Everyone stood at attention immediately. Then I heard, "Hello." I turned around to see who it was and found a man dressed in a uniform. "I am Brigadier General William Elson. I understand this whole thing had been confusing for you, but we had to stick to the protocol. However, since you're here now, I believe it's safe to tell you what this is about," he finished with a nod.

I looked at General Elson and said, “I certainly hope so. I’ve been wondering about it all day, ever since the unexpected guests you sent showed up at my doorstep .”

He pursed his lips, and after a moment of silence, he responded, “Well, we’re sorry about that. I do understand your concern. I would also have been worried if I were in your shoes. I’m sure today has been quite a rollercoaster for you. Let me see,” the General held up his finger before I could say anything. “From what I’ve been told, I understand that you were in the Army as an NCO once, but are now a civilian?” he asked, looking at me with curiosity.

“Yes, that’s true,” I answered.

General Elson continued, “Well, Mr Ludendorff, even though you were in the military and may be working with us, your military bearing is out the door, to remind you that you’re a civilian now; especially for this meeting. Just a friendly reminder, you are expected to keep whatever is discussed in this room to yourself when you walk out these doors. Do you understand? You are not allowed to share a word, not even with your family.”

I contemplated for a moment and then slowly nodded in acknowledgement. “I understand.”

“Alright then. I appreciate your cooperation, Ludendorff,” General Elson said, extending his hand, which I shook. “Before we proceed, do you need to use the bathroom or need anything to drink?”

I nodded. My throat felt parched, thanks to all the anticipation and anxiety. “I may need a few minutes to drink some water and use the restroom,” I told him.

“Alright. Captian Ellis will join you shortly to escort you,” he nodded and with that, General Elson walked towards the group that had escorted me to the headquarters. Shortly after he left, a Captain spotted me walking around the ground floor of the building and approached me, introducing himself, “Hello. Mr Bryan Ludendorff, I presume?” I nodded in response, and he

continued, “I am Captain Ellis, and this here is Captain Allen. I know you two have met before. I will be your escort here during your stay, and Captain Allen will make sure you have all the documents pertaining to this investigation that you are required to read. I know you have been waiting for far too long, but it had to be kept a secret until you got here. You’ll need the documents to get an idea of what we will discuss in the meeting tonight. I would suggest you freshen up and eat something before reading them.”

I thanked them, and they left me with my own thoughts. *Here goes nothing*, I thought. I sighed and made my way to the restroom. About twenty minutes later, everyone was in the lobby and ready to go into the meeting. “Alright, let’s get this over with,” I sighed and followed the group to the meeting room.

\*\*\*

A huge mahogany table was placed in the middle of the room with several seats around it. **Brigadier General William Elson** was sitting on one of the chairs, thinking about Bryan Ludendorff, who he had just met a few minutes ago. *I wonder what this guy knows about the diamonds. It has been twenty-seven years, but I’m sure he knows something about them. It would be really helpful for the case to know where they are. What are the chances they are in Ludendorff’s possession?* His mind, at the moment, was full of all the possibilities this meeting could lead to. Picking up a glass paperweight, he contemplated his next moves.

*I just need to bide my time and watch how this investigation unfolds. Maybe he’ll be given enough rope to hang himself and end up serving time. I’d rather he face the music than me in this situation. I am confused, though. The order to come here urgently has made me nervous. I could have landed in a bigger mess. My smuggling operations could have been discovered had I not been cautious at every step. Whether this guy is extremely bright or stupid, I need to stay on my toes. I*

*can't risk getting caught, he thought as he spun the glass orb on the sleek surface of the table. I heard some stories about Bryan Ludendorff. When he was in Freetown, he was well-connected with the Sierra Leonean government. I don't really care what happened there. For me, the real question is, where did those diamonds go after everyone left Sierra Leone? General Olson and I were friends once, but now, we keep our distance as much as possible.*

*I also heard some things about Mrs O'Grady. She could get incriminated along with me. For now, I only know one thing for sure: they both need to stay away from me. The biggest surprise for me in this case is the presence of Lana O'Grady. She's here to interrogate Bryan. I hope I won't get caught up in it. When I read about this Mr Ludendorff, I couldn't figure the guy out. When I saw Bryan in Freetown, the African people warned me about him. I need to be on my guard. He put the paperweight on the file and steadied himself for the meeting. It was about to begin.*

\*\*\*

I entered the room and saw Christopher Speer, who was in charge of MI-5, in the room already. He looked up when he saw me come in. He was the kind of guy who exuded power and authority, but I wasn't intimidated by his leadership. Captain Allen, who accompanied me, went back to get everyone and announce that I'd arrived and that the meeting had started. I noticed General Olson, who had accompanied me on my trip to CIA headquarters, sitting at the head of the table.

Major General Peter Olson greeted me. "Please have a seat, Mr Ludendorff," he said, and then addressed the rest of the people present. "Everyone, let's introduce ourselves to Bryan Ludendorff."

The first man to introduce himself to me was Colonel Jim Richardson, who, I was told, was leading the investigation of this case. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr Ludendorff,” he said. “I hope this goes well for you.”

I smiled at him politely and replied, “I hope so, thank you. It’s nice to meet you too.”

The man sitting right across from Colonel Richardson spoke next. “I am Christopher Speer from MI-5. I am assigned to oversee special cases, including those posing a potential threat to national security, to both the USA and Great Britain. Nice to meet you, Mr Ludendorff.”

“Likewise,” I responded as I returned his glance. Then my gaze fell on a person, sitting to the right of General Olson, who shared a remarkable resemblance with someone from my past. She was the last to speak, and when she did, her voice brought back some memories, good and bad.

“I see you already have met and Major General Peter Olson,” she said. “I am Lana O’Grady, the highest-ranking civilian at the NSA at this time. I was called here at the last minute to conduct this investigation. Just to let you know, the problem at hand is considered a threat to national security.”

She looked at me, and from her expressions, she seemed just as surprised as I was, but I had a feeling that she knew about me being here. Both of us were looking at each other in astonishment, not having seen each other even once in the last twenty-seven years.

I smiled at her and then spoke. “Yes, I have been informed about that already. And we had met earlier, when you were still Lana Mason. It’s nice to see you again. It’s been a long time since we last saw each other. Twenty-seven years, I believe?” I asked, and she gave a slight nod. I directed my attention to the group present in the room and said, “Shall we begin?”

Brigadier General William Elson leaned forward with his elbows on the table. “Before we begin, I would like to cater to any queries you have, Mr Ludendorff. This investigation came as a surprise to you. I’m sure you have a list of questions.”

I sighed and responded, “Yes, you are right. I have many, but let’s start with the basics: I would like to know why I am here. Do not beat around the bush because I’ve had enough of that. Get straight to the point. What do these national security concerns have to do with me? Why am I so important to this investigation that you had to fly me here in an emergency to be interrogated?” I just wanted to get this over with. I had been with these people for hours and I hadn’t even been told why exactly I needed to be there in the first place.

Just as General Olson was about to answer, another man entered the room. “Sorry I’m late,” he apologized. “I was talking to the boss.” He turned to me. “I’m Peter Emerson, in charge of intelligence and counterintelligence, second in command under Jan Xander here at the CIA. Everyone has already been introduced, I assume?” General Elson nodded.

Peter spoke to me. “Mr Ludendorff, I have heard a lot about you, but I have a few questions that I would like to ask you personally. You were in the Peace Corps, right?” I couldn’t understand why they kept asking me these questions. They didn’t seem important or relevant to any kind of national security threat or whatever these guys were on about.

“Yes!” I replied, exasperated. “That’s no big secret, is it? Is that why I am here? If so, I have better things to do with my time. Don’t tell me the CIA came to my house to bring me here, only to keep asking me this question? Why not just call me and get it over with? Why did you bother flying me all the way out here to headquarters to ask that silly question? If it was that important, I could have just sent you my CV. I think that would have sufficed, no?” I was fuming.

Christopher Speer didn't seem to like my tone and immediately cut in, "Enough with the sarcasm! We have important things to worry about, and yes, we have more questions to ask you, so bear with it. We told you before; this matter is of utmost importance, and we believe you can help us in our investigation. However, we need to be careful about how much information we can share with you considering it might threaten your life too." I grimaced at his outburst, but I wanted to hear what he had to say.

"There are four people on our wanted list, and we believe you might have come across them in Sierra Leone. There are two others that you may have met when you were a corrections officer with the state of Virginia. From the information we have on them so far, we believe they are now most likely a part of a terrorist group and are extremely dangerous people," Speer explained, turning on a projector that threw a slide up on the wall in front of the table with a picture of a man on it.

"The first one is Suture Washington, known as The Stiletto. He oversaw the Underground, a.k.a., the Arabian Express, a syndicate operation back then. Now the Arabian Express, or what was left of it, has turned into a rogue terrorist organization called The Circle. This is now an official terrorist group getting its funds from Iran and other Islamic fundamentalist countries that hate America.

"Their goal is to destroy the United States by giving rise to a civil war within our country. It is rumored that there are sleeping cells in America's political groups, and we can't confirm that the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, has sleeping cells in those two Parties, if so, our country would be in calamity by now. The alt-right groups, and alt-left groups, are believed to have some sleeper cells inside those organizations that caused the 2020 Riots in the big American cities. It's only stories and rumors about the major political parties have sleeping cells inside them.

Our intelligence can confirm that a few alt-right groups, and some alt-left groups are causing riots, and making small sabotage attacks against our government, including destroying businesses. They are given the task of sowing the seeds of race wars in our country. Our intelligence has not confirmed the existence of a terror training camp in America. However, we do have enough information to put these groups on our radar,” Speer continued. The name Suture Washington certainly rang a bell, but I stayed quiet and listened to what Speer had to share.

