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Prolog

Wichita, Kansas, November, 2037, Tuesday...

“The President has been shot!”

Sheila Remington looked like she was sleeping. Only a small pool of blood beneath her right cheek signaled the nation’s loss of a great leader. Bob Nash hung his head. He had failed her.

The news appeared on the diverse information nets almost as soon as it happened. Text messages began scrolling with the details. Live videocam streamed onto the screens of TVs, computers, and cell phones everywhere. The marquee in Times Square announced it to astonished New Yorkers. Mid-afternoon talk shows were interrupted with the news and video shots from the scene.

The Secret Service agent picked himself up from the stage and hurried to the President. Even with the wind knocked out of him, he rushed to give assistance. As he knelt down beside her and tested for a pulse, he soon realized that there was nothing that he could do. He looked back at the other dignitaries who had sought cover. Only the President’s Chief of Staff was injured.

Bob Nash's day had started badly. He nearly missed the plane at Andrews and the President kidded him about it. Then, as Air Force One taxied, he received a cell phone call from his girl friend telling him that she was dumping him. Finally, just before the plane landed in Wichita, he saw a report on the CNN investment infonet that told him he had just lost a ton of money on some stock that he had just put in a buy order for the previous evening. With all that bad news, he fully expected the day to not be one of his better ones. He never imagined it could be so bad. Career ending bad.

The good news was that the advance detail report said that the city and the university campus were quiet, exceptionally so considering that by contrast the rest of the Midwest was a mess. St. Louis had been under martial law for three months. Chicago had just quieted down after gangs of young hoodlums rioted four days earlier when the local pro soccer team lost the national championship to Houston. Kansas City was in the fifth week of a sanitation workers' strike that had left it smelling like fermenting human waste.

Yes, Wichita was peaceful. Expectant about the visit from their favorite daughter, yet peaceful. There were the usual protestors with their hastily drawn and sometimes clever signs highlighting a number of causes; their number was small and self-restrained. Radical, but not violent. At least for the moment.

The President's entourage deplaned and climbed into three sleek new black hydrogen-fueled limos that had come out onto the tarmac to greet them. The first car was filled completely with Secret Service agents, the second with some staff and press. President Remington and her Chief of Staff were in the third, along with Nash.

They had done this many times. The President liked to travel around the country and meet her constituents face to face. She was also a world traveler who often flew in late to conferences and diplomatic meetings on the Presidential scramjet long after her entourage had lumbered in on Air Force One. She was popular overseas in spite of the fact that the US was not. But now she was home, really home.

The drive to the campus took about a half hour. After their arrival at the large auditorium, it took another ten minutes to get everyone in position and allow the President enough time to adjust her hair and makeup so she could meet the public.

They set up a small area for her back stage. As she composed herself, she looked at Nash.

“You look tired, Bob.”

“I’ve had a bad day so far,” he explained.

“Personal problems?”

“My girl friend dumped me, for one. Nothing I won’t get over. Comes with the job. You’re looking a little pale yourself, Madame President.”

“Yes, I could use a drink.” Nash offered her his flask. “I presume this is the usual?”

“Twelve year old Jameson’s,” he replied.

She took a swallow. In a few seconds her color started to return. She handed the flask back to him.

“Now I’m all set. Shall we do it?”

“Knock’m dead, Madame President.”

He put the flask away without drinking any himself. He only kept it for her. He never drank on the job. And she rarely drank enough even to satisfy her cardiologist.

He moved around behind the stage to the edge where he could watch both behind and up front. He had done this so many times that he had to be careful not to go on automatic.

Always expect the unexpected.

As the dignitaries moved onto the stage, Bob surveyed the crowd. His comrades spread throughout the auditorium were doing the same. Some of the advanced detail had been out among the audience for hours. All were nervous, much more so than the President. She never seemed to be nervous – always trusting her bodyguards and way too trusting of her audiences.

Bob looked at the President who smiled back at him. They understood each other, mostly, even though he was from Maine and she was from Kansas.

Maybe my luck is changing and this will be a piece of cake.

President Remington was a gifted public speaker. She had been on the debating team in both high school and college and had done lots of summer theater. Her formal speeches were all notable as far as Nash was concerned. For example, he knew that her first inaugural address was already being studied as one of the most important ones in American history. She had laid out a plan for the nation and stuck to it, getting most of her initiatives through Congress by sometimes cajoling, sometimes dealing, and sometimes taking the battle to the public via the media, especially the internet. They were already calling her Lady Solomon for her artistry in bringing about compromises.

