

A Proposal

PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT

A Supernatural Thriller

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99,000 words

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All Sandy wants is to hold her fractured family together, but a higher power has sent her on a dangerous mission: wage war against evil men and violent demons in a battle for the soul of America.

PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT is a story of a struggling family caught up in a conflict of strange forces—paranormal, demonic and angelic. They clash with the Directorate, first across the continent in the heavens, then hand-to-hand on the New England coast. The Directorate's mission is to control the minds of every American or kill the those who resist. So far they have been horribly successful.

The Plot

- Behind all the mass killings in America is one secret society with paranormal powers. The Directorate hypnotizes leaders of American institutions and controls their minds to comply with their objective: to mold all Americans into a herd of mindless sheep.
- The Directorate executes anyone that obstructs their diabolical strategies.
- One person has broken the Directorate's cover—Gabiella, an elderly, mystical prophetess with superior supernatural powers.
- Gabiella foils the Directorate's assassination attempts with spiritual, telekinetic energy.
- The Directorate wages all-out war on Gabiella and all who live at her estate, Cielavista.
- Gabiella mysteriously disappears and Sandy, her distraught granddaughter, takes up the battle.
- Sandy and her groundskeeper, Carlos, transform his extended family into a paramilitary defense force called Task Force Saber.
- The Directorate's demon-possessed army attacks TF Saber's defenses at Cielavista.
- TF Saber conducts a withdrawal from Cielavista to the sea. The Directorate appears victorious.
- God and His angelic warriors surprise TF Saber and their enemy by destroying the Directorate's forces with the Sword of the Lord.

Target Audiences In Order of Priority

1. Adult Christian and general fiction readers, men and women
2. Spiritual warfare buffs (Christian)
3. Paranormal groups (non-Christian)
4. Patriotic Americans (both Christian and non-Christian)
5. Right-wing conservatives (both Christian and non-Christian). There are hundreds of such organizations.
6. Advocates of alternative medicine, non-traditional education and lifestyles

Positioning in the Marketplace

Readers who will like **PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT** are enjoying Christian novels such as Steven James's **PLACEBO** and Joel C. Rosenberg's **THE COPPER SCROLL** because **PROOF**

THROUGH THE NIGHT appeals to readers' curiosity about supernatural forces at work in the human realm.

There are several significant differences between my novel and these two fine works. One is that in both PLACEBO and THE COPPER SCROLL the level of paranormal/spiritual involvement in the lives of the characters is minimal. PLACEBO's evil twins, Daniel and Darren have limited abilities to project power over distances, and these powers are being developed through training and scientific experimentation. SCROLL's Mordecai has some exceptional prophetic power, but no supernatural abilities. In PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT both the Christians and the evil people that oppose them have full-blown telekinetic and telepathic powers, and they can project them over long distances to alter events remotely. The Directorate uses their non-local mind-to-mind power to shape America into their evil design, and the Christians use their spiritual telekinetic power to protect the Directorate's targets.

In my book, I give very little attention to the scientific explanations for these paranormal/spiritual forces where in James delves deeply into the research and experimentation related to paranormal activity. Rosenberg expounds the details of his scholarly research into prophecy and archaeology. My characters—both the good ones and the bad—are more involved in the use of these forces to wage war against each other rather than how they work. I do not dwell on the intellectual foundations of their powers, but I concentrate more on the emotional and relational elements of all my characters.

Another difference between my book and these other works is that mine concludes in an all-out hand-to-hand battle on the ground between humans, taking place in contemporary America with a spiritual war between angels and demons in the air.

PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT will interest several more reader subgroups than James's or Rosenberg's work.

- Patriots, especially those on the far right, will be attracted to PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT because many of them believe that the country is rapidly becoming a herd of complacent sheep, and they are looking for the kind of hope my book offers. Since my adversary, the Directorate, has successfully gained control of the leaders of contemporary America by telekinetic hypnosis, my novel portrays a pathetic America that must be returned to its rugged pioneer spirit.
- Conspiracy theorists will enjoy PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT because it revolves around the evil strategies of the Directorate, a group of seven billionaires who control all the US institutions.
- The thousands of people who follow the paranormal activities of the US Army as described in Jon Ronson's book, THE MEN WHO STARE AT GOATS will be interested in my book because I write about the same telekinetic power that those Special Forces soldiers were purported to have.
- Those people who subscribe to complementary and alternative medicine will want to buy PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT because its characters are champions of non-traditional

healing, and are strong opponents of the practice of prescribing pharmaceuticals that cover symptoms rather than correct the cellular cause.

- “Non-mainstream” individualists who live against the grain like home-schoolers, organic farmers, co-op members, commune dwellers and herbalists will love PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT because the theme of “what’s wrong with American consumerism” runs strong in this book.
- The battle in my novel involves paranormal forces as well as spiritual. There is a list of over 3,000 paranormal societies, many of which will be drawn to PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT.

First Fifty Pages, PROOF THROUGH THE NIGHT
About 10,000 Words

CHAPTER ONE, Spring In America, 2015

The Directorate's executive board was inbound to Chairman Akebe Cheron's 100 meter super-yacht, *Angelica*, off the California coast. One of the ship's waiters had just finished cleaning up Chairman Cheron's pig sacrifice to his Voodoo Loa, Ogoun in the barbecue pit.

Silently Akebe prayed. *Ogoun, master of the darkness, give me patience to deal with these inferior, but necessary underlings. They do not know that you, my god, are in control of our master plan to shape America into a herd of mindless sheep. Thank you Ogoun, for giving me your power and wisdom. Amen.*

Donald Snow, Director of Weather and Agriculture, piloted his seaplane to *Angelica's* starboard boarding platform and the yacht's crane chair hoisted him up to the main deck. He joined the chairman on the bridge.

"Greetings in the name of American Excellence," said Akebe.

"Hello Akebe, great venue," said Donald.

The two men shook hands and Akebe offered Donald a scotch and Donald accepted.

"No ice, Akebe, just neat, thanks."

Donald Snow, pudgy, white and bald was the physical opposite of Akebe Cheron, a full blooded Nigerian from the Yaruba tribe, tall, raven-skinned and muscular.

“So, Akebe, how goes the vetiver empire? How fascinating that Haitian grass has become such a profitable industry.”

Akebe inspected Donald’s face for traces of sarcasm. He would be surprised to find any in his weaker partner, but he was always wary. “Western culture cannot satisfy its lust for luxury, my friend. The rare fragrant oils from vetiver grass are sought after by perfumers and their over-indulgent customers. The prices of perfumes like Le Labo’s Santal 33 and Ermenegildo Zegna's Florentine Iris keep soaring, and the Dangote Group keeps getting richer and more powerful.”

“Yes, I saw your uncle Aliko Dangote’s name on Forbes’ list of richest black billionaires. Wonderfully successful man. We met last year at a fund raising gala for one of his foundations in Nigeria. Wonderful man.”

Akebe just nodded.

“Here comes Olivia,” said Akebe as the distant clack of helicopter blades became louder. “Frances O’Donnelly is with her.”

Olivia Kingston, Director of Food Production, piloted the AW119 to a perfect landing on the yacht’s helipad, cut the engine and climbed out of the cockpit.

“Those birds make such a racket,” said Donald.

“Yes, and the crew has to make sure everything is tied down or the downwash would blow everything into the ocean,” said Akebe.