“Now getting back to The Stiletto: I will go through his profile so you can have an idea of who we are dealing with,” Speer said, and I nodded in acknowledgment. Changing the slide, he began reading out the details, “The Stiletto grew up in London, England and was born on October 13, 1959. Right after finishing high school in 1980, he joined the Special Air Service Regiment, the SAS. He did five years with the SAS and had a perfect record. In the Falkland Islands War with Argentina, he did combat time and was highly decorated for his achievements.

“After that, he went back to school to complete his studies and enrolled in a college. He graduated from Cornell with a degree in Chemistry in 1988. For a while, he worked with The British Embassy in Algeria. After completing his service with the Algerian Embassy in 1990, he suddenly disappeared. Even though we don’t have much information about his exact whereabouts, we believe that he is living in Mauritania now,” Speer finished. He flipped to the next slide with a different man and his name written in bold: Mohammad Omar Aziz.

“The second person of interest is Mohammad Omar Aziz. He was born in Monrovia, Liberia, but his family is basically from South Africa,” Speer began. “Growing up, he mostly lived in Swaziland. He continued to travel around these two countries, bringing illicit goods out of South Africa to Namibia. His track record shows that he has been involved in criminal activities for quite a long time, even before joining the Arabian Express. As for his education, we don’t have much

information on that, but we believe he has a master's degree, but no record of his education existed in Chemistry, he may have used a different name to receive that degree. People who were arrested within the last twenty years, and who knew of Mohamad at that time; he bragged to them and to many of his comrades that he received his master's degree in that field. Mohammad is very close to The Stiletto. We consider him his right hand," he finished. The organization didn't seem to have too much information on this guy, Omar Aziz, but he did seem important. Speer moved on to the next person.

"The third person is Zayed Dubuc, born in January 1965 and from Nairobi, Kenya. His current whereabouts, including the exact dates of his movements, are unknown. Some of his close relatives, specifically his uncles whom he sometimes visits, live in Freetown. Mr. Dubuc is close to The Stiletto and is believed to be good friends with Mohammad Omar Aziz as well. That's why we suspect his involvement with The Circle.

"The fourth person is Steve McDowell. He was born on July 14, 1970; in Richmond, Virginia, but graduated high school from Alexandria VA. His parents moved there as his dad worked with the Middle Eastern Imports Carpet Company, which made his family move from Richmond, Virginia, to Alexandria back in 1986, Virginia, back in 1988. Due to his father's new job opportunity by working with the Middle Eastern Imports Carpet Company, that's why his family had to move to Alexandria VA, Mr. McDowell worked at that company part time with his dad, while going to high school, he learned Arabic quickly according to testimonies of former employees there. He then enlisted in the US Army as a 97E, Military Intelligence specializing in Arabic going to Language school as an Intelligence Specialist, at Morro Bay California, and later with the Green Berets. After two years working in his military occupational specialty, or MOS, he

decided to become a Green Beret until his enlistment ran out. He then decided to go to law school on the GI Bill.

“During his time in law school, he was found guilty of assault, for which he served five years at Greensville Correctional Center,” he stopped and turned to me. “You might have come across him in the Virginia Prison System, Ludendorff. Our intelligence has recently picked up some information from a guy working for The Circle. McDowell was in the Virginia Prison System as a convict for assaulting someone with a whiskey bottle. He left the guy with some serious wounds,” Speer finished. “Those were the top four wanted people on our list. Now, I will show you the next two I was talking about, the ones you might have met in Virginia.

“The fifth person of interest is from the prison you worked at. His name is Adam Heart, a.k.a. The Ghost that name was given to him at Keen Mountain, and a little bit at the prison that you worked at. The Circle would hardly call him by that name. He was born on June 30, 1972, and grew up in Alexandria, Virginia. He graduated high school in 1990 and went straight to college on some scholarship program, at William and Mary. He received two undergraduate degrees in Political Science and Computer Science in 1993, with a minor in French. He took extra classes in French to pick up that language which according to some of his professors he had the ability to pick up that language quickly. With his computer science degree and excessive knowledge of that subject; he is probably the best hacker who has worked for several terrorist organizations according to our intelligence.

“During college, he made money through a computer scamming network. He served two years in prison at Keen Mountain for a cybercrime that was committed. In addition to that, he received added time for assaulting a corrections officer in prison. After that, Adam Heart was transferred to Greensville Correction Center. In prison no one called him by his real name, he was

just known as the Ghost inside Keen Mountain, because he would disappear and avoid any prosecutions of additional crimes inside that prison. Maybe you could have heard that name at the last prison you worked at?" I shook my head nodding back and forth saying no.

"The last person is John Riccardo, or The Brain. He was born on December 29, 1961. He grew up in Los Angeles, California. After graduating from high school in 1978, he enlisted in the Army for five years as an 11B, infantry. He underwent demolitions training and was then re-enlisted into Military Intelligence as a 35F, Army Intelligence Analyst, where he studied Arabic, French, and Spanish. He took college courses where he was stationed.

"It wasn't till 1988 that he got involved in criminal activities. His first criminal record mentions him attacking an NCO in Japan, which resulted in a dishonorable discharge from the military. In 1999, law enforcement ran DNA and fingerprint evidence taken from a crime scene and found a match in the military database against John Riccardo. The evidence was found at the scene where two police officers were murdered in Carlisle, England.

"John Riccardo is wanted for the killings of the undercover policemen, Officer Jonathan Owens and Herald Homes. Neither policeman had anything to do with the Arabian Express as we initially suspected they might. Another crime Riccardo is thought to have been involved in is the Scotland Yard bombing. We'll share some files with you later tonight that have information on the crimes Riccardo is accused of. Riccardo's fingerprints and DNA were found at the site of the bombing.

The Arabian Express had the most to gain from the death of Officer Owens and Riccardo had been initiated into the Underground by then. Officer Owens kept getting the right people inside the organization to make serious arrests of members. Many undercover operatives were

encouraged by him. The Brain is renowned in the criminal circle for being a hired terrorist, and he is extremely dangerous.”

With that, Speer clicked off the projector. I had a few questions, so once he was done, I spoke. “By Underground, you mean the Arabian Express, right? That term, the Underground, was hardly ever used before, and if anyone calls the Arabian Express or the T.A.E. that, you will assume they’re law enforcement. Or are you trying to refer to today’s operation called The Circle?”

Back then, as far as I know, people referred to the syndicate operation as the Arabian Express and not the Underground. Only a few locals called it that who didn’t know anything about the operation. Whoever is in charge of intelligence and counterintelligence here at the CIA needs to know the group’s actual name because people’s lives depend on that. Don’t call anything the Underground in Africa unless you have a death wish; I’ve heard of people disappearing overusing that word.”

Emerson didn’t seem to get my point and my words triggered him. He looked frustrated and a bit angry. “Stop! Can you please refrain from being sarcastic? It’s not like we’re disrespecting you. We brought you here because we want your insights into this complex issue.”

I turned to him and said, “Sorry, but that wasn’t my intention. I was only trying to save lives by telling you what I know about this group. The things I have said were only for future reference.” Emerson didn’t seem too pleased but calmed down a bit. There seemed to be a lot of confusion around this case, so it was understandable that everyone seemed to be on edge.

“Now, for Suture Washington and John Riccardo, I think you should ask Mrs. Lana O’Grady, General Elson, and General Olson here, the very same questions you asked me. I remember seeing Major General Peter Olson and even Brigadier General Elson talking to those two during the time I was in the Peace Corps in Freetown.”

As soon as I finished, General Elson stood up, shouting angrily, “Stop right now! *We* are asking the questions here,” he punctuated his words by pointing his finger in my face, “not the other way around!” But I wasn’t having any of it. Why should I be the only one to be questioned when they had also had the same encounters with the people they were looking for?

I chuckled and turned to the group. “Well, well. General Elson, what has gotten into you? It almost looks like you’re hiding something. I think I should tell them myself then, right? You were in Freetown at that time. From what I remember, you seemed pretty close to the people associated with the Arabian Express,” I said. I could see General Emerson clenching his fists in anger. I ignored him and kept talking to the group.

“I saw him with some of his embassy workers, talking to The Stiletto and The Brain. Now, has it ever crossed your minds to have these people interrogated?” I asked, gesturing to where Olson, Elson, and Lana sat, none of whom seemed too pleased to hear me turning the tables and talking about them. “I do not think I’m the bad guy you’re looking for here. I have a feeling that I am being set up so you guys lose track of the actual culprits. I have seen General Elson talk to the people you have mentioned and a lot more Africans regarding the trade of illicit goods at The Sun and Sand Beach Resort. I knew that something fishy was going on and made it a point to stay away from him. As far as I can remember, he was in charge of overseeing the transportation at The Embassy, giving him an easy gateway to get things done and cover up the corruption in that country. I think you all have got it wrong; you should start your interrogation with them, not me.”

As soon as I said that, General Elson snapped. He stood up and looked ready to throw a punch, but before he could, someone ordered him to sit down and let me continue.

General Elson’s reaction was expected so it didn’t bother me much. I turned to the room and continued to speak, “So, what was I saying? Oh, yes; it is true that there was a coup, and we

were together at that time. However, I don't know what associations everyone else had with The Circle. The coup happened on April 29, 1992, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Whatever I say here is based on what I witnessed during my time there, and I can say for sure that some people present in this room seemed to be good friends with The Stiletto, or even associated with The Circle.

