



# THