

Chapter 9

The early morning frost held the earth in a trance, its creatures awaiting rescue by the rising sun. Rachel leaned on the gazebo railing watching wisps of mist spiral up like smoke from the lake. There was peace in the stillness, in nature. Perhaps one day she'd have more time to notice it. She glanced doubtfully at the man next to her looking through a pair of binoculars. The fair-haired man was Mason's replacement and, despite a pleasant appearance, his style of communication was irksome. He had an uppity tone and an indifferent demeanor, like he was bored with everyone but himself. Suddenly a sound like the cocking of a pistol came from the binoculars and Rachel backed away with a scowl.

"That's just the field glasses taking a picture," Tristan informed her. "Handy feature." He directed the glasses down the only path that led to the gazebo. "Now... What's so urgent that it couldn't wait for our next scheduled meet?"

Rachel resisted the urge to say, *Why do you think?* Instead, she replied, "They've decided to eliminate Cara. I'm sure of it now."

"Why so certain?" he asked, continuing to peer through the lenses.

You'd know the answer to that question if you'd read the brief, she thought, and would have said it along with a few expletives had she not promised Mason she'd give the man a chance.

Apparently, Tristan spent all his years in the Resistance as manager of a copper mine in the DRC, very close to the African war front. Before that, he'd worked for the Corporation.

"Tristan might seem out of touch," Mason had told Rachel, "but he understands management."

Recalling her promise, Rachel tried a different approach. "This assignment must be quite a change for you," she ventured, "after all those years in the Congo."

"The war has many fronts," Tristan noted mildly. "Africa's one, the Corporation is another." His head tilted slightly to one side. "You were about to explain?"

So much for chitchat, Rachel reflected.

Aloud she said, "The setup for a kidnapping has been the same every time. They brainwash employees with lies about the person they plan to abduct. That's phase one and for Cara, that began six months ago."

"Her colleagues didn't see through it?" he quizzed.

"They don't know what to think and are afraid to ask. The lies, you see, are released *so incrementally* that people don't notice that their perception of the target is being manipulated. Works pretty well. By the time the person disappears, the employees have heard so many bad things about them they think the victim got what they deserved. The employees don't know any details. They don't know the victim was drugged and imprisoned in a work camp. They were told the person was fired and are too afraid to investigate."

"How do you know they're not just scaring her and hoping she'll leave of her own accord?" he asked.

"Because they've moved onto phase two and that has always signaled a kidnapping," Rachel answered.

"Which is..."

“They get someone to file a formal complaint,” Rachel said. “For women, they don’t have to prove anything; they just need to discredit them professionally or personally so no one questions their removal.”

“And a man?” he asked.

“They’d have to have proof that the man broke an inviolable rule.”

“To get people to ignore the sudden disappearance of a woman, all that’s needed is a degrading story,” Tristan mused, squinting through the binoculars. “I’ve never understood how people fall for slur campaigns. Don’t they know that the Net continuously assesses what they like and don’t like and that the Corporation uses this information to manipulate them? It’s so plain! How can they miss they’ve been manipulated when the victim is always accused of the very thing they dislike *the most*? If you’re afraid of snakes, the victim’s a snake. If you envy smart people, the victim is Mensa. If you don’t like women, she’s a bitch. What once we called a witch-hunt, is now a *bitch* hunt. Same game, new name.”

“Both forms of denigration are still used,” Rachel remarked dryly. “But I’m not surprised you don’t know that. It’s easy to ignore what doesn’t affect us.”

Tristan lowered his binoculars to look at her. “Anyone who would shame a woman would stab a man in the back,” he said. “We’re on the same team, Rachel.”

“But not on the same page,” she observed. “I’d love to chat about what *all* is not right in the world, Tristan, but I came here to solve a problem.”

“I don’t see a problem,” he countered, lifting the glasses again. “The assaults on Cara will intensify right up until they try to whisk her away. *That’s how this works.*”

A flash of anger flitted across Rachel’s face and then disappeared. “They’re setting her up to collapse from exhaustion and if they succeed, the mission will collapse with her.”

“Why is she on the verge of collapse?” he asked. “Are they poisoning her?”

“No. Someone sweeps Cara’s apartment every day for chemicals and I’ve taught her how to protect herself at work. She’s *worn out* because she’s not been trained to handle danger that’s intense and ever present,” Rachel explained. “There wasn’t time.”

“I see,” he replied inscrutably. “Do you think they suspect she’s allied with us?”

“*If they do*, they’re keeping their suspicions quiet,” Rachel answered. “I’m still hoping they see her as a threat because she stood up for Gwen.”

“A *threat* to their *criminal* serenity,” he joked.

