

The End of Slavery

By Craig A Maciolek

Prologue: Chance

About 530 million years ago, a very large school of fish drifted with the currents in an impossibly large ocean. These fish had never been seen by the eyes of humans; not even their fossils. They looked a little like what we know to be a fish today, in shape and motion, however, these fish were extremely simple. They had no eyes or any other sensory apparatus except for a single invisible cluster of nerve endings in the flesh of their foreheads. From their forehead, the nerves traveled down their spine and into the muscles along their length. These fish survived by drifting along with the currents and filtering food from the water. They were not great swimmers, although they did jockey around a little within the school.

The current that carried this large school of fish flowed over, and collected, the super heated water of an underwater volcanic vent. As the water became warmer, most of the fish experienced the firing, or stimulation, of the nerve endings in the center of their forehead, which caused their muscles to react and made them swim faster; straight forward to their deaths. Some of the fish experienced no nerve firing at all and drifted slowly to their death. A very small number of these fish had nerves that fired and caused their muscles to react, making them swim faster, but for some reason they turned and swam away from the hot water, out of the current, and to their survival. Not all of the fish that turned, survived. Some were not strong enough swimmers and were carried to their deaths by the current. Some were turned again by bumping into other fish. Also, some of the fish that reacted by swimming straight forward, survived because they were bumped into turning out of the current and harms way by a fish that had turned.

Over the millennia, the fish that reacted to the hot water by swimming away and the fish that were bumped out of harm's way, evolved into two separate species.

Chapter One

Michael was late. He hated when he was late. Working as fast as he could without making a mess or missing a step, he put all the cleaning supplies away and rinsed out the mop. When everything was in order he looked at his watch and saw that he was behind by three minutes. He checked that his clothes were in order and left the janitor's shop. He ran up the three flights of stairs to the main level, paused at the door to compose himself, and came out of the stairwell by the elevators as usual.

He was happy to see that the workers were only just starting to trickle in, that he had not missed the mad morning rush, which gave him a moment to decide where he was going to watch from. The main entry to the federal building had an L shape to it. The entryway itself was recessed into the building by a funnel shaped courtyard that was about fifty feet from the parking lot. Once through the front doors the lobby opened up into a large area with couches to the right and the main security desk directly across from the entryway. Past the security desk, to the left, was the elevator lobby. However, to get to the elevators the workers had to go through a security checkpoint with metal detectors and armed guards. To Michael, there was a noticeable difference between the desk guards and the armed guards.

He used to like the security guards behind the desk, watching the monitors and answering the phones, but he had not been in the mood to watch from behind them for a while. When he stands behind them they talk to him under their breath about the people walking in. In the past that was alright because it made him feel like he belonged, but his interest in the people had changed and he found it to be a distraction – the talk came from a bad place he didn't want to associate with anymore. Michael was trying to be more confident and he recognized that laughing at other people only gave the illusion of confidence, and that illusion did more harm than good. Michael James was a little ashamed that it took him so long to figure that out.

There were three other places that he liked to stand and watch. The first one was all the way out front, to the right side of the main doors, where he watched through the glass as all the people were herded together into a few doors by the narrowing courtyard walls; the people would acknowledge one another for the first time and engaged in simple organization. The second place was on the corner where the main lobby turned into the elevator lobby, just behind the metal detectors and the heavily armed guards, where he would watch the interactions between the people as they organized themselves further and their interactions with the guards who processed them. The last place was behind the elevators at the far end of the elevator lobby, where he could watch all the people waiting. Today, he decided he was going to watch from the corner behind the metal detectors.

He called it watching, but he didn't really technically watch much of anything, just the shoes going by. He called it watching because he didn't have the full understanding or confidence to call it what it really was. He knew he was actually feeling the people, feeling their emotional

energy, but since he couldn't explain it completely and clearly to anyone he kept it all to himself. For him, feeling other people's emotional energy was like watching, or listening. To him, emotional energy was as real as light or sound.

As Michael came out of the elevator lobby and took his position on the corner, the guards gave him a quick glance and then looked at one another as they did their work. They smirked and made their usual quiet comments. Michael took out his Grandfather's old watch chain that he had used a pair of pliers on to make into a smooth loop, and began to rock a little while working the chain through his fingers, link by link, with his hands directly in front of his chest. His eyes stared past his hands to the floor, open but useless, as he put his entire focus on that part of him that received emotional energy.

The flow of people coming into the building began to pick up and Michael was in his place; physically and emotionally. In the fourteen years that he had been doing this, he had become quite good. He had learned that everyone had an emotional fingerprint in two ways. The first was the frequency that their emotional energy was transmitted. To him there was a spectrum of emotional energy and he could receive a certain swath of that spectrum, a majority of it, but there were a few people who transmitted outside of his range. It was either that or they did not transmit anything at all, but he simply could not accept that option. Emotional energy was such a large part of his life it was impossible for him to believe that there were people who were completely silent. The other part of each person's emotional fingerprint was their bass rhythm. To him, people were like music. They had a persistent, but quiet, emotional bass rhythm playing underneath the louder and more varied melody. It was Michael's belief that this bass rhythm was absorbed and learned from the environment people grew up in. It was a long term conditioned piece of music. The melody, on the other hand, was the day to day dance of mood and temperament that can change instantly in response to the day's events. What was very interesting to Michael, something he had learned about seven years ago, was that the melody was tied to the bass; that two people's happiness or sadness were not the same. Our melodies were dictated by our bass rhythm. A person with a dark heavy bass rhythm had a happiness that was different than a person who had a lighter and more playful bass rhythm, even if they appeared to be happy about the same thing in the same way.

Recently Michael had been focusing on the interactive nature of this music. How the melodies can change, morph and adapt as people bounced off of one another, and all the while the different bass rhythms maintained their tempo. Most people had similar rhythms. Rhythms that would synchronize to one another if the people remained in contact long enough. Most people were very similar; he guessed from growing up in the same general way. However, in this dance, there were a few people who had a very unique bass rhythm. Michael called them the "untouchables". They were the ones who had been teaching him the most, simply because there were so few of them swimming in a sea of darkness. It was these few people who had convinced him that there was an emotional energy spectrum. Because the people he could not feel at all would respond to them like others did. If everyone had the same general kind of bass rhythm, then it would be hard to say that the people he couldn't feel didn't simply learn the dance steps and were faking it. But, when they interacted with a person who had a very different

bass rhythm, they responded spontaneously like everyone else did. Thus, Michael was convinced that, while he could not feel these people, others had a range of frequency that included them and were interacting normally.

The traffic into the metal detectors and guard station increased and the emotional dance picked up. In the fourteen years that he had been working at the Federal Building, there had only been three security issues. At those times the guards had been perfect. Like most people, the guards used the mystical terms "instinct", "intuition", or "a feeling in their guts" to describe why they knew someone was planning something bad. Michael knew better. The rest of the time it was all a choreographed dance that was only performed for the sake of the dance. It was a game of mood, temperament, and ego. Sometimes the guards gave someone a hard time because the person was feeling good and strong, and other times the guards would pick on someone because a guard was feeling low and weak. The six people who had the unique bass rhythms were the anomaly. The six "untouchables" were never bothered by the guards. Michael thought it was because they had learned that those people were above their game. He had watched, one time, as a new guard put one of the "untouchables" through all of the paces, but the person never stopped being helpful and polite, and ended up leaving the guard station feeling the exact same as they did when they approached. The guard felt worse and ended up taking it out on someone else to regain his self esteem. The lesson to Michael was that it takes emotional energy to try and drain someone of emotional energy, so if the other person had more and was better at managing it, then it was not worth trying.

This was the most interesting dynamic in the interaction of emotional energy as Michael experienced it. Since people were not aware of their ability to feel emotional energy, they accepted responsibility for everything they felt. Thus, all of their actions were drawn from the bias that everything they were feeling was somehow about them and they had to control all of it in one way or another. It was like assuming that everything we heard with our ears was about us and something we must act on. A person would go crazy living like that. Especially if their ears were very sensitive. Michael was all too familiar with that. Slavery to the senses was what his life was like before he made the choice to walk his own path.

Suddenly, there was a change in the whole environment. Everything jumped up an octave and all the people were starting to show subtle signs of increased agitation. Everyone was feeling it even though they were not aware of it. Sometimes this happened because there was a glitch, like one of the metal detectors going off-line making everything more complicated, but Michael couldn't see anything out of the ordinary with his eyes. It was the beginning of the full rush and things seemed to be moving normally. That was when it hit him – a mixture of piercing fear and anger like he had never felt before coming from a single point outside in the courtyard.

He had to move, he had to get out of there, but where? He felt control slipping away from him so it had to be fast. He looked toward the elevators, but the lobby was crowded with people waiting. For some reason beyond his understanding he chose to move toward the sharpness. He quickly slid through the exit gate at the guard station and returned to the wall on the left side of the main lobby where he moved along quickly, trying to keep as far away from the source of

the energy as possible. He made it to the doors and paused for a moment while waiting for a little break in the traffic, and then made his move.

His heart was pounding and he realized that he was not in control anymore. He had pushed two people to get through the door, and once through, with his eyes on the ground in front of him, he bounced off of people left and right. He heard their comments and protests, felt bad for what he was doing, but nothing stopped him. He made it back to the wall to the left on the outside and started moving away from the exit when he noticed something very strange; it made him stop and look with his eyes. The source of the fear and anger divided into two. The fear was approaching the entrance to his right and the anger was further away – out towards the parking lot.

Michael took a step in to get a closer look at the fear walking towards the door. It wasn't just fear, there was subtle sadness and frustration interwoven. He saw a man walking towards the entrance. He looked a little disheveled, like he was wearing someone else's clothes that were too big for him, and was carrying a large, old, briefcase. He stared straight forward as though in a trance and was whispering something over and over again. Michael looked him up and down and felt bad for this man. He wanted to help this man. But, then he lost all control. A dagger of anger stabbed right through him.

When he looked to see it's source, there were two men glaring right at him from a van at the far side of the parking lot. He turned and ran away. Running along the wall, he came around the corner and ran into a woman carrying a box of papers. The papers went flying and the woman landed on the ground. Michael looked at her, got stuck in her eyes for a moment, got into a half bend as though he was going to help, but froze. He knew this woman. Not surprising in itself because he knew everyone who worked there, but she was a woman who stood out because she felt very familiar to him. She was not one of the "untouchables", but Michael always noticed her when she was around. As some people started to gather to help pick up the papers, he broke his eyes from hers, quietly said "I'm sorry", then jerked back from another stab of anger and ran away.

The woman sat up in disbelief and frustration. While she was sitting, she dejectedly started picking up papers. Someone helping said, "they shouldn't let people like that work here... I mean..." She didn't agree with that sentiment, but she was too disappointed to say anything. She was alright, just felt so frustrated by not feeling she could get mad at that man. He being disabled and all. All there was for her to do was spend far too much time, time she didn't have, getting her papers back in order. She got up and said thanks to the people who had stopped to help. And just as she bent over again to pick up more papers she was suddenly thrown backwards through the air and onto the ground again. And as she laid on her back, dazed at the ringing in her ears, the tingling all over her body, and little pieces of something hitting her face, she marveled in wonder as everything faded out.

Michael was close to the other side of the parking lot when the explosion pushed him forward, making him stumble. He regained his balance and continued to run as fast as he could. A few moments after the explosion he put his fingers in his ears. While his hearing was very sensitive, he was not trying to block out any sounds. Putting his fingers in his ears was a reflex that he had when he wanted to stop any form of input from coming in, no matter if it was sound, light, or emotional energy. Shortly after the shock wave of the blast almost knocked him off his feet, a tidal wave of fear, anguish and sorrow had washed over him. He wanted it to stop.

Agent Anna Elizabeth Spencer came to with an aching, groggy head, a loud ringing in her ears, and pain under her arms and legs. Looking around told her she was being carried by four people and that was why her arms and legs hurt. She couldn't remember if she was wearing pants or a skirt so she looked down, but couldn't make sense of what she was seeing. She tried to lower her hands to make sure she wasn't showing herself to the world, but she couldn't reach. The effort caused one of the people carrying her by the arm to lose their grip and stumble a bit, then he grabbed again a little harder. Agent Spencer looked up at that man and saw him saying something to her. She heard the sounds he was making through the ringing, but they didn't make any sense. She grew a little panicked because she wanted to be sure she was properly covered. She looked up at the two men carrying her legs, each in turn, and then her eyes focused past them and saw smoke rising out the building where she worked. And then she remembered, and started to cry.

Michael did not know how long he had been running, but he became aware of his Grandfather's old watch chain hitting him on the side of his face and that brought him back to the place where he could choose to be in control. He took his fingers out of his ears and came to a stop. Bending over and trying to catch his breath he wondered if the volume of fear and anguish went down, or if he had simply gotten used to it. He didn't get a chance to think about it very long, because even though he was not at a bus stop, a bus came to a stop next to him. The door opened and the driver asked if he needed a ride. Michael answered by getting on the bus. The driver was full of questions about what had happened, but Michael just walked past him and sat down without saying a word. The driver knew Michael, all the drivers knew Michael, and knew of his different ways. So, the driver did not stop talking to Michael even though Michael showed no effort to respond. Sometimes Michael wondered if they were listening to him in other ways, because often the things they were saying were in perfect sync with the things he was thinking and feeling; the driver would ask a question and Michael would answer it in his head, then the driver would continue on as though he heard the response.

About one hundred yards behind the bus, a black SUV with dark windows patiently matched its speed and path.

Agent Spencer was sitting on a little grass strip on the far side of the parking lot where emergency vehicles were setting up their base of operations. She was checked out by an EMT and told that it appeared she just had minor cuts and bruises, but she should go into the hospital to get her head checked out. To Agent Spencer that was as good as a clean bill of health. Her head had cleared up and her hearing was much better, although there was still some ringing. She had things to do, but she couldn't help taking a few moments sitting on the grass, pulling on her pant leg, feeling guilty that she was so concerned about whether or not her panties were showing when so many good people had just lost their lives. Consciously she understood the whole disorientation thing and that her mind was muddled, but she felt that was no excuse. She felt as though she just witnessed an unconscious part of herself that she wanted to strangle.

Her first call was to her mother. It was quick and sharp; "Hello?... Mom, I'm Ok. Turn on the TV and you will understand. Please let everyone know and I will call when I can." and she hung up. The next call was to her partner who she hoped and prayed was his usual late. He had to have answered before the first ring ended, "Where you at?" "On the grass over on the diner side of the parking lot, by the ambulances." "You alright?" "Fine." "I'm helping the firefighters so I will see you in a little while." "Do what you gotta do, I will be here." and she hung up. Her third call was to her boss who she hoped and prayed was his usual early. She got a little nervous as she listened to the fifth ring. Then he answered in a muffled but knowing voice, "Hello Agent Spencer, are you feeling OK?" She responds a little confused, "Hello... yes... where are you?" "Twenty feet to your left." She looked over at the smoke-dirty man sitting in the grass with an oxygen mask over his face. She hung up her phone and moved over to sit next to him.

Chapter Two

At his apartment, Michael was pacing along his usual path that went from the kitchen window, through the little eating area where the front door is, around the corner into what passed as his living room, and to the window next to the television set. He stands for a moment next to the TV, peers around the drapes out of habit but doesn't really look at anything in particular, and then turns to make the return trip to the kitchen window. Michael would do this when he was overwhelmed; too much information going through his head.

Over the past fourteen years, Michael had slowly developed an understanding of how his brain worked. Over those years he noticed that he paced less the more he understood about what was happening around him. He also noticed that he did other things less frequently. The fingers in his ears always embarrassed him, but he also rocked in place, or wrung his hands, when there was no room to pace. On the other hand, he also noticed he was getting better at talking to people. He now regularly looked some people he knew in the face while talking to them. But still, that only lasted so long before they reached a point in the conversation that pushed Michael away. When that happened his eyes dropped back to the ground and he would start wringing his hands or rocking. His friends understood. Well, actually, they did not understand, but they were familiar with it as being the end of the conversation.

Michael understood why this happened to him and even categorized three different kinds of reactions that he could not control; there were the times when his brain was overloaded, there were the times when something was happening around him that his brain did not understand, and there were the times when people would emotionally push him away and he could not physically get away. Also, he knew how different levels of intensity appeared in his reactions; ranging from simply becoming submissive with his eyes on the ground, to running down the street with his fingers in his ears. He knew that his senses were very sensitive, and a very little change in the environment could cause him to react. Michael was aware that it could take him a very long time for him to become comfortable in a new place because he had to register every little aspect of that environment. Even longer when the environment included the variables of other people's ever changing emotions. However, he had also learned that there was a process to it all. That the over stimulation of his senses would inevitably lead to over working his brain as it tried to catalog and make sense of everything. Thus, all new experiences ended in pacing, and the amount of pacing was dictated by the intensity and duration of the experience. In the end, however, Michael was optimistic, because if he was aware of the process, then he might someday learn to use and manipulate that process to his benefit. In recent years, for example, Michael had experienced that he retreated inwards when he focused on his emotional sense, and that looks exactly the same to other people as when he was backing away from them. This understanding was a happy groundbreaking moment for him as it helped him realize that he could not trust how people acted towards him as a measure of how he was behaving. Before

that he would get angry and frustrated when people treated him in a way that he didn't feel he deserved, or that didn't correspond to what he was thinking of himself at the time.

