

TRAVIS THRASHER

THE COMING FIGHT FOR FAITH

AMERICAN OMENS

A NOVEL

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To Barry Smith, for making God known

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Another kind of religious leader must arise among us.
He must be of the old prophet type, a man who has seen
visions of God and has heard a voice from the Throne.
When he comes (and I pray there will be not one but
many), he will stand in flat contradiction to everything
our smirking, smooth civilization holds dear.

—A. W. TOZER

Don't believe what you hear, don't believe what you see
If you just close your eyes you can feel the enemy

—U2

If you're going through hell, keep going.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

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Prologue

The spiderweb cracks in the windshield made it easy to spot the old Chevy SUV in the parking lot. Jon Dowland stood next to the car and examined the black duct tape that covered a hole the size of his fist on the passenger side. One of the shots he'd fired last night had obviously connected, but it hadn't stopped the driver from disappearing once again. Even though the Chevy looked abandoned, Dowland knew the man wasn't likely to be far away.

The morning sun began to leak out over the Indiana countryside. Dowland had forgotten how bleak the Midwest could be in winter. The wind was cold and cut through him as he walked toward the motel sitting right next to the gas station and former truck stop in the middle of nowhere. In one of those dingy rooms, the man he'd been hunting was probably wide awake, wasting his time by praying. This little game had been interesting for the last few months, but Dowland was done with it now. Nearly getting run down on an Indiana highway by some lunatic calling himself the Reckoner had used up what little patience he had.

It took only two hundred dollars to bribe the bored and pimply-faced kid behind the front desk to give him a room number. A simple direct exchange, or DE, that took two seconds. Dowland could have shown his FBI credentials, but he never did that. If anybody came around asking, which wasn't likely here of all places, he didn't want the FBI to be a part of any conversation. Only a few people knew what Dowland was doing, and nobody knew his present location. If he was arrested or shot dead for some reason, no one could find anything on his SYNAPSYS. It'd be blank, requiring official approval to exorcise the personal data.

He found the door on the second story, stood there for a moment to look

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and listen for anybody nearby or in the parking lot below, then took out his customized Beretta just before kicking down the door. They no longer made doors with locks that got old and could be so easily broken, but in this run-down motel built decades ago, Dowland felt like the star of an eighties action movie. Sure enough, nobody was in bed asleep. The covers looked untouched, with an assortment of files and papers spread out on them. The man traveling under a handful of aliases was sitting in a chair next to the table with a laptop computer open beside another set of file folders. It had been a while since Dowland had seen anybody working on one of those archaic devices.

Aiming the firearm directly at the man, Dowland nudged the door back to close it, and when it wouldn't stay put, he took the other chair and propped it against the door. The man in the motel room held his hands up, his fingers outstretched and his eyes open wide. One corner of the glasses he wore was held together with masking tape.

"No, no, no. Hold on, just wait, just wait a minute!" he shouted to Dowland.

The target was out of breath and looked as if he hadn't slept in a week. He started to stand up, but Dowland shook his head to make the man stay put.

"Please, I'm not armed. I can't do anything," he said.

"You can mow a man down on the side of the road, can't you?"

Along with his black eye, bruised jaw, and cut lip, Dowland nursed a shoulder injury from diving for cover to avoid the car yesterday. Good thing the mostly useless arm was his left arm, the one he didn't need to shoot his gun.

A quick scan of all the papers confirmed what Dowland already knew. This was indeed the man he'd been hunting all this time.

"Clemente on," Dowland said, stating the name to turn on the man's SYNAPSYS as he held the barrels of the Beretta against his head. "Contact info."

The customized box the size of his hand appeared to his right. The information on the augmented interface was further proof.

Robert Vasquez. I've finally found you.

The SYNAPSYS showed the various code names this nutjob had used during the last few years. Dowland knew the background on Vasquez—from his resignation three years ago as an Arizona senator amid allegations of sexual misconduct and fraud to his incarceration last year for vandalizing a town hall

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with graffiti. The latter offense had been Vasquez's own doing, but the controversy that had ended his career in Congress was orchestrated by the same group paying Dowland's salary. Vasquez had never shied away from his personal faith, and after years of being told to remain quiet, he eventually had pushed things too far.

No one could have imagined that he was the Reckoner, the one responsible for creating a group to deliver lies and spin stories and incite trouble in the name of Christianity. Dowland had been tracking down members of this group for the last two years and had been ordered a few months ago to take out their leader. Finally, two days ago he got a golden tip about where the man was hiding.

"You don't have to point that at me," Vasquez said. "I'm not dangerous."

"So why are you calling yourself the Reckoner?" Dowland asked.

Vasquez didn't flinch at the mention of the name. He merely shook his head. "That's not me."

"Of course not. And you don't have any connections to all these operations in your files, right? Like Operation Bulls on Parade, where you created chaos in downtown Chicago by unleashing those cows. Or Operation Panic. Or how about Operation Black Waters?"

"I didn't say I had nothing to do with those," Vasquez stated. "But I'm not the Reckoner."

Robert Vasquez was a typical fifty-two-year-old man in every way. He was one of the last guys anybody could imagine suddenly abandoning a successful career in politics to start being vocal about his views on Christianity.

Nobody rises from the dead, buddy. You're going to learn that soon enough.

"Who knows you're here?" Dowland's eyes scanned the walls and the contents of the room.

"Nobody. Not a single soul."

"None of your little frat brothers and sisters? Nobody in your playgroup?"

"It was better for no one to know I'm here."

For the first time since Dowland had stepped over the state line into Indiana, something didn't seem quite right. The way Vasquez was claiming he wasn't the Reckoner and the few items he had in the room with him . . .