“Mrs. O’Grady, or Miss Mason then, I suppose, wanted me to get her, along with Nikita, out of that country since they were friends and had ties with the Arabian Express! Remember what I said earlier, Nikita and Lana: they were great friends in Sierra Leone back then. They both feared for their lives and sought my protection. If you were to ask Miss Mason at that time, I am sure she would have told you the same thing I’m telling you right now. It seemed she didn’t want to be with those people but didn’t have a choice, and if I were in her shoes, I don’t think I would have done anything differently. Her life was at stake, so she did what she thought was best and could save her. She even pleaded for me to take her to the U.S. Embassy but was afraid of something there, too many people were close to The Stiletto and the Brain. Remember that the embassy had a lot of shady people possibly working for The Circle. My guess is that someone would have turned her back to The Stiletto’s group in Freetown. Both were afraid to be seen around there because many embassy people were close to the Arabian Express: they even spent time with The Stiletto’s group.

“Even so, I helped her out the day of the coup. I took her to John Polk, the Ambassador to Sierra Leone. He was the only one I could trust to get her out of the country safely. She was desperate. She told me that she didn’t want to live her life like a whore anymore,” that’s all I had to tell them at that moment. Moving towards the two of the six people they had shown me, I said,

“These pictures are Adam Heart, AKA, The Ghost, and Steve McDowell, The Stealth, who was also serving his sentence at Greenville Correctional Center. I didn’t really know them and just came across them when I was working as a Corrections Officer at Greenville Correctional

Center. In fact, I just recognized them after seeing these pictures. There were many prisoners I used to see on a regular basis, so whatever I knew about these two was nothing more than what I knew as a professional working there. Yes, I did talk to them and knew some random stuff about them, especially Steven McDowell. Don't get me wrong; I don't usually get along with prisoners, but surprisingly, that wasn't the case with McDowell. I remember him being extremely intelligent. I got along with that guy very well, but our conversations were mostly just small talk and philosophical debates. I had grown fond of that guy. Had he been not incarcerated; we might even have become friends.

I remembered we both had an interest in law enforcement, and from what I could understand from our conversations, his felony was merely a one-time mistake. His goal was to become a US Marshal or something like that. That's all I know about him; I have no knowledge of his personal matters and what he did. Give me some time to think it over. It has been a long time since I last saw him; maybe I can think of something more that can help you guys with this case." It was true; it had been years since I last saw them, and even then, I didn't know much about these two. After leaving the Peace Corps, I continued with my life and never thought about the time I had worked at Greensville Correctional Center, not until now. *What did it have to do with the Arabian Express or The Circle? And most importantly, what did it have to do with ME?* I thought. Guess we are back to square one now. By the time I was done explaining to them how I knew those people, my patience had begun to wear thin, and I believed it was time that I got my answer to why I was brought to the headquarters. Sure, I knew those people but not enough to help them with whatever case they were working on. Or maybe, I could. But I still didn't like how they had just flown me to this place.

“So, the information you have provided me so far was interesting. I can see why you would ask me to come here and ask those questions. I would have no problem coming here with you all, but just showing up on my door without any notification and rudely banging on my door was what irked me the most.

Well, I will look past that now. I think you would appreciate whatever info I can provide you on The Stiletto. I knew that guy, and sometimes we had some beers together. We were not really close friends or friends at all. He was, however, close to Mohamad Aziz and Zayed when they were around Freetown. Something about those two didn't sit well with me, and I made it a point to stay away from them. So, I can't really tell you guys much about them. Sorry, I can't help you there.

There is one thing, though. I am not sure if it would help in any way, but I once had a fight with Aziz and smashed his face with a brick. His ear is cropped because of that. Those two loved acting like a bunch of tough guys' every time I saw them, and that was a turn-off to me. I had to give them a taste of their own medicine.

The Brain, I had only heard of him mostly before the coup, but never met him until I went to The Mamie Yoko at Freetown Africa. For Steve McDowell: he was a prisoner long after I completed my Peace Corps Service in Africa, and I started to work in law enforcement; graduating the police academy to start working at the Maximum-Security Prison,” then I turned to Lana, who had been listening to me keenly. I knew that she was aware of what I was talking about and decided to involve her. I knew that she didn't like it one bit that I was dragging her into the conversation.

“Come on, Mrs. O'Grady, you have seen those guys we are talking about. I am not the only one here who knows of The Stiletto. In fact, the others, including General Elson, General Olson, and other employees at the embassy, can help with this case better than I can. I am sure

people here know more about those guys than I do. I mean no disrespect to anyone, but have any of them told you the things I have just told you?" I turned to Christopher Speers, and it seemed that he looked a bit confused at the revelation but quickly covered it up with a calm look. I continued, and what I was about to tell them was surely going to turn the tables.

"Mrs. O'Grady was the girlfriend of The Stiletto and The Brain as well. Did you know that?" Christopher Speer looked at me with a raised and said,

"Well then, let's hear your side of the story." I let out a frustrated sigh. He was again making me the center of the conversation. Maybe I was wrong; he knew about it all already.

"My side of what story? There is a story now? I think you know everything already, just from Mrs. O'Grady's point of view. How about you ask her about Aziz's cropped right ear? Miss Mason witnessed that incident. At that time, Sierra Leone had become a hub for drug deals and their usage," I then paused to reconsider sharing information about the drug deals and usage that I had witnessed many people being involved in at that time. Admitting to drug use was questionable in the government agencies.

"Am I going to get in trouble for this? Especially considering everyone who was involved. How will this impact our government retirements or future employments; will I be penalized for this?" I asked Christopher, to which he answered,

"No, you won't get in trouble for this; we need to get as much information as we can to stop this terror organization. When I was telling Mrs. O'Grady about an old Peace Corps member who was coming here to be interviewed, she thought it could be you but wasn't sure. We asked Lana to come here at the last minute to be on this board."

Mrs. O'Grady, who had been quiet till now, turned to me, saying, "Yes, I remember that incident which was a time in my life I wasn't proud of. And Bryan, you are lucky to be alive, you

know that? When the last time we were together with those four individuals, with the Arabian Express in Africa; The Brain could have slit your throat after you hit Mohamad with that brick.” I leaned back in my chair and answered her question,

“Yes, I do.” I got up to get myself some water from the dispenser sitting at the corner of the room. Everyone patiently waited for me to continue my story or my version of it because it seemed that they already knew a lot about what had happened in Sierra Leone back then. I sat back in my chair, preparing to tell them everything, starting from the first day of the coup. I looked at Lana and then everyone present in the room. I could tell Lana was anxious, and other employees were especially interested in what I had to say. I knew as I spoke that there was a chance that Lana could be incriminated along with me after I was done telling them whatever I knew. But I was willing to take the chance. There were several lives at stake. I cleared my throat and began speaking,

“When did we four met, you asked, right? That was during the coup at Freetown. That coup was unexpected, and so was our meeting.....” I relaxed in my chair as I further described the events that had happened during that coup.

*“What I fear most is power with impunity. I fear abuse of power and the power to abuse.*

*~Isabel Allende*

**Freetown Sierra Leone, West Africa. The day of the coup; April 29, 1992.**

It was early in the morning when the sound of gunfire woke everyone up, confused and bewildered. It didn’t take too long for people to figure out what was happening. A guy named Bret could be heard shouting in the corridor, “What the fuck was that?” The sounds of weapons being

loaded just outside the Peace Corps Rest House alerted. I got up without wasting another second. We went to bed late after a night of partying with Bret. I went out of the room, walking down the stairs that led to the living room of the guest house. We saw some people gathered there, with a look of panic on their faces.

I shouted, addressing them, “Quick, everyone! Go check up on everyone. Wake up everyone and inform them; we are under attack.” With that, my friend Bret went upstairs, where Peace Corps members were staying in different rooms. We checked the rooms and found that many had already woken up. I opened one door, only to find two members sprawled naked on the bed, with no covers around them. It seemed that I wasn’t the only one who was partying hard last night. Letting out a frustrated sigh, I knocked on the opened door loudly. The couple woke up with a startle, looking around to see who had disturbed their sleep, only to find me standing at the door with a grimace on my face.

“Come on, Romeo and Juliet, you need to get up and get dressed. There is a commotion out there. I believe it’s something bad! Quick, look around and see where everyone is and go upstairs for accountability,” with that, I left the room to find others.

“Bryan, you’re a prick!” the woman shouted after me as I left their door open after informing them about the situation. People were going outside to see what the commotion was about and then went back inside when they saw the Sierra Leone soldiers firing their weapons in the air.

Everyone, along with myself, sat on the rooftop of the Peace Corps rest house for about two hours. The whole time, they could hear the sounds of multiple gun fires and watch the soldiers drinking from looted stores they had broken into.

Doctor Fritz Gilliam, who most of us called Frank Burns, was a great guy as well as a great doctor. That nickname always stuck with him long before I came to the country. Doctor Frank Burns tried his best to keep track of everyone during the coup. However, he seemed totally incompetent for that. But with everyone constantly being distracted by paperwork and phone calls, he couldn't really be blamed.

I noticed that the soldiers participating in the coup were getting closer to the rest house. Even though that should not have been the case, believing that their curiosity of foreigners being in their country led them to the house Peace Corps members were staying at. The people inside the house couldn't do much, so they sat on the rooftop, watched Dr. Gilliam do his job, and the coup unfold. I needed to meet someone, but considering the situation, there was a very slim chance that he would be able to leave the Peace Corps Rest House. I kept observing the doctor trying to do his job and noticed that he was quite busy trying to organize all of his paperwork. An idea immediately popped into my mind; *if people were unaccounted for, I had a good chance to sneak out to meet him as planned.*

With that idea in my mind, I decided to sneak out and ask some of my friends to cover for me. The meeting was important, and that's what had made me take the risk. I told my friends not to worry and that I will be back soon. Hoping that no one would notice me missing, but just in case, I wanted my friends to cover for the absence if anyone asked.

"If anyone asks about me, just tell them I'm looking for some Peace Corps Volunteers," I instructed my mates and snuck out of the house. Since I could not go too far from the house, I decided to have that meeting nearby, but far enough from the Peace Corps rest house. I went outside and chose to leave the property using the house's backdoor. As I started to walk towards the place where the person, I intended to meet was waiting for me.