Rachel’s mouth dropped open. *Is he an idiot?* she thought, and glared at him.

“I read the brief, if that’s what that look on your face means... but I want you to list all the relevant details. Humor me, just this once,” he coaxed.

Her eyes narrowed angrily but she did as he asked. “They’ve given Cara projects with impossible deadlines and to meet them,” said Rachel, “she works fourteen-hour days, six days a week. There’re constant attacks on her data and equipment and most of her day, every day, is spent managing sabotage. She’s terrified all the time, but she persists because she knows that *not meeting project goals* is grounds for dismissal and under those circumstances, they won’t need to get approval from top officials to fire her.” She paused to add, “so we’ll never learn their names and *our mission will have failed.*”

“I’m listening,” he said.

“We want the RM to think he’s succeeded in making her unstable but we can’t afford to have her actually *get there*. She has to have her wits about her when they call her in for questioning or we won’t get the information we need.”

Tristan deliberated for a moment and then answered, “Yes, that’s a problem. Find a reason to put the RM on the defensive, something they can’t ignore... so that we can speed up the process. With regard to Cara’s weakening state, Anthony has someone who intervened once in a similar situation. I’ll ask if that person’s available to help us.”

“All right,” Rachel agreed. She didn’t like him, but she thought well of the plan.

“A joggers’s headed our way,” he informed. “He’ll be here in fifteen seconds... Remember that the RM and his underlings are tired too, Rachel. They want to wrap this up as much as we do, so help them out. Look for a safe way to force their hand.” Then he pointed to a nearby thicket just as the runner entered the rotunda and said, “Oh look, the juncos are back.”

“I have to work while we talk,” Anthony said as he parked the car. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” Cara looked through the tinted windows at the homes along the street. “What kind of work?”

“I’m watching that house,” he pointed. “Actually, I’m watching their dog.”

Cara looked in that direction and saw a large dog engaged in a comical romp with a young cat.

Cara threw him a quizzical look. “Why?”

“Keep watching.”

The home in question was two doors down on the other side of the street. Cara noticed a group of people progressing up the walk and one of them was carrying a covered dish. The dog bounded jubilantly across the yard to greet them with a wildly wagging back end and in return, received praises and pats.

“The man of the house suddenly died yesterday,” Anthony said. “The dog and the man were inseparable.” He turned to face Cara. “Does this faithful companion look sad to you?”

She frowned. “No...”

“Have you ever seen an animal after a beloved owner dies?” he asked.

Cara thought of the family cat after her parents died. “Yes,” she answered. “They’re usually more visibly depressed than the people,” he said. “It can take many months for them to quit moping around.”

“How does that answer my question?” Cara asked.

Anthony chuckled. “I suspect the man faked his death to avoid paying off his debt to me. On the bright side, we don’t have to feel sorry for the dog. My work is done here; let’s talk about your situation.”

“Which part?”

“At the moment you’re practically plastered to the door. I can’t tell, are you even sitting on the seat or are you on the armrest? You remind me of a cartoon cat, clinging upside down to the ceiling by its claws.”

“Well, you’re a scary guy,” she stated drolly.

“Taa,” he scoffed. “You’re not afraid of me. You’re traumatized, and for this operation to succeed we need to address that.”

“Do you have a magic wand?” she griped.

“Maybe,” he said. “I have a friend I completely trust. He’s a Benedictine monk trained as a psychologist.”

She snorted. “A priest *and* a therapist? How screwed up do you think I am?”

“It’s *wise* to get guidance when you’re in a difficult situation,” he chided. “He’s very good.”

They sat together in silence for a while.

“You’re quite unassuming in the light of day,” she told him, “away from toxic waste dumps and ship graveyards.”

He smiled.

“Were you one of my father’s graduate students?” she queried.

“One day we’ll talk about that,” he deflected. “Right now, we’re talking about my friend. Will you see him?”

Cara noticed that the dog was now lying peacefully in the grass with the cat curled up in the furry scruff of his neck. She wished she could be that cat.

“Sure,” she answered, “why not.”

“May I call you Cara?”

“Of course.”

Across the table, Father Ettore D’Angelo looked extraordinary in his floor length, hooded black robe. Under normal circumstances, Cara would have been curious to know how a contemplative monk from Italy spoke perfect American English with a slight English accent. But there was nothing normal about meeting a priest for therapy in the back room of a Korean restaurant. Rachel had assured Cara that the restaurant was in a ‘protected’ part of town where the residents chatted pleasantly with the DM without ever communicating a thing. The Domestic Military frequently entered the area to seize stores of illegal antiviral in raids ordered by city officials, but only if Anthony approved. This way, the residents avoided trouble and the city leaders could look ‘tough on crime’ while procuring a lucrative stash of antiviral. The arrangement seemed satisfactory to everyone.