"I've been trying to find you for months," Dowland said, the gun now at his side but still ready for any surprise. "How'd you elude me in Philadelphia?"

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"That wasn't me."

Once again Vasquez's demeanor made him seem believable.

This man has made telling lies a life mission. He's mastered it.

"You've been waiting for someone," Dowland said. "Who?"

Vasquez gave him a solemn smile. "You, Mr. Dowland. I knew you'd find me eventually."

Staying in this motel so close to where Dowland had found him last night . . . His SYNAPSYS still on and easily accessed . . . Nothing in his files with more information on the Reckoner . . .

For a second Dowland caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror on the wall facing the bed. He resembled a boxer after a fight.

"Just tell me," Dowland said as he let out a tired sigh. "Are you the one behind everything? We're going to find out soon enough after we scour all your data."

"I just told you I'm not."

"Okay, fine. Get your science project together and come with me." Dowland aimed the gun at him again. "We're heading back to Chicago."

"You're being controlled. And you're as expendable to them as the rest of us are."

"Nobody controls me."

"There is freedom in letting go," Vasquez said, "in finally admitting you can't do everything on your own."

"You guys never turn off the switch, do you? Meeting in secret and delivering your clandestine messages."

"We're not the only ones who meet in secret, Mr. Dowland."

He didn't like hearing this guy mutter his name. Dowland stepped closer to the man, close enough to press the Beretta to his temple again.

"I know one thing about control in this world," Dowland said. "I have it in my hand right now."

"The Lord's prophet is warning the rest of us. There is still time but not much. You must listen to me. Hear me out—"

"I had a grandmother who talked crazy just like you. Nobody could tell whether it was the religion or the senility talking. I think it was the vodka she had stashed away."

Sweat covered Vasquez's forehead, and his body odor was strong from a spending a week running and hiding.

"I know you think I'm crazy, and that's fine, but you're holding a gun to the head of a normal, decent American who's done nothing wrong. Do you think that maybe—possibly—you didn't happen to find me, but rather you were led out here for a reason?"

"And what reason is that?"

"The Reckoner wants you. You have a specific purpose. That's what he's been told."

Dowland gritted his teeth, then chuckled the same way he might curse. "I want you to tell me right now, this very instant. What are you doing all the way out here? And where's the Reckoner?"

"We've done this to ourselves," the shaky voice said. "We've turned our backs on God, and He's had enough."

Dowland jammed the gun even harder against the idiot's skull. "There's only one god in your life, and he's standing right in front of you. But you're right about one thing. He has had enough."

Dowland fired the shot without further thought. This was going to be done either on the side of an Indiana country road or in this room. It didn't matter. He'd heard enough from this guy. Now it was done. Two more shots made sure of that.

With the body crumpled on the floor beside him, Dowland leaned over and picked up a series of large photographs. After looking at half a dozen, he felt his stomach twist.

There's no way they know all this.

He knew he couldn't leave anything behind in this room. He also knew that things were much worse than any of them had imagined.

Apparently the Reckoner hadn't been lying at his last public announcement when he declared, "All will be revealed soon." The faces of the men and women in those pictures were the revelations he was talking about. Dowland needed to know how much proof they had.

And whether or not this corpse was indeed the Reckoner.

While he was piling the belongings onto the bed, a handwritten note slipped out of a stack of papers. Dowland scanned it.

Abraham approached him and said, "Will you sweep away both the righteous and the wicked?" —Genesis 18:23

He let the piece of paper gently drop down onto the dead man. Dowland could only shake his head and curse as he thought about his father. Vasquez had been as deluded as his grandmother, thinking this world still contained both the righteous and the wicked.

The only righteous thing left in this world was being honest about its absence.

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Blackbird

1.

The building loomed above the other towers, pointing toward the heavens, daring to outshine the stars. Inside the mile of floors that composed Incen Tower, night and day didn't matter, nor did sunrise and sunset. The Chicago structure contained its own universe, controlled by mankind and operated by machines. Three hundred stories could make anyone believe in the impossible.

On the 118th floor at the start of the workday, a young woman walked in the midst of the restless crowd that poured into the main atrium from the three stairless escalators that resembled multicolored waterfalls. As always and exactly on time, Cheyenne Burne headed toward Bistro #4. Even though all ten places selling coffee in the atrium had robots serving the same brand, she liked Henry at the fourth counter in the center. She swore he made her morning drink just a little better than the other machines. Plus, she liked the witty things he said each day. They resembled sayings in fortune cookies.

"Good morning, Miss Burne," his cheery voice with a British accent said.

Henry wasn't fully functional. Only half of him stood in place at the counter, swiveling back and forth with metal arms that extended, poured, and mixed. He knew people from ten feet away, and they could even utter what coffee they wanted into their SYNAPSYSes an hour before leaving their apartments. Cheyenne no longer had to do that. She always got the same order, so Henry knew not to ask.

"Did you have a good weekend?" he inquired.

"I worked."

"That means you loved your weekend since you love your work."



Cheyenne grinned. *He's always trying to be ironic.* "Certain aspects, yes," she said and then tried to be ironic back. "Just climbing the corporate ladder."

He picked up the sarcasm and made his smile bigger. There had been no attempt to make Henry or the other baristas look lifelike. Instead, Henry resembled a puppet, with only eyes and a grin that changed sizes. His personality, however, was what gave him character. Each encounter helped to develop Henry's knowledge of and relationship with her. Even the most minor and insignificant detail from an interaction was recorded and could be recalled at a later date.

If only guys had even half of those abilities.

Henry handed her the coffee. "Remember, Miss Burne, the higher up you go, the more mistakes you are allowed. Once you're at the top, if you make enough of them, it's considered to be your style."

"That's a great insight, Henry."