“Greetings, ladies,” said Akebe, “in the name of American Excellence.”

“Frances, our Director of Education Control, how good to see you,” said Donald.

“Hi, Donald, Akebe. Quite the boat,” said Frances.

Akebe handed each lady a glass of chablis. “Thanks,” said Olivia, her khaki shirt and slacks and aviator sunglasses somehow incompatible with her New England patrician visage.

“Lovely yacht, Akebe, how large is it?”

“They claim 100 meters,” said Akebe. “I could live out here indefinitely. But we have such important work to do on the continent, eh?”

“Ah, must be our Director of Healthcare and Pharmaceuticals,” said Akebe looking over the port side to the northeast where a high performance motor yacht was approaching. “He’d be sailing from Puget Sound—Romano Goldstein.”

“And another boat to the southeast. Look at those beautiful sails,” said Frances.

“Okay,” said Akebe, “all present and accounted for. That’s Randal Sanford, our Director of Business and Finance.”

In a few minutes the six billionaires that formed the Directorate’s executive board were all together on the bridge.

“My crew will show you to your state rooms. Make yourselves comfortable. We will assemble in the saloon at sixteen-hundred for our meeting and dinner,” said Akebe. “Do not discuss any Directorate business until we get to the saloon. That’s the only room on the ship equipped with security protections from prying eyes and ears, all right? See you all at four.”

###

Akebe had the saloon set up as a combination board room - dining room. At four o’clock each member of the board sat comfortably in leather seats with wine glasses and an array of appetizers before them on the thick glass table.

“I suppose we must wait for Randal,” said Romano Goldstein, “late as usual.”

“Please,” said Akebe, his Haitian accent barely perceptible. “Tell the waiter your wine preferences and enjoy some hors d’oeuvres. I particularly like the seared steak lettuce cups.”

“Akebe,” Frances O’Donnelly said, “I have a quick question while we’re waiting.”

“Yes, Frances.”

“As far as I know we have never resolved the question about these radical Muslim groups in the middle east—ISIS and Al Qaeda and the others. Are they in any way affiliated with us?”

Akebe nibbled on his d’oeuvres. He looked up at Frances, knowing how strategically her mind worked.

“Frances, we have been kept out of the information loop regarding the Islamists. We must consider ISIS and the fifteen other radical Islamist groups who are working toward a worldwide Caliphate as long-range competition. However, as you know we’ve been able to use their publicity as cover for our operations. Over half of our assassinations have appeared to be the work of radicalized Muslims.”

Frances nodded and laid a piece of brie on a cracker. “Right, thanks.”

“Glad you could join us,” said Romano to Randal Sanford as he took his seat. “You missed Akebe’s favorite choice of hors d’oeuvres.”

Akebe was bored with the adversarial body language between Goldstein and Sanford. He filled his wine glass with pinot noir, lifted his glass and said, “A toast to American Excellence.”

“To American Excellence,” the Directorate’s executive board repeated.

The evening meal was simple: glazed salmon with pineapple salsa, green beans, rice pilaf, assorted breads, and sorbet for dessert, along with several wines. The ventilation system allowed for cigar and pipe smoking. Snifters of Remy Martin all around.

Chairman Akebe Cheron abstained from the alcohol, save one glass of Dominus Estate 2012 Bordeaux with his salmon. Sober, somber and dark, he began the official proceedings with their organization's pledge.

"Let us stand."

All stood and recited, "We are the Directorate. We humbly accept our role as the overseers of the free world's institutions, and where necessary we will carry out our duty to prune out those hinderances that prevent the healthy advancement of the American culture. Duty. Honor. Oversight. Always loyal to the Directorate." They took their seats.

Each executive poured over the spreadsheets from the ops center. The successful entries were highlighted in green, the failures in red. Alarmed at what they were reading, they murmured their surprise and looked at Akebe.

"The primary item on our agenda tonight is the efficacy of our current operations officer, Andrew Johansen. You have seen the monthlies. In the last month out of seventeen attempts, only two were successful at removing an obstructionist. So the format of your presentation tonight will be as follows: first your reports on your areas of expertise, then state your position on Johansen's termination. I'll go first, then around the table to my right."

Akebe Cheron briefed on the history of his control of senior officials in the federal government, state governments and specific departments, Defense Department, National Security

Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation and all law enforcement agencies from the US Attorney General down to police officers on the streets.

“I estimate an increase of our hypnotic control over government agencies from twenty-five percent this time last year to thirty-two percent this year. I’m not satisfied with this increment, but that’s where we are. Most substantial progress is in the executive branch with our current president totally under my control, advancing a communist agenda that is weakening our local police forces and ushering in an unprecedented era of chaos. He has also degraded the strength and morale of the military by appointing senior leaders who are totally submissive to our hypnosis. They are incapable of any coherent strategy and they are infecting the military culture with social experimentation that is ruining key war-fighting units in all branches.

“The rest of my report dovetails with your departments, since government control is pervasive over everything, so I will hold my comments on those specifics until after your briefings.

“Now about Andrew Johansen our operations officer. Here’s how we will proceed. Romano, since you trained and recruited Andrew, I will ask you to recuse yourself from the final vote, but your comments on his viability are most welcomed. I will have a vote on his continuation or termination when it comes time for that.

“I will say this. You can see from the reports in front of you that there’s a fly in the ointment, my comrades. You know where that expression comes from? Anyone?”

Vacant stares from the directors.

“Well if you illiterates knew your Bible you would recall Ecclesiastes, the tenth chapter, the first verse, and I quote, ‘Dead flies make a perfumer’s oil ferment and stink; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor’,” said the Chairman. (Eccl. 10:1 HCSB)

“A fly?” said Olivia. “Whoever or whatever is messing up our pruning operation is more effective than a bug. Our system is broken. We need to examine every link in this chain and find out where the disconnect lies.”

Randal Sanford agreed. His voice slurred from the wine, “There’s a fly. A real aggressive, dangerous fly that has found a vulnerable entry point in our system. Someone’s behind it. Some evil cockroach of a human being that’s attacking our operators.”

Donald Snow asked, “What does our operations officer have to say about all these failures? Fifteen losses against two wins is pathetic.”

“Finally, the right question,” said Akebe. “Andrew briefed me on his last failed target, the Stone woman in Arkansas.”

###

One Week Earlier

Old Gabriella spoke to the sand crab that was desperately trying to escape from the sea gull’s beak, slashing with his pinchers at the gull’s eyes.

“Mr. Crab, for nine decades I’ve watched your ancestors in their struggle with gulls and I’ve never seen one crab win.”

The Atlantic had calmed down from last night’s spring rain. Gabriella felt the rhythm of the ocean lapping gently against the granite shelf below her ledge, where the gulls dined on sand crabs every day. She set her face to the soft breeze. Her thick black hair danced on her shoulders.

“Up you go, Mr. Crab,” she said.

The gull soared high into the morning twilight with the flailing crab in her beak. Then she released it with deadly aim, dropping it onto the rocky table where it cracked open. The gull swooped gracefully down to her breakfast. She turned one black eye in Gabriella's direction.

"Most coastal folks consider you a troublemaker, dear bird. And I'm sure the crabs think you're evil, but you and I know you're one of the Master's fine creatures. Enjoy your breakfast. I'm getting another assignment."

