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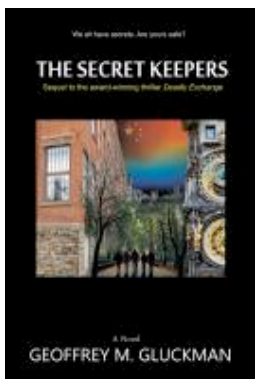
THE SECRET KEEPERS

Sequel to the award-winning thriller *Deadly Exchange*



A Novel

GEOFFREY M. GLUCKMAN



When Sara Nardell and Peter Wellington meet with a man telling a tale of an upscale brothel in Manhattan, it disrupts the easy life of reunion that Sara and Frank Revere have enjoyed. Sara joins Peter's U.N. Special Operations team, and discovers a world rampant with sex trafficking and computer hackers, from Vancouver to China. A seemingly simple mission becomes shrouded in deception and hides a Chinese government-sanctioned group known only as The Elders.

The Secret Keepers

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The Secret Keepers

The Secret Keepers: A Novel

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One

New York Harbor, NY

Sunday 2:05 am EST

The outline of three masts belonging to a ninety-foot schooner anchored in the harbor could just be seen against the canvas of a dark sky. Having arrived late afternoon, it was moored south of the Brooklyn Bridge in the third largest harbor in the United States. Off to the right lay the port for immense container ships, filled with a variety of poor quality items, primarily made in China, destined for American markets around the country. Almost all of the container vessels would return home empty.

Bells clanked. Boards creaked. Buoys rang. Boats of all sizes strained at mooring ropes as the tide shift brought deeper water.

A tall figure moved upon the schooner's deck, then motioned with a hand to someone unseen. From below deck emerged a line of shorter and narrower figures all linked by rope. Most of them trudged along with feet dragging. Despite the cloudless night and light from the city that never sleeps, the movement of the group as they got into a small dinghy was well hidden beneath the cloak of darkness.

The tall figure had chosen this night well—an evening between a waning and a waxing moon. Yet, if one looked closely, it could be perceived that the line of figures carried themselves differently to the tall man and his compatriot at the end of the line.

Knowing better than to curse aloud, the tall man kicked a figure that stumbled upon stepping into the small craft. Shortly after all were huddled in the dinghy, the compatriot, who looked like a human fire-plug, began to move the oars of the boat cautiously in the water. The slight slap of oars mingled with other harbor sounds, becoming indistinguishable. The boat's cargo kept a low profile as instructed by the tall man, thus giving the appearance of only two occupants.

After ten minutes of steady but gentle rowing, the boat bumped up against a pylon for one of the more decrepit piers. The tall figure climbed a rickety wooden ladder to the pier and secured the mooring. He stood motionless, waiting, watching.

From the shadows nearer the shore, a small bent-over, limping figure moved toward the tall man. Rather than make an effort to meet the less able person, the tall man simply stood stock-still.

Eventually the hunched figure reached the waiting man, who was almost two heads taller. They murmured in low voices, mostly in a foreign language.

Finally, the tall man reached into his long, black seaman's coat and extracted a withered envelope, which he slid into the waiting palm of the hunched figure.

"Dobre," said the bent-over man. He lit a cigarette, the small flame showing his face to be lined and weathered from a life lived by the sea. Two faint glows replaced the flame as each man inhaled tobacco, sealing the deal.

"Nice girls, ha ha," he added between puffs, his hollowed sockets portending deep suffering. The tall man nodded, flicked his cigarette into the water, and signaled his compatriot in the dinghy.

Awkwardly, each girl clambered the weathered wooden ladder onto the pier. None could move too fast or too slow due to the heavy rope looped around each girl's waist, linking her to the next girl. Once all stood upon the pier, they huddled together, trying to keep warm, as most wore clothing ill-suited to early March.

The tall man loosed the dinghy from mooring, then ushered the line of girls toward the dock. The hunched man limped along behind the girls, muttering softly. He believed the girls would be placed with good homes, doing domestic work, thus paid more than him.

As the group neared the rundown shanty office at the shore-end of the pier, a black paneled van came to an abrupt stop nearby. The side door slid open and the man inside beckoned toward the tall man. The girls were herded into a spacious area suitable for cargo—no seats.

The tall man nodded to the old man and stepped up into the passenger seat. Before his door closed, the driver had put the vehicle in motion, whisking all into the night.

*

San Francisco, CA
Sunday, 10:38 am, PST

Sara stood erect in front of the vanity basin, grabbed a hand towel, and dried her face. Warily she opened her eyes, but the reflected image in the mirror reassured her—no surprises.

In the eighteen months since the destruction of Lectures and More, Inc., the nibble of horror at seeing another face in any mirror had subsided, for the most part. Yet, deep in the back of her mind, she kept expecting that other face to appear, but none had.

She ran a hand through the gentle ringlets of blond hair that once again tickled her shoulders. She smiled at her reflection. She truly had returned to her former self, Sara Darnell, except that she had kept Peter Wellington's altered version of her name, Sara Nardell, just in case.

She turned, hearing Frank calling to her from the kitchen, or so it sounded.

"Just a minute, hon," she said and stepped into the walk-in closet, predominantly filled with her clothes, ones that she had selected and bought, unlike all those years with Lectures and More, Inc. also known as LAM. And unlike the motivational speakers circuit that she had unknowingly been bewitched to tour for LAM, after being stripped of her real identity, now she got to present educational lectures for Cherish the Wild Foundation, a not-for-profit organization promoting stewardship of the planet, its resources, and its myriad collection of species, humans included. Ostensibly, she had merely jumped ships, taking on a similar role with the Foundation that she had endured for five years at LAM.

The difference this time was conscious choice.

Brushing a hand over some outfits hanging before her, she remembered that it was Sunday, so nothing too fancy. Her hand drifted to a pair of jeans that fit well. Dispelling the mild indecision about the pants, she took them off the hanger, which tipped the scale on what else to put with it.

Within ten minutes she was silently descending the stairs in the two-story townhouse shared with Frank, her true love, lost and

found. Frank Revere, as he was called, had wisely sold his Coit Tower condo before the real estate bubble burst in California. Then he had bided his time, waiting for the right place to appear, at the right price—for both of them. The purchase had been a joint decision, the year anniversary of living together only weeks away.

She lightly tapped her fingers on the oak banister, and smiled. It's going well.