Michael had no idea how long he had been pacing; losing time was a part of it. A long time ago he had paced for two whole days before he realized that he was hungry and couldn't remember the last time he had something to eat. That time was shortly after a holiday dinner where his oldest sister and her new husband, glowing in their love, remarked how they had no idea why they were so compatible; she was a literature professor who thought in words and phrases and he was a mathematician who thought in numbers and formulas. Michael could read and write, and he was alright at math, but he didn't think in those terms, he thought in pictures. That was the beginning of his journey, the realization that everybody was different and not just him. However, everyone else was different in ways that were understood, accepted, and folded easily into society. Michael was different in a way that was not understood by the routines and processes of the community he was living in. For two days he considered all of this as he paced, focusing on the processes he used for language and math. From that point on, Michael was fully aware of the fact that everything in his brain was done with pictures. From that point on he started to alter his life to accommodate that understanding.

A knock at the door brought Michael out of his processing.

He stood in the middle of the kitchen, a little startled, trying to think who could be knocking on his door. At first he was scared that someone might have broken in the outside door of this old boarding house turned into an apartment building, but he remembered that the outside door was usually open during the day. There were only four apartments in the building and the landlady lived in one of them, so she had made sure things remained decent. His mind then remembered the woman he ran into and left on the ground. A wave of guilt came over him. There was simply too much for him.

The door knocked again and he went and opened it a little, bracing his body behind it; not to keep it from opening further, but to hide behind it. In the hallway there were two big and imposing men looking at him. They looked like soldiers to him, but they were not wearing uniforms; just regular clothes and blue jackets that had FBI in yellow letters.

“Mr. James?” the biggest one said. Michael kept his eyes on the floor, but nodded his head.

“Mr. James, my name is Agent O’Brien and this is Agent Sullivan. We would like to ask you a few questions about what happened today.”

Michael stood still with his eyes wide, staring at the feet of the two men. The men were growing a little agitated when Michael whispered something.

“What was that?”

He took a breath and tried again, “Are you with the FBI?”

The big man let out a chuckle and looked at the other man and held out the lapel of his jacket that had the yellow letters on it and said, "Yes sir, we are with the FBI."

Michael returned quietly, "But I don't recognize you. I know all the agents that work in my building. Can I see your badges?"

Again, the big man looked at his partner, but this time they were not laughing. "Sure..." and they both pulled out a leather fold and flapped them open. "We're not from this office. We were brought in to help."

Michael released his grip on the door a little to reach his hand out to grab one of the badges and get a closer look, but the man pulled the badge away and put his hand on the door with weight and said in a stern voice and wry smile on his face, "You can trust us Mr. James. May we come in?" And to Michael's surprise the door kept opening slowly under the increasing weight of the big man.

At the intrusion, Michael backed away from the door and, for an awkward moment, didn't know where to go; he just went around in a circle until he sat down in his usual chair at the kitchen table and started to rock back and forth and wring his hands. The men watched Michael do this little dance with shock on their faces. They enjoyed how they intimidated people, but this was more than they were used to. The bigger man pulled a chair from the table and put his foot on it while the other man slowly walked around the little apartment – picking things up and putting them down. The bigger man started asking Michael all sorts of questions, but Michael found that he couldn't talk. The man quickly figured out that he had to keep his question to a simple "yes" and "no" format if he was going to get anywhere. Nonetheless, the man started getting more and more frustrated at Michael, which caused Michael to pull further and further away.

Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, the bigger man stopped and looked up at his partner, who was standing in the living room behind Michael, and gave a nod. Michael heard a snap unfasten and the man behind him fidget with something heavy and metallic. He heard metal screwing into metal. He had no idea what was going on, but he grew terrified and started moaning. As the big man turned away and walked to the kitchen window, the other man walked up behind him. And then, there was another knock at the door.

The knock quickly became frantic, "Michael? Are you in there? Are you alright?" It was his landlady and friend of his mother. She was a nurse in her 60's who was always very nice to Michael and, oddly, always there when he needed her. Shortly after he started his own journey, he found that his mother was getting into his way. It wasn't her fault, she wasn't trying to disrupt him, she was simply reacting normally in a society that was structured to avoid insecurity and doubt. His grandfather would go on and on about how people would spend so much time and energy developing ways to distract themselves from the world. Michael took this idea further to the understanding that since people went through life collecting, processing, and acting on information, they would condition themselves to voluntarily clog their own input devices, their own data collection devices, with redundant information because they were afraid of new

information. Especially if they did not understand that new information right away. Then, Michael realized that people were not really afraid of new information, but the insecurity and doubt that was attached to new information. People in this society, as Michael saw it, would go a long way to avoid responsibility, and the first defense against responsibility was to block and fight against all new information. The second defense was to create false information to counter, or overpower, the original information. His mother was getting into Michael's way because she would react negatively to the insecurity and doubt Michael was inviting into his own life by his effort to understand himself better. Michael was looking for more responsibility and that scared her. So, after too much unnecessary fighting and mean words that were not meant, Michael moved into an apartment his mother's friend had available.

The bigger man came from the kitchen to the door, and before opening the door, looked at his partner and shook his head saying, "Forget it. It's not worth it. He's a tard anyway. We need to get out of town." Michael heard the man behind him turn and walk back into the living room just before the bigger man opened the door.

The landlady saw Michael sitting at the table first and then was surprised by the big man at the door. "Oh... is everything alright?"

"Yes ma'am. We were just finishing up asking Mr. James a few questions about what happened today."

"Yes, I've just come from the hospital. Michael's mother and I were worried... she would've come herself, but she used to be an ER nurse, and well... Do you know who did it?"

"We're not at liberty to say ma'am, but if you will excuse us... we need to get going." And the two men quickly bulled their way past the landlady standing in the doorway. She spent a moment puzzling at the strange behavior of the FBI agents as she watched them leave, but then, as though she just remembered, she snapped out of it and went to Michael. She sat next to him and rubbed his back and started to sing.

Once Michael was settled down a bit, she got up and made him some food in his kitchen. When she finished the preparation and put it on the table in front of him she said, "I'm sorry I cannot stay Michael, but I have to get back to the hospital." She put a hand on his shoulder and looked at him warmly, "Are you going to be OK?"

Michael looked at her waist and smiled, "I will be alright, thank you."

"Of course you will. And you are welcome." Then, she gave him a kiss on the head and left.

Agent Spencer and her partner, Agent John Gonzales, climbed the stairs towards Michaels apartment. It had already been a very long day for the both of them. She was stuck at the hospital until fully checked, scanned, and tested and had to learn an old lesson over again – sometimes the fastest way to get through an obstacle course was to be cooperative. He had

spent the day helping emergency crews in any way he could. They were both tired and motivated at the same time. Doing nothing was not an option. At this point, nobody knew anything, and since the building, along with its security camera tapes and data, were still in a state of lockdown until the all clear was given for people to start looking for such things, there was only one lead to chase; the one person who seemed to know what was about to happen.

At the top of the stairs they both took a moment to compose themselves and then Agent Gonzales knocked on the door of Michael's apartment. A few moments passed and the door opened to the end of its chain, a chain that Michael was using for the first time, and Michael's head peered around the door.

"Hello?"

"Mr. James, my name is Agent Spencer and this is my partner Agent Gonzales. We are with the FBI."

"May I see your badge, please?" Michael put his hand out.

"Yes, you certainly could..." Agent Spencer quickly got her badge out and handed it to him. "I kind of figured you would've recognized us from the building."

"No, I recognize you alright. Enough to know that Agent Gonzales is always late." Agent Spencer gave Agent Gonzales a 'told you so' look and he responded with a shoulder shrug and mouthed the word 'traffic'. Michael handed the badge back and said, "I wanted to compare it to the badges of the other men that were here earlier. They're different."

Agent Gonzales, shocked, started, "Other..." but the door shut in his face which shocked him again. They heard the sound of the chain coming off the door and the door swung slowly open. By the time it opened enough for the agents to get through Michael was already sitting back down at his table. The agents walked in slowly looking around and taking out their notebooks and pens.

"Mr. James..." Agent Spencer started.

"Please, call me Michael."

"Ok, Michael... what other men? FBI agents?"

"They said they were FBI agents, but I didn't believe them. They forced their way in and questioned me, but I was so scared I couldn't talk. I'm not proud of that reaction, but it is what it is. That is what my grandfather says anyway." All the while Michael's hands worked at his table moving cards around.

Agent Gonzales stood completely still in a state of disbelief. Michael's table was covered with what looked like Tarot cards. He could see that some of them were actually Tarot cards, but the rest, a majority of them, were like Tarot cards only hand made. The pictures were nothing like

any he had ever seen before, and he was somewhat embarrassed that he knew what he was talking about.

As Agent Gonzales stood there, images of his aunt flooded into his head. He called her his crazy aunt Frieda, and every time his mother heard him say that he would get a slap upside the head. She was a woman who bought into all that New Age junk that he believed to be nothing more than a marketing scheme to take advantage of people who were disenfranchised. Kind of like Dead Heads and hippies in the old days. He and his brothers used to have a field day whenever she came to visit. Once she left her Tarot cards behind by accident and they spent hours pretending to tell the future with them. His brother was the best at it, doing all the acting and drama; "John," he would say after spreading the cards out all over the place, "John, I see in your future that you will eat breakfast... and you will do this more than once."

"Do you remember their names?" Agent Spencer asked as she tapped Agent Gonzales on his hand holding the pen to knock him out of his trance. But, no sooner than agent Gonzales snapped out of it, he was shocked again by the wall of information coming at him as Michael gave every detail he saw on their badges; names, addresses, and so forth. He even rattled off a twelve digit badge number from each of them. He tried hard to get all the information, but found it highly unlikely that any of it was all that accurate. He figured that Michael would have had to examine their badges for an hour or two to get that kind of detail, and he doubted anyone would have let him do that. When that was done he gave his partner a look of doubt, but noticed she was a little different; she had a little soft spot for this man. He snapped his notebook shut and asked Michael if he minded if he had a look around. Michael, with his head down and hands busy, said he did not mind.

As Agent Gonzales walked by Michael and his table, Michael said "It's not what you think." but Agent Gonzales was already somewhere else in his head and simply let it go.

Agent Spencer stood next to the table watching Michael move his cards around. Only a few of the cards were on the table, the rest, the bulk of them were on the chair next to him in a boot box standing on their ends with indexed organizers separating them into smaller categories. When he sat back down from answering the door he had picked up a section of them and returned some of the cards to the box and pulled others out to add into the huge complex setting on the table. "Can I ask what you are doing?"

"I'm thinking."

"What do you mean, thinking?"

"Well, a mathematician will work out his thoughts with numbers on a chalkboard, a writer will work out their thoughts with words and phrases with pen and paper, a musician will work out their thoughts with sounds on a piano, and a painter will work out their thoughts with colors and shapes on a canvas. I, however, do not think in numbers, words, music, or color; I think in pictures. And not just any pictures – to be more effective I have learned to think in emotional images."

Agent Spencer heard her partner let out a big sigh. She herself was aware that she was unbalanced, unable to not think of her youngest brother who was autistic. As the oldest, she decided to put distance between herself and her family when it started falling apart. Of her two brothers, the youngest started showing signs of being different early on, and as a result, everything changed. Her parents started fighting more and her brother got worse, which caused her parents to fight more still. And she avoided it all by burying herself in her studies. Her parents eventually divorced and her mother spent all of her free time taking care of her youngest brother. At that time it seemed all fine by her, but now she looked at this man and saw her brother. Although, there was something completely different; something she could not put her finger on.

Pulling herself back together and deciding to get past the Tarot thing for the benefit of her partner, Agent Spencer gently asked, "Can you tell us what happened today?"

"Yes, I can." And with that Michael picked up a pad of yellow legal paper and started to tell his story as he referred to what was written on the paper. Agent Gonzales, finished with looking around, came to a respectful distance behind Michael to read over his shoulder as he took notes, but quickly realized that being sneaky would not work; only some of the writing was recognizable as words to him. Not wishing to make an issue of anything he simply focused on taking notes. Then he noticed that Agent Spencer gave up on the note taking and had her little tape recorder out. So, he went back to looking around the place, and only writing down certain things.

Michael recounted the story with excruciating detail. He told them how sorry he felt for the Arab man with blood on his hands and fear in his heart and how he wanted to help him. This caused Agent Gonzales to let out another sigh and give an angry glance at Michael. Michael went on to tell how he couldn't help because of the anger coming from the men in the van. He explained to them that it was not authentic anger, but the manufactured anger that some people use to mask the fact that they were not proud of what they were doing; like a high school football player's manufactured anger towards a weaker student that he bullies to gain the approval of his friends.

"Were these men in the van the same ones that were here earlier?" Agent Gonzales growled.

"No, they were not."

"Could you describe these men?"

"Yes..."

"Why don't we hold off on that..." agent Spencer interrupted, "Let's just get the story for now and after the security footage is viewed we can decide if we need more."

Agent Gonzales knew she was right, procedurally and in managing his anger. "Alright... so you couldn't help the terrorist... what then?"

Michael told of running around the corner and into Agent Spencer. He apologized profusely for that happening. He told her that he wanted to help but he felt the anger turn from manufactured anger to authentic fear anger, and it was focused on him. And all he could do was run. He finished his story with the two men coming earlier that day and then leaving when his landlady came to check up on him.

Agent Gonzales walked past Agent Spencer in a way that told her he was finished. Agent Spencer thanked Michael for his time and that they would be in touch if they needed anything else from him. Michael said goodbye and went back to working his cards as though they were never there.

On the way down the stairs Agent Gonzales quipped, "That was a waste of time. That guy's just flat out nuts. I'm surprised they let him work at the Federal Building... I mean did you see what he had written down? It looked like Egyptian hieroglyphs for crying out loud."

"Easy John, we don't know anything right now, and while his story does sound fantastic, there is probably some truth to it... just mixed with fantasy. We are all stressed, don't take it out on him." She let a moment pass and then added, "His writing reminded me of sheet music."

Bristling at the admonishment, Agent Gonzales simply walked to the car and got in. He knew she was right, but this was one of those occasions that she was going to have to accept a draw.

Chapter Three

Dave hunched over the freezer and leaned on the counter of his diner. It was his usual late morning posture; crookedly leaning on his right elbow and supporting his head with that hand under his chin so he can talk to his regulars and see the television. Dave always laughed at how uncomfortable he must look to other people, but after eight straight hours of hustling, his old body didn't really care anymore. His part was done. The early morning set up through breakfast. He could hear his niece working away in the back setting up for lunch. He thanked God for that. It was always in his mind that he would pass down this diner to his children, but they didn't want it.

When he was their age he was all hustle, constantly looking for a way to be secure. He took the risk of borrowing money from his grandmother so that he could borrow money from the bank and open up his diner. He worked his fingers to the bone and lost many nights of sleep to get it established, where it could be sustained by its regulars. Now it was just a matter of following through. He often got frustrated thinking about it, but he knew that maintaining this diner was not a risk for his children. When he was young security may have been the goal, but it was the hustle that drove him. His children were no different, off hustling their own adventures in life. His niece didn't grow up working in the diner, didn't grow up with this kind of security, so it was something she appreciated and valued. Dave was just happy that his children will have someplace to fall back on if they needed to. However, whether they liked it or not, it was his niece that was in his will.

All the ten O'clock regulars were in attendance, sitting in their usual spots and having the same conversations. The one difference today was that Michael was in a booth. On a normal weekday, Michael would come in earlier and sit at the counter, eating quickly before hopping on the bus to go to work. Only on some weekends would Michael sit in a booth. He would bring his box of cards with him so he could work out whatever he had to work out. Michael was in a booth with cards spread out all over the table and working intently. When Michael was like this everyone seemed to keep an eye on him out of interest, but nobody dared bother him. Which was a shame because an FBI official was on the TV talking about the terrorist attack that happened the day before and everyone wanted Michael's input.

Dave and all the other regulars knew Michael to be "gifted", but he was also a walking lie detector. Dave could not count how many times Michael had told them that someone on TV was lying or not telling the entire story, only to find out later that he was right. He knew that Michael was at the Federal Building the day before, but what he really wanted to know was if the guy on the TV was lying. Dave felt like he was.

Michael had explained to Dave many times over his theories about emotional energy and our ability to transmit and receive, but Dave was still unsure of what he meant. Michael explained that everyone was capable, to some degree, of feeling other people's emotions and projecting

their own to other people, but our society conditioned people to ignore this ability. It was a result of it being the first sense to evolve after our ascension into consciousness. Millennia of building community structures around five senses had made the emergence of a sixth sense impossible. Impossible because success was measured, in part, by a person's ability to ignore that sixth sense. Leaving people for whom the sense was too strong to be ignored out in the cold. Michael got excited when he explained that it takes work to understand it, and heretofore, nobody had been willing to put in that work. For the world, it was far too easy to simply dismiss emotionally sensitive people than try to understand and nurture them.

Everyone loved to listen to Michael talk about this stuff because he would get so excited about it, and there was something about listening to Michael when he was excited. It was like listening to a musician who was lost in the groove. Dave was certain that, like him, nobody fully understood what Michael was saying. It sounded like it made sense because it was so intricate and thorough, but no one really knew for sure. They all simply took his word for it, because the excitement was contagious. However, Dave had made the effort to at least try and trust his instincts more, to notice his feelings at times, but it was tricky. As Michael once told him, "it is hard to discern between what we feel and what we want to feel." Which reminded Dave of something else that he had said offhandedly one morning, and even though Dave was busy over the grill he had to take a moment and write it down; "It is alright to trust what you think, and it is alright to trust what you feel, but never trust what you think you feel." And Dave was unsure if he was feeling that the guy on TV was lying, or if he wanted the guy on TV to be lying. As if on cue, another regular started talking about how he didn't trust the guy on the TV. Dave immediately recognized the desire to believe that he was lying. It was like believing that the referee's were biased against the Broncos. It somehow made it easier to cope with the disappointment. He decided to let it go.