After a few minutes of walking, I reached a deserted bar in Freetown. I went inside and looked for the guy. The dim lights of the deserted bar did little to help my search, but he finally spotted a huge figure sitting at the bar with a mug of cold beer in front of him. I immediately recognized him, as Suture Washington, The Stiletto.

Suture saw me approaching him. Taking a sip of his beer, he greeted me, or more like complained, “Ludendorff, you’re fucking late.”

I rolled my eyes at him and replied, “You’re lucky I even came. No one knows that I am here except a few of my mates. I had to sneak out; The P.C. Rest House is in disarray. But thankfully, they haven’t decided to put the lockdown.”

“Alright, I get it. But I need you to do something for me,” Suture said as he lowered his voice, avoiding anyone overhearing their conversation.

“Okay. Suture, but don’t forget that I’m just a Pee-On Peace Corps Volunteer. Let’s just keep it that way and don’t expect too much from me,” I reminded him.

Suture nodded and told me what I needed to do, “I need you to go to The Sun and Sand Beach Resort and order a beer. All the foreigners always go there to drink, the bartender tries to sell drugs, diamonds, weapons, or other illicit goods. He’s involving himself in something right now, probably making fake passports to get people out of this country. You will find a dude there, with the Russian Accent, a real big guy. Someone told me that you knocked him out about two or three weeks ago when he was getting pushy with you one time. You will easily be able to recognize him,” I listened to him carefully, nodding as he filled me in with the details.

“I want you to take an empty glass and turn it upside down at the table and leave. That’s it. Can you manage to do that?” Suture asked as he ordered another beer for himself.

I thought about it for a minute as Suture patiently waited for my response, “Well, I guess? I guess I have seen that Russian around here. You don’t see them much in this area, so I believe you are talking about the same guy. He’s always been too pussy whipped by Nikita Lebedev,” I chuckled as I said that to The Stiletto.

“But what is this all about?” I continued, “Actually, save it; I do not want to know. I owed you this one, so I won’t ask you any questions,” I said.

Suture nodded and I changed the subject, “And by the way, we will be here for a long time, and seeing the situation of the city, I figured that the drugstores would be closed, because of that the recreational drug supply will be minimal. So, it won’t be easy to get some goodies for a while since businesses are closed.” Suture said as he handed me a bottle of Codeine Phosphate, “I understand drugs will be hard to get, especially now during a coup. Here, keep this I have a few more bottles for myself. There are fifty tablets in it, and that bottle hasn’t been opened yet.” I took the bottle from him and placed it in my pocket as I thanked him.

“Thanks for doing this for me. I appreciate your help,” Stiletto thanked me as he chugged down the last of his remaining beer from the mug and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“No need to thank me. As I said, I owed you this, and you are merely calling in the favor. It’s no big deal. You have taken me out several times to party, gotten me drunk, high, and even laid. So, I guess it makes us even, right? I said to Suture with a smile.

I didn’t have much time to spare, so I said my goodbye to Suture and left the bar. I wanted to get the task Suture had given me done as soon as I could. So, I headed straight towards the Resort Suture had told me about.

I walked for a while, down to the Sun and Sand Beach Resort. It took him several minutes to walk there. On the way, I saw many soldiers driving around, firing their weapons in the air, and

even at the houses that appeared to be empty. I finally reached the resort and went inside. The bar owner that I thought to be Lebanese was giving out free beer. Upon asking, he told me, "I am closing because it is going to be a crazy night tonight!"

Taking advantage of the situation, I quickly ordered a beer and chugged it down. I looked around, and the bar was comparatively emptier than any other regular day, and for obvious reasons. I saw four people sitting at different tables, drinking themselves to sleep, but one guy stood out among others the most. He was the same guy that I have seen around often; the big, Russian guy. And sat with him was his girlfriend, The Russian Porn Queen, Nikita Lebedev who was always around Lana.

Knowing what I needed to do, so I just went to their table and did as The Stiletto had asked me to do. Addressing the couple, I said, "Can I get you any beer from the bar? It is about to close soon." The glass was turned upside down on the table they had occupied, as The Stiletto had told me. The guy's reaction to my approach, on the other hand, wasn't what I even expected.

The guy stood up from his chair, his jaws clenched in anger, "Who the Fuck are you, punk?" he gritted out, making me step back a bit from the table. Shocked and startled, I said, "Come on, dude, I don't want any trouble. I was just trying to do something nice, honestly. I did nothing to you." I looked around in search of something that I could use to defend myself. I spotted a chair nearby and sighed in relief, knowing that I could have something to defend myself if things got messy here. The chair, I thought, wouldn't do much damage to the huge guy, but I hoped to use it to distract him for long enough to escape.

The only choices I had at that moment were to run or fight. But from the looks of it, that I figured that it wouldn't be too wise for me if I tried to take on this guy when he was ready to fight me. The guy, for one, was huge and heavily built. Also, he seemed like a guy who was prepared

for the unexpected. This wasn't the first time I had met that guy. He had an encounter with me a few weeks ago. But at that time, I had taken the guy by surprise. The fight had taken place in a dark alley, but this man was too drunk to remember who he had the fight with.

I had been in a few street fights before in my life; I had taken quite a few blows myself too. What I knew is that this street fight would never end well, even if he won against me. One could never leave such fights without a few bruises and a swollen face. I also worked as a bouncer at a few local bars in the Philippines and at the United States to survive. If I had learned something about those previous fights, it was that the best way to win; one was to take the opponent by total surprise.

But at the moment, the situation wasn't exactly in my favor. I could tell the guy was trouble. There was no way I could take him down without a weapon or by without the element of surprise. And unfortunately, I didn't have the latter.

I looked around the resort and found that almost everyone had cleared the Sun and Sand Beach Resort. And the chairs that I was planning to use as a weapon weren't an option anymore because I noticed that they were sealed to the cement floor. I was left with no other option but to try to talk my way out of the trouble I had landed himself into.

"Hey, come on, as I said, I don't want any problems, trust me," I said as I continued to slowly walk backward and looked around to find any object that I could use for my defense. *If I can't find anything, I would only have the option of running away from the scene;* I was worried. As if on cue, my eyes fell on one of the tables. *Finally!* I thought. There it was an empty beer bottle.

And the idea popped in my head. I planned to run to that table as soon as I found the opportunity to grab that empty bottle and throw it on the Russian guy. And seizing the opportunity,

I would sprint into a run. That's what I wanted it to play out, but I needed to find that guy's weakest point before throwing the bottle at him. But the running part, that depended on how the Russian would react.

I knew from experience that anything could go wrong when throwing a beer bottle or a pool ball at the opponent, especially when he is ready for a fight. He could duck, he could grab the bottle before it hit him, or he could see that you are planning to make a move before you can actually do it. A minor mistake, and I would have found myself in a bigger mess. Having worked as a bouncer for a while, I knew a few tricks to distract an unruly drunk when no other options were on the table. The best thing to do was to throw a pool ball at the opponent or put a few pool balls in a pillowcase to use it as a club if the opponent proves to be extremely violent.

*As a typical saying for a bouncer or any good martial artist goes like,*

***'I would rather be tried by twelve than carried by six.'***

So, with that thought in mind, I ran to the table, grabbed the beer bottle, and threw it on the Russian guy. The bottle directly hit the guy in his face, and there was a loud crack. I let out a sigh of relief when my bottle hit the mark, but the moment was short-lived. Surprisingly, the Russian guy wasn't even phased by the hit. If anything, he looked more pissed than before and ready to tear me into pieces. My heart just stopped.

The best thing for me to do was just to run. I turned around and ran to the bar, where I found an empty beer glass. I broke it and grabbed the biggest shred of glass to use as a weapon. It all happened so fast that I didn't even get the chance to regain my footing after throwing the glass bottle. I figured that the fight was going to be a matter of life and death match. I knew that the Russian guy had an advantage over me.

The Russian guy roared in anger and ran towards me, knocking off a few chairs on his way. I turned around to run towards the exit when he heard a gunshot. Then I turned around to see what had happened and was surprised to see The Russian's chest was bleeding. Someone had shot him with a sniper.

From the looks of it, it seemed that the bullet had punctured one of his lungs. He put a hand on his wound, trying to stop the blood from oozing, but it seeped through his fingers, staining his shirt. He started to gasp for air as he struggled to breathe. A few seconds later, blood started to come out of his mouth.

Nikita, his girlfriend, was nowhere to be seen after her boyfriend got shot. It seemed that she didn't want to get involved in that bullshit. I decided that it was best for me to leave quickly. I turned around and ran as fast as I could. I wanted to make sure that I was far enough from the Sun and Sand Beach Resort without being seen by anyone before I stopped to catch my breath. I did not know if I was going to be shot next. Better safe than sorry, as I thought.

I didn't stop and kept moving at a slow pace without looking back. I decided to cut across to a dirt road and walk to the main road to return to the rest house. That was the safest route to take after that incident with the Russian.

I moved forward as planned and was walking towards the main road when I came across Mohamad Omar Aziz on the way. I was out of breath. It seemed as if I had just run a marathon. Mohamad took a quick look around the road and then said to me,

“Bryan. The Stiletto wants to talk to you immediately. Meet him by The Mammie Yoko right now!”

That was all he said to me, before he quickly left. He seemed to be in a hurry. I looked in the direction where he went, and I saw that there was another guy who had accompanied him. I

recognized him later as his friend Zayed. At that time, I didn't know the other guy's name. But I had seen him around with the people who worked with The Stiletto's Group or the Arabian Express at that time.

