

**TRIAL BY FIRE**  
by Shane Tourtellotte

**Extraordinary shocks lead to extraordinary temptations....**

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**I**

The lab was in a quiet, controlled tumult. Subjects had been flowing in and out of the scanning room all day, and Lucinda Peale hadn't been out of the monitoring booth for a good five hours. She was going on inertia today, the inertia of years of doing work she had believed in.

They were scanning the last of the violent criminals on their volunteer list, filling in gaps of their knowledge of the structure and function of such brains. The team had been doing such scans for seven years, and for the last five had been treating violent pathologies and other conditions with neural overlays. Knowing the patterns of nerve connections and chemical signals in an unhealthy brain allowed one to impress those unhealthy areas electromagnetically with a pattern known to be healthy.

As much as they knew, and as practical as their knowledge proved, the brain was still profoundly complex, with more subtleties the deeper one looked. Their lab, and those at half a dozen other universities, had not charted the whole territory yet. They certainly wouldn't finish the job today, but they might answer a few more questions.

Dr. Leonard Urowsky shared the booth with Lucinda, sitting at the far end of the console. He adjusted one monitor to trace dopamine and noradrenaline release in the orbito-frontal cortex, as Dr. Dreher in the scanning room talked a subject through memories of a particularly grisly crime. He began to sag with fatigue.

"Just one more after this," Lucinda whispered.

"Oh. Good, Dr. Peale." He rubbed his lined face, getting a little energy back. "Then we can finish this report and have it for the committee on Friday."

The project had been politically charged from the outset. Altering minds, constructive as it could be when the minds were diseased, still held terrors. Politicians and ethicists feared its potential misuses, usually meaning any uses they disapproved of. The public saw it as a version of brainwashing. "Mind-wiping," they called it, though "mind-cloning" was a popular alternative.

She and colleagues had spoken before state boards and legislative committees often in the past. This time, though, it went beyond California, all the way to Washington and the House Science Committee. The research team was sending its full ethics sub-group to testify: Urowsky, Dreher, and Pavel Petrusky. Dr. Petrusky had arranged the testimony, with his usual political skill.

Lucinda was not going. In her darker moments, she felt that Pavel had also arranged that with his usual political skill.

Urowsky spoke again. “And make sure to send us the results of tomorrow’s synesthesia work. We can show—”

Pavel Petrusky opened the door. His eyes barely touched Lucinda before going straight to Urowsky. “Ah, Pavel,” Urowsky said, “how did the procedure go?”

“Very well. The patient should be awake now, and Dr. LaPierre will be there to check her cognition. I needed to get back for these last scans.”

Urowsky looked at the main monitor, where Dreher was showing in another manacled, orange-suited man. “Last scan. Please, sit.” Petrusky put himself neatly between Urowsky and Lucinda, never turning his eyes left to her. “I was just reminding Dr. Peale to send the synesthesia data ahead to us in D.C.”

“Oh, absolutely.” He took the briefest look at Lucinda. Pavel had always lobbied for study in areas away from violence and insanity, things that would taint their work with judgmentalism. “We need to let the committee know all we’ve done, and can do. It’s an important opportunity.”

He gave her another sidelong glance, and she could tell he didn’t mean that in the strictest professional sense. His ideas of the social, and even political, uses of overlay were far different from hers. Pavel treated the field as engineering, with the human brain as a complex mechanism whose workings should be adjusted and perfected. And he had his own definitions of perfection.

There had been a power struggle within the team, one Lucinda had lost. Pavel had gained unspoken control over the program at Berkeley, and its agenda. The testimony in two days would be the fruit of his labors.

Pavel and Urowsky were talking softly among themselves. “Fortunate we’re only losing two weekdays to travel and the hearing,” Urowsky said.

“I knew it would be more convenient for us this way,” Pavel said. “It also sets up the issue perfectly for the weekend cycle of news analysis. People will be thinking about overlay on our terms for once.”

Lucinda wanted to bolt. She bit her tongue and concentrated on signs of hyperactivity in the amygdala to keep herself in her seat. Soon enough, the work was done. “I’ll organize the scan files,” she told Urowsky.

“Yes, thank you,” he said absently. His attention was still with Pavel. Urowsky led the overlay project in title. Lucinda wondered whether he knew yet who led it in fact.

She retreated to her office to get that work done. Moments later, there was a

knock. “Sam.”

“Come in.”

Sam Jeung slid inside. He looked down the hall both ways, then shut the door. “It’s all set. We should have five dual-casting outlets, a couple radio, a couple print. The news conference will be in the courtyard, or the lobby if the weather’s bad.”

Lucinda frowned. “I had hoped for more.”

“You don’t need more to make a big media splash. This is enough for full propagation.” He paused in his headlong discourse, almost a full second. “If you mean you hoped for more team members walking out, you could still approach Barber. She might go.”

“And if Kate doesn’t, she’d expose us early. The whole plan’s predicated on maximum impact, striking right after the testimony. We have to play it safe here.” She took her own pause, holding up a hand to keep Sam from rushing onward. “Speaking of that, you don’t really have—”

“Stop. You’re not getting rid of me, Doc.”

“Sam, you’d be walking away from your doctorate work. You have lots more to lose.”

“So what?” Sam grimaced at how loud he had said that, and toned it down. “I’m not going to let Petrusky and his ilk set up their orthodoxy as the standard to which all right-thinking folk have to conform. That’s what’ll happen in the end, unless we derail it now, get some control back.”

Lucinda nodded gently. “I know. I just wanted to give you the chance.”

Sam grinned. “You’re giving me the chance, and about time.” Had Lucinda not reined him in, he might have tried something like this alone months ago. “And I’ll get by. I’m going to be famous, after all, or at least notorious. Someone will take me on, just for the publicity. It’ll be even better for you.”

Lucinda tried to mirror his smile. “I can hope.”

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“We’ve had this conversation before.” Joshua Muntz paid out some of the leash. “I’m not gonna abandon you because the going gets rough. I owe—you deserve better than that.”

It was a chilly evening, so Lucinda and Josh walked close, arms loosely around each other’s waists. Ben, her Rottweiler, snuffled at the neighbors’ greenery.

“I just want you to understand, if they put me under a microscope after tomorrow, they’ll probably put you there too. You haven’t done anything to deserve that.”

“I’ve been under that microscope,” he said tightly. “The first time, I did deserve it. This time around might be easier, with a clear conscience.” He ruminated. “If you’re really saying you want me to lay low a while, for your sake—”

“No!”

It was the shortest lie she had ever told. Josh had been a patient of her team, cured of a murderous schizophrenia that had kept him institutionalized for thirteen years. Lucinda had seen him through the rough times after his rehabilitation, and over time he had become her ... what?

Her lover? Not in the usual, physical sense, and she wasn’t yet sure about the emotional sense, either. Such distinctions would probably matter little to the enemies she would make among her colleagues the next day. They could condemn her for a breach of ethics, and might make it stick. In a battle over ethics, it was a potent threat.

Pavel would have a tool to destroy her, and not the only one. Even without this, she’d likely be outmatched.

“You’ve got no reason to go into hiding,” she said as they turned up the path to her small house. “And I can handle whatever happens.”

Josh pulled her closer. “You don’t need the false front with me, Luci. You’re giving up your job, risking your professional reputation. You’ve got everything on the line.”

She stopped at the front step. “Do you think I shouldn’t do this?”

Josh needed a moment to meet her eyes. “I know someone should. I know better than most, this thing is too powerful to leave in the hands of people eager to use it. You’re just being braver about it than I would.”

Lucinda turned away, ostensibly to open the door. She had been eager about overlay in the beginning. Never as eager as Pavel and others, perhaps, but she had believed in it. She still did, within bounds.

Ben stumbled going into the house. “What’s wrong, pal?” Josh said, kneeling beside him.

“He’s starting limping on that front paw,” Lucinda said. “Just getting older, I guess.”

“Oh, no, you’re not,” Josh told Ben, and started tickling him. Soon Ben was lolling on his back, his coat scruffy from Josh’s attention. Josh slowed to vigorous rubs, then firm pats, his face wilting into sadness as he slowed down.

Lucinda watched it all. “You didn’t come here tonight to exercise my dog. You look like you’re having a rough time too. Is it your parents?”

Josh's hand stopped, and he barely noticed Ben squirming free and trotting away. "Dad finally left the house. He's insisting I come with him. Mom's insisting I stay."

He had returned to his parents after being released from the institution, for family support in reintegrating into society. It had instead reopened their old wounds.

"I'm gonna make someone furious," he said, standing up. "I could look into finding my own place, but even custodial supervisors don't make that much, and my electronics course eats into that. I.."

As he searched for words, Lucinda put her arm around him, rubbing gently. She then took a step back. "If you need a place, Josh, you can always come here."

She watched him absorb that and begin struggling inside. She had all but invited him into the physical intimacy he had been avoiding. The attacks his past self had committed had been against women, which made him feel undeserving of a woman's trust and favor. His connection with Lucinda was slowly dissolving that rationale.

Beyond that, though, was what the overlay had left behind: shadows of the mind whose neural template was used to correct his. That person had had unfamiliar ideas, including quite progressive attitudes on sex, that Josh had been disturbed to find running through his head. He usually mastered all the stray thoughts, and if he perhaps overcompensated in the area of sex, Lucinda let him. The last thing she wanted to do was disregard his conscience.

"Sorry," he stammered, "I'm just thinking. It's a little tough to decide, not knowing what rent I'll be paying."

Lucinda nearly corrected him, but held back. If these were Josh's terms, including what lay unspoken, she would take them. She wouldn't tell him so, but that extra money might be handy to her soon.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," she said. "Give me a few days to figure it out."

"No problem," he replied. "Not like I expect an answer tomorrow." They both laughed, the two strains of tension canceling each other.

"But just in case..." Lucinda went to her purse on the dining room table, dipped in, and took out a key. "If the tug-of-war becomes too much, you can come here for relief, however long you need."

Josh took the key tentatively. "Even if the news trucks are staking you out?"

"I'll trust your judgment."

His cheeks colored. "Thank you." He gave her a slow, gentle kiss. "You're

probably busy tonight, so I can go.”

“Not at all,” she said, taking his arm and walking toward the living room. “I could use some company for a while.”

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It was a dark six forty when Lucinda pulled into the parking garage and walked to her familiar campus lab. She lingered a moment, looking through the gloom at the grassy courtyard bounded by three buildings. *Five hours*, she told herself.

Coming out of the stairwell, she almost bumped into Kate Barber. Kate was walking down the hall, engrossed in talking to someone on a cell-pic. Lucinda swerved into a parallel course to avoid a collision, but got close enough to hear who was on the other end: Dr. Petrusky.

“—to snow, but it looks like it’ll miss us. We should have no trouble with our return flight.”

“Great, Pavel. Hold on. Lucinda, it’s Pavel,” Kate said, reeling Lucinda in before she could move off. “They’re in the Rayburn Building, ready for the hearing. He’s touching base before he has to check his cell. Committee rules.”

Apparently, they didn’t allow phones into chambers, probably as a security measure. Or maybe Congress had a sense of decency and decorum.

“The hearing starts in a few minutes,” Kate went on. “They got all the files last night.”

“I know.”

Lucinda tried to get away, but the voice struck fast. “Let me talk to her, Kate.”

Kate held out the cell-pic. Lucinda slowly turned, seeing Pavel on the little screen, with what looked like Dreher’s shoulder behind him. “Peale,” he said, “make sure the synesthesia volunteers know we have no interest in altering their condition.”

“They know. It’s on the release forms.”

“Remind them.”

Pavel was jerking her chain. Synesthetes rarely considered their condition a handicap, but while Lucinda had no interest in coercion, she realized a few might truly want a standard set of senses. Pavel had been all for giving subjects freedom of choice in previous areas—one of which had cost her dearly in the office power plays—but the winds blew him differently here.

“I’ll continue to underscore it, Dr. Petrusky.” She kept from snarling or snapping with the underlying thought, *Five hours*.

She handed back the phone, went to her office, and powered up her computer station. Before she could do anything more, Kate swung her door open.

“There’s a TV set up in the conference room, Lucinda. The team’s going to watch the hearing there.”

“Oh.” Lucinda sighed. “I’ve got some work I need to square away, Kate. I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

“It can’t wait a couple hours?” But Kate was already backing out. With a shake of Lucinda’s head, she disappeared.

Lucinda counted to five, then went to close the door. Gently, she turned the lock. Back at her desk, she started her word processor program, put in a disk, and called up her resignation letter for a last look. It was fine: a few simple sentences, without invective. That would come later, on both sides.

Next, she studied the statement she’d be giving at noon with Sam. She noted a couple of possible revisions on the screen of a pad, and tried to think them over. Her eyes kept being drawn to the clock in the corner. Four minutes of seven; four of ten in Washington.

Lucinda shrugged. She turned on her secondary monitor, went to C-SPAN’s site, and called up the web simulcast. She might not be part of the pack, but she was still curious.