Her gift for public speaking was all the more notable considering she had overcome a childhood lisp. Born in Wichita, she moved to Omaha, Nebraska with her family when she was two. There she grew up loving the great outdoors. Her lisp gradually disappeared as she became more and more involved in environmental activities. Those led to politics by way of public policy and law degrees. In her first major political job as a district attorney for Omaha she was known for the logic and the eloquence of her arguments, even in the cases she lost. Her career had been mostly uphill from there.

Yes, she lost her first try at a congressional seat and yes, she lost her first run for governor, but she had won every election since then. She became President in 2032 in a very tight and dirty election, her opponent claiming that a woman would be soft on crime and terrorism. The same opponent came back to challenge her in 2036 but she won handedly then as the American public liked what they had seen during the first four years. In spite of growing energy and national security problems, most people respected her and wanted her leadership. She seemed to be the steady hand at the rudder that the nation needed.

She was no Lincoln but she managed to hold back the tide of balkanization that seemed to be a cancer eating at the rest of the world as quarreling ethnicities and religious groups demanded the right to govern themselves. She was a populist in many ways, socially liberal and fiscally conservative. She didn't like big government and often spoke out in favor of states' rights, the latter winning her favor with growing separatist and radical factions spread across the US that promoted secession from the union for various reasons, mostly economic. She had tried to appease various other radical groups,

attempting to bring them to the bargaining table with promises of amnesty if they laid down their arms. Many from the far right wing of her own party privately and sometimes publicly stated that these attempts to broker peace were evidence that maybe her electoral opponent had been right about her being soft on crime.

Sheila Remington in many ways did not fit the mold of the professional politician from either party. She had her own agenda and her own thoughts on the way the country should be run. She was more attune to what people thought and wanted than the power brokers from either party. She didn't seem to be afraid of either big business or the unions and did her best to lead the charge against government waste and corruption.

Both she and her husband had been helicopter pilots in Afghanistan and Iraq. She left the service but her husband stayed on to fight. A widow at twenty-nine, she had raised three children alone. She never remarried. She was a steady churchgoer but deplored fanaticism in all forms. She especially disliked those who would appeal to people's religious fervor for political gain.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States, Sheila Remington.”

She strode to the podium with confidence. Even without high heels she was a half head taller than the Provost of the University of Southern Kansas. She rarely wore them due to foot problems that had tormented her since her basketball days at the University of Wyoming. Her auburn hair was its natural color. At fifty-two, she was still a striking woman.

She was also intelligent enough that she could have been a research scientist, an important surgeon, or the CEO of a major corporation. She had chosen to become the CEO of the United States government instead.

“Mr. Provost, distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman, it is good to be back in the heartland. I didn’t stay here long as a kid, but Wichita and Omaha are more home to me than Washington DC.”

There were some cheers and a few whistles. She immediately relaxed and looked around the auditorium, setting her gaze on the first rows. It was a very diverse audience of mostly shining young faces. She did well among the young. They industriously worked for her in election campaigns, their efforts often generating resonance far beyond what she or the political pundits expected.

The press corps had treated her fairly over the years, but the press wasn’t what it used to be. Newsnets and e-zines with their cryptic stories and streaming video had diminished the ranks of real reporters and photographers over the years, so much so that the traditional newspaper had largely been replaced by on-line computer and cell phone freebies and subscriptions. Most people had electronic butlers that sifted through the news to find what fit their personal profile. The newsnets and e-zines still needed to get to the source of the news, though, so they had managed to squeeze in an impressive number of reporters and videocam operators. Most of these were not seated.

“My new Chief of Staff, Jimmy Ito, he’s from Hawaii, ladies and gentlemen, and he’s just recently confessed that he’s never been to the heartland. Jimmy, take a bow.”

Jimmy, who was sitting next to the Provost, stood and bowed. There were a few boos in recognition of the fact that he had never been to the Midwest, yet the applause was still warm. Jimmy had been seen on the newsnets quite a bit since she had named him Chief of Staff. A lot of people across the country believed he was a good pick. He was a solid family man with a pretty wife and three children. Bob Nash also knew the guy could throw down a few and tell some good jokes.

An all right guy. She had picked well.

