

At an interview with Imperium Solutions, a mysterious oil company, Max LaFollette inadvertently reveals information triggering a chain reaction that threatens his life. It's the best day he's going to have for a long time.

Drift

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DRIFT

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DRIFT

Steven Paul Mark

One

Don't fucking move.
The words chilled Max to the bone. Yet that drop in temperature was nothing compared to the blood freezing touch of the cold gun barrel against the side of his head.

Max had no problem in complying.

When he entered his apartment on West 48th Street, he smelled them before he saw them. *Polo by Ralph Lauren? Jovan Musk?* Whatever it was it seemed to permeate the room like tear gas, hanging in the air waiting to choke its hapless victim. That's what Max was now.

The place was a mess. Just like the movies. Books thrown to the floor, furniture cushions haphazardly strewn across the room, drawers open. They had obviously been there for a while, biding their time by dismantling Carolyn's pain-staking decorating that had taken several months.

Carolyn!

Max wanted to talk to her about last night, their worst battle in a war that seemed to have rivaled World War II. It made no sense for them to stay together anymore. The years of sniping, bickering, skirmishing and tactical nuclear exchanges had taken their toll on both of them. Fixing the apartment was supposed to be her return to sanity; she had even stopped taking the medications. As the last fixture was installed, the shaky cease-fire ended.

Max hoped she didn't arrive at her usual time that was just about now.

"You're in some serious shit," the more senior of the pair finally said. He looked like someone out of a parodist's take on a gangster movie: acne scar-studded face, an open-collared black silk shirt probably purchased somewhere in Brooklyn, a shiny silver suit, a thick, rope of gold around his neck and black cowboy boots with pointed toes. Didn't anyone tell this Guido that those boots passed into the fashion Hall of Fame years ago? The name Vince popped into Max's mind.

As Possible-Vince spoke, Max caught his reflection in the mirror just a few feet away. Max was thoroughly familiar with the NATO-qualified,

Beretta Cougar pressed up against his temple having used it as a sidearm in his military service. He wondered if the bullets were 9 mm or 45 caliber; it didn't much matter at point blank range.

"Listen, I don't have much money—" Max began, but the increased pressure of the gun barrel cut his sentence off.

"I told you not to move. You do that again and Carlo's programmed to stop the movement."

Max could feel the sweat beginning at his hairline and the rivulets running from his armpits down the sides of his body. His shirt had stuck to his back in the stuffy flat. No, this didn't look like your usual West Side burglary and despite the superficial tackiness of both men, they seemed to know what they were doing and what they were after.

"Now, won't you have a seat, Mr. LaFollette?" Possible-Vince offered politely.

Max knew better than to ask how he knew his name; after all, they had torn the house apart. Max obliged but Carlo never took his weapon from Max's head.

"We'll only be a minute but we just need to find out a couple of things."

"What things? What's this about?"

"Ah, ah, Mr. LaFollette, I'm asking the questions. You just sit back and answer them. Pretend I'm your teacher and we're in class."

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, you paid a visit to Imperium Solutions this morning."

"For a job interview," Max explained.

"There weren't any openings available."

"I know, so I just left."

"Well, that's not quite all, is it, Mr. LaFollette?"

"What do you mean? I just thought there might be a possibility. The company looked interesting."

"You mentioned Bran?" The question was more of a statement. "How do you know Bran?" he asked in a more demanding, ominous tone.

Bran? Max began to rewind his memory tape.

* * *

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A few hours earlier but what seemed like a lifetime ago, Max heard the dreaded two-word sentence, *You're fired*. He knew it was a possibility when they brought the new CEO in on a major restructuring at his company. But he had just been asked to put a proposal together for his new boss. It didn't make sense. Max knew he had been instrumental in building his company's profile in a few years, from a small start-up to a multimillion-dollar operation, thanks to his marketing strategies. He should have been getting reparations for all the time and effort, the salary reduction and the debris of his marriage. Instead, the Board was bringing in more seasoned leadership.

Ironically, Max had been a captain in the Marines' Force Recon and had more leadership skills than anyone else in the company. But it was one thing to stay alive in northern Iraq assisting the Kurds, in Mogadishu's confusing firefights and in Bosnia's mountainous terrain avoiding roving bands of Serbs, and another to navigate the serpentine politics of his company. Decorated young veteran or not, there he was in the office of the new and arrogant, senior-most executive with those dreaded two words *You're fired* still echoing in his brain.

It's not about you, Max, I need to bring my own team in. We're giving you a generous severance. With my team we'll enhance the value of your stock; you should have no problem finding... The words drifted off as Max's head seemed to float a foot or two above his body.

Carolyn's going to be pissed, Max thought.

Max left the CEO's office in a daze. He needed air desperately. When he got to his office he grabbed his bag and suit jacket and headed for the street. The renovated SoHo building that had originally served as a clothing factory only had eight floors but the elevator seemed to take forever.

The trendy neighborhood brimmed with activity and even though the calendar said late October, the air was thick with humidity and the temperature was already over seventy degrees.

"Goddamn global warming," a homeless man muttered as Max passed.

Max didn't care. In comparison to the near panic attack in his boss's office, the air felt good. It was 11:30 and, if he hurried, he'd be able to see it. At least there was a silver lining. Or a pinstriped one in this case.

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Max walked south, becoming more aware of the unusual heat. At Canal Street, he took off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves; at Broadway and Worth, he loosened his tie and opened his shirt button. By the time he reached the Woolworth Building, he looked like every other young executive taking an early lunch break instead of the latest addition to the unemployment roll.

The gathering crowd was already three or four deep at the curb, swaying back and forth like kelp in a tidal zone. Flags and victory signs adorned the light poles along with several intrepid souls who had climbed up for a better vantage point, lookouts ready to cry out from their urban crow's nest.

Suddenly, farther down Broadway, a low roar began to develop and Max could feel the crowd's anticipation. Several blocks downtown it looked like a swirling snowstorm had suddenly burst forth even though the hot October sun shone brilliantly overhead.

The crowd around Max strained to see, turning their gaze southward. Somewhere in the reduced visibility a high school band played a march and the familiar music mixed in with the loud cheering and horn honking. Max recognized the strands of *New York New York* over the cacophony and wondered how John Phillips Sousa would have felt if he were listening.

The temperate Nor'easter moved uptown at a rate unseen on weather maps and the warm breezes swirled the bits and pieces of paper into eddies and small twisters. As the music grew louder in the City that never sleeps Max could see the bobbing hats of the oncoming band, blasting away at the notes attached to their instruments.

He could feel the electricity in the air as the full band came into view. Their gold-emblazoned, rich green standard, proudly carried by two embarrassed young ladies dressed as leprechauns, was followed by a high-stepping African-American Drum Major and his flock of 120 kids blowing bugles at the tops of their lungs and banging drums as if their very college admissions depended upon it.

As the main attraction approached, the office paper squall filled the air and the freight train roar of the crowd grew louder in the narrow canyon. Twenty open cars overflowing with the World Champion Yankees and their wives and kids brought the conquering heroes

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through the streets of their City in a procession that would have made Caesar envious. High above Max, from the fifty-eighth floor of the Woolworth Building down to the twelfth floor, offices tossed out massive amounts of confetti, streamers, torn bits of paper and occasional pages from discarded office communications, joining with tons of other pulp homage to the team.