The camera was panning across a large room, paneled in dark red wood. The angle went from a nearly full public seating area, across long tables festooned with mics and small consoles, to the double arc of desks, already half-filled by Congresspersons, and backed by portraits on the wall. The caption at the bottom identified it as the House Science Committee’s hearing room.

As a mellow-voiced announcer told Lucinda more things she already knew, she drifted back to her pad for a couple of minutes. She only looked back when there was movement. There they were, entering the hearing room, led by an anonymous staffer. Pavel was in the lead, and took the middle seat at the nearer table.

Someone came up to shake Pavel’s hand and exchange a few words. By the time the announcer identified him, he was headed away, toward the arcs where the Representatives sat. Lucinda was unsurprised. Pavel had minted myriad such connections. However many he had cashed in to arrange this hearing, he had plenty more.

Just past the hour, the image switched to the Chairwoman’s seat at the top arc. The camera caught an inscription in the wall above her head—“Where there is no vision, the people will perish”—before zooming in on her. She formally opened the session, and rattled off introductory remarks. She then introduced the other

committee members, who made their own remarks. Lucinda made herself listen, but was nearly lulled to sleep before the chair introduced Dr. Urowsky.

Leonard burned some of his time explaining the mechanics of neural overlay to the committee, needing that time to find a rhythm. Two banks of emitters set into the desktop created a light interference pattern, so his scripted statement unfolded before him in the thin air. He needed time to fine-tune his use of the scrolling controls, but soon was reading steadily.

“...has already proven its great therapeutic worth, through the nearly two hundred patients treated by our program alone,” Urowsky said. “All it needs is some salutary oversight, to prevent a patchwork of ethical guidelines in various states from sowing confusion. The AMA is currently working on developing such a framework. If Congress feels it must act in the matter, I urge it to study that framework, and...”

Too bad. Leonard had been doing okay until then. The AMA board had flailed about for nearly a year without producing this framework. Leonard’s appeal for patience and restraint was lame, and he probably knew it. At least it showed he still had ideas independent of Pavel.

Urowsky went on in similar veins. One long camera angle showed Pavel, his body taut, one foot twitching with impatience. He didn’t need to wait long. Once attention was on him, he was the image of calm and intelligence, and he was in his stride within seconds. He didn’t even need his ghostly prompter.

“The greatest proof of the value of overlay is in how much it has accomplished despite wholly adverse circumstances. Research is scattered across half a dozen universities; oversight is disjointed and weak; worst, there is no overall mandate for what overlay can and should provide to humankind. We can continue to function in this environment, but a rationalized system would unleash us to make far swifter and broader gains.”

Lucinda split her pad screen, so she could take notes on Pavel while still having her speech in view, to adjust her words to rebut his. And he had plenty of words.

Pavel was proposing a national overlay study center, to conduct research and coordinate the efforts of subsidiary labs—meaning everyone else. All researchers and practitioners would submit to its oversight. That oversight would come from an advisory board, ideally appointed, he said, from the ranks of those most experienced in the field, the research scientists themselves.

It was what Lucinda had expected. Heavy-handed as it was, the scheme might work, with the right people. If Pavel picked those people, starting with himself, she saw disaster.

Her attention snapped back from her note-taking. “...pool of brain templates, from which we pick the best matches of physical structure for our overlays, must be



rescreened. Anecdotal reports of stray ideas, opinions, and memories being transmitted to template recipients, while still unsubstantiated, indicate a potential failure point. In correcting the original pathologies, we might possibly sow the seeds of new ills.”

Lucinda remembered when Pavel put no stock in those anecdotes. A good scientist would change his mind with the facts, but the timing of Pavel’s change was certainly convenient, for him.

“The greatest threat here is not from familiar mental disorders or violent tendencies. It arises from the less recognized diseases of political, evangelical, and cultural extremism, whose kernels can more easily lie undetected, but are just as destructive to modern society. I am speaking of hate: legally culpable hate.”

Lucinda almost dropped her pad. The stakes had just gone way up.

“Hate crimes are a stain on American society. The underlying prejudices that inspire them are stains on the mind. Combating this scourge is now crucial, not only for its own sake, but to ensure that its evil does not reproduce itself, unseen and unknown, by being imprinted into minds we mean to heal.”

Well, he had a new target, one that might encompass an older one. Cast a wide enough definition of “hate crime,” and you could catch a lot of people: for example, her. It might be his way, incidentally or not, of purging her from the program.

Too bad she’d beat him to it.

“We must scrutinize existing files, and we must closely screen new template pattern donors, by background check and under brain scan, for these aberrations, to ensure our donors are of sound and trustworthy mind.”

Lucinda nodded sadly. She centered the paragraph she had been mulling.

*Overlay is drifting toward becoming a political tool. The solution to that is not to put control in the hands of a political body.*

Out came “drifting;” in went “being driven.” She scrolled downward, adding the more forceful words and phrases she had been hoarding. She had held herself back, out of a persistent professional respect, and a remembrance of what once had been friendship. That was past now. She was making Pavel her open foe, and she had to go all out, as Sam had urged, to win this contest.

“But this is only a stopgap, until we end our tolerance of extremist hate, treat it the way we treat the more explicit violence in our society, and remove this lurking risk from our work. I call upon Congress to give full support to a program of research to identify the root patterns of hate mentalities. Only then can neural overlay be free from menace and fear.”

It might even be too late now, whatever words Lucinda used. She had given Pavel the first move, and he played politics like a chess master. He could lock up the committee, maybe even the whole Congress, if his zeal swept them up. And right now he was—

Saying nothing. Had she missed the rest of his statement, lost in her own thoughts? She looked up, cursing softly.

The camera was swinging, blurring the picture. There was a murmur, loud and rising. She could hear the scrapes of chairs. The camera stopped at the top arc, where one man in a security uniform was pulling on the arm of the nonplussed chairwoman, while a second pointed to a side door.

The camera wheeled again. Before it reached the gallery, with people jostling in the aisles to reach the main door, she caught a flashing glimpse of incomprehension and alarm on three familiar faces.

Lucinda caught the mood, confused and a little panicky. “What’s happe—”

The picture cut to a glass-walled studio. A man, the host of C-SPAN’s call-in show, was at the glass, pointing. Someone shouted “Move!” off-screen, and he did.

The camera zoomed, catching the airship as it fell from an overcast sky. The gondola was smashed and smoking. Rips in the skin fabric widened as air tore at them. One antenna came away, tumbling to earth.

The ship was a fixture in Washington’s sky, a sensor and security platform. Now it was a wreck, crashing somewhere well north of the Mall.

“It came from the west,” the studio host said, voice cracking.

“What did?” Lucinda said, her voice cracking too.

“What’s that?” The camera slewed left, past the Washington Monument. Somewhere beyond the Lincoln Memorial, there were two dots low in the air.

The picture cut out, and Lucinda’s breath caught. When it returned a second later, it showed a new, lower angle on the crashing airship, as its tail caught the corner of a large building.

“—the convention center,” said some woman. Only now did Lucinda see the “LIVE—WJLA 7” logo. C-SPAN must have picked up a local feed, a reporter and camera on one of the lawns of tourist Washington. “The missile came from west of us, maybe from the Watergate—and now there are—”

The camera caught the same dots, now with visible short-winged silhouettes. One was banking toward the Lincoln Memorial, the other flying nearly head-on to the camera. There were shouts, and a scream, drowning out the distant buzz.

“—small airplanes, maybe drones. Cruise missiles? No, they’re banking

around, not crashing, but this can't be coincidence.”

Flames tore across the sky, above one of the planes. The camera followed it for a second until it self-destructed, then followed the thin smoke trail back to the roof of an ornate building just as the “whoosh” reached them.

“—Old Executive Office, the missile launcher on the roof. Now I can see next door, the White House, people running across the roof, carrying weapons. I don't think they have a clean shot. The planes are—what's that? Smoke?”

There was a rattle at the doorknob, then a pounding. “Luci!”

“I'm watching it, Sam!”

Back on the screen, one of the planes had left a white puff in its wake near the Reflecting Pool. “Gas?” said an off-screen voice, probably the cameraman. “Spores? Oh, jeez!”

“An unknown substance,” the reporter said, “emitted by—there's another cloud—”

The camera had gone low to follow the drone. There were now panicked tourists running through the shot, racing like Lucinda's heart. It had been almost a year since the last one of these, and that had just happened, the dust settling before the first camera caught anything. Now—

“More!” The cameraman swung around, catching more dots beyond the Capitol. Figures on the Capitol roof shouldered bulky boxes, but did no more.

“—want to shoot, but I think they're screened, the drones flying just behind the House Office Buildings.”

Ice jabbed into Lucinda's heart. Her colleagues were right in the heart of this. Leonard, Vera, and yes, Pavel.

A lance of light shot from one of the gunners. A drone erupted and fell, the laser staying on it all the way down.

“They got one! And this way, another one's going down.” The camera got it just as it fell into the Potomac. “The defenses are working, but now I see more in the south—wait, those are ours!”

A flight of three arrowheaded war-drones split apart. One went for the drone still buzzing the Lincoln Memorial, one for the drones around the Capitol. One kept going straight north.

The camera swung ahead of its path, wobbled, and fixed on a plane swooping into a hard climb. Perspective was deceptive, but it looked like a small private jet a couple miles away.

“—musta been flying rooftop height,” the cameraman said.

“A new plane, a bigger one, part of the attack, we assume—”

Laser fire from the war-drone caught its tail. The plane shuddered, and its climb flattened. The missile pedestal at the Old Executive building fired a volley, and the first missile caught it on the nose.

An image hung in Lucinda’s mind from the instant before, a wisp of cloud passing in front of the plane, almost beautiful. It clung there because there were no more images to take its place. The feed had cut out again, and the frame stayed blank. She heard angry shouts down the hall, so it wasn’t just her.

She tried to reload, but her browser couldn’t find the page. She tried C-SPAN’s homepage, with the same effect. Remembering the call letters, she tried WJLA’s website, and got a cached page that didn’t mention the attacks, and wouldn’t show the webcast.

“What the—” Had the government cut off the live news? She’d heard once there were shadowy plans for that, in emergencies. She hadn’t liked it then. Now, in this ghastly limbo, she detested it.

She swept out of her office to the conference room, to tell them what little she knew. A few steps from the door, she noticed the silence. Her brain spun into overdrive, thinking of all the possibilities she had been suppressing until now. It didn’t stop her from walking in, didn’t stop her mouth from saying what she had ready on her tongue.

“I can’t get any news. What’s—”

She saw their eyes, horrified and sunken, none of which left the screen. She saw Kate holding her cell-pic, forgotten, next to her ear. She knew instantly she didn’t want to see what they did, but her legs carried her on inertia, and her eyes turned, by magnetism, to the TV.

Someone was standing with a camera in a parking lot, angle pointed slightly up to the bank of clouds that started several miles off. In the distance, maybe ten miles away, a pillar of smoke had thrust through, boiling upward, flashes of muted but still diabolical orange and red flaring in the huge mushroom cap that topped it.

The camera trembled, its holder’s hands unsteady. “We’re outside our studio, in Newington, Virginia.” He choked on the next words. “Washington is gone.”

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## II

Lucinda drove off-campus on Shattuck, skirting the town of Berkeley itself, dreading to see what might be happening there. She got onto the I-80 Autoway just south of Albany and activated the handoff to computer control. Only when she lifted

her hands from the wheel did they start shivering again.

She and the others had watched for almost an hour. It was the same cycle, with little deviation: pieces of the drone attack; the jet carrying the Bomb; shots of the mushroom, now from two angles; footage of President Davis and Vice President Sanchez at the Cabinet meeting, before they were to have gone to Iowa to campaign for Monday's caucuses.

The one variation came when someone got a news-drone into the air. It showed smoke and flame, the stump of what was probably the Washington Monument—then the rising trail of a missile from a Humvee, and static.

That was when it became too much, and she and Sam left. And then Sam—

No, she wouldn't think about that. Nor would she think about what could have happened if she had confronted Pavel directly, not hatched some stratagem that let him and the others go off to Washington. No, she'd go mad if she went on ... if she hadn't already.

She made herself think about Josh, for distraction. She reached for her purse, then realized her phone wasn't in it. She had left it in her office.

Lucinda wasn't going back there. She thought about driving on to Fairfield, where Josh worked, but decided to get back home, settle in, and call him from there. If the municipal building would let her call through, and if Josh was still there, and if—

Another car zoomed past, missing her side mirror by an inch. Traffic was sparse on 80, but much of what was there drove off automatic, very fast and none too steadily. People were panicking: no surprise. A black car came up behind, and Lucinda gripped the wheel tighter. This one passed smoothly, though, for all its speed, and she got a glimpse of opaque windows as it cruised by. Lucinda soon made her turn-off at Richmond. She could see the traffic downtown, nearly gridlocked around the supermarket, and detoured past it. She took side roads through eerily quiet residential areas, and turned onto her home street.