All the while Dave kept an eye on Michael. He was sitting in a booth with his back to the front door, sitting all the way next to the wall with his box of cards on the seat next to him. He had a pad of paper and pen on the outside corner of the table next to him with the rest of the table completely covered with cards. Dave knew that some of the cards were Tarot cards, but the majority were made by Michael. Some were drawings in various colors of pencil or marker, and others had photographs attached. Dave watched as Michael, with the focus of a laser, arranged and rearranged the cards, searched through his organized box of cards for one or two, then reorganized again. Then, he would reach a certain point that was obviously important to him and take up his pad of paper to record the arrangement. Or that was how it seemed.

Dave had a chance to study Michael's writing once and it was nothing he could make any sense of. It was a mix of recognizable English and pictographs, which obviously represented the cards, but it was all arranged in a weird way that looked like musical annotation. At that time, Michael was in one of those excited states talking about language being a manifestation of our thought process. He went on and on about how we communicate is the result of how we think. So, if a person thought in a different manner than everyone else, the language they naturally communicated in would be different. And if people were not aware of this, they would condemn those different people as being unwanted, stupid, or broken for no other reason than that they

couldn't understand them. As a result, the different thought processes, or languages, battled in our society like animals in the jungle. Science vs. religion was his favorite example. Michael had gone to use the restroom and left his pad out on the counter. Dave was looking it over when Michael returned. Dave had recoiled and apologized for being so nosy, but Michael dismissed it, happy to have an opportunity to talk about this stuff with someone who didn't look at him funny. Dave continued to not really understand anything Michael told him even though it all seemed to make sense.

Michael went on explaining about how life had many different levels of individuality and each level of individuality interacted in many different ways, and in large and small cycles that worked at different rhythms. The first example he had used was that of marriage. A marriage between two people was a small Super-individual composed of two Prime Individuals. Each Prime individual had their own day to day emotional process and development, and the marriage, the Super-individual, also had its own emotional process and development that it went through. Thus, sometimes a couple would argue about something stupid, and if the marriage were in a good place the argument would have a completely different flavor and meaning than if the same argument was had while the marriage was in a bad place, or out of alignment. The whole thing would get far more complicated when it was extrapolated to the Super-individuality of a family. Because then, not only are the prime-individuals of the children and in-laws added to the game, but also the Sub-individual traits of the house and cars and all the other items that cannot exist alone, but were a necessary part of the family, came into play. And the complication grows exponentially the higher the level of individuality is considered; a super-individual neighborhood, town, state, and country. Then, at the opposite end of the spectrum, inside an individual there were many different levels of Sub-individual traits that were different aspects of our personality and consciousness that moved in their own cycles and patterns.

So, Michael tried to explain his writing by first defining the levels of individuality that were to be represented. Each level had its own line; an individual person or a family. Then, once those levels were understood, he noted each line's individual rhythms and sculpted how those rhythms moved, cycled, and interacted; starting with the past, moving through the present and into the future. This was where his cards came into play. But, Dave had no idea about any of that. He remembered that when Michael was explaining that part he was lost in memories he had of his late wife. How they would have those stupid arguments, and sometimes it would end up making them laugh, and other times it would expose a deeper issue; a misalignment in their shared intention is the way he later thought of it.

Dave was snapped out of his ruminations by seeing Michael become stiff as a board. He felt his attention get pulled to the front of the diner where he saw a black SUV with tinted windows slow to a quick stop out front. Dave didn't need to wonder about this feeling. All the alarm bells inside of him were going off. Michael was getting it too apparently, because he was quickly trying to get his cards back into the box, in their organized way, and rapidly becoming more and more agitated. The front passenger door opened on the SUV, and a man in his middle thirties, who looked like a soldier on leave, got out in a very succinct and professional manner. Michael let out a little yelp and put his box of cards on top of all the other cards on the table and quickly got

up from the booth. He stole a quick look towards the front door to see the man open the door. Dave was frozen as he watched them make eye contact for a split second as the man put his right hand into his partially zipped jacket under his left arm. By the time the man was fully through the front door Michael was in the little back hallway where there were two restrooms across from one another and a door to the back alley. In his panic, Michael tried the Men's room door, but found it locked and occupied. He let out another little yelp and lunged for the back door. Dave watched Michael slide through the door and into the alley, and just as his shoulder disappeared the wall next to the door exploded twice. As the diner filled with the loud reports of the gunshots Dave found himself reflexively falling to the floor. He hit the ground and forced himself to get right back up, but by the time his head got back over the counter all he could see was the back door of the diner swinging closed again, and all he could hear was the sound of the SUV screeching away.

Michael didn't notice the gunshots as he left the diner, he was too focused on running. He was interested in the fact that he didn't have his fingers in his ears. In a moment he concluded that it was because the volume of the emotional energy was not that loud, but the focus of it was piercing, causing him to react and run. In a fraction of a second his mind was comparing it to the experience he had of running the day before. He could not help but notice the next gunshot that hit the brick wall right in front of him, spraying little pieces of brick into his face as he rounded the corner to the left, out of the alley and onto the side street towards his house.

The diner was situated on the corner of a main street and a side street. Michael lived two blocks up that side street and three houses down the road to the left. He was in a full run when another bullet hit the car parked just to his right. He heard the footsteps pounding behind him and then the screeching tires and the guttural roar of a big engine coming up the road. He made the left turn onto his road with another bullet hitting the telephone pole in front of him. Parked in front of his house there was another black SUV with tinted windows. He could make out two figures in the front seat as he ran straight for it. Both doors swung open and the driver was the first to get out and pull his gun, leveling it between the open door and the vehicle. He fired twice in Michael's direction, but Michael was unshaken.

Instinctively he ran straight for the passenger side of the parked SUV along the sidewalk. The passenger was out and standing with her gun pointed right at Michael. He ran right past her to her left. As he did, the screech of the other SUV coming to a stop at the corner came first then a barrage of gunfire coming from the two FBI agents and the other SUV. Michael ducked behind the agent's SUV and by the time he came to a full rest it was all over. All he could hear was the other SUV racing away and the voice of Agent Spencer talking into her phone. Then, a moment later he noticed the sirens and wondered how long they had been screaming in the background, slowly getting closer.

Agent Spencer finished with her phone call and came to the back of the SUV where Michael was sitting on the ground and rocking back and forth a little.

"Are you alright?" She asked Michael.

"Yes." was the reply she heard, and she was surprised and shocked by it. Michael's voice was calm and mature, even though he was sitting all balled up and rocking back and forth on the ground. In fact, Michael's response had made her a little embarrassed because she had asked if he was alright as though he were a child. She didn't realize it at the time, she was still on autopilot. But he had answered like an adult, which snapped her back into being aware of herself.

As she stood there simply looking at Michael in wonder, Agent Gonzales came to the back of the SUV breathing heavily and securing his firearm back into its holster. He had run after the other SUV.

"No plates at all... I'm certain the police will find it abandoned soon enough... but I do know I hit the shooter on foot at least once."

"It is probably abandoned already" Agent Spencer said, happy to return to familiar ground, "I put enough holes in the engine to make it useless fast."

Agent Gonzales leaned against the SUV with a big exhale that signaled his body was aware the situation was over. Agent Spencer noticed this and decided it was time for a little leadership. Police cars were just coming around the corner, and as she checked to make sure her badge was visible she said to Agent Gonzales, "Do you mind taking the lead here and lining out the locals? I'm going to stay here with Mr. James and make sure everything is OK with him."

While Agent Spencer was technically his superior, it had never been something that made itself apparent – most of their work had been boring paperwork. He, however, was no idiot and understood what was going on. He immediately became aware of his posture and demeanor and got himself off the SUV and stood upright. The truth was that it was his first time firing his weapon in the field and was learning, quickly, that there was more to it than just squeezing the trigger. Up until this point he understood the importance of projecting professionalism, and now he understood that there was no excuse to let that lapse. In fact, the more tense the situation, the more important it became.

Reading the look on his face as he pulled his badge from his belt and turned to head towards the arriving police cars, she called after him, "John." He turned real quick, anticipating some reminder of procedure or something, "You were real impressive during that confrontation. Right there, fully commanding the moment." Again, not being an idiot and realizing that she must have a good reason for the way she was talking to him, he decided to trust her and figure it all out later. He responded with a quiet thanks, a nod, and continued towards the police cars. Agent

Spencer watched him go for a moment and then sat down on the curb behind the SUV, facing Michael who was sitting on the pavement with his back to the SUV.

Agent Spencer pulled out her tape recorder and pressed record. Then asked Michael to tell the story of the last ten minutes. She was not surprised that Michael's story of the last ten minutes took thirty minutes for him to tell. Neither was she surprised that she was going to have to listen to the tape many times to catch every detail. It was obvious when he was finished and she simply turned the player off and put it away.

She let a few moments pass and tried to get herself to calm down a bit so she could ask some other questions. It wasn't working. Anyway, Michael beat her to the punch. "Why did you come here?"

She took a deep breath, "We finally got to see the footage of the security cameras early this morning and there were a few small things that made us want to talk to you again... things that we would not have looked for if it wasn't for the account you gave us yesterday."

"What did you see? Did you see the van?"

"No, we didn't see what could be clearly identified as the van you told us about. First, we saw in the video that the bomber looked beaten. Which made us look closer through the parking lot footage and found that several cameras were recently put out of commission that would have made it possible for a van to come and go without being recorded... if they knew which cameras were out." Agent Spencer picked up a pebble and played with it in her hand for a moment and then threw it out into the street. "We were going simply on the fact that we had no other leads and that at least we could take your story a little more seriously this time."

Michael looked up at Agent Spencer, "Thank you." Then, he read her uncomfortable confused face and said, "for admitting that you didn't take me seriously at first. It is really quite normal to doubt someone else's story. What is not normal is to continue doubting in the face of mounting evidence... And that is really what makes it frustrating sometimes dealing with people. Their pride, arrogance, and insecurity... is frustrating."

"Well, there is no doubt now."

"But, why did they come after me? Why all this shooting?"

"That is a good question." It was a good question. One that Agent Spencer had not had the opportunity to think about. After seeing the security camera footage, they started making calls and asking questions based on Michael's account. Somewhere along the line someone must have been alerted. Someone must have known that the investigation was turning in the wrong direction and decided action had to be taken to secure the story. Just then she remembered Michael saying he was visited by the FBI prior to her visit.

"Were those the same men that said they were with the FBI yesterday?"

"No. Well, at least not the one that came into the diner. I didn't see the ones in the SUV."

"There was more than one in the SUV?"

"Two in the SUV, one on foot. I saw two silhouettes."

She let a few moments pass, not really certain what to do until they got back to the office. She decided to ask what was on her mind. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"How do you know what is going to happen?"

"I don't know what is going to happen. I am empathetic. I feel other people's emotional energy. So yesterday, and this morning, I only knew I wanted to get away. Pure reflex really. I actually don't have any control when the energy is as intense as all this. Just a passenger going for a ride."

Agent Spencer thought for a moment, "I don't understand. How does that work? How does feeling someone's emotions tell you to run away?"

Michael smiled, happy to be getting into something he knew about, "Why does love draw you closer to someone? Yesterday I ran away from the intense feeling of anger and hatred, I felt sorry for the man because I felt his fear, sorrow and frustration. None of those feelings were mine, but they don't have to be mine for me to want to get away from them. It is like a teenager playing his stereo really loud, but with the stereo you could at least ask, or tell him, to turn it down. With emotions there is no volume control."

"So these men were angry and hateful?"

"I guess. I am only really experiencing these things myself for the first time Agent Spencer... consciously that is. I have spent a long time building an understanding of how I work and interact in the normal world, but now the world has become extreme and, in the short term, I can only try to fit these new experiences into my current understanding." They sat quietly while many police and FBI agents bustled around them. "I would guess that murder requires a certain level of anger and hatred. I would guess that all those movies and books that depict assassins as perfectly emotionless and detached are wrong. Even if a person has the physical control to not show their emotions, certain acts – murder and rape and so on – require a large amount of anger and hatred in their hearts. Yesterday, the anger started as manufactured, like someone was convincing themselves they were doing the right thing..." He thought for a moment, "or directed inward at themselves, and then it became focused on me. It became organic. I was seen as a threat." Again they sat quietly for a few moments as they both thought about these things.

Agent Gonzales walked up and stood across from Agent Spencer. She looked up to him and he reported, "Everything is secure. The police have cordoned off the area and FBI forensics have

arrived and have taken over everything the way that they do, and we are ordered to escort Mr. James back to our makeshift headquarters.”

Agent Spencer looked to Michael, “Michael, I hope you understand that this is for the best.”

“I do, but my cards are still at the diner.”

Agent Gonzales snapped to, “I'll get them” and Michael became visibly tense.

Seeing this Agent Spencer jumped in, “Michael, they probably have that area secured; looking for fingerprints and such. Agent Gonzales will be careful. We can go get some things from your apartment while he goes down to the diner.”

They both looked at Michael for a moment while he processed his thoughts. Michael let go and his shoulders dropped. He looked to Agent Gonzales, “It's not that I don't trust you to be careful with them, it is just that there are a lot of cards and it will take me forever to reorganize them... But, I am going to have to do that anyway, I suppose.” He looked to Agent Spencer directly in her eyes, “Will I not be coming back here?”

“For your safety it is best to assume not... for a little while at least.”

Michael continued to hold her gaze, nodded and said, “OK.”

Chapter Four

The makeshift FBI offices were in the parking lot of the bombed Federal Building. Two double-wide trailers parked end to end on the furthest most edge of the lot from the mangled building. There was an argument to put the temporary facilities out at the old airport, but the decision to keep it there was made for psychological purposes; keep everyone in town, and let them be reminded of the stakes every time they open their eyes. More permanent offices were being arranged just a few buildings away, but would not be ready for another day.

As Agents Spencer and Gonzales drove towards the trailers, with Michael in the backseat, everything buzzed with activity. People came and went from the trailers, and folding tables were set up in the parking lot where meetings were being held outdoors. They could see their boss, Director Peirce, pacing back and forth in front of one of the trailers, talking into the thin air, and periodically checking papers spread out on the trunk of a car parked at the end of his pacing route. As Agent Gonzales parked a considerable distance from the center of the action, Agent Spencer watched as Director Peirce came back to the car trunk, wrote something down, and then slammed his fist into the trunk in anger and talked firmly to the rear windshield of the car. Everyone in a fifty foot radius stopped what they were doing to watch respectfully. She couldn't help but wonder if he was really that angry or if he was trying to inspire the team; like a basketball coach getting himself ejected from the game. But, as soon as she thought of the question she knew what the answer was. It was both. He was angry and was choosing to let it out publicly to inspire the team.

The agents asked Michael to wait in the car while they went to see what was next. However, they were about halfway to the trailers when Director Peirce saw them and made it very clear without using a single word that he wanted to talk to him. Without speaking Agent Gonzales signaled to Agent Spencer that he would go back and get Michael and that she should continue on and get the lay of the land. Agent Spencer passively agreed, giving a little back to her partner, and continued forward and followed where the Director had disappeared into one of the trailers.

She was surprised to find that the trailers were almost completely occupied by the bustle of the secretaries. She knew that it was silly to be surprised by that. It should be perfectly clear to anyone who had spent five minutes working for a large institution, the people who did the least pleasant, but most necessary, work were always in charge; whether people openly acknowledged that or not. Director Peirce even once commented on the fact that nothing had more influence in bringing the end to monarchies and the feudal era than bureaucracy. "How impotent a king is when he doesn't know or have control of how his orders are disseminated." It was the secretaries who controlled the flow of information; it was the secretaries who were in charge. There was, however, one small room in the back corner reserved for private meetings. That was where Director Peirce led Agent Spencer.

They entered the room and Director Peirce went to look out the window in what seemed to be a peaceful moment.

"This isn't terrorism," he said. "Terrorism involves a direct relationship between the terrorist's act and his stated goals. This is quite clearly manipulation using terror and fear as leverage. In Game Theory terrorism is a direct competition. What we have here is one side playing a different game than the other. And what makes it so insidious,... is that they are using our own bureaucracy against us." He turned towards Agent Spencer, "We are being told not to pursue any money trail. Ninety-nine point nine percent of all crime, of all wars, of all fights and battles that have taken place in the history of life on planet Earth are about money and resources... Evolution is about the fight to acquire resources, for crying out loud!! And we are being ordered to ignore the flow of money and resources." He looked to the ground, then turned to look back out the window. After a while he said, "There is as much truth, if not more truth, in the flow of information than there is in the information itself, and this investigation is going to force us to make some serious choices about who we are and where we stand within that flow."

Agent Spencer stood quietly, knowing that this was one of those moments that she was being told something that could not be stated outright. In the silence she wondered if it was something she was being told or something she was being asked. They stood for a while without speaking. The truth of the matter, from the perspective of Director Peirce, was that he liked that Agent Spencer was thinking about what he said and didn't just react with a standard line, or dismiss it and start talking about something else. Either way, it was only a minute or two of silence before Agent Gonzales was standing in the door, knocking a couple of times lightly on the wall. In that moment everything changed and they all slipped into the usual roles that were to be played.

"Michael James," opened Agent Spencer, "this is Director Peirce. He is our boss."

Director Peirce extended his hand and said, "Mr. James..." and Michael meekly took it, giving the clear impression that he was eager to give it back. "Have a seat."