“He’s flown over it many times, but this is first time on the ground here. He says he likes it a lot.” Now there were cheers. “Hey, I’ve promised him a big juicy steak tonight. Do you think Wichita can deliver on that?”

There was a chorus of yeses, more cheers and whistles in response.

“Course, it’s a wonder there’s any real beef left in the Great Plains after the last administration.”

That brought a chorus of laughs and catcalls. In his last year in office Sheila’s predecessor had failed to help the cattle ranchers when a series of blizzards hit Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming and practically ruined the cattle business. Since beef was now close to forty-five dollars a pound, thirty thousand dead cattle represented quite an investment. Many ranchers had declared bankruptcy.

“Well, enough of the culinary theme. I have come to talk to you about space. Now you ask yourselves, why does this old bag come all the way to Wichita to talk about that?”

She looked around the audience. The young faces looked expectant. The reporters were ready to pounce on any US policy change. But the topic was a surprise. The safest thing to talk about in Wichita was cattle, pork, and grain futures.

“There was a time when Missouri and Kansas were the beginning of the great American frontier, the starting place for a new expansion of this nation. Two centuries ago pioneers battled tremendous odds to push west. In them was the same adventurous spirit of our forefathers who braved the stormy seas of the Atlantic and settled Plymouth and Jamestown. We have lost that spirit because we have no frontier anymore.”

“There was also a time when the US was a leader in space exploration. Not any more. We don’t do much space exploration now because we have become indifferent, people think it costs too much, and it’s become overly commercialized. Frankly, the national consensus is that the Europeans and the Asians do it better. In a strict scientific sense, I suppose that is a correct assessment, but it is not my point today.”

She turned and used her remote to turn on the big overhead projector, a huge flat screen panel that was more like a clear window into another universe.

“Ladies and gentlemen, and especially those young students in the crowd, I believe we are ignoring our destiny. Our destiny is to populate the solar system, to explore and colonize. Americans have always been explorers. If we stop now, we will stagnate.”

A magnificent picture of the hundred meter high frozen methane dunes on the equator of Titan with ringed Saturn poised overhead filled the screen. She paused for

effect. If she could get this message through to her conservative constituents in the heartland, if she could get them motivated, she knew she could win the battle in DC.

“Yes, space is the last frontier and everything we do there seems to help out down here. I remind you that before those blizzards came, the cattle business in the heartland was saved from a plague by using new drugs developed in microgravity research aboard the International Space Station. My predecessor occasionally did some things right.”

There were some smiles and knowing nods from a few members of the audience. Many were still surprised at the topic and wondered where she was going with her speech. Some even noticed that she didn't mention how resistant the ranchers had been to using those new drugs. They had been forced to use them by the US government.

Bob remembered those past events well.

It had been like getting your children to take their daily vitamins. Only afterwards, sometimes years later, did they finally realize that it was really good for them.

His alert eyes picked out a student in the second row who seemed a little fidgety.

Were those beads of sweat on his brow?

He pulled out a small pair of binoculars, not much more than old-fashioned opera glasses, which he kept for crowd control.

Nah, just a youthful sheen on that forehead.

He kept surveying the crowd with the glasses, though, studying the faces.

“What can the President do about it? How can I get you motivated? Well, we all know that Congress is often motivated by money. It's very simple: when the people back home make money, their congressman is re-elected. Well, there's money to be made in

space. We can no longer afford to let the Europeans and the Asians monopolize its exploration and especially its exploitation. I think the excitement about the exploration will return once we're out there again. The bill I'm trying to get through Congress, co-authored by your representative and one from Nebraska, will pour money into space research in much the same way NIH works hand-in-hand with the drug companies to develop new drugs. Here's how."

She clicked to the next slide, one filled with four cartoons with arrows connecting them. It was a slide that one spoke to, using the cartoons to help people remember the relationships.

President Remington paused to take a sip of water. Nash's Irish whiskey had left her mouth a little dry. As a polished public speaker, she knew the dangers of a dry mouth.

Just at the moment she put the glass down, the young student in the second row of seats stood up suddenly. Without a word he pulled a gun and fired six shots. Three hit the President.

When the student stood up and began to raise his arm, Bob Nash reacted instinctively. For a big man, he could move fast. By the fourth shot he was between the President and the student. He took that shot and the fifth one. The sixth hit Jimmy Ito.

Other Secret Service agents, ever vigilant, were on the student in a moment. Even before that, members of the crowd already had disarmed him and thrown him to the ground.