There was a black car parked in front of her house, one with opaque windows. As Lucinda stopped her car two houses down, she saw the business-suited woman leaving her front door and crossing the lawn. A man got out of the black car, and also approached.

She seized the wheel, shifted into reverse ... then let her hands fall. These people didn't look explicitly threatening, and she couldn't immediately spot guns, but she could tell these were not people to mess with. Not today.

The woman arrived at her window, rapping on it. "Dr. Lucinda Peale?" Lucinda looked at her and nodded. The woman checked a handpad, confirming something. "We need you to come with us, now."

Lucinda didn't understand, and it didn't matter. Almost without willing it, she unlatched her belt and opened the door.

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The black car sped out of town. Lucinda sat in the back, under the woman's gaze, unmoving. She paid no attention to the outside for several miles, except for the subliminal sense of going north, then east. Her mind quietly put the two together, and she looked out the tinted window long enough to confirm it, spying a sign showing the distance to Buchanan Field.

They arrived at the airfield and dashed into the terminal. The woman kept a firm grip on Lucinda's collar, half protecting, half steering. The man ran interference, clearing the way past officials with shouts and a badge. Their passage roiled the already agitated knots of passengers, whom Lucinda saw as blurs, milling around timetable boards with right columns all in red, and around TV screens she refused to look at.

They went through a door and onto the tarmac, near a small jet with dark-suited men at the bottom of the gangway. They climbed in, and the stairs began rolling away almost before they were inside. The male agent turned to the cockpit. "Have we got clearance?"

"For now. The airspace is shutting down. They might decide—"

Lucinda could hear no more. She was being hustled back, past more agents sitting with phones and computers, through a thin partition—and into the rear section where Nancy LaPierre and Kate Barber were already sitting. They didn't look nearly as surprised as she felt.

Kate had her cell-pic out, hitting redial, just as she had most of that awful hour in the conference room. The escorting agent made her put it away, then strapped Lucinda into her seat. The plane was moving before she finished. Within two minutes, the plane was taking off.

They shot upward, hard and fast. Nancy moaned, holding a hand to her stomach, but kept control. After a few minutes, their ascent angle moderated.

"Lomax, can I see you?" said someone on the other side of the partition. The female agent unbuckled herself and went forward, up a still-tilting deck.

Across the aisle from Lucinda, Kate pulled out her cell-pic again. "Kate," Lucinda hissed, but she redialed without heeding. "Who can you be calling?"

"Pavel, of course," Kate said, giving her a quick and unsteady glance. "I have to know if he's all right. He won't—won't pick up, and—"

Lucinda reached across the aisle, grabbing the phone in her hand. "Kate!" Kate looked back, her eyes wide and bright, her mouth twitching at the corners.

Lucinda drew a long, shaking breath. “Remember, Kate? They took his phone before he went into the committee room. He wouldn’t have it even—he just doesn’t have it. All right?”

Kate’s stare held, but the wildness faded out of it. “You’re right,” she said. Lomax chose that moment to reappear, snatch the cell-pic away, and go back forward. Kate nearly lost control, settling back into her seat and trembling.

Nancy, behind Kate’s seat, caught Lucinda’s eye. She mouthed “Thanks.” Lucinda just nodded.

There was low talking ahead. Lucinda listened, catching only pieces. She made out “yield estimate” and “recovery teams,” then nothing for a while. “Anything on the shooter?” she heard, but the reply eluded her.

She gave it up, and turned back to Nancy. “Why did they take you? Us?”

“They never said. They came right into the lab—minutes after you and Sam left—and took us away. I think they left someone behind with Julio.” That was their other grad student. “No explanations.”

“And I asked,” Kate added. “Plenty.” She paused a moment, as the plane leveled off. “Well, they’re going to answer now,” she said, unbuckling herself, “and if they don’t, I—”

“You’ll what, Kate?” said Nancy. “March into the cockpit and order the pilot to turn around? They’ll...” She couldn’t bring herself to say how that would end.

Kate shook her head. “I’m going.”

“No,” Lucinda said. “*We* are. That’s the only way to do this.”

Her hand had just reached the buckle when a man came through the partition. He was black, young, his face very handsome but also very hard. He turned to Kate. “Please sit down, Ms. Barber.” Disarmed, Kate obeyed.

He looked at the others in turn. “Dr. Peale, I presume. Dr. LaPierre. I’m Morris Hope, NSA.” He produced no card, but nobody doubted him. “I’m deeply sorry for your losses today. I’m also sorry for our abruptness in collecting you, but these are extraordinary circumstances, and minutes may be vital.”

“Vital for what?” Lucinda asked.

“For discovering who destroyed Washington.”

Lucinda absorbed this. It was the only answer that made sense, but it still answered nothing. “You have suspects? People in custody?”

“Not yet, Doctor. Maybe soon, but we cannot wait for a capture to start bringing in specialists. We’ll need to extract information from them very fast—so

America can respond fast.” The last words struck Lucinda like the toll of a huge bell.

“We can perform lie detection scans,” Kate said, “but it isn’t really our specialty. There are people closer to the scene—”

“We know all about the Penn State method,” Hope said, “and we’ve got people trained in it. It’s only relevant, though, if your subject is answering questions. If he’s not, we have to make him want to answer. We have to change his mind.”

Finally it was clear to Lucinda, but she got no leisure to consider it. “And I guess torture’s not fast enough for you?” Nancy sneered.

Hope took the blow stoically. “There is no current interrogation method—not drugs, not psychological pressure, and not physical torture—that guarantees full or reliable results in anything less than weeks. We don’t have weeks. We may not have days.”

In the silence that followed, Lucinda finally collected her thoughts. “Why us?” she asked him. “Johns Hopkins is far closer.”

“I know, and someone’s going there, if I actually got someone to listen to me. But I was out here, so I gathered who I could.”

“Here?” repeated Nancy. “Doing what? Spying on us?”

“No! My team was in S—in the area on assignment. I was watching C-SPAN in my room when everything went down. That kinda put you people in mind.”

“And did you get the whole team?” Lucinda asked. “Did you find Sam Jeong?”

“Still looking, last I heard,” Hope said.

“Find him, please.” Lucinda got a puzzled look from Nancy. She told her nothing: nothing about what Sam had gone to do, how she hadn’t had the nerve to stop him. Or join him. “He can help us,” she told Hope, to cover up those thoughts.

Kate shook her head pensively. “We’ve never done something like this before, you understand.”

“And we won’t now,” Nancy said. “You can turn this plane around now, Mr. Hope. We’re not going to cooperate.”

Kate flared. “Speak for yourself! When did you become boss?”

“Two hours ago. I’m senior surviving member of the team, Ms. Barber, and—”

“You don’t know that!”

“Of course we know. Tell her,” she said to Hope. He put his arms behind his



back, his face a perfect blank.

“Besides, you don’t have seniority,” Kate said, her voice still cracking. “Lucinda was with the program before either of us.”

“And you know why she isn’t in the chain of command. She accepts that; so should you.”

“I don’t,” Lucinda snapped. Nancy took it like a slap. “Sam and I were going to quit the team today, at noon, before that became irrelevant.” There was a curious relief in finally saying it, but just a little.

Nancy stared at Lucinda for a second, then turned away, toward Morris Hope. “I won’t go into the medical ethics of what you’re proposing, Mister. I will tell you I won’t lend myself to the bloody-minded pursuit of a scapegoat. I will not feed a cycle of violence that will only kill, and kill again, until nobody is left to die.”

“Some people don’t need a cycle to—”

Hope hushed Kate with the slightest move of his hand. “I can handle this, ma’am.” He met Nancy’s eyes. “Do you have more?”

“Plenty. I’m sure you don’t want to hear it.”

“Fine.” He stepped down the aisle, looming over her. “I don’t want scapegoats, Doctor: I want the guilty parties, and I want it incontrovertible that they’re guilty. I know my history. If we strike back at the perpetrators, and then the slightest doubt creeps in about what they did, it will paralyze this country. It will make us afraid to defend ourselves, probably long enough for us to be destroyed.

“I don’t know what the President...” Briefly, he closed his eyes and murmured to himself. “...will do, though I’d have strong recommendations, if he’d listen. I do know it must be fast, decisive, and sure. For that, he should have certainties to go on, not probabilities.” He looked around. “You can give me certainties. I’ll let you think that over.”

He stopped at the threshold of the partition. “By the way, we’re not turning around. And if you do try getting into the cockpit, we’ll stop you.”

“How?” Nancy said, her fires somewhat banked. “Shoot us?”

Hope gave an incongruously friendly smile. “Guns are a bad idea in a pressurized cabin. And we wouldn’t need them.” He left.

Lucinda barely had a second before Kate and Nancy began making their appeals. “Don’t ... start,” she told them, and they subsided. “I have a lot of thinking to do, in peace. If either of you tries talking me around again, I’ll go the other way. Got it?” Two aggravated nods gave their answers.

She sank into the seat, her head hanging to one side, letting her look out the

window. It was the first time she saw the fighters, two of them, flying in escort formation. She shut the blind and closed her eyes.

Was what Hope wanted even possible? Anyone knowingly involved in this heinous act had to be utterly convinced of the political idea that America deserved it. And reversing political convictions was a problem. They were too diffuse, not confined to exact areas of the brain. One could pinpoint them, but overlaying them with closely matched areas of another's brain to reverse their content would be very hard.

Lucinda worked to recall cerebral patterns they had studied in years past. Was there an underlying similarity to structures of political thought they had missed? Probably not. Pavel had worked hard to uncover one, and he would have trumpeted it if he had even gotten close. If he hadn't found one in months and years, how could she succeed in days, or hours, separated from all their equipment and data?

They could work by brute force, imposing wholesale changes on the subject brain, but that would threaten to wipe out the knowledge they hoped to extract. It would be disturbing enough if it worked, the subject's memories and identity scrambled or effaced. If it was all for naught ... could her conscience bear that?

Her eyes opened. Conscience.

It wasn't enough to have extreme views that theoretically justified mass murder. You needed a particular mindset permitting you to participate. Lucinda had seen plenty of examples over the years. She knew the pattern.

The basic theory was thirty years old, dating back to Fried's Syndrome E paper. Bursts of overactivity in the orbito-frontal and medial prefrontal cortices produced feedback that inhibited the amygdala. That blocked consciousness of emotion, allowing monstrous action without remorse. Afterward, the prefrontal cortex would fall into underarousal, precluding self-reflection, letting one avoid acknowledgment of the horror of one's deeds.

"Of course," Lucinda told herself. Anyone closely involved with the plot would have that defective neural architecture, maybe stronger than she'd seen in all the murderers and pedophiles who had gone through the lab. They could attack that structure. They could do it.

Now, should they?

"Of course what?" Kate asked.

Before Lucinda could wave her off, a commotion began up front. They heard mutters of horror and disgust, and Morris Hope swearing like an urban gang member, complete with traces of inner-city accent.

"God, what now?" Kate said. She stayed in her seat, but Lucinda got up. She raised a fist to knock at the partition door, looked at it as though it were something

ludicrous, then knocked anyway.

It got quiet up front. “No keeping secrets in these quarters, is there?” Lomax said.

Hope opened the door, wearing a scowl that sent a shock through Lucinda. “Salted,” he spat.

“What?” Nancy and Kate said. Lucinda, through bizarre association, thought he meant peanuts.

“The bomb was salted. Sampling drones confirmed cobalt-60, zinc-65, maybe others. The fallout’s gonna be a mother.” He stopped there, this time. “They really thought of everything. Fu—argh, stinking geniuses.”

Nancy, horrified by the salting news, was suddenly doubly so. “How can you say that about these monsters, calling them geniuses?”

“Intelligence doesn’t guarantee moral goodness, Doctor.” Hope spoke with forced mildness, and let the words hang for a second. “It does seem to guarantee good planning.”

“Good?” said Kate. “Why attack a city with drones filled with gas or germs or what-have-you when you’re going to nuke it a minute later?”

“Diversion,” Hope said sharply. “All diversion. The rocket that took out the sensor aerostat came from the southwest, fixing attention there. Then came the drones from west and southeast, splitting that attention. They probably had nothing but smoke aboard, but they spread confusion, and kept attention away from the northeast. The plane out of College Park Airport must’ve been noticed flying at rooftop level, but word didn’t filter into the command and control loop until it was too late. Of course, the bomb probably had a dead-man’s switch, going off right when that SAM hit it, but at least we might have limited the damage if we’d caught them earlier, set it off lower to shrink the blast radius.

“And the timing.” He grunted, but lost none of his impetus. “All the commuters are in the city; the West Coast is awake; the attack unfolds just slow enough to give millions of people time to tune in and watch the big ending live. And it comes just before an election. Yeah, they knew exactly what they were doing.”

His discourse had put Lucinda’s stomach into knots, more than before. “You sound very knowledgeable, Mr. Hope,” she said. Morris gave a hesitant nod, no more. “Who do you think—?”