She admired the bamboo flooring in the entry hall lit by faint bands of sunlight streaming through the long, narrow windows beside the front door. The flooring had been a conscious effort for further greening of their home, like the solar panels installed on the roof, which had reduced their use of electricity considerably. True, the panels were expensive, but they would pay for themselves in five years, or so.

Treading softly, Sara paused in the archway that led into the living room and peaked in. Just inside the doorway, with eyes closed, there sat Frank in his favorite chair—a papasan. It was positioned perfectly to catch the rays of morning sun, when it decided to appear, especially this time of year as the sun traversed the sky at a lower angle. Often the Bay Area remained overcast and rainy in March.

She gazed at his strong jaw-line that had drawn her attention in San Diego—the second time. In the time since, he hadn't changed much, maybe a line or two around the eyes. His dark complexion seemed to linger even without the sun. The chocolate-colored hair was still cut short, but not severe, like his friend and former SEAL Willem Tasker.

A shiver went up her spine. She loved to watch him resting, but leaned over and gently placed her lips to his. He didn't jump, of course. No matter how silent she tried to be, he always could sense it. Instead, his lips responded with welcome warmth.

“So, mister, all ready, I see.”

She withdrew as Frank arose from the deeply padded saucer-shaped chair. He reached out and put a hand to her cheek. She closed her eyes, as tingles trickled up and down her body.

“You happy, honey?” she said, gazing into his hazel eyes.

“Absolutely. I was just reflecting on what has happened between us in the last two years.”

“That’s one year and nine months, to be exact. I was thinking of that magical day at Seaport Village in San Diego, when we first crossed paths. Again, that is.”

He nodded and, with a gentle touch on her elbow, began to move toward the front door.

Sara gave a sideways glance. The lines between his eyebrows were almost gone and he was talking more now. For six months after the battle at ENOCH, the research and development building of LAM, Inc., in a Virginia suburb outside Washington, D.C., he had remained so reticent. The first month afterward, spent on the island of St. Kitts with the rest of the team, had been the worst. He hardly spoke the entire time, except to John Wilde, the ex-CIA operative turned Rastafarian, and to Willem.

She remembered how he had spent hours walking the sand alone or in the water, once the eight-inch gash on the back of his leg from Dr. Jones’s blade had healed enough. Despite what she expected, he had continued to push himself with Willem and some of the others, doing mission specific physical training and practicing with weapons.

For her, there was something eerily terrifying in his silence, as if she were glimpsing a living ghost, a spectre of his former self.

Fortunately, she thought, that’s all past.

She turned the key to lock the front door. Frank had already set the alarm inside. Hand in hand, they stepped into the sunshine. She felt the roughness of his hand from the physical training that he had continued with Willem. She had continued too, but not to the degree that Frank had. Part of that included a weekly run of an obstacle course at night, no matter the weather, dressed in combat gear.

“So, where to my lovely lady?”

Sara smiled, more at Frank’s tone than the question. “How does Fisherman’s Wharf sound?”

Before he could answer, her Blackberry chimed—text message. Rummaging through her purse, she pulled out the maroon-colored device. She glanced at the message, which was encoded. Only one

person would send it that way. She typed a coded reply per protocol and dropped the device into her purse.

“You know,” Frank said, a shadow of a wry smile gracing his lips. “Most of us at Cherish the Wild have iPhones.”

“I know. It’s just that I got so used to this type.” The truth, Sara knew, lay with the sender of the coded message, whose encryption only worked on the phone operating system she had, for now anyway.

Frank continued the playful banter about antiquation, but she only half listened as they made their way to Fisherman’s Wharf. She contemplated the message, which called for a meeting tonight. She would need an excuse to get away, as Sundays were dedicated to sharing quality time with each other. Not that he would pry, he couldn’t know what she was doing. Not yet.

The deception felt as if she were having an affair. If only he could know the real reason.

Soon enough, she thought, taking hold of his left arm above the elbow.

Two

San Francisco, CA
Sunday, 7:51 pm PST

Sara hurried down the street to the designated meeting place, received by text message fifteen minutes ago. She'd had to lie to Frank, saying that a girlfriend had just broken up with her boyfriend and needed consoling. It meant that she would miss the movie that they had rented.

Had Frank minded? She wondered, turning the corner onto Webster. He had not seemed too perturbed, but he was so hard to read. In truth, the enigma that he had been when they met again almost two years ago had not diminished that much in the last year of co-habitation. He was a very private person, perhaps from years of covert missions with the National Security Agency.

She rounded the corner of Union Street, knowing she was almost there—Café Pergolesi—an all night coffee house. She and Frank came here, whenever not at a nearby Peet's Coffee & Tea. She checked her watch—two minutes before the hour—and pulled the door open. Once inside, her eyes casually swept over the patrons settled into a variety of off-beat tables and chairs, low sofas, and deep pillow chairs. The décor, best described as eclectic, suited San Francisco. Above the chatter, soulful jazz tickled her ears. Three two-foot round diameter pillars, which reached to the ceiling, punctuated the open room. She knew that the building dated back to the turn of the twentieth century, having survived the earthquake of 1906.

Sara's contact, if she could call him that, would be disguised. She took a few steps further into the room, still using practiced observation techniques. Her eyes returned to a man with gold-rimmed bifocals, his back to a wall and reading a newspaper at a corner table in a more secluded section of the café.

That's him! She cautiously began to move his direction, noting his erect posture, which he could alter at will, a hallmark of his upbringing in the Old Country, as he often called Great Britain.

As if by radar, the man's eyes lifted and focused directly on Sara. It was unnerving how he knew, as did Frank too, when she was nearby. She had been practicing the invisibility techniques taught to her before the LAM operation, but still struggled.

Sara slid into the empty chair at the man's table with a sigh. "I made it on time."

"I see. Your promptness is appreciated."

She noticed that the lines around his brown eyes had deepened since their last meeting. The disguise, effective to be sure, included the glasses and medium length black hair, which she knew to be a wig because his real hair was gray. A black wool fedora with a gray band lay on the table. His face showed the color of regular sun exposure, as he lived further south in the state.

"Pe..."

An upraised hand cut her off.

"Right. I forgot—no names." She put a hand to her forehead. It was as if everything she had learned about tradecraft had slipped from her brain, like sand through a sieve.

The man, known to her as Peter Wellington, a long-time friend of her dead parents, and the one to re-connect her with Frank, placed a hand atop hers. "It's quite all right, my dear." He allowed his true British accent to seep through as he spoke, exuding genuine warmth. Then he added, "Take a few breaths. That's it. As it is we're waiting for a third party to arrive."