"That's a quote from the legendary dancer Fred Astaire."

She laughed and said goodbye to the robot. His wit always reminded her of why she loved her work and why it was never ending.

The genius isn't the machinery. It's the programming.

Enough human beings looked like plastic-and-celluloid creations, so there was no reason for robots to keep up with the Joneses. The great leap was the intelligence that was being built and modified and advanced, an intelligence she specialized in and refused to call artificial. In her mind it was a new form of art. Trying to replicate in algorithms the way neurons in the brain used their synapses wasn't merely complex; some days—most days, in fact—it felt almost absurd.

Yet that's what they said twenty years ago about putting technology in people's heads. Before people ever knew what a SYNAPSYS was.

The coffee was perfection, tasting like vanilla initially, then morphing into a Columbia Supremo caramel in her mouth. It was never too hot, yet it would retain its temperature in the disposable cup. As she headed across the glass walkway that was playing an old music video, she had to have a few sips before getting on the 7:33 a.m. I Elevator going to the PASK offices.

The ingenuity of her morning java reminded her that every great invention, no matter how big or small it was, came from someone asking for and wanting more. *What will these ingredients taste like if I put them all together?*

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How can I improve something as simple as coffee? Is there a way to make more out of this staple drink humans take for granted?

That was how she had approached her work in algorithms from the very first days she began to play with them. Could they be expanded and modified? Could something as complex as human emotions be sown into technology? Those questions had been answered over the years with a resounding yes.

The figure underneath her heels looked like a clown in distorted colors, with a thin white face and red lips, until it panned back to reveal the ruffled collar and the hat of a Pierrot. Normally Cheyenne didn't pay attention to the background music or even the accompanying retro videos that filled the atrium floor, but this morning she couldn't avoid it. She knew David Bowie simply by the voice. She couldn't remember hearing this song, but the lyrics made her feel as if a stranger's fingernails were scraping against her neck.

"I never did anything out of the blue."

It was just another morning and another short walk to the offices, and yet for some reason everything about this day felt a bit off kilter, like this song and the video. Cheyenne didn't know why she was feeling this way. Last night and the past weekend hadn't been unusual. There was no reason for her to feel low, and her body monitor gave her all the usual levels, yet she felt as if she were approaching a barrier and impasse. Not in this building but rather in her life.

As she passed Bistro #2, she smiled at the familiar stranger who stood there with his coffee in hand, watching the crowd flow by like a river after a rainfall. He looked like any other businessman, always wearing a suit and fashionable tie, always well groomed, always politely acknowledging her with a friendly smile and either a nod or a raise of his cup. Today, however, the dark-haired man began to walk next to her, something he had never done before.

"Good morning, Cheyenne," he said.

She didn't slow down—she couldn't afford to do that—but she did turn her head in surprise.

"You speak English?"

"Have you ever heard me speak Korean?" he asked without the slightest accent.

A quarter of the occupants in Incen Tower were foreign, with a majority of them being Koreans who didn't speak English. She had lumped this man in with that group, though she deeply resented when others did that to her.

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"I've never heard you speak."

"That's because you've never spoken to me." His tone was more playful than condescending.

"You haven't either."

"There's a pecking order, Cheyenne. I'm not on the upper level. I don't get to take the I Elevator." He continued without either of them breaking stride. "I have a note to give you," he said.

"You don't strike me as a secret admirer," Cheyenne said, smiling.

"The note is from your father."

This made her stop, causing the woman behind her to bump into her and almost sending both of them to the ground. Cheyenne stood there, no longer with a smile but with a desire to know what was going on. The stranger now looked completely different, as if shrouded in a shadow.

"My father went missing more than a year ago," she said. "If this is some kind of sales pitch, I will get your license revoked as fast as I can."

The steady eyes and chiseled face remained steadfast in their expression. "Can we talk away from the crowd?"

She nodded and followed him to one of the fountains in the atrium. The water changed colors as it bloomed. Cheyenne recalled walking by one of these fountains ten years ago when she was seventeen and already being recruited by Acatur. Her father had taken her to Chicago, where they had been able to witness the grandeur of the new Incen Tower together. Despite the modern-day wonders of technology, including elevators that soared to the clouds without any semblance of motion, she had most enjoyed watching the rainbow of hues and patterns in the water and had stared at them for a long time. Long enough for her father to put his arm around her and whisper in her ear, "*One day you're going to live here.*"

Perhaps he prophesied it, or perhaps he put the ambition in her heart and soul. Her father used to have that sort of power over her until she realized she was not powerless and needed to break free.

"Your father gave me very specific instructions," the man told Cheyenne.

"Who are you? How do you know him?"

"My name is Hoon. I met Keith—your father—at a critical moment in my life. He helped me."

She couldn't help looking above Hoon's head at one of the rows of long

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escalators slithering up the side of the building like tentacles. The view never looked the same, the tower having been designed to resemble an ever-shifting maze. There were kiosks with Seis to give directions or even escort people to their destination. And all around, everywhere a person looked, security watched and monitored every single soul stepping foot in the building. This included the guards in their uniforms, who carried guns at their sides, and the stationary police monitors—robots that functioned in the same way as the servers in the coffee shops.

Then there were also the men and women dressed in business attire who carefully guarded the premises undercover. Cheyenne knew about these gun-toting people because she had a higher-level clearance than most around her.

“He gave me exact instructions in case certain circumstances occurred,” Hoon said.

“Have you seen him? Where is he?”

Hoon’s eyes scanned around them in such a way nobody could tell he was looking out. “I haven’t seen him in five months. I’ve only received a few messages, all instant and evaporating upon being read. Nothing via his SYNAPSYS. But he stayed connected. Once a week I would get a notification from him to let me know things were still okay. But it’s been two weeks now since I’ve heard from him.”