The only furniture in the room were three desk chairs. Not comfortable desk chairs, more like the kind of metal and plastic chairs that would be found in a school or public facility. Agent Spencer and Michael sat in two of them next to one another facing towards the window while Director Peirce took the third and sat directly and aggressively in front of Michael; almost knee to knee. Michael recoiled inward, his head dropped down and to the right, and his hands started to knead in his lap. Agent Spencer was about to say something when Director Peirce noticed himself.

He got up and moved his chair back and to the side a little, "I sorry Mr. James, things have been tense around here and I wasn't thinking in terms of respectful communication." Michael didn't answer, he just remained unmoved. Director Peirce made a show of serious effort to relax and Agents Spencer and Gonzales, who had settled with leaning against the wall to the side, followed suit. A minute or two passed while Michael slowly loosened up. Finally he reached into his pocket and pulled out his grandfather's watch chain and started working it through his hands.

"That looks like an old chain." Director Peirce broke the silence.

"It was my grandfather's, from a pocket watch he gave me." Michael paused for a moment, "The watch stopped working, so I made the chain into a loop. I find it helps me focus my mind at times."

"I doodle." Director Peirce said warmly. "And I am fairly certain I wouldn't be able to add two and two together if I didn't have a pen to draw silly little pictures with."

Michael smiled and looked up at Director Peirce, "If people only understood that it is all just a function of scale." At this Director Peirce got that distant look of someone who just experienced a moment of clarity. Moments later, when Director Peirce's attention returned, he found Michael looking at him with a broad warm smile.

"Mr. James, I am not going to lie to you. You are the only witness to a horrendous crime and the criminals are aware of your identity and position. As you have noticed, they want you dead."

Michael listened and nodded an affirmation to this last point. "Now, we are going to do our best to help you, but I need you to understand that sometimes things just happen, sometimes we just find ourselves in a bad situation and the only thing we can do is roll up our sleeves and fight our way out."

Director Peirce went ahead and started questioning Michael about all that had happened over the past day, starting with getting the full story as to what happened that morning. Then, he moved to the day before with a precision that impressed everyone in the room, including himself. He exhaustively confirmed that Michael's story was not only complete, but perfectly consistent. Throughout the three hours of questioning no one moved all that much, except for Agent Gonzales who occasionally shifted from one foot to the other. Michael eerily maintained the same position and posture the entire time. While he stared at the ground and his posture was still a little submissive, the tone of his voice and the manner of his speech revealed no lack of confidence or maturity. Agent Spencer spent a large amount of this time wondering if he was focused on remembering, or if he was focused on speaking. Was his apparent physical detachment the result of the effort to remember or the effort to speak well, or both. She decided that it was the effort to speak well because she didn't get the impression that memory was an issue for him. What she didn't account for, and what Michael would point out as being a problem of arrogance with people's perception, was that he was empathic and what he was actually focused on was aligning himself with the energy of Director Peirce.

During the debriefing, Michael's entire focus was on his own interaction with Director Peirce. He was actually very excited to have the opportunity. Most of the time he simply witnessed the interaction between other people, as a passive observer. Not many people have ever tried to engage him respectfully and with such serious intent. So, to him, this was a chance to test out theories and perspectives to see if they had any value at all.

One of the first things Michael realized was that the easiest thing to do was match Director Peirce's emotional state. Easy, but not very effective as far as communication was concerned. He found that his answers ended up being too short, too defensive, and there was an intense urge to allow empty spaces remain empty. He presumed this was because Director Peirce already had an idea that he did not want to alter. He decided instead, to let himself play with rhythms and responses. He began intuitively. In his mind it was like how jazz musicians communicated on stage through their improvised music; it was fluid, leading each other forward into new ground. After about an hour or so of this improvisation Michael decided to try and formulate small little interactions. Certain emotional phrases seemed to invoke consistent responses. Thus, if he could string several of these together he might be able to direct the conversation, or at least influence it a bit.

As the debriefing came to a close, both Agent Spencer and Gonzales felt a bit elated that they had just learned a thing or two about how to interrogate a witness. Director Peirce was elated that at last something he did produced some results; making him feel a whole lot better about all the stone walls he had run into over the past twenty-four hours. And, Michael was elated to have gained some experience in his own understanding and abilities.

Director Peirce stood up, "Thank you Mr. James. I don't think I have ever interviewed someone as cooperative and thorough as you." Michael simply smiled and nodded. "There is a restroom around the corner, but I am afraid I am going to have to ask you to stay here. Do you understand?" Michael nodded again. "I am going to borrow the agents for a while, so we can figure out what to do next. I will have someone come right away and take your order for lunch. Is there anything else we can do for you?"

Michael shifted his eyes for a moment, as though he was trying to find a place to look, then ended up looking directly at Director Peirce, "My cards please... and pen and paper."

Director Peirce looked inquisitively at the agents, first Agent Spencer, then Gonzales. Agent Gonzales snapped out of silence first, "They're in the car. I can go get them right now."

"If you would please." And then turned his gaze to Agent Spencer, "And maybe Agent Spencer can scare up a table."

"I will."

"Good. Get that done and then come find me. We have things to discuss." With this Michael was left alone in the little room for a moment before one of the secretaries came in and asked what he would like for lunch.

Out in the parking lot, next to the car with the new dent in the trunk, Director Peirce was explaining to the Agents why he had to have a psych evaluation done on Mr. James. It wasn't his choice, it was simply protocol. Agent Gonzales was apathetic and wanted to get back to

actually doing something that felt productive. Agent Spencer was a little defensive, but she didn't really know why. She knew it was not only right, and going to happen no matter what she thought or felt, however, there was still a little scratching sound deep inside. The evaluation was imperative to what would happen next. The question was about what to do with Michael James, and why. Director Peirce was talking to himself out loud to the agents. Telling them all the millions of different ways the determined mental health of Mr. James affected the direction and outcome of their investigation, and there was simply no point in doing much planning until that was completed.

Michael sat in the small room in the trailer in front of an eight foot folding table. He finished his lunch consisting of a BLT with french fries and two pickles, and threw the trash away in the can out by the secretaries. All that remained was the large cup of watered down warm flat soda that sat at the end of the table in a ring of its own sweat. The rest of the table was covered in cards.

Michael was happy. An eight foot table was much larger than he was used to, and it almost filled the little room completely. Normally he would have been on the floor to get this kind of space. He had, several times in the past, moved furniture around in his little apartment to get more space on the floor when he needed it, and suffered the crick in his back, neck and legs in order to work through the thoughts in his head. Michael let out a little snicker at the memory of what was so important to him at those times – usually, some little argument with his mother, or people picking on him. While he knew that all things progressed, and he wouldn't be where he was if he never went to where he had been before, there was no escaping how trivial those past issues seemed to him. He worked feverishly as so much seemed to be coming together as a result of his experiences over the past thirty-six hours. He worked feverishly until his attention was disturbed by the feel of someone standing at the door watching him.

Michael let him stand there for a moment or two. The man was a psychologist; he knew the feel well enough. It was a feeling of intent that was different from what he got from Director Peirce during the debriefing. Director Peirce was intent on what Michael knew, this man was intent on Michael. Michael knew that the man was going to take the opportunity to observe him without him noticing, but what the psychologist didn't know was that Michael was also observing him. Michael was paying attention to what this stranger was feeling as he did different things. Michael moved certain cards around and made a note on the paper. The man in turn made a note on his paper.

Michael decided to show the man a certain emotion – frustration – to see how he responded to it. Of course Michael didn't feel frustration, but that was not important. Most people don't consciously go by feel, they go by display and appearance. So, Michael faked a little frustration by acting like he just realized something was obviously wrong with his card layout that he should have known; a display of self reproach. He looked at a part of the table with mock disdain and quietly chastised himself as he picked up a whole section of his card layout. He took the cards and mixed them up a little bit and started, with frustration, laying them back down thoughtfully;

trusting that the psychologist would not be paying enough attention to see that he was putting them back in the same arrangement. The psychologist watched quietly and when Michael was done, he quietly made a note on his pad of paper. Michael got the image that the stranger was a good observer. The man did not give off any emotional reaction to Michael's display.

Unfortunately, Michael had much experience with psychologists who were emotionally involved with what they did; desperate to prove that they were right or that they understood everything. Those psychologists often gave off the energy of a young student eagerly raising their hand to answer questions only to show off to the rest of the class. Worse still, were the ones who would ask loaded questions only to show off what they knew. Those were the ones, from his experience, who would bias their approach so a certain outcome would be displayed – ensuring that they would be seen as right. Pleased with what he perceived of the psychologist, Michael lifted his head and pretended to be surprised by his visitor.

"Hello.. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." The man approached and extended his hand, "My name is Dr. Turnable." Michael stood and gave his hand, but did not make eye contact. He still had to abide by some things that he could not control. "Mr. James, I am a psychologist and I have been asked to evaluate you. It seems that the situation that you find yourself in makes it necessary to have a better idea of who you are... both for their understanding and for your safety." Dr. Turnable read the look of Michael's body language, "I'm sorry, did they not tell you I was coming? I asked them to be sure you were aware."

Michael was not only pleased, he liked the man. He didn't seem to be emotionally involved and it was easy to tell when he was lying. He was straight forward about who he was and why he was there, but lied about asking that they tell him he was coming. This was a small standard lie from Michael's perspective and he let it go by. "That's alright Dr. Turnable," he said as he sat back down. "Would you like me to clear some space on the table?"

"Just a little if you don't mind... so I have somewhere to write."

"No problem at all."

Dr. Turnable was an experienced man in his early sixties whose appearance and demeanor was of a person fully committed to the role of psychologist. While Michael collected up the cards on the far side of the table, Dr. Turnable went through the process of putting things down and unpacking things, pulled up a chair and got settled. "I have to admit, I am very interested in what you are doing here... Are these Tarot cards?"

"Some of them are, or I guess all of them are, maybe. I started with the regular deck of Tarot cards but quickly found them to be insufficient."

"Insufficient how?" Michael was clearly at a loss to answer that question simply. "Maybe you could tell me how you use them. I don't get the sense that you are trying to predict the future, are you?"

Pleased at the easy nature of Dr. Turnable, "No, no, no... I have learned that I think in pictures,.. emotional pictures... and this is how I process my thoughts."

"Like a mathematician might use numbers on a chalkboard..."

Michael picked up his head and looked him right in the eye, "Exactly!"

Dr Turnable smiled back, "But why Tarot cards?"

"That is a good question. It is something that I had to wrestle with for a while before I was able to let go and simply do what I am doing." Dr. Turnable sat quietly with his pen in hand, and waited for Michael to continue, as it was clear that he was about to.

"Well, it started with the fact that the pictures on the cards simply appealed to me... something of an emotional connection. Then, when I examined them more closely I noticed that there was a story involved with the pictures." As he spoke, Michael pulled cards of the same suit, Wands, from his arrangement and put them in order in his hand. Then he reached over and placed them one by one in front of Dr. Turnable. "Each card tells a story, and each suit tells a bigger story. Can you see the story in this suit of Wands?" Dr. Turnable leaned forward to examine the cards. "Oh, I'm sorry... it might help if I tell you the Wand in these images represents industry, or a project that we might engage in and try to grow."

Michael waited for a little bit and became a little impatient. "The first card is having an idea of an industry or project. The second is thinking it through and planning it out."

"Oh, I see... First you have an idea, then plan it out," He pointed to each card as he went along, "wait for the right moment to act, celebrate a small success, and then greater success is revered,.. defend ourselves from copycats, but our opponents learn to work together against us, we suffer the inevitable defeat, and then learn to accept it all as part of a greater enterprise that we play an important role in." Dr. Turnable looked up at Michael pleased with himself.

Michael was beside himself, "So, with the four suits in the basic deck, four different stories, I started playing with the stories, and with the single elements of the stories, and found that they interacted with each other. I was then able to use them to think through things more easily."

Dr. Turnable leaned over to look at the box of cards, "and how many suits do you have now?"

"Sixteen."

"You made twelve suits by yourself?" He said Somewhat amused.

"Yes." Michael tried to measure if he needed to explain further, but then decided to anyway. "At first I found a few processes of our modern life that are only referred to in the original suits. Our modern understanding has become more aware of certain things than the people of centuries ago." Michael searched for a card and found it, "For example, I made the suit of Candles to tell the story of our process of developing awareness of our own health and wellness. According to

the traditional Tarot card people, the original suit of Pentacles represents wealth, and they simply folded health into that. But I think our modern understanding of health and awareness of health is far more advanced than it was, and thus must be seen as a separate process. Becoming aware of, and maintaining, our health and learning to acquire and use wealth are two different things." He put the card back down, "The rest simply came about as solutions to the gaps I found in my effort to express my thoughts. Even now I am working on building three more suits; mirrors, waves, and trees."

"What do the mirrors represent?"

"Our perception of self... the suit is the story of the process of building an understanding of our self."

Dr. Turnable was a little surprised, "So, there is no mysticism involved at all?"

Getting more engaged, "No, and that was the hard part. I had to develop an understanding of what these cards were and where they came from that allowed me to use them the way I wanted to. Otherwise, every time I picked them up I would get sidetracked by the need to hide away or defend myself against the idea that they were supposed to be used for something else. Like a child trying to draw something with a pencil, but keeps getting admonished by their mother for not writing properly."

Dr. Turnable nodded and took notes.

"After doing a little research, I developed this story... That these cards were originally nothing more than a textbook – a way to teach basic principles to illiterate people. No different than how cave paintings or other pictographs were used, but more closely related to the stained glass windows of a church, or early Bibles, which were all pictures that told an educational story." Michael paused and let Dr. Turnable catch up with his writing. "I think the mystery around them comes from the fact that they were seen as a threat a long time ago. The Catholic church was trying to convert people to its perspective using picture stories to teach people how to live with the institution of the church at the center of their lives. And then there was this other perspective being passed around that was just as effective at teaching people, but did not put the church at the center. The reader of the cards is at the center of the story." He paused again, "As I was working on this perspective I happened to read a book, just a fictional story, that centered on the mystery of the Cathar religion; a religion that the Catholic church worked so hard to eliminate. Apparently, right before the last stronghold of the Cathar's was destroyed, something important was removed and hidden away. With some further research I learned that the last two people executed by the Catholic church for practicing the Cathar religion were in the same region in Italy where Tarot cards were first recorded being used about a century later."

"Weren't they first used as a game?"

"That is the first recorded use of them, but I think that when we are bored we all will make games out of the things lying around. Imagine some kids going through their great grandfather's

things found in the attic and coming across these cards. They would have had no idea what they were or how they were to be used, but they were drawn to them as I was..." He paused for a little while, then he felt the need to placate Dr. Turnable's sense of skepticism, "Again, I am aware that it is just a story, but it is the story that gets me past the mysticism so that I can simply use them to develop my thoughts."

Dr. Turnable asked while writing, "That is an interesting story. But, how do you think the mysticism fits in for other people?"

"Well, I think it is pretty simple. No different than those children who found them in the first place... only the game that the mystics and psychics have created involves a little more understanding. It is like astrology. From my perspective, astrology is simply the study of natural patterns in our lives. Some of those patterns occur in large periods of time and all of them overlap with one another. The easiest way to remember and teach these patterns is by associating them to the motion of the planets. Over time, some people became detached from the original intent and gave the planets power over us. The stories in these cards are also patterns, but not natural patterns like in astrology... They are patterns of will – patterns we create when we pursue something. And, people who know these patterns appear to be enlightened compared to others who do not know these patterns. No different than if you were a caveman and the only one in your tribe to know how to make fire. You would be seen as a god. In the end, over time, as with all politics of power, people work to deceive by creating all sorts of stories designed to acquire authority and protect their station in the community. So, the stories end up becoming more and more fantastic"

"So, you're saying that psychics are all fakes?"

Michael got the sense that he was purposely trying to lead the discussion, "No, not at all. Everyone does according to their abilities. But, I do think that people who call themselves psychic limit their development because they buy too much into the story of mysticism and don't understand the process of communication all that well."

"And, what is that process?"

"It is my opinion that people who are 'psychic' are empathic, simply communicating on an emotional level. However, in language terms, it is all still very rudimentary. They are only able to hear grunts and are not able to control their expression at all... They only know a couple of words and are not able to put complex sentences together or build logical structures. I think they get blinded by the experience of feeling the energy, hearing a single word, and then build mythologies around the experience, and build religions around the single word that they felt. Never realizing that there is a whole new form of communication available to them. It is like if a mathematician were to discover a single theorem and then simply stopped looking for anything else; assuming that they had discovered everything. They would build a story of how everything was solved by that one theorem. A story driven by ego and politics that put them in the center of it all." Something crossed Michael's mind and he demurred a little, "But, I must say that this perspective of mine is biased as I am empathic. Since my experience is through my own

empathic nature. My understanding of everything around me is through that experience. Whether it is true or not, I have no idea.”

“And that is alright for you?.. Not knowing if it is true, that is.”

“Perception is nine-tenths of reality,.. and the most fundamental responsibility that comes with consciousness is choosing what is real.” Michael said without really paying attention to what he was saying.

Dr. Turnable's was nodding and writing, amazed that Michael just said what he was thinking, when his cellphone cut into the conversation like a knife. Dr. Turnable leaned over slowly to get the ringing phone out of his pocket and looked at the screen to see who was calling. He put down his pad of paper as he got up and said, “I very sorry Mr. James. I hate these things and really don't like how they interrupt everything, but I really need to take this call.”

Michael nodded and smiled as Dr. Turnable left the room, knowing that he was telling the truth.