Half an hour into the happy madness, onlookers stood ankle-deep in paper. Max didn't care, nothing else mattered: not his getting fired, not the ugly fight with Carolyn last night, not the beastly warm day. It was his first ticker-tape parade and he felt like a kid again.

As Max gave a thumbs up to yet another car, a sheet of falling paper stuck to his shoulder. Max reached for it but as he did, it blew flat against his face. Annoyed, he pulled it off and was about to toss it onto the ground when he noticed a rather lavish logo at the top of an inter-office memorandum that read 'Confidential'. The word 'Draft' was also inscribed on the memo. Someone had discarded the draft, which was now recycled as part of the paper tribute. Max read the message which referred to an oil drilling project and the need to step up the production schedule. Its author was clearly irritated at the slow progress to date and was calling for a high-level meeting to get things going. At the bottom of the page, it was clear that there was a source of the irritation:

Bran has become a real danger to the project and is to be terminated. This must be done immediately.

Poor bastard, Max thought, another guy fired. Well, what the hell, one person's misfortune is no reason for another person to miss fortune. Max took out his cell phone and got the number. Over the deafening thunder of the spectacle, with a finger stuck in his other ear, Max could barely hear the voice announce, "Imperium Solutions, may I help you?"

The memo told Max two things: Imperium was an oil company and it suddenly had an opening. *So what if I haven't worked in the oil industry since school. I was damn good at it.* Max got more excited as the elevator whizzed past each floor of the stately, neo-gothic building, rising toward the fifty-sixth floor and the corporate offices of Imperium Solutions.

When he finally reached the designated floor, the elevator opened on a sumptuous reception area, complete with breathtaking photography of natural areas, museum-quality minerals displayed in large Plexiglas pedestals and a large floor-to-ceiling scale model of a futuristic-looking deep-ocean, oil rig. It was love at first sight; Max wanted in.

"May I help you?" the receptionist politely asked Max, in a somewhere-in-Eastern Europe accent. The name "Radivic" on her nameplate confirmed this.

Max felt awkward. The idea seemed like a good one when he stepped onto the elevator but his confidence had faded as quickly as the hydraulics had boosted the elevator skyward. The receptionist stared at him, waiting for a response.

"Uh, I'd like to leave my resume, if I could," Max responded, timidly handing her the one page that summed up his career. *This is the dumbest fucking idea.*

"That would be fine, Mr. LaFollette," she answered, quickly noticing his name. "I'll let our HR Department have it. I'm sure they'll contact you."

Max resented the perfunctory assurance and regained his nerve. "Say, Ms. Radivic, maybe I could see Mr. Dilworth now?" Dilworth was the author of the peculiar tickertape memo.

"I don't think so. An appointment has to be set up in advance and I don't do that," she said.

"Aw come on," Max coyly urged her. "Most of your staff must be downstairs enjoying the parade. If he's here, maybe he'll have time."

"Actually, all of our staff is here working hard."

At first, Max thought she was kidding. Then, he realized she was dead serious.

"Well, it's my lucky day."

"Oh, why is that, Mr. LaFollette?"

"It's beautiful outside, got to see my first Yankees tickertape parade and I got to meet you."

Max LaFollette was easy going and easy to get along with but still waters ran deep in the soul of Max LaFollette. Most of his friends knew he was a former Marine but Max wouldn't talk about his service record with anyone except, perhaps, another Marine.

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The scar on his cheek, he told anyone who asked, was from some broken glass. There was no point in telling the truth that a piece of shrapnel during a Somalian firefight was the sculptor of the uneven crease. It gave an otherwise good-looking face a bit of mystery that made some women even more attracted. His ready but slightly crooked smile and single dimple etched into his other cheek softened his square jaw and gave the impression that some mischief was afoot.

He loved the outdoors, always seemed to sport a slight tan and kept his thirty-eight year old body in excellent shape, a habit begun at Parris Island in what now seemed to be another life. The other lesson taught by *Semper Fi* was to take that life one day at a time; it was less complicated that way.

He detected the slightest color coming to Radivic's otherwise pale cheeks. *I'm in!*

"I don't know, it's not appropriate."

"I'll buy you dinner," Max finally urged.

"You needn't do that, Mr. LaFollette...Just give me a moment...Why don't you have a seat over there?" she suggested.

Max wanted to have a closer look at the model drill platform so he chose the couch that faced the elaborate replica. While the receptionist disappeared through a door behind her desk, Max studied the oil rig for a few minutes and was amazed at the obvious advancements in technology since he had graduated.

The information accompanying the model specified that not only could this rig drill far deeper than any other on the market but it could extract sixty percent more oil at a cheaper price from a given oil deposit, an unheard of efficiency in the petroleum industry. While the rig was still in the research and development phase, it was clear that Imperium Solutions already had a first generation, deep-ocean, drilling technology all their own.

The display promised a fully operational version of the new rig in two years' time. The bad news was that Max knew he didn't have a chance at a job here, except, perhaps, in the mailroom. But the good news was he'd call his stockbroker and buy some stock in the company with some of his severance package.

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Frustrated, depressed and a bit antsy, Max got off the couch and walked over to the windows facing west. He looked out toward the Hudson River and 'Ground Zero' where new construction was well underway. He shook his head at the thought. In the attack, he lost two good friends, a Marine buddy and the lawyer that drew up his employment agreement with his now former employer. The evil that men did in the name of religion, politics, greed or whatever other idiotic motive continually baffled Max.

"Mr. LaFollette, you were right," Ms. Radivic announced as she reappeared from the interior office area.

Max looked confused.

"You said it was your lucky day. Mr. Malinowski has a few minutes before his staff meeting. He's head of our Facilities Department; he works with Mr. Dilworth."

"Ms. Radivic, you won't regret this. Just figure out where you'd like to go for dinner," Max said excitedly.

As Max followed Radivic down the long hallway, he was struck by how quiet everything seemed: no clattering of keyboards, no telephone conversations, no one clustered around the water cooler or in the photocopy room, no ringing phones. It was more like a morgue than a busy international company, but even a morgue had the occasional sound of a drawer being opened or closed.

"So, Mr. LaFollette," Malinowski began after giving Max's resume a quick once-over, "I see you attended Tulane University."

"Yes, in New Orleans," Max answered.

"And you majored in Mardi Gras, bourbon and decadence," Malinowski asked with deadpan tone.

"Ah, no, Mr. Malinowski, I was actually interested in voodoo. There were a number of people I didn't like at the time," Max quipped.

There was no response. Max immediately regretted his flippant remark. Malinowski's sense of humor must have been stillborn.

"Actually, I've been interested in geology since I was a kid. As I got older, I became more interested in petrology. My grandfather was a wildcatter."

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Malinowski said nothing but started reading Max's resume again. Max was uneasy and decided to continue.

"Tulane was great for a couple of things like its Natural Disaster course and its petrology lectures and lab. But I transferred to Caltech after that."

"Yes, I see," Malinowski said, not looking up. "You're also a Marine veteran," he added. "Credible resume."

Max waited for the question he knew was coming. He got a bonus question added.

"Why didn't you seek employment in the oil industry when you got your Masters Degree? Or proceed to your doctorate?"