Attempts to assassinate a President or a member of his family had already been made several times in the 21st century. In spite of extreme security, one or two had been wounded.

With the increase in crime the number of private citizens legally or illegally carrying concealed handguns had also increased. Technological improvements in firearms had made them even more deadly. Guns, rifles, vibrablades and high powered tasers were sold openly on the internet. There were not enough cops around to ensure that they were being sold to law-abiding citizens. The authorities became more reactive and less proactive as the century wore on. Moreover, various states passed laws that not only allowed private citizens to openly carry weapons but also gave them special legal protection in cases of a violent response to perceived threats. In many ways US society was at war with itself.

At the same time personal weapons technology was being developed and gun laws were being relaxed, technology responded by creating more as well as better ways to protect a person's body. For example, the same tasers were a powerful deterrent against muggers. Lightweight body armor had progressed to the point where a public figure like the President could wear it and not feel uncomfortable.

As a consequence, the two shots that struck Sheila Remington in the torso did little more than knock the wind out of her. Unfortunately the third had gone high. In New York City's Soho district or the Chicago high crime areas she might have been wearing a helmet that would have saved her. She could hardly do that on a Wichita college stage.

The third bullet hit her in the head. The President was dead by the time she hit the stage floor. Chief of Staff Jimmy Ito later died in the ambulance in route to the hospital.

Bob Nash, who had taken the other two shots, was saved by his own body armor. By the next year the assassination had caused another war in the Middle East and Bob Nash had left the Secret Service.

Chapter One

George Washington University, Washington DC, December, 2077, Friday...

“The person at the number you are trying to reach is not available. At the sound of the tone you may leave this person a short message.”

Sandy Clark waited for the tone and then briefly said why she was calling. She figured that after all these years she might even have an incorrect number. If so, some complete stranger would get the message, scratch his head, and then forget about it.

The historian's frustration. Even when you're dealing with recent history.

She put the phone back in its stand. The number she called had come up on one of the reference e-docs she had received Wednesday from the National Archives. It had been a long shot. Considering the state of her thesis, long shots were not to be overlooked. She didn't even know whether Bob Nash was still alive. If he was still

alive, it could take some time to figure out where he lived now. She didn't want to take that time at the moment.

She had been in her small cubicle since 7:30 that December morning. In the first week of January she had to give a progress report on her thesis research. In the interim she also had her parents 25th wedding anniversary where attendance was mandatory. As a consequence, she felt the pressure of time on her.

She knew she was far from being ready for the progress report, so she left Miss Boots, her lovable old Maine coon cat, sprawled on the covers of the unmade bed and took the maglev into Foggy Bottom. The high-speed train ran above the old tracks of the DC Metro and was filled with the usual passengers for that time in the morning.

Riding with her were the homeless, wearing the multiple layers of clothes that represented their entire wardrobe, carrying all their other belongings in old duffels and bags. Most had spent the entire night on the train or sleeping in the stations. Sometimes the police would run them off but most of the time they didn't bother. With their low wages, cops weren't too many steps from being homeless themselves. In fact, some of them were.

There were also the prostitutes and their pimps. The latter usually kept a low profile, knowing that the cops usually went after their charges who usually got off with no more than a warning, especially if they offered a freebie to the cop.

There were the muggers. It was easy to tell them apart from the homeless since the muggers were usually better dressed. One studied Sandy for a moment. She gripped her taser and prepared herself, but nothing came of it as his attention turned elsewhere.

There were also the activists, those who carried signs for all kinds of causes, proselytizing for some new religious sect or warning against some new government conspiracy.

It was hard to tell the difference between any of these and the mentally ill because those dropped by the social services often became homeless, prostitutes, muggers, or activists. Sandy also counted among the mentally ill the occasional flasher or other pervert.

These were the down-and-out of a society in chaos. Every year there were more of them as the world became more and more homogenized, the numbers in poverty increasing while a few maintained a sumptuous lifestyle. In the countries of the Third World standards of living had actually gone up, but not much. In Europe and the US standards of living had actually gone down. People worked harder, received less vacation time, and had exorbitant taxes and medical care costs.

Sandy didn't reflect much on these economic realities. Her stomach grumbled because she had not eaten any breakfast. There was little at home to eat – a tin of tuna for dinner and some food for Miss Boots. She wondered if the little deli near the university would have some day-old muffins or buns. It would be hard to justify anything more, considering her budget.