Gabriella looked into the slowly brightening sky and listened. "*Anna Stone is their next target. Protect her,*" said the voice.

Gabriella smiled. "Let me see how I can stop these evil murderers one more time."

###

Doctor Anna Stone put the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher, dried her hands and called upstairs to her husband and daughter. "I'm taking off now."

"Okay bye," said Paul.

Anna's mouth bunched up when she was perturbed, so as she looked up the cluttered stairway her mouth bunched up. "Hey, you guys forget something? I said I'm leaving the house now."

Paul appeared on the landing with Melissa perched on his hip. "Mommy wants her kisses," he said.

He made his way downstairs. "Oh, I forgot to tell you something your daughter said yesterday."

"What?" said Anna.

“So we’re picking up the clothes from church. Four boxes of stuff from the clothing drive, right?”

Melissa twirled her little pink finger in her father’s ear.

“Cut it out, kid.”

The four-year-old grinned at her mother.

“Anyway, we put the boxes in the van, right? And deliver them to Salvation Army. I strap the kid in her carseat, and guess what she says?”

“Can’t imagine.”

“She says, ‘Daddy, are we thieves?’”

Anna looked at her little cherub, shook her head and laughed. “Where do you get this stuff?”

Paul leaned over. He took the left cheek, Melissa took the right and gave Anna her kisses.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

Anna cruised through her hometown of Cabot and swung up the onramp to Route 167 South toward North Little Rock. Winter was all through with Arkansas. For the first time since November Anna opened the Camry’s moonroof, pressed the buttons to lower the windows and let the Spring air ruffle her long auburn hair. Willie Nelson’s version of *Uncloudy Day* was blasting out of the new Kenwood sound system Paul installed for her birthday. Traffic was light on Anna’s familiar commute down the highway.

About a half mile before her exit onto Kiehl Avenue Anna saw a woman ahead sitting on the guardrail. Anna slowed. The woman was cradling a baby in her arms. *What the heck?* Anna clicked off the music. She pulled into the breakdown lane, stopped the car and walked back to

see if she could help the woman when the shock wave knocked her on her face before she heard the explosion. She flew into the air and landed hard on the pavement. Shards of asphalt and concrete dust fell all over her back. Still conscious, Anna inspected her skinned palms, elbows and knees. The woman and baby were gone.

###

Andrew Johansen leaned back in his black graphite ergonomic office chair, eyes glaring at the six-foot, high-definition screen on the wall above his operations console. He kept playing the North Little Rock explosion over and over searching for Anna Stone's red Camry, but no matter how many times he analyzed the video, he could not see any vehicles crossing the bridge on Highway 167 when his explosion went off.

Then he widened the view and there it was, Anna Stone's car. It was stopped by the guardrail fifty feet away from the smoking crater. He ran the recording again, and saw the chiropractor laying on the pavement, covered with grey dust.

"Maybe I got her," he said.

Andrew zoomed in on Anna's prone form. He leaned forward and peered into the big flat screen above his console. *Are you dead? Are you dead? Please be dead.*

"Oh crap. You're moving. You're alive. You're getting up. Why can't you just die like you're supposed to?"

Andrew banged his fists on the console. He put his hands against his temples and leaned his elbows on the countertop.

Despite his fury at the blown assassination attempt, Andrew still remembered to post the false notifications on the internet giving ISIS credit for the bridge explosion in Arkansas.

“Got to be some explanation.”

Something went wrong again. He flicked the space bar on one of his keyboards activating a spreadsheet listing all current operations. In the last five weeks, only two of seventeen hits were successful. All six of his squads had at least two failures, Bravo and Echo Squads had three each and Delta Squad now had three failures including this one.

So far Andrew was able to lay the blame on his squad leaders, but now he was sensing a need for a more intricate strategy to deflect responsibility away from him. In this risky line of work, the consequence for poor performance was terminal, and that didn't mean termination from the job, but termination from the planet.

He knew the risks when he signed up with the Directorate. His elevation to this position of operations officer was gradual and handled very carefully. By the time he reached this level he had realized that many eyes were watching and many specialists were evaluating him—mentally, psychologically, socially, physically and morally.

He knew the Directors found in him a rare mix of attributes: the pathology of a dissociative adoptee, the emotional isolation of a sociopath, the uncontrollable drive of a workaholic, a genius level intelligence, rabid patriotism and the look of a choirboy. Andrew felt no sense of joy or distress at this job, it was simply the kind of work at which he was exceptionally adept, and once he found what he was really good at, he was addicted.

One of the phones on his console buzzed. It was Bubba Whiting, the leader of the operational unit in charge of the Anna Stone assassination calling in his report.

“You messed up, idiot,” Andrew shouted into the phone.

“I don’t ignite the charge, Andrew, I just identify the target and place the explosives. And as you can see I did an excellent job,” Bubba said, his voice not displaying the slightest concern. “Stuff happens.”

“I’m going to put this to you in terms your neanderthal mind can absorb, Bubba. Your squad has failed three attacks in a row. Your earlier successes mean nothing in the face of all these failed attacks. America deserves better.”

###

Bubba Whiting, was sitting at his favorite table at the Generator Coffee House and Bakery on Shackelford Road in West Little Rock . He was enjoying their famous chocolate walnut pie and a cup of iced coffee. “Yeah, so what are you sayin’ Andrew?”

“I’m not sayin’ anything, Bubba, I’m doin’.”

Bubba dropped his cell phone as the glass wall that separated him from the sidewalk exploded from the gunfire of three AR-15 automatic rifles. One round grazed his right shoulder, and Bubba screamed, the pain searing his right side. He went to his knees next to two women who lay bloody beside him. He watched the three men in ski masks fire their weapons with grim smiles fixed on their mouths. Bullets zipped and cracked over Bubba’s head. Then everything went black. He never heard them yell, “Allah Akbar”, or saw them jump into the van they had stolen that morning and drive away before any police responded to yet another “Jihadist” mass shooting in America.

###

Akebe Cherone continued his briefing to the Directorate’s executive board. “This so-called holistic healer is a creature of habit. She drives from her house in Cabot to her office in

Sherwood Monday through Friday, nearly the same time every morning. This time, for some unknown reason the woman stopped her car a quarter mile short of the bridge where our squad placed the demo. There's a slight delay between the time Andrew pushes his remote igniter and when the actual charge goes off. He activated it with precisely the right lead time for the speed Anna Stone was driving. All this is recorded digitally on his computer. But Stone stopped her car and got out right when Andrew triggers the demo, preventing her from being on the bridge when it goes off."

"Why would she do that?" asked Randal.

"Listen to our recording of her cell phone call right after the explosion hit the local news." And he pointed to the technician, "Play that recording, number 338."

Over the speakers in the ceiling came the voices of Paul and Anna Stone:

"Are you okay, honey?" (Paul Stone)

"Yeah, I stopped my car just before the bridge blew up." (Anna Stone)

"Why?" (Paul Stone)

"There was a woman with a baby on her lap sitting on the guardrail there. I thought I could help her, so I stopped. Then the bomb went off and I was tossed in the air and I landed on my face." (Anna Stone)

"Wow, you get hurt?" (Paul Stone)

"My hands, elbows and knees are all scraped up, but nothing serious." (Anna Stone)

"What about the woman?" (Paul Stone)

"Never saw her again. Weird. She either hopped the guardrail with the baby and ran for it, or she disappeared into thin air." (Anna Stone)

“She’s covering for somebody,” slurred Randal. “She knows damn well why she stopped her car. Somebody tipped her off, and we gotta root him out and get rid of him.”