Max squirmed a bit in his suit and tie but decided to play it honestly.

"I made a big mistake. I spent a couple of summers on rigs in the Gulf and off the Cal coast while I was in school. Didn't get much chance to continue my research. Boredom of youth, that sort of thing. After my Masters I got a patriotic urge and joined the Marines. I thought it would give me a solid base with my education. I also got married and my wife didn't like to climb over and under rocks."

"And now you're ready to be serious, I take it."

"Mr. Malinowski, let me be as candid as possible." Max was about to lie through his teeth.

"I just walked out on an unsatisfying marketing job this morning. As I headed downtown to this parade, I thought a lot about what I wanted to do with my life. When I heard about Imperium a while ago, the idea of getting back into oil excited me but I didn't do anything about it. Then I remembered that Imperium had its offices here so I decided to take a chance. I'll do anything to get back in, any entry position in R&D. I can handle marketing, too."

Max knew that if he could get into research and development, he could really shine. Both his Tulane and Cal Tech advisers said he was a 'natural.'

"We really don't do much marketing, Mr. LaFollette," Malinowski coldly advised. "But you say you heard about us. Where was that? We don't do any advertising or public relations. We don't drill in the usual places."

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Max was sunk. If he mentioned any oil trade magazines or newspaper articles, he'd be as dead in the water as a cormorant soaked in an oil spill. He used the only connection he had.

"Ah, Bran was talking you up. I was in a bar on the upper West Side a while back and overheard him talking about oil exploration," Max lied. "So I introduced myself and we got to talking."

"You know Bran?" Malinowski replied with a strangely urgent tone in his voice.

Max was unnerved by his sudden change in demeanor from a disinterested, icy automaton, to a concerned and anxious interviewer. Max needed to cover his lie with another one.

"Well, we talked for a bit but he was getting loaded so I doubt he'd even remember me."

Malinowski stared at Max for an uncomfortable moment as if he was expecting further details. When Max said nothing he picked up Max's resume again and carefully read it seeking those details. Finding none, he put the paper down and then smiled.

"Mr. LaFollette, we may have an opening shortly for someone like you. Let me discuss the matter with our field operation and someone will get back to you."

Max thought the comment was perfunctory and insincere but he shook Malinowski's extended hand. It was oily. *Perfect*, Max thought. But he was relieved that the interview was over.

As Max found his way out, he realized his mention of Bran colored the meeting. Maybe he should just be up front about Bran and say that he really didn't know him. It was the right thing to do so Max slowly made his way back to the office, getting close enough to hear Malinowski's side of a telephone conversation.

"But he said he met Bran...Yes sir...No, how else could he know?...I'll call them right away."

Max heard him hang up the phone so he quickly made his way out to the elevators. Radivic was gone; an unattractive replacement was at the reception desk.

As Max walked through the vaulted lobby of the Woolworth Building, he felt uneasy. The architectural gem may have been called the Cathedral of Commerce when Woodrow Wilson first turned on its lights

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from the White House, but Max saw it as a dark fortress from which he was escaping. He didn't like Malinowski's tone and wondered who he was calling 'right away.'

Max got his answer hours later as the two gangster-types invaded his life.

Possible-Vince seemed to be losing patience as Max related his morning expedition downtown.

"Look, Mr. LaFollette, it's hot and Carlo and I want to take the rest of the day off. Either you tell us what you know and we leave or you don't tell us what you know and we leave. But in the latter case, you'll be dead."

Carlo chuckled. Max knew what Carlo wanted.

Possible-Vince sauntered over to the front bay window, gazed down at the street and stiffened

"Shit, cops! Let's get out of here!" he commanded Carlo who immediately unscrewed the silencer and holstered his gun.

Max felt the hand of God reaching down and patting him on the head.

"We'll be in touch, Mr. LaFollette. Think some more about Bran, eh?"

With that, Possible-Vince smiled and quickly followed Carlo out the door. When Max was sure they were gone he got up to shut the door but instead of closing it, he saw two of New York's Finest coming up the stairs.

Two

“Have a look at this, Becky. Another weird pattern.”
Rebecca Hausman, Chief Seismologist at the prestigious California Institute of Technology, put down her cup of coffee and walked over to the computer.

“What’s up, Manny?”

“I’ve never seen this pattern before. It’s like the currents from El Niño are attracting the jet stream and it’s all getting mixed into a mess.”

“Doesn’t sound too scientific a description, Manny.”

“Here, look at this,” Manny offered and loaded another screen onto his computer.

It was the development and disposition of El Niño over the past forty years, depicting warm water in red and cold water in green.

“This pattern hasn’t been seen before. You got the warm subsurface currents and the Humboldt Current as usual but there’s a huge mass of warmer water extending way too far out into the Pacific. This is cold water right here.” Manny moved his finger along the green strip off Peru’s coast.

“Here by Ecuador the fishing’s real good but that’s not going to last long and farther south the fish have disappeared. Look at this.” Manny pointed to a large red tongue of color reaching down toward Antarctica.

“What’s that?” Becky asked.

“That? Oh, probably the end of the world as we know it. I hear there are Adelie penguins walking around with placards that read *Repent!*”

Becky knew Manny was kidding, but Manny’s quips, puns, jokes and sarcasm often had a thread of seriousness in them. So she waited for the real response.

“This section here looks to have branched off from the main eastward flow. It’s real warm and flowing south.”

Becky knew the rest. An increased Antarctica ice melt could create conditions far worse than the usual coastal flooding, massive fish die-offs and strange weather patterns that marked El Niño’s visits.

“I’ve already named it...*El Diablo!*”

“The Devil?”

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Becky smiled at her associate's humor. She loved her Caltech colleagues and loved her job. As an expert seismologist she knew earthquakes intimately but over the years she'd made a significant investment in vulcanology, meteorology, climatology and mineralogy. She devoted a four-day vacation to paleontology and actually discovered some sixty million-year-old fossils.

If Caltech was her life, the earth sciences provided the heart beat. When she did have free time, vacations forced upon her by the Department's director, she chose to write and had been fortunate in publishing three books on her field. The last one, *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, title courtesy of a savvy editor at Putnam, had become a crossover best seller because it explained how and why earthquakes and other geologic-based disasters occurred in easy-to-read fashion.

For Becky, work was everything and there was little time for a social life, even a small one. Yet this was her choice and so what if she couldn't remember the name of the last guy she dated.

"It's also coming on much earlier this time." Manny looked up at the painted sign he and his lab colleagues had hung, *Bienvenidos, El Niño. Be Nice!* It seemed like a cute idea last month when it was clear that the strange, large-scale climatic fluctuation was going to arrive early. That alone was a source of concern but it was no more explainable than El Niño itself.

El Niño was named for the Christ child because, like Jesus, the strange current oscillation usually showed up around Christmas off the coast of Peru and Ecuador. Theories for it abounded: global warming, atmospheric pressure changes, deep ocean anomalies such as magma displacements, thermal vents or ocean floor earthquakes. Becky theorized it had to be related to the ocean floor: changing currents rising from volcanic activity, heating the upper layers of the Pacific and thereby affecting air temperature and wind currents.

"So what did you really want?" Becky queried. "Other than to show me pretty colored pictures."

"I like your notion of deep ocean anomalies. Something's going on down there."

