

SECRET OF THE SCRIBE

By

Douglas Misquita

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, incidents, and businesses is purely coincidental.

© Douglas Misquita

First published in 2012 by Frogbooks, an imprint of Leadstart Publishing Corporation

Second edition published by Douglas Misquita

Second edition print ISBN: 978-93-5268-015-3

Second edition eBook publishing and distribution powered by pronoun.com

Douglas Misquita is an action-adventure thriller writer from India. His books have been praised for their quick pace, visuals, intertwining plots, and high-octane action.

Find out more at

douglasmisquita.com

[Goodreads.com/douglasmisquita](https://www.goodreads.com/douglasmisquita)

[Facebook.com/douglasmisquitabooks](https://www.facebook.com/douglasmisquitabooks)

Other books by Douglas Misquita

Fiction

Diablo

The Apocalypse Trigger

Secret of the Scribe

Haunted

Non-Fiction

Impressions of Egypt

eBook short

Know Thy Enemy

To my dad, Douglas, Sr. for taking me to the movies, where I learned what it is to be entertained.

PRAISE FOR DOUGLAS MISQUITA

DIABLO

Highly recommended. A spectacular ripped-from-the-headlines thriller about terrorism and the global migrant crisis – bestthrillers.com

4 out of 5. Diablo, by Douglas Misquita, is yet another episode of myriad of characters, from varying social and geographic backgrounds, astutely interwoven together, into a gripping action thriller. - [Chicky Kadambari](#)

Fans of political, thrillers, action and suspense genres will find this a fun read. -[Charity Tober](#)

Douglas Misquita has used a great mix of technology and modern day problem to create an entertaining and thought provoking thriller. - [Payal Sinha](#)

Well written ... tight edge-of-the-seat action drama... the story line is well thought out and the book definitely is (sic) a good read. - [Hemantkumar Jain](#)

THE APOCALYPSE TRIGGER

... a wholesome adventure riveted with action, tech and the good ole apocalyptic plan - [Dallyn Misquita](#)

Amazing book with expertly written action scenes and a plot which leaves you craving for more! - [Tulika](#)

Misquita is a prolific author; he is creating his own oeuvre in the action-adventure-thriller genre, and uses history, technology and fiction quite effectively. - [Roshmi Sinha](#)

It's a perfect Hollywood script, the plot is excellent and the writing style is totally different. - [Nitin Vadher](#)

SECRET OF THE SCRIBE

...reveals the strength of his writing as well as flexibility in dealing with an almost futuristic story. - [Shana Susan](#)

You know you are in the hands of an adequate and efficient writer - [Mandar Talvekar](#)

An excellent read, this book is fast paced and very difficult to put down - [Omstavan Samant](#)

This book is difficult to put down, so I would recommend reading it over the weekend. It has a gripping story-line combined with a fast pace - [Newton Lewis](#)

HAUNTED

Move over CB and the host of writers who think they can write, Douglas is a star story teller. - [Samarpita Sharma](#)

This is most definitely going at the top of my recommendations list. - [Molly Edwards](#)

It's almost impossible to believe that "Haunted" is the first published work of Douglas Misquita. - [Naman Kapur](#)

Non-stop explosive gun-battles, car chases, double-crossing thugs, and a full cast of dispensable characters carry the plot of this emotion-packed story to an unexpected surprise (sic) ending. - [Richard Blake](#)

Read more reviews at www.douglasmisquita.com/reviews

FOREWORD

We live in an era that is witnessing the rampant proliferation of the communication technology and devices.

We are told that these innovations and their application will make our lives easier, but have they? Do we spend more time at leisure now, than earlier? Do we spend more time with each other now than earlier? There is a danger of being insidiously seduced into a silo-like virtual world. The amount of time spent interacting via technology allows us to speculate that a breakdown in social interaction is not implausible. We are ignorant or careless of our ever-increasing dependence on technology. One may even say that, at some time, and our lives will be run in proxy by technology.

It would not be beyond certain individuals or organizations to assume total control, by controlling the information and technology that governs our lives. This is the subject matter of this story.

- Douglas Misquita, Mumbai, 2011

PROLOGUE: EXTRACTION

The frozen lake reflected the light of a full moon like a giant mirror, lighting the surroundings in a surreal cold, white hue. Along the shore of the lake, the quiet and sentinel wild grass, that had weathered the Siberian winter, shone like silver blades. An owl hooted somewhere. In the biting cold, no insects buzzed.

Five silhouettes materialized, like wraiths from the tree line bordering the lake, and crouch-ran across the open field, in thick knee-deep snow. They wore heavy arctic camouflage parkas, clutched rifles in gloved hands and their faces were hidden by white ski-masks showing only keen, tense eyes. The leader raised a hand in signal, and the group split up.

Three men darted toward the stone bridge spanning the lake. They blended with the icing-like layer of snow over the yellowing stone of the bridge.

The remaining two men darted for the glassy lake. On the frozen lake, they tread lightly. Their intelligence on the geography told them that the frozen lake could easily bear the weight of a Jeep. But intelligence had a nasty habit of being wrong. They moved among the damp spans of the bridge, their parkas rubbing against the lichen that had found a home in the masonry. Within a few minutes, the team was across and converged behind a clump of withered bushes. Icicles hung like dripping pearls from the dry branches.