The few real commuters on the train sipped the cheap chemical swill that was little more than coffee-flavored caffeine water and squinted at their PDA screens in order to catch the morning newsnets. A few were well-dressed business people, always watchful for muggers, but most were government employees that were assured a steady

wage, some basic medical coverage, and a small pension, all of which were just enough to keep their heads above the water if they were frugal. Some, especially the business people, were so wired in that the PDA plugged right into the side of their head, technology that was already twenty years old. It allowed the user to be on-line all the time, if he were so inclined. Sandy had never felt the need to do that. She didn't want to feel that her brain was just another CPU on the internet.

A short escalator ride brought her to street level. Jumping over the piles of refuse and the occasional homeless person, she walked the few blocks to GW. A flasher she often met confronted her on the sidewalk. He did a little jig before he flashed her. She knew his routine well.

“Joey, you're going to get pneumonia. Go into the station.”

Joey looked at her with his one good eye. He had lost the other in a knife fight. Still, he believed he recognized her.

“Yeah, station. Good idea. Bless me, Mother Mary.” He made the sign of the cross, closed the old raincoat, and ran off.

She sighed and resumed her walk, enjoying the crisp, December air and studying the people she passed. It was a habit engendered by wariness – street smarts, her father called it – and just plain curiosity about her fellow inhabitants in the nation's capital.

A few of the passersby carried Christmas packages. There was nothing ostentatious as no one wanted to attract muggers, but there was the occasional bright flash of festive reds and greens. As usual, the shopping had begun shortly after

Halloween, so now some people were almost in a desperate state to get the presents bought, wrapped, and stowed under the tree.

This close to GW, of course, many people were just students, their dress and their attitudes as unconventional as always, even with their coarse winter coats. She even saw a few of her own students, said hi, and smiled. She remembered all their names. It was a matter of pride and duty for her to do so. She remembered when she had been a freshman at Harvard where only a few professors and instructors ever managed to learn their students' names. She wasn't about to make her own students feel like they were just entries in a computer database.

A hint of snow was in the air as she strolled toward the high tower that housed GW's political science department, although, more often than not, in DC it would probably just be freezing rain or sleet.

What a contrast with the summer.

Then everyone would be in a hurry to get into an air-conditioned environment to escape from the heat and humidity as the swamp that was DC took its toll.

Why did they ever decide to build the nation's capital here?

Once in the tower, she removed her coat and called for the elevator. Her cubicle on the fifth floor was small but comfortable. It had been her home for three years. There was clutter, yet it was organized clutter.

She sat down at her laptop and continued to work on an outline of what she intended to say at her meeting with her thesis committee. That was when she made the

call to Bob Nash. Disappointed, she temporarily put on the back burner the little project of finding the Secret Service agent.

Just before 9 am, one of the undergraduates who was a department courier financed by a work study program, brought her three boxes of records. They were all from the Department of Homeland Security, obtained via what little was left of the Freedom of Information Act after several updates to the Patriot Act had finished shredding it. It had taken her nearly a year to get the documents so at first she was excited and immediately opened them.

As she sorted through the contents of the boxes, however, she realized that DHS had decided to make her life difficult. While there were a few computer data cubes in the boxes, the content consisted mostly of hard copies.

What a waste of paper!

She also noted with dismay that a lot of the lines in the documents were blacked out. Heavy government security had always been the bane of the academic researcher; this was no exception. But she also knew that most material was inconsistently classified. There had been a team of people blacking out those lines, a task as old as Washington DC, yet what one thought was classified, another might not. By correlating facts taken from all the documents, she hoped to come up with a clear story.

I just don't know what that story is yet.

The story she was trying to write, or rather the subject of her thesis, was to explore and debunk the theories about who was responsible for President Sheila Remington's assassination that had led to the last war in the Middle East. The

assassination was still shrouded in mystery. Most people thought that it would remain so, like the Kennedy assassination in the previous century. The Indonesian graduate student that shot her never admitted to belonging to any radical group.

In this case, however, there was considerable circumstantial evidence that a home-grown radical Muslim group called Bravo Islam had pulled it off. A considerably expanded Bravo Islam still existed and continued to deny any participation in the assassination. If they were responsible, there was no public knowledge about what they had hoped to gain by it. The war had gone very badly for the Muslim world.