She leaned forward and spoke in a whisper. "I don't like lying to...you know who. When can I bring him in from the cold?"

"Does he suspect?"

Before Sara could respond, she saw Peter shift his focus for an instant, and then run a hand over his hair. Recognizing it as a signal, she fought the desire to turn and look at who received it. Instead, she looked at the man before her: the one who had orchestrated her 'extraction', as it was known in espionage circles, from LAM, Inc. On the surface, he owned an import/export company in San Diego with his lifelong friend, John Wilde. The two had been counterintelligence operatives for the U.S. government quite a few years ago. Though both had since quit the government, Peter kept a

hand in the espionage business as a consultant, mostly for corporations. Despite that, and in his mid-fifties, he displayed a calm and serene demeanor, as well as being physically fit. After all, she knew he had been with the British SAS before the CIA had recruited him.

Sara turned her head as a tall, lanky man in his late thirties ambled toward their table with a loose-limbed gait and the smile of a con man.

The man placed a white espresso cup and saucer on the table, eyed Sara up and down, and took the seat that had its back to the door, which appeared to evoke some discomfort for the newcomer.

“Mr. Lawrence Marchetti has some information for us,” said Peter, eyeing Sara. “Please begin.”

“Call me Gino, please,” he said, after taking a sip of espresso. “So nice to have such a beautiful audience. May I know your name?”

About to speak, Sara shook the man’s large, soft hand, but Peter cut her short. “That won’t be necessary. Please, Mr. Marchetti, our time is precious.”

“Yes, just so much hush-hush. I thought...” He stopped, settled back into the chair, and unbuttoned his black leather jacket, as if to unveil his stylish clothes, a black button-down shirt woven with fine gold vertical lines. His long legs were clad in grey wool slacks and his black Euro-styled shoes were Italian, of course.

He then related how a few months ago a friend of his, who shall remain nameless, had encountered some interesting fellows in New York City late one night. Out on the town with some friends, one of whom knew these Eastern European guys. One thing led to another, drink after drink, and the group of guys ended up at an illegal brothel. Marchetti’s friend wouldn’t have thought anything about it as each guy enjoyed a young lady from the house, except the girl Marchetti’s friend ended up with spoke some Italian, despite being from Turkey.

“Is there a reason for that?” Peter asked.

“Is he always this impatient?” Marchetti looked at Sara, but didn’t wait for a reply. “Evidently, the young girl’s uncle had lived in

Rome for some time and taught her Italian, one of the easiest languages to learn. Gracie mille, unlike English.”

Peter shifted his chair and crossed his arms in front of him.

Marchetti took the hint and continued. According to his friend, the girl was very pretty, but not even sixteen. And she whispered to him, as they rolled in bed, how she had been kidnapped when she had traveled to Romania seeking work. According to her, a woman in her home town, a small one outside Ankara, had suggested she meet with colleagues of hers in Constanța, Romania. Supposedly, they employed young girls in various domestic capacities, such as housecleaning. Yet, once across the water into Romania, the woman had handed over the group of ten girls to several men, and money changed hands.

From that point on, Marchetti’s friend’s girl for the night had been held prisoner and forced into prostitution. First, the men who had paid for them in Romania broke them in and then transported them across Europe by truck, possibly to Prague. Next, the group of girls was split up. Some went to England, others to America.

Marchetti stopped speaking, interlaced his fingers and placed his hands behind his head. The shape of his lips always appeared to offer a smile.

“That’s it?” Sara said, sandy-colored eyebrows arching.

Marchetti gave a slight nod and the smile became a grin.

“My colleague has a point.” Peter placed his hands on the table and moved the newspaper a fraction. “Are there any other details? An address for the New York brothel?”

“I didn’t ask for an address, as I prefer not to pay for my dates. I know that my friend did not contact the authorities.”

Peter nodded, evidently understanding the unspoken request. “What does your friend want?”

“Ah, yes, the fun part,” said Marchetti, eyeing Sara. Then he explained how his friend had a cousin that wanted to come to America, but that her visa had been delayed.

“So he wants this in exchange for the rest of the information?”

“Precisely, pretty lady.”

Sara looked at Peter to see if he was as annoyed as she, but his demeanor hadn't changed, except that he gently stroked his chin. She knew that this meant deep thought, so she addressed the Italian. "Has your friend no conscience? Think of the plight of these young girls, not even sixteen, for God's sake."

"Touching. Look, honey..."

"Don't call me honey." Sara's eyes flashed with real fire.

"Both of you. Keep your voices down," Peter said, his voice low and harsh, though still maintaining an American accent.

"You see, it's simple," Marchetti began. "Everything has a price. Sure, these girls should be helped, but everyone needs help. Right? Besides, prostitution is the oldest profession."

"Oh my God!" Sara threw up her hands.

"Enough. Mr. Marchetti, I can't make any promises, as I'm certain that you are aware of the tightening of U.S. Immigration policies. Give me your friend's cousin's name, and I'll see what I can do." Peter paused. "Also, I need the brothel address, or no deal."

Marchetti sat upright, placing his hands on thighs. He looked at Sara and Peter, then slowly reached into his jacket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. With the same lack of speed, he placed it on the table and slid it toward Peter.

Peter opened the paper, but did not remove it from the table. Beside the paper was a small photo of of striking dark haired girl no older than sixteen. Sara leaned over to read:

Nina Salieri
Florence, Italy
2472 Tenth Avenue NW ?

Peter folded the paper and placed it in an inside jacket pocket. Then he said, "Very well."

"How do I know you'll work on this?"

"Mr. Marchetti, you have my word."

"That's not saying much these days, if you know what I mean."

"I'm not acquainted with the people that you choose to spend time, but in my line of work my word still means honor." Peter began

to gather his things, folding the newspaper and placing the fedora on his head.

“Wait!” Marchetti said, his voice less calm. “How do I contact you?”

“You don’t. We’ll contact you. Thank you for your cooperation. Human trafficking, especially sex slavery, is a vile business.”

Marchetti stood quickly and extracted an engraved silver business cardholder, flipped it open with practiced one-handed skill—a card offered toward Sara. Again, the perennial smile deepened.

Peter placed a hand on Sara’s outstretched hand, and said, “Not necessary. We know where to reach you, Mr. Marchetti.”

With that, Peter placed an arm around Sara’s shoulders and proceeded to guide her toward the entrance of the café, but in a circuitous fashion that never let Marchetti out of sight, nor fully exposed their backs.