The leader indicated a house, said hoarsely. "Eleven o'clock." They quickly reconnoitered the open land over which they would have to make a final dash. At this time of night, all the lights in the houses of the village were doused. The target house stood at one end of the village, away from the main body of the village... which was good. The owl hooted again and roused the barking of a dog.

"On my mark," the leader said. The others nodded. They readied themselves. Weapons were cocked silently, bolts slid home. One last look around. The leader held up three fingers, two, then one.

Confident that they were alone, they broke out of cover, darting behind low mounds of snow, leaping over dead bushes, crisscrossing each other. Each kept an eye on the man in front and the man beside. The thick snow sucked the soles of their boots in, but they were trained for special covert operations in this type of terrain.

His breath coming in foggy wisps, the lead American was ten feet from the door of the target house, when he spied something in the snow: a trail of heavy boot threads leading to the door.

"Cover!" he whispered urgently, signaling an alarm with a raised fist. Just then staccato muzzle flashes erupted from a window of the house. The leader went down in the snow as rounds tore through his cold-weather gear.

Behind him, his team responded rapidly, leveling their rifles and firing. The shooter in the window went down in a grotesque death-dance.

From inside the house, they heard shouts in Russian. In the village, a few lights came on — rectangular squares of light in curtained windows. The shots had roused people, echoing across the bowl of earth, in which the lake and the village rested.

Quick dispersal smoke grenades sailed in the night, through the window, and detonated. Thick gray smoke billowed out from the house. More shouts in Russian as the men inside choked and blinded. The door was smashed open and two Americans went in low, beneath the level of the rising smoke. Another ran around the back, and the fourth scaled the thatched roof, to go down the broad chimney.

Inside the house, guns blazed and muzzle flashes strobed the thinning cloud of smoke. Another Russian went down. As he died, his finger jammed on the trigger and bullets spewed in a deadly arc, sloughing holes into the stone walls, chipping the wooden door and windows, sending all the others ducking for cover.

The two enemies bumped into each other, their guns were knocked from their grip, they grappled and clawed for each other's throat. Out came serrated combat knives, slashing viciously.

In the main hall of the house, a Russian leaped over a wooden table, knocking it over, and spun, firing. The American in the doorway was hit in the thigh and went down but not before he winged the Russian. But the bullet had not done enough damage and the Russian recovered quickly and readied to put in a killing shot before the American could realign his sights. Out of the corner of his eye, the Russian saw a cloud of soot puff out as another American landed in the fireplace. The Russian accepted his death, but he would take one of the Americans with him. He fired at the wounded American in the doorway just as the American in the fireplace let loose a volley that threw the Russian's body over a dirty couch, killing him before he hit the floor. The American by the doorway sank to his knees, blood spurting from his neck.

Knives swished in deadly arcs. Sparks flew when the blades met. Their muscles trembled as each tried to get the better of the other as they lunged, parried, blocked. Then the American's blade sank into the Russian's parka, cutting through the right bicep. The Russian roared and

locked his right arm over the American's outstretched arm, trapping the American blade. Deftly, the Russian flipped his knife to his left hand and sliced his blade across the American's eyes. The American released his knife in agony, clutching his torn eyeball. The Russian seized his opportunity and lunged viciously... just as three bullets from the soot-covered American slammed into his head, bursting it open. The Russian knife skittered across the floor.

Blood streaming from his eye, the half-blinded American opened his mouth to shout a warning but it was too late. Another Russian crept from behind and executed his saviour, the bullet exiting cleanly from the center of his forehead.

As he fell, the Russian stood sneering in triumph and did not see the Russian blade come cartwheeling toward him, thrown underhand by the one-eyed American. The blade caught the Russian under the jaw, embedding in his throat.

Silence descended in the house.

Outside, the dogs were barking incessantly. Villagers were shouting.

The lone American stood unsteadily and hyperventilated from shock and exhaustion. An ordinary man would have slipped into unconsciousness. But he had been built by the strenuous training routine to handle such situations on his own. He ripped the curtains from the small window and fashioned a bandage around his damaged eye socket. Then he picked up a fallen rifle and went deeper into the house.

"Yuri Pavlovich!" he called out, "I'm an American. If you are in this house, we must go *now!*" No reply.

Outside the wind was whistling. He tripped over a plate in the dark, crushing it underfoot, and banged into the sideboard with a curse. The voices outside were louder.

"Yuri! Are you here?" He stepped into the kitchen, spied rotting food on the counter. It didn't look like anyone had lived in the house for a while. He cursed because it meant his team's sacrifices had been in vain.

Wood creaked under his boot: A trapdoor built into the stone floor. He yanked the trapdoor open by an iron pull-ring, and used it as a shield, aiming his rifle into the darkness below.

"Doctor Yuri Pavlovich, I am an American soldier. If you're down there, come out now! We don't have much time."

He heard a shuffling sound from beneath. "Wait, wait... I am coming." More shuffling, and then a frail, sickly looking Russian, with thinning red hair, appeared in the doorway. Pavlovich started at the frightful sight of the wounded American, looking at him, blood soaking through the impromptu bandage over his right eye.