The scowl returned. “I’m thinking the QT’s, but they couldn’t build an atomic bomb, not one this powerful, not alone. That means a government produced it, and who couldn’t that be? Iran, Pakistan, China...” He hesitated, but he was too far in to stop. “Maybe the ex-Israeli arsenal, Russia, Korea, Brazil, or Egypt if they’ve really got ‘em—any nuke power except us and Britain, maybe Japan.”

“You don’t need us after all,” Nancy said archly, “if you’re convinced al-Qaeda al-Taeni is guilty.”

“I’m *not* convinced,” he shot back. “Even if I were, it’s not me who matters. I’ve gone through this before.” He advanced a step on Nancy. “But whoever did it, did all they could to kill, destroy, contaminate, terrorize. Yes, Dr. LaPierre, they’re smart. Maybe smart enough to get away with this.” His look took in Lucinda. “That means they’ll have the chance to do it again.”

Lucinda felt her face burn. Nancy’s dark face didn’t flush, but her expression showed similar reactions that she strove to master. “Mr. Hope, I have a husband back in California who hasn’t been able to reach me the last couple hours, and must be worried out of his mind. I need to speak to him, tell him I’m well. Can you arrange that?”

Hope’s face went from sympathy to suspicion. “I’m sorry, I can’t permit that.”

“Can’t? You mean you’re going to cut us off from the world if we don’t cooperate?”

“What about my daughter?” Kate added. “She’s just in sixth grade.”

“I can’t let any of you call out. It’s a matter of security, not punishment.” He ignored Nancy’s snort. “We can contact your families, give them some explanation of the circumstances. That’s all we can do.”

“What about a computer,” said Kate, “or a television? Something to let us know what’s happening in the world right now.”

Hope grimaced. “We’ll consider that. Dr. Peale?”

Lucinda started. “Huh?”

“Is there anyone at home you need me to contact?”

She thought of Josh—then of her two workmates, just feet away, listening to every word. She wavered, then latched onto something else. “My dog, Ben, is locked up in the house. Nobody knows I’m gone. He’s getting up in years ... don’t know how long he can manage alone ... oh, it sounds so stupid, fretting over him when...”

Hope laid a hand on her trembling shoulder. “We’ll manage something. He’ll be okay.” He slipped through the partition.

Lucinda recovered with only a moist sniff. She wasn’t going to start crying now, of all times. She felt eyes on her, and looked over her shoulder at LaPierre.

“Don’t let him take you in, Luci. He’s a manipulator, playing good cop, bad cop with us.”

“Stop it, Nancy,” Kate snapped. “She said she didn’t want us arguing with her.” Her voice dropped. “But if *you* want to talk about—”

A sharp throat-clearing stopped her cold. Lucinda added a warning look, then turned her head toward the window and opened the blind. She watched the earth pass beneath, and tried to ignore the fighter escorts, as she thought.

She wanted these perpetrators, these murderers of historic proportion, found. She wanted things done to them she’d be ashamed to tell to anyone—even if a couple of hundred million Americans would approve. She had no problem whatever with putting them through forcible overlays. She knew the reaction was emotional, but she trusted it.

What she could not quite trust was the government, or specifically the current administration. Or its remnants.

Lucinda recalled fragments of news, shots of the Treasury Secretary’s motorcade on the streets of Chicago. Someone must have known, or presumed, that he was next in line. He was ... he was ... such a cipher, she couldn’t think of his name.

“...anti-government extremists, diehard revanchists for Israel, even a treasonous military faction...”

She turned back toward Nancy. “Was I not clear?” she hissed. Nancy opened her mouth, then stepped back from the brink. “Thank you,” Lucinda said, and leaned back to the window.

What was his name? She strained for minutes on end. Burrows? Barlow? No, Burleigh. Lewis Burleigh.

The Senate had let him squeak through confirmation a few months ago on a party-line vote, not from confidence in him, but from inability to find anything actually disqualifying. He was a party drone, a bloodless accountant. He wouldn’t do much but go with the current of what was left of the Davis Administration.

She had no respect for them: misguided, power hungry, intermittently competent, preferring politics to statecraft. They didn’t deserve to wield power. They didn’t deserve a taste of *this* power. And they didn’t deserve to have someone ride in and rescue them from this fiasco.

But there were over three hundred million other Americans. What did they deserve?

As she pondered that, she saw a new plane approaching, then another. Did they really need that many escorts? Then the original escorts peeled away, and the new fighters took their place. Just a changing of the guard, but that still pointed to someone thinking they were worth the trouble.

“...irrational, insane to provoke us. They have what they wanted. We’re out of the world.”

“They must count North America as part of the world.”

Lucinda unbuckled her seat belt and stood, glowering over them. Kate and Nancy both managed to look abashed, or at least worried about what she would do. She had to think about that for a moment.

“I’m going to the lavatory,” she decided, “for exactly five minutes. Get it out of your systems.”

They managed to hold their tongues until she shut the door on the closet-sized washroom. She made good use of the time, but by the fourth minute was reduced to periodically dashing cold water on her face and looking deep into the mirror. Still she waited, until five minutes to the second, before opening the door. It hadn’t been enough.

“—won’t bring them back to life, and I won’t abet it. Our work is the antithesis of that attitude: we cure instead of punishing. Will you betray that?”

“Betray?” Kate sputtered. “You call that betrayal? Getting no justice for our friends, for all the dead, for our country is betrayal!”

“I’m so sorry to see you like this, choking on hatred. I’m sorry to see you fall in line with *them*.” Nancy’s voice grew softer still. “Pavel would never have approved.”

“How, how can you tell me that?” Kate was choking now, on tears. “How can you throw—throw that in my—” She broke down completely.

Lucinda finally understood, and could scarcely believe it. Pavel had never seemed interested in women. Nor in men, either, even when that would have explained his particular vehemence during the incident that wrecked her standing in the project. Pavel and Kate? It didn’t seem like him.

Unless it was one more political stratagem.

It was horrible to think that, now, but she couldn’t unthink it. True or not, what luck that she hadn’t tried to recruit Kate for the walkout.

Thinking of that led her to worry about Sam, and her mind spun off in new directions. She walked past Nancy and the sobbing Kate, took her seat, and began looking again at the choice before her.

She didn’t realize how long she’d been thinking without a resolution until it registered that the wide, dark river the plane had just passed was the Mississippi. As she despaired of ever reaching a decision, Morris Hope came in again. He looked more depleted than before, save for the slim, dangerous smile.

“We got the shooter,” he told them. Three blank expressions met him. “The rocket shooter,” he said, “trying to flee through Virginia. Had him for hours, but it took this long to bring us into the loop.”

“What?” said Kate. “How could they not tell you?”

“Turf marking. Fear of error. I’d expect that from the CYA—er, the CIA, but anyway, we’ve got him. He should be taken ... where we’re going.”

“And where is that?” asked Nancy.

Hope’s face closed off. “A secure facility. Now, I have to have your final answers very soon. We’ve gotta know how many people we’re taking through security. We can’t wing that, not there, not today. So, ladies, I need—”

“Oh, drop the pretense of politeness,” Nancy said. “You’re giving us an order. I’m disobeying it.”

Kate gave a quick, burning glance over her shoulder. “I’ll help you, sir, any way I’m able.”

Hope almost smiled. “Dr. Peale?” He waited. “Please?”

Lucinda could barely find words. “I have ... reservations ... and I don’t understand the urgency. Why would you rather have a ‘no’ now than a ‘yes’ tomorrow? Why can’t it wait even a couple of hours?”

“Doctor, you’ve had hours.”

“I think you know what I mean.” But her strong tone was a sham.

“Okay, I do.”

“It makes me ... leery.” It wasn’t a big problem with her; it merely touched the outer fringes of her greater distrust, the one it wouldn’t help to share with him.

Hope stood for a minute, thinking, then stepped back into the forward compartment. Nothing happened for a while. Nancy leaned forward to whisper, “He can’t answer you, Lucinda,” but Lucinda didn’t acknowledge her.

A moment later he returned, a television console in his arms, its electrical cord draped over one arm. Another agent was behind him, a Hispanic woman who got a dirty look from Nancy.

“This is programmed for feeds from the five networks,” said Hope, “the big four cable news channels, the C-SPANs—but those are gone.” He looked around the constricted space. “Where can we put this so all of you can watch?”

They had to set it on the aisle in front of the partition door, and snake the cord past Lucinda’s feet to an outlet. In the confusion, the Hispanic agent slipped into the

seat across from Nancy.

“You’ll get thirty, forty minutes of this before we start our approach.” Hope looked right at Lucinda. “I hope this helps you.” He handed her the channel changer, and stepped gingerly over the set and through the door.

Lucinda hit the power button with a bitter-medicine quickness. A voice was reciting names, supplemented when the picture came in by photos and captions.

“—assistant director. Louis Pastorini, video technician. Marianne Porter, audio technician—someone I knew when we worked together in Chicago. Osvaldo Reyes—”

A casualty list, but not for the city or the government. The anchor was reading off network employees missing in Washington. Lucinda clicked the remote, before the urge to hurl it grew too strong.

The next network showed gridlock outside the New Jersey exit of the Lincoln Tunnel, then people packed cheek-by-jowl reading the departure board at Penn Station. The city was emptying, and it wasn’t alone, as a shot of Los Angeles freeways proved. Residents and workers in dozens of cities thought theirs could be next.

The report returned to the studio—but it wasn’t the news studio. The camera stayed tight on the lone anchor, but the background Lucinda could see was from a sports channel. Part of the same corporation, she recalled, and well outside New York.

“Looks like someone beat the rush,” she muttered, and flipped ahead.

This channel was showing footage of overseas reactions, but when shots of a vigil in some European park gave way to cheering crowds in a poorer setting, they cut the video. “We’ll return to that footage later,” one anchor stammered, “but right now it’s pretty raw.” With a wince, Lucinda switched again.

The next channel showed a map, Washington offset to the left, showing wind vectors and fallout patterns. Some expert was explaining what the various colors in the fallout diagram meant. Another talked about how the wind was shifting, from northwest to southwest, creating a broader fan of contamination from Annapolis to Baltimore.

They both gave sheltering advice, and a switch to outside footage showed the reasons. Taped footage from Morningside, Maryland, shot through a window, showed thick salt-and-pepper flurries drifting out of the sky. A close-up showed several of them settling on the outer windowsill, lasting an instant before melting into inky droplets.

“Survivors of Hiroshima recalled a black rain after the atomic bomb,” the anchor butted in. “In Maryland, black snow is falling.”



None of them mentioned those isotopes Hope had named. Was that being kept secret, or had the networks just chalked up one more horror and moved on?

The footage shifted to residential areas inside D.C. Fire trucks fought a wall of flame, until their hoses went limp as water pressure died. Another shot showed the exodus, cars and pedestrians clogging a road as a fire engine and ambulance tried vainly to breast the flood.

The next shot was live. Through the smoke, they could see an armored vehicle firing shells into a brownstone, bringing down a wall. A bulldozer advanced on the wreckage.

“They’re hoping this firebreak will stop the blaze, or at least give them time,” said an off-camera reporter. “But it’s maybe three blocks away, with the wind behind it now, and nobody here looks—”

A piercing horn cut him off. Someone shouted about radiation and moving out, and the feed cut out seconds later. Coverage went back to a scrambling studio. One co-anchor stumbled into a sidebar report.

“There are disturbing reports of major unrest at several college campuses, presumably over the attack in Washington. Conditions described as ‘violent’ and ‘riotous’ have been reported at the University of Michigan, Wisconsin-Madison, Texas A&M, California-Berkeley, and Cornell, among...”

Lucinda’s gut, already knotted and cold, went to absolute zero. Riots at Berkeley. Her university. Where she had left Sam.

*He had pulled out of the underground garage a few seconds ahead of her when they left the lab. When he stopped his car suddenly on the West Circle, she went to see what was the matter. His glare was murderous. She followed it to a knot of several dozen people across the way at Moffitt Library. She couldn’t hear them, but she saw arms waving and pumping.*

*“Celebrating?” Sam breathed. “Can’t believe it, those—”*

*“Sam, no.” She shook her head, trying to shake it all away. “You don’t know that.”*

*“Don’t I?” His words staggered her. “I’m not taking it from them. Not today!” His car screeched off, the back wheel nicking Lucinda’s shoe as he drove toward Moffitt.*

Lucinda hadn’t followed him. She had been afraid: of estranging Sam, of getting caught in a mob, of Sam being wrong, of Sam being right. Of everything.

Now she saw what had grown from that first incident, as pictures from Berkeley filled the screen, looking like something from 1968. Lucinda turned to her workmates. “When did this start?”

“I don’t know,” said Nancy. “There may have been some small disturbances when we were strong-armed away.”

“Oh, definitely ‘disturbances,’” Kate said. “Over at Moffitt, and beyond. They didn’t exactly sound funereal,” she added, blatantly baiting Nancy.

Lucinda didn’t notice. She got up, pushed the TV aside, and didn’t bother knocking on the partition door. Her sudden appearance gave the agents on the other side a shock. “Did you know about the Berkeley riots?” she demanded the instant she spied Hope.