Chapter Five

Michael was immersed in his work when Dr. Turnable returned from his phone call. He hesitated at the door for a moment and then quickly returned to his seat. It wasn't until he sat down did Michael shift his attention to the Doctor, and immediately discovered that something was different; Dr. Turnable was different. He wasn't comfortable in the role of psychologist anymore. He seemed awkward and out of balance. To Michael it was clear that something had pushed him out of balance and out of his role, but he wondered if it was something internal, like a judgment he had made about Michael, or if it was something external, like what ever happened on that phone call.

Michael watched Dr. Turnable as he made a little production out of getting resettled – fumbling with his pen, and how his lips pursed and twitched a little. It occurred to Michael that there might be a third option to the cause of this change, that Dr. Turnable was not comfortable restarting a conversation in the middle of the flow. Michael himself was a person that had a hard time picking up something in the middle. Some conversations, emotional conversations, needed to be had out in full, from beginning to end, in one flow. With words and logic it is easy to pause and restart a conversation wherever a person might want to, but with an emotional conversation it is impossible to stop and restart the emotional energy when and where a person might want to. It would be like trying to stop a river, or the moon.

All of the time Michael would see examples of this; people engaged in an argument, only to have it interrupted and neither side being able to get back into it. They would simply wave their hand or say that it is over. One of the measures that he used to gauge a person's emotional maturity was how deep and long they could connect in an emotional conversation without reflexively running away or trying to control things. Michael had even watched people who created a distraction to an emotional argument because they became insecure and must have instinctively known that breaking the flow would end the discussion. These people were the most confounding to Michael because there seemed to be no way to reach them at all. However, Michael was aware that his sensitivity made it so he was not very emotionally mature. He was too sensitive, but he had his goals to work towards. As soon as Michael thought it through it was obvious to him that this was not the answer. They were not having an emotional conversation because psychologists didn't allow themselves to have emotional conversations as a rule; as part of the role they play.

It was obvious that Dr. Turnable was taking his time, trying to get himself together and back into the role, but to Michael that was not possible. He saw Dr. Turnable trying to give the appearance of balance, of playing the role, but the mental and emotional balance that he had earlier was gone. What was left was a person clearly trying to play a role; like a bad actor on a stage. The good ones don't show that they are acting. When he finally looked up and found Michael looking at him, he made a stern thoughtful face and lowered his eyes back down to his papers. Michael knew instantly that Dr. Turnable was no longer a passive observer. His instincts told him that Dr.

Turnable was unbalanced by whatever the phone call was about and now he was going to try and regain his balance using Michael as leverage. Michael felt sorry for him, wanted to help him and make everything better. Michael felt the clinch of reflex begin to draw him back down into himself. Allowing Dr. Turnable to have his way, after all, was the easiest way to help him.

Without looking up, Dr. Turnable said in an authoritative voice, "Again Michael, I apologize for the interruption, but I wonder if we could pick it up again by telling me if you think it is good to be making up your own stories."

Michael stared at the card he held in his hands. He didn't say a word as he felt himself being pulled further away. Michael was not even considering what to say. He was completely focused on how Dr. Turnable was filling the space he was vacating. As Michael's posture became more submissive, Dr. Turnable's became more confident and dominating. Michael knew that they were connected. Everyone was connected with the only questions being how much and how deep, but it seemed that all he could do was watch.

After a minute or two of silence passed Dr. Turnable continued in a condescending voice, "You see Michael, our society requires that people work together and to do that we have to agree on certain things. Society doesn't work if people just start making up their own stories whenever they want to." He paused and looked over his glasses at Michael who was staring at the table and very slightly rocking in his seat. "Not to mention all the scientific research and evidence that we are now using to build our understanding. What do you think would happen to our society if everyone started creating their own stories to fulfill their own desires – their own desires to be right or better than everyone else. That is, in fact, how we describe those who are delusional; like the people who you will meet that might think they are George Washington... or someone else they are clearly not." Dr. Turnable sat back in his chair with his hands folded on his leg and looked at Michael. "If you insist on believing your own stories," Dr. Turnable paused for effect, "I must determine if these stories are dangerous to yourself and others?"

Michael heard what Dr. Turnable said, but hardly processed it. He was completely focused on how he was sitting and acting, and was acutely aware that his behavior was connected to Dr. Turnable's behavior. He didn't understand why he never noticed this before, it must have been a simple function of all the experiences he had been having lately. The experiences changed him. He was different.

Michael sat staring at the table and rocking slightly, not, as Dr. Turnable suspected, out of guilt or insecurity, but from the increasing effort to contain the building anger inside of him. He was different. All his work trying to understand himself had given his recent experiences meaning to him – and understanding. Michael had no doubt that everything he had done over the past two days would have happened the exact same way if he hadn't spent so much time trying to understand himself, however, since he had that information at hand. It changed him. It changed his perspective. And now he no longer wanted to be locked inside of himself. The very idea of pulling away like this gave him a strong sense of revulsion. He thought of how disappointed his Grandfather would be if he saw him like this. And still the energy grew from deep inside of him.

He was afraid. He had no experience with this and didn't know what was going to happen. Just then he remembered the words of Director Peirce from early that day about how sometimes we just find ourselves in a place where there is nothing else to do but roll up our sleeves and work our way out. He had to make a choice. To continue the fight to keep the energy inside and in control, or to let it out even though he didn't know what was going to happen.

Michael saw this as the same experience as running from the bombed out building with his fingers in his ears, or from the diner as the gunmen chased him. Slowly, Michael leaned forward and sat up more erect, and placed his hands on the table with his fingers touching his cards. He spent a few moments looking at the cards which gave Dr. Turnable the impression that he was thinking, but the truth was that Michael was not thinking, he was only desperately trying to hold back a wall of energy that he did not understand. He wanted to let it go, but he was taught that it was not right to let such energy out. It hurt people, and it hurt him to hurt people.

Dr. Turnable sat unmoved, completely staunch in his position; stubbornly holding the ground he had recently gained from Michael. He watched as Michael's mouth quivered and flapped a couple times without any sounds coming out. To Dr. Turnable, this behavior was all part of the process of handicapped people who couldn't cope with the reality of their condition; projecting out the anger of being exposed. Dr. Turnable comfortably thought everything was going to play out in the usual way, until Michael lifted his eyes from his hands and cards and looked right into his eyes, and directly through his head.

In a firm but quiet voice, Michael said, "Who are you?"

Dr. Turnable chose not to answer.

Louder, "Who are you? Who are you to tell me what the value of my experiences are?" Dr. Turnable stared directly at Michael, but remained staunch and quiet. Michael let go and exploded, "Who are you to tell me who I am!?" Michael stood up, keeping both his hands on the table and leaned towards Dr. Turnable. "Experience is the foundation of understanding, thus you have no understanding of who I am! Your only experience is in judging other people. Did you choose this profession because it was the best way to hide your own insecurities? So you always have someone to look down on? Is that it? Mommy's little boy wants to pretend to be a man so he develops the tools and the skills to be king of the mountain. Who is telling the stories? Everything you believe has you at the center of your understanding. I have the right to be the center of my understanding... I have the right to be myself, and to be the center of my own life!" Michael twisted and let his hands drag across the cards, throwing them against the wall while he screamed, "I am sick and tired of hiding from insecure people so that they don't get hurt!" He walked to the window and looked out for a moment. "I can't do it anymore!" He turned back to look directly at Dr. Turnable, "If you want to measure me, if you want to judge me, you are going to have to fight me. Is that not the measure of a healthy, well adjusted person? Someone who is willing to fight for their identity, for their space? Evolution dictates it, no? That anyone not willing to fight for themselves will go extinct." Michael let his eyes drift away for a moment and then came back to Dr. Turnable, "I guess the question is how do we fight for our

identity? You maintain your self-esteem by judging and diminishing others, and I have built my self-esteem by learning about myself. I am sure there is much good in the field of psychology, but is there anyone out there making sure that it is not being used as a form of bullying? Institutional bullying? Or is it evolutionary bullying?" Michael leaned in closer to Dr. Turnable, "Wouldn't it be funny if psychology was nothing more than the efforts of inferior people trying to keep evolution from making them obsolete?"

Through all this Dr. Turnable sat still, dramatically looking down at his notes for no other reason than to maintain his appearance of confidence. With Michael's small pause, he decided to try and contain the issue. He sat forward and put his notepad on the table and folded his hands on top. His hands were shaking slightly. "Mr. James, you are not helping your own situation here."

Every muscle in Michael's body flexed at the same time in a furious release of energy. He jumped up off the ground and spun away from Dr. Turnable, "Fuck You!!!!" He screamed louder than he ever screamed before. Michael made it to the wall and turned to look at Dr. Turnable. "It does not matter anymore Dr. Turnable. I will not hide from you anymore... and people like you. I will not be afraid of sharing what I know, of living my life, because of how it will hurt all the people who have done nothing with their lives but learn how to lie. I will not help people lie to themselves anymore. If you don't like who I am, if who I am scares you, then that is something you are going to have to deal with... not me." Michael started pacing back and forth along the far wall, "I will not take your drugs, I will not sit through any more sessions, and I will not allow myself to be examined and studied anymore. I am finished with the lies, Dr. Turnable. You came back in here after being knocked off balance by your phone call and..."

"I beg your pardon?" Dr. Turnable interjected incredulously. "That phone call had nothing..."

"I am finished with the lies!!! You were not the same person when you returned... You might have become so good at lying and pretending that you don't realize it. You might be unaware of it, but you simply are not the same person. I don't know what happened during the call, but you came back in here with a need to regain some of your self-esteem, to regain your balance. And it is certainly possible, most likely probable, that my reaction... this reaction, was caused by this intent of yours. But you are not aware of it... No one notices it!! Everything we do, all of our interactions, either add or subtract from our self image. But you do not notice this because of the stories you tell yourself. The stories about who you are, all hinge on how you rationalize other people's behaviors,.. never about your own." Michael came to a stop standing in the corner looking at the ground where his toes almost touched the walls. He let out a big sigh, looked up at the ceiling with his hands on his hips, and said, "You cannot understand human behavior in the third person. It is a simple fact... Hell, we cannot even fully understand animal behavior by watching and observing them. We can pretend that we understand, but we cannot understand. Experience is the foundation of understanding."

"Mr. James, I have over twenty years of experience working with autistic people."

Michael was still standing in the corner, with his hands on his hips and looking at the ceiling. "Dr. Turnable, your experience is in watching and observing the autistic, your experience is justifying

their behavior in a way that keeps you in control and on top. Your experience, and thus your understanding, is not in the condition of autism, but in methods of maintaining control over it and people you decide have it."

A long silence fell over the room. Michael stayed in the corner and Dr. Turnable doodled on his notepad. Finally Michael broke the tension, "Dr. Turnable, I am sorry for the way this conversation took place. I am sorry for the ferocity and volume of it all, but I am not sorry for the content of it... I am not sorry for what I said. So, please forgive me, but I am finished here. There is nothing more to discuss."

Dr. Turnable secretly agreed with this, but was rather cross that he was not the one to say it. He was placed in the weaker position and he was angered by this. Without taking the time to put things away in their proper places in his briefcase, he stood up, gathered his things in his hands and walked out the door. In the outer room of the trailer he found all the secretaries working diligently in perfect silence. At the door to go outside he paused for a moment and looked around the room. No one returned his look or broke from their work. Even Agent Spencer, who was sitting at the other side of one of the secretaries desks, seemed to be completely engrossed with the documents in her hands.

Michael stayed in the corner for a while, and then started to slowly pace across the room. Even though he felt calm inside, he was exhilarated to the point that he was shaking. He was trying to remember all that he said to Dr. Turnable, but he couldn't do it. He remembered telling Dr. Turnable that he meant what he said, but he couldn't really remember all of it. This made him worried. He was worried that he said something completely crazy. On the other hand, he was aware that he understood and felt confident of the emotional release. He just wasn't sure that the logic of what he said was in alignment with the emotions that he was feeling. Michael wanted to know that everything was perfect, that there were no vulnerabilities, but he could not be certain. He did not remember what he said.

On top of not being able to remember what he said, he started to feel a little insecure about why it was that he exploded in the first place. He couldn't clearly remember if it was justified. Michael worried that it was not actually Dr. Turnable who was different when he returned, but Michael who was different. The fear spread its roots deeper into him, as he worried whether or not he really lost control for no reason at all. The roots started to tighten. Michael wasn't sure if it wasn't he who created an illusion to justify his reactions; that he wanted to explode and so he created a story to justify it. In the midst of all his thinking, Michael finally sat down in his chair, stared at the floor with his arms wrapped around himself, and tried to replay the afternoon over and over again in his mind.

Agent Spencer came out of the trailer to find Dr. Turnable waiting to talk to Director Peirce, who was meeting with a group of people, and she went to stand next to Agent Gonzales, who was

waiting a respectful distance as well. Director Peirce brought the meeting to an end and gave a glance to Agents Spencer and Gonzales as he approached Dr. Turnable.

“Dr. Turnable.” He extended his hand. “These are Agents Spencer and Gonzales. They are working with Mr. James.” They all shook hands. “So, what do you have for us?”

Dr. Turnable was taken aback a little by the sharpness and informality to this process. His thoughts staggered for a moment and regained structure by remembering his environment and that this was all a part of extraordinary circumstances. “Well,” he started off slowly, “you asked for a quick assessment and not what would be usual. This I understand to be a part of the circumstances.” He paused to choose his words carefully, “The short of it is that Mr. James is not a dangerous person, although I think he may be a bit delusional.”

Agent Spencer jumped in, “How do you mean?”

Dr. Turnable continued to direct his response to Director Peirce, “Well,... it is my opinion that the intensity of recent events has had the effect of shocking Mr. James into creating fantastic stories,... as a way of coping with the trauma.”

Again, Agent Spencer questions, “Are you saying his testimony is not reliable?”

“I guess I am saying that, in his current state, his perception of reality... is a weakness.”

Director Peirce quickly asked a question before Agent Spencer could open her mouth again, in a way that reminded her to be careful, “How do you mean a weakness? Is his memory of events not reliable?”

Agent Spencer couldn't stop herself, “We already know that his story has value, from the men who were trying to kill him.”

Director Peirce shot her a look that clearly ordered her to be more careful, “Please pardon Agent Spencer's interruption...”

“Of course,...” Dr. Turnable worked to stay focused, “Mr. James survived a couple of close calls, and it is not unique that he may create a fantasy that makes more of it than it really is. And, in a court of law, that could be used to unravel the whole account.” He felt the pressure of their eyes wanting more information. “To be frank, he believes that he survived the bomb blast because he felt the emotions of the terrorists. There is no scientific evidence that this is possible.”

“Then how did he know to run?” Agent Spencer successfully fought to make the question sound professional.

Dr. Turnable was condescending, “Agent Spencer, Mr. James is a man who has worked in that building for fourteen years. Most likely he simply noticed that the terrorist was not usual and reacted. I mean, to him, to someone who watches everyone everyday, such a small difference would jump out at him.”

"And how did he know to run in the diner?... His back was to the door."

"Agent Spencer, I don't know the details. Maybe he saw a reflection, or the look on someone's face who saw what was happening. All I am telling you is that his frame of reference is delusional... unreliable... and a weakness." He paused to collect his thoughts, "I will admit that he is very convincing. His theories are very complex and well organized, but, unfortunately, that is to be expected with people who are so isolated." He was thoughtful for a moment, "In the end, it is my opinion that any defense attorney would be able to use that successfully against him. But, that is not for certain... You know better than I how fickle the legal system is. People will believe what they want to believe until proof of the contrary is shoved down their throat."

Agent Spencer let out a little snicker as she wondered if Dr. Turnable was listening to himself. Director Peirce then jumped in, "I think I got what you are saying, Dr. Turnable." With this he gave the clear and decisive signal that the issue was over. He extended his hand, "Thank you for your time. And if you could be sure to send me a formal letter of your full professional opinion as soon as you get a chance."

"Of course." Dr. Turnable shook his hand, said his goodbyes to Agents Spencer and Gonzales, and left.

Agent Spencer stood stiff as a board waiting for the right moment. Director Peirce picked up a folder off of the car trunk and began thumbing through it. When Dr. Turnable was a good distance away he spoke quick and sharp, "Relax Agent Spencer, this was just information. You seem to be taking this personally."

It was only in that moment, hearing it through her own ears, that she realized that she was taking it personally. She stopped to think, making it clear that she was no longer going to say what was in her head the moment before.

"The reality is that, from the way this is being handled from above, none of this is going to matter in the big picture. We are getting handcuffed by the politicians... And I guarantee you that if our only path to the truth is one solid witness, it is a lost cause. Those jackals are going to rip apart anyone who contradicts their story, no matter what their mental health is determined to be." He threw the folder back down onto the car, "The second after that bomb went off, every lobbyist in Washington was on the phone with Senators and Congressmen, telling them all that bills that favored their companies would have prevented this from happening, and would help prevent this from happening again. Every damned company, from makers of baby-food to tire companies. They all want a piece of the reaction to this. A reaction that is based on the story that it was Arab terrorists who did this for religious reasons."

Agent Spencer listened closely and understood what she was being told. In the end, it was all out of their hands. This was being seen as a political opportunity and the only thing they could do was go through the motions to protect their image. "So, we do nothing?"

"No," Director Peirce returned sharply, "of course not. But, we have to be sure we understand what we are all about. The question is which path do you want to take?" He took a long look into the face of each agent – they did not waver, giving him his answer. "We have his story, and I have a sketch artist waiting. After that, we will find him some place safe and secure and sit on him while we see where it all leads to."