"Is that your question?" Becky liked to tease Manny.

Manny was something of an anomaly himself. He grew up in Watts and East LA. He was the youngest of three sisters and two brothers, his mother's pride and joy. Manny Ramirez had a special quality that set him apart from his siblings, friends and schoolmates; he was a dreamer, a stargazer and a collector of rocks and insects. Before he ever went to school he could name sixty-two species of dinosaurs, classify minerals, point out the primary constellations and read better than any second grader in his school.

Manny's mother constantly guarded her brood, keeping her sons from joining gangs and her daughters from unwanted pregnancies. For the most part she succeeded except for her oldest boy. Although his cohorts wanted to enlist Manny, his brother adamantly refused. *The professor's going to do great things*, he used to tell them.

So Manny went through school, a ghetto prodigy, recognized by his teachers, counselors and psychologists as uniquely gifted. College and graduate school were never in doubt. How much the scholarship or fellowship would be was the only issue.

"Well, I guess I'd like you to have a look at all the seismic and volcanic activity I've been collecting since the last El Niño, see if there's a pattern anywhere to help explain El Diablo."

"Consider it done, Manuelo! Besides, maybe I'll come up with a decent speech for that conference next month."

"Oh yeah, that's right. In New York. Then Thanksgiving with your folks."

"Yeah, who haven't seen me in two years," Becky said, a bit defensively.

"Hey Boss, you don't have to justify to me. You don't take enough vacations."

"Spending time with my family is no vacation. More like the Decathlon: ten events of strength and endurance followed by utter exhaustion."

"Your Dad still fish?" Manny remembered Becky's folks from their last trip to California and he really liked them.

"Yup, he got himself a nice boat and goes out every day. He can't wait until he gets his First Mate back again. The best thing they ever did was move to Massachusetts."

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“Finally, someone who leaves California to make his fortune!”

They both laughed. “Yeah, but I really miss them. Call you soon, Manuelo.”

Leaving the building, she began to think about many things, unscientific things, like taking stock in her life. On the career profit and loss statement, she was running a whopping profit but on her personal life the spreadsheet showed nothing but red numbers in parentheses. *You can't have it all. You can have it all. Who makes up these things?* She thought. But it was a beautiful day and as she headed to her car, she remembered the description she once read about Caltech when she was dissecting a frog in high school:

We're a small scholarly community where history and tradition coexist with a passion for innovation, intense intellectual curiosity, and a healthy amount of craziness, where it's relatively easy to find your niche, be known for yourself, and connect with people as colleagues and friends.

It was the line about ‘craziness’ that clinched it for her. *Give me some of that, Girl!*

“Ladies and Gentlemen, if you’ll please take your seats we can get through our business in time for you all to get home early tonight...for a change.”

John Westerhaus addressed his ‘direct reports’ deployed around the large teakwood conference table, a gift from an Indonesian shipping company. Besides the table, gray upholstered chairs from Italy, deep pile carpeting, recessed lighting and artful satellite photographs of the company’s drilling locations gave evidence to the successful worldwide reach of Imperium Solutions.

“You all have the agenda,” Westerhaus began, “so why don’t we take a tour around the world. Pieter?”

“Yes John,” a sharply dressed, thirty-something executive responded. “Possibilities in the Gulf of Mexico are looking up. Senator Rickabaugh

has agreed to a visit and will likely support our efforts to build more deep-drilling platforms. He wanted to see our European operation but I've been able to keep him focused here in the States. Environmental groups have withdrawn their objections because of our new Third Coast Reclamation Fund to rebuild the wetlands."

"And because we can build far offshore. Time frame?" Westerhaus asked.

"Two months to get him totally on board, another two months to get our papers through and we should be in construction by the spring."

"Excellent work, Pieter," Westerhaus commented. "Isabel, how about Pacific operations? Last time we met, you were concerned about our overall production schedule."

"As you all know, our efforts to complete the Pacific Rim axis of drilling platforms, targeted in our overall business plan for this year is back on track. We were finally able to conclude agreements with the parties in dispute for the Spratly Islands, one of our key sites."

"They're nearly invisible on any map and have been the subject of multiple claims by several countries. More than that, they're centrally located in the South China Sea. Substantial oil and gas potential. No indigenous population. In effect, we're providing a perfect diplomatic wedge for China and Taiwan. We deflate the competing claims for which no one seems to be prepared to go to war while at the same time investing the capital and labor as a neutral entity."

"In the claimants' eyes, our efforts might create an economic windfall through a division of barrels of oil or profits making their concessions all worthwhile. The UN couldn't have done it better." She smiled and then concluded. "We go online next month following some tests. Our drilling will undoubtedly bring up enough oil to make everyone happy."

"And that's what we want, Isabel, happy clients. By the way, the offer out to our Africa specialist has been accepted so she'll be coming on board shortly," Westerhaus announced.

An hour later, after hearing generally good news about the mid-Atlantic project, Hudson Bay, the Indian Ocean platforms and the original drilling site in the Caucasus, John Westerhaus looked like a man who had just dined in a four-star restaurant. He was ready for dessert.

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"Walter? How goes your principal project?" Malinowski's report was usually the sign that the important work was done but in the last few weekly meetings more concerns had been raised by a recent break-in that Westerhaus was sure was connected to Bran.

The over-sized Director of Facilities shifted a bit in his seat. Despite the cool 68° temperature, his glistening forehead betrayed his effort to appear confident.

"We have a few good leads, Sir," he began cautiously. "My contacts have located someone who recently met Bran and I suspect that we'll soon have the information we need."

"Walter, you know how urgent it is that we find him. He knows the entire operation top to bottom. He's the only loose end. I'm leaving for Europe soon and I need to know this isn't going to be an issue."

The other executives began to squirm a bit in their chairs. Westerhaus stared at the photographs on the far wall as his anger rose. He thought Malinowski was a buffoon who barely knew how to deal with outside contractors and subcontractors but he did have certain 'contacts' that had proven useful in the past.

"Perhaps you can all excuse Walter and me. I'm quite pleased with the situation, in general." It was a resounding shot at Malinowski.

The executives gathered their papers and other effects and slowly filed out of the room until the Chairman and the facilities guy, as most employees referred to him, remained. Malinowski could feel his body shake.

"Walter," Westerhaus said quietly, "this is a high stakes game. I need to know that you can handle this situation. Can you?"

"Yes, John, I think I can."

"Damn it, Walter," Westerhaus exclaimed in a rising voice, "I can find a hundred people who will 'think' they can do a job."

"I know I can."

"How long?"

"Three months, tops."

"Too late. You have one month. Your job depends upon it."

"Jesus, John, I work around the clock for this company. My job's my life."

STEVEN PAUL MARK

"Like I said, Walter, your job depends on it. Bran's got to be found and taken care of."

"Mr. LaFollette?" the NYPD officer addressed a startled Max.

"Yes. Jeez, you got here just in time. These guys—"

"Some neighbors complained about a loud fight coming from your place last night," Officer Charles O'Malley, Badge 2615, addressed Max. He was the older and more veteran cop. The other, Officer John Thomas, said nothing but began taking notes.

Max cringed. It wasn't so much Carolyn's screaming, he figured, but the various objects hitting the walls and smashing to bits that disturbed the neighbors. Yet again.