“Thank you... and please, call me Ettore,” the monk said, his kind brown eyes bestowing good will. “Do you know why I’ve been asked to meet with you?”

“Because I’m hazardously naïve?” Cara proposed dryly.

He looked puzzled. “Did someone say that to you?”

“Not in those words,” she admitted, “but they seem afraid I’m going to do something foolish.”

“And you took a remark about naiveté as an insult?”

Cara shifted uncomfortably. “I guess I did.”

He mulled that over. “Sounds like someone made a thoughtless comment. We’re a lot like dogs when we’re not at our best. We *bark* to get people’s attention or to make them go away.”

Cara felt her jaw relax into a smile.

“Besides,” he said and waved one hand as if to shoo unhappy thoughts away, “naïve means *inexperienced*, nothing more. Students are naïve; first day on the job, a worker’s naïve. I’m naïve, because I only know what others have told me about you... In fact, there will always be more situations that we have no knowledge of than we can ever have knowledge about, which makes us all perpetually naïve.” He held his index finger in the air in pretend erudition. “He who laughs at naiveté insults himself.”

Cara snorted a laugh and Ettore beamed.

Then his smile disappeared and he looked down at his folded hands. “Innocence should be protected,” he said, “but *too often* it’s not. Neither you nor I would throw a kitten out into the woods at night but some people would. *When you’re around people like that*, naiveté is a danger

to you.” Ettore leaned back in his chair. “What’s your understanding of the role you’ve taken on?”

Cara shrugged. “The R wants to know who in my division has the authority to order abductions and who’s involved in covering it up. Since I had ‘high profile parents’, it’s believed I can’t just be dumped in the river... that there would have to be an *approved* cover-up, requiring the involvement of top-tier management. By closely monitoring what happens to me, Rachel hopes to learn the names of some of these people.” Cara drank some water before adding, “The plan is to extract me at the last minute, but if something goes wrong I could get drugged and wake up in a work camp. Or never wake up.”

Ettore’s face was grim but his tone was resolute. “Those worst case scenarios are unlikely on Rachel’s watch,” he said.

At that point the door to their private room opened and a man called, “Hello!”

Ettore stood and rested a hand on his shoulder. “Cara, I’d like to introduce my friend Joon, the owner of this establishment. He and his family also run an import-export business that supplies much of the tea sold in the city.”

Joon smiled brightly. “Happy to meet you Cara. I’ve learned we have friends in common, Professor Xu and his wife Qiuxia. Your mother and Qiuxia were in the same PhD program, I think.”

A flashflood of childhood memories stunned Cara into silence. A vivid recollection of her mother and father appeared in her mind, eclipsing all sensory perception of the present. She followed the memory like a lost lamb...

Hearing voices, Cara got out of bed. She peered into the living room and saw her parents sitting with two of their friends. Dr. Xu said his family had to leave that night and her mother looked like she was going to cry.

“Nice to meet you,” Cara mumbled, sweeping the memory aside. “Yes... the Xu’s were close friends of my parents. Where are they now?”

“Still living under house arrest in Shanghai,” Joon answered, “but very active *in furthering our shared objectives* in spite of that. I communicate with them regularly.”

“They had a daughter a few years older than me,” Cara recalled. “Is she in Shanghai as well?” Joon shook his head sadly. “She disappeared two years ago and they still don’t know what happened to her.”

Cara’s breath grew shallow as the news filled her with fear. This is what befell her parent’s friends after they left so many years ago... She felt Ettore’s eyes piercing through the pall that threatened to engulf her.

“These problems are everywhere, now,” Ettore stated quietly.

“Which is why *we* are everywhere.” Joon added cheerily. “Cara, do you like spicy food?”

She smiled, guessing that Joon had changed the subject as a kindness. “I do.”

“Then I recommend our kimchi jjigae stew,” he said. “Ettore?”

“That’s my favorite, thank you.”

“Very good,” Joon said, and with a slight nod, he left them.

“Now, where were we...” asked Ettore.

“You were going to explain why Anthony asked you to meet with me,” Cara suggested.

Ettore chuckled. “I can do that,” he allowed. “Anthony is worried that the environment at your workplace is having such an adverse affect on you that it could endanger both you and the operation. Rachel told us about the constant barrage of attacks on your person and your work,

and said that you've *not been yourself*." His head tilted slightly. "It would be strange if you *were*, wouldn't it?"

Tears stung her eyes and Cara hurried to wipe them away. "Sorry. I'm just very tired." She cleared her throat. "I don't know what to do differently. It's essential for the mission that I watch everything and everyone around me carefully, but it's exhausting. I wake up in the middle of the night panicked I've overlooked something important."