Most people weren't even interested anymore. In some sense the war still continued as radical Muslims, either home-grown or ones who infiltrated the porous US borders, attacked the nation's shopping malls, public events, and infrastructure. The American public had learned to live with it. There were those few who fought fire with fire, of course. Radical Christian groups fought the radical Muslims tooth and nail, mostly in America's big cities. The DHS and other agencies under the umbrella of the National Intelligence Directorate were known to be extremely lethal on occasions. But the average US citizen was just tired of it all.

There was really nothing to fight over anyway. The Middle East was mostly at peace, although many more millions now lived in poverty and disease. The oil was mostly gone. Most of the profits generated from the rising prices of an increasingly scarce commodity had been squandered. The anemic economic development that the remainder brought came too little and too late.

Only the West and the Far East had possessed the scientific wherewithal to survive the oil scarcity, although they were still struggling. The wonderful world of plastics was mostly supported by petroleum derived from coal or garbage often taking the place of oil. The oil that was left was either heavy crude or found in tar sands and shale. The refining processes for that were more costly, complicated, and time-consuming compared to the time when light crude was king.

The whole world was on a downward economic spiral accelerated by the homogenizing influences of lack of fuel, globalization, and over-population. The downward spiral spread from the Middle East, then to Europe, and finally to the West and the Far East. No one was escaping.

Sandy was intensely interested in the Remington assassination. Her favorite uncle, her father's brother, had died in that last war in the Middle East, for one thing. Her parents had been involved in other ways. Plus, Sandy was an admirer of Sheila Remington. Her promising political career had been cut short. Sandy wanted to understand the hows and the whys. That she could do something she was so motivated to do anyway and get a doctorate out of it in the process was occasionally amusing. Most people's work was not like that.

She began the laborious task of scanning the documents into her laptop as she went through the boxes. She was generally happy with the material. She forgot completely about her outline, beginning to correlate the data using a program she herself had written. It was a take-off on a standard search engine where the code tried to find

logical matches to a user's input. In this case, one document served as input and the program scanned all the others.

There were lots of correlations, so she had to keep refining the search criteria. In a separate file, the program kept track of weirdness, things that didn't seem to correlate with anything. She would check this separate file occasionally, hoping to find nuggets for her thesis.

She worked through the whole morning, putting in a final run just before she took the elevator down to get something cheap in the cafeteria. The day-old muffin had just about gagged her. Yesterday's soup was bland and watery but at least it went down better.

When she returned, the program had finished, so she checked her weirdness file. It listed three anomalies from three different documents. She brought up the three files on her large screen monitor. She put down the soup and stared at her screen.

The first was a memo from a surveillance the DHS had run against a businessman named Vladimir Kalinin with suspected ties to a very violent and radical Christian group called Purity. It seemed to be a routine surveillance. Yet, from the President's appointment calendar Sandy already had available, this same man had met with Sheila Remington in DC just the week before she was assassinated in Wichita.

One of Sheila Remington's successes had been to close down Purity. The group not only had executed abortion doctors, legal or otherwise, they also had executed women that received abortions. They had also destroyed numerous fertility clinics,

killing everyone inside. Based in Kansas City, the group had created cells all over the US.

The second was a memo from an FBI agent in Wichita to Bob Nash who had been the Secret Service agent in charge of the assassination investigation. The author was an analyst, Ted Randall, working for the FBI, and the memo subject line read: “Possible radical Christian involvement in Remington assassination?”

Ted Randall suggested that Purity was possibly connected, basing his opinion on one group member’s interrogation when they picked him up and charged him for a bank heist. It was a tangential reference completely unrelated to anything else Sandy could remember, except for the first memo. It was such an anomaly, contrasting with the conventional wisdom about the assassination, that it had to be a fluke.

The third was a copy of an e-mail thread between an FBI agent in Denver, Joe Prescott, and Bob Nash again that seemed to be a follow-up to the memo.

Nash: “Can you clear up what Randall is saying?”

Prescott: “Are you asking about the artifact? We don’t know where it ended up.”

Nash: “What artifact? Randall says you helped interrogate that bank robber Pete Casey. Can you strengthen his argument about the Purity connection?”

Prescott: “Oh, Casey. Just the other day Randall asked me about something else. I thought you were referring to that. Anyway, Casey is a real nut job. Anything I know about him and Purity is in the report. Randall wants to make a big deal about it. He gets these hunches sometimes. I’ll grant you they’re sometimes right, but not this time. Kalinin’s squeaky clean on this one.”