He began walking towards the location Aziz had provided him, but he stopped after a few steps. Something nagged at me. I felt that something was a little strange about Aziz and his friend. Stopping at the corner of the street, I watched Aziz and his friend Zayed. They were clearing a house and shouting to a family to get the fuck out. They took out five people; a guy that seemed to be about sixty years old, three children, and the mother who looked quite younger than the older male.

Mohamad Omar Aziz shouted and ordered them to kneel. "Here. Watch and learn. This is what we do to people who fucking cross us!" He said, pointing a 9MM pistol at the back of the old man's head. There was a click sound when he pulled the trigger, followed by a loud shot. And shit went off. Aziz had shot him from behind and sent the bullet through the man's head without any warning at all. And he didn't stop there.

One by one, he began shooting the children, pointing the gun at the back of their heads, and shot them as he did to their father. There was only one person left. The mother sat there frozen. Her eyes filled with tears as she saw her family getting killed, one after another. What I saw next haunted me for the rest of my life. The mother's eyes were on me. I didn't even realize for how long she had been staring at me in the hopes that I might help her family and stop those men from killing them. But it was too late. Her eyes held no hope anymore. Her family was dead, and she was waiting for these cruel men to decide her fate.

Right then, Aziz noticed me watching all the scenes being unfolded. His eyes were void of any remorse. Mohamad let out a sinister laugh, put the gun behind the woman's head, and pulled the trigger. He did it all by looking at me with that ugly smile on his face.

*What a bunch of fucking cowards!* I thought to myself before running towards Aziz in rage. I wanted to beat him up into a pulp. The two, Zayed and Aziz, pointed their weapons at me when they noticed myself advancing towards them.

“Not so fast, Ludendorff. Let us do our work and get back to yours,” Aziz mocked me, waving his gun on my face.

I had no weapon but wish I had, and I was outnumbered. As much as I wanted to beat them to death for what they had done to that family, I couldn't do much about it. I was sure that the Stiletto wouldn't appreciate me interfering in his men's work. It was in my best interest to control myself and leave the area immediately.

I glared at both of them and turned around to leave. Zayed and Aziz broke into a burst of laughter as I walked away from them and to The Mammie Yoko as instructed by The Stiletto. I was fuming.

*I will get these motherfuckers someday; I will. They have the guns, and I don't. There's not much I can do right now. I would only get myself killed.* I thought in an attempt to calm myself down.

I reached The Mammie Yoko Hotel and looked around to find The Stiletto. I was tired, and just wanted the day to be over with after what I had witnessed. One thing is I was angry, more at myself for not having been able to help that family. But there wasn't anything that I could have done to save them. They would have killed me and the family after that anyway.

I slowly walked towards the direction I heard some voices coming from. Taking a turn, I saw the group I was looking for and walked towards them. I noticed The Stiletto and his men among the group. "I'm here," I said as nearing the group. The Stiletto nodded in acknowledgment. I noticed that Lana O'Grady was with the group as well. I had met her before. We had had some occasional sexual encounters together previously. Nikita, the Russian guy's girlfriend, who was Lana's friend as well, would join in with us when we were together. They wanted to disassociate themselves from The Stiletto's group, as well as the Arabian Express, but they were too caught up in a mess and too scared to leave the country. They had told their wish to me, but I even offered them help to leave before the coup. I wish they would have taken me up on that offer to go to the Saka Stevens Stadium and tell them that 'the Lidster or the Teacher sent them.' They would have had no problem in leaving Sierra Leone.

The Stiletto's friends and his bodyguards stood around him. They were all armed with heavy weapons, ready to fire if they found any threat. There were around ten to twelve people in the group, including Lana. I could recognize a few others in the group but didn't know the names of the rest. Some among them were foreigners, and a few, I could recognize, were from Sierra Leone. Everyone had some weapons with them except for Lana and me. That made me nervous, but I kept my cool. I couldn't let those people think they had the upper hand on me.

"Aziz and Zayed will join us shortly," that's all that The Stiletto said as they waited for them to arrive. I didn't know what came over me but grabbed a broken brick that I had found nearby and held it behind my back with a smile.

*Finally, Payback time for me. They will get what they deserve.* I thought to myself as I hid the brick. No one saw me doing that.

A few minutes later, Aziz and Zayed arrived. They walked towards where the group was.

“Bryan. I believe you have already met Mohammad Aziz?” The Stiletto asked as he introduced the two guys to me.

“Yes, we have met before,” I answered with a smile as I sized Aziz up. Slowly, he got closer to them without drawing any suspicion on me.

Aziz and Zayed walked towards The Stiletto, and I followed. Their backs were towards me. Now I thought it would be a good time to act. Mohammad was about to say something to The Stiletto when I swung that brick with all my might on Aziz’s head. He was clearly blindsided when the brick hit the side of his head. Zayed was a little out of my range to hit him directly with the brick. Without a second thought, I threw the brick at Zayed with a rough aim. Zayed saw the brick coming and tried to avoid being hit by it. He ducked, and the brick almost missed him. The brick had just grazed the side of his face, leaving a small scratch.

Zayed’s quick reflexes had saved him from the damage intended, but he wasn’t prepared to avoid what came next. Screaming, I ran towards Zayed and tackled him to the ground. I had managed to land a punch on his face before The Stiletto’s guys came forward to pull me away from Zayed. The Brain pulled out a knife and placed it on my throat in warning. Soon, other people had pointed their weapons at Zayed and me to maintain order.

I noticed that the knife The Brain was holding to my neck had blood on it. I found out later; it was the same one that he had used to slit The Russian’s throat, after he was shot in the chest at the Sun and Sand Beach Resort. That shot had managed to collapse the lungs, just enough to keep the Russian alive. The Brain wanted to kill the Russian himself. Later I found out that the Brain went back to finish that business of killing the Russian, after Mohamad and Zayed completed killing that family I witnessed. The Brain had this obsession with his knife; he loved using it to

end his victims' life so he could brag about how tough he was to not kill them with a gun like a coward.

The Stiletto came forward, stopping just a few inches away from my face. His jaws were clenched, and he seemed pissed at my outburst. He pointed the finger at my chest, his voice low as he warned me, "You... stop. Right. Now. You know what I would do if you ever tried to pull that stunt again. Not in my presence, Ludendorff." The Stiletto stepped away and ordered The Brain,

"You, John. I want you to just keep that fucking knife on this Ludendorff's throat until I say otherwise. The Brain nodded and pressed the knife a bit harder on my throat.

"Everyone else, lower your weapons. Hold both of these guys and take their weapons away now. If anyone moves or tries to create a scene again, shoot them!" The Stiletto ordered the rest of his men.

"And you, fuck head," he turned to me. "What is wrong with you? Aziz is knocked out cold over there. COME ON, what the fuck was that!" he asked.

I couldn't hold my anger anymore, "No!! You should ask them what's wrong with those two jackoffs—shooting unarmed civilians, including a mother, father, and three children? What do you call that? They're a bunch of fucking cowards! I gave them what they deserved!" I was breathing heavily. Never before had I talked to the Stiletto in that tone, but that day was an exception. I couldn't wipe off the memory of how they killed those innocent people in cold blood.

The Stiletto shouted at me, "SHUT THE FUCK UP! You are a stupid motherfucker," he said, pointing his finger at me. I had known him for long enough to know that he was not a person to mess with, and he certainly didn't like someone questioning his authority. And the stunt that I had pulled had definitely hit his nerve.

“You dared do that in front of ME, The STILETTO! Not to mention in front of my bodyguards and my girl,” he said, referring to his girlfriend, Lana. “Either you got some big-time balls, or you are a very foolish person. Which is it? Use some common sense! Do you have a death wish?” Stiletto let out a dry chuckle, probably wondering how I could do that, knowing that he could have easily put a bullet in my head without giving me a word as an explanation.

“Consider yourself lucky that you are not dead on the floor you are standing on right now. For a peace corps volunteer, I never would have expected you to attack any of my comrades, let alone the best of my men,” The Stiletto sighed. He noticed Aziz coming back to his senses. He started to get up slowly. I noticed bleeding on the right side of his face.

The Stiletto must have sensed that I might try hitting Aziz again. “Hold this guy!” he said to the two men who kept me restrained. Not that I was going to make a move knowing that a sharp blade was on my neck.

“You, Zayed, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING? And you know you work for me, right. Don’t forget that!?” The Stiletto asked, sarcastically. Zayed didn’t like the Stiletto’s tone and reminded him why he was there in the first place, “Don’t forget that I am Zayed Dubuc. Yes, I do work for you. But let me make this clear for you; I am loyal to King Yousuf, who sent me on this mission with you. I’m here to make sure that everything is operated smoothly,” Zayed made his point clear, keeping his tone firm.

Aziz had gotten back to his senses by then, and once he gained his composure, he looked at me. The anger was evident on his face.

“You PEACE CORPS FUCK have signed your own death warrant. Your days are numbered here in Sierra Leone. You are so dead; I will get you, white boy. I will!” he gritted out as he held the side of his head that was still bleeding. He winced in pain, but that didn’t stop him

from threatening me. I knew that he meant every single word that he said and that his threats were not empty.

“I killed a white guy in South Africa. Do you know what I did next? I cut off his ear and kept it as a trophy. And you, Ludendorff, are soon going to be a part of that collection. You’re a dead man walking,” with that, Aziz lunged at me, but before he could reach me, he was held back by two of the Stiletto’s bodyguards.

“That’s enough, you two! Shut the fuck up. If I hear one more word coming from any of you, I will shoot the brains out of both of you. You hear me?!” The Stiletto warned again. That made both of us keep our mouths shut, but I could see that Aziz wanted nothing more to see me dead on the floor. He seemed angrier for not being able to strangle me right then and there. I looked at him and let out a sarcastic chuckle.

“Enough of that if you value your life, Ludendorff,” the Stiletto gave me a look, and I wisely kept myself from throwing another insult at Aziz.