"Yeah, my wife and I had a domestic squabble," Max responded, trying to be humorous. Neither officer laughed.

"From the looks of it in here, I'm surprised there aren't any burnt out tanks," O'Malley said.

"Oh, no, my wife and I never go to bed mad."

The cop looked confused, waiting for a better response.

"Actually, I'm really glad you guys showed up."

"Why's that?" O'Malley asked. The younger cop just kept taking notes.

"I got home from work, uh, actually I had the day off," Max began, realizing he already sounded nervous, "and these two guys were waiting for me. They wrecked the place."

"Uh-huh. Are you in any trouble, Mr. LaFollette?"

"I guess so. They asked if I knew this person named 'Bran'. They're from a company called Imperium Industries or something."

"Now why would a company hire thugs to ransack your place?" the cop responded, suspicion dripping from his words.

"I have no idea. Isn't that what you guys are supposed to do?"

"We'll look into it. How can we reach your wife?" O'Malley asked.

"Actually, she's about half an hour late. But you can reach her at home usually. She's not working."

"Mind if we take a quick look around?"

"Not at all," Max responded.

DRIFT

"John, why don't you give the place a once-over and we'll leave this man to clean up the mess." Then he had another thought. "By the way, if you want us to investigate the break-in, you'd better not touch anything until we can get forensics here."

Officer Thomas went to the kitchen first as his partner continued.

"What was the fight about?"

"Oh, you name it. We haven't gotten along for years. Carolyn's a manic-depressive and every time she gets a new medicine or dosage change you can be sure it'll be fight night in LaFollettville. Last night started with 'I have no life' and ended up 'you've ruined my life.' Tough to defend against that."

"Not just leaving the toilet seat up," O'Malley knowingly chuckled.

When Thomas left the kitchen, Max noticed he was wearing latex gloves. He began to amble around the living room, not touching anything.

"Will you check out this Imperium company? Their guys were really threatening. They had a gun."

"Well, why don't you describe them and what happened and we'll give it to the detectives."

While Max began his story of Carlo and Possible-Vince, Officer Thomas finished the living room and bathroom and entered the bedroom.

"Charley," the voice came from the bedroom, "I think you ought to see this."

It was late afternoon as Andrea Wilcox suffered under the station's well-meaning, but worst make-up artist. She was so bad that Andrea had to redo the job herself more times than Andrea cared to remember. Nepotism lives! This would-be movie make-up queen once put rouge on Andrea's eyes and a lovely blue-gray eye shadow on her high cheekbones. She couldn't get it completely off before her camera call and it looked like she had been in a fight and crying for days. For once, there was time for damage control.

"That's great, Jessica," Andrea lied as the make-up girl started rummaging through her kit for some finishing touch.

"But I need to brighten the red," Jessica argued.

STEVEN PAUL MARK

"No, Darling, I think it's just perfect."

"Wait, just give me a sec and I'll find what I need."

War was narrowly avoided as the associate producer walked in with Andrea's script.

"Oh, sorry, Jessica, I've got to read this. Thanks and I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'm off for the next week," she said sullenly as she tried to close her case.

"Oh," Andrea responded, "then I'll see you next time." *Maybe she'll be in a car wreck. Quit? Hired away? Who cares, a week of bliss.*

By the time Andrea finished scanning the pages, it was time for her anchoring but she had to talk to the producer first. When she found him, the commercial break was running. She didn't mince any words.

"This is a joke, right?" she challenged the headset-wearing producer.

"Nope, that's it. We extended the coverage because the weather's just too weird. We got some great graphics for your opening."

"Jeez Louise, Tommy, what the hell is going on? Eighties in New York, forties in the Yucatan...major windstorm in Sydney, torrential rains in the Gobi Desert."

"Ain't it great?" the producer responded. Bad news was good news in the newsroom.

Max could hear the cops talking quietly in the bedroom. In a moment, O'Malley came back into the living room with a dour look on his face. He sat across from Max.

"You say your wife usually comes home around now?"

"Y-yeah," Max answered nervously.

"She's been here the whole time. I'm sorry to tell you this, but she's dead. She's lying on the floor on the other side of the bed. She's in a nightgown."

The words seemed to enter the atmosphere and suddenly dry up, gone as quickly as they came.

Max sat on the couch frozen. His limbs felt paralyzed and he thought that the bottom of his stomach had just dropped out but the bile was struggling to find a way out through his throat. His face felt like it was on fire.

DRIFT

"Mr. LaFollette?" The sound of O'Malley's voice seemed to be miles away.

"Mr. LaFollette?"

"Huh?"

"We're going to have to call in homicide. They'll want to ask you some questions." To his partner he said, "John, they'll need a forensics unit here, too."

An hour later, the crime scene investigators buzzed around the apartment like bees in a flower bed, collecting samples from the carpeting, shelves, bed and just about everywhere else and neatly sealing them in plastic bags. Another specialist dusted for fingerprints. Max hoped they'd find something so they'd believe his story about the two thugs. One thing was clear to him: from the moment Officer Thomas found Carolyn the veil of suspicion descended upon him like a blasting mat.

Becky felt deliciously secretive about her twice weekly drives south. Because she was one of the research directors no one questioned her patterned disappearances from the face of the Earth; after all, at virtually every other moment she was examining reports, seismographs and geology maps in the Caltech seismology lab. In Becky's world, this was her treat, an intellectual love affair that had started as a fling and had now developed into a full-blown romance.

Becky Hausman woke up every morning of her childhood listening to the surf crashing on the rocks a hundred feet down from her backyard. She loved the ocean and everything associated with it, even the coarse smell of the fish her father had caught as a successful commercial fisherman. Like most kids growing up, she wanted to be just like one of her parents, in this case her father. For years she helped him during summers and school vacations, which gave her a lifelong respect for the sea, how it affected her life and how its balance, as part of Nature, had to be maintained.

With the kind of childhood Becky experienced, earthquakes seemed to be a long way off the radar screen until her untroubled days at Berkeley ended on a hot October afternoon. The box seats near field level were a special treat for Becky, thanks to her roommate. Third game

of the much anticipated World Series: Oakland and San Francisco, two teams separated by a bridge. On this balmy night, the Giants were already down two games to none but the noisy home crowd could feel something in the humid air. It just wasn't baseball.

Becky looked at her watch as the pregame festivities unfolded; it was just after five. Suddenly, a strange vibrating sensation moved across the stadium like a fan wave but this sensation was strong enough to sway the upper deck of Candlestick Park. Within seconds, Becky realized an earthquake was shaking the bay area and Time and every one of the sixty-two thousand fans, players and stadium staff stood still. As with most quakes, it was over within a matter of seconds. It was a first in World Series history.

The crowd slowly came back to life from an unearthly silence but the resultant buzz wasn't the sound of thousands of baseball fans awaiting the first pitch. When the public address announcement began, the buzz dissipated into the sounds of the stadium flags flapping and the gentle breeze blowing through baseball's infamous wind tunnel.

Six hours later, Becky collapsed into her bed. She was exhausted after a snail's pace evacuation from the stadium parking lot through an endless labyrinth of broken concrete and damaged cars and a long detour to the south to get across the Bay. The nightmarish sights of fires, collapsed buildings, rushing ambulances, roadblocks, crumpled steel, and unspeakable chaos chipped away at her emotions.