Frances O’Donnelly weighed in. “Take it easy there, slugger. Anna had no reason to be secretive on the phone with her husband. She’s a naive little country doctor and she has no idea that her phone is being bugged. If someone warned her about an attack on her life, she surely wouldn’t have left the house at all. She would have called the police. And there was definitely no police presence at the point of the explosion. It took nearly five minutes for anyone to respond. No, she never got an actual warning. But there is certainly something going on here. She sounded convinced that she saw a woman and a child in distress, and she stopped to assist them.”

“Enough, people,” said Akebe. “The question I have laid on the table is whether or not Andrew Johansen is the right person to hold the pivotal position of operations officer for the Directorate. I am leaning toward removing him.

“That concludes my report, next is Romano Goldstein, director of Healthcare and Pharmaceutical Control, give your report first, then your assessment of Johansen.”

“I’ll be brief,” said Romano.

“That’ll be a first,” said Randal.

“For over twenty years we have successfully invaded the culture of America’s medical establishment—from their medical schools to the legislation governing their practices to the unbreakable ties they have with the large pharmaceutical corporations. The new overarching Affordable Care Act, expertly engineered by our chairman, has effectively bonded the network of health insurance companies and government bureaucrats to health care providers, so as to ensure total control over all medical practitioners. Medical doctors no longer diagnose illnesses or in-

juries and look for cures. They just read our detailed protocols and prescribe chemicals that will temporarily mask any symptoms. This process enables our agents and the physicians under their control to continue issuing mind-numbing chemicals into the brains of American citizens.

“The chief threats to our operations are people like Anna Stone who refuse to accept the medical establishment’s protocols. There’s still a large number of so-called ‘alternative medicine’ people who obstruct our efforts. This is where Andrew and his pruning squads are most necessary.

“The chief threats to our operations are people like Anna Stone who refuse to accept the medical establishment’s protocols and those few well educated physicians who have somehow escaped our brainwashing mechanisms in med school.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” said Francis, “but who, for instance? Can you name anyone?”

Dr. Goldstein stammered just enough to reveal his reluctance to answer. “This Doctor Ben Carson, for instance. He’s radically conservative, devoutly religious and absurdly fixated on his insane views about how to care for the sick.”

Olivia jumped in, “Yes, and how many times has our brilliant operations officer tried to take him out? Four? Five?”

“As our chairman has mentioned, there have been too many failed assassination attempts, and whoever is gumming up the works is especially protective of this Carson buffoon. This is exactly why Andrew and his pruning squads are so essential to our ultimate success.

“So here is my assessment of Andrew ...”

“Briefly, I’m begging you,” said Randal.

“Andrew Johansen,” continued Romano Goldstein, “is a rare amalgamation of human traits. He’s a sociopath, certified by myself and my staff at the Loving Center, where as you know I preside over one of the world’s most brilliant staff of psychologists. His intelligence quotient is at genius level. He has no family ties, and he suffers from a pathological disassociate disorder that keeps him from caring about any other human being. He’s also an addictive workaholic. All these so-called disorders make him the perfect specimen to work as our operations officer whose job it is to execute all the pruning orders we give him.

“That, Randal is my brief description of Andrew Johansen. My only advice to the board is that when you consider your vote for his elimination, remember, it will be very difficult to find a replacement.”

Akebe said, “Thank you Romano. Good report. Randal, you’re up next.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Randal, “business and finance have seen a couple major leaps forward, thanks partly to Akebe’s influence over congress with the passing of the Patriot Act, and keeping it in effect, despite all the misguided attempts to repeal it. This law gives us unprecedented access to just about every list in America. We have deep roots in all the databases where the NSA and the FBI are rapidly harvesting personal information on every US citizen. The illegals are causing us some problems, though. I don’t know what we’re doing accepting so many of them. They’re hard to track.

“Anyway, as you know I have been elected chairman of the board at Columbine Capitol and I have installed my people in all the key positions. We have enhanced our capability to digitally invade every TV network and alter their broadcasts so the public gets only the information we want them to get.”

“Example, please,” said Donald.

“Sure. One of the networks, I think it was Fox, did an interview with this free-thinking jerk of a Navy Seal Veteran, can’t remember his name. He’s telling the camera that his treatment for PTSD at the VA is all messed up. He says all the doctor does is look in his cook book—that’s what he had the gall to call it—and dish out meds. Then he talks about how he went to a homeopathic practitioner for treatment, and he gets better—healed, he says from the mental trauma. Well you know we don’t want to spread that kind of garbage, so my guys just grab the broadcast out of thin air, reprogram it and have the soldier tell the world how great his VA doctor is.

“On top of that we now have identified several new targets that are obstructing our successful campaign of controlling the minds of all Americans.”

Frances O’Donnelly asked, “Any names, Randal, in the business world?”

“Well most notable is this guy Donald Trump, big real estate billionaire and TV personality. He’s making noises about running for president.”

“President of what?” said Frances.

“President of our good old U S of A, God bless her.”

“Ridiculous,” said Frances, “Trump couldn’t get nominated, never mind elected. Don’t waste our resources going after such an imbecile.”

The rest of the board of directors erupted in scoffing laughter, all except for Akebe whose grey pallor grew even darker with the mention of Trump’s name.

“Fine, then I’ll take Trump off Andrew’s list then,” said a sulking Randal.

“But I want to weigh in on what to do with Andrew. I say we keep him. He has created an entire network of ingenious technological advancements without which my operations would be

impossible. Just last month he came up with that plan to use structures that look like cellphone towers to broadcast mind-controlling microwaves. Good plan. That's it from me."

Akebe listened intently to his board. He heard nothing new from Olivia Kingston who briefed on her programs to expand the food industry's degradation of the nutritional value of processed food. Her only advance seemed to be in the increased popularity of energy drinks that are successfully poisoning the younger age groups. She also mentioned her direct control over Monsanto, and like Sanders, she has placed Directorate agents in key positions in that company.

"My research shows," Olivia said, "that over sixty-five percent of the US population buys into Monsanto's propaganda. I'm reading from their website here, 'Monsanto works with farmers from around the world to make agriculture more productive and sustainable. Our technologies enable farmers to get more from every acre of farmland. Specifically, we are working to double yields in our core crops by 2030'."

"Right," said Randal, "but you have your threats. The Organic Consumers Association has to be taken out. And we need more visibility on the protestors. By my last count we have only terminated a dozen or so of these radicals. You have more problems than you realize, lady."

Olivia cast him a look of superiority from her well-bred, nearly masculine face, molded by centuries of aristocratic DNA.

Akebe said, "And your position on our operations officer, Olivia?"

"Randal's so misguided on this. We need to get rid of the arrogant slob."

Randal said, "Olivia, you can't see beyond your bigotry. Andrew is an essential asset to the Directorate."

"That's enough, people," said Akebe. "Donald, your report on climate control."

“Well our latest pilot program to cause continuous cloud cover is ready to go national. We’ve blanketed the northeast US with almost continuous clouds for eight months. The only reason we allowed an occasional day of sunlight is so the locals wouldn’t realize how bad we are making it for them. The effects are phenomenal. We’re seeing a spike in clinical depression and suicides. We’re still studying the effects on how the lack of sunlight is having on general mental capacity.