"Come on!" The American reached down and pulled Pavlovich up the ladder, through the trapdoor. "We must go now!"

They cracked the back door open, looked out. The wind had picked up and it was howling, kicking up snow, reducing visibility. The American strained to see with his one eye. He shouted over the wind to the Russian, "I cannot see too well; do you see anyone?" Pavlovich shook his head in an emphatic 'no'. Down the hallway, behind them, the villagers had breached the house and discovered the dead bodies. "Okay, then, let's get out of here."

By the time the villagers had stumbled on the open trapdoor, the American soldier, and the Russian scientist had disappeared.

Their boot tracks and trail of dripping blood was quickly obscured by the falling snow.

PART I: HOPE

CHAPTER 1

SOMEWHERE OVER POLAND

It was a picture postcard day: blue skies overhead with tufts of cotton clouds. Yellow fields stretched into the distance, the blades of grass ruffled with the gentle breeze. On a hump in the earth, a windmill turned lazily. The creak of its wooden blades carried over the land a sound that was idyllic and relaxing. Nearby, cows grazed; a jigsaw pattern of white and black patches across their bodies. The call of an early morning bird sang out across the land.

The serenity was broken by the coughing and sputtering of an engine. A spec grew against the blue skies. A small aircraft headed toward the field, trailing black smoke like a dirty smear against the postcard.

"Mayday! Mayday!" Alarms blaring, beeping. The piercing sound intensified as the aircraft fell. Everything shook violently. The cabin was rattling so hard, Emely Mayenschein thought it would tear apart at the seams. A duffle bag tumbled from the overhead luggage bin, narrowly missing her head, but landing hard, on her shoulder. It slid, rolled and bounced toward the cockpit. The scene unfolding before her eyes was too terrifying for her to react to whatever had fallen.

She clutched the armrests in a death-grip, her fingers white, manicured nails gouging the padding in the armrests. The g-forces pushed her into her seat so that even if she wanted to, she couldn't assume a brace position.

She heard a scream of pure terror, and realized a moment later, that it had come from her lips.

Over the top of the seats, she could see directly into the cockpit. The pilots were still shouting as they did their best to control their fall. She could see the dials on their control console: the luminous displays, the pointers spinning crazily and gauges scrolling inexorably toward an inevitable oblivion.

The aircraft began spiraling. Everything was whirling, and Emely threw up. Her vomit swirled around her head, splattering in her face and on the windows.

Then, through the windscreen, she could see the earth rushing up to greet them, rapidly. She could almost imagine what was going to happen in the next few seconds as the Piper Cheyenne III hurtled downward.

The vast expanse of earth engulfed the windscreen.

Emely Mayenschein was a Pole, from Wadowice, the same town that the late Pope John Paul II came from. She had been raised a devout Catholic. The Lord's Prayer escaped her lips.

The last words she would ever utter.

The Piper crashed into the earth. Outside, the windows were streaked with dirt as the impact raised a huge plume of mud, earth, and yellow grass high into the air. There was a terrible jolt as the nose crumpled inward. Chunks of earth pummeled the windscreen, shattering the tough glass. Shards flew like jagged projectiles into the cabin, lacerating the pilots, and cutting into Emely's face.

She momentarily squeezed her eyes shut but death has the power to amaze and. She reopened her eyes.

She was whiplashed hard. Her head bounced off the backrest with a frightening *crack*. Her mind raced to understand what had just happened. The seat belt cut painfully into her stomach. Had it not been cinched tightly she would have been thrown against the bulkhead. There was an awful shredding of metal. The sound carried along with all the other sounds of disaster through the fuselage.

The Piper jumped and the landing gear was shorn from its belly. Out of her peripheral vision, she saw a wheel go spinning in the distance as the Piper landed on its belly, and slid in the field.

It was amazing how even in the midst of such terror the human mind could register such things.

The tall yellow stalks of grass went rushing by. The undulating grass had belied the harsh terrain under. They were hurtling forward at an incredible speed.

Outside, the starboard wing buckled. The engine was torn from its mounting and tossed into the air. The wing bit into the earth. Emely felt weightless, as the fuselage rose on the buckled wing bit. The seat she was in strained against gravity and was finally torn from its bolts to the floor, toppling her onto the bulkhead, pushing her hard against her cheek, neck bent at a crazy angle.

There was a loud protesting groan of metal from all around.

Already raised on one end, the *whole* Piper was lifted into the air again as it hit a bump. For a second, she saw the blue skies as the flattened nose was raised and hung there, motionless. Then the fuselage slammed back into the earth, blasting a wide crater in the field. Emely was thrown like a ragdoll across the aisle, her back slamming hard against the edge of the seats. She gasped in intense pain, and rolled into the aisle, unconscious.

AN INTERNET NEWS ARTICLE

2 YEARS LATER

REVOLUTIONARY TECHNOLOGY ENABLES LOCKED-IN SYNDROME PATIENT TO SPEAK AGAIN

Just hours ago, Mark Steinberg, founder, and CEO of Linguistics, Inc. announced a breakthrough in thought-to-speech technology.