He nodded and said, "Understandable."

"Luckily, I have Rachel," Cara added. "I report everything out of the ordinary to her and she tells me how to handle it. I'm supposed to leave the worrying to her, but that's easier said than done."

"You're unnerved because that's their intention," he told her, "and you've too little training to counteract it. The game is to take away everything that is comfortable and familiar so that your sense of self disappears. With every attack, they want you to feel less yourself, then less still, until you feel as if you are *no more*."

A shiver struck her spine but she shook it off. "What should I do?"

"You must understand *precisely* what you're up against so you can *instinctively* avoid mistakes. What you call naiveté I view as *gaps* in understanding. I suspected as much so I asked Rachel if I could share her story with you. Do you know how she came to join us?" he asked.

Cara shook her head. "I know Rachel's husband died early on in the war..."

"She has a daughter named Sarah who's about ten years older than you."

Cara was visibly startled. "I didn't know."

"It's not something Rachel was at liberty to share with an asset," he explained.

"But you can?"

"Yes, one reason being that we're sitting in a safe house," he answered. "Rachel's daughter Sarah used to work for the Corporation too, but because she was attractive, she was a target for a cruel and increasingly common form of social pressure. Her coworkers were trying to set her up with a man in the group who had a crush on her, and to give him the advantage they started putting a drug in her thermos each day.

Sarah thought she was going crazy because she'd never been interested in this man but suddenly she started having unusually strong sexual responses to his advances... unusual for her, at least. The intensity of the attraction was *so bizarre* that she confided in her mother. Rachel asked her if she'd noticed anything else unusual and when Sarah mentioned that lately the water in her thermos tasted *sweet*, Rachel had it analyzed. The water tested positive for THC syrup."

Cara felt the blood drain from her face. "Putting a chemical in someone's body without them knowing it... What if she'd been allergic? She could have died."

"Yes, well, my guess is they didn't care. She didn't matter," he said. "If she'd mattered, they wouldn't have done it. You could try to defend such people and say *they didn't think it through*, but you can be sure they wouldn't stand for someone putting a drug in *their* thermos. Feeding their egos, maintaining status... this is all they have. Sad."

Cara gripped the edge of her seat, too angry to speak.

"Sarah didn't go to HR or the police about it," Ettore continued, "because Rachel had witnessed similar attacks against other women and knew there'd never be an honest investigation. But, if they did *nothing*, her daughter risked getting the same treatment again. So Sarah left the Corporation, Rachel stayed, and they both joined the Resistance." He smiled radiantly.

"Corporation's loss, our happy gain."

"Why tell me this?" Cara asked.

“To help you understand the people you’re dealing with,” he answered.

“I already know more than enough.”

“Do you?” he rejoined. “Tell me... who dictates what can and cannot occur in your immediate work environment?”

“The regional manager.”

Ettore shook his head no. “He’s just a fall guy, someone who’ll be sacrificed if need be- and he *knows* it. That’s why he keeps such a tight rein on all of you. He’s painfully aware that if things go south, the higher ups will blame him to save themselves. The RM’s probably *just* as terrified as you are, although that’s where the similarity between you ends, given that he’s kidnapping innocent people for personal gain and you’re losing everything in the hope of stopping them.”

A person entered the room to serve them tea followed by another with their food. The servers appeared to know Ettore well and the ease of their conversation brought a peaceful calm into the room. Cara gazed out the window and watched as a group of boisterous preschoolers poured out of a building into a yard to play. The children running around in the bright winter sun made the day seem friendly despite the cold, blustery wind.

After the servers departed, Ettore took a bite of his food. “Oh! Delicious!” he exclaimed.

Cara smiled and absentmindedly ate some of her food.

“What do you think of them, your attackers?” Ettore asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “They’re agents of violence and hate. I can describe them further with expletives, if you like.”

He grinned but then his expression grew subdued as he examined the inside of his teacup. “Do you see them as *damaged* people?” he asked.

Cara’s eyes narrowed irritably. “I hope you’re not asking me to feel sorry for them.”

“Objectivity is what you need,” he told her, “not sympathy and not escapist fantasy, either. It’s normal for the oppressed to hope that God will remove their oppressors... make them *fly away*,” he said, his fingers fluttering up like birds taking flight. “As a man-of-the-cloth, I never give up on a soul but as a psychologist I’m practical about a person’s ability to change within their circumstances. I happened to have looked into the histories of the individuals presently inflicting harm on you, and I don’t believe they will be receptive to redemption... at this time.”

“Why do you think that?” she probed.

“Because your perpetrators believe they can’t step beyond the boundaries set by *their* abusers.