“I want to thank Randal for manipulating the local and national weather broadcasts on TV. His people have been able to alter the weather reporting so when meteorologists report on the unusual stretches of cloudy days, our agents have effectively kept that information from the public. Even internet articles on the lack of sunshine get buried.

“The other program we have initiated since our last board meeting is causing droughts in those areas in California where the large organic farms have cropped up.

“ And, Chairman Cheron, your ingenious strategy of brainwashing key leaders in the government regarding global warming has created a marvelous smoke screen that has effectively concealed our meteorological manipulations. We have an iron grip on the scientific community. Not only are they publishing peer-reviewed papers and articles that support the climate hoax, they have spread their influence globally. And any free-thinking scholar who tries to publich or teach the truth gets ostracized, and often loses tenure.

“Now about Andrew Johansen, Olivia, you need to get some long-range perspective on this. The young man has served us well for what—fifteen years? Give the boy a break. Keep him on.”

Olivia stood up and banged the table. “He’s a failure. He’s the fly in the ointment.”

Randal said, “Pipe down, woman. You don’t know what you’re talking about. The fly is external.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me like that, you miserable drunk. I deserve more respect than that.”

Akebe raised his hand, just slightly. He smiled his disturbing grin. “Let’s stay on point, folks.”

Akebe watched the two powerful executives comply with his rebuke like children to a stern father. *Thank you Ogoun for giving me this controlling power.*

“Frances, your report on education control?”

“We are in the aggressive maintenance mode,” said Frances. “We’re well entrenched in all levels of public education from pre-school to post-doctorate. The leverage we have with government funding keeps them all in line. From the top down professors and teachers provide very little thought-provoking instruction. The students are not rewarded for understanding the principles behind the facts, just rote memory. Every curricula simply provides the formula for repetition and test-taking. The whole idea of standardized testing gives us a tremendous tool for control.

“When I say ‘aggressive maintenance’, I mean that we must continue pruning out the free thinkers who pop up all over the place. Usually it’s not teachers or professors, we have them pretty well brainwashed into our mold. The resistance is coming from students and their parents. When we hear of these dissenters we take about a year or so to hypnotize them, but if that doesn’t work we target them for elimination.

“Requiring the homeschoolers to register has been somewhat effective, especially in local school districts where we have solid Directorate servants as gatekeepers. These officials impose lots of barriers to the parents who try to set up homeschool programs. Andrew has my target list of these obstructionists.

“On the issue of terminating Andrew I can’t honestly judge him without seeing him. I’ve never met the man. I may have to delay my vote.”

“All right,” said Akebe. “Let’s take our vote and take a break. I will yield my chair to Romano since he is recused. Romano?”

“The issue before us tonight is whether to keep Andrew on as our operations officer, with the sole duty to execute our directives to prune out those independent thinkers who are impeding our progress toward the new American Excellence,” said Romano Goldstein.

“All those in favor of keeping Andrew Johansen in his position say ‘aye’.”

Randal Sanford, “Aye.”

Donald Snow, “Aye.”

“All those opposed say ‘nay’.”

Akebe Cheron, “Nay.”

Olivia Kingston, “Nay”

“Frances?” said Romano.

“I’m sorry to hold up this very important decision, but before I can cast my vote, I must meet with the man. I intend to go directly from here to Missouri to interview Andrew and view his operations center. I will notify the board of my vote afterwards. I’m sorry,” said Frances.

Romano said, “Well with that delay in place, we will table this discussion and I yield the chair back to you Akebe. Looks like Andrew will live to work at least a little longer.

“I yield the chair back to our chairman.”

Akebe spewed out a sigh of frustration. “We’re deadlocked. I was hoping we could dispense with this matter quickly, but I suppose we’ll have to live with Frances’ deliberations.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the board, we are being opposed by a fly in the ointment. It is a force that has found a way to thwart our noble efforts to change the face of America into a land free of dissent and obstructionist thinking. We will find the source of this force and eliminate it. In the meantime we will continue to control every institution, every organization, indeed, every human being in this country. We will right this floundering nation and set it on a new path of greatness under the control of our brilliant minds.

“We are the last remnant of great American patriots. Stand tall, my brothers and sisters in the battle for the new American Excellence.

“This meeting is adjourned. Please enjoy your stay on *Angelica* for as long as you desire, then return to your posts, refreshed and renewed.”

The board finished their meal and repaired to the ship’s auditorium to watch the German Film, *Goodbye Lenin!*, then to their plush staterooms.

A few minutes past midnight there was a soft knock at Akebe’s door. He opened it and welcomed the stately Olivia Kingston into his bedroom.

###

CHAPTER TWO

Across the continent on a granite outcropping just south of Cape Ann, Massachusetts a Gabriella stood with her face to the wind, focusing all her prophetic energy on the Directorate's meeting. Their high-tech security measures obscured the details of their conversations from her, but Gabriella was able to catch the gist. She made her way quickly up the rocks to her cottage where dinner was almost ready.

"The Directorate will be searching for us," Gabriella stated quietly as she placed the serving bowl of pasta on the dinner table. Before sitting down, the aged woman turned her back to the room, looked out the bay window and took her time scanning the Atlantic horizon beyond their rocky point. Past the visible realm Gabriella "saw" the shimmering formation of the angelic

platoon she had requested. They halted in the air above Cielavista where they would establish their field headquarters.

Gabriella's granddaughter and grandson-in-law waited respectfully for their perduring Nonina to take her seat at the head of the table. Accustomed as they were to the ancient Sicilian's agility, they still marveled at her inexhaustible energy. Gabriella spun on her toe and dipped onto her chair and slid it forward to the table, her lips murmuring in prayer.

"Who are these people?" said Sandy as she dished out the pesto pasta with chicken into three bowls while Sandy's husband, Henry poured the wine.

"The ones who are orchestrating all these murders," Gabriella said.

"Well, maybe we just have to hold off for a while," said Henry after his first sip.

"Oh, no, no no," said Gabriella, "many good, important people will die. We cannot let that happen. I have to continue protecting their targets. They have attempted to kill this Doctor Ben Carson fellow several times. But we must initiate countermeasures. Henry, you will take charge of that."

"No problem," Henry said.

Gabriella read his eyes. He didn't have the slightest inkling of what she was talking about. Gabriella knew that in twenty-eight years Henry Baker had never gotten comfortable living here with her and her granddaughter, where every daily event burst onto the calendar with unpredictable spontaneity.

Gabriella could see it coming—another raging episode roiling up in Henry's gut. *Lord, I know that but for your grace, this marriage would never have lasted a year.*

###

Henry was a nervous planner. It was his nature to create lists and calendars and budgets and charts, so when tomorrow broke, every eventuality was covered: enough food, gas, money, time, the right clothing, equipment, supplies, everything. But not here. Not at Cielavista.

For the thousandth time Henry constructed a calm veneer over the fire building in the left hemisphere of his brain as he observed his wife pour her affection on his grandmother-in-law.

From the kitchen, Henry called to his wife, “Sandy, honey, would you come in here for a sec?”

“What is it?” said Sandy. She could feel the tension radiating from Mister Neatness.

“Not a big thing, just thought I’d tell you. See this butter container?”