The *Linguistics Band* is worn like an ordinary headband. It reads electric signals from the brain's motor cortex. These neural signals are generated when the wearer *thinks* of a word. Using proprietary algorithms, the Band interprets the signals as vowels or consonants and translates them into formant frequencies (resonant frequencies of the vocal cords). The frequencies are then interpreted by a display or a speech synthesizer.

While Linguistics isn't the first company in the domain, it *is the only* company that has overcome the barrier of mapping the trillions of neural connections in the brain's motor cortex, intelligently analyzing and interpreting the electric signals on the fly – which means the system does not have to be trained in new words or sounds; and finally matching the speed of neuron firing, to achieve normal speech delivery without delays.

Linguistics unveiled the technology on Emely Mayenschein. Ms. Mayenschein was involved in an air crash two years ago. Trauma to her brainstem resulted in locked-in syndrome, a condition that leaves the patient's voluntary muscles, except those that control the eyes, paralyzed.

Mr. Steinberg believes that his company's solution can bring hope to many differently-abled people around the world, and those afflicted with vocal paralysis.

Linguistics, Inc. is committed to delivering an affordable solution to the world.

CHAPTER 2

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Mark Steinberg stood by the door to Emely's bedroom. He watched as the chambermaid helped her to bed. Steinberg could hardly begin to imagine the utter helplessness Emely felt. The chambermaid carefully unstrapped the headband and soothed Emely's hair into a comfortable spread, adjusted the respirator. Then the woman left.

Steinberg stepped into the room, his pace matching the rise and fall of the diaphragm in the respirator. He stood by Emely's bed, picked up the headband and looked at it. He held her hand in his.

She raised her eyes questioningly. After two intimate years, he knew exactly what she was thinking and smiled briefly. "Emely," he said, "after all these years, you know as much about this," — he indicated the Band — "as the team."

Another signal from her eyes. *Yes.*

"The shimmer was very frequent, wasn't it? Despite what we thought, there's still neural impulse interference."

Yes.

"I'll have the guys look it over." He turned down the night lights. They had fallen in love. Steinberg could not explain it. Maybe it was her indelible resolve to live, to recover, to accept her condition. "Good night, Emely."

Good night, Mark, she thought.

He kissed her, long, passionately. She could not return his affection, but she was cognitive of his gesture.

"I'll be back, soon," he said when he broke away.

She knew enough to know he would not rest until he had registered the issue with the Linguistics team.

Steinberg drove to the Linguistics, Inc. building outside Seattle. After the buzz of the evening's revelation, the building was deserted and silent, save for a single night guard. Steinberg acknowledged the guard, walked down the darkened corridors, took the elevator to the sub-basement.

The elevator arrived with a soft *ding* and waited. Steinberg splayed his fingers on a section of the door and it turned translucent. A concealed fingerprint scanner had been activated with the pressure of his palm.

If Steinberg had failed to place his palm on the scanner within five seconds of the elevator stopping, an alarm would have gone off at the police station and the elevator shaft would have been locked down. Further, the sub-basement would have been automatically sealed off. Only a heavy artillery shell could have broken through.

His ID confirmed, Steinberg put his other hand on the wall, activating another security measure. An alphanumeric touchpad materialized, Steinberg entered his sixteen-character passcode at a specific rate. Two checks were cleared: One required him to activate the touchpad within three seconds of the fingerprint scan, the second required him to enter his passcode at a specific rate. A soft female voice announced, "Welcome Mr. Steinberg."

The elevator doors, and then the five-inch fortress doors of the sub-basement slid open.

Mark Steinberg stepped into the stark, white sanctum of the Linguistics Research and Development Laboratory.

Rows of overhead lighting provided optimal lighting. Banks of equipment and test bays were carefully arrayed in the space. A panel of displays showed lines of scrolling data, metrics, and critical data being backed up from the Linguistics Band prototype, that had been worn by Emely.

A forty-inch monitor displayed a revolving *connectome* — a 3D rendition of the human brain's neural pathways as clusters of wiry swirls.

To one side, was a larger display, spanning an entire wall. Once the backup was complete, computer programs would parse the data and generate a dashboard that would be displayed on that giant screen. The team would use the analysis to improve future iterations of the Band.

"Thought I'd find you here," Steinberg said as he approached the young man, sitting on a swivel chair, staring at the streaming data.

Dr. Timothy Sable, a brilliant neuroscientist, the youngest on the Emely Mayenschein Research Program at twenty-six, adjusted his wire rim glasses and flashed his handsome smile. The same smile had won him the "World's Sexiest Intellect" that year. Sable still wore in his tuxedo, the bowtie dangled from his neck. He said, "Yes, this is an important test and after the last crash, I want to make sure we capture all the data."

"You're running it manually?"

"Pseudo-manually."

It would take ten hours to process all the data from the Band. But apparently, Sable was prepared to pull an all-nighter rather than have the system crash — like a previous time — and lose important test data.

"Ok," Steinberg said. "About the shimmer..."

Sable nodded and said, "I noticed. Only we did. It was very frequent." He appeared pensive.

"Thought we'd smoothed that out."

"Looks like interference."

"We'll look at it." Part of the security protocol that the team had committed to was that their neural sensors would only pick up signals that were required to accomplish the end objective and nothing else. "Anyway," Sable said, stretching, "The announcement was a grand success. We're through to the next round."