Two of the agents rose to expel her, one reaching for her hip. “Stand down,” Hope said, and though they didn’t back away, they stopped. “Yes, Dr. Peale, we did.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“We needed time,” he replied slowly, “for confirmation.”

“Of what? The riots? You could have turned on a television!” Her mind began to register the several computers, one for every agent, all brimming with data of various forms. “No, that wasn’t it, was it?”

Hope stepped into the aisle. “I’m sorry, ladies.” Only then did Lucinda notice Kate and Nancy behind her. “Your colleague, Sam Jeong, was caught in the demonstrations. He’s been taken to a hospital, but ... he isn’t expected to survive.”

“No.” Lucinda could barely say the word. “No.” She recoiled, stumbled into the side of the television, and fell hard into her seat.

Immediately, one of the agents slammed the door. A second later, Hope opened it, gesturing sharply at whoever had shut it. He went to Lucinda, shoving the still-running TV aside with his foot. “Are you all right?”

All right? What could be all right? Sam was dying, and she had done nothing. Everyone was dying, or dead. Would she do nothing?

She reeled. Hope reached out to support her, letting go quickly once she had her balance back. Kate and Nancy were crowding in close, too.

Lucinda shut her eyes, summoning the remnants of concentration. When she opened them moments later, they went straight to Kate. “Kate, we have to get working. I think I have a viable methodology, but maybe you can spot any flaws in it.

“Mr. Hope, you’ll have my cooperation interrogating your conspirator, but I have serious doubts about my personal ability to perform a neural overlay. I’ve observed several procedures, but the last was over a year ago. I’ve never placed a single electrode or stimulator myself, and this is a bad time for trial-and-error

learning.

“Dr. LaPierre—” Odds were bad, but she had to try. “Nancy—”

LaPierre’s face carried her answer in its defiance and revulsion. “No, *Doctor* Peale,” she growled, but she hadn’t needed to say a word.

Lucinda shook her head wearily. “She’s out, obviously,” she told Hope. “And I don’t know whether Kate and I are enough.”

“It’s okay,” Hope said. “We’re working on it.”

\* \* \* \*

### III

They raced across the tarmac: Lucinda, Kate, and a quartet of agents. Nobody had told her where they’d landed. “Grant County Airport” signs didn’t help, but spotting the West Virginia plates on some utility trucks did.

“What about Nancy?” she said in a gasp to Hope. “Are they taking her back to California?”

Hope shook his head. “Nothing’s flying that isn’t absolutely vital, like you. Might put her on a train or bus, but those may not be running, either.”

They came upon a trio of helicopters. Hope bundled Lucinda and Kate into the back of one; his fellow agents piled into the second. Lucinda noticed, while strapping in, the turrets and launchers on the third one.

The choppers shot into a dim, patchy sky. With their easting and the time in transit, dusk was approaching. From the sinking sun, Lucinda figured their course as northeast, following the Appalachians.

She and Kate continued to consult. Could they risk keeping the patient awake, to get him talking faster, as Hope suggested? Brain surgeries often happened with conscious patients, but it introduced variables during overlay, extra input streams while they were trying to lay down very specific patterns.

Could they imprint the new patterns faster? Maybe, but the gain in time would not be great. It would also risk lost precision, even possible injury to the subject’s sense of identity. “I have no problem effacing the kind of personality that could do this,” Kate said over the rotor noise, “assuming we’ve got the right man.”

That thought had been nagging Lucinda, too. She reached across to get Hope’s attention in his front seat. “How sure are you that the man in custody is the rocket shooter?”

Hope squinted, shook his head, and reached for a set of headphones. On his signal, Lucinda and Kate found and donned theirs, and found the activating buttons. Lucinda repeated herself. “I can show you the police video of the launch tube they

found in his vehicle,” he answered.

“He took it with him?”

“Guess he was worried about us getting fingerprints if he left it behind. We will get them, too, for whatever good that does. Turns out the car was stolen, though, so that dead-ended.” He snorted. “More of their planning.”

Lucinda thought a while about what to ask next. “Agent Hope.”

““Morris is okay.”

She nodded mechanically. “The riots we saw on TV; the evacuations; the panic. That’s what you’re trying to forestall by moving so fast, right?”

Morris grimaced. “Yes and no. That’s just the rash—symptoms, I mean. Thing is, in times of great threat, people need a way to feel safer. Either they need someone to protect them, or they have to protect themselves. It can even be psychological protection: take Churchill’s speeches during the Blitz, backing up the RAF’s work: “If people don’t have that sense of protection, they become useless. Fast or slow, they fall apart. The bigger the threat, the worse it is, and the bigger the group, the more vicious-cycle feedback pushes things over the edge. If we as a country don’t believe, soon, that we’re no longer as vulnerable to another mega-terror attack, this nation will fall apart—or tear itself apart. That means apprehending, punishing, deterring.”

“Does it mean we’re going to wipe out the country responsible—if it is a country?” Morris tensed. “You can tell us. Dr. LaPierre’s not here, and we won’t back out now.”

“I really can’t say. I don’t decide; I probably won’t even get to advise. But...” His jaw made short, grinding motions. “There are about to be two groups in America: those wanting reprisal, and those wanting restraint. There are the America-haters, too—a little minority, at least here—but they fit in on the fringe of the restraint group. Both sides think that their way makes us more safe, and that the opposing way is dangerous and immoral. Give them long enough waiting before something is done or decided, and those groups will rip this country to pieces.

“So there has to be a resolution, soon. Now, if it’s for reprisal—well, the restraint side sorta expects it. They’re resigned to the violence in human nature. They’ll be disappointed, not shocked. They won’t revolt.”

“Their own restraint at work,” Kate said.

Morris chuckled. “Not as much as you’d think, but let’s leave the inner psychology out of it. The reprisalists, though, won’t take a restrained response lying down. They’ll find a way to lash out against the guilty. If we’re lucky, that means a little ethnic or religious pogrom. If we’re not, it means they go after the government that fiddled while D.C. burned.

“So yeah, we’d better slam them hard—which, granted, is what I’d say in the first place without all that analysis. It doesn’t have to be nukes, but it does have to leave them in pieces.” Morris turned back forward, his shoulders bowed, his head slowly sinking.

Lucinda reached a hand toward him. “You haven’t been thinking about this just today,” she said. “More like years.”

The corner of his mouth twisted. “Twenty-two years, four months, and eight days.” Lucinda didn’t have to count backward to know. “I was gonna join the Marines or Army, but by the time I was of age, I could see how the wind was blowing. I took another career path.”

“Looks like you made the right choice.”

He looked back, his eyes suddenly sad. “I haven’t accomplished anything yet.” His voice was soft, but the tone made it unanswerable.

Lucinda tried to occupy herself by thinking about the work ahead, but there wasn’t much more she could do that moment. Morris had said she’d have a link to the team’s computers at their secret location, access to their brain pattern templates and the overlay-planning programs. Without them at hand, she could only plan the broadest strokes of their work. She had asked Morris to encourage whoever was on site to run some preliminary scans, but he didn’t sound confident about the advice making an impact. Did they even have MEG scanners and TMS machines on site, wherever it was? If they didn’t, all this was going to be for nothing.

“When did we turn around?”

Lucinda had to take off the headphones: Kate was speaking without them, leaning in close. “We haven’t.”

“We must have. We’re going south now. I can see the sunset.” She pointed out her right-side window, toward the orange glow suffusing through the clouds near the horizon.

Lucinda looked there, then snuck a peek at the light coming through her window. She swallowed. “Maybe we’re doubling back,” she said behind a cupped hand, “to keep the secret location secret.”

Kate shrugged. Morris turned to say something, but Lucinda silently hushed him. She recalled Kate’s earlier brittleness: she wasn’t going to hazard its return. She kept a tense silence, taking scarcely any looks at the distant funeral pyre of Washington.

The helicopter pilot started talking a lot more. Lucinda looked outside into the twilight, assuming they were close to landing. She saw the added choppers first, circling in a patrol pattern, then one swinging over as an added escort. Moments later, the denuded trees below gave way on one hillside to clearings with low

buildings, linked by snaky roads. The area showed few lights in the enfolding darkness, but plenty of vehicles crawled along the roads, and smaller motes milled around the buildings.

“We’re about to land,” Morris said unnecessarily. “Get out on my side. Do *not* leave me. Understood?” Lucinda and Kate both nodded.

They alighted on a corner of the nearest large clearing. Lucinda waited as Kate climbed out, then followed her. The first thing she noticed outside was two soldiers about twenty meters away, their large weapons leveled. That, it happened, was the lightly guarded side of the landing pad. She cleaved to Morris, close enough to step on his heel once.

They stopped near a building entrance, plastered with signs she couldn’t read in the fading light. Morris spoke to a waiting officer, who then lifted a machine to the agent’s head. A moment later, it spat out something that the officer gave to Hope. He then advanced on Lucinda.

“Ma’am, look directly into the lenses. Try to avoid blinking.”

She knew this drill. She held her eyes open for the retina scan, took the card the machine produced, and waited as Kate, and then the agents, got the same treatment.

Morris led them into a building. Lucinda tried to read the signage outside the door, but in the haste and failing light, she could only catch disconnected words: “Weather,” “Unauthorized,” “Without Warning.”

Inside were a pair of railcar bays, one occupied. Her group clambered into the car. Seconds later, the rest of Morris’s agents joined them, along with two large soldiers. The car lurched and began running on its track, downward. Light was soon far behind, save for yellowish bulbs at long intervals in the tunnel.

Through all the disorientation, Lucinda remembered that she and Kate would be at work in a few minutes. She caught Morris’s eye. “We’re going to need to see your prisoner’s scans immediately once we get where we’re going. I assume your people have taken a proper baseline.”

“I ... don’t know about that, Dr. Peale. They may not have been notified.”

“Find out, and notify them now, if you can. Kate, if they don’t have a baseline—”

“I’ll handle it, Lucinda.”

“Good. We’ll also need access to our project files at Berkeley. That is, if our lab building hasn’t been burned to the ground.”

“They got uploaded a couple hours ago,” Morris said.

“I’ll need to review them right away. Hopefully, I’ll be able to read them somewhere close to your interrogation room, and the surgery.”

“We’ll do what we can.” Morris leaned away, tried his cell-phone, and snapped it shut with a grunt. He talked to his agents instead.

It was strange for Lucinda, talking business this way, playing boss after hours of helplessness. Maybe it was the shock finally wearing off, or maybe a new kind of mental barrier rising up.

The car rattled to a stop. They came out in a regimented jumble, toward a trio of electric carts. “This way, Doctor,” someone said, with a tug on Lucinda’s arm.

She found Lomax pulling her to the rightmost cart, as Morris took Kate to the left. She smothered an instant of clingy panic and got into the back seat, one of the guards stationing himself next to her.

Only when they were driving did Lucinda notice her surroundings. It was a small underground city, inside a cavern maybe fifteen meters high. Floodlights on the ceiling gave enough light to match an overcast day outside. Buildings two and three stories high were all around, and down one road they crossed, Lucinda was sure she saw an artificial pond, with a fountain gurgling away at its center. People were meant to live here, for a long time.

They stopped at the main door of one building, and Lomax bundled her out. Following the agent’s example, she gave her card to the guard, who slipped it into a scanner and took another retina scan. They both passed.

They wound through halls and a stairwell until they came to a door with yet another guard, who stepped aside smartly. “I’ll be outside if you need anything,” Lomax said.

“Um ... yes.” Cut loose, Lucinda could do nothing but open the door.

Inside, the room was half bare, with a bank of monitors and interfaces laid along the opposite wall. A small figure in a thin white coat, with thin white hair, sat at one of the monitors, unmoving. The door clacked shut behind Lucinda, and the figure turned with a start.

She knew him by sight, though they had never met. He was the lead neurosurgeon on Johns Hopkins’s overlay research team. “Dr. O’Doul,” she said, stepping toward him.

Edwin O’Doul’s crinkled gray eyes peered. “They said they were bringing in others.” The eyes narrowed further. “Do I know you?”

“Maybe by reputation. Dr. Lucinda Peale, California-Berkeley.” She held out a hand.

“Oh.” A flash of distaste crossed his face, but he did take the hand for a second. “You’ve come a long way.” He blinked, and turned back to his monitor.

Peale took the seat next to him. “Me and one colleague. Are any of yours here?”

“What? Oh. Oh, no. I—they—they set off to Washington, to volunteer their medical services. I remained behind. I thought I should, to prepare our hospitals for the influx of cases. They’d be coming to us. We’re Johns Hopkins, after all. But then the government people came and swept me away.”

“Us, too. We’re in this alike.”

O’Doul made a soft sound, no more. Lucinda took a minute to figure out the interface, and another minute to get into the template files. While she was waiting, she looked over at the brain model projected in O’Doul’s holotank. “How far have you gotten?” she said, hoping to draw him out that way.

He shook his head limply. “Not far. Not anywhere. How they expect us to rewire such deep-seated hatreds in a man is beyond me.”