“You can put down that knife,” the Stiletto said, nodding at the Brain, who was obediently keeping the knife right on my jugular. I let out a sigh of relief and rubbed the area where he had placed the blade. I winced at the small cut and glared at the Brain.

“Well, Mr. Fuck and Mr. Shit... You two listen to me and mark every word that I am telling you. This is how it goes from now on; you don’t look at this Mr. Ludendorff guy,” he said to Zayed and Aziz, pointing at “and you don’t talk to him,” he said to me, pointing at Aziz, who seemed smug to see the Stiletto schooling me about not messing with him. “And the same goes for you, Aziz. If anything happens to this Ludendorff guy and I find out that you or any of your friends have a hand in it, I will personally come after you and cut off your limbs. Did I make myself

clear?” The Stiletto asked, looking at Aziz and me. I glared at Aziz and then gave the Stiletto a curt nod in affirmation.

“NO ONE ever disrespects me like that, and no one should dare to, including you, Mr. Ludendorff, and Aziz. You two do not talk until I tell you to. Is that understood?” Before any of us could respond, there was the sound of guns being fired. We could hear some people nearing where the group was standing. A few seconds later, we saw some drunk soldiers walking towards us.

“Where do you think you are going? Stop right there,” The Stiletto shouted at them, but the soldiers kept walking towards us. The Stiletto pulled out his gun and fired two shots, followed by two from the Brain. The four soldiers dropped dead on the floor in front of everyone. The Stiletto had made his point clear; you either listen to me or die.

The Stiletto then turned to me. Lowering his gun, he said, “This is what happens in a coup, Bryan. Do you understand?” I just looked at him, and he then pointed his gun at Zayed and Mohamad Aziz, “Both of you, I shit you not; I mean what I said here. The only person who has actually done something for me and did what he was told is Bryan.”

“To let everyone here know,” he then started to walk back and forth as he addressed the whole group, “This guy Bryan, has proved to me that he has got some balls.....,” he then turned to Zayed and Aziz and looked at said pointedly, “...which you two didn’t have.” He finished and just stared at us. Everyone just stayed silent, waiting for his next words.

“Now, I want you two to get out of my sight,” the Stiletto said, pointing to Zayed and Aziz. “I don’t want to see you two for the rest of this week or I will change my mind about not shooting you... OUT. NOW!” he gritted out.

Zayed and Aziz had no other choice but to leave. They couldn't do anything about me and just glared at me as the Stiletto ordered them to leave.

Done with those two, the Stiletto then turned to me, "Now, as for you Bryan, you did get on my nerves by creating a ruckus today," he said, referring to the fight I had with Aziz a few minutes ago, "But...you have proved to be a valuable person of this group. I'm pleased with your work and how you completed the task I had given you today." I nodded as he continued to speak to me, "I want to introduce you to my girlfriend," he said, gesturing to the woman who was standing beside him. "She is an American just like you, and guess what, Bryan, you can fuck her, and she will get you high too. For now, I have three vials of Pentaphene and two clean needles for you. But, I believe that the drug supply will be running out soon due to the coup."

"Well, Ludendorff, that's enough for now. You can go rest for a while or do whatever you want to do. I have some work to do," he said as he left with his bodyguards. It was now just Lana and me. We didn't say a word to each other as she led me inside the building.

I cleared my throat when we entered the lounge and said to Lana, "Do you think that The Stiletto will be alright with..... this? I think I am already on his bad side.

"What do you mean? Lana asked, raising her brow in question. "I mean, I know we have been together before, but he doesn't know that. Could that be a problem?" She just smiled and shook her head, "Don't worry, The Stiletto has many girlfriends, and he does whatever he wants. He even lets his friends do the same."

I raised a brow in confusion but didn't ask much about it. "You wanted to leave this country, no? Well, if you still want to, I think it is a good time to leave. I have some connections and can get you straight to the US Embassy or the Saka Stevens Stadium tonight. All you need to do is tell them that you are friends with the Teacher or the Lidster. They will understand what you

are talking about,” I explained to her as we walked upstairs to her room, “You will be protected by some of my trusted friends, and they will assist you in leaving this country,” I continued.

“Remember the last time we met? I told you and Nikita the same thing,” I said as we stopped in front of her room.

Lana looked at me, and instead of answering my question, she said, “Quit looking at my tits,” and before I could say something, she kissed me.

“Come on, cut me some slack, Lana. I almost had my throat slit today or could have been shot in the head outside this hotel a few minutes ago. I am still in shock but happy to be alive.” I said. She started to laugh and said,

“I must say, Bryan, you sure have got some guts. I have never seen anyone do what you did in front of The Stiletto and live to talk about it. And do not worry, you will be getting these goodies very soon when we get to my room. Be prepared for a workout tonight. I want it to be my job to give you the best pussy you have ever imagined.....”

\*\*\*

“STOP!” Lana O’Grady said, stopping me from further mentioning the conversation we had on the day of the coup. I could see that she was on the verge of crying but tried her best to stop the tears from flowing.

“Stop, Bryan. What is the point of mentioning that in this meeting? You make it sound like I did something wrong. Is that what you truly think? What else could I have done in that situation?” she asked.

I remained calm and replied, “No, Lana. Don’t get me wrong. I get it; you were in a bad place at a bad time. I am not saying you did anything wrong. You did what you had to do to survive, and I might have done the same thing if I was in your shoes,” I tried to calm her down.

“At that time, I already had some suspicions about you being sent there by undercover law enforcement. My suspicions were confirmed when we met up with Melina in Madrid, Spain. I found out that you were there as an undercover agent, investigating the Arabian Express. I had nothing to worry about. You couldn’t do anything to me since I wasn’t a part of that organization. Your job was to collect information on the people involved with the Arabian Express but somehow, I believe, you might have ended up being a snitch because you had serious legal troubles pending. Unfortunately, you ended up joining that group.

Before we met at The Mammie Yoko Hotel, I heard you talking to someone. I noticed that the way you carried yourself and talked reflected that you were a fairly educated and intelligent person, which goes the same with Nikita.

That is if you really wanted to know what I was thinking about you two at that time. Also, I was a bit scared of you two, you and your friend Nikita. And that’s because there were a lot of things that didn’t quite add up with you two. I get it; you were not treated well by that group and seemed to have a lot going. But, none of that explained as to WHY you were with The Stiletto?” I asked, and all the heads turned to Lana.

“I was only doing my job!” Lana shouted at me. “I had to get close to the Stiletto and the Brain,” she reasoned.

I didn’t say anything in reply and turned to the group, “You asked me when I saw those four people together? Well, that’s the time those individuals were togeth-,”

Brigadier General William Elson interrupted me, “Stop trying to confuse us with that nonsense, Ludendorff. None of it explains or justifies what YOU did. You were working with Virginia law enforcement and, not to mention, with the Peace Corps as well. You were handed a trusted position, and you knew really well that there are certain rules that one must follow being

in that position and drug usage is one of those things that is not tolerated under any circumstance. I wonder how did you manage to get through the Army MEPs? I take it you lied. Of course, you did; how else could you get through that,” General Elson chuckled sarcastically.

“If you ask me,” he said, addressing the group, “I am questioning his integrity right now.” Then he turned to me, saying, “And by the way, it is against the law for intelligence to be involved with the Peace Corps. I believe you knew that already, didn’t you? I bet you were friends with The Stiletto and took some kickbacks on smuggling the blood diamonds out of Africa and all the corruption inside Sierra Leone.”

“That’s enough, General Elson,” I interrupted angrily. He knew nothing about what happened in Sierra Leone. Besides, he had no right to point fingers at me and question my integrity.

“No one here ever questions my integrity again, or I will leave this meeting. And General Elson, since we are talking about corruption and hypocrisy, why don’t we talk about the times when you were working as a Senior Warrant Officer. As far as I can remember, you were constantly using drugs. I saw you buying some on the beach as well. Don’t you dare pose yourself as a high and mighty employee. I know what you had been doing for years; you tried to control the black market in Sierra Leone,” General Elson was fuming once I started to remind him of his not-so-legal activities in the past.

“Let me tell you more about it, everyone....” I said as I continued to disclose the dark secrets of General Elson to the people present in the meeting. Everyone was keenly listening; some even looked shocked to hear about General Elson’s involvement in drug dealing.

“...Mr. Elson here was working at the US Embassy at that time and was in charge of overseeing the transportation in and out of Sierra Leone. It gave him a perfect opportunity to

supervise the drug smuggling operations in and out of the country. On the day of the coup, he left the country along with Jason Read and SGM Greenspoon. I have seen him purchasing drugs from the Mallard and using them, and that was not it; the smuggled items included gold and diamonds. He used to have meetings with The Stiletto, and there were many rumors around Freetown about him killing the Mallard with a garrote.”

“That’s enough, Ludendorff. Where is this all coming from?!” Elson shouted. “I don’t know what problem this guy has with everyone, but this needs to be stopped. This investigation was about him, not us!” I had definitely hit a nerve there. I knew that Elson was pissed. It bothered him I was bringing up his past in front of everyone in the meeting, but I wasn’t going to back down.

“Calm down, general Elson. There is still a lot that I haven’t talked about yet,” I said to him, raising an eyebrow and challenging him to continue his objections. Good for him; he kept his mouth shut.

“Well, since we have embarked on this conversation, I might as well add a few major details of your past,” I said. I wasn’t done with him yet. I had to tell the group he had been involved in the past. I turned to General Elson, “I have seen you and Sergeant Major Greenspoon with Jason Reed and John Ricardo, the Brain, not to mention a few other shady people. From the looks of your involvement with them, it seemed that you were a part of the Arabian Express in Freetown. If not, why did you leave during the coup? And tell me, why was Lana so scared to go to the US Embassy?” I asked. General Elson just looked at me with his angry eyes. I wasn’t surprised to see he didn’t have answers to any of my questions.