Outside, the chill of evening had descended upon the city, and, with it, the deepening fog. They easily slipped into the folds of grey before Marchetti even exited the café.

*

Sara and Peter walked in silence, until reaching the corner that led to Sara and Frank’s home in the Pacific Heights region of the city.

Sara faced her companion, and said, “Peter?”

“You did splendid tonight, if I do say so.” His British accent had returned to full fluidity. He had also removed the disguise, except for the fedora.

“What do you mean? I was just myself.”

“Precisely. It was that genuineness that I counted on, as well as your charm and beauty, to distract our new friend there.”

“I don’t understand. What’s going on? Is this...this human trafficking something our group handles?”

“Quite right, my dear. The fact is that at least two and one half million people are trafficked every year, bringing a profit of thirty-two billion dollars. Governments around the world remain largely indifferent to this form of slavery. For sex trafficking, seventy-five

percent begins online. I hadn't mentioned it before now as there was no need. However, now you know. I'll explain more later, when I have both you and Frank as my audience."

"You mean..." Sara's eyes sparkled with delight. She felt her heart surge with joy. No more hiding.

"Yes. Time to bring your dearly beloved in from the cold, so to speak. But," Peter took gentle hold of her arms, "you must begin to bring him around, because I sense he may be quite resistant, to say the least."

"But how do I do that?"

"Oh, I'm quite certain that you'll find a way." He released her and turned to go.

"What about Marchetti's friend's cousin?"

Peter stopped and gave a chuckle. "There's no friend. And as for a cousin, that's Mr. Marchetti's girlfriend, I imagine. Perhaps a sister. Now, I must be off. Cheerio." Within seconds, he had melted into the fog and darkness.

Sara's mouth hung open until a raindrop splashed her cheek. She shook her head and hurried to the house a few doors down the street. Still stunned by Peter's revelations, and her ignorance of Marchetti's game, she burst through the door, wanting to spill everything to Frank.

But she couldn't. Slowly, she thought. It must come like drips from a leaky faucet.

Suddenly aware that everything was quiet, too quiet, she reached for the entry hall light switch, which should have been on.

A strong arm grabbed her body and lifted it off the ground, and a hand clamped tight over her mouth.

She screamed, but the sound was muffled. She struggled to get free, but her captor had immense strength and size in comparison to her.

Three

New York City, NY
Sunday, 11:59 pm, EST

The large upstairs living room remained divided, the experienced girls on one side, the new girls on the other. Helene was part of the latter. Since arriving in America they had been treated much better than during the long journey to get here. They enjoyed good meals, coffee, cigarettes, and alcohol—whatever they wanted—all delivered to them. True enough, they weren't allowed to leave the building, but she hadn't expected that. Some of the more outgoing girls had become friendly with the established girls of the house.

All together, Helene counted, sixteen girls. She glanced around the room. Most were chatting, smoking, and drinking. The room looked like a Sultan's palace with plush furniture and lavish ornamentation, though much of it outdated. Newer, huge, puffy pillows were strewn everywhere. Handmade rugs, perhaps Persian, covered hardwood floors. The building seemed old, but kept up well. Several large hookahs on large low round tables were strategically placed as centerpieces in lounging areas.

She had never known luxury. Her family barely scraped by. That's why she had followed that old bitch to Romania for work, so she could send money home.

This room served for customer entertaining, before going off to a 'love nest', as the keepers liked to call the bedrooms. No customers were allowed the day after new girls arrived, so the others had said, supposedly to endear the new girls to the experienced ones.

Helene surveyed the heavy, gaudy drapes that adorned the numerous windows. Earlier, in the day, sunlight had flooded in, but other than that the windows only functioned one way—the girls could see out, but no one could see in. All the windows were linked to an alarm system in case of breakage. That was an innovation. Sula, also from her home country, who seemed nice, had told her that last year a girl had gone berserk and tried to throw herself out the window. It had worked except in her drunken, drugged out stupor she

had chosen the window leading to a rusting fire escape. She had managed to fly through the window only to land on the fire escape platform below, and had lain there for some time, bleeding profusely.

In the end, according to Sula, the injured girl, Tanya, had been taken to hospital, but she didn't believe that and had argued with another girl from Romania that did believe it.

The fact remained: Tanya had never returned to the house. The story told by their keepers, mostly Eastern European men, was that she was sent back to her family in Turkey.

Helene reached behind her back and retied the bow of the two sashes from her white cotton blouse. Earlier, after a shower, she had had to redress in the same clothes she wore upon arrival. According to Sula and some others, tomorrow was shopping day. Of course, they didn't get to leave. Instead, a big truck packed with clothes came to the house and each girl got to select what they wanted, presumably paid for by the keepers.

Helene released the bun that held her jet-black hair, now cascading about her shoulders. She stood, lightly shook her head, and massaged her scalp. Then, she smoothed her tight-fitting American jeans, a gift from an uncle who traveled frequently.

Silently, one of the established girls offered her a cigarette. Hesitant, she took it, though usually she only smoked when drinking at clubs. Exhaling, she thought it didn't matter now. As a prisoner, who knew what the future held? Besides, the girl who had been there the longest, Katya, a long-legged platinum blond with an attitude, from somewhere in Russia, had said that most girls were 'moved on' after two years. For some unexplained reason, Katya had not been 'moved on', despite being there more than two years.

Helene took another drag as someone handed her a shot of vodka, which she downed. The liquid was nice and cold, so no sting. They had a fully stocked refrigerator and pantry in the kitchen, just down a hallway. Downstairs, towards the rear of the house, was a larger kitchen. All the new girls passed through it upon entry into the house from the secluded alley at the back of the building. Off the foyer was a dining area, living room, and a study, none of which the girls ever visited, only heard about from the keepers.

Helene recalled the fresh fruit, not canned, that she had eaten after tonight's dinner. Her faint smile faded as she took a step and felt residual soreness in her inner thighs, though they no longer ached from the beasts that had raped her when first taken in Romania. She ground the cigarette out in one of many ashtrays, as if trying to remove the memory.

At that moment, a hand touched her head gently. Helene jumped.

"Don't worry," said Sula. Her accent revealed her to be from İzmir, a coastal town. On a clear day, she had said, one could see Athens, Greece from the shore of her hometown.

Helene relaxed and leaned her head against Sula's shoulder, welcoming the nurturing, and longing to be at home in Çeşme, also a coastal town in Turkey. It had been the longest day of her life.

The worst was yet to come.

*

San Francisco, CA
Sunday, 9:20 pm, PST

The trembling had stopped.