Is this whole Purity thing a distraction? And who was Vladimir Kalinin?

She hurriedly began digging into her notes and other documents she had collected on Sheila Remington. There was plenty on Purity, of course, although there was no suggestion that they had been even remotely connected to the assassination.

Nevertheless, she recorded the FBI agent's name in her computer records and made a note to track him down. She knew plenty about Bob Nash but she didn't know why he didn't continue with his follow-up of the FBI memo. It was all the more important now that she talk to him if he was still alive. She also fully intended to follow the trail of Vladimir Kalinin. These were all loose ends and she didn't want to leave loose ends. Maybe her thesis committee would never know, but she would.

She marked all three anomalies as important and then reluctantly went back to her outline. At least she had the news to report that she had received the three boxes of documents from DHS.

That evening, as was her custom, she backed up her hard disk. Through an RF link to the desktop in her studio apartment, the disk was already backed up there, but she was always cautious. There was too much valuable information associated with her thesis. She couldn't afford to lose it. So every Friday she did a backup to data cubes over and beyond any automatic backups.

In this case, she also made a copy of the backup. The first set of carefully labeled data cubes she put into a drawer with previous backups. The second set of unlabeled data cubes she stuffed into a mailer, addressed it to her home address in Vermont, and then put it into the delivery service bin. She was going home next Wednesday. Although she

planned on taking the laptop, she would not have access to the desktop in her apartment. By sending the backup, she would ensure her access to everything if somehow her laptop croaked on the trip.

She finally turned out her light and left the office, wondering if Miss Boots would forgive her for the late dinner. It was 8 pm. It had been a long day. She was tired and famished.

The cat accepted her verbal apology because it was accompanied by an offer of a little tuna mixed in with her regular food. When she finished, she watched Sandy eat her tuna sandwich. The extra mayo made the two-day old bread almost soft enough to eat. The hard parts she pinched off and gave to the cat who was sitting on the chair across from her at the little dinette set tucked away into one corner of the studio apartment's kitchen. The apartment was all of two rooms, the bathroom and the rest. It was adequate and the right price. Sandy didn't make much as an instructor at GW so she was thankful to be in university subsidized housing.

She answered a few e-mails that had come in on the old desktop computer that she had used since her days at Harvard. She then read a chapter in a used historical novel she had picked up from a barter table two months ago. Finally, by eleven, she decided that she was relaxed enough to sleep. She had already brushed her teeth after dinner to get the tuna taste out, so she dropped her sweat pants and sweat shirt to the floor in a heap of other dirty clothes, turned out the light, and crawled into bed. She was soon asleep.

She was used to hearing night noises. The building was old and the walls thin. The night noises were often associated with drunk students coming home from a party,

especially on Fridays and Saturdays. Sometimes a homeless person would sneak into the building and sleep in the corridor.

The noise that woke her was different, though. It was a key in her lock.

My lock!

The DC area was not exactly the safest place on Earth. Alexandria's old section that her studio was in had seen better times. Now it was mostly filled with students and others willing to team up with four or five room-mates because they couldn't afford to have a place of their own. Sandy counted herself lucky to have found the studio. She had lived with three room-mates at Harvard for three years and had hated it.

Although the area was heavily populated and there were drugs for sell on most of the street corners, she never had problems before. Most thieves knew that people living there had very little to steal. But she also knew that there were perverts out there who had other things on their mind besides robbery.

Where's my backpack with the taser?

She looked around for her backpack, but didn't see it. She didn't have time for a more thorough search. She tiptoed to her closet and found her softball bat. She had been quite the player at Harvard, but now she just participated in pick-up games with other students. Still, she knew how to swing a bat.

When the door opened and a burly man stepped in, she was there to swing the bat at his head. She wasn't about to fool around with a potential rapist. Incredibly he caught the bat in one meaty hand, swung her around with it, and then grabbed her by the waist

with his free arm. He took the bat away gently and then bound and gagged her with professional ease. He seemed oblivious to the fact that she was dressed only in panties.

Not a pervert. A thief, maybe?

“Spunky little bitch, ain’t you?” Miss Boots then chose to crawl out from under the bed. She started bristling and hissing. The man scratched his unshaven chin and looked dumbly at the cat. “Nice kitty. Mind your manners or I’ll cut your eyes out. Your little mama’s gotta leave right now with me. I hope you find something to eat while she’s gone.”