"It is going to be very trying," Steinberg warned.

Now that the Linguistics solution had been soft-launched, every investigative agency and medical and scientific administrative body would be knocking at their door.

"But we'll get through," Sable said, flashing that confident smile again. "I know."

CHAPTER 3

The red Mazda sedan took the light curves of the road quickly. Sitting in the driver's seat, Lorraine Tao adjusted her sunglasses and turned up the air-conditioning. It was getting warmer by the year. Environmental groups were calling for immediate action on global warming. Well, she thought, some people worry about Climate Change; I worry about sensitive technology and its potential misuse.

The road crested a slight rise, and she saw the satellite city. A single broad thoroughfare ran through the city, with sleek, eco-friendly buildings on either side.

A few minutes later, she pulled off the thoroughfare into a shady road outside a building marked as Linguistics, Inc.

"Lorraine Tao." She flashed her ID to the security, "I have an appointment with Mark Steinberg."

Lorraine was directed to a sparsely-decorated reception area on the second floor and asked to wait. A few minutes later, she was told, "Dr. Sable will see you now."

"I have an appointment with Mark Steinberg."

"Please follow me," the receptionist insisted. Shrugging, Lorraine followed the receptionist, to a wood paneled door. The receptionist knocked softly and pushed the door open.

Lorraine stepped into a big office with a wide window that offered a panoramic view of the landscape. She could see Seattle in the distance. The office was so big, she took a few seconds to notice Timothy Sable seated at a desk, silhouetted against the outside light. There was another man — tall and hunched, with a worried look on his face — in the room, who stood, buttoning his tweed jacket.

"Ah, Ms. Tao," Timothy said, standing, "Come in."

Lorraine crossed the room, her heels sinking into the plush carpet. She extended her hand and shook Sable's hand, noting that he was very handsome. Sable indicated the other man. "I requested Dr. Michener to be present as well." Lorraine shook Michener's hand. "Dr. Michener designed the security protocols at Linguistics. Mr. Steinberg sends his apologies, but I assure you, I am a good fill-in."

"I was hoping to meet Mark," she admitted, "But I'll take you at your word."

Sable bowed. "I trust you had a good flight over."

"It's a nice break from Washington D.C."

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, coffee is good, thank you."

Sable ordered coffees and tea for Michener. Then he turned all business, "So. Ms. Tao, we haven't heard of the Office of Sensitive Technology Regulation. Perhaps you could start with an overview?"

Lorraine said. "The OSTR has been around for a very long time, almost as old as the Manhattan Project. It has gone through several reorganizations and relocations and has been called many names before OSTR.

"We exist for one purpose: to regulate the application of sensitive technology and to ensure that other agencies and organizations within the United States do not abuse said technology or solutions. As an example, a branch of OSTR regulates the application of genetic technology to human and animal cloning.

"I'm sure you will agree with me that with billions of dollars at stake, certain organizations are willing to go to any extent to exploit a technology." She eyed them, they returned impassive stares. She continued, "We have been fairly successful over the years in averting several disasters."

"OSTR believes that Linguistics technology comes under the category of potentially dangerous?"

"OSTR does."

"We are already being certified by several agencies and administrative bodies across the world. We receive calls every week, from at least five, requesting information, inspections, and audits. We have been very transparent."

Lorraine slid two printed sheets across the table. It was a list of all the entities that were auditing Linguistics.

"You're pretty thorough," Michener said, flipping the pages.

"Updated as of yesterday, 1800 hours," Lorraine informed him. "The intent of OSTR is not to audit the technology at Linguistics, Dr. Michener." She looked at them. "But to ensure that the people who use Linguistics technology, do so ethically and legally. Because the Linguistics Band essentially works by reading neural signals, what stops anyone from altering the specifications to read the brain's deepest secrets? You were approached by DARPA for example."

"And we made it very clear to DARPA that the technology was not for military purposes."

"And you believe DARPA will sit quietly?" Before they could reply, she went on, "Gentlemen, OSTR has surreptitiously, on three occasions, prevented DARPA from *misusing* commercial technology."

"Linguistics has set up a supervisory panel to oversee such applications, Ms. Tao," Sable said.

"That is if we ever lease the technology. In the first place, such a possibility is very remote.

We will retain all IPR and sole production and application rights to the technology. Mark Steinberg has been very clear, from day one: The core technology is inherently dangerous and so will never be exposed outside a very select core group.”

“And are you certain of the integrity of this core group?”

Both men exchanged glances. “They *are* the original team.”

“Who worked with Emely Mayenschein,” Lorraine completed for Michener. She leaned forward. “In my experience, the only thing consistent about integrity is the ease with which it can disintegrate at the right offer.”

Michener said, “If you are concerned about security and reading people’s thoughts, let me clarify that we *do not* store neural signals –thoughts - that we detect from the motor cortex. That’s the beauty of the Linguistics Neural Sensor Technology (LiNST) algorithm.”

Lorraine was not convinced with his glib statement. “All the greatest disasters in our human history began with a very generous and noble thought, Dr. Michener. You’ll have to excuse me: The technology exists and can be reverse engineered to other applications. Period.”