Sara had caught her breath, but the adrenaline still drove her heart like that of a sprinter. Being grabbed in the darkened entry way had flooded her brain with memories—Dr. Jones's wicked smile, the feel of the Uzi's barrel on her neck, the smell of burning carpet and debris—all remnants of the destruction of LAM, Inc. and ENOCH.

Now, in the light of the hallway, her gaze switched from Frank to the man across from him, the one that had grabbed her. His name was John Wilde, an African American, and a Rastafarian with thick dreadlocks hanging from his head like jungle snakes. He stood, all six feet four inches, grinning.

"I...I can't...believe..." Sara began. "Actually, I can believe you would do that, John. But you, Frank, letting him do it." She gave Frank a hefty shove, then added, "Scared the hell out of me."

"I'm sorry, hon," said Frank, stroking her back with a hand.

“Yes, mon. Truly sorry, little lady. It was all my idea, seen,” said John, grinning slightly less and allowing the lilt of his island dialect to have full reign.

Sara loved to hear him speak, though she knew he could speak perfectly well without an accent. She embraced him, feeling that warmth and strength that she had come to know so well. It triggered the image of Frank fighting Dr. Jones in the grass field behind the exploding ENOCH building, as John restrained her from running to help.

Releasing him from the hug, she said, “What are you doing up this way? Wait! Can anyone use a drink? I’m having a glass of Merlot after that little incident.” She started down the hall toward the kitchen, nodding her head as Frank called for two beers and said they would be in the living room.

“She hardly drinks,” said Frank. “Must be shook up.”

John settled onto the overstuffed sofa with Frank standing nearby. Sara distributed the beers and sat next to the Rasta. After a toast, she took a healthy sip of wine.

“So, John, your visit?” she said.

“What? A mon no can come see friends, if he likes?”

“I actually knew he was coming, honey. But he wouldn’t let me spoil the surprise by telling you.”

Sara tapped the nail of a finger against the crystal, creating a sonorous sound. John took the hint, took a swig of beer, and began to speak.

“Well, I jus’ come to see you know who. Him say we all need to meet, so I thought it’d be good to see you two.”

“Uh, who is ‘you know who’?” Frank asked.

“Peter,” Sara said. “He’s in town.”

“So ya know dat, seen. I return San Diego on Tuesday. Mon, da security in da airport, such a joke yet dem be so serious.”

“Makes you miss that private jet we had on the LAM op,” said Frank. “Why wasn’t I told Peter was here?”

Sara and John looked at each other, trying to decide who should answer. Based on what she had discussed with Peter an hour ago, an idea struck her.

“When I was with my girlfriend tonight, he texted me.” She smiled, one part truth, one part fiction. “He actually wants for us all to meet. Obviously John, too.”

“Yes, mon. It seem something has come up.”

“Not another ‘save the world’ operation that he ‘volunteered’ us to do,” said Frank, with a wave of a hand at John. “Our government spends billions fighting wars we shouldn’t, and when I was with NSA, we knew about Al Queda then. Did it help with 9-11? Or was the strike allowed to happen to produce a nation of fear?”

“Frank, please, not that old story again.”

“As dem say, you be preachin’ to the choir, mon.”

“John’s right. Peter has something else in the works, a new organization, I think.”

“Sara, I’m already deeply involved with Cherish the Wild, as are you. Never has there been a better time for the ‘Caring for the Planet’ message.” Frank paused. “Does this new organization have a name?”

“Of course, hon. It’s called AEGIS. And it is directly linked to environmental issues. It sort of fits perfectly with Cherish the Wild.” Sara took a sip of wine, which had done wonders to calm her nerves.

“I’m listening.”

“Well, I’d better let Peter fill you in on all the details.”

“John, is that what you’re meeting Peter about?” Frank said. “After all, you could have chatted with him in Solana Beach at the import/export store.”

“Still don’t miss a trick, Frank. But him say it was important for us all to be together.” Then John launched into a story about a hot looking woman that came into the store, The Natural Path Import/Export Company, asking for some African herb for virility to give her husband—to replace the Viagra that he had been taking. “I had to turn her away. Sad to say, mon.”

Sara smiled at John. The story had been a good distraction and lightened the tension. She realized that John’s visit might have been another avenue devised by Peter to coax Frank into AEGIS. During and since the LAM operation Frank and John had become close friends. Most importantly, Frank trusted John, which spoke volumes. Not that he didn’t trust Peter, he did. Yet, the last operation had

triggered something in Frank, causing him to distrust himself, perhaps.

Sara remembered upon returning from the Caribbean, Frank had not put the black Kevlar case of weapons away, as he had said he would. She hadn't pressed him then, because of his silence. She looked at him now, relaxed yet passionate, as he talked with John about Cherish the Wild's latest endeavors. Sometimes she wondered what Frank would have been like if she had not been kidnapped, and believed to be dead by him. She knew that the entire Foundation had been created in memory to her, the other Sara that had existed before being taken, and before her mind alteration by LAM, Inc. under the direction of Ulrich Rogers.

Sara stood and walked over to the bookshelf, where the guys were looking at a beautiful book, *The Last Wild Wolves*. It revealed unfathomable knowledge about several wolf packs in British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest. The photography alone was worth the cost of the book.

"So guys, is it a threesome for the meeting with our favorite Brit tomorrow morning?"

"Honey, the last thing the world needs is another corporation designed to 'Save the Earth'. After all, I should know."

"Frank... AEGIS is different, very different. You'll see."

"Eh mon, the lady be right. Again." The Rasta paused, and squeezed Frank's shoulder. "'Ow many times I tell ya to listen to her?"

"The last time I nearly got killed, if I recall. We all were almost killed."

Sara and John looked at Frank, not with pleading, rather gratitude. Everyone had played a part, but he had saved everyone's life, barely escaping with his own.

"All right, I'll go." Frank smiled. "It'll be good to see ole Peter, anyway. I miss that guy. But, no promises."

"T'anks and praises to Jah," said John, winking at a grinning Sara.

Four

Prague, Czech Republic
Monday, 7:03 am

Only one of the three men at the small, secluded table in the corner of the café ordered a beer. The other two men took espresso with their fresh baked bread. The café constituted part bakery and part coffeehouse, situated in the heart of historic Prague. Bustling with patrons having a coffee breakfast before work, the three men easily blended in.

The capital of the Czech Republic had been chosen because it was an easy city to become invisible amongst the crowds, and it was close to other countries in which they ran operations. Also, the leader, Jozef Potok, was Czech and lived in Prague.