"Where is safe and secure?" Agent Gonzales asked with a professional tone that made Agent Spencer a little jealous.

"Good question... There is an old place way out by Sterling. I will go in and see if it is still there and still available. You two go home and get what you need. You will have the first watch,.. and use that time to see if there is anything else he might remember." He looked at Agent Spencer, "Yeah, I doubt it too, but we must remain positive. Either way, by the time you get back I will have a safe and secure place for you to take him." Director Peirce then disappeared into the trailer, leaving the two Agents standing together.

Silence passed as Agent Gonzales tried to size up his partner. He had never seen her this emotional before. She was turned to the side, looking away, but she felt his presence and understood that he deserved an explanation. However, the truth was that she really did not fully understand herself. Or, at least, that is what she wanted to believe.

Tears started pushing their way out of her eyes and she wiped the first ones away with her sleeve. "I never stood up for my brother." She finally said quietly. "There were many times that I wanted to, but I always stopped short,.. and then found something else productive to do to avoid it all completely." Her tears began to flow freely, but her behavior became more composed since the energy had been released.

Agent Gonzales had been married for fifteen years and knew when to keep his mouth shut. He stood there patiently as Agent Spencer slowly pulled herself back together. She tried to break the discomfort with humor, "I'm sorry we are getting sidelined from the action to babysit."

"Are you kidding me?" He responded in kind, "They already tried for him once. The best chance of getting in a little action is by his side." She looked at him with a smile, and he added offhandedly, "I'm planning to bring an arsenal." This he said jokingly, but was actually serious. He was well aware of the fact that he could have been killed that morning and had no intention of letting that happen again. Even if he really thought this babysitting was going to be a boring waste of time, his ideas of a bigger arsenal were a part of his new full time strategy.

A little more time passed and he asked, "You good?"

"Yeah, I'm good." She returned to her usual demeanor, "I'm going to get my things, actually get a shower in and a meal, and be back here in two hours,.. maybe two and a half."

He smiled, "Do you think he will be done with the sketch artist by then?"

She laughed and started to walk away, "Maybe one of us should bring that poor man a drink for when his ordeal is done."

Director Peirce knocked on the wall to get the attention of Michael, who was still sitting in his chair with his arms wrapped around him. "Michael, I just wanted to inform you of what we have decided, and see how you felt about it all." The Director came to a stop next to the end of the table, "While we valued the Doctor's opinion, we have decided that we cannot abide by his perspective. If it is alright with you, we are going to take the dangerous route."

"Are you saying that, to take his advice is to have me committed and drugged, thus negating anything I may have witnessed. But, by not taking that path, we will invite them to try and kill me again."

"Something like that. I don't think you would ever be committed and drugged, but you would be bullied, abused, and pushed aside." Director Peirce thought about it for a moment, "but to be perfectly clear, the choice was really made by Agents Spencer and Gonzales, who will be standing right next to you if they should try again."

"Well," Michael started thoughtfully, "from my perspective, only one of those options brings certain death, and I would rather fight to live."

Director Peirce knocked his knuckles on the table twice, said, "Well put. Agents Spencer and Gonzales will be back in a couple of hours and will be taking you to a safe house for a few days. Just to let things settle out a bit." He then turned to the door and said, "In the meantime Mr. James, this is Mr. Janson. He is a sketch artist. I would like for you to describe every person and every vehicle that has been involved in this to the best of your ability. Is that alright?"

Michael took a deep breath, looked around at the mess his cards were in, and said, "I would be happy to, Director Pierce, so long as Mr. Janson doesn't mind me cleaning up my mess while we work." and peacefully began to pick up the cards on the floor.

Chapter Six

Michael sat in the back of the agent's SUV hunched over against the door watching the road go by and working his grandfather's watch chain through his fingers. Agents Spencer and Gonzales were in the front; Agent Spencer talking on the phone and Agent Gonzales driving. The three of them were on their way to an old safe-house that the government had outside of Sterling. His grandfather used to take him this way out to the Pawnee Grasslands every now and then to do a little hiking and to see what kind of birds they could find. Michael enjoyed the drive, the familiar scenery, and the peaceful time to think.

He was still feeling uncertain about his emotional explosion. In his mind he figured that it was what freedom felt like, but he still wasn't very happy about it. What he noticed was the push and pull between the feeling of power, and the lack of vision or a sense of direction. He didn't know what to do, if anything. He kept thinking of his old rule, over and over again; trust what you feel, trust what you think, but never trust what you think you feel. And that was where he was looking for strength, because he was well aware that power without direction was very dangerous. And he was trying like mad to be still and accept the world around him as it was. He had an image in his mind that any small move made out of arrogance or ego could change everything for the worse. This sense of freedom was new to him and he didn't want to take it for granted and blow it. So, he passed his time remembering his grandfather, vowing to remain still until it became perfectly clear in what direction he should go.

They were well out of Denver in the open grasslands before the two Agents finally settled down. The phone conversations were over and everyone had been perfectly quiet for a little while.

Agent Spencer broke the silence, "Are you alright Michael?"

"Yes, I'm fine." He responded peacefully. "I was just thinking about my grandfather."

"Does he live in Denver?" "No. He passed away fifteen years ago." "I'm sorry..." "That's OK." "Were you close?" "Yes, we were..." "What did he do for a living?" "When I knew him he was retired, but prior to that he was a philosophy professor." Michael thought for a moment and decided to continue.

"My grandmother died before I was born, and I was only a couple of years old when my father left. My grandfather moved in with us to help my mother out. We spent a lot of time together. My older brother and sister were in school already, so it was me and him home all day long until I started going to school as well. I have always felt sorry for my brother and sister, because they never bonded with him the way I did."

Agent Spencer turned to look out the window to hide her face.

"So, your parents didn't get along?" Agent Gonzales asked.

"Um... I think they got along until the unexpected things started to happen. My sister and brother were born a year apart, and then four years later I came along. My parents were not the type of people to have planned something like that. From my perspective, it is clear that I was a mistake and my parent's regimented sense of order and repressed emotionality couldn't handle it." He paused to think about things, "They couldn't cope with things that weren't planned."

A little time passed in silence. "It is kind of funny if you think about it. From my perspective it is emotional energy that made me this way. My brain developed during a period of emotional intensity, and it is my opinion that energy had an effect on how my brain wired itself; making it just a little bit different from everyone else's. You know, like they say that listening to Mozart affects how a baby's brain develops... Or if a person loses their sight, their brain will compensate by focusing more on the other senses, even to the point of rewiring itself a little. I believe it is that way with emotional energy too. Especially if it is very intense emotional energy transmitted by frustrated parents who did not know how to cope with unexpected burdens very well. What I find funny is that my parents' frustration made me different, which compounded their frustration.

"Anyway, it was a year after my grandfather died that I decided to get out of my mother's house. Things were alright while my grandfather was around, but when he died, it became clear to me that something was going on... something that wasn't healthy. This was before I started looking into understanding myself, so I didn't have even the smallest clue about anything. But, in that year, as I tried to separate myself from her, first physically then emotionally, I realized that my mother and I were caught in an emotional feedback loop of sorts. She would worry about me, I would feel that worry and project it in my own way worrying about her, sacrificing myself to ease her worry, and then she would feel that and distort it again. In the end, we became emotionally locked into that loop."

Agent Spencer continued to look out the window, fighting back the tears. All she could think of was how distant her mother was to her after her youngest brother was born. Was that what made her father leave; the emotional feedback loop? She never got the sense that it was either of her parents fault for the divorce, it simply happened. However, listening to Michael, it seemed to her that it was indeed something that they did not understand happening to them. And because they did not understand what was happening, there was nothing they could do about it.

"That is why I have this watch chain. At first, I used it as part of a little routine I had to separate my feelings from my mother's. I had a little prayer that I would say frequently, to remind myself that I had to pay attention to what I was feeling. Since then, I have learned to distinguish between my emotions and other people's fairly well, but I found that my mother's emotions were impossible to distinguish from my own. Instead, I had to learn to be constantly vigilant in paying attention to what was happening around me... making sure that my emotions had context. I have no doubt that it was this effort to separate myself from my mother that taught me so much about how I interacted with everyone else. I had to learn to look around at what was happening around me before accepting responsibility for an emotion that I felt. So many times I would feel

the repressed anger of someone else and watch as I would start to act out on those feelings without ever knowing why I was doing it.” Michael paused to take a deep breath. “Now, it is just a habit that helps me to focus.”

Agent Gonzales laughed to himself as he quickly checked to make sure his Eight Year coin was where it was supposed to be. How many times had he crushed that coin into the flesh of his hand as he resisted the urge to join everyone else in the drinks they were having. It was the same battle to keep separate from them and remain in control of himself. It was only a few months ago that he realized how established this routine to avoid falling off the wagon was. It was at a wedding reception of one of his wife’s cousins. He holds the coin and crushes it into his hand when the urge is great, and every hour or so he steps outside on his own to say a little prayer, reminding himself to be in control. At the end of the night, his wife takes his hand in hers and gently massages around the perfect imprint the coin has made in his palm. Then she rewards him as only she could for his effort.

“My mother’s friend had an empty apartment and they arranged for me to move in. My mother paid my rent for a little while. I think they had the idea that it was a small phase that I was going through, but after a short time, a very busy time for my thoughts, I worried that they would change their minds and I would end up back at my mother’s house. So, I went out and got a job at the Federal Building to ensure that I never had to go back there... for both of our sakes.”

Pausing to watch some geese fly overhead. “It was touch and go for a while. My mother was hurt and we argued. I think she grew accustomed to the feedback loop and felt lonely when it stopped. She would show up at my apartment and insist on doing things for me. At first I let her, not being able to understand what was going on and, thus, not being able to fight back. But, the more I understood about myself, the more I was able to make small little fights. And, I think, over time, she slowly became used to it anyway.”

Michael was finished talking and they drove on in silence for a long while.

The sun was approaching the horizon and the trip was starting to feel long. Agent Spencer had pulled herself together and was at a point in her thought process where she needed to say something.

“Michael, I don’t mean to be rude, but I have to tell you that Dr. Turnable told us that his professional opinion was that you were delusional. I’m sorry, but I just feel that I should share this with you.”

Michael smiled and suppressed a little laugh. “That’s OK. I would have been surprised if he didn’t.”

“Why is that?”

He took a deep breath, "There is a psychological fact that states, the harder a person works to achieve a goal or understanding, the less likely they are to consider it to be flawed or imperfect, or even listen to another view. Unfortunately, by my experience, psychologists have a hard time applying that fact to themselves... They can be ferociously unwilling to accept that someone might know themselves better than they do." Michael paused to take another deep breath. "My whole life has been questions, probes, and studies; all to determine the state of my mental wellness. In the end, it all revolves around the story we tell ourselves. They have always told me a story where I was broken and they were not, and they knew exactly how I was broken and they knew the best way for me to go about my life. My mental wellness was measured by whether or not I accepted their story. This afternoon I told Dr. Turnable a story about myself where I was not broken and I, not he, knew what was best for me. Our conversation began very good, but then something happened, something knocked him off balance, and out of reflex he tried to exert his story onto me." Michael paused, "Something about the experiences over the past two days has made it so I cannot accept that anymore... So I didn't."

"So, Dr. Turnable is wrong?" Agent Gonzales said bristling a little.

"Agent Gonzales... it is not a question of one person being more right than another person. It is the fact that no one can be more right about me than I am; no one can be more right about you than you are; and no one can be more right about Dr. Turnable than he is. The conflict comes when people want to force other people to accept their story as a universal truth. Universal truths do exist, two plus two and all of that, but not when we consider human individuality and freedom. Every person is unique, thus, every person's perception of freedom is different. Some people think freedom is working a nine to five job and spending their weekends in the garden. They get angry at anyone who doesn't want to live their lives the way they do, and blame them for all the problems in the world. Others consider that slavery and think that freedom is climbing mountains... or surfing."

Agent Gonzales understood this well from his own thoughts and experiences. He has always considered his psychic aunt and her children as free loading nutjobs; spending all of their time on crazy art projects and other things that don't seem to have any value. However, he had to admit, they always got by and they were always happy. He decided that he needed to really take his wife's advice and to let it go. It was her opinion that he would be more frustrated with them if they were working with him in his job than if they were off doing the crazy things that they were doing. He always knew she was right; working for the government was frustrating and confusing enough without the touchy-feely artsy-fartsy types getting involved. At this Agent Gonzales quietly laughed to himself. "I have to admit that, when I saw your Tarot cards all arranged on your table, I couldn't help but think you were a bit crazy like my aunt."

"Is she crazy?" Michael asked, playing along.

"Not technically, but she buys into all that New Age stuff and reads Tarot cards herself."

Michael laughed, "I jokingly call those people Grunters."

"Why is that?"

"Well... people must learn to grunt before they learn to speak. It is like in the whole evolution of verbal communication... it all began with grunting. So, now, imagine that a new form of communication is evolving into our consciousness, and people are starting by learning how to grunt. The hard part is the fact that our society is constructed around five senses, so a sixth sense has to battle against all sorts of preconceptions for it to surface respectfully. Thus, people have a tendency to hear one grunt and then build a whole mythology and religion around that single sound; a mythology and religion based on a five sense understanding... Thinking that one single grunt was some universal truth and the fact that they heard it and no one else did somehow makes them better."

Agent Gonzales was laughing, "I like that... psychics will hear a grunt every now and again in this form of communication and act as though it is some sort of universal truth. I need to tell this to my aunt."

Michael was enjoying the lightness of Agent Gonzales. He went on to tell them about his theories of where Tarot cards came from, how they were first used, and how they evolved into what people perceive them to be today. Then, following the stream of his own thoughts, he decided to continue. "I have never shared some of these things before, so I am not too certain how they will come out. I have also developed a story about Moses and the Ten Commandments... In the Bible, God descends down as a pillar of fire and speaks to all the Israelites and the sound of his voice drives them crazy. So, God instructs Moses to build a fence around Mt. Sinai and to meet him at the top. If he could make Moses to understand him, why couldn't he make everyone else to understand him? Was he declaring Moses to be king? I don't think God would work that way. Not if we consider all the other stories in the Bible. To me, God either did not know that the sound of his voice would drive them nuts, or he was trying to show something to all those people. My story is that God wasn't naive or stupid, he simply communicates with emotional energy. And since the Israelites had no idea, they reacted to the sound of his voice as though it were their own emotions. God descended and spoke to them that way to show them that they couldn't understand him... it was a practical lesson. Then he gave Moses the Ten Commandments, which are a lesson plan for learning the emotional language." He paused a moment. "The first step, the First Commandment, is a salutation, which is the first step in understanding something as a language... but, people were lost and confused because they built a mythology around the single grunt they heard from God when they saw the pillar of fire. If those people recognized that they could feel each other's emotions, they would be able to understand what they were feeling was a language. Then, maybe, if they understood that our communities are a projection – a manifestation – of our ability to communicate, they would have seen that God was trying to teach people how to communicate more effectively so that they could build a better, more efficient, and more complex community." Michael took a moment to decide whether to take the final step in his explanation, "In their confusion, people use the Ten Commandments as laws to be used to control other people in order to artificially manufacture a healthy community. But, from my perspective, the Ten Commandments are a

lesson plan, that when followed by the free will of individuals to improve their own ability to communicate, they enable those people to naturally manifest a healthier community, that constantly increases in structure and complexity, without trying.”

Agent Gonzales tried to listen, but could not get past the image of his aunt as a gorilla. He was tired and slap happy. So, he tried to head off the whole thing by asking jokingly and rhetorically in a funny voice, “Since you have all the answers, what is to blame for all the world’s problems?”

Michael looked out the window, aware of the knot of anxiety that had just crept into his stomach. He did notice the light tone that Agent Gonzales asked the question with, but inside he felt the need to take advantage of the moment and answer seriously. At very least for his own sake; for the opportunity to give voice to his thoughts. He took a few breaths and let go of the need to respond to the light and humorous side. This was a serious topic that should not be taken lightly for fear of being misunderstood. It is what his grandfather said was on the other side to the adage of not casting your pearls before swine; the side that focuses on how a person shares the things that are important to them and not who we share them with. His grandfather told him that everyone deserves more information, but we should always be careful how we shared the information that was important to us.

“I know you were joking, but I am going to answer your question anyway. I think the best way to understand my perspective is to ask what you think is the greatest cause of threat to human survival.”

Agent Gonzales was quick with a response, “Nuclear weapons and fuel, used or just laying around and decaying.”

“Pollution and all the problems it causes.” Was Agent Spencer’s input.

“From my perspective those are not causes, those are tools, or symptoms, of the greatest threat to human survival.” He let them sit quietly thinking for a moment before he began again.

“Imagine a tribe of people in a peaceful valley. This tribe had been in that valley for a very long time and had every aspect of their life tuned and balanced. A part of their system was to keep a lookout posted on top of the mountains on both sides of the valley. These lookouts had big hollow logs to pound on at any sign of approaching trouble or opportunity. Different rhythms were used to signal different types of things that they saw; a beat for unfriendly tribes approaching, a beat for friendly tribes approaching, a beat for forest fires, a beat for game animals out on the range, and so on. In this example, what is the greatest known risk to their survival.”

“A poor lookout.” Agent Gonzales was again quick to respond.

“That is right. But, how? How many different ways can a lookout be bad?” Michael decided to make the question rhetorical and continued on. “The lookout could lack discipline and focus and fall asleep, making the tribe vulnerable. The lookout could also have a bad memory and forget what the signals were so that the people in the valley would not understand what the lookout

was seeing. The lookout could be childish and decide to have fun with the tribe by sending false signals. And, worse still, the lookout could be devious and connive a way to use false signals, putting the tribe at risk, for their own gain."