Seeing that she would not back off, Sable queried, “What are you suggesting, Ms. Tao?”

Lorraine sipped her coffee. “I’m suggesting collaboration between OSTR and the supervisory panel at Linguistics. OSTR’s experience will be helpful in detecting patterns that are indicative of potential misuse. At least among the indigenous organizations.”

“What about the foreign organizations?”

“You can be quite sure,” Lorraine said with a sly smile, “that the indigenous organizations will ensure the foreign organizations don’t get ahead in the game.”

The two doctors considered this in silence. Then Sable said, “We’ll have to get back to you.”

“The sooner, the better. And oh, don’t let our obscurity belie our influence. OSTR can invoke a presidential order and *get* involved, whether you like it or not. We just don’t want to get off to a rocky start, especially when it appears that Steinberg does indeed have honorable intentions.”

“Thank you,” Sable said graciously. “You’ll hear from us within forty-eight hours.”

Lorraine handed them her business card. “These are my direct numbers.”

“You do know that we *will* investigate OSTR,” Sable said.

“Be my guest. You’ll find we’re on the level. I could hasten your investigation, save you time trying to uncover the layers that lead to OSTR, but then that would be influencing the outcome, wouldn’t it?”

“It would.”

She indicated a number on the card. "That reaches my immediate supervisor. Every field operative is assigned a supervisor and you will work with the two of us. We work in silos to avoid contamination."

Michener was deep in thought. Though he had appeared confident about the security measures that were in place — security that he had implemented — if OSTR checked out, he would be glad for the outside assistance and opinion. Michener couldn't be sure, but over the last few weeks, a creeping sense of —

"Jesse?" Michener snapped out of his thoughts. "Lorraine was asking who would be her point of contact at Linguistics. I told her it would be you unless you decide to put someone else on the front line..."

"Yes, yes," Michener said quickly. "I will assign someone. As you can imagine, I am very busy during this time."

"I understand." Lorraine picked up her satchel. "So I will hear back from you, Dr. Sable, within forty-eight hours?"

"Yes. I don't think we have much choice," Sable said tightly.

"We may turn out to be your only friends."

"For all our sakes, I hope that situation does not arise," Michener said grimly. "I'll walk you out."

In the reception, Michener said, "Tell me, Ms. Tao. Does OSTR also make informants *disappear*?"

Lorraine looked at him askance. "By *disappear* you mean?"

Michener looked around carefully and said in a low voice, "Like the FBI Witness Protection."

She eyed him darkly. "There's something already going on at Linguistics?"

"Answer the question, Ms. Tao."

"We can."

Michener nodded. "Be seeing you, Ms. Tao." He walked away, leaving her looking at his stooped shoulders.

CHAPTER 4

2 MONTHS LATER

Rain hammered onto the roads and the sidewalk, drumming on the car's roof. Michener peered forward to see past the *flick-flick* of the windscreen wipers. He turned right, took a narrow exit away from the road, and steered beneath a stone viaduct.

He stopped beside the third archway and flashed his headlights thrice. In response, headlights flashed out of the gloom under the arch, behind the curtain of rain cascading from the viaduct. Michener turned into the shadows of the arch, parting the curtain, turned out the lights, climbed out, crossed over to Lorraine Tao's car.

"What have you got?" Lorraine said, getting right to the point as she stepped out of her car. She was still in her business suit.

"They altered the specifications," Michener said hurriedly.

Her eyes flashed. "I need specifics, Jesse... and names."

Michener looked around, his expression guilty. "Steinberg is distracted by Emely. He has left Sable to oversee operations... and Sable is..." He fumbled for the correct term, finally said, "Sable is dealing dirty."

"You have *proof*?"

"I need assurances."

"You have my assurance. No harm will come to you, or your family."

"I think Sable suspects me, already." They heard a heavy vehicle speeding above them on the viaduct. Michener grabbed her elbow and his voice took on a tone of urgency. "Within the next two days, Lorraine!"

Lorraine shook his hand off gently. She was ready. "Two days. And you will bring us, what?"

"Original versus altered specifications, a list of names and correspondence between Sable and the key players in this subterfuge, plans for mass deployment and who gains from all this. And something very... odd." He was trembling and Lorraine could tell it was not just the cold from the rain. Something had spooked Dr. Michener, and he was falling apart with the burden of what he knew and had to do. "This goes way deep, Lorraine. They will come for you as well."

"I can take care of myself," Lorraine said firmly. "And OSTR can take care of you." She needed to boost his confidence, reassure him. "What did you mean by 'odd'?"

"I'm unsure... something to do with a myth." He shook his head. "You will see when I bring you the information."

Over two months she had cultivated his trust and cooperation. Legally, Michener was not to be liaising directly with Lorraine but certain inadvertent discoveries had compelled him to cross the line. Michener had confided in Lorraine: something *was going on* at Linguistics.

"We're almost at the end of the road." He nodded, not entirely convinced. "Jesse," she said more firmly. "Look at me, we're almost there. Just two more days and this will all be history. Okay?"

"Yes, okay." Michener looked miserable.

"Good. What is the *Purge*?"

"Purge?" he repeated slowly. She had caught him unaware.

"Yes. I know it is your brainchild so don't deny it." She sighed. "But you kept it from us." She was upset. "We're on the same side. Level with me. I need *everything*, Doctor. The intent is to clean this up, not keep any ends untied. *I am on your side.*"

Michener divulged, "*Purge will purge* all the Linguistics systems effectively corrupting and erasing all research and collected data."

"Wait, *collected data*?"

He nodded miserably. "Contrary to what Sable said, Linguistics is saving *thoughts*."

They had to shut Linguistics down, Lorraine thought anxiously. "Go on, about the Purge."

"It's a protocol I designed as a last-ditch option to prevent the research falling into the wrong hands. Even though it was vetoed, I still secretly implemented it. It's still there. Nobody knows about it. I altered it to destroy all collected data, too."

"Can you trigger *Purge* remotely?"

"I need access to the mainframes. That's possible from within Linguistics, or from a computer that is linked to the mainframes."

"Then we need to get you back into Linguistics."

"I won't do it."

"We need to trigger *Purge*!"

He was unmoved. "I believe the solution still has benefits. If we act now Linguistics can still benefit humanity. It'd be a shame to destroy everything; I don't feel that decision should be in the hands of one man."

"Then destroy only the collected data. We'll handle the exposé."

"I was working hurriedly. A one-shot erase is what I implemented."

Lorraine was watching him closely. She could see the conflict he was facing. The battle between science and conscience were evident in his tense features. "If you need to know, Sable let that tidbit about Purge fall into our lap."

Michener understood. "He was trying to find out if *Purge* exists."

"We will need to separate your family from you when we move on Thursday. Book them on the Greyhound. An OSTR agent will travel with them. Once you've been debriefed, you will be taken to a safe house while we bury your past. Within a week you will be reunited with your family under new identities."

CHAPTER 5

Thursday evening, 48 hours from Michener's meeting with Lorraine, arrived with light showers. The sky was overcast; the street lights had turned on. Jesse Michener stepped away from the flower-motif bedroom curtains. His wife, Martha, carefully packed a small travelling bag. His backpack lay on the bed; he had packed without interest. All he wanted was to get out of the house, get the *deed* over with, leave the country. Safely.

In contrast to her husband's perpetual disquietude, Martha faced the world with equanimity. She went to him. They kissed, savoured the moment, and embraced, long. "It's going to be alright," she whispered in his ear.

He nodded, trying to draw from her strength. "Yes." Silence. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

His eyes strayed to the wall clock. It was nearing five-thirty. Michener gently broke the embrace. "It's time."

In the dining room, Jesse Michener knelt beside his adopted teenage son, Lance. "Hey kiddo," he said, ruffling the boy's hair.

Lance's big green eyes, looked at his foster father. "Do we have to go?" He had developed a crush on a neighborhood girl, and wanted to pursue the relationship.

"Yes. But only for a little while," Michener lied. There was another reason Michener hid the truth from Lance: his son's youth had been one of constant relocation, the result of a broken family. The therapist at the orphanage had advised a stable environment until Lance developed confidence and outgrew his past. "Lance, look at me, son. This is related to my work, okay? I must meet some people about a new job. It's not about anything else."

The boy nodded. Michener hugged him. "Be good. Take care of your Mom."

"I will."

Michener glanced surreptitiously at Lance's left sneaker. His eyes met those of Martha, who was standing in the doorway, watching intently. Unknown to Lance, the sole of his left sneaker held Michener's back up plan.

Michener was not about to reveal the instructions to activate Purge to Lorraine Tao because he believed Linguistics was salvageable. But he had taken a precaution: he had written the instructions on paper that was shaped to fit into Lance's sole. Then he had stuck the sole back onto the shoe.

"Then let's go," Michener said, "otherwise we'll miss the bus."

They exited from the back door.

As they waited for their bus to be called, Michener kept looking for the OSTR agent. Martha touched his arm, "Jesse, I think you should relax. You don't know whom to look for."

He let out the breath he had been holding and smiled at her. "You're right."

She grinned. "You'll probably get us detained for suspicious behaviour!"

His face grew serious. "You remember what to do?"

Her grin vanished. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

"But you remember," he persisted.

She looked away and nodded. "Yes, I remember, but —"

"Hush," he said squeezing her hand. "that's all."

When their bus was called, they said their goodbyes. Martha and Lance joined the short queue to the gate. Michener watched as they boarded the bus, found their seats.

He did not know that it would be the last time he saw his wife and son.

CHAPTER 6

ELLIOT BAY CARGO TERMINAL, WASHINGTON

Michener drove slowly into the container compound. The guard at the gate had (as promised by Lorraine) waved him through. Stacks of huge, multicolored shipping containers formed a towering maze in the glare of floodlights, that telescoped between the container blocks.

He parked in the center of the compound. He touched his jacket pocket for the umpteenth time, feeling the bulge of the portable drive. He looked at the luminous dial of the clock on the dashboard. The engine purred softly. A minute passed.

Then he saw a figure approaching, keeping to the shadows of the containers. Michener unclasped his seatbelt and unlocked the door. Lorraine stepped into the light. She was wearing dark jeans and a black polo-neck under her jacket. Her hair was left loose. She looked different: athletic and purposeful, determined. Like a cop. As always, she was direct, "You have it?"