“No answer, Elson? See, you are not in a position to question me about integrity when you have skeletons in the closet yourself. I admit that I have done things in the past that I am not really

proud of. But I did what I had to do to further myself and make things better for others. Putting myself in difficult situations and being a part of that terrorist organization was what I believed was the only option I had at that time.

“My point is that I wasn’t the only one getting involved with the wrong crowd. Some of us didn’t have any other choices and willingly chose to be involved. It came with perks. We were young, and we did stupid things in our lives. I am not here to give my confession to God about my sins and choices, nor will I lecture you about the rights and wrongs of the world. If you want me to talk, that’s exactly what I will do, but don’t expect me to talk in your favor,” I shrugged. “I am not covering for you guys.

“So should I keep talking, or is that all you need to know?” I paused. “Isn’t that why I was brought here without proper notification? Tell me now because I have better things to do,” I insisted, raising my brow questionly. I could tell them more, but I wanted to gauge their reactions first. A heavy silence fell over the room as everyone contemplated my words. Mr. Emerson was the first one to speak after a few moments of silence.

“Go ahead and proceed,” he said with a nod.

General Elson, who was fuming a few moments ago, looked at me with an evil smile and said, “Go ahead, Ludendorff. I want to hear what else you have to say.”

His smile bothered me a bit but I ignored it and continued, “The choices I had were either submitting to low-paying jobs or improving people's living standards for good. If making the right choice makes you want to question my integrity, do so. But before you do, let us talk about Lana. Apparently, she had no problem fucking me and getting high with me. She even wanted me to help her shoot up the Pentaphene that The Stiletto had given us. And, by the way,” I turned to Elson,

“before you jump in and try to school me about using drugs, I would like to remind you that you were using it too.” I locked eyes with Elson, challenging him to accuse me.

“Oh, and how do you know that?” General Elson questioned. I had seen it coming. I knew he would try to trap me and prove me wrong every chance he got.

“Through the Mallard. He told me he sold the same drug to you. He also filled me in on how you used his house as a shooting gallery,” I said. General Elson opened his mouth to object, but I pointed my finger at him, stopping him before he could say a word.

“Listen, General Elson,” I stopped him, my tone firm and serious. “I will state this fact for the record here: you were a walking drug store when you were in Sierra Leone, and you can’t deny it no matter how hard you try. Stop interrupting me and listen.” General Elson could only glare at me.

I turned to Lana, “As for Lana, I have even seen her getting high back in February 1992 when she first visited Sierra Leone. Prior to the coup, I saw her with General Olson. He was a First Lieutenant back then. I am not sure if they were together sexually, but I know that Lana was friends with the Russian Porn Queen, and they, along with the General, used to watch a sex show together. I mean, come on. Look who is questioning me about my integrity!

“They were not only involved in these things but also with the Stiletto. I have my suspicions about them carrying out the Stiletto’s orders as well. I mean, how do I know they were not involved in ordering the assassination of The Russian? Maybe they killed him themselves or had a hand in it.

“I would like to remind you all as a reminder that the Russian Porn Queen, Nikita, was The Russian’s girlfriend. Had you seen him, I’m sure you would be intimidated. He was a tough guy, yet she seemed to have complete control over him. I hope you are all smart enough to connect the

dots and understand why I suspect that they were somehow involved in his assassination,” I said, looking at Speers, who was keenly listening. So far, there had been no response from him. I believed the information was too much for anyone who wasn’t there at the time of the coup, on April 29, 1992. His silence, or that of anyone in the room, didn’t bother me much. I was sure they needed some time to process it all before responding.

“Lana’s and Nikita’s involvement with different people didn’t bother me. However, I was confused and somewhat shocked, you could say, to know that Lana and Nikita wanted to be with me all the time. For a short time, they even were with me. I understand that Lana and Nikita seemed to be with The Stiletto and his friends against their will, so I don’t really blame them for being scared and doing whatever they had to do to survive and get out of that country. Lana must have thought I was her rescuer or something,” I said, looking at Lana, who sat across from me. I could tell that she was trying her best not to cry and keep her composure.

“I don’t like digging things up from the past, but that’s exactly what I was brought here to do. The things I am saying would hurt and anger many, but everything needs to be sorted out once and for all. I can’t have my name tarnished for things I had no control over. Why should I be the only one being questioned? That too by those who were part of everything themselves?”

I looked back at Lana and spoke to her. “Let’s get everything out in the open! Go ahead. Do you want to fill in some blanks here? Let me help you. Why don’t you start with how you randomly began telling me about how many orgasms you had, and how you suddenly appeared wherever I went? What about the times when you stalked me when I was with Malina in Spain?” I said with a dry chuckle.

“Stop it, Ludendorff! What’s the point of mentioning all that in this meeting? What are you trying to get out of this?” Lana asked instead of answering my question.

“It has a lot to do with the mess that went on during the coup, Lana. It seemed that you and Nikita had an ulterior motive behind being around me all the time. Were you spying on me or something? What else would you call it? You bothered both Malina and me and wouldn’t leave us alone. Malina once voiced her opinion about you and said that you were just an opportunist, which I believed you were.

“Did you even tell your husband about your time with The Stiletto’s group? About being a Dick Thirsty Bitch? ‘The meaning is a female who has sex with a lot of different people!’ Do you want to tell everyone about the time when you stalked Malina and me in Spain after you were driven to the US Embassy? Don’t tell me that it was a coincidence because I know for sure that it wasn’t!

“All that stalking and the efforts to get closer to me were not for nothing, Lana. I had already figured out that you wanted something from me, maybe some information. Why else would you come all the way to Spain when you had just met me in Sierra Leone? I think you thought that I would be willing to go against the Stiletto because I fought with Aziz and Zayed in front of him and his group. You probably thought I had the guts to go against the Stiletto, so I would be your only means to help you get rid of the group and safely leave the country.

“Even though it seemed that you were impressed by it, I think that was the stupidest move I made. If I had to do it again, I wouldn’t, considering that the Stiletto could have put a bullet in my head right then and there. And yes, I was incredibly lucky to have lived after pulling that stunt,” I said to Lana with a lazy shrug.

“And you,” I continued, turning to face General Olson who had yet to make any comments on my revelations. “I saved your career when I helped you in Freetown. I hope you haven’t forgotten that. We did have our differences, true. You tried to intimidate me and have the upper

hand. It was all fine until I objected. Then things started to go south for you, and your bodyguard, Bradley Greenspoon, got arrested in Sierra Leone.” I shifted the conversation back to General Elson.

“What about you, General Elson? Do you want to add something? Tell everyone here about your lucrative business outside of Sierra Leone. And don’t forget to mention how you managed to run it, using military transportation to carry out your illegal activities. You had strong ties with the Stiletto. No wonder you did it all without getting caught; he supported you and covered your tracks,” I revealed.

I took a breath. Then, addressing the group, I continued, “So ladies and gentlemen, can you blame me for thinking that General Elson here is the most dangerous person in this room? He should have been detained for what he did in the past. I wonder what made him think he could sit in front of me and question me like a criminal when he himself has a fair share of offenses to answer for,” I said. I turned to look at General Elson. He didn’t seem to like the truths about his past being told like this.

“I made friends with the local police officers in Freetown, Makeni, and a few other places in Sierra Leone. Those people included local military officers and local civilians. I taught martial arts back then, which they liked very much. It helped me build friendships, and in return, I used to receive the news, including local news, muggings of foreigners, recent arrests, and whatnot. That’s how I kept tabs on the criminal activities going on inside the region,” I informed them, pre-empting any questions about my sources.

Mr. Speers finally broke his silence and spoke up. “Bryan, you realize that the information you have shared with us can land you in serious trouble if we find out that it is all a bluff?” he asked me. His face betrayed nothing.

“Of course, I know. But I have nothing to fear. Whatever I have told you is true,” I said confidently. “If there is anyone you should be questioning instead, are these people,” I said, gesturing to Lana, Olson, and Elson. Speers turned around and faced them.

“Is that true, Lana, General Olson, and General Elson? General Elson, what he is saying better not be true, or else you are in serious trouble,” Speers said. From his tone, it seemed that he didn’t believe a word I had said and was still asking them to attest to the claims I had made against them.

“Wow! I see that fingers are only being pointed at me for being involved with the Arabian Express! Why not everyone else?” I shouted.

General Elson threw me a cold glance saying, “Enough, Ludendorff!” I could see the panic on the General’s face. He seemed to feel there was still much of his story that could harm him if I revealed it in front of the group.

General Olson piped in, “Why are you guys not making him shut up? We are not here to listen to his nonsense. This is supposed to be an interrogation, not a witch hunt against us!”

“Well, well. Would anyone mind telling me if this is an interrogation or investigation?” I asked. “I hear two different terms being used, so what is it actually? I need to know because the outcome of those two would be different in terms of legal proceedings for me.

“Or is it just you guys playing around and trying to get information from me? Will I be imprisoned for not being able to provide you guys with the information you are expecting me to? Just cut to the chase and get to the point, please. I have wasted enough time explaining things to you, but I see that it wasn’t what you wanted to hear,” I said. General Elson was about to say something, but I continued to speak.

“Let me tell you one thing: I have no sympathy for people committing crimes, especially the ones you just showed me in the report. I would have no problem putting these guys or people like that away for a long time. I would do anything to help make our world a safer place. None of these people are friends of mine, and they never will be. It was unfortunate that I came across those people back then and somehow got involved in their business, but my intentions were always good, as they are now. I will help you if you are willing to give me a chance,” I declared.