Not just because they’re afraid of punishment, but also because they feel perversely protected by those boundaries. An analogy would be, the smugness of the favored son of an alcoholic mother who elevates him above her other children, promising him a lifetime of security *if*,” Ettore

paused to wag a threatening finger, “*he always sides with her*.”

No human being can promise lifelong security to anyone but a *child* doesn’t know that. Children cooperate with a mother’s obsessive control because instinctively they know they’re at the mercy of the adult who feeds them.”

“Hypotheticals are not helpful here,” Cara informed him.

“That wasn’t fiction,” Ettore replied. “That’s the childhood story of Roger’s friend Judd and his teenage years were worse... I could tell you about each of your attackers individually, or I could describe them all together like this: their mothers did not love them, or their mothers loved them *too much* and not in a good way. Their fathers were absent in their marriages and absentee dads. When a parent *was* present, they were frequently abusive because of being addicted to one thing or another and because they are victims of abuse themselves.”

He looked out the window at the children in the schoolyard. “A child raised by an abusive parent thinks abuse is *normal*. Such children require deprogramming before they can lead a happy, healthy life. It can be done... but only if they can become honest with themselves. *Your* abusers are not capable of that... *at this time*.”

“I don’t care about their unfortunate pasts,” Cara retorted and then stabbed a piece of meat with a chopstick.

“What about their lives at present? Would you like to hear about that?”

“Not really.”

“*Know thy enemy, and know yourself*,” he advised. “Do you know who said that?”

“No.”

“They whitewashed your education; do you want to remain ignorant of your attackers too?”

Cara looked uncertain but said, “No.”

Ettore bobbed his head in agreement and continued. “The people abusing you are all married to people they don’t love or who don’t love them, raising children they don’t know how to love. Their children have been acting out since they were babies but no one inside the family noticed because agony looks normal to them. Outside the family, however, the suffering is clear. One or more of their children are doing drugs and shoplifting. Another child is smashing his fists through walls and still another is beating up younger boys. To the point: because abuse is normal to the people attacking you, they will never have sympathy for you. They may never even notice you’re in distress and if they do, they’ll think it’s funny or find it irritating. To ever recognize they’ve wronged you, they’d have to leave the life they’re leading and *recover from it*, and that would take years.”

“I don’t see how any of this is helpful,” Cara challenged.

Ettore viewed her quietly. “I’m giving you facts so you won’t cling to false hope.”

Cara frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You joined the Corporation believing a certain power structure existed because that’s what you were told. According to this belief, ability outranks inability and leaders are informed, logical people. Even though there’s a preponderance of evidence that supports the exact opposite, I fear that a part of you wants to believe that because you’re two tiers higher than Roger and outrank him, that you could win a battle against him, forcing the RM to back off. That part of you wants to believe you’re different, untouchable.

But you must ask yourself, who would arbitrate this battle? There may be people in leadership positions who’d be sympathetic to your cause, but we have no idea who they are. If they exist, they are very quiet. What we do know is that there are people in the highest tiers of management authorizing *abductions*.” He leaned forward. “*Cara*. This *isn’t* something you can fix. Do you see that?”

She looked away.

He leaned back again. “One day, when you’re far away in time and place, you’ll make sense of all of this. But right now, your safety depends on your ability to focus on keeping your cool and following instructions. Period. If you can do that, I promise that you’ll look back on your part in this endeavor with pride.”

She shuddered. “Or guilt... for not doing something sooner. I knew something wasn’t right long before Gwen approached me, but I didn’t investigate.”

Ettore looked incredulous. “You committed no atrocities, broke no laws and supported someone when they tried to expose the corruption. Are you guilty of not magically fixing everything for everyone? Are you guilty because your attackers say you are? No. What you *are*... is angry and

troubled by the lies that your colleagues are hearing about you and you're grieving the loss of these relationships. But for now, you must let all this go. Your colleagues may never discern what's going on in the Corporation." He studied her a moment and drank some tea. "You're doubting my assessment... so let me remind you.

Back when *you* were the colleague of the person who disappeared, you heard *terrible things* about the person-in-question, how *crazy they were* or how *immoral* and over time these accusations made you question your understanding of the accused. When suddenly the person was snatched away, you thought, 'wow, they must have done something *very bad* or *really crazy* or *fill-in-the-blank*... for them to have been removed like *that!*' That's what you thought, because that's what fear and lies do to people who've purposely been kept in the dark."

"It upsets me that I didn't help them," she said. "I regret it deeply."

"If you had been *as sure as you are now* that something wasn't right, you would you have spoken up. I know that, because when you knew *a lot less* than you do now, you supported Gwen despite the risks."