“Are you one of them?” she asked. “Are you one of those followers?”

You are, aren’t you?

“Who I am is of no concern to you. My story doesn’t cross paths with yours except for this.” Hoon handed her a square piece of paper, a note that had been tightly folded. “I didn’t read this, as Mr. Burne requested. He said if two weeks passed and I hadn’t heard from him, I was to give this to you.”

She was almost afraid to hold it, as if it might suddenly burst into flames, or maybe someone would come and grab it out of her hand so she could never read it. Cheyenne was afraid to read the words inside. Were they long or short, loving or hateful, approachable or preaching?

“Mr. Hoon—”

“Just Hoon, with two o’s.”

“Hoon—where do you work? What company?”

“I work for your father.”

“You what? For my father? Doing what?”

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"Well, for one, I keep tabs on you."

Her palm buzzed, and she looked to see the time. "I'm late."

"I know you have to go. That's why I'm making this short."

The light note in her hand felt so foreign, so unreal.

"What should I do?" she asked.

"Read that and do whatever it says."

He began to walk away, but she clutched his forearm to make him stay. Just for another moment.

"Your contact info—," she began.

"I don't share it."

"Then will I be able to reach you somehow?"

He shook his head. "No. But I won't be far away. I'm never far away."

She could only laugh, and as she did, the man gave her a questioning glance.

"Are you trying to be like Clarence?" Cheyenne asked. "The angel from *It's a Wonderful Life*?"

"No," he stated. "I've never seen that film."

Her comment was a joke, but his reply didn't treat it that way.

"It was my father's favorite. He would get teary eyed every time he watched it."

"If anybody is the angel, it's your father. Be careful, Cheyenne."

With those words the man in the suit stepped into the steady stream of other suits and vanished, as if swallowed up by a sea monster. Cheyenne held the note, her hand quivering. She rushed to the escalator that would take her to the I Elevator.

2.

The eyes and ears of Acatour were everywhere, so Cheyenne wouldn't dare even attempt to read the note after arriving at her office. Soldiers were stationed at the entrance to Incen Tower, and more guarded the elevators leading to the upper floors. She had grown used to seeing them in their bulletproof gear, their machine guns slung over their shoulders. Once she stepped off onto the 248th floor, home to the PASK division in Acatour, she knew eyes were on her just as they were on every other employee entering. Hidden devices scanned for any-

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thing unusual on her, while others made sure her data matched her SYNAP-SYS. Big Brother was indeed here, but he wasn't as ominous as George Orwell had made him out to be. The watchful eyes followed her as she reached the front hall, where one of half a dozen women with the title of Advisor would be standing there behind a glass reception desk.

"I still remember when they were called receptionists," her father had told her once after visiting her on the floor, the result of a rare invitation he had received from PASK. "They'd be sitting behind a counter or desk, smiling and answering phone calls and making you sign in. Now you have runway models taller than I am who don't really greet you but simply let you walk by."

"And here I thought women had finally progressed enough to no longer be pretty signposts for men to pass," Cheyenne had replied.

Her father's summary had been mostly true, though occasionally, like this morning, a welcoming personality might be standing by the glass doors to the PASK offices. Missy was a friendly soul and as welcoming as the sunrise she seldom saw outside the building. Yet as Cheyenne approached her, the advisor didn't look like her usual self. No smile, no morning story, no laughter.

"Kaede wants to see you immediately."

Most people, including Missy, pronounced the VP's name as "Katie," but Cheyenne knew it was actually pronounced "Kai-day." Cheyenne waited to see if there was a punch line for the joke, but none came. As the glass door slid open, she waited, stunned that an executive wanted to meet with her at the start of the day. Especially Vice President Kaede Nakajima. The last time Cheyenne had spoken with Kaede was an awkward exchange in the restroom at a holiday dinner last year.

"Did she say why?" Cheyenne asked.

Missy shook her head, showing no emotion. Cheyenne gave her a polite smile, then proceeded to her space, evaluating the short interaction with Missy faster than one of her algorithms might.

It's obviously serious. Missy doesn't know anything, of course. Does she fear what's about to happen? Or is Missy concerned about what her superiors will think if she shows any sort of emotion?

It wasn't as though Cheyenne went out for drinks in the evening with Missy or regularly shared polite conversation with her. She didn't have much of a relationship with anybody at PASK other than Dina, her tech analyst. There

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had been Malek, of course, but he had been gone for six months, a very long and frustrating six months. After being fired from PASK, Malek had suddenly disappeared.

Just like Dad.

As with Malek, she knew that once Acatour made a decision like that, it was final and foolproof. The decision had come from the upper levels of management in Acatour and had been communicated to PASK, which made PASK look really, *really* bad. Whatever her dear, beloved Malek had done, it had been serious. But as far as her father was concerned, there was no reason for his disappearance, at least none she could discover.

Officially, Cheyenne had worked for the PASK division of Acatour for five years, but they had actually started training her when she was still a junior in high school. Many of the people working in this division had no clue what PASK stood for. Founded forty years ago, in 1998, by the legendary Jackson Heyford, the company originally carried the cumbersome name of Programming America's Systems & Keys, Inc. As it grew more successful, the name was changed to PASK, and with the introduction of SYNAPSYS and digital identities in 2025, PASK triumphed, and devices such as phones and computers suddenly became secondary in the market.

When she officially joined the company, moving to the Incen building and being given a desk on this floor, another brilliant young university graduate, Sef Malek, also joined the company. She was amazed how quickly he navigated data and how he could manipulate algorithms. It seemed as if his right hand was working on one project while his left hand was working on another, yet somehow his brain could do both. Even so, Malek claimed he had only half of the talent she did.