"So, the cause of the greatest threat to our society is poor communication." Agent Spencer said quietly.

"Exactly... communities survive on their ability to collect, process and act on information. Any problem, any man made disaster you can think of would be the result of a breakdown, or an inefficiency in that process. Politicians lie to save their image, corporations pay scientists to contradict other scientists so they improve their bottom lines, people ignore obvious problems as though they were asleep because they do not want to be responsible, and the list of examples goes on and on of simple little breakdowns in our communication structure. All of which by themselves have the potential to cause great destruction, never mind their effects when taken together. Nuclear bombs will only be used if honest and sincere communication fails."

A natural pause in the conversation allowed them all to think a little, then Agent Gonzales blurted, "The owner of the diner said you were a walking lie detector!"

Michael smiled while looking out the window, "The survival of a community depends on accurate and efficient communication. As the community becomes more complex, the structure of communication needs to become more complex to sustain it. Today, you will notice that our community is falling apart because the complexity of our community has grown beyond the ability of our understanding of communication to sustain it. From this point there are two options... either the community must become smaller and less complex, or our structure of communication needs to become more efficient and complex."

"But isn't that what cell phones and the internet are doing?" Asked Agent Spencer.

"Are they adding to the structure of communication or are they simply adding to the volume of communication? Are cell phones and the internet allowing people to communicate more accurately and efficiently, or are they simply adding to the amount of inaccurate information being shared. Making communication less efficient since people have to spend more time trying to figure out what is true and what is not true, if they can at all. Remember, the bad guys are using the same system to disseminate false information."

With this the Agents drifted off into their own thoughts. Both of them thinking about the sheer volume of information they have to sift through every day and how much of it they were completely uncertain of. If they only knew that they both figured that at least eighty percent was questionable. Agent Spencer then became hung up on what Director Peirce had told her; that the politicians were restricting the information they could pursue. And going over and over in her head was the idea that there was more truth in the flow of information than there was in the information itself. Collect, process, and act.

Chapter Seven

The safe-house was a small two bedroom ranch that had seen better days. The paint was peeling and weeds were growing in the cracks of the cement. There was a single garage attached to the house, but when they opened it, they found it to be full of various pieces of equipment and garbage left by the people in charge of maintaining it. It obviously had become a storage facility for someone's operation.

The inside was dusty and old, but tidy enough. The furniture was from the seventies; all brass and glass with orange and brown shag carpet. They all had a good laugh when they walked in and quickly set to getting things in order; plugging in the refrigerator, unpacking food, and getting something ready for dinner. Michael and Agent Spencer were to sleep in the bedrooms, while Agent Gonzales would take the couch. He was actually fine with this as he was able to unpack and arrange all of his electrical gadgetry on the glass coffee table. Everyone was exhausted. So, when dinner was done and everyone was settled in enough, agent Gonzales laid on the couch and watched a movie on his laptop while Michael and Agent Spencer sat motionless at the dining table and stared at the black night-time reflection in the back sliding glass doors.

“Director Peirce recently said to me that there is more truth in the flow of information than there is in the information itself. And, then he said that we were all going to have to make choices about what we want to be true, or something like that. I think he was trying to tell me something, but I am not sure what.”

Michael thought for a moment, “That is a very enlightened statement... about the flow of information. I'm sure he meant it politically, but it applies on deeper levels. What is more real, the telephone or the words being passed over it. I think, politically, he was telling you that people were saying one thing and doing another. And, since actions speak louder than words, eventually you are going to have to make a choice as to which information you are going to act on. Are you going to act on what people are saying, or what they are doing? This has been the battle of my life, to build the confidence to act on the information that I was getting that no one else acknowledged to be real. So, I can tell you from experience that people will fight you if you choose to act on information they are not ready to be responsible for... People these days are more than happy to be responsible for their words, but not their actions... and the space in between is where the Devil lives.”

Agent Spencer let out a little exhausted laugh, “I'm sorry, but more and more I get the sense that you should be a professor somewhere with a Phd and everything.”

He smiled, “Like my Grandfather.”

“I think he would be proud of you.”

Michael nodded in agreement and said absently, "Pride is the opposite of guilt. One of his favorite sayings. He would tell me that the most important thing was to be proud of yourself."

They sat quietly for a while, both enjoying the quiet and relaxation.

"You know, I always thought that my brother was watching out for me, but in a very strange way that I never understood. I think I understand better now."

"You brother?"

"I'm sorry. Yes... my youngest brother is autistic..."

Michael leaned back and let out a big laugh that briefly got the attention of agent Gonzales through his headphones. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"For years you have stood out from the crowd because you felt familiar to me... Now I realize that you feel like my sister. The drive to succeed, and the use of that success to avoid certain feelings."

Agent Spencer looked at the edge of the table, slowly losing control of her face as tears started to flow down her cheeks. As Michael watched with understanding, she struggled to speak but kept getting caught up in her quiet sobs. Finally, she was able to quietly say, "I never stood up for him. When things got tough I just ran away and hid in my room and buried myself in my studies."

Michael let a moment pass so that she could get past the wave of emotion that was washing through her. "It's OK. It is not your fault. People are not responsible for what they do not understand..." and then he said, speaking almost to himself, "but once we understand it, we must own it. It is why experience is the foundation of understanding. We all, invariably, will work ourselves into a place where the experience of failure will teach us of new responsibilities that we were previously unaware of."

They sat quietly while Agent Spencer slowly pulled herself together. Eventually she got up and said goodnight to Michael and waved at Agent Gonzales, who waved back, and went into her room.

Michael remained at the dining table perfectly still. Agent Spencer had gone to bed and Agent Gonzales was watching a movie on his laptop. It was a very strange sensation for Michael. With all that had been going on, he did not feel like moving at all, his mind drifted and wandered but his body remained perfectly still. He wondered if it was fatigue, or something else, a side effect of his new found freedom; the ability to sit still and peacefully, patiently processing his thoughts

without losing himself to them. He sat and stared at the glass doors and the blackness that was behind them.

Despite the repose, he was still a little worried about what he was to do next. He felt like he had been given something of great importance; something of great power. Even if it was not true, even if there was no power in him, how does a person cope with the feeling? Michael closed his eyes and an image came into his mind of a man sitting cross legged in a peaceful, meditative posture. The background of the image slowly came into clear focus and, as it did, the image of the man changed. The background became a large expansive tree and the man morphed into what he guessed to be the Buddha sitting under it. Then the tree slowly shifted into an elaborate stone temple and the man became an elderly Asian man with long white hair. Michael had no idea who it was, but he guessed it could be Confucius. While he was thinking of the people it could have been the background shifted again into a desert, and the man became Jesus.

Michael opened his eyes and continued to stare out into the darkness without moving. The image of Jesus peacefully meditating in the desert had stuck in his mind and the thought gave birth to other thoughts, which worked together to build ideas. He remembered his Grandfather telling him about the forty days that Jesus fasted and meditated in the desert. Actually, Michael was lying on the floor and drawing in his pad of paper while his Grandfather was sitting in his chair lecturing the television news about politics and how leaders should behave, but Michael was his audience. "During his forty days in the desert the Devil tempted Jesus three times." Michael was always in awe at how his Grandfather's voice projected, even when he was just talking to one person. He couldn't imagine what he was like in a lecture hall in front of hundreds of students. "Here, it is safe to assume that the Devil is a metaphor for our animal past. Our animal past that stands opposed to the possible future that is represented by God. That is to say, at any given moment all humans have the choice to either allow themselves to react like an animal, to fall under the influence of the Devil, or to overcome their reactions and aspire to be more. To choose to respond in a way that helps manifest our possible future. So, while Jesus was fasting and meditating in the desert for forty days, the Devil came to try and break his will by tempting him with reactions of our animal past.

"The first temptation was the Devil telling Jesus that he could turn the stones into loaves of bread to sate his hunger. This is a metaphor that teaches us two things; the first is to not use our gifts and powers to serve ourselves alone, and the second is that the path to our possible future requires suffering and that if we alleviate all of our suffering out of base animalistic reaction we will not grow or evolve. Jesus would not have achieved what he set out to accomplish by fasting for forty days if he simply made the stones into bread. If we wish to live in a more civilized, more humane society, we must choose to live without so much convenience, so much security. We must make sacrifices that include putting our cell phones down for a while and paying attention to the immediate world around us. We must make the sacrifices that come with reducing our oil consumption and electricity use. Certainly it is not the easy thing to do, but that is why the idea of sacrifice is so important.

"The second temptation was the Devil telling Jesus that he could jump from the highest temple to make the Angels catch him. You see, God had charged the angels to always protect Jesus, thus the Devil suggested to Jesus that he use their protection to show the rest of the world who he was and to respect his authority. He declined the temptation for a simple reason. It is wrong to flaunt our gifts and powers in front of others because they have a great potential of reacting to the display of authority. To flaunt authority is to invite a reaction to that display, and if it was the goal of Jesus was to show people how to choose away from reaction and elevate themselves above their animalistic desires, then taunting them with a blatant and childish display of power and authority would work against him... he would have reacted in a way that worked against his own goals. Our politicians would learn much from this lesson since our foreign policy is dominated by issues created by this country flaunting its power. The United States flaunts power and authority in the face of the world and then spends all of its energy reacting to the reactions of all the other countries. It is a practical display of a simple concept; we have to be the people we want our neighbors to be, just as we have to be the workers we want our employees to be, the leaders we want our politicians to be, and even the lovers we want our spouses to be. Right now, we behave like children, then scoff and accuse the world of reacting to us like children.

"The third temptation was the Devil taking Jesus to the top of a mountain and telling him that he could be the ruler of all that he sees if he simply bowed down and worshiped the Devil. This is the one that burns me Michael. All these politicians making themselves subservient to corporations and billionaires, all these people selling themselves short, fighting like animals for a dollar bill, and then claiming that it is only natural that they do so. It is doubt and insecurity that rules them, and then they build a rationalization to excuse their insecurity. If you remember anything your old Grandpa says remember this;.. what we have been given in this life is ours and we do not owe a single person for it. You are who you are Michael, and you are here to be you... No matter what anyone says about it."

Michael had to wipe a tear rolling down his cheek at the vivid memory of his Grandfather. In his mind his Grandfather went on, "there are so many things that constantly test our doubt and insecurity. The bankers tell us that if we bow down to them, they will give us everything we want. The politicians tell us that if we bow down to them, they will make the world a better place. And, the generals will tell us that if we bow down to them, they will give us the world to build the way we want to. But, the trick is that no one has that power... no one can do such a thing. We have all been given a life to live and we do not owe a single person on Earth for it. The best we can do is to share what we have been given without (holding up his index finger) serving ourselves, (adding his middle finger) flaunting what we have been given, and (adding his ring finger) giving ourselves to someone else.... giving power over our gifts to someone else." His Grandfather had become aware of his agitation and got up from his chair and walked to the kitchen. With his back turned there were words, but his memory could not form them fully. When he got into the kitchen his Grandfather turned around and his echoing voice reached him clearly again. "This is the danger of money and materialism Michael – money is a tool of insecurity. Money is a device we use to convince ourselves that we have no value. To have value in this world that we have built here today, a person needs money, not the gifts that God has given them. And if we believe

such a thing, we end up doing whatever we can to get money, and then we are bowing down to the Devil. Bowing down to our animal past." With this memory Michael let out a little laugh because it was always around this point that his grandfather realized that, despite the walk to the kitchen, he was ranting and tried to back pedal and make sure that he was not being too fanatical. "Now Michael, you know that I am just going on like I do, and you know that I am not speaking literally. We cannot know if there is a God or not, but it is an idea that people can use to elevate themselves. People use the idea of God to gather together and build better communities, to reach greater heights, to become better people, and most importantly... to allow them to share themselves. But, don't worry about all that. Just remember that you are who you are, and you do not owe anybody for it." His Grandfather came back into the den and turned off the television and stood in front of Michael. "I have said this before and I will say it again. If there is one thing I know for sure it is that the history of human thought comes down to nothing more than the battle for control of our own self image... for our own sense of value. Clever people are always coming up with all sorts of new elaborate arguments to convince you that they have greater value and you should do what they tell you. They will say that they have more money, they are smarter, better looking, more athletic. They will go on and on about being of a race that is better than all the rest, one nation better than all others, or a member of a certain club, or their religion gives them greater value. They will tell all sorts of stories to justify their insecurity to claim that their insecurity has more value than your confidence. In your life, you specifically Michael, you will always hear that your behavior means that you are of lesser value. Never accept that!" His grandfather turned to look out the window. He said absently, "Every now and then, however, someone will come along and show that all those stories are nothing but slavery." His Grandfather was quiet for a moment. "One day you will find your own value; you will find the thing that gives you strength and makes you who you are. When you do, when you find it, just remember; don't use it to serve yourself, don't flaunt it in front of others – especially in any effort to claim that you are better because of it - and don't think you owe anyone for it. If there is a God and he made you the way you are, he did it for a reason, and it is highly doubtful that that reason was for you to spend your life on your knees praying to him. Just be yourself and do what you think is right... Now, let's get the hell out of this house and enjoy the day before I give myself a stroke."

Michael wiped another tear from his eye as he thought that he did not owe anything to his Grandfather for him being who he was, but he did owe him for his ability to know it. He owed his Grandfather for his awareness of his own value.

Michael had gone to bed and was lying awake thinking. He felt more confident after the memories of his Grandfather. He didn't know what he was going to do exactly, but he was feeling better about letting things roll forward. What he was actually thinking about was the experience of the waking dream; the images of the meditating man that came before the memory of his Grandfather.

It wasn't the first time that such a thing had happened to him, but he always found them interesting. Michael was a prolific dreamer and his theories about dreams were heavily influenced by these experiences with the visions, or images that he had when awake. Actually, his theories all stem from the memory of a particular experience as a child when he had fallen asleep with the television on. The dream he had was frantic and unintelligible. So out of the ordinary for Michael. When he woke up it was clear to him that it was the sounds of the television that fueled his chaotic dreams; that his brain was trying to interpret the signals it was receiving while he was asleep. There were other times when he was young that he experienced similar things – sleeping in the car, and so forth – and none of it really concerned him until later, when he started to try and figure things out for himself.

Michael had categorized three types of dreams that he had experienced. The first type were the very light and quick dreams that he could never really remember. To him, those dreams were nothing more than his brain processing information; just like the psychologists said. They are the dreams that he would see a dog having. However, the level of a dog's consciousness limited them to only that type of dream. The human brain had evolved further. The second type of dreams were longer and well organized, like little movie vignettes, and were always accompanied with an emotional signature. But, most importantly, these dreams always made some sort of sense to him because they had context with what was happening in his life. Michael always remembered these dreams. They were real to him. His theory was that these dreams were his brain trying to interpret his own emotions that he was feeling at the time. Which stood in contrast to the third type of dreams that he had. These dreams were exactly like the second type of dream except for the fact that the emotional signature and the content of the dream never made any sense to him. It was his theory that these dreams were his brain trying to interpret the emotions that he was feeling from someone else. He had no definitive proof of this himself, but he had plenty of circumstantial stories. Michael's theory is that everyone has the first type of dream regularly, the dog dream. And most people will experience the second type of dream, but fall into two groups; those who pay attention to them, and those who do not. Only people who are very sensitive, like Michael, will experience the third type of dream, and of those, only the ones who are paying attention and working on understanding them will develop the ability to have waking dreams. Michael was convinced that dreams were the first stage in the next step in the evolution of our consciousness. The dreams that dogs have are the precursor to dogs becoming conscious. And the evolution of consciousness, at our level, was something that could be aided and improved upon with understanding and training.

Lying awake in bed, Michael was wondering if his recent waking dream was his tired brain trying to interpret his own emotions, or if his Grandfather was trying to help him. The dream made complete sense to him so he logically leaned towards it being his own emotions – but he hoped. He didn't know where he stood with the existence of God, but he hoped there was someone out ahead of him – leading the way, maybe leaving a breadcrumb or two. In his own life, and in his own way, he had discovered that there was more to himself than anyone had known. He hoped that what he had discovered and experienced was only the tip of the iceberg. Even if it was just a part of his brain making an emotional recording of his Grandfather to play back when he

needed it, that would show that there was still something more to uncover and understand about his own experiences. His Grandfather would tell him that metaphysical thought was a good way to pass idle time, but he should take the precautions to never get lost in it. Michael was happy for this idle time.

At some point in all his musings, Michael fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

The house was dark and quiet, everyone was asleep, and Michael was dreaming.

Michael was sitting peacefully in a house that was unfamiliar to him, but a house he knew to be his own. He was all alone and through the window he could see the ocean nearby. The waters were still and quiet, and he somehow knew that it was dusk, with the sun just over the horizon – but he also knew that it was always dusk.

The dream rolled along like a movie, with Michael watching passively his own roll in the film. His awareness shifted to the people who just seemed to appear behind him. It was the two agents sleeping peacefully on the floor. Then he was aware of a rising feeling that he needed to protect them. Michael went to the window and scanned the horizon for anything that could be considered a threat. Even though he could not see anything, the feeling still continued to get stronger. Water started to rise within the house. He noticed that as the feeling grew stronger, the more water appeared in his house. Eventually the water from his house began to flow out the door and into the ocean, making the ocean a little less still and calm. This continued for a little while and Michael watched as more water from his house entered the ocean, slowly stirring up the ocean until it was very rough. Then, off in the far distance, Michael caught a line of darkness building on the horizon. He watched as it slowly got thicker. By the time he realized that it was a tidal wave it seemed like everything was moving too fast and there was nothing he could do. Michael turned to shout at the sleeping agents but he knew they could not hear him and there was nothing he could do to wake them up. The wave became bigger and bigger and seemed to completely surround them, even though the ocean was only on one side of them.