A waitress handed the beer to Jozef and scurried off to serve other customers. Raking a hand over a few days of sand-colored stubble on his long, thin face, Josef watched the girl's ample hips swivel beneath a green apron, then took a swig.

The espressos, both doubles, came shortly with a plate of bread. Steam rose from the thick, dark slices. The two coffee drinkers slathered on butter and ate with gusto. These two men could not have been more different, in size anyway. One was six feet two inches and weighed over two hundred twenty pounds, not fat either. He dwarfed the man next to him, who had a wiry, well-muscled frame.

"Jozef, what is so important that we have to meet at such an hour?" The bigger coffee drinker spoke in Czech, though he was Russian, actually Chechen. He appeared as if he had just escaped a Siberian prison by bending the bars. He looked like a large barrel, his torso, atop two tree trunks, his legs. With a paw of a hand, he took another piece of bread. The wiry man, Tobias Lazar, methodically stirred sugar into his espresso.

"Are you working that bar, Ivan?" said Jozef, his sad green eyes on the big man.

“A nightclub. And I just got off work.” The Chechen worked security, offering an excellent opportunity to scout potential candidates, visiting from nearby countries.

“And you, Lazar?” Jozef turned his attention to the smaller man. “Any complaints?”

Tobias, the smallest of the three, merely gazed at the beer drinker, and took a sip of coffee. His black eyes shown like polished marbles, rarely revealing anything to anyone, an asset on late nights with cards in hand. He stroked the brown strip of groomed stubble below his bottom lip, but remained silent.

“Silence today from the Romanian, such a surprise,” said Jozef, arching sandy-colored eyebrows. His hair was thinning, though only in his mid-thirties. “Ah well, good news. The handlers in New York and London were pleased with the last shipment and...”

“As they should be. We only send the best,” said Ivan, reaching for the last slice of bread.

“Don’t interrupt, you lazy Russian. They want increased shipments. One per month.”

A grin spread across Ivan’s round face, then he nudged Lazar. “I may be lazy, Jozef, but I am not Russian. I am Chechen.” Then, his gray eyes grew cold, and he added, “Do not make that mistake, again.”

The wooden chair beneath Jozef creaked as he sat back, arms folded across his chest, weighing the full force of the man’s vehemence.

Ivan knew that Jozef reserved his most savage attacks for Russians. Growing up under the heavy fist of Communism imposed by the USSR, his bitterness grew like an unseen tumor. On the surface, Jozef had remained obedient as a boy, even after Russian soldiers murdered his father. But once the effects of the Velvet Revolution took hold in the early 1990’s, Jozef’s resentment burst forth with violent acts and schemes for moneymaking.

After a long silence, Ivan said, “Please, Jozef, continue. What is it you want us to do?”

Finishing the last of his beer, Jozef placed the glass on the table and leaned forward. “Yes, let us finish business. In the last few years

we have operated with shipments once every three months, which gave plenty of time for setup and delivery. With an increased schedule for delivery, several things will need to change.”

The other two men nodded as he continued, outlining the plan to deliver more girls to the handlers.

After ten minutes or so, Ivan pondered the plan over another espresso. It would force him into a difficult position, more than he had endured thus far. He also knew that Jozef was merely passing along orders from the boss, who lived in Austria.

Ivan needed more time, the precise commodity that slipped away so easily, especially when one wasn't aware.

*

New York City, NY
Monday, 8:53 am, EST

Cars entering the Manhattan Bridge thundered overhead as five Chinese men, one from each of five major cities along the Eastern seaboard of the U.S., walked along Canal Street, one of many dirty streets in the heart of Chinatown. Each man wore a suit of fine linen varying in color from grey to black. They turned a corner and entered a popular Chinese Restaurant, even though the sign on the door read: Closed. They passed through the now empty open seating area of the main room and were met in the corridor to the bathrooms by a stooped, elderly Chinese man with black-rimmed glasses. He opened a door situated between the gender-specific doors for the washrooms.

In single file, the men mounted a narrow flight of stairs to a broad landing outside an ornate door, depicting a small hut atop a wintry mountaintop. Two large Chinese men the size of sumo wrestlers, who wore identical light grey suits with lightweight black turtleneck sweaters beneath, with large bulges under one armpit, flanked it. After frisking each of the waiting five Chinamen, relieving each of laptops, mobile phones, and briefcases, all of which were forbidden, the ornate door was opened to reveal a spacious and luxurious room directly above the restaurant below. In the center of the room was a ten-foot long oak table surrounded by padded leather chairs. Off to

the front corners of the room were one-way windows, allowing a clear view of the street below. Off to the sides of the large table, below the oak paneled walls, were small, round oak tables with lounge chairs circling each table. At the far end of the room, opposite the window to the street, stood a monstrous oak bar with beautifully carved wooden stools.

To any one's eye this was both a room for pleasure and business, depending on the occasion. Today, it was business, serious business.

The five visitors took places at the table toward the window end and a petite Chinese girl, with features as fine as porcelain, took drink orders. She whisked away, her long black skirt swirling about her legs, and passed through a door next to the bar.

The seat at the head of the table remained vacant, as did the one to the right of it.

An elegant gold clock hung on the sidewall opposite the entrance, the ticks of each second audible above the murmur of voices.

Suddenly, on the wall opposite the clock, which began to chime the hour, an opening appeared. A short, slim, clean-shaven Chinese man, perhaps sixty, stepped through the doorway created from the opening in the oak paneling. His thin eyebrows matched his black hair cut business length. He was impeccably dressed in a charcoal grey suit designed for him by one of Paris's finest tailors. Gold cufflinks and a subtle tie of rouge adorned his starched white shirt.

Close on his heels followed a younger Chinese man, who resembled a fireplug with short cut black hair. He wore the same attire as the guards at the door. His face was smooth save for a four-inch scar that descended from his left ear to the corner of his mouth. He moved with the alacrity of a cat to the head of the table and pulled out the chair for the older Chinaman, who promptly sat, elbows on the table with fingers interlaced.

He remained in that pose long after the others had fallen silent. Only after the attending young girl brought a small pot of tea with cup and saucer did he change position. The others knew better than to disturb him before the tea took its place before him. The last man to do that had to be carried out by the guards.

Mr. Chan, as he was known in the U.S., maintained a plush residence on the upper West Side. He had been spending more time in America than China, which was a switch from ten years ago. No one had dared ask why, but rumor had it that he had taken to the freedoms of American life. Others within this tight knit group doubted that, but wouldn't surmise another reason, at least aloud.