“Not hatreds. Conscience.”

She spelled out the theory she had developed on the plane. A light began to show in O’Doul’s eyes. “Of course,” he said. “Use the animal levels of the brain to help reawaken the humanity of the human brain. Why didn’t I see it?”

“It took me time, too.”

“But you’re right. We can—but will it be enough? Will the subject have ingrained opposition and refusal to help deep enough in his mind that it resists the flood of conscience by inertia?”

“There’s one way to find out.”

“Exactly! Here, this is what we have on him so far.” He linked their stations, and the neural map in his tank appeared in hers. They came alive in tandem, colors shifting as the brain performed its myriad inner functions.

“There’s the underarousal,” she said half to herself. The expected portions of the frontal cortex were blue, the medial prefrontal cortex deepening toward violet as she watched. “Where’s the context?”

“Here.” A timeline appeared under the image, with a green dot inching rightward. Ticks on the line produced dialog boxes when she moved the cursor over them. “Who provided you with the stolen car?” was one; “Did you procure the rocket launcher yourself, or did someone give it to you?” was another. Someone must have recorded them as they were asked.

“Where do I bring up his answers?”



“They’d be on that line, but I don’t think he’s been answering them.”

Lucinda ran the recording faster. With a few parameters drawn from the prisoner’s scans, she ran a first compatibility check with the neural templates in their files, Berkeley’s and Johns Hopkins’s alike. It pared away about a third as unsuitable, leaving plenty, she hoped, for the more exacting comparisons to come.

“I suppose I should know,” O’Doul said, out of nowhere. “You’ve had more recent exposure to the news, Dr. Peale. How bad is it really, outside, there?”

“I ... I’m sorry, Doctor. We were kept alone in the back cabin of a plane during our trip.” She regretted the half-truth, and hoped she wouldn’t be telling more.

“I understand.” He stared into the holotank. “I thought you might have heard something about Georgetown. Was there any—”

The opening door saved Lucinda, even though this time she would have been honest in her ignorance. Morris Hope came inside. “Lucinda; Dr. O’Doul,” he said, seeing the elder doctor for the first time. “Barber is almost set up with the prisoner. You’ll have live audio-visual feed access inside this room, along with real-time scans. Do you have any other requirements?”

O’Doul roused himself. “I assume everything will be recorded for later playback?”

“Absolutely.” Once O’Doul nodded, Morris beckoned to Lucinda. She walked over, fearing she’d be finding out why he couldn’t have just used the phone.

“We sent an agent to your house,” he murmured, “like I promised. Your dog’s fine. Turns out someone had come over to look after him, a man named Joshua Muntz. You know him, right?”

“Josh?” In her surprise, she finally managed a nod.

“Okay. I’ll let you get back to work, Doctor.”

He had the door halfway open before Lucinda touched his sleeve. “Thank you,” she said. Morris nodded, and walked out briskly.

She found her way back to her seat. O’Doul looked her over skeptically. “Are you sure about that Josh person?”

Lucinda snapped back into focus. “Of course. He’s a very good—” She sighed, and a smile crept onto her face. “He’s someone who loves me.”

He accepted that latest half-truth. It was enough for her now to say that much. “He’s someone I love” could come later.

Her reverie ended when O’Doul made the connection to the examining room.

A flat screen to Lucinda's side showed a figure inside an older model MEG. He was lying down, his face and torso hidden. Plastic chaining bound his wrists and ankles. Above one manacle was a device clamped around the leg.

"A shocker." O'Doul must have noticed it. "Hope they've got lots of spare battery packs."

It was the first angry word Lucinda had heard from him. Had they been using it on the prisoner already? Not during the interrogation, she thought: she would have seen clear signs of pain.

Kate walked into the margin of the picture, and stood in silence. The soft music they usually employed to relax a subject was missing. It was just Kate and the prisoner, and presumably guards off-screen.

"My name is Katherine Barber," she finally said. Lucinda took notice. Kate never used her full first name. "Will you tell me yours?"

Nothing. Kate filled the time by working a stylus across her pad.

"There are extremely grave charges laid against you. Do you understand them?"

Still nothing.

"You are accused of shooting down a security aerostat over Washington, facilitating a nuclear attack on the city. Do you confirm or deny that you did this?"

He said nothing. His brain yielded a bit more. Lucinda watched his medial prefrontal cortex creep deeper into the blue. Kate's questions became more specific, but his silence remained as complete.

"Looks like he's enjoying himself," O'Doul said. Lucinda thought he was reading far too much into the tenacious passivity.

Kate went on without result, until she walked out of shot in quiet frustration. Lucinda looked for camera controls, but before she found anything, Kate was back in the edge of the screen.

"Maybe you were fleeing from the scene too fast to see how powerful that bomb was. The news is estimating seventy-five kilotons, but I've heard higher numbers here, ninety or one hundred. Hiroshima was destroyed with a twelve-kiloton weapon."

Kate began striding closer. "You do know, don't you, that your bomb didn't just destroy a few national landmarks? It killed other human beings, tens of thousands of them, maybe hundreds. It crushed them under rubble, roasted them alive when it didn't just vaporize them, or showered them with radiation so their bodily functions are falling apart, this moment, from the inside out, until—"

Kate's voice, already cracking, gave out altogether. But then why were her lips still moving, her hands chopping at the air?

Lucinda saw O'Doul's hand on the volume switch, now turned off. His other hand was over his face, tense and trembling. She couldn't bring herself to turn the switch back. She spotted an earpiece, plugged it in at her console, and got the sound back for herself alone.

“—blowing across Maryland, poisoning it with those salted isotopes.”

Kate had grown shriller still. Lucinda moved to dial down the volume, before something in the holotank caught her eye. She forgot Kate.

“Dr. O'Doul. Edwin!”

O'Doul raised his head, and Lucinda pointed at his tank. The frontal areas were indigo now, but her finger indicated the limbic system, and the cingulate cortex brightening into orange.

Raw eyes met hers. “I know. What did you think I meant?” Before Lucinda could fashion a reply, he braced himself and turned up the sound.

“—from your action.” Kate was hoarse and phlegmy. “People you knew; people you liked—the way I lost people I knew. Colleagues. Friends. A man I loved.” Her voice shattering with the last words, she turned away, close to sobbing.

In the holotank, the cingulate cortex peaked at a dull red. Lucinda double-checked the most active neurons. They were indeed dopamine producers. Kate's litany of horrors, and her breakdown, had brought the prisoner a strong surge of pleasure.

There was a whimper. Lucinda was never sure whether it was Kate's, O'Doul's, or hers. Kate was looking at her own monitor now, seeing what they did, realizing what they had. She looked around her, grabbed and hefted some hard object, but after only one step toward the prisoner, let it crash to the floor. She left the shot again, leaving no doubt she wouldn't be back.

“We've got more work ahead than we thought,” Lucinda said, not trusting her voice past a whisper. “Let's find the best matches.” She started putting together two sets of pattern recognition parameters, one for the frontal structures and one for the cingulate cortex.

They outlined specific neural pathways and structures, the ones responsible for the prisoner's most important reactions and affects. They ended up using two pattern recognition routines, hers linked up from Berkeley, his from Johns Hopkins. Both finished in less than ten minutes. Their short lists mostly overlapped, giving four matches for the frontal cortices and three for the cingulate cortex. No brain template was on both lists.

Lucinda frowned. “Have you ever done an overlay using two separate templates?”

“No,” said O’Doul, “but it won’t raise problems if the two areas aren’t connected. That means damping dopamine production at the cingulate source, rather than cutting off their effects in the frontal lobe. I had intended that anyway. We don’t need all that dopamine floating around.”

“Certainly not. Still, I think the frontal lobe should be our priority. We’ll get the best match we can there, then pick the cingulate structure that meshes best with it.”

“I concur.”

They both shuffled through the scans, to find their matches. Lucinda felt an odd sensation creep over her as she examined the frontal structures. *Someone’s walking on my grave*, she thought, before realizing she couldn’t have made a worse comparison at that moment.

“Hm. Mislabeled.”

“Come again?” Lucinda said.

“This scan,” O’Doul responded. “I assume you took it, but it lists you as the subject.”

“ID doesn’t matter in—” She suddenly knew why something had seemed familiar. “Actually, I did provide a template for our research. Me and Pavel,” she said, trailing away.

“So this is yours?”

“Yes. It’s me.” Her mind began churning. “It has to be me.”

“If you say so. Now, out of these templates, I—”

“No, Doctor,” said Lucinda. “I meant we have to use mine.”

O’Doul gave her a guarded look. “I was going to say, Dr. Peale, that the third template appeared best suited.”

“Under any other circumstances, I’d probably agree. Right here and now, though, my template has an advantage the others can’t touch.”

“And what can that be?”

She pulled herself straight. “Me, here.”

\* \* \* \*

“Are you certain, Lucinda?” Kate still sounded froggy, and her eyes were painfully red.

“It’s our best chance to produce a successful overlay,” Lucinda said, walking past Kate into the scanning room. One of the guards followed them inside, the other closing the door behind them.

“Are you sure it’s not becoming personal?”

Lucinda wheeled on her. Kate’s expression was stern and adamant, but she soon began to color. “It’s personal for all of us,” Lucinda said, “but look at it outside all that. Will this give us greater precision in attacking the specific attitudes we need to erase, or won’t it?”

Kate’s jaw ground tightly. She finally shifted her eyes. “All right. Get in.”

Lucinda didn’t wait for a less grudging invitation. She laid herself on the examination bed. It felt warm, but still gave her a chill to think of who was lying there moments before. Now he was being prepped for surgery. O’Doul was still upstairs, observing, recording, preparing his overlay template.

Kate set the restraints for Lucinda’s head and upper body, then went to the control panel. The bed slid into the scanning tube with a slow grind. New equipment apparently didn’t get into this complex very often. She made herself not think about what that could mean for the overlay procedure.

The bed stopped and locked. Suddenly, it was very quiet. Lucinda tried to keep her mind clear, unperturbed by the emotions under the surface. She started reciting the Greek alphabet, forward and backward, an old calming technique she hadn’t used for years.

“Dr. O’Doul’s messaging,” Kate said. “He says to stop thinking in Spanish: it could confound the baseline with signals from the language centers.”

Spanish? Lucinda almost laughed. Having O’Doul misled by her looks was a comfort of sorts. If magnetoencephalographic scans were the key to “mind-reading,” as some thought and feared, scientists didn’t quite have the knack yet.

Things got quiet again for a minute. Just as Lucinda got used to the calm, Kate began talking. Her words came slower than with the prisoner, and no longer had the personal, accusing tone and content. Mainly, they were still the same words, the same recitation of terror, destruction, death, and despair. It ended this time with “People we knew, people we liked.” The same colleagues; the same friends; then the admission from Kate that Lucinda could not match.

It was over sooner than Lucinda had expected. She could have borne no more of it. The emotions she had held down in the observing room broke through here, where metal and plastic shielded her from view. Tears flowed, and she could not stop them, or even move a hand to wipe her eyes.

The bed began pulling out. She made a supreme effort of will to staunch the

tears, and only made herself heave with a sob. She couldn't even turn her head or cover her face. She screwed her eyes shut, the only thing she could do.

She felt Kate looming over her. "I wondered when it would come," Kate said. The restraints came loose, and Lucinda opened her eyes to see Kate offering her a hand up. She took it, using her free hand to wipe her face. Kate moved as if to hug her, but stopped and handed her a fistful of tissues instead.

Lucinda got her face almost dry. "Have I ruined the template? Or..."

"No. You doubled its effectiveness, if anything."

Lucinda hoped she was right. She didn't want to burn up the time for a second scan.

Kate went over to a workstation and found a mic. "Is that scan going to be sufficient, Dr. O'Doul?"

"Ample, Ms. Barber," came over the speakers. "Lucinda, can I have you up here?"

"Right away." She waited for Kate to close the link. "Kate, you should check the operating room. See that their equipment is up to our standards."

"Sensible enough," Kate said, just a bit anxiously.

They left the scanning room. The guards at the door followed them, one apiece. Lucinda felt hers like a weight between the shoulder blades. Once Kate and her shadow were safely down another corridor, she looked back. "I hope I'm not taking you from serious duties, corporal."

"Guarding you is my duty, Doctor," he answered, with a Southern accent too clipped to be a drawl. "I take that seriously."

Lucinda shook her head. "Do they really think someone's going to get under this mountain and assault me?"

"After this morning, I don't assume anything's safe."

She couldn't argue with him.

Building overlay templates was a job for neurosurgeons. Lucinda had only assisted Dr. Urowsky a few times with producing them; with Pavel, never. She was glad she had that modest experience, because it would have been too disturbing to have O'Doul building something out of her brain patterns while she sat to the side, doing nothing.

It was still creepy with her involved. They took the potentialities of strings of neurons, matching them as closely as possible with the captive's so they could replace one with the other. Those were the patterns, the tendrils of her thoughts, or

at least the physical architecture that produced those thoughts. It was like having a mirror to look into her own soul.