Cara smiled and said, "I appreciate your confidence in me."

"I say what I see," he answered.

They sat in silence watching the children outside run around the playground.

Ettore chuckled. "Look at them, in their puffy coats! They look like beach balls with little faces."

She laughed. "Look at the ones on the slide!"

Children loaded themselves like canon balls into the top of a tube slide, disappeared, and then tumbled out the other end atop each other like puppies in a pile.

"We'd never find fault with *their* innocence," he observed mildly.

She glanced at him sideways. "I'm not a child."

He shrugged. "There's no fault in naiveté at any age; the fault is with the people who exploit it."

He scowled. "I know of people that prey on the elderly and con them out of their assets. They worm their way into aging, lonely hearts and then offer to help them *with their banking*. Is the older person to blame?"

"No." Then she sighed. "But if I'm not to blame, why am I paralyzed by guilt?"

"Oh, guilt is not your conflict," he told her. "You're 'paralyzed' because a part of you wants to hide and pretend none of this ever happened... that you'd never heard of the kidnappings or the Resistance... so you could go back to the way things were before you knew."

Cara stared at him in astonishment. "That's right," she said. "You're *right*." Then an odd feeling came over her, as if a great burden had been lifted. She felt weightless, like she could float away.

Ettore spoke gently. "We all experience times in life when we learn hard truths and it's normal to want to go back to not knowing. But there's no going back as sure as there is death waiting for us at the end. Once we accept that, we can focus on the job at hand."

Cara gazed for some time at the clouds flying across the windswept sky. Finally, she said, "So... is that *it*? Are we done?"

Ettore burst into a laugh. "No, but the hard part is done. You still need a way to handle your day-to-day stress so that it doesn't exhaust you." Ettore pointed out the window. "See how a cloud has blocked the sun? Now, look at the teachers. A minute ago, they were smiling, but the sun left them and suddenly they look tired... robotic. The good thoughts in our minds are like rays of sunlight in winter. Without them, things look bleak. In psychological warfare, you need a reservoir of good thoughts that you can tap into and be replenished. I can provide the means

for you to learn a form of meditation that would sustain you in a tight spot. Practically speaking, it would teach you how to detach emotionally from a pressing problem so you could focus your attention on a solution.”

Cara sat a little straighter. “That sounds good.”

“I’ve already discussed this with Rachel. She’ll arrange for you to practice a neurofeedback technique that will help you create a place of refuge within your own mind. A hologram will assist you in this, the very first holoprogram I ever used, in fact,” he said, pausing a moment to smile and reminisce before continuing. “The computer program runs an apparatus that projects a three-dimensional animation of a window, much like this one here,” he said, pointing to the window near them. “The task will be to learn to focus on the tree beyond the window, a beautiful tree, that calms you as you gaze upon it.”

“A *tree* to relax me?” she asked.

“Some scenes in nature have that effect, yes. You’ve experienced it, you just never thought about it. Poets like to describe the tranquility they feel when they look upon natural beauty. You’ll see...”

During this exercise you’ll wear a headband that tracks your brainwaves and every time the waves are predominantly calm-alpha or low-beta, the hologram rewards you by zooming you through the image of the window, out to the lovely tree. By practicing this, you’ll learn what a calm physical state feels like and how to use the mental image of the tree to achieve that state on your own.

If we had more time, I’d also give you kinesthetic training to habituate a calm expression on your face in response to stress. Instead, you’ll wear a heart monitor, a device so tiny you’ll forget it’s there until it produces a pulse in response to an increase in heart rate. No one will notice it but you; and when you do, that’s your prompt to calm yourself by picturing the tree.”

She observed him doubtfully. “*All* of this... just to get me to *relax*?”

“And prevent you from reacting to hostility,” he said.

Cara crossed her arms. “If I train myself not to respond, how do I protect myself?”

“If you react out of rage you could do something that *you* believe is wrong,” he answered, “and the resulting damage to your psyche caused by self-reproach will be *far worse* than anything you could *possibly* inflict on *them*. You see... what others think of you matters very little. What you think of *yourself*, however, is the most important process that goes on in your mind.” Ettore tapped his temple. “It all starts and ends here: the mind is the real battleground. All the rest are proxy wars.”

“What about my physical safety?” she asked.

He nodded. “You protect yourself by following Rachel’s instructions,” he replied, “but this technique will help you too. You need something that will prevent you from acting impulsively under pressure. Once you’ve run the holoprogram a few times, you’ll see that it doesn’t dull your natural faculties, it sharpens them. You’ll need to train regularly though; it’s essential that you’re able to do it reflexively. Oh, and Cara...” He leaned forward. “If at some point you can’t quite picture the tree... *don’t worry*,” he told her. “Just *try your best*, and that will get you through.”