Chan waited for the young girl to pour a cup of tea, his first, then took a cautious sip. He surveyed the group, knowing each man represented a major metropolis—Montreal, Boston, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Miami. He replaced the cup in the saucer with slow, deliberate movements, and began to speak in Mandarin. “Gentlemen, we have reached a critical point in the plan The Elders have set for us. As you know, with support from the Chinese government, last year we were able to penetrate the computer systems of almost all Western nations, including the U.S.A. Despite the intrusion eventually being detected and secured by Western governments, our success proves our superiority and the excellence of the Cyber Attack Force. It also shows the vulnerability of the West.”

The others around the conference table nodded as Chan continued. “The Elders have decided the time to implement Trident, the three-pronged attack against Western domination of the globe is at hand. China has the people, the technology, and most of all, the will of iron.” He held up a tightly clenched fist. His coal-black eyes lingered on the faces of each man present. Then he explained that the first test of the attack would occur within the week. Admittedly, the scientists behind the technology weren't exactly certain of the precise outcome once the targets were rendered inoperative. He stressed the last word with a finality that only death brings. He instructed the men that immediately after the attack each were to carefully observe what occurred in their respective cities.

Each man nodded in assent, absorbing his words carefully, as no notes were allowed to be written.

“What if this attack fails?” asked one of the younger men at the table.

“Remember the attack involves three prongs, like a pitchfork. This is a test to determine if the viral program operates correctly.”

“When will the other two prongs be driven into the Western beast?” said an older man from Miami, pushing square wire-rimmed glasses onto his face.

Chan nodded at the man to his left that had asked the question. He knew all too well of Mr. Kan’s eagerness to wreak havoc on the Western world, despite owning a profitable business in America, as did all the men present.

“In time,” Chan said. “These things cannot be hurried, as you know. We Chinese have survived for 5000 years. We shall not depart just yet.”

Murmurs of approval went around the table. Chan snapped his fingers and the young girl entered from the back kitchen. Once at his side, she poured a second cup of tea. Chan took a sip.

Each man watched and nodded in approval.

Chan reminded them that the second prong involved satellites. Many countries used satellites for telecommunication purposes. Korea’s launch of its own had afforded more autonomy to China’s little neighbor to the East. Korea no longer needed to rely on leasing satellite time from other countries. Then, he added, “Now, gentlemen, the timeline for the attacks after the viral test will be given in our next meeting, which is two weeks from today. At such time, we will have a special guest with us. From each of you I want reports on the effects of the test attack.”

The youngest man, furthest from Chan, said, “And the third prong? What is it?”

“That I am not permitted to say. But soon we shall all know more. Gentlemen,” Chan stood, “until our next meeting.”

Chan’s bodyguard rose quickly, depressed a panel on the wall to release the hidden door, and waited for his boss to pass through. He then followed, leaving the others to wait until the secret door closed. That was routine. It protected Mr. Chan, which was critical, almost as important as the secrecy of the operation.

Five

San Francisco, CA

Monday, 9:25 am, PST

Sara, Frank, and John waited outside the entrance to a building, situated a few blocks from Union Square. They all knew the place well, as it was one of the safehouses where they had met after Sara's 'extraction' from LAM, Inc.

The door buzzed and Frank grabbed the handle, letting the other two in first. They took the elevator to the top floor, a penthouse suite with spectacular views of the city.

John gave the required knock sequence on the door, which opened promptly to reveal a smiling Peter Wellington, no disguise.

Sara looked him up and down despite having seen him the night before. He seemed so different. Now, he was warm, friendly, and gracious. She noted that his hair might be a shade grayer than two years ago. It matched the silver-framed glasses that he wore.

Frank took Peter's offered hand and shook it warmly. "You haven't changed a bit. Life's been good to you?"

"Quite right, ole boy. Good of you to come, Frank." Peter squeezed his shoulder. "My goodness, looks as if you've put on a bit of muscle."

"Special ops training exercises. That, and the great meals Sara makes."

"Wonderful. Please come in. Get settled. I dare say you know the place. Coffee? Crumb cakes?" Peter and John did a playful fist bump.

After getting coffees, tea for Sara, and crumb cakes from the spread on the modern black dining table, they all stood chatting, eschewing the high-backed wooden chairs surrounding the table.

"Frank, how is the world of environmental education?" said Peter, with a glint in his eye.

"Really well. Sara's been fabulous. Of course, she's basically transferred all the skills cultivated with Lectures and More over to

us.” Frank threw a smile to Sara who stood next to Peter at the foot of the table. “I guess we owe Ulrich a bit of thanks.”

“Watch it!” Sara said.

“Quite the sense of humor, hasn’t he, I should say.”

“So, what’s all this AEGIS stuff about? A new organization?”

“Quite right Frank. Sara’s filled you in then?”

“No. Not at all,” Frank winked at John across the table, taking another piece of crumb cake. “I think it’s safe to say that she was thrown off a bit last night. She even had a glass of wine, so you know what that means.”

Sara quickly relayed the surprise that had awaited her upon returning from seeing her ‘girlfriend’, while Frank and John succumbed to hearty chuckles.

“Ah, I see. Yes, there’s no prank quite like a Rastafarian one. I’ve been on the receiving end a few times.” While Peter’s tone was kind, the look he gave John was not. Then he smiled, and said, “Shall we? I know Frank’s itching to get down to brass tacks, as we say.”

He ushered everyone into the living room, just off the dining area. The lingering morning fog blocked views from any of the windows. As it was, the top of one of the towers for the Golden Gate Bridge barely peaked out above the still, grey mist.

Peter checked on everyone’s drinks, and then placed his cup and saucer on a low coffee table that matched the dining table in both color and style. He preferred to stand and discuss. He tapped a finger to his lips and looked at Sara next to Frank on the fake-leather sofa.

“Just start at the beginning, Peter,” Sara said, as if reading his mind.

“Quite right, my dear. I shall. Prior to the enormous amount of attention on global warming, and the LAM operation, I was approached by a multi-national organization of some repute. They wanted to form an intelligence network that would oversee the planet’s environment, for safe-keeping, I suppose. As they got things sorted, I kept busy with other tasks, as you know, including our little escapade with Dr. Jones and ENOCH.” Peter smiled at Frank and continued. “Six months after our take-down of LAM, Inc., this multi-national organization offered me the head post, but I declined,

suggesting another candidate. Instead, I agreed to be involved, and thus AEGIS was born.”