Her nose still stung from the acrid clouds of dust and smoke but in that moment she knew she wanted to learn everything she could about earthquakes. During the sleepless night, she wondered if Berkeley had enough undergraduate courses in geology and earth science or whether she'd somehow have to explain to her parents that she needed to transfer.

As she turned onto La Jolla Shores Drive, the main drag of Scripps Institute of Oceanography, her thoughts naggingly returned to her address at next month's East Coast Seismographic Society conference. She still had no clue as to what her presentation might be. *Comparison of East Coast seismic events to the vibrations of the NYC Subway?* At least she'd get some chuckles.

DRIFT

Max felt invisible as an hour and a half went by and the crime scene investigators busied themselves all over the apartment paying no attention to him. Max wondered where the homicide guys were. *My God, Carolyn?* Even though they'd had a tough time of it and were headed for divorce, Max remembered happier times and occasionally wiped tears from his eyes. It had been painful to call her parents and Max could sense they held him responsible, if not for the actual killing, then for the asphyxiation of their marriage.

"Mr. LaFollette," the voice broke in.

Max looked up at two detectives who didn't need to identify themselves as homicide. Max didn't know when they came in.

"I'm Detective Feingold and this is Detective Warren. We spoke with the first officers on the scene and have some questions we'd like to ask."

"Uh-huh," Max nodded, half in and half out of what was going on around him.

"Why don't we start by you telling us about your wife: her friends, any enemies..." Detective Feingold began.

As Max went through the process, including advising that Carolyn had no enemies he could think of, he felt detached and in the middle of a bizarre television episode of *Law and Order*.

"So, despite the fact that your wife was on medication and prone to fits of anger, you don't think she pissed someone off big time?" Feingold asked.

"She didn't get that bad," Max responded.

"But you told the officers that last night's fight was the worst in a long time. Flying objects and the like," Detective Warren finally spoke.

"It was sort of bad."

"Loud enough for neighbors in all parts of the building to hear," Warren added.

"Yeah," Max said wistfully, "probably loud enough to hear in New Jersey."

"You said you came home from a job interview, that you were fired today?"

Max nodded.

"Any chance that you came home angry, continued your fight from last night? There was an accident...maybe you hit her, she fell and hit her head? Now's the time to tell us."

"I never hit her. I told you I got home and there were two thugs waiting for me. They put a fucking gun to my head! Why the hell aren't you out looking for them?" Max shouted. Once again, tears formed in his eyes.

"Just routine questions, Mr. LaFollette. We got to ask them. We're also investigating..." he looked at his notes "...the Imperium connection and your two visitors."

That calmed Max but he froze as Carolyn's body was taken out of the bedroom, downstairs to the waiting transport.

"Where are they taking her?" Max asked.

Detective Warren answered. "The M.E.'s office. They'll do an autopsy first. After that, they release the body to the family. They'll contact you tomorrow."

After an uncomfortable moment of silence, during which Detective Warren looked at Max intently, Feingold announced that they had no further questions for now. The words chilled Max. He didn't know why but he felt guilty. Guilty for not paying more attention to Carolyn, guilty for not trying hard enough to help her with her depression and drug issues, guilty for not understanding, guilty for being absorbed in his job and guilty for her death.

"I don't know if I can stay here," Max said quietly.

"I can understand that," Detective Feingold said. "Besides, our CSI guys may not be done for a while."

"Is there anyone you can stay with...any family?" Warren asked.

Max shook his head. "I'd really like to go to our cottage in Patterson. I can give you the phone number and address."

"Is that in Jersey?" Warren asked.

"No, it's a small town near Brewster," Max advised.

"We'd prefer that you stay in town in case we need to talk to you again," Feingold admonished

"Am I a suspect, Detective?" Max asked bluntly. "That's what this shit's really about, isn't it?"

DRIFT

"The spouse is always the unofficial suspect. But, no, you're clear for now," the detective answered.

For now. Those two words again. Max's mouth was dry as the Mojave Desert.

"It's just easier for everyone if you're accessible. But Patterson's close enough. Just over an hour, right?"

"Yes," Max responded and wrote down the information for the detectives.

Three

Max returned from the funeral, lost and despondent. It was a sad affair with many friends and family members. For Max, his real family had been Carolyn's. His parents had died three and nine years ago, his brother wouldn't talk to him and his sister was part of Doctors without Borders somewhere in Bolivia. The family tentatively embraced him, conflicted in comforting the grieving husband who might also have been Carolyn's murderer.

"Stay in touch, Max," her father said to him as the taxi pulled up to the curbside.

"Yes, let us know how the investigation goes," her mother added, sounding as if she wouldn't be shocked if Max was somehow culpable.

Only Carolyn's sister, Robbie, walked Max to the taxi.

"Robbie, I have to say something."

"I know you had nothing to do with it, Max. My parents are just upset. Watch your back, though. Okay?"

Robbie's reference was to Max's description of the events a week before. Whereas Carolyn was the conservative, no nonsense sister, Robbie was the neo-Bohemian, rebellious one and had an atavistic distrust of big companies. When Max had a moment alone with her and described his experience at Imperium and the consecutive appearance of the two henchmen, Robbie had no doubt Max was telling the truth.

"I need to find out who did this, Robbie."

She kissed his cheek, gave him a gentle pat on the back and then closed the taxi door. The long flight home from Seattle was the only good part of the trip.

Max walked out onto the raised deck of the Patterson cottage late in the evening. It was the best thing he could have done, getting away from the City. There'd be time to think about his future but right now it was important to cool out and stay away from his apartment.

The cottage smelled damp and musty even though all the windows were open. The unseasonably warm and humid air and the cottage's proximity to the lake conspired to cover everything with a moist film.

DRIFT

Max poured himself a glass of cold Bombay gin and sat down in one of the Adirondack chairs on the wooden deck. The gin had been his only companion since he'd settled into the cottage. He felt like Carolyn's murder was a bad dream and that he'd hear her any moment coming to join him in the early evening darkness. But the only sound was the remaining insects and birds tricked by Nature's joke of early November's balmy temperatures.

Max finished his first drink and was annoyed. *Why didn't you take the bottle with you, Asshole?* He got up, went back in the house and reached for the half-empty bottle. Then he noticed the light blinking on his answering machine.

"Mr. LaFollette, this is Detective Feingold. We met with Imperium and want to talk to you about some things. Please give me a call when you return from Seattle."

The machine indicated the message was left earlier in the day when he was out. He'd already gotten out of the habit of checking for calls; he didn't get any. Max returned to his chair and poured a generous glass of gin. He wondered why the gin in the bottle had such a peaceful, sky blue color but the gin in the glass was colorless. *Just an illusion?* It was too tiring a thought. Eventually the combined effects of a bottle of gin and the stress-filled visit to Seattle conspired to push Max into a deep sleep.

Carolyn looked unusually beautiful as she fed some pieces of bread to the ducks. The full moon cast an eerie glow over the landscape. As Max watched from the deck, the water level lowered slowly until the ducks poked around for the bread on the muddy lake bottom.

"It's ending, Max," she quietly said.

"What's ending?"

"Everything," she responded. "Look at the water, Max. Look out over the water, Max. Look out."

Carolyn walked across the nearly empty lake toward the middle where there was still some water. Immobilized, he watched as she slowly entered the water and disappeared, leaving barely a ripple and two shimmering reflections of the full moon.

"Nooo," Max cried out.

He awoke to two lights that seemed to extend from his dream. But just as suddenly as they appeared, they disappeared. Max assumed he imagined it but his nerves were on edge and these weren't times for trusting his perception, only his instinct. Within seconds, he was out of the house and into the woods that bordered the cottage on all sides but the lake.

The natural sounds of the night stopped as Max peered out from a secluded spot. Fortunately, the moon was just a sliver but Max knew he had to avoid creating a silhouette against the shimmering lake. He strained to see into the darkness at the top of the long driveway but he saw nothing. His ears, however, were more successful.

Shortly after hearing the crunch of footsteps, two men materialized out of the shadows and by the way they ambled down toward the cottage he could tell these were not nature-lovers. Despite their effort to move quietly, one kept swiping at a swarm of gnats, cursing their mothers as if they were members of a rival gang. The other kept stepping on fallen brushwood. They might as well have come strutting down the gravel drive for all the covert skill they demonstrated.

Max knew them immediately. One skirted the cottage to block off any rear exit while the other, the one Max took for the boss in his apartment, quietly ascended the front steps to the deck. Max's initial panic softened a bit to scared as he watched the two men carefully survey the inside of the cottage. Max could see that they had their guns drawn.

How the hell did they find me? Mail was forwarded, I didn't tell anyone. Suddenly, Max froze in fear. The damn cops! Who else could it be? They must be on Imperium's payroll. That smooth-ass Feingold or his buddy, Warren? Yeah, I'll bet they want to ask me a few more questions. Jesus, what do I do now?

Max watched and waited. If only he could get to his car but his keys were on the small table in the entry foyer. Even if he could get away he had no clue where he could go at this point?

If Imperium had a cop or cops on their payroll he couldn't seek protection there. He had little cash on him and the nearest ATM machine was at the strip mall about a mile away. To get there, he'd have to get past the two men first and that didn't appear likely.

DRIFT

The two men went inside where some lights were still on. Max considered making a run for it but if he failed, he knew he was dead. He hoped that they'd just leave after a while.

"He's has to be around here somewhere," one voice floated on the heavy air. "Maybe he took a walk."

"Well, at least there are no fucking bugs in here," came the reply.

Max could feel their evil presence as he remained hunched over peering out of his meager hideout. He knew that it wouldn't take much of a search to find him but the two were obviously averse to the natural surroundings. At least that was in his favor. Max perspired through his shirt and began to get uncomfortable as the temperature slowly dropped. He had to move. These thugs might stay until morning and then he'd have no options.

Max's survival instinct kicked in. In the midst of a panic that nearly closed his throat, he knew his only way out was across the swamp that bordered the lake, then through the rock quarry to the village. He could get some money from the cash machine, call some friends and then catch the last train to the City.

The Pacific sunset was never the same. No matter how many times Becky watched it, its colors were always different. Thanks to southern California's infamous air quality. Tonight, as she drove back north, it was particularly beautiful and she just couldn't keep her eyes off it as she merged onto the freeway,

It was a wonderful afternoon, she thought. Her two seminars and a long discussion with her adviser resulted in the germination of an idea for her New York conference address.

Her cell phone suddenly disturbed her academic reverie.

"Becky?"

"Hi, Mike."

"Sorry to bother you but we just got a real doozy. Measures about 9.1."

"Jesus, where was it, Mike?"

"About two hundred miles north northwest of the Bonin Islands. That's the good news."

STEVEN PAUL MARK

"Yeah, but why there? There shouldn't be that kind of stress in that area."

"Either the Caroline Plate has suddenly acted up or the Eurasian Plate finally got tired of taking it on the chin from the Pacific Plate and decided to punch back," her lab associate offered.

"Either way, we got a monster. Have tsunami warnings been issued?"

"Affirmative. Japan and Taiwan are all over it. There are warnings out to Hawaii, too. Manny's doing all the mapping and analysis. Where are you?"

"I'm in Orange County on my way back. I can be in the office in a couple of hours. There may be a fair amount of press on this and we'll get the usual stuff from our colleagues. Feel free to handle any press inquiries. Just don't mention any new plate theories."

"Roger that. I'll hold the fort."

"Thanks, Mike."

Becky punched the "end" button and thought about Mike's news.

Jeez, a 9+ quake. Thank God it's oceanic. What the hell caused it?

The sun had turned vermilion as it began to descend below the Pacific horizon but Becky had forgotten all about it.

By the time Andrea Wilcox left her small cubicle en route to the 11 PM news set, Garvin Jones, News Director, had made his decision. It didn't look like much but the small ratings bumps they were getting for their heavily teased weather reports every few nights was evidence enough. He fanned through the other Associated Press reports and found some more good stuff.

The lead had promise. *Mammoth Underwater Earthquake Stirs Pacific.* He scanned the information, saw that it was centered near the Bonin Islands and quickly brought up a map on his computer screen. As soon as he realized the location, his instincts to turn a small story into a larger one kicked in. *Right near Iwo Jima. We can tie the story in that way. Mount Suribachi was an extinct volcano, wasn't it? Earthquakes and volcanoes are related, aren't they? Christ, no time to get an expert. Damn, of course, the West Coast may be open for business.*

DRIFT

Jones didn't become the first African American news director in New York by sitting quietly by. He rushed off to his office and quickly looked up the number he knew he had somewhere in his address book.

"Caltech Seismology," the voice announced.

"Good evening, this is Garvin Jones, News Director at WIBS in New York. May I speak with someone about the Pacific earthquake, please?"

"Well, I guess I'm elected," Mike Pinckney answered.

At tomorrow's staff meeting Jones would float his idea and see if it would sink or swim.

Max reached the train station with a vague recollection that there was a last train to the City just after eleven. He checked his watch and it was 11:07. The few people on the platform moving back and forth from the rail bed, presumably looking north for any sign of an oncoming train, told him he was in luck.

He was a mess, though. The trek through the woods and swamp left his clothes tattered, his arms and face scraped raw by invisible tree branches and his body covered in slimy, foul-smelling mud. The last time he was similarly attired was Marine boot camp but that was worse. He had to deal with snakes and a tough drill instructor then. But thanks to that D.I. and his Marine training he was now safe.

He looked north and saw the light of the oncoming train. He had just enough time to get some cash from the ATM machine.

Nine minutes later he looked out the window into the darkness, seated at the rear of the last car with no one near him. The only discomfort came when the conductor showed up to collect his ticket. Max couldn't tell who was more unnerved, the Metro North conductor or him. Fortunately for both, the transaction didn't take long and Max was again left alone for the hour trip to Grand Central Station.

One step at a time. It can't be Feingold. Maybe I can still reason with him.

With survival on the line, fear and logic battle for supremacy. Max tried to think where he could go. It was too risky to return to his apartment and he couldn't think of a friend who might take him in. A hotel was the only smart choice. First, however, he'd deal with Feingold. He took out his cell phone and tried calling several times but he couldn't get a signal.

STEVEN PAUL MARK

"Andrea, I had the script revised for the third segment. Big earthquake," Garvin Jones advised his star anchor at the commercial break.