“Now, I want to lay out some terms to ensure my protection and people related to me. It won’t bother anyone who has nothing to do with this case. That includes my family and friends, old and new. There will be no lawsuit or criminal charges against them or me. You better keep this investigation fair and unbiased because that’s the least you can do for dragging me here for investigation,” I said, and Speer nodded in response.

I just don’t want innocent people being dragged into this. So please, think about them as well and not just your own selfish benefits. I know how you guys work and have seen that injustice was done to innocent ones. Take the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s, for example,” I reminded them.

“Don’t worry, Ludendorff. We will make sure that all your concerns are addressed. All we need from you is your help to get to the root of this organization,” Speers tried to assure me.

“Not that I doubt your words, Speers, but I would like to have that all in writing. I want all the names I will give you mentioned in that letter. Also, I want some attorneys paid by you, of course. I want a JAG and a civilian attorney together with me whenever I am brought to be questioned. Full immunity. Even if you don’t find my answers useful, you will not go against the terms I have set. After all, I am just a messenger, and I can only tell you what I know, not what you want to hear,” I shrugged.

“I did nothing illegal and nothing that I should be ashamed of. So this so-called “investigation” it will be done my way. That is the deal; no room for exceptions. Another thing that I do not want is my retirement taken away from my family. And please, keep my dreaded exes away from this investigation. I don’t want them to have anything on me that they can use against me later,” I added.

“That’s a long, long list, Ludendorff. Anything else that you would like to add?” General Also piped in sarcastically.

“Yes, actually. There is more,” I said with a chuckle.

“Okay, Ludendorff. You may continue,” Speers said, throwing Elson a warning glance.

“A lot of people I knew back then, I still consider them my friends. I do not want anything bad to happen to them. Unless you give me some proof that they are involved with The Circle, you can’t approach them. I have dated Malina from Morocco; you better leave her alone. You too, Lana! I don’t know if you had any contact with her but leave her out of it. She has been through enough because of her controlling father. Anything you may suspect she could have done in the past, she didn’t. At least not with the wrong intentions,” I said, and Lana pursed her lips. I knew that she didn’t like the way I was ordering around. But they all needed me, and I was going to make sure that I had it all sorted to avoid any problem in the future.

“I have made many enemies throughout my life for doing the right thing. For all I know, someone in this room could be setting me up for a long prison sentence right now. Especially you, General Elson,” I said, looking at him, “These guys would do anything to save their own career.

“One more thing, guys; the next time you guys want to have a meeting with me, please notify me. That would be all for now. Now, can we all take a break, please? It has been a long two

hours, and maybe some of us got off on a bad start. So can we do that?" I asked, stretching a bit in my chair.

"Alright, let's take a 45 minutes break. Then we will get back here and continue our conversation," said Speer.

"Oh, General Peter Olson, Mrs. Lana O'Grady, I would like to have a word with you two," I said as I stood up and followed Mr. Speer.

"You are with MI-5 or Scotland Yard?" I asked him. "I would like the same letter from you too or something that would guarantee my demands," I continued.

"You will get that from Scotland Yard, don't worry," Speer assured me. Just then, Jan Xander, Colonel Richardson, and Lieutenant General Stevenson came to join us.

"There would be no need of that, Ludendorff," said Xander. "We saw you through the cameras installed in the room and have heard everything that had been discussed," he added. Then turning to Speer, he said, "Mr. Ludendorff will not be prosecuted."

"And you, Mr. Ludendorff. You will be provided with everything you requested," Xander said to me. Then he looked at Mr. Speer, "I want Lana O'Grady and Major General Peter Olson to be in the front to answer some questions. I also want Bryan to be there. Brigadier General Elson will be restricted to headquarters and will not be able to communicate with anyone right now. That's until we get some things figured out. Have Captain Allan assign three guards for General Elson. Make sure that the guards stay with him all the time. Before sending him to the headquarters, mak confiscated his cellphone as well.

As for Bryan, the only people who will be questioning him will be Colonel Richardson and Christopher Speer. Captain Ellis no longer needs to escort Mr. Ludendorff," Xander finished.

“It looks like you and Mrs. O’Grady need to start talking to Bryan Ludendorff. Everyone needs to catch up on a lot of things,” Jim Richardson said to General Olson and Lana.

With that, we all went to a private room to have some talk over coffee. I knew those people and had spent time with them in the past. It had been a long since I had seen them. As I filled my cup, I wished we would have met in better circumstances.

I sat down on the couch next to Lana and Olson. “This is going to be a long week,” I sighed. It was quiet for a while; then I broke the silence. “General Olson, it wasn’t too smart a move to have me interrogated here of all places. Everyone has skeletons in their closet. And considering that I know all that you all have been doing in the past years, having me called here for interrogation was either too brave or foolish of you,” I said, looking straight into his eyes. I knew that he regretted having me here.

“Didn’t it cross your mind that if I told these guys everything, it could jeopardize our careers, including my retirement?” I questioned.

“Law enforcement and intelligence agencies have been after these people from The Circle for over twenty-five years. And that also includes everyone with a badge. Trust me; I also dreaded the day you would be brought here to be questioned,” Lana said. “I know that it was sheer luck that the Stiletto spared your life after you pulled that stunt. But do you think they would believe you? Do you think they would really think that you had nothing to do with him and his work? Don’t tell me that you think they would actually believe that the Stiletto let you live after you insulted him like that for no reason? Some people in the CIA are saying things about you. There seem to be too many coincidences about this; meeting the same people again and again throughout your lifetime,” she said.

I looked at her in surprise. I was offended, “Who? me?”

“Come on, Bryan. You have worked with the Peace Corps, the Virginia State Prison System, and the US Army. You know when you are being questioned. Yes, I am talking about you. What kind of influences do you really have with The Circle?” she asked, but before I could say anything, she continued.

“Just so you know, I am not the one you need to convince; it is the board. Maybe there is some more information that you can provide to help us with this investigation. For example, that one house raid you did with the Third Infantry Division in 2003 in Fallujah, Iraq. I know that you guys had found some important documents that can particularly be useful for our intelligence on the War on Terror. There was one diary by Jeb Smith that we were able to get our hands-on. It said that you were seeking employment with the Arabian Express around 2002. There was also some rumor about you taking out seven to eight hitmen at a warehouse north of Fallujah. It is suspected that those hitmen had connections with T.A.E or The Circle,” Lana explained.

“Now tell me, Bryan; how close were you to The Stiletto? The Circle is a highly secretive group and cannot be understood with INTERPOL. But your name did come up during the investigation. NSA took a keen interest in your name mentioned in Jeb Smith’s Diary. I think it was left purposely by Zayed or Mohamad to trap you. They were both in the Battle of Fallujah and had a personal grudge against you. Out intelligence went through the material that they found and read your name. That made you an interesting suspect to interrogate. Another document they found said that you were good friends with Adam Heart, The Ghost.” I scratched my head and said to Lana and General Olson, “After that raid in Northern Fallujah, I told General Taylor that those documents were diversionary tactics left by Muhammad and Zayed. It’s fake intelligence Dan Exstein wanted the US military to take. It was a bait ordered by The Circle. Taylor was connected to The Stiletto. Dan Exstein tried to kill me at a warehouse with other contractors.

I interrogated Abril Saab and found out information that helped me prove that Mr. Exstein was a fraud. He couldn't speak the languages he claimed to speak. His cellphone had contacts of members of The Circle saved in it. Dan knew that I was a threat to him and wanted me dead.

Now for Mr. Heart or The Ghost, I didn't know if that name until it was mentioned in the meeting. I only knew him as Adam Heart. In fact, I did not remember him at all until I saw the picture that you showed me in the meeting. And when his name was brought up, it refreshed my memory. I knew Steve McDowell when I worked in the prison system in Virginia. But he was not the Stealth; at least I didn't know him as The Stealth back then. Trust me, I would never be friends with anyone who has ties with a syndicate or any type of a terrorist organization," I explained to Lana and Olson.

"Here is another picture of Adam Heart, The Ghost. And here is one of John Riccardo, The Brain," Lana said, handing me the picture. I took the pictures from her and looked at them, "Is this the Brain?" I asked, showing her one of the pictures. Lana nodded in answer.

"How recent is this picture? I asked. He seemed quite different than the last time I had seen him. "This was taken about two years ago," Lana answered, "The Brain was the one who held the knife to your throat when you smashed Aziz's head with a brick. You also hit him after leaving our room at the Mamie Yoko. You knocked him out."

I studied the pictures for a while and gave a quick glance at the file given to me on John Riccardo, the Brain. I read a bit about him from the files. The first thing I read was that he grew up in Los Angeles, CA.

Lana said as I read the file, "Tonight, in the room next to this, we will read the Top-Secret files about everything pertaining to the case. You will also have the chance to read about the Scotland Yard bombings.

“These were bombings inside the Scotland Yard premises, causing the assassination of two law enforcement individuals in the building. You’ll also find information on those killings in Carlisle, of those two law enforcement individuals. Read the file tonight; it’s a cold case from 1998, but The Brain is still wanted for questioning regarding those crimes.”

Glancing at the file, I said to Lana O’Grady and General Olson, “Who is working for whom? As I remember, The Brain seemed to be taking orders from The Stiletto. My observation about The Brain is that he did not seem as smart as The Stiletto; he acted too impulsively, so he made mistakes. I never figured out why they called him The Brain, unless it was to make people overestimate him. Do you have anything to add?”

Nothing was said for a while, until Lana spoke up. “I kind of figured The Brain was extremely loyal to his friends, but you bring up a good point there. It is better to overestimate someone than underestimate someone. Maybe he was putting on an act. Now he appears to be a high-ranking member of The Circle. That name you mentioned, The King – I’ve heard of him, but The Stiletto would never talk much about him.”

“King Yousef is the boss that The Stiletto works for,” I told the room. Then I finished my coffee.