"You're the most gifted programmer here," Malek once told her, though she believed he was just saying that because he had a crush on her.

CEO Heyford never used such a crude word as *programmer*. He labeled the divisions of the company with amusing names a third-grade boy might have come up with, names such as Astronauts and Spies. Cheyenne and Malek worked in the Architects division, a title she loved to hear.

So far nothing about this morning had been normal, starting with the stranger handing her a note supposedly from her father, and now this.

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They have to be related.

Nobody at PASK knew about her father's disappearance, at least not that she was aware of. That might have changed for some reason.

Arriving at her desk, Cheyenne set her coffee on the surface and then waved her hand over the right glass eye. Usually the system popped up immediately, showing four virtual-reality screens she had aligned with her SYNAPSYS. Some people preferred to use only a couple of screens, while others, like Malek, enjoyed working off a dozen interfaces. At least Malek used to enjoy this. She couldn't see any screens, so she tried a few more times but without success.

"Dina, is your system running?" Cheyenne asked.

"Yes. No glitches."

Cheyenne liked to call Dina her partner instead of assistant, but that's what Dina regularly did for her—assisted with any needs that the work spawned. There was usually enough work for half a dozen people, so Dina was always busy.

"My screens are not coming up. Do you know if there's a problem?"

"No. Let me check."

Dina was no-nonsense and socially awkward, but she was a machine when it came to her work. If such a thing as cyborgs existed, the first person Cheyenne would suspect to be one was forty-year-old Dina. Cheyenne didn't know anything about Dina's personal life or if she even had one. All she knew was that Dina sometimes acted before Cheyenne could even speak, and Dina was absolutely trustworthy.

"Your system is nowhere to be found," Dina said as she quickly walked over to Cheyenne's desk, wearing shoes that didn't match. "I was just finishing my cereal in the break room."

"I'm sorry to disturb your breakfast." Cheyenne kept swiping and holding her hand out over the sensor on her desk.

"It was my *break*. I had breakfast two hours ago."

Looking up at the analyst, Cheyenne noted how extra curly her frizzy hair looked. Dina fulfilled only the minimum requirements about daily appearance, just enough that the front offices wouldn't reprimand her about it again. She would have easily fit in with the casual work environment Cheyenne had read about from two and three decades ago when the tech world had exploded.

The petite woman scanned the glass eye, and instantly all six of her stations showed up in front of them. "Mine are there," Dina said. "Let me see if I can manually get yours to come up."

As Dina's hand moved and typed in the air, Cheyenne glanced around the office. Nobody could be seen at the desks nearby. "Where is everybody?"

"There was a large meeting in the conference room. I assumed you were in it."

"What was the meeting for?"

"I thought it was a cake-cutting or work-relations sort of thing. The very things I avoid like a virus."

"Nakajima wants to meet with me."

Dina stopped concentrating on the electronic screens in front of her and looked at Cheyenne. "Why?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you might have an idea."

This time it was Dina who glanced around the silent office.

"They wouldn't tell me if they were going to fire you," she whispered.

Most people wouldn't go directly there in their thought process, but Dina did. And considering what had happened to the equally talented Malek, they knew anything could happen to anybody.

"When is your meeting?" Dina asked.

"Now."

"They took you off the system. That's exactly what they did with Malek."

Another scan of the office didn't reveal anybody. She was looking for the big guys in the flak jackets. Seeing them in an office meant someone had a gun or a bomb or someone needed to be escorted out of the tower.

As Cheyenne went to pick up her coffee, the note she had slipped inside her tiny pants pocket fell on the ground. Dina scooped it up and looked at it.

"What's this?"

"It's a love letter from an admirer," Cheyenne said, which wasn't a lie.

Dina grinned and gave her back the note.

"Listen, I need to go to the meeting before she comes to find me," Cheyenne said. "Stay in touch the best way possible."

This was their way of saying to keep the communication open outside of the PASK lines, though Cheyenne never really knew when the company was

watching and listening to her and when it wasn't. Her whole life was basically inside the walls of this building, a building Acatur owned, meaning they could be surveilling her twenty-four hours a day.

"If they force you to leave, what am I going to do?" Dina asked.

"You're going to help me."

"Help you do what?"

"Help me figure out what in the world's happening."

3.

Halfway down the hallway, past familiar walls with photos showing off PASK's global success through the years, Cheyenne heard an unfamiliar voice call her name. Her full name, one nobody here knew. She stopped and turned around, then glanced into the two offices next to her. Nothing.

"Cheyenne Myst Burne," the man said again.

Her father had told her that Myst stood for mystery, and that's what Cheyenne had been to them. Or at least to her father. This wonderful, beautiful mystery, according to him. A mystery her mother never pursued since she had left when Cheyenne was a little girl.

The voice spoke again, slowly and carefully, sounding smart and thoughtful.

"Do not overthink and analyze the situation you're about to encounter," he said. "Just act and don't react. Deal with the road in front of you and the door that's about to open."

He's talking through my SYNAPSYS. But that was impossible because she would have to authorize it, and she hadn't given any new authorizations in the last six months. Nobody—not the most notorious hackers out there, not the government, and not even Acatur—could break into an individual's SYNAPSYS. It was scientifically impossible.

"Who is this?" she asked.

"This is your wake-up call, Cheyenne. You've been sleeping your whole life, dreaming those dreams. The alarm clock is about to go off, and there won't be any way to press the Snooze button. So just keep walking. Keep breathing. And maybe start believing."

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She continued looking around, but she couldn't see anybody.

"Who is this?" she asked again, then tried a few more times. But the voice remained silent.