"Where?"

"Pacific Ocean, a few hundred miles southeast of Japan."

"Jesus, Garvin, that's news? Has there been any tsunami reported?"

"Don't know yet but trust me, Andrea, I got some ideas. Teleprompter's changed and we have some graphics ready."

As the make-up girl touched Andrea up, she scanned the script. Basic stuff. No deaths reported. Playing up the tsunami scenario. *Hey, I just read the stuff.*

"Okay, guys," Jones said as he stood in the control room and watched Andrea on the monitors, "let's give our lady a curve ball."

"Ready Camera Two, we're coming out of the break. On my mark. Four...three...two...one." He snapped his fingers for the switch and watched as Andrea looked into the camera like it was her lover.

"Remember Iwo Jima? Scene of the US Marines' great World War Two victory and that famous flag-raising picture? In area waters surrounding the historical island, there was a huge underwater earthquake earlier today measuring 9.1 on the Richter scale. If it had occurred on land, the destruction would have been extensive."

Behind Andrea, the graphics of a map were displayed.

"While damages to any major landmasses are unlikely, scientists at Caltech are concerned about a possible tsunami of record proportions. They're also puzzled as to why such a large quake would occur where it did. Even though the island has a long dormant volcano, earthquakes of such a magnitude don't generally occur in this area of the Pacific. The epicenter is approximately 550 miles from Japan."

"Well," John Polk, Andrea's co-anchor added, "we got weather disasters and now an earthly one."

"Weather's in the next segment, John. We don't want to steal anyone's thunder," Andrea quipped.

"Good line," Polk acknowledged. "Next up, a nine car pile-up on the Long Island Expressway leaves fourteen people injured, including three seriously, and thousands of angry rush-hour commuters."

DRIFT

Thirty-five minutes later, while an old movie was running on the WIBS channel, a tsunami siren began to sound on the southeast coast of Japan and the eastern shores of the Philippines.

Becky Hausman got back to the office after nine. Despite the fact that the Iwo Jima quake was under thousands of feet of water, it was big news in the Caltech seismology lab. Mike Pinckney looked seriously stressed as he continued to field telephone calls, faxes and emails along with two graduate assistants. The East Coast calls had ended but now calls were coming in from the West Coast, Japan and other earthquake centers along the Pacific Rim. The Pac Rim countries knew Becky Hausman a lot better than the eastern press.

“Let’s see, we got Dr. Akigama from the University of Tokyo, K-Net checked in, a researcher from Radio Honshu wants a quote, the usual end-of-the-world calls and about thirty others. Take your pick.”

Becky spent the next few hours on the phone with foreign accents that ranged from incomprehensible to Oxford-educated. Most conversations related to the unusual magnitude of the quake, how the quake and its aftershocks might affect the oceanic topography and why no major tsunami had occurred.

When Max left Grand Central the streets had a surrealistic look to them. People seemed faceless, their skin washed in varying colors depending upon the unearthly glow cast from garish, neon lit storefronts. He didn’t know whether he should keep to a still active 42nd Street or head downtown where the side streets were more deserted. When a taxi suddenly pulled alongside the curb, his startled reaction gave him his decision. He was nothing more than prey now and Imperium seemed intent on making him history. *For what? This fucking ‘Bran’?*

It was cold and Max felt like he’d turned to stone from the dried swamp mud on his skin and clothes. At least it didn’t seem to smell as bad in the fresh, late-night air. Yet each time an occasional pedestrian came near it was obvious Max still could use a long, hot shower.

Max started west and tried calling Feingold again but just as the call connected, the low battery warning started flashing. He pocketed the

useless device, looked around to ensure that no one had followed him and found a pay phone.

"What do you mean, he's not available?" Max nearly shouted at the officer who picked up the phone.

"It's after midnight, Sir. He's off right now."

"What about a home number? It's urgent."

"Can someone else help you?"

Max thought for a moment and realized that if there was one cop on Imperium's payroll there could be others. That definitely wouldn't work.

"No. What time does he come on duty?" Max asked. He kept looking around expecting to see the two Imperium thugs approaching. Fear began to creep into the area of his brain reserved for clear thinking. Sooner or later, they'd be after him again. As he stood holding the street corner phone he felt vulnerable.

"He should be in about eight o'clock. Do you want to leave a name and number?"

Max hung up. There was no way he was going to make the same mistake. Besides, he had no idea where he'd be in the morning.

A cold breeze bore down the wide street as Max fumbled in his pocket for more change. A dark figure came toward him and he froze.

"You done, Man?" he asked in a surly manner. His street accent was rough and intimidating.

"What?" Max asked, absent-mindedly.

"The phone, man. You make your call or what?"

Max nodded and decided to find another phone.

"Damn, man, you smell like shit."

Max crossed 42nd Street and started down Fifth Avenue. He looked across the large intersection at the public library, lit in a ghostly glow by invisible spotlights. He wished it was open so he could go in until morning; he knew the two thugs would never go inside a library. *Sanctuary*, he surmised, smiling to himself.

A few blocks away, he found another phone and tried a friend. The answering machine advised he was out of town. So did the machine at his second friend's apartment. On the third try, he was told, in no uncertain terms, to stay away; it seemed that two rather threatening men

DRIFT

were looking for him. Another few calls got the same reaction. His luck returned with his last bit of change, even though Marti Bader was mildly annoyed. She'd just fallen asleep.

"Christ, Max," his former colleague said as she opened the door. "What happened?"

As Max showered, washed out his clothes and donned the bathrobe of Marti's estranged boyfriend, the security guard at St. George's Tower finished his lobby rounds several blocks away. The fifty-four story building was the newest addition to the Eighth Avenue skyline that had seen a gold rush of new construction. Its entrance opened on a plaza festooned with numerous fountains, flags and exotic tree plantings and was set back from the avenue by some 150 feet. At night, the fountains were turned off so the area was quiet.

The breeze that came off the river could never quite find its way among the narrow, canyon-like streets and wide avenues but settled for brushing by the trees in the plaza, causing a characteristic hissing sound. New Yorkers fondly and promptly labeled the building St. George's Dragon.

At exactly 2:05 AM, the hand of a small travel clock touched a small metal nub and an electrical circuit was closed. At the same instant a battery passed its electrical charge through a wire, through the clock's hand, through the metal nub and another wire into a wad of C-4. The resulting large explosion shook the plaza, demolished the lobby area with its four-story glass windows and damaged the front of the building for another ten floors.

A huge plume of smoke billowed and got caught by the breeze as debris began to fall from the injured Dragon. In a few moments, as some curious onlookers cautiously peered around corners from a block away, police, fire and emergency vehicles responded, their sirens and blinking lights disturbing the serenity that came even to the City in the early hours of morning.

While Max slept on the pullout couch of his friend's apartment, the first call claiming responsibility for the bombing was received hours later at One Police Plaza. Yet no one ever heard of the Islamic Brigade of Martyrs, either in the Middle East or anywhere else. New York's

STEVEN PAUL MARK

confidence, so delicately rebuilt after 9/11, was about to take another hit.

At an interview with Imperium Solutions, a mysterious oil company, Max LaFollette inadvertently reveals information triggering a chain reaction that threatens his life. It's the best day he's going to have for a long time.

Drift

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