Sandy indeed saw the square plastic tub that contained a butter-like substance—supposed to be healthier than the real stuff made with cow’s milk. She felt the heat of Henry’s anger glaring off his words, and she braced herself for the ambush she knew awaited in Henry’s literal mind. “Yes, what about it?”

“Okay, see, this side is obviously the front of the tub. And when the lid is on the container, the printing on the lid should be right-side-up when you are looking at the front of the tub, right?”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at, Henry. There’s no right way to put the lid on the butter as long as it’s seated properly. It’s a square, so whichever way you put it on, the lid fits.”

“Well, maybe darling. But the way this product comes in the store, the lettering on the lid is aligned with the front of the box, so if it’s worth putting the lid on the container, it’s worth doing right. I mean it doesn’t take a few seconds to make sure the printing is readable from the front and the top, now does it?” said Henry.

“Here’s another thought,” said Sandy. “Let’s say I remove the lid like this and place it on the counter right next to the tub with the lettering facing front. And I dip two fingers into the butter like this and gob it on your shirt like this? How ‘bout that?”

Henry didn’t make any effort to remove the big glob of butter. He just looked at his mischievous wife and let the rage build up in his head.

Sandy backed quickly out of the kitchen, smiling.

“Not funny,” he said.

Henry changed his shirt, cleaned up the kitchen and put everything away, including the butter with the lid properly secured on the tub.

“I’m going to walk my rounds,” said Henry. “Meanwhile, dear Gabriella, how about coming up with a plan for what I’m supposed to do to keep the bad guys from the gates.”

Henry heard Gabriella whisper to Sandy, “I’m afraid you’ve upset your husband again.”

He refilled his wineglass and carried it with him as he went out of the cottage through the yard toward the stone mansion at the center of Villa Cielavista.

###

In the soft twilight drifting into the dining room, Sandy said, “Nonina, sometimes I don’t know whether to admire you or have you committed.”

Sandy got up from the table and came over behind Gabriella and draped her arm over her grandmother’s bony shoulder.

“You eat three bites of dinner, take a sip of the vino and walk out to your rock. You stay out there on the point until after midnight and then you sleep a couple hours and you have an

espresso and some toast. You write for a while, have some fruit salad and out you go again. Yet you are stronger than any of us. How do you do it, my love?"

Gabriella feathered her calloused hand over the arm Sandy laid across her shoulder. "You are the one to be admired my daughter. I thank my God for you. You and that obsessive Henry of yours. You take care of everything."

Dusk was approaching the shoreline, transforming the joyfully brilliant sky into a chalky amber-grey. Gabriella rose from her coffee and biscotti at the dining room table and turned again to the big bay window.

"What?" Sandy asked, recognizing once again the familiar power radiating from Gabriella's body when she was "seeing".

"Get your laptop, dear."

Gabriella closed her eyes. Sandy went upstairs to her room, returned to the dining room, sat down at the table and waited for her grandmother to turn around. Sandy closed her eyes and felt something new massaging her inner mind. She felt Gabriella sit down beside her and she opened her eyes.

"See if there's a news alert about an attempted murder on a chief justice," the old lady said with a wave of her boney fingers toward the computer.

Sandy glanced at Gabriella's face then at her screen, tapped some keys and the CNN website came up.

The headline read, *U.S. Takes Cuba Off State-Sponsored Terrorism List*. The women waited a few seconds. A red banner coursed across the top of the page: *News Alert: Chief Justice Anton Scalia Escapes Attempt On His Life*.

Sandy clicked on the banner and a brief paragraph gave scant details of the incident.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Anton Scalia was the target of a sniper attack this afternoon at his home in McClean Virginia. Justice Scalia was getting into his car in the driveway of his home in the secluded neighborhood of Colony Estates when three rounds struck the car's driver-side window, inches away from Scalia's head. The elderly judge miraculously escaped being struck down by the sniper. More details of this story to follow.

“Snipers don’t miss,” said Sandy. “What did you do?”

“I’ve been doing this for over eighty years, and every incident amazes me. I’ve never done anything like this before.

“The Spirit prompted me to create a wall of energy in the path of the bullets between the sniper’s rifle and his target. Evidently this mass of vibrating ions slightly deformed each projectile, causing them to deviate from the victim in the sniper’s cross hairs.”

“Why wouldn’t you just eliminate the murderer?”

Gabriella turned her face to her granddaughter and she looked into her eyes. “My precious Sandy. Did you feel anything in your soul a few minutes ago?”

Sandy took a deep breath, inhaling some of Gabriella’s fragrance and aura. “Yes, Nonina.”

“Soon you will be inheriting this spiritual gift, and then you will understand those mysteries that you cannot understand.

“Our enemy is getting better at masking their brutal plans. I’ll be on my rock, dear. Our heavenly helpers have arrived. Have a peaceful evening.”

Gabriella kissed her granddaughter on the forehead and walked softly through the french doors and down her path to the granite ledge on the water.

###

This majestic thirty-acre rock, covered with manicured forest and gardens, had a profoundly stabilizing effect on Henry's engineer mind. He had studied how the natural footings of granite were permanently embedded the bowels of the earth, and he sensed a permanence of structure here against the unceasing agitation of the ocean. A masterpiece of hydrogeology, the massive outcropping stood impenetrable to the relentless crashing waves that battered its bulwarks. The solid landmass provided Henry a counterbalance to Gabriella's unpredictability and the chaotic lifestyle it spawned.

He approximated Gabriella's age at over one hundred and five. She was Sandy's grandmother and Sandy was fifty two. Add about twenty-five years for each generation and the old lady had to have been born just after nineteen-hundred. And she could be a lot older, given the fact that some of those Sicilian families had a dozen children, and she talked about some of her younger brothers and sisters. Her history and her origin were shrouded in mystery and murky legends.

From where he stood at the edge of the lawn behind the cottage Henry looked down and watched Gabriella climb down the ledges on the cliff like a teenage gymnast. Despite his animosity for her, he had to admit he was fascinated by the old lady's physical and psychic prowess.

The rusty-grey granite rocks heading down to the tideline were stacked by nature like a pile of toy blocks. The first length of Gabriella's path was a natural flight of stairs, but in other places she had to climb down backwards on her knees and stretch out with her thin, muscular

legs to reach the next foothold. She ended her descent at a shelf of rock, split in two by a deep crevice that she had to jump across to get to her meditation spot. Henry watched her take two graceful running steps and leap over the wide gap with her tiny right foot outstretched and her left leg trailing, until she landed down softly on the opposite ledge. There, on that one rock she waged her invisible war with the wealthy elitists who systematically targeted and destroyed mindful men and women whose noble character and curious minds posed a threat to their insidious stratagems.

Henry's anger dissipated as he sipped his Burgundy and strolled through the herb garden taking in the fragrances of basil, mint and thyme. He looked up at the tops of the blue spruce trees inexplicably waving to him against the sky without a breeze to disturb their branches. He dismissed what he saw as just one more curious fluke he had no desire to explain.

The angel assigned to protect Henry stopped shaking the treetop and watched his reaction.

Henry was thinking back to the summer of 1985. He and Sandy were both twenty-three.

###

Henry had found himself breezing through all his coursework at Northeastern University in Boston, unaware of his excellent performance. He never checked his grades. He just threw himself into his studies and the job the school assigned him in the work-study portion of his college career. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Office hired him for twenty hours a week during the school year and full-time during semester breaks.