Then, the sun burst brilliantly from behind the clouds and sunshine poured in the window.

“Ha!” Ettore exclaimed pointing at the playground. “The sun pops out and they’re all smiling again! How simple life is.”

The children began lining up to go back inside. Most of them were holding hands in pairs but a few stood alone. The teachers led the lone children to another and soon they were all marching happily up the stairs and into the building.

Ettore looked on amazed. "That's all anyone has to do."

"What?"

"Take hold of someone's hand... to feel part of it all again."

Cara decided to begin the neurofeedback sessions right away, so that same night she drove to the teashop next-door to where she'd met Ettore for lunch. Seeing the shop was closed, she knocked and a young man about her own age opened the door.

"I came for the tea I ordered," Cara told him, using the line Rachel had given her.

"Name?"

"Watkins. We ordered a pound of Double Bergamot Earl Grey," she said, "and I'd also like a pound of Yorkshire Red."

"Of course, please come in," he offered, and once he'd shut the door and locked it, he extended his hand. "Hi Cara, my name's Bae. You met my dad today in our restaurant."

"Nice to meet you," she said shaking his hand.

"Rachel's out back getting things ready for you. If you'll follow me..." he said, and led her from the shop into the warehouse.

"Busy place!" Cara exclaimed as she viewed the group of people processing shipments.

"Everyone in the building at this hour is Resistance," he explained. "Once we put the closed sign in the window, it's just friends and family. Feel free to speak your mind. We certainly do."

After that first night, the teashop became a bright spot in Cara's life with its wonderful smells, delicious tea and engaging people. When she arrived she'd sit in the shop drinking tea and conversing with whoever happened to be on break. Eventually Bae would show up and lead her to where Rachel was waiting in a makeshift room made of pallets stacked high with crates of tea.

"Anything happen today that I should know about?" Rachel asked as she always did.

Cara mulled the question over as she finished the last of her tea. "Yes... and maybe I should have mentioned this before but it seemed small in the scheme of things."

Rachel turned from the computer to face Cara. "What did?"

"More than once, maybe four times now, a complete stranger has approached me while I'm waiting somewhere... like for a seminar to begin or when I'm in line to buy coffee.... They start by chatting about something in the news and then, very abruptly and in a completely unconnected way, they say, 'I'm a friend of Roger Ennis.'"

"Roger Anus? Spelled *A-n-u-s*?" Rachel joked.

Cara smiled. "I don't answer them."

"I'm just kidding, you did the right thing," Rachel assured her. "Start taking pictures of these people and I'll find out who they are. Anything else?"

"No," Cara replied. "My days are otherwise the same: guarding experiments and computers against sabotage... submitting ten-page forms requesting minor repairs I'm no longer allowed to do myself... fielding text scams and red-flag emails warning me I've been 'hacked' on accounts I've never had and websites I don't use because Roger and his 'friends' spend *their* days trying to ruin my work."

“What fulfilling lives they lead,” Rachel remarked dryly. She pointed to the computer. “Is this neurofeedback stuff helping you? I’m thinking of trying it.”

“It is,” Cara answered. “I feel more focused during the day and I sleep better at night.”

Rachel looked impressed. “Hmmm! Who knew?”

Bae popped his head in the door and said, “You wanted to see me?”

Rachel looked uncharacteristically uncomfortable when she answered, “Yes. Cara wants to know more about the poison sweeps done in her apartment each day.”

“I see,” Bae responded evasively.

Seeing the subject was in some way delicate or difficult, Cara sought to ease the tension. “I’m just curious, that’s all. I wondered how they went about it. Do they swab specific areas and test for known chemicals?”

“Nooooo,” Bae answered hesitantly and then pulled up a chair.

“The person sweeping your place for poison,” Bae began, “is someone who’s been in a situation like yours, but was not as fortunate. He was poisoned and though he lived through it, he has a resultant chemical sensitivity. We have a team of such people who have devised methods of pinpointing the location of a poison and carefully removing them.”

Cara was visibly startled. “Their bodies are the instruments of detection?”

“Yes.” Then seeing this shocked Cara further, Bae added quietly, “If you want to talk more about this, I’m happy to, but right now I probably should let you get on with your training.”

Rachel nodded. “It’s getting late,” she agreed.

As soon as Bae left, Rachel said, “Ready?”

“No!” Cara exploded. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“Because I figured you’d balk, like you are right now.”

“I can’t have these people risking their lives for me!” Cara declared. “They could have an immune reaction that’s fatal.”