In the dream, Michael's conscious mind was aware of the repressive feeling that he would get when dealing with people who wanted to control and confine him; like he felt with Dr. Turnable. He fought against it with ever increasing force. Consciously, he never wanted to go to that place, not even in his dreams. He lost control and panic set in as the huge tidal wave began to crest one hundred feet above his house. He screamed "No!" and threw up his hands to brace against the wave. To his surprise the wave stopped in its place. With the fear just behind him, Michael reached out with his feelings and realized that he could feel all the little details of the ocean. Somehow he knew that the water from his house, mixing with the ocean water, let him sense it. Then he realized that he stopped the wave by controlling the water from his house that was mixed into the ocean. A few moments later he confidently pointed in a direction and the water violently parted into a deep water canyon. The agents woke up to the commotion. At first Michael thought it was the sound of the wave and water exploding that woke them up, but he just knew that it wasn't. They heard him in his effort to stop the wave. Then, in that moment, they all knew that to be safe they had to leave the house and run through the wave along the valley of water that Michael created. The agents ran past Michael and into the valley. Michael

was about to follow, standing on the beach, but something made him take one last look behind him. What he saw made him freeze in his place. There were people as far as he could see. All of whom were in various stages of waking up from a deep peaceful sleep. For a brief second Michael understood, but then he woke up.

Michael woke with sharp anger and intent in his heart. He knew that they were not his own. It was the same aggressive energy that he felt before the last two attacks. He almost panicked as he quickly got dressed. He came out of his room and quickly and quietly opened Agent Spencer's bedroom door and made his way to her bed. He gently but firmly woke her up, making it clear that she should be quiet. He said, "trouble is approaching" and walked out of the room. Michael went to the couch where Agent Gonzales was asleep and decided to be much more gentle in waking him up. Agent Gonzales slowly came to and looked at Michael with confusion. Michael responded to his look by saying, "trouble is approaching." Agent Gonzales started to ask what he was talking about, but remembered who he was dealing with. He grabbed his cellphone and examined it. Whispered, "Damn! No bars. They must be blocking the signal." Then quickly got up and put his shoes on, happy to have been too lazy to get undressed before falling asleep. Moments later he was fully armed and making his way towards the front window.

Agent Spencer appeared with her weapon drawn at the end of the hallway that led to the bedrooms just as Agent Gonzales reached for the window shade. A quick thought went through her mind about the tiny amount of light spilling out from the kitchen by the little night light that was left on, but it was too late. Agent Gonzales pulled the shade to the side a little and leaned to look out. A few tense moments passed, and just as Agent Gonzales started to pull his head back pieces of the window exploded inward as the bullet missed his head by millimeters and buried itself into the wall on the other side of the room.

Seconds passed like hours. Michael, seemingly reading Agent Spencer's mind, ran and dove onto the floor in the hallway behind her. She simply squatted down where she was, looking to see if her partner was alright and aware of what was about to happen. He was. Agent Gonzales was on the floor crawling towards the duffel of his that carried his arsenal. Only a few long seconds passed, just enough for whoever was outside to use their radios. Then all at once, the walls and windows erupted with bullet holes from all directions.

Agent Gonzales was at his duffel, getting his assault rifle ready. He knew that they were going to fire until they were empty and had to reload. Then, he would only have a few seconds to fire back, three he figured, but he might stretch it out to four. He also knew that this was just a delay tactic to keep them from entering the house too soon, and that it would not work all that long. Agent Gonzales knew that only the initial excitement of a gun fight would make soldiers exhaust their ammo and reload at the same time. The further they got into this fight, the number of bullets coming at them would decrease, but the consistency would increase as they figured out to stagger their firing. After getting his rifle ready he looked up towards the hallway and saw his

partner looking at him. They made eye contact and he knew she was on the same page. He glanced at his gun and nodded towards the front window, then looked at her gun and nodded to the back. She nodded her understanding just as the shooting stopped.

Both agents jumped up with their guns firing. Agent Spencer stood against the wall and emptied her pistol out through the hole where the sliding glass doors used to be. Agent Gonzales jumped up from behind the couch and fired his assault rifle out the front window, counting to himself. Just before he got to "four one thousand" he stopped firing and dropped to the floor. He was a little late as a bullet went through the meat of his shoulder on his way to the floor. Agent Spencer, having a smaller clip in her gun, was already back in her crouch by that time. They reloaded as they waited for the next break.

This back and forth went on for a minute or two, but as they expected, the times where it was safer for them to fire back were getting smaller and less frequent. Agent Spencer was down to her last clip and she saw that Agent Gonzales was bleeding and becoming distressed. Michael was still on the floor behind her, curled up in the fetal position and rocking a little. While she sat, waiting for a break to return fire, Michael stopped rocking and his attention snapped up the hallway towards the bedrooms. She knew immediately what he was telling her, it was inevitable. As she sat thinking about what to do she saw her partner lying on his back, holding his rifle across his chest, waiting for a break. She saw the look on his face. It was clear that they were taking no survivors and there was no way out. A wave of despair washed over her and at that moment Michael screamed "No!"

Unlike the Agents, Michael knew immediately how many men were approaching and what their intent was. Ever since he woke up he felt them getting closer, from all directions. And when the bullets started to fly he laid on the ground fighting off the fear and trying to make sense of all the things going through his head. It seemed like everything was trying to go through at once.

He thought of the "untouchables", the people he would watch as they seemed to repel all the negative efforts to bring them down. He thought of how most people, without being conscious of what they were doing, would make little reactions to each other's emotional state. He thought of how his mother and landlady would always show up when he needed them, and how his friends, on the buses and at the diner, once they let go of their prejudices, would respond to Michael's thoughts, even though he did not make them known. He thought of his cards and all that he now understood about communicating emotionally. He thought about evolution and the constant fight to be an individual. He thought of his Grandfather always standing his ground firmly, but gently. But, mostly, he thought of those "untouchables." And as the pressure mounted all around him, they kept returning to his mind, seeing them peacefully coping with the demeaning treatment of the guards.

The minutes passed and the pressure continued to build for Michael, and in a flash he understood; he leaped at the understanding for fear that it would slip away. The "untouchables" were like they were, had that unmoving attitude that no one could touch, as a result of random

accident. They were the product of the random event of all the variables being just right. With Michael, not all of the variables were just right, as Michael was more sensitive – however, Michael was aware. He was aware of his emotions and how they interacted with his thoughts and behavior. He was aware of the emotional energy around him and how it interacted with his emotions, his thoughts, and his behavior. He was aware. He was conscious. He could choose to become “untouchable”. It would be difficult. It would be a constant choice, like his Grandfather taught him about alcoholics who had to constantly choose to remain sober. Or a married couple who had to constantly reaffirm their commitment to work together. For Michael, becoming “untouchable” would require a constant choice. But he didn't know how to make that choice. He had no experience with it. His argument with Dr. Turnable was only a brief reaction and could not remember how he got there. Just then, Michael's attention was pulled towards the bedrooms. He looked up the hallway in fear as he could feel the increased tension of the men coming through the windows.

A few moments later, on top of the ever increasing pressure of the men attacking from outside, he felt the wave of despair coming from Agents Spencer and Gonzales. That was too much and he felt himself being overrun. He snapped. Michael reacted out of fear and anger and hatred of that place he would hide inside of himself. Like he did with Dr. Turnable, but this time far more aggressive. And this time he was paying attention, watching himself react to his environment. Michael heard himself screaming “No!”

The Shooting stopped and Agent Gonzales suddenly became filled with rage. He had no idea where it came from. He jumped to his feet and began firing wildly; even yelling curses out the window. When he ran out of bullets he continued to yell and scream, until he heard his own voice over the gun and quickly came to his senses.

The first thing Agent Gonzales heard after he stopped making noise was Michael laughing quietly. He looked over and saw Michael sitting up on the floor and looking at him. He quietly said, “It's alright Agent Gonzales. We are going to be alright.” Just then a few gunshots were heard outside the house which caused the two agents to flinch. Michael quickly focused himself and said to the agents with quiet, peaceful, confidence, “It's alright... I understand now. What you are about to feel is not your own emotion. I am projecting it. Ignore what you are feeling and focus on what we need to do, which is to get out of here.” As soon as Michael stopped talking he closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh. Moments later Agents Spencer and Gonzales felt a wave of emotion.

Agent Gonzales was knocked off balance, and so he sat down on the couch and drifted away into his thoughts. Agent Spencer stayed sitting in the hallway with her face in her hands. Michael got up off the floor and grabbed Agent Spencer by the arm and firmly pulled her up to her feet. He looked her in the eyes and said, “Ignore it. It is not yours. Go get what you need. We are leaving.” She looked into his eyes for a moment longer, then her face changed to show intensity and resolution and she walked back into her bedroom.

Michael walked over to the couch and grabbed Agent Gonzales by the hand, pulling him to his feet. "Focus. Get what you need, and let's get out of here."

Agent Gonzales nodded slowly and looked around at his things, then started throwing everything he needed to take into the biggest bag. Just as he was zipping up the bag and standing up Agent Spencer appeared in the hallway with her bag. They both looked at Michael, who stood at the front door. Michael asked if they were ready and they both absently nodded their affirmation. They were snapped from their thoughts when they saw Michael reach for the door. They both wanted to yell out and leap to stop him from opening the door, but neither of them did anything. They simply watched in terror as Michael confidently opened the door and walked out of the house.

The Agents quickly caught up with their pistols drawn and proceeded cautiously. Michael made it to their SUV quickly and stood next to the passenger side back door. The Agents were slow, looking at the two men sitting against the house, crying into their hands.

"We need to leave. I don't think it would be wise to take too long." Michael said calmly.

Agent Spencer was bewildered, "What is going on here?"

"No time now. I will explain later."

Agent Gonzales made it to the trunk door, opened it, and threw his bag in. Then went to retrieve Agent Spencer's bag from her, threw it in, and closed the door. He was about to get into the front passenger seat as Agent Spencer made her way around the front of the vehicle to the driver side door when she let out a little shriek.

Michael and Agent Gonzales both looked to where she was looking and saw one of the men lying on his side in a fetal position, with his hand in his unzipped pants – masturbating. Before Agent Spencer could say anything Michael said firmly and with some concern in his voice, "Agent Spencer, get in the car, we must leave."

As she was getting into the car Agent Gonzales said, "Michael get in the front here, we need to take one more thing." and hopped out. He quickly went to one of the men sitting against the house crying and stripped him of his weapons, pulled him to his feet, and handcuffed him. He had a little trouble getting the man to cooperate as he pushed him into the back seat and jumped half onto him so he could close the door behind and said, "Let's go."

Agent Gonzales was focused on his prisoner sitting next to him. Agent Spencer was focused on her driving, having recently finished a series of phone calls and telling them that they would have a police escort soon. Michael sat peacefully and watched the little reflectors on the side of the road go past. A tear made its way down his cheek.

"Alright Michael, whenever you are ready." Agent Gonzales said politely, "I really need to know what the hell happened back there."

Michael took a moment to collect himself. "The short answer is that I figured out that I was not only very good at feeling other people's emotions, but I am really good at projecting them as well. It occurred to me that the emotional feedback loop that I was stuck in with my mother, was something that I experienced with everyone. So much of my past behavior was dictated by trying to not hurt other people's feelings... whether they were aware of it or not." Michael paused for a moment. "I had to learn the hard way that my feelings were more important to me than other people's were." Quickly adding, "That is no excuse to be a jerk, it's just... well, you know what I mean."

"We know what you mean." Agent Gonzales said supportively. "So, what were you projecting that made me think of watching my son help our elderly neighbor?" He added quietly, "He was walking home from a friend's house and didn't know I was watching from an upstairs window, but he spent about fifteen minutes helping a neighbor move some heavy things around her yard."

"Pride." Michael replied. "I was thinking about my Grandfather's funeral. I was a pallbearer. They weren't going to let me at first, but I was persistent. I have never been more proud, walking with the casket in front of all his friends."

"Then why were these guys crying?"

"Pride is the opposite of guilt." Michael said calmly.

Agent Gonzales thought out loud looking sharply at the prisoner sitting next to him, "Mercenaries have no pride."

Agent Spencer's voice cracked, "There are things I am proud of, but all I could think of were all the things I didn't do for my brother."

Michael was quick and soft, "Don't worry Agent Spencer. I am certain that my emotional energy has a signature that is familiar to you and is reminding you of your brother. And to correct you Agent Gonzales, I am also certain that these mercenaries have pride in something, just not what they were doing this evening."

Some time passed, then Agent Spencer got up the nerve, "So... um... what about that guy masturbating?"

Michael laughed, "That is why we needed to be quick. There is no knowing how a person will react to an emotion; it all depends on their own personal experiences. Somewhere in that poor man's life he has had experiences that makes him associate pride or guilt with sex. Moreover, I did not want to find out what would happen if all those men were made to feel my energy for too long... Not only is it impossible to know how people will react to an emotion, but everything

becomes exponentially worse if those behaviors are allowed to evolve. Those men sitting against the wall crying might have started fighting, or shooting at each other, or killing themselves. Remember, according to the story, the voice of God made everyone go crazy.”

“I’m not necessarily against that.” Agent Gonzales said while looking at the prisoner next to him.

Michael said peacefully, but with something laced in his tone that made everyone shudder, “With great power comes great responsibility, Agent Gonzales.”

Everyone was quiet until Agent Spencer’s phone rang and several flashing lights appeared on the horizon coming towards them.

Chapter Nine

One year later.

Agent Spencer pulled up in front of Michael's apartment building to find Michael standing on the front walk receiving people. Other cars and other women bringing their children up to Michael, and Michael confidently greeting them, exchanging a few words and saying goodbye as the women then turned to leave. Their child would go to the house where an older woman collected them on the stoop and ushered them inside. The apartment house was different than it was a year ago. It had been modified to look more like a business on the ground floor. She decided to wait for a break in the flow of people before getting out. She pretended to be on her phone.

When the time was right she got out of her vehicle and walked towards Michael who gave her a warm smile. "Good Morning Agent Spencer."

"Please, call me Anna now that this isn't official business."

"Very well Anna. How have you been?"

"Alright, considering the mess that you created." She said jokingly. "I don't know how any of this is going to turn out. People can't see it by how things appear on the news, but everything is falling apart. There is a small part of our government that wants everything investigated and out in the open. Then there are the multiple parts that are working viciously against us... and against each other, it seems. The hard part is that it is impossible to tell who is working for who." She let a moment pass and decided to take the chance, but Michael started before her.

"We've talked about all this before. I would rather spend my time teaching the future than fighting the past... there is no future in the past." A big smile came to his face.

"But it really seems like it's going to all fall apart." She said pleadingly, "We could really use someone that could navigate the lies and stories."

"Of course it is going to fall apart, eventually. There is no way to stop it; study your history." She gave him a wry look. "It is very simple Agent... Anna, since you arrested that mercenary they are not threatened by me. But if I started playing the game you ask of me? They will eventually find a way to kill me, and I will not be able to teach everything I know to the people who need the information. However, if I ignore the game and simply teach? Those bad people will never realize that I am fighting against them... and winning. Not here and now, but in the future."

Michael let a moment pass and said, "Imagine what would have happened if Jesus never got caught up in the politics of Jerusalem? What would this world be like if he simply stayed in a quiet village and peacefully taught those who sought his help? How many disciples would he

have had then? And how much more would we have known today? It is right for you to fight this battle, but it is not right for me."

Agent Spencer let it go with a big sigh and gave him a smile. "The place looks great."

"Thank you. It does. But the credit goes to my mother and landlady who have quit their jobs to help out and take care of the business end of this. I wouldn't be able to get the proper licenses and permits myself."

"So, is this him?" Michael gestured towards the car.

"Yes, that is Stephen. I am sorry to say that it will be a little difficult to get him out of the car." Agent Spencer was about to go on and say more, but she was interrupted by the car door opening and her brother getting out. Stephen, in his late-twenties, approached them on the sidewalk looking down at the sidewalk and carrying his backpack in one hand. Agent Spencer was stunned silent.

Michael said, "Hello Stephen, my name is Michael."

Agent Spencer almost passed out when she heard her brother quietly say "Hi Michael" with his head still bent to the ground.

Quietly, a small boy came from the house and stood next to Michael. "Stephen, this is Darren. He will show you around and show you where you can put your backpack." Again, Agent Spencer stared in disbelief as she watched Darren put out his hand for Stephen to take, and he did. Stephen took his hand and followed Darren into the house.

"So, he is not going to be a bother?"

Michael didn't answer, he just looked at her with a confident smile. When she understood he said, "see you in the evening."

"Yes, I should be here around six-ish."

"Have a good day, Anna." And Michael turned around, leaving Agent Spencer looking nervously at the house.

Endnote

This story was published on Smashwords.com between 2012 and 2017. I decided to consolidate everything and looked at it again. To my embarrassment, there were a bunch of stupid mistakes and typos. There are probably still a few, but it is amazing how much better writing aids have gotten in five years. (However, the real problem is that I suck at editing.)

I have been through, again and again, editing this document... only to find stupid mistakes that were not there previously. Suffice to say, my cynicism assumes skullduggery. So, please assume that there will always be stupid typos and grammatical mistakes popping up out of nowhere.