“Give him a brush on the cheek,” Michael said to Tobias. Tobias turned to the archangel and smiled. He floated down over the brooding human and fluttered his invisible fingers across Henry’s face.

Henry wasn’t startled, he just absently flicked his hand at the feeling and chuckled to himself.

Henry was recalling when he joined the understaffed engineering division of the Boston branch of the FBI. He soon realized that this division occupied the lowest priority in the budget. The engineers weren’t involved in the planning of security operations, they only served as advisors to the regional director for matters of construction of barriers, diagrams and layouts of buildings they needed to secure or enter.

Tobias, drifting above Henry’s head, decided to improvise and he hummed a few bars of Henry’s favorite song, “Up Where We Belong”. Henry found himself softly singing the lyrics.

Unfazed by the spiritual interruption, Henry continued his reverie, remembering his impression of the engineering division chief, Shirley Devens. She could serve as the poster child for all that’s wrong with federal employees. The ponderous, fifty-something bureaucrat would establish herself every morning in her specially-designed office chair at exactly 8:00 a.m. Monday through Friday. She moved only three times daily, once at exactly nine-thirty to use the lady’s room for nearly half an hour, then at noon for her hour lunch on the second floor of the Thomas P. O’Neill Federal Building, and at 3:00 p.m. to visit the lady’s room again. At her desk she ruled her little nearly-irrelevant division of the Boston FBI with astonishing incompetence and an iron fist.

Tobias tried something else. He rose aloft above the towering spruce trees that bordered the herb garden and spoke Henry's name. "Henry."

Henry calmly looked around, but dismissed what he thought he heard, too deeply involved with his memories.

Within a few weeks at the Federal Bureau of Investigation Henry realized that as long as he arrived on time and stayed until 5:00 p.m., he could do pretty much whatever he wanted, so he explored the Bureau's databases with the fervor of a zealous monk. He had immediate and incredibly rapid access to the detailed plans for every major building in every major city in the US and most of the major cities in the world. And he discovered the information systems for all the nation's transportation networks. Eventually he purchased three high capacity hard drives and downloaded the information on them so he could study them at home.

"Having fun on the computer?" Mrs. Deven's gravelly voice inquired from her corner cubicle through the cloth and metal partition to Henry's work station next to hers.

"Just learning what I can, ma'am," Henry said, suppressing the familiar burst of anger.

"How 'bout delivering these reports to the director's office," she said.

"Right away," he responded and quickly logged out of his internet search and stepped into her cube.

"These?" he picked up an inner-office envelope.

"Yeah, time sheets and a bunch of forms we have to fill out weekly. Thanks."

Henry navigated the maze of alleys through government-grey cubicle partitions on the fifth floor of the O'Neil Federal Building on his way to the director's office. He walked by the agents' area. Henry had little use for the neanderthals who investigated federal crimes and chased

down the criminals. Over the several months of his employment in the engineering division he kept himself at a polite distance. He knew they perceived him as a paper-pushing pansy of a clerk and gave him a continuously more aggressive hard time.

He heard snickering and a crusty voice call, "Hey, Wussy."

Henry felt the trigger in the deep recesses of his brain. A torrent of epinephrine gushed through his nervous system. He controlled it, and he kept on walking, keenly aware of the drumming in his head and the churning in his gut. He was sweating and red-faced when he delivered the forms to the director's secretary's desk.

"Thank you," the young woman said without looking up.

On Henry's way back through the maze, Billy Mahoney stood leaning against the pillar of his cubicle, his coffee mug handle looped in his trigger finger. "How ya doin', Wuss?"

A blinding, white light flashed inside Henry's eyes and he found himself on the floor straddling over Billy, whose nose was surging blood. Billy's service pistol was in Henry's hand, cocked and aimed at Billy's terrified, bloody face.

"Keep your weapons holstered," Henry heard himself say to the agents who had rushed to the ruckus, "or this little incident will get much more serious." His voice was calm, his words measured.

"We're cool," the senior agent said. "This little moment has already been forgotten. Let's just get back to our jobs, okay?"

Henry hopped up, stepped back from the trembling field agent who was trying to grovel to his feet. He set the Beretta pistol on safe, popped out the magazine and racked the slide back,

ejecting the nine millimeter round from the chamber. He handed the pistol, magazine and bullet to Luis Valencia, the senior agent and walked back through the maze to the engineering division.

No one ever mentioned the tussle again. Billy Mahoney decided to request a transfer to the Phoenix, Arizona office for his wife's health.

In the thirty years since that episode, Henry experienced hundreds of raging bouts, some violent, some loud, all hurtful to others and himself. His wife, Sandy was the most frequent target of his outbursts. But as he aged, the ferocity of his fits diminished, but the frequency increased.

Tobias decided he had bothered Henry enough for one night and returned to the angelic base. Michael said, "Tobias, Henry belongs to you. Respond to his every request."

Henry's time at the FBI was useful to him as a developing engineer and as a student. He taught himself how to read complicated drawings of all kinds, structural, electrical, plumbing, utility systems, sewers, storm drainage, highway, air and sea ports and the national electric grid. And he copied almost all of them onto his two-terabyte hard drives. His academic classes were a breeze. He graduated from Northeastern magna cum laude, and he didn't even realize it, not bothering to walk the graduation ceremony with his classmates. He never established any kind of friendships there.

Mrs. Devens offered Henry a full-time job in her department after one of her three engineers got promoted a few months before Henry graduated. Henry accepted her offer. Not only did it pay him enough to rent a small apartment in Danvers, own a used Honda and have some discretionary income to eat out and support his fishing addiction, he got to enjoy the luxury of not having to do any real work.

Then he met Sandy.

###

When the Massachusetts weather permitted, Henry's Saturday routine included a big breakfast at Candee's Kitchen in Gloucester after a morning of fishing from 4:00 a.m. to seven. One May Saturday morning Henry ordered his usual breakfast—a thick slab of ham, home-fried potatoes, buttered toast, four fried eggs, over-easy and a bottomless cup of black coffee—listed on Candee's menu as the "Hungry Helmsman". Half-way through his pile of greasy food and half-way through a scathing article in the Boston Herald by sports writer, Joe Gordon, hotly criticizing Red Sox manager, Ralph Houk for keeping Rainey in the game after allowing three runs in the fifth, Henry noticed this tall, striking brunette at the take-out counter. She wore a faded blue man's dress shirt, loose kaki pants and a confident, unselfconscious attitude. Her smile and cheery conversation with Candee over the counter cast something pleasant and intense at Henry's heart. The careless outfit couldn't conceal what Henry saw—a gorgeous figure, a beautiful face and a vivacious countenance.

For seven consecutive Saturdays Henry studied this compelling woman dressed in the same indifferent clothes, as she picked up her order at Candee's counter. Henry carried her image around in his memory all week from Saturday to Saturday. Then on the seventh Saturday Henry finally felt noticed. Looking up over the top edge of his paper, he briefly met the gaze of the lovely brunette in the loose shirt and baggy kakis. Henry nodded. She held his gaze for a few meaningful seconds, enough to communicate interest. Then out she went with a quick look back over her broad, square shoulder, a look that stirred Henry in the gut—a look that offered promise.

The next Saturday Henry decided to sit on the old wooden bench by the take-out counter waiting for Sandy to arrive in her beat-up El Camino and he said, “Hello”.