The process usually took several hours. O'Doul had completed the work for the cingulate cortex while she was being scanned. Finishing up the frontal cortex took less than an hour with Lucinda's help. Finally, O'Doul pushed back his chair, gazed pensively at the screens, and nodded.

"You're ready, Doctor," Lucinda said in encouragement.

"Me?" said O'Doul. "Not we?"

"I'm not a neurosurgeon, Doctor, or a nurse. I've only attended one overlay."

"That's probably one more than anyone else they could provide me here," O'Doul said, "unless there's been another abduction we haven't heard about. Even if there has, I should like to have someone in there that I know, even a little."

There was only one response: the one Lucinda wanted. She had hoped to participate all the way, but that needed to be O'Doul's decision, and now it was. "Then let's go," she said.

By the time they dressed, sterilized, and entered the operating theater, the procedure had already begun. The subject was anesthetized, and a nurse was shaving off the last of the hair on his skull. "No transcranial stimulation?" Lucinda asked.

The nurse flicked away the last of the hair, and looked up. "No time to bring in a TMS machine," she said, the eyes above her mask dark and narrow. "We got the electrode-placing robots in just two hours ago. Mount Weather wasn't meant to be a research hospital. Sorry."

"No, I understand." So, this place did have a name.

"Of course not," O'Doul echoed. He looked over the available equipment, including the smaller MEG the OR had. "Yes, this will suffice. Is everyone ready?"

Ready or not, they had no time to waste, and they began. A sterile wrap went over the patient's head, with two holes over the entry sites. O'Doul made the first incision at the crown, peeling away the skin and fastening it back with tiny clamps. Then came the bone drill, neatly cutting out a plug of cranium the size of a dollar coin. O'Doul slit and parted the dura, and there was the brain, right where the frontal lobe blended into the parietal.

He and Lucinda threaded the electrode filaments down the longitudinal fissure between the hemispheres of the brain, getting them close to the cingulate cortex. From there, they fed instructions to the tiny robots attached to the filaments, to guide them down to the precise locations needed for the electrodes. "Looks good," O'Doul finally said. "Let's get him in."

They slid the operating table to get the patient's head inside the MEG. Lucinda went to the control panel for the electrodes, and sent some test pulses. O'Doul looked over the scans that resulted, and found two electrodes slightly misaligned. They pulled him out, and got to reprogramming the microrobots.

"Does it always take this long?" their nurse said as she applied suction to clear some pooling blood.

O'Doul scowled over his mask. "There is no hurrying brain surgery."

"Transcranial is much faster," Lucinda added. "Your bosses should get a TMS machine here, if they want us doing more of this."

"You think that's likely, Doctor?" O'Doul asked.

"I can't imagine whoever masterminded the attack dealt directly with this guy. There are always layers. It might—"

"You might want to stop speculating," the nurse snapped. Lucinda was taken aback, but neither she nor O'Doul said anything.

The second time was the charm, as the test pulses showed everything in place. "Start the overlay sequence," O'Doul said. Lucinda touched the button, and it began. Currents flowed through into the brain, shaping old neural pathways into new networks of activity.

"I can monitor the repotentialization," Lucinda told O'Doul, "if you want to take a break." The overlay would need more than an hour to impose its pattern.

"Not at all, not at all. Better I keep my mind occupied."

They kept their vigil, almost superfluous as the program did its work. Lucinda took intermittent looks at the patient. The MEG housing obscured part of his face, and the rest was blank, revealing nothing. She looked hard for some sign of what was happening inside his mind, before she made herself stop.

The program ran until the patient's MEG scans matched the template, and they could bring him out. Once the electrodes were out, the nurse replaced the plug of bone and sealed up the scalp, while the doctors opened the second hole over the prisoner's prefrontal lobe. The electrodes went in, the patient went back into the MEG, and the overlay began again—only this time it was Lucinda's pattern being imprinted.

She didn't feel the shiver of horror any longer. In its place was vague worry, that the procedure would fail, that she would bear double blame as participant and template. She tried to think of other things, but after enough thoughts of Washington, of Nancy, of Sam, she retreated to the worry of failure. That might go away before long.



From the first human trial of neural overlay, Lucinda had wondered whether this procedure effaced personhood, changed the soul. It had nagged her quietly with each person who underwent it, no matter what acts he had committed. She noticed she didn't feel that worry now.

"I think it's done. Do you concur, Dr. Peale?"

She shrugged off her musings, gave the display a look, and concurred with Dr. O'Doul. They pulled out the subject, withdrew the filaments, sealed up his skull, and put in a shunt. It was while O'Doul was applying wound glue to seal the incision that Lucinda noticed the anesthesiologist pulling out the IV. "That's a little early," she said.

"We need him awake and talking as soon as possible," he answered.

"That means topical anesthetics for his scalp," the nurse added. "No opiates or other narcotics."

"Yes, okay," Lucinda said. She hadn't forgotten their urgency. "Can someone call Kate Barber? She should be on hand when he wakes, for the interview."

Two disbelieving stares met her words. "We have people to handle that interview," the nurse said. "We won't need Barber, or you."

"What?" Lucinda said, in unison with O'Doul. "But someone has to monitor the MEG," she went on, "to see how the templates have taken hold, to—"

"We'll handle that." The eyes above the mask softened. "It's very late. You two have to be tired."

"I'm on West Coast time," Lucinda said feebly. The nurse didn't answer, going instead to the OR door. She called in two orderlies, and told someone else to make sure the recovery room was secure.

Lucinda turned to O'Doul, who was done closing. "How do we stop this?" she asked. "Can we?"

"Should we?" he replied.

"I don't like leaving my work for people I don't know to finish."

There was no more time for discussion. The orderlies were there, one securing his left arm, the other binding his legs, making the patient a prisoner once more. Lucinda took a last look at him. His eyes were slits, showing the stirrings of returning consciousness.

Then they shot open.

Lucinda only had time to touch O'Doul's sleeve and whisper "Edwin," before the man lunged. His bonds cut the lurch short, but he still reached the instrument tray

with his free hand, and grabbed the biggest scalpel. His eyes fixed on Lucinda, frenzied. She couldn't look away. She couldn't move away.

He swung the scalpel—into his own wrist. Blood splattered Lucinda's face. The moment of near-frozen time crashed into bedlam—shouts—hands grabbing for his arm—a second slash of his wrist arrested mid-stroke—his arm yanking free.

Lucinda wrapped a hand around his wrist, trying to squeeze the scalpel free. He jerked his arm, knocking her off-balance. A second jerk, and the blade connected with her flailing free hand, biting through latex into her palm. She almost lost her grip, and he dragged the scalpel toward his bared neck.

Two pairs of hands grabbed his elbow and yanked. The scalpel flashed through the air, and clattered across the floor. He thrashed once more, reaching for the tray, but Lucinda and the orderlies pinned his free arm.

Then he screamed. What began as an animal howl became a quavering, tormented wail, leaping and plunging in pitch, going on seemingly forever until it began to sputter with sobs. Lucinda turned her head, and saw agony.

“Why did you stop me?” he cried. “I want to die! Oh Christ, I deserve to die!” His wail began again, now a spent echo.

Lucinda had never been there when a patient woke up. Had any of them been like this? Or was he unique, with so much on his conscience?

She grabbed his face, a hand on each cheek, and made him look straight at her. “Not anymore, you don't,” she said. “Tell them everything. Start making amends, now.”

He gave a wide-eyed nod. She pulled away, leaving a smear of her blood on his cheek. The nurse and orderlies started working on his gashed wrist.

“They recruited me nine months ago,” he said. “Two of them. Sayyed was—”

“Get them out of here!” the nurse said. One of the orderlies hustled away the two doctors, as O'Doul was still tending to Lucinda's bleeding hand.

The double door shut behind them. O'Doul sighed. “I guess that was a success.”

“I guess so.” Lucinda's breath started turning ragged. “God, I hope so.”

\* \* \* \*

## IV

Lucinda awoke groggily. Without looking at a clock, she knew she had slept long. She took a shower, and dressed in clothes starting to get stiff and smelly on her third day under Mount Weather. After a second's hesitation, she went to open the door.

It would not open.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” said someone outside, presumably the guard. “Can I get you breakfast? Or lunch?”

Lucinda was ready to start demanding answers—but if what she feared had happened, they wouldn’t do her much good. “Lunch, please,” she answered flatly.

“Right away.”

Lucinda retreated to a chair. Was this how Kate and Edwin had disappeared? Had they lasted as long as they were useful, as long as the authorities required to prepare someone else to do their work? Maybe she should take pride in being last to go. The thought was barely in her mind before she rebuked herself for it.

She had worked through three overlays yesterday. Someone had replaced Kate for the second interrogation session, and her inquiries gained no information. Then they took her out of the second operation to monitor the third interrogation. O’Doul had never joined her during that job, and when she reached the operating theater, there was another surgeon in O’Doul’s place. He was resting, they said, and in her fatigue Lucinda had accepted that explanation. She wondered how they’d explain her absence now, before remembering there was no one left to ask.

When the lunch trolley arrived, Lucinda tried to skirt past the steward bringing it. Her guard stepped smartly into the doorway. “Please stay inside, Doctor.”

Lucinda knew better than to try him. “Could you at least see if I might speak to Kate Barber? She’s my colleague. We were brought here together.”

“I’ll see what I can do, ma’am.” The steward left the room, the guard closed the door, and a click announced it was locked again. Lucinda started in on her meal, watching the door.

An hour later, long after she had finished eating, they came for the used trolley. “What about Kate?” she asked the guard.

“Nothing yet.”

“Then try Dr. O’Doul. We were working on the overlays together. It’s important that I consult with someone.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said, and shut her in again.

Lucinda knew what that meant now. It wasn’t his malevolence: he was under orders. Still, he was her only link to the outside, and she had to work on him.

“Your superiors are treating me like a prisoner, Corporal Lemmer.” She had taken pains to look at his nametag and rank insignia while lunch was being cleared away. “I was brought here in hopes of tracking down whoever destroyed Washington. I gave them that help. So did my colleagues. This is what it’s earned

us. If nothing else, I'd like to know why."

She let that question work on him awhile, then started anew. She told him about Sam's fate back at Berkeley. She told him about Kate's young daughter, whose father was in Missouri. She told him about her dog Ben stuck home without her, saying nothing about Josh looking after him. She would have said something about O'Doul's missing person at Georgetown, but didn't know whether that was family or friend, male or female.

Footsteps in the corridor interrupted one monologue. She waited, but they left again. So much for getting results. She started in again, but got cut short when she appealed to her guard by name. "I'm not Lemmer, ma'am," the new voice said.

Of course they wouldn't keep one guard permanently in place. She renewed her campaign, but slowly ran out of steam. What could she do, appeal to every soldier they had in this place as they cycled past her door?

Her appeals dissolved into pleas. "At least bring me some news from outside, what's happening in the world. Or some books. Anything to occupy my time in here. God knows how much of it I'll have."

The hours crept past until dinner. The usual steward arrived with the usual trolley. She briefly contemplated starting a hunger strike, which struck her as so self-martyring that she ate much more than her dulled appetite warranted.

An hour later, the steward returned, took the trolley, and left some items on her table. There were two thin paperback books with worn spines, plus a handheld computer puzzle.

In a flash of inspired desperation, Lucinda riffled through the pages of the books, looking for any concealed message folded between the pages or scribbled in the margins. She found nothing, of course, and she laughed bitterly at herself for even trying.

She read the covers of the books. No Solzhenitsyn, which would have showed somebody had a sense of humor here, however warped. Not even an old Tom Clancy book, with massive terror attacks against America, and having the saving grace of being long and time-consuming. Just a pair of pedestrian detective novels. Nothing worth her time. She set them aside.

Half an hour later, she picked one up, and read halfway through it before feeling tired enough to sleep.

Late the next morning, she had broken down enough to start playing the puzzle game. The moment she heard the snick of the unlocking door, she guiltily shut it off and put it on the end table, behind the books.

Two soldiers looked in through the open door. "Dr. Peale, would you come with us?"

She barely had the energy for a jaundiced look. “What is it? A new patient? I didn’t know I was doing that work anymore.”

Their expressions didn’t shift. “Come with us, please.”

She obeyed. There was no point in resisting just to resist. They led her outside—a relative term inside the Mount—to a waiting cart, and drove off. She turned to look at the pond and fountain as they passed, but the sight gave her no pleasure. It was an artifice, an attempt to make this place something it wasn’t.

They slowed as they approached a white-fronted building with a heavy guard. Not another hospital, surely. A prison? That seemed redundant. Her guards bundled her out of the cart, toward a checkpoint at a side door. There they checked her badge, took a retina scan, and passed her through to another set of soldiers.

They led her inside, down bare hallways, up a flight of stairs, to another checkpoint. They scrutinized her again, and passed her again, this time to escorts mostly clad in suits. They took her down a hall with a brighter paint job, into an anteroom. That’s where she got thoroughly checked. She submitted quietly to it. By now, she believed she knew the reason.