She hadn't imagined the voice. It was real, just like not being able to log in to the system, and just like the somber look on Missy's face, and just like Hoon giving her a note from her father.

She knew she needed to read it. She needed to read it now.

4.

The all-watching eye couldn't follow her into the restroom. At least that's what Cheyenne believed. After making sure nobody was in the black-and-white bathroom that had been recently remodeled for no reason, she entered a stall and shut the door behind her.

Her hands shook as she unfolded the letter. The handwriting was unmistakable. Her father had an elegant and deliberate signature, and immediately she knew this note had indeed been penned by him. Before reading one word, she closed her eyes and exhaled to calm herself.

Dear Cheyenne,

If you're reading this in your office, don't continue. You are in danger and must get out of the building as fast as you can. Save the rest of my comments for later.

She didn't have to think twice. Cheyenne refolded the note and slipped it inside her pants pocket.

Twenty feet after she exited the restroom, Vice President Nakajima's assistant walked up beside her, looking down with a big grin.

"Right this way, Miss Burne."

With a shaved head and a square rock for a face, the man looked more like a bodyguard, which everybody understood to be the fact. Nakajima was fiercely private and handled most of her affairs herself, including setting up phone calls and meetings and sending messages. The assistant was there in case someone who didn't like the VP decided to do something about it. Quite a few people fit in that category.

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"I really need to get back to my office before—"

The man's hand didn't merely latch on to her arm. It locked on like a robot's appendage. He guided her down the hall and didn't let go. When they reached the office, Cheyenne watched the glass door open in front of her, and she thought of the words Malek had repeated over and over to her: *Don't ever trust her. Not a bit.*

Seconds after she took a handful of steps into the ordinary and average-sized office, bare enough to resemble one belonging to a newly hired manager, the door slid shut behind her, and the glass turned to frost. Nobody could see them now. The vice president stood behind her desk, and several screens were lit up on the black countertop.

"Sit down." Her voice carried a slight accent.

So much for any pleasantries or early-morning small talk.

The chair was less comfortable than the ones in the conference room. Cheyenne had a theory about this office and had confided in Malek about it. She concluded that the vice president had several offices in multiple areas in the building and that they were all a simple means to an end: to project power and authority and to never display any sort of emotion or life outside the company. Nobody knew if Kaede Nakajima was married or had children or anything else remotely personal about her. No official information was online anywhere, and the speculation included everything from her being a Japanese spy to her being a proxy for someone else running their division.

"I was awakened this morning by a surprising call," Nakajima said as she still stood at her desk. "Our CEO called me personally, something that never happens. Mr. Heyford had some rather unfortunate news to share with me."

Nakajima tapped on several of the screens and moved them to show Cheyenne.

"All the national news outlets have it. Progress, Divisional, Foxnet. Mr. Heyford doesn't know what their sources were, but they're validated by the information and the pictures. They're damaging, to say the least."

The words and images in the news feeds seemed to attack Cheyenne at once. The image of her father shocked her. The photos of him were recent. She had never seen him with his gray hair so long or his beard so unkempt. In one shot he carried a backpack, as a drifter might, and was looking over his shoulder as if monitoring who might be following him. Another showed him at a seedy

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motel. Then another set of pictures showed items that supposedly belonged to Keith Burne, including an assortment of automatic rifles, bomb-making materials, and confiscated letters written by him. According to the news these letters contained “hateful and racist” content.

In the middle of all the materials, one item stood out: her father’s worn leather Bible.

“Hate Crimes Linked to Missing Businessman,” one headline read. “Former Fortune 500 Exec Turns Rogue,” another declared. The last one she read contained all the information she needed: “Suspect Identified in High-Level Hate Crimes; Missing and at Large. Reward Posted.”

Under one of the recent pictures, her father’s name was spelled out clearly.

“By the look on your face, I gather you didn’t catch up on the morning news feeds. It’s a lot to read, of course, but I’ll show you the reason Mr. Heyford called me.” Nakajima tapped and expanded a paragraph in one of the articles. The words grew as big as the VP’s hands.

Keith Burne’s only daughter is Cheyenne Burne, a technology expert at the venerable Acatour corporation, who both works and lives in the Incen Tower.

For a moment Cheyenne forgot to breathe, her mind moving faster than the elevators ascending and descending this building.

“Every article mentions you in some way,” Nakajima said. “I was amused at the variety of descriptions they had for your title, especially since we don’t like to officially give titles to our employees. ‘Technology expert.’ If they only understood what PASK’s most talented architect knew.”

The last comment was both a question and a threat to Cheyenne, and she didn’t like being cornered and questioned and accused.

“You’re wrong,” Cheyenne told Nakajima.

“Excuse me?”

“I said you’re wrong. Sef Malek is PASK’s most talented architect.”

“He *was* talented, but he never could approach your abilities. Malek had this wonderfully quirky charisma, one that caught your attention, did it not? But he also had a knack for snooping around in business that wasn’t his.”

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“Why did you fire him?”

The smooth and porcelainlike face didn’t move, but Nakajima’s lips began to twist in a way that reminded Cheyenne of a worm on a fishhook. “Have you had any contact with your father in the last week?”

Cheyenne wondered if the guy downstairs really was a friend of her father’s.

The note is real. It’s more real than that image of the Bible, which could have been easily fabricated and manipulated.

“I haven’t seen or heard from my father in more than a year.”

“What happened to him?” Nakajima asked.

“You know as much as I do. He went missing.”

“After quitting his job, correct? After supposedly having some kind of divine experience and suddenly professing vitriol hidden in the sweet perfume of Jesus Christ. Does that sound familiar?”

“I don’t know exactly why my father quit his job,” Cheyenne said.