“Well, first of all,” Rachel replied, “they’re very careful and have emergency back up. But yes... there’s a risk, just like what you’re doing has risks. This is-”

“I-” Cara tried to interrupt but Rachel talked over her.

“-not about any one person, Cara, it’s about all of us. It’s about the people who’ve been kidnapped and all the people who *will be* unless we stop them.”

When Cara fell quiet, Rachel sat down and took her hand.

“This is a dangerous time,” Rachel cautioned, in a tone as unwavering as her gaze. “*You must have no illusions...* These people are confident. They think if they attack you long enough, eventually you’ll crack. To win this, you need you to stay focused on *your role* and leave ours to us. Do you have questions about what you need to do?”

Cara rubbed her throbbing shoulder in the place where stress seemed to accumulate as pain.

“No, but it would help to know what’s next on the torture agenda. I know you don’t want me to worry about things that might not happen, but actually, I’d rather be prepared.”

“Do you remember how the RM abused Gwen’s boss?” Rachel asked.

“You mean... they’ll go after me in meetings?” asked Cara.

“It’s possible,” Rachel acknowledged. “They’d arrange it such that you’d have no allies present... no one who would be brave enough to stick up for you or back your word... and in the audience they’ll plant their goblins, people who will act as ‘witnesses’ and speak against you later if they request it.”

“Okay, that’s the setup, but what kind of things would they do or say during the meeting?” Cara pressed.

“Well... if *you're* giving the presentation, they could have people interrupt you with inane questions and derail the talk to the point that you run out of time before you can finish. They could tell someone to say something to get you to lose your temper.”

“Like what?”

“Accuse you of something abominable... Or steal your work and claim it as their own,” Rachel said.

Cara was aghast. “If someone stole my work I’d have to challenge that.”

“No,” Rachel said firmly, “you *wouldn't*, because if you did you’d be walking into their trap. *Think*. If you cry plagiarism, it will be your word against the data they’ve falsified to *predate your own*, thus giving them the opportunity to accuse *you* of plagiarism.”

“They can’t do that.”

“*They have access to your data cloud*. All they have to do is download a presentation you’re working on, download the data, change the dates and names and say it’s their work.”

Cara’s mind went blank. “Then... what am I supposed to do?”

Rachel pointed to the holoprogram on the computer. “You do this. Your job is to remain silent in response to all lies and accusations so that *we* can have a clear view of when they will act. They’ll try to remove you only when they feel confident it’s safe to do so. That confidence can show up in different ways... but I’ll know it when I see it, and when I do, we’ll fit you with a Commlink. Once you’re wearing the Comm, we’ll guide you through each situation but until then, use *every thing* that scares you as practice for the day when they get you behind closed doors and make a formal accusation. Practice not reacting, using this method.”

Cara shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t get it. The people they get rid of... at least the ones I’ve known... were qualified and worked hard for the success of the Corporation. Don’t they want the Corporation to succeed, if for no other reason than to keep the company functioning so *they* have jobs?”

Rachel waved her hand nonchalantly. “Nope. They only care about the money they’re packing away. When the day comes that the Corporation is whittled away to *nothing*, they’ll point to their fat bank accounts as proof of their right actions. In their minds, if you can find a way to make yourself rich- *that’s* success, and success is always good no matter how you get there. But *don’t worry*; they’ll get what’s coming to them. Nature has a way of taking care of such things. And *you*, once you leave the Corporation, you’ll continue contributing in the generous way you always do, but you’ll be working with people who’ll support your work, not sabotage it.”

“I don’t worry that I won’t make it through; I worry I’ll never recover,” Cara admitted.

“What do you mean?”

“We had a cat,” Cara said.

Rachel looked amused. “A *what?*”

“An old cat that lived most of her life very comfortably in a house down the street, ended up in our neighbor’s barn when her owner died. One day, my mom opened the back door and the cat ran straight into our house and disappeared. We found her more than a day later in the tiny space between a kitchen cabinet and the floor. The space was so small you wouldn’t have believed it possible, but there she was in the light of our flashlights crammed against the wall. We adopted her and she knew she was safe with us, but the experience of losing her owner and living in the barn had changed her.

I feel like that... changed. Work was a place I trusted, with people I trusted. But now they’ve cut me off from the people I knew, and I spend all day every day waiting for the next insult, the

next implication that there's something's wrong with me. My work's been turned upside down and I'm inside out. Even if I make it through, how can I get back to how I was?"

"You won't; you'll move on to something finer. You said the cat was changed but who are you to say the cat wasn't changed for the better? We give things up as life goes on, but we gain things too. You have lots to look forward to in life," Rachel said warmly and then laughed.

"*And* Ettore says there are no Rogers in heaven... not until they've lived a thousand lives as a cockroach."