They finally satisfied whatever arcane requirements they had, and two of the suited escorts led her through one last door into the office beyond. One look confirmed Lucinda’s belief. The room was oval.

Two agents stood at opposite sides of the room. A third man was hunched over the desk near the far wall, writing. His thin, graying hair was unkempt, his tie was crooked, and his suit jacket was rumpled, almost as if it was too big for his shoulders. President Lewis Burleigh made Lucinda forget her self-consciousness about her own appearance, but that was scant comfort.

“Dr. Peale, please sit down.”

The President said it without standing, with barely a glance upward. She walked slowly to one of the chairs in front of the desk. The door clicked shut behind her, with one of her guards remaining inside, standing before it at parade rest. As Lucinda sat down, Burleigh finished his writing, and uploaded it from his pad to the console on his desk. Finally he looked up, quietly appraising her. She returned the look.

“Dr. Peale,” he said, his high voice a little tired, a little nasal, “first let me offer my personal sympathies for the three colleagues you lost in Washington on Friday.”

Lucinda tightened all over. She had held no hope, but this note of finality was still a blow. “Is that confirmed, Mr. President, or are you ... just assuming the obvious?”

“I’m afraid it’s confirmed. We excavated the shelters beneath the Capitol complex, what was left of them.” His eyes looked past her. “No shelters seemed to

be enough that day.”

Lucinda read between the lines. “You have my condolences, sir, for all the colleagues you lost as well.”

Burleigh nodded absently. “They died in service to their country, as I consider your three associates to have done.” He shook off the sorrow. “Speaking of service, you’ve rendered us important service over the last few days. You have your nation’s thanks for your aid in examining the men we captured and brought here.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. President. About those men, I wonder whether I could have access—”

“Excuse me. I have rather more to say.” The suddenness of the rebuff stopped Lucinda cold. “I would say thanks for helping bring those men to justice, but in their altered condition, I find that’s taken on a different meaning. It’s a meaning that I think needs wider currency, and that is where I am asking you and your colleagues here to continue helping us.”

Lucinda showed no reaction. He could have his say, but it would have to be pretty spectacular to move her. His first words were a fair start.

“The world is poised to annihilate itself, either all at once or piece by piece. I will not permit the former, but right now I am powerless to prevent the latter. We saw on Black Friday that, when people are determined to kill and destroy, they will find a way to do it. And it’s only getting easier for them to acquire the means, whether it’s to destroy a neighborhood, or a city, or a country.

“It’s a flaw, inherent in human nature—so human nature must change.

“Raising our defenses won’t work. Aside from whatever flaws would remain, like homegrown attackers, it would be an exponential drag on the economy, grinding it to a halt. I have some very perceptive advisors confirming my intuition on this matter.”

“Did you happen to have Agent Morris Hope advising you, sir?”

The President received the question worse than Lucinda suspected he would, with the lines around his eyes deepening sharply. “God, not him. I know how much initiative he showed bringing you here, but the man is a menace. He didn’t spend that flight filling your head with claptrap about China, did he?”

Lucinda remembered the glimpse she had gotten of the last prisoner’s face before he went into the scanner, his particular Asian features. “He mentioned them once,” she said, “as one of the dozen or so entities that could have bombed Washington, along with Second Al-Qaeda, Pakistan ... Iran.” O’Doul had recognized their third detainee’s curses at Kate’s replacement as being in Farsi. He had had Iranian graduate students, years ago.

Burleigh's face creased again. "Hope was chomping at the bit, wasn't he? That doesn't surprise me. He'd have me retaliate against nuclear powers, touch off the holocaust we avoided once with the Russians, end the world, and call it justice."

Lucinda wanted to say that wasn't how Hope thought. She also wanted to ask whether China and Iran really were responsible. Lone nationals weren't cast-iron proof, and Burleigh surely knew more. She held her tongue.

"It is that kind of person," Burleigh continued, waving an upraised finger, "that kind of personality that would commit such appalling acts, that must be remade. Whatever those poisonous elements are, either innate or perversely cultivated, must be wiped clean from them, from all humankind. Do you see what I am getting at, Doctor?"

She did. Horrified as she was, she could see how she, too, might conclude it was necessary. "I think so, Mr. President," she said slowly, "but that's a dead end. Enemy nations, terrorist groups, would never submit to it."

"They will. There will be irresistible international pressure to accept curative overlays—because we will lead by example. We will purge America first, and about time."

Lucinda's head spun. "Of whom? Of terrorist personalities? Of sympathizers with terrorists?"

"Oh, that's just the start. There are other people just as dangerous to the world. The revanchists, for one, the people who would have me destroy whole countries for this act, and who will do it themselves if they ever gain the power to do it. And beneath them, there's a whole base of intolerance and primitivism that lets those violent attitudes flourish. Their debased mindsets are a luxury we can't afford anymore. No. No, we never could afford them. They brought us to this pass."

He gave Lucinda a strained smile. "I actually got to see Dr. Petrusky's testimony about this, after the fact. It was persuasive. He can claim partial credit for the decision I've reached. I hope he would be proud of that."

Lucinda could barely whisper, through a closed throat, "I imagine he would."

"It's sad those three aren't still with us. We need every trained overlay neurologist and technician we can pull together: to perform the treatments, to train others, to streamline the process so we can handle the numbers this will encompass." The President ran a hand over his disheveled hair. "It's a lot of work. But the good people of America will be behind us. They'll understand what has to be done to make a clean start on a better world."

Lucinda waited until she was sure he was done. "I think you'll be surprised, Mr. President. Starting now. I cannot participate in this."

Burleigh passed right through surprise into severity. "May I remind you, Dr.

Peale, you already have.”

“With a man caught red-handed, then with associates he named under circumstances that leave no doubt of their complicity—unless you’re telling me that’s not so.” Burleigh mumbled some denial. “What you’re talking about is forcible overlays on people who have committed no crimes, based on what? What they think? And this isn’t just curbing their liberties, or confining them. We’d be altering them fundamentally, irrevocably.”

She sighed. “I’m aware how fine the line is between ethical and unethical uses of overlay. I’ve been treading that line for seven years. So I’ve got some standing to say that this goes way over that line, and I will not cross it.” She pushed herself up by the armrests. “I think I’ll return to my room now.”

“I think you will stay here, Doctor.” The President didn’t move. Neither did the agent standing between Lucinda and the door. She tried to reach around him for the doorknob, and found her hand firmly deflected by his. She wheeled on the President, who remained seated in silent thought. Lucinda didn’t return to the chair, but waited with arms crossed, and that agent’s breath tickling her neck.

Burleigh took his time before speaking. “Many people would conclude, Doctor, that you already have crossed the ethical line. That procedure you performed on Mr. Lodish directly contr—”

“On whom, sir?”

Burleigh lifted his eyebrows. “The missile launcher. The first man you had overlaid.”

“I see. I never learned his name before now.”

“Oh. That doesn’t matter. Your operation directly contravened federal laws regarding humane treatment of persons held in custody. You committed a gravely serious act, Ms. Peale.”

Lucinda boggled at this ploy—and noted in passing that she was no longer “Doctor” to him. “So, you’re telling me I’ve committed an awful crime, and you want me to commit lots more as penance.”

“It isn’t a crime now. I signed an executive order on the matter, the morning after the attack. Your other overlays are covered, but not, I’m afraid, the first one.”

Lucinda glared. “Is this the threat? That I’ll be locked up for turning a remorseless terrorist conspirator, complicit in destroying the nation’s capital, into a man with a conscience?”

President Burleigh lifted himself up. “You mean cutting open a man’s skull, jabbing electrodes into his exposed brain, and doing a mind-wipe on him that sets him to slashing his wrist, and begging for the release of death? There’s a word for



that: torture.” He looked down at her hand. “As for his conscience, you didn’t give him enough of one to keep him from injuring you.”

Her palm throbbed. She yearned to reply, but what was the point? This wasn’t about reason. It was about power—and she had none here. She wasn’t getting out of this place, certainly not if she didn’t play ball.

She had misjudged this man. He was no drone, and that was no blessing.

“That’s what awaits you,” the President said, “if you don’t own what you’ve done. We can prevent that, *if* you will work with us. You can consider it mutual assistance, if you’re so inclined. You can also consider it a plea bargain, if you’re inclined that way.”

“My term is ‘extortion,’ Mr. President.”

“Your attitude is your problem, Ms. Peale. The choice is there before you. I can give you time to think it over, but not much.” He motioned to the Secret Service. “Take her to the holding area.”

Two of the agents took her in hand, leading her toward the door. As one opened it, she turned over her shoulder. “I don’t need that time. I’ve decided.” She saw Burleigh scowl, and the agents’ grip on her stiffened. She nearly reconsidered before going on. “I’m ready to work here.”

She had the satisfaction of seeing the President’s jaw drop, meager consolation that it was. He was going to take this course, with or without her. Her choice was between the invisible martyrdom of refusal, or working within this project, mitigating its abuses as much as she could. That was a worthy goal—and she didn’t have the nerve to try the alternative.

Burleigh quickly gestured to the agents to turn her loose. Once they did, she finished her sentence. “But I’ll need some guarantee that I won’t have the overlay of Mr. Lodish held over my head.”

The President grew guarded again, and Lucinda much preferred him that way. “What guarantee?”

Lucinda rolled her shoulders to get circulation back into hard-gripped arms, and strode halfway across the oval room. “If that procedure was a crime, as you allege, then I think a Presidential pardon is in order. In writing, with your signature, and in my hand before I leave this office.”

“You’re asking rather a lot, Doctor.”

“Under the circumstances, I’m asking rather little, compared to what I’ll be giving you.” *Like my soul.*

Burleigh’s eyes drifted downward as he thought. Finally, he turned to his

computer. “Very well.” Lucinda felt a spurt of triumph, and got ready to name her next conditions. “But,” he continued, “let me make all the terms clear.”

“I have rather more to say.”

“Not now, you don’t. You are not going to have freedom of communication or movement while under our auspices. You’ll be working in a secure federal facility, probably here at the Mount, at least at the start. You aren’t going to tell people where you are or what you’re doing without our explicit permission. You won’t be communicating *anything* to anyone outside without our permission, and oversight. Do you understand?”

“You’re talking about censoring my letters, my e-mail, everything. That comes as no surprise.”

“It shouldn’t,” Burleigh said, very matter of fact. “A Second World War project would have acted similarly.”

Put that way, it almost sounded reasonable. Still, it meant severing herself from her regular life. Home, family, friends ... Josh, whatever he was to her. Even poor Ben: he’d have no place here. Josh might have to take him in. She might not see him for a long time. Either of them.

What would Josh have told her to do here? He had said overlay was too powerful to leave to people eager to use it. But he had said that when she about to challenge the system, not work inside it. She wanted him here to guide her, and knew it was impossible.

“I ... accept those restrictions, sir.”

“And will you sign an agreement along those lines?” Burleigh saw her balk. “If you’re expecting that pardon—”

“I know what deal I’m negotiating, sir.” Lucinda needed to wrest away his upper hand. “Will you be keeping Dr. O’Doul and Kate Barber here as well?”

“O’Doul, yes. Barber, we don’t need. Her skills aren’t that vital.”

“Can I see her before she goes?”

“She’s ... already out of the Mount. Now, that signature.”

Lucinda knew the President was dissembling. Kate had refused him, and probably wasn’t headed home. She wanted to cheer, or rail, or throw his words back in his face. She did none of those, with an act of inhibition that was already becoming second nature. She knew her limits here.

“Our signatures, you mean,” she said. “I think you should draw up those papers.”

He bent over the keyboard, and hammered away fast. Not giving her time to back out, she guessed. Let him think she might, for whatever psychological edge it might grant her.

And Lucinda did wish, intensely, desperately, that she could back out. Pavel might have made common cause with the President willingly. So might Nancy, who had been so adamant on not aiding acts of reprisal. But it was her here, not them: one small irony, adrift in the oceanic nightmare of the last few days.

She had done this before. She worked under Dr. Petrusky's de facto control of the Berkeley program. If she could stand that, for a while, she could stand this, for a while. But when she couldn't stand Berkeley any longer, she had the choice of leaving. She wouldn't have that here.

*One year*, she told herself. Burleigh could not last forever. The country would not stand what he would do. They'd stop this, maybe by sheer mass of outcry, surely no later than the November election. If he held one.

Lucinda screwed her eyes shut. She would drive herself insane if she dwelt on such thoughts. *One year*, she repeated. *I can endure one year.*

"Is there a problem, Doctor?"

Her eyes blinked open, a shimmer of tears fogging her vision. "It's catching up to me," she said, not looking at the President. "All the people I've lost; all the ... things."

A printer began humming. "We have to look ahead," Burleigh said. "What's past will not return, ever."

Lucinda Peale stared at a bare stretch of the curved wall. *That's what I'm afraid of.*

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*(EDITOR'S NOTE: Earlier stories of the overlay project include "Acts of Conscience" [March 2005] and "A New Man" [October 2003].)*