“What does it stand for?” Frank asked, taking a sip of coffee.

“Sara, I’m surprised at you. Anyway, AEGIS is the Alliance for Eco-Global Intelligence Service, an official organization, though a tad hush-hush.”

“Great. Just what the U.S. needs, another ‘Intelligence’ outfit,” Frank slumped back into the sofa. Sara punched him in the arm to which he faked mortal injury.

“I didn’t say that this was an American show, did I?”

“Who is in charge of AEGIS, then? I always wanted to know that.”

“Hold up a minute, Peter! Sara, you already knew about this?”

Sara couldn’t hold back a grin, especially with Frank’s mouth hanging open like a train tunnel.

Peter smiled. “What did you think of all those times she had to run off and what, help a friend?”

Frank continued to stare at Sara, jaw still agape. At last, he recovered, and said, “Peter...”

“That’s right, my boy. She’s been working with AEGIS for the last nine months.” Peter pointed at John, “Him, too.”

Frank crossed his arms. “I’d like to say I can’t believe it, but I suspected something.”

“Honey, I wanted to tell you, but...”

“But I told her not to do so because I felt you would be resistant. What with the LAM operation and all.”

“No surprise there! Last time we got involved with you and your secret affiliations...”

“Frank, we know,” said Sara quickly, hearing that tone in his voice, not quite bitter, rather more defiant.

“Hey mon,” said John, at last. “You did great on that op. And the fact be, we ain’t dead. And on the other ‘and, we did the U.S. and the world a favor. Jones was a bad man. You know’t.”

Sara could see that somehow the words of the Rasta sunk in and soothed the fire in Frank. His jaw relaxed and he released his arms.

She reached for his hand, taking a deep breath, her first in the last five minutes.

“Who is in charge of AEGIS, anyway?” she asked.

“The United Nations,” Peter said, beginning to pace the hardwood, which Sara knew meant more secrets were to be revealed.

“Hmmm. I actually meant the person in charge, since you turned the post down.”

“Quite right, my dear. That’s my first surprise, shall we say.” With that, Peter turned toward the guest bedroom door nearest the living room, which was shut. He then cleared his throat and the door began to open.

Out stepped the jowly and smiling face of a man they all knew too well. He lifted a hand, giving a little wave.

Sara’s mouth gaped open, as if the mechanism for the jaw had snapped.

*

New York City, NY
Monday, 1:23 pm, EST

Helene took a drag on the cigarette and put it in the ashtray on the nightstand next to her bed. From a heap of clothes on the bed, she picked up a bright colored, flowery dress and held it close to her body. She loved it. She could never have afforded this back home. True, it was for summer, which was quite a few months away, but that didn’t matter. She danced around the room, watching herself in the mirror on the back of the door.

Her room, she thought. This was better than back home where she shared a room with her brother. It had been fine when they were kids, but once she had become a woman.... Now that she was almost sixteen and Xavier fourteen, it was embarrassing—for both of them.

Then she remembered what Katya, the long-legged blond Russian had told her. Each girl had their own room, which seemed luxurious, but it was designed to keep friendships from developing too deeply. Also, according to Katya, girls in their position in other places did not have it so good.

She looked back to the heap of new clothes she'd selected that morning from the shopping truck. All of a sudden, she felt a wave of sickness rise up into her throat. It emanated from what felt like a leaden ball in her stomach.

Then it hit her: what would be required in order to earn these clothes, this room—this life. She dropped the flowery dress on the floor.

Would she even live to see the summer? She flung herself onto the bed and curled up in a ball. Tears began to flow. Sobs shook her small frame.

Just then, a knock came at the door. Must be one of the girls because the men wouldn't have been so courteous. The door opened and Sula, her Turkish friend, entered.

"I heard crying." Sula rushed to the bedside. She occupied the room next door and the walls were as thin as any cheap motel. "You all right?" she said.

Simply hearing the care in the girl's voice, spoken in her native language, helped calm Helene's fears and anxiety. She turned to face Sula. They held each other a few minutes. Helene breathed, deeper and deeper.

"Thank you, Sula. You are so very kind."

"It is nothing. We all need nurturing."

"How do you know so much and are younger than me?"

"Helene, I told you I'm the oldest with two younger sisters and a brother." She paused to brush the dampness from Helene's cheeks. "Who do you think took care of them while my mother toiled?"

"I'm sorry. I remember now." Helene's almond-colored eyes shifted to the pile of clothes. She could feel the lead ball forming again. She reached for another cigarette and lit it, offering one to Sula. Instead, they shared.

"You're scared about tonight?" Sula said.

Helene nodded, exhaling a plume of smoke, and said, "I know what you 'experienced' girls say: 'The first night is the worst.'"

"I didn't say that, but I suppose it is true."

Sula shifted to sit next to Helene, who sat on the edge of the bed, leaning forward, elbows on knees. She took Helene's hand, and said,

“I’ve only been here three months, so the other girls may know better, but I think we all need to find our own way.”

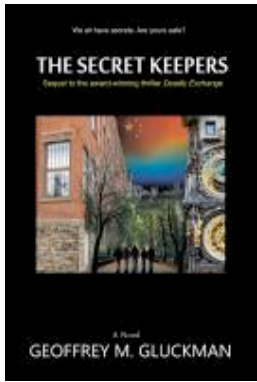
A tear rolled down Helene’s cheek, her jaw slackened. She looked at the cigarette burning down, like ashen sand falling in an hourglass.

“A lot of new girls aren’t picked the first night because the repeat customers have favorites. So you never know.”

“That’s like slow torture, delaying the inevitable. I’d rather get it over with.”

Gently, Sula took Helene’s face in her hands, and said, “Let’s not think about it. From what I’ve heard from a few of the girls transferred in, like Rosa from Mexico, we are treated very well.” She paused. “How would you like to pamper ourselves? We could do each other’s nails. And have a drink while doing it.”

Helene smiled weakly, and nodded. She knew it was only a distraction, but what else did she have. She lit another cigarette after stubbing out the other. Fears to burn. Having a drink sounded good to her.



When Sara Nardell and Peter Wellington meet with a man telling a tale of an upscale brothel in Manhattan, it disrupts the easy life of reunion that Sara and Frank Revere have enjoyed. Sara joins Peter's U.N. Special Operations team, and discovers a world rampant with sex trafficking and computer hackers, from Vancouver to China. A seemingly simple mission becomes shrouded in deception and hides a Chinese government-sanctioned group known only as The Elders.

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