This was the first lie, but it wasn’t a full-fledged, bold-faced one. Her father had told her about finding God and having a new look on life, but his words hadn’t made any sense to her. It had been as if he’d gone to Tibet and climbed Mount Everest and then had tried to talk to her about it while speaking in Tibetan.

“A man like your father, as deluded as he most certainly happens to be, would contact his one and only beloved daughter.” Nakajima leaned over the desk and glared at her. “I bet he’s spoken with you recently. We’re already checking records.”

“I’m sure you did that before I even woke up, and I know you didn’t find anything because there’s nothing to find.”

“Obviously you can see the problem this has created.”

Cheyenne stood up. She was taller than the vice president, so she liked this position better. “I have had no contact with my father in a year, so I have no idea if any of these things they’re saying are true. But my father doesn’t know how to make bombs. He doesn’t own automatic rifles. How could he even find one? They’ve been outlawed for years.”

“So are drugs, yet even something as dangerous as I-Murse can easily be obtained.”

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"*My father and hate* do not belong in the same sentence," Cheyenne said.

"Sit down." Nakajima swiped off the screens.

"I can already see where this is heading. Malek certainly disappeared for doing far less."

"Do you know what your 'buddy' did?"

Cheyenne stayed quiet for the moment, despite the anger and adrenaline racing through her.

"The problem is that you have participated in many more campaigns and have been presented with much more sensitive material than Malek would ever dream of having contact with. You, the lovable Cheyenne Burne, were our golden child who could do no wrong."

You're jealous and have always been jealous, and it still looks ugly after all this time.

"Your work in the last year—"

"Is confidential," Cheyenne interrupted. "I've always known that, and I still do."

"Then surely you can see our current impasse."

"I haven't done anything wrong." Cheyenne turned around and headed to the glass door. It remained shut.

Nakajima circled her desk like a wild animal moving toward its prey. "You can't simply *walk* out of this office. Or merely gather your belongings and be on your merry way. This is not *The Wizard of Oz*."

Cheyenne turned. "Open this door now. I know my rights. I can blink and send a message to the authorities on our floor. If you want a national public relations nightmare on your hands, just try to keep me in this office."

A glimmer of hesitation could be spotted in Nakajima's eyes. A very rare sight indeed. But she quickly hid it by displaying her smug grin again. "Those authorities you talk about receive their salaries from the same people who pay yours."

"That's fine, but my friends at Divisional News would love to hear about my firing. Since I'm a hot commodity in national headlines, the so-called groundbreaking tech person in the company, people will kill to interview me." She deliberately stressed the word "kill."

Again Nakajima seemed to be weighing her options.

"Open the door," Cheyenne said.

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“What do you think is out there anyway?” the vice president asked as the glass door slid open.

My father. And I'm going to find him.

5.

The glow of the orange numbers on the wall showed the slow passage of time. Even though a voice out of nowhere had told her to wake up and to keep moving, Cheyenne wasn't moving at all. She remained stuck on the hard leather couch she seldom sat on, one of the expensive and stylized pieces she had purchased after starting work at PASK and earning a salary she couldn't have ever imagined making in her life. Just like the figures that increased in her account every week, the fancy furniture couldn't fill the void inside, nor could it provide the comfort she had felt as a child living with her father.

Now her job and income were suddenly . . . gone. Just like the voice she'd heard in her head earlier this day.

Who was talking to me, and how'd they get inside to do that?

That was the number one question she had after the hundreds of questions she had about her father, such as where was he, and what was he doing, and what sort of danger could he be in, and would she ever see him again? They had unfinished business, to say the least. As her mind kept returning to their last encounter, she stopped herself, ending the movie before it began, turning off the images and sounds and forcing herself not to go there, not now. Not after everything that had happened today.

Outside her apartment door stood two uniformed security men, making sure she didn't leave and nobody came in. After forcing her way out of Nakajima's office through threats, Cheyenne had been greeted with another set of men wearing uniforms and carrying sidearms, ones who were so courteous to usher her out of her own office. At least she was able to see Dina one more time and tell her she would find a way to be in touch, knowing her assistant understood it would be in a way that nobody could hear or read or intercept. As the men told her to gather her personal belongings and leave the building, once again Cheyenne had forced the issue.

“I don't know who you report to, but you can tell them I'm not leaving *right now*. I can't vacate my place in five minutes.”

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When the two men, brawny and acting the part of bullies, tried to intimidate and frighten her, Cheyenne didn't back down. That only made her more defiant.

"Neither of you has any security clearance whatsoever, so get out of my way, and tell those above you that I will leave first thing in the morning. Or else you will have every single person who hates this company at your doorstep demanding an explanation. Do you understand?"

If the two men Cheyenne left outside the PASK offices had had tails, they would have been tucked between their legs. They knew enough to realize they had to leave her alone. Cheyenne wasn't the enemy, at least not yet, and she was using one of the two assets she had for the moment: her ability either to speak out or remain silent. PASK and all those higher-ups wanted her silence.

I'm also holding something far more valuable: information.

The world would be very interested and even outraged at the experiments she had been conducting the last year. She could share a lot with others.

This could lead to potential dangers down the road. Actually, it could be the moment she walked out of this building. At least here she was still protected by the number of people around her and all the security and watching eyes. Outside in the real world of sorts—the kind with a sun that moved up and down instead of endless elevators every day—she wouldn't be as safe. She would be on her own in every way, and like a wounded pup that's fallen away from the pack, she would be vulnerable.

"There are people in control," Malek once told her. "Not the government but higher-ups. A small group that controls everything. And Jackson Heyford's one of them."

Malek had never been one for conspiracy theories, but in the last few months of working for PASK, he had started saying things like that. And he had told her that he had the information to back up the claims. But before he could show her, Malek was gone.