The cat wouldn’t have any of it. She went back under the bed. Her attacker shrugged, seemingly amused. He then took the bat to the closet and put it back, wiping it clean of prints before he did. After that he glanced at the desktop, then walked over to it. Sandy couldn’t see what he was doing, but he spent a good fifteen minutes rapidly keying with those oversized hands. Finally, he seemed satisfied and wiped the keyboard clean of prints.

“You got any backups?” he asked, going over to her and removing the gag.

Although her eyes were wide with fear, Sandy managed to find her voice.

“In my office at GW.”

She felt a semi-honest answer might help her situation. She didn’t have to tell him about the backups she had sent to Vermont.

“I’ll take care of those later,” he informed her. “Now we’re going for a little ride. Just you and me.”

He replaced the gag, hoisted her over his shoulder, closed and locked the door behind them, and headed down the stairs. On the street, he threw her into the back seat of a car that she recognized to be one of the newer multiple energy source vehicles which ran off just about anything besides gasoline. It was a car that was far too expensive to be left overnight on the streets of this neighborhood. He obviously hadn't intended to be staying long.

Has he been stalking me? Am I being kidnapped? Why? I have no money. Dad and Mom are fairly well off compared to the average Joe, but they're not rich either.

She thought of her father, once a medical doctor that had repaired war-ravaged bodies in the Middle East. He now had his private practice up in Vermont, quietly helping people with their aches and pains and other ailments, often pro bono. Her mother, born in Iraq and a run-away at age twelve, had met her father during that last war. Her world had completely changed. With her travel agency, which mostly did on-line business running off a bank of servers, she helped people in her own way to relax from the struggles of modern life.

Sandy struggled with her bonds but they were expertly applied. Whoever her captor was, he was not your common thief or pervert.

Where is he taking me?

They traveled for about thirty minutes. She heard the sounds of traffic – the screech of brakes, the horns, even the curses of some of the drivers in a multitude of languages. She figured they were cutting across DC, heading east. Then their car turned off into a graveled parking lot.

Her captor finally opened the back door and sat her up. She shivered in the night air. A mixture of rain and sleet was falling.

I'm going to catch pneumonia.

“We have arrived, spunky. Get out!”

As she did so, she looked around. A sign at the end of the parking lot said, “Welcome to Rock Creek Park, Washington’s Breath of Fresh Air.” Occasionally Sandy had gone running in the park in better weather, admiring its lush growth while she got her aerobic exercise. Now it looked foreboding. Most of the trees had lost their leaves. Their branches dripped silver blood in the eldritch light of the urban forest.

Her captor pushed her into the woods.

“Nothing personal, you understand. I’ve just got a job to do. Keep going, spunky. Too bad you got involved in this. As they say, too much knowledge can be dangerous.”

He kept pushing her further into the dense forest. They had long ago left any recognizable trail. Both she and her captor collected cuts on their faces and arms as low lying branches from the trees slapped them, the sting made all the more raw by the wetness. Her captor didn’t seem concerned by them but they added to her misery and fear.

She stumbled several times, cutting her face even more as she fell head first to the ground. She was unable to catch herself with her arms and hands bound. The burly man just picked her up and pushed her onward.

Once the man’s cell rang. He spoke quickly in his raspy voice.

“You sent it? OK. We’re good to go then. I’ll check out the GW office after I’m done here.”

He closed the phone and popped it back into his pocket.

“Come on, spunky. You’ve got an appointment to keep.” He pushed her forward again.

Soon they came out in a small clearing where Sandy could finally see the roiling clouds eerily lit by the reflections from the light of the city.

“All right, we’re here.”

He removed the gag and pushed her down to her knees. She turned to look up at him, tears in her eyes.

“What – what are you going to do? You could have raped me back at my studio. Why are you doing this? What did you mean back in the parking lot? Are you going to kill me?”

She was becoming incoherent. He just stared at her for a moment. There was no lust in the stare, only sadness. In the time he had been with her she had become a real person, someone’s daughter.

A nice kid who has a nice cat. An innocent victim of the eternal struggles between men of power.

He mentally shrugged. He had a job to do. He methodically pulled out a gun from a shoulder holster and shot her twice in the back of the head.

He then began the real work. It was gruesome and time-consuming, but he was a consummate professional. And he knew very well how to fake a crime scene. He had done it many times before.