“Hi,” Sandy said. “Seen you around here. You a fisherman?”

That started it.

In the months that Henry got to know Sandy he became more and more fascinated with her life. She lived with her ancient grandmother on a high-priced, secluded stretch of cliff overlooking Magnolia Bay, a few miles south of Gloucester. When he drove there to meet her for their first date, he was struck, not by any display of extravagance because at Cielavista there was no such display, but by a deep stirring in his spirit. Never before had Henry been aware of such a sensation—couldn’t figure out what was going on inside himself.

Henry was late arriving at Cielavista, having missed Woodlawn Avenue, the hard-to-notice road from Gloucester to Magnolia—no signpost. Then trying to find Shore Drive, the unpaved lane off Woodlawn Avenue that swept through the thick woods along the coast—frustrating. Henry missed it twice because it was hidden by brush and overhanging branches. Eventually he found the narrow dirt road through the woods, dark even at high noon. He urged his Honda slowly over several miles of bumps and ruts.

The estate first announced its presence on the left side of the lane with a high wrought iron fence, interrupted by a series of fieldstone pillars every fifty feet. The fence ran for over a mile. Henry was thinking, *how big is this place? Talk about secluded from the outside world.*

Then the wide, unguarded gate, supported by huge fieldstone pillars on each side gave way to a pea-stone driveway that wound through a manicured wood—still no view of any build-

ings. Henry's fears and uncertainties were somehow assuaged by a strange, calming spirit that hovered over the property.

Finally, after what seemed like miles, an imposing granite mansion appeared down the hill before him through the trees. Surrounded by meticulously pruned hedges and fastidiously trimmed gardens the three-story colonial style manse gave Henry the impression of a grand, yet comfortable castle. He stopped his car on the high ground overlooking the stately home to absorb the effect this property was having on him. Not a hint of intimidation—just safety and security.

Behind and to the right of the big house was a substantial stucco bungalow, then the Atlantic, then the distant horizon and then the sky. The grounds around the two buildings were laid out in a careful array of lawns, gardens, fruit orchards and wispy fields of high grass.

The tires of Henry's Honda crunched to a stop near the portico of the mansion. Sandy skipped across the grass to Henry's car, pulled open the passenger-side door and sat beside him. Evidently she decided to upgrade her wardrobe today from the familiar faded outfit to a light green V-neck jersey and black cotton slacks.

"You look nice," Henry managed.

"Thanks. Pull around to our house in back. How are you, Henry?" She smiled at him.

"Sorry I'm late," Henry said. "I felt like I was on a scavenger hunt, trying to find this place. You could have a war here and no one would even hear it."

She looked over at him and their eyes met. Henry noticed a touch of extra color on her lips and her dark hair was nicely arranged today. Having her seated so close to him made him pleasantly nervous.

"You look a bit flustered, Henry. You okay?" she asked.

He guided the Honda around the driveway toward the smaller house near the cliff.

“Heh, heh, heh,” chuckled Henry. “This may not be the right way to say it, but you ever go fishing?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“And that feeling right when you get a strike, and you know the fish is hooked, that rush of excitement?”

“Henry, you are such a romantic. I’m getting some of that too,” she laughed. “Which one of us is the fish?”

As they approached the bungalow she said, “Yeah, pull in right here. Good.” And she hopped out and waited for Henry at the foot of the steps leading up to the porch.

“Grandma and I live here. Come on in,” she said and walked through the screen door ahead of Henry. He let the door clack behind him against the wood frame and stepped with Sandy through the foyer into the living room.

“Grandma’s praying out on her rock. We’re alone so you can kiss me,” she said turning to him with a grin.

So he did.

###

On their next date Henry took Sandy out on his thirty-foot fishing boat past the horizon and he dropped anchor in a calm, flat sea. He fired up the gas grill, and put on the flounder he’d just caught and cleaned, unfolded a stainless steel table and spread a linen cloth over it, lit a candle in a hurricane lamp, set the table with silver, china and crystal, poured champagne and sat across from his girlfriend.

“Tell me about your life,” he said.

Sandy sipped the champagne and nibbled on a cracker covered with caviar and said, “I suppose I should start with my grandmother, okay?”

Henry nodded. Twilight in the eastern sky was giving way to Vega, the evening star.

“My grandmother, Gabriella Quartarone spent her first ten years in Aci Trezza, Sicily. She lived in one of the homes in the seaside villa of her great uncle, Don Giovanni Quartarone, the *padrino* of one of the most prosperous and influential families in Catania Province. Don Giovanni’s father and uncles had built a wide network of enterprises from their small fishing fleet, to a pair of cargo vessels to an ever-expanding global merchant marine fleet, eventually adding several international banks and steel plants to their corporate empire.”

Henry served the flounder al la Moutarde with home fried red potatoes and onions, mixed vegetables and baguettes. He refilled the champagne glasses and set water bottles on the table.

“Hope you like flounder,” he said.

“If you’re trying to impress a girl, you might be getting there,” said Sandy. “Mind if I say a quick blessing?”

“Fine.”

“Lord, thank you for all you provide. Bless this meal with your grace. Amen.”

“Okay,” said Henry, “where were you?”

Sandy savored a bite of the fish and closed her eyes for a few seconds. “Man, this is really good. Let’s see.

“When Gabriella was born there were thirty-six people living at the villa in Sicily, all *famiglia estesa*. Her mother died of small pox two years after Gabriella’s birth, so her aunt Maria assumed responsibility for her upbringing.

“Some of Maria’s family moved to the United States in the early nineteen hundreds and set up a trading company in Gloucester, and purchased what is now Cielavista, the villa on Magnolia Bay. They had amassed enough money to maintain the property into perpetuity. Gabriella became the sole owner of Cielavista by outliving the rest of her extended family. As you have noticed, Gabriella and I live in the cottage near the cliff. She gave the big stone house over to her landscaper, Carlos Santiago and his extended family. So now it’s just me and my grandma in the cottage and her adopted family in the mansion.”

###

Henry’s reverie was interrupted by a friendly shout from the driveway of the big house. It was Carlos Santiago, the head groundskeeper and patriarch of the clan that lived in the stone mansion.

“*Hola, Senior Henri. Como se va?*” Carlos’ body wasn’t much bigger than a twelve-year-old boy—tight, compact and lithe. But his brown, leathery face and long, white mane of hair affirmed his true age. He was a great-grandfather. He drove over to Henry on his golf cart and said, “Hop in, chief.”

Henry smiled at his good friend. “Can’t join you tonight, Carlos. I have to come up with a security scheme for Gabriella. She’s concerned that there may be a threat against us. But, hey, tomorrow night let’s get together. I’m gonna need your help, okay?”

“Fine with me. See you *mañana*.” Before he drove away he said, “How do you like your new body guard?”

Henry gave Carlos a curious scowl, “What’re you talking about?”

“Oh, I guess you haven’t met him yet. *No problema*,” and he waved and drove into the pine grove beyond the herb garden.

Henry spent the next six hours on his home computer connected to the FBI data base. First he reviewed the latest updates of his colleagues at *PEAR - Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research*. Then he combed the criminal data base, locating the incident file on the North Little Rock explosion.

“There’s gotta be a way,” Henry said to his computer, “to block our enemy from getting a fix on our location here at Cielavista.”