Do not overthink and analyze the situation you're about to encounter, the voice had said to her. Deal with the road in front of you and the door that's about to open.

She kept telling herself that was what she needed to do.

So get up and start. Move and begin to make plans to leave.

Before doing anything, however, Cheyenne had to finish reading her fa-

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ther's note. But as if she were frozen in her seat, which came from fear and shock, she didn't want to open the letter again. Yet she had to. Especially in the confines of her home, a place the government forbid any human monitoring.

They've broken a lot of laws, so I wouldn't be surprised if they were breaking this one too.

Cheyenne finally went over to her backpack, which was full of her important things, dug into it, and took out the note.

Okay. Here we go.

6.

Under the small curved reading light by her bed, Cheyenne cupped the piece of paper close to her eyes so that if there was a watching device somewhere, the people monitoring it wouldn't be able to read what it said.

Dear Cheyenne,

If you're reading this in your office, don't continue. You are in danger and must get out of the building as fast as you can. Save the rest of my comments for later.

I know it's been a long time since you've heard from me, and I'm sorry about that. I'm also sorry that this is the way you're finally hearing from me again. So much has happened, Cheyenne, things that I want to, that I truly hope to be able to tell you, even if it has to be in heaven. And don't roll your eyes when I say that. I mean it with all my heart.

A year ago when we last spoke, a conversation I deeply regret having gone wrong, I had the same spirit the apostle Peter had in John 13:37. He was eager to serve Jesus and said he would even die for him, but Peter was so impatient and didn't understand the bigger picture. He would later, of course, but God had to take him through some difficult times before Peter fully comprehended what it meant to be a disciple. I think I understand; at least I know more now than I did when we last spoke.

I'm here to help you—to warn you and also to connect you with someone. But I realize this note might be read or stolen or might not

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ever reach you. So I have to speak in code. We shared our own language when you were a little girl, so this will be easy for you.

There was something that I began to admire and even love later in my life. Something you said that you could never quite understand and something that I even attempted to help you appreciate. Think of this single word.

There is a man with this nickname. He is near the place you always wanted to settle down in. A local will know of him. He loves microbreweries and stout beer. Look for him so he can find you. When he trusts that you are who you say you are, he'll tell you everything he knows.

There are more words to come. But not now. Not like this. My song of the day is "Blackbird" by the Beatles. Please listen. Please know I love you.

I vow to tell you these three words again in person one day.

Daddy

She folded the note and stood up beside her made bed. Perhaps other women would have to wipe tears from their cheeks but not Cheyenne. She was still trying to process everything instead of becoming all emotional. She was analyzing the mystery he had presented her. And perhaps burying the other stuff he had written to her.

Moving to the blacked-out windows of her apartment, Cheyenne called out to open the blinds. Of course, there weren't actual blinds, nor was there any sort of glass or a window that could open. Not on the 194th floor of the Incen Tower. The glass was actually a powerfully clear material made in Germany, something that had a technical name but was basically superglass. It couldn't be broken and was also pliable enough to work within the grand structure of this skyscraper. As the tinted windows became clear, she could see the dark night outside.

Cheyenne moved to the edge of the glass and looked down. Chicago looked like golden snowflakes so far below her. It felt as if the city was as far away as her father.

"Indy, play 'Blackbird,'" she said, talking to her LC.

The term "Life Companion" always amused her, since a companion was

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someone you snuggled with on the couch or spooned in bed or cooked eggs with after waking up. Her father told her that people used to call it “Siri,” based on the popular intelligent personal assistant Apple had created. But now those so-called Siris were everywhere, so they needed to be categorized. Everybody’s Life Companion was the artificial intelligence inside an individual’s SYNAPSYS, and perhaps nobody in the world knew more about the intricacies involved with this than Cheyenne herself.

The nickname Indy was short for Indiana Jones, one of her childhood heroes because the movie character had been her father’s hero too. So much of her life came back to this monumental figure in her life, one she sometimes wanted and other times needed to chip away at and even break away from. It was dangerous to have heroes. At least real live ones.

As the song began to play throughout her apartment, Cheyenne looked at the walls, listening with her full attention to the song. It was the Beatles; this much she knew. But she couldn’t remember hearing it before. The tune was simple and intimate, sung as though the singer were sitting across from her. Just an acoustic guitar and a tapping, as if something were wrong with the audio.

That’s a foot tapping. Just like Dad used to do.

She thought of the way he had signed the note. Cheyenne hadn’t called him Daddy in a long time, but deep in her heart, that’s what he would always be. Hearing from her father made him become Daddy again, at least in this private moment where nobody else could hear, where darkness waited outside her apartment and the rest of the world lived so far below.

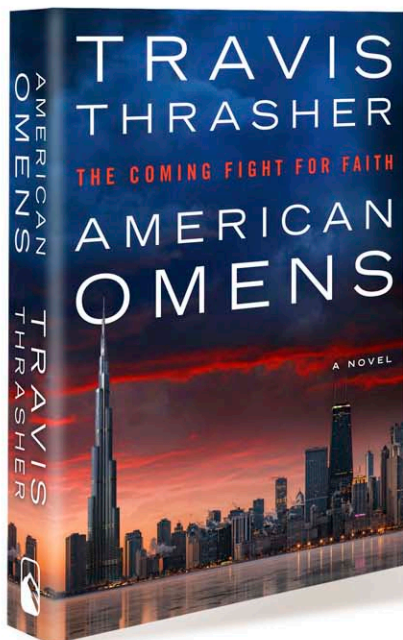
“Blackbird fly into the light of the dark black night.”

Her father hadn’t written only to connect with her. He had given her specific instructions. Tomorrow she would follow his advice.

Tomorrow she would figure out how to fly.

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