"Of course," he said, a bit irritably, and patted his jacket pocket, again. "Why else would I be here?"

She ignored his acerbic tone. "My car is parked beyond this line of containers. Come on."

"My car..."

"Leave it," she called over her shoulder. "Let's go."

Michener reached into the car for his backpack.

A big black Bell Huey helicopter suddenly flared over the tops of the containers. The helicopter came in very low, and the wash from its thumping rotors flattened Michener to the ground. A powerful searchlight cast a bobbing white oblong of illumination on Michener and his car.

Michener could see two figures in the bay, their legs dangling out of the helicopter.

Someone was shouting; Michener couldn't hear over the sound of the helicopter; he was still reaching into his car, frozen under the searchlight.

"Jesse! Get out of there now!" Lorraine was waving her hands. There was something in her hands. Michener saw the expression on her face and knew he was in trouble. He moved.

The figure sitting in the bay in the helicopter received an order over his radio headset: "Take the subject out!"

A single high-powered round zoomed into Michener's forehead, puncturing a huge hole in his head, exiting from the back, in an explosion of brain matter and bone fragments. The round

smashed into the rear windows of his car and lodged in the container behind the car. The impact lifted him off his feet and slammed him into the side of the car, where he slumped lifelessly. Gore splattered over the car.

Lorraine had her Glock out and fired up at the helicopter. The helicopter pulled up, out of range. She saw staccato muzzle flashes as the helicopter gunsels turned their Ares Shrike 5.56 rifles on her. She dived for cover, sliding over on the far side of Michener's parked car. Gunfire followed her, chewing up the concrete and punching ragged holes in the car's hood. Bullets took out the windscreen and windows in an explosion of pulverized glass. Lorraine shielded her face as glass rained down on her. She had her back to the door and it wouldn't be long before a bullet nailed her. Hoping against hope, she reached up and tried the door handle.

It was unlocked.

She pulled the door open, jumped into the car, crawled across the front seats. She noticed the car keys were still in the ignition. And the engine was on! She knew the searchlight was trained on her back and they could see her through the shattered windscreen.

She twisted, aimed quickly, and fired.

Two spider web patterns formed on the helicopter's windscreen and the pilot pulled away, throwing off the aim of the shooters. A round narrowly missed her, punching into the backrest, ploughing a hole in the seat padding.

Still lying across the front seats, twisted around the gearshift, Lorraine poked her head out of the open driver door. She saw the bloody mess of Michener inches from her face. Michener had subconsciously patted his jacket pocket earlier; she could only hope what she needed was in there. She stretched, and her fingers dug into the dead man's jacket closing around a padded package inside. She yanked it out. Then ducking inside, she popped the car into reverse and slammed her palm on the accelerator.

With a screech of tires the bullet-ridden sedan leaped backward, out of the searchlight, fishtailing crazily.

Lorraine shoved the package into her jacket pocket and clumsily righted herself in the front seat, enough to look over the backrest of the driver seat.

The helicopter dipped its nose and gave pursuit.

Lorraine aimed the sedan for a gap between the container stacks. The automatic weapons from the helicopter came to life peppering the ground in front of the fleeing vehicle.

The car entered the gap, its flanks narrowly passing the walls of the containers. But the two open front doors were ripped away from their mounts simultaneously and cart-wheeled into the air before slamming and sliding into the ground. The car rocked from side to side. There was a screech of grinding metal and sparks flew as the flanks grazed against the containers. The car was now speeding in reverse through a narrow corridor between walls of containers. Lorraine craned her neck, looking past the jagged line of broken rear windscreen. The container stacks formed a T-Junction. She needed to go right, and circle around to where her car was parked.

She yanked the wheel hard and the car obeyed. The front end did not clear the tight turn and rammed into a container. The car came to a bone-jarring halt!

The helicopter overshot the stuck sedan.

Lorraine scrambled over the seat and tumbled out of the car. Clutching the portable drive, she took off at a sprint.

Above, the helicopter was turning around.

Whizz!

She felt the heat as a bullet whistled past her cheek. Her breath came in gasps. Where could she go?

If she surrendered...

No, they had not given Michener a chance. They surely weren't going make an exception for her.

Up ahead was another junction. Right, would return to the open area where Michener had been killed. The shadows were better. She darted left.

The helicopter hovered a few feet over the ribbed containers. A figure leaped out, landed lightly on the container. The helicopter rose again and crossed the six-foot gap between the container stacks. It deposited another figure atop the container.

The two figures hefted their automatic weapons and ran along the edge of the containers, in pursuit of the fleeing woman, with the helicopter covering them.

Lorraine was still intent on circling back to her car. She had an automatic rifle in the trunk of her car for emergencies. At least she would take down as many of these guys with her. She was running flat out, in a zigzag pattern to throw their aim off and she was beginning to tire. She was thankful she ran ten miles every Sunday. She slammed into a container and bounced off it, sucking in sharp breaths.

On the containers, one of the men fanned out diagonally intending to cut her off. He signaled the other figure running on the opposite container outlining his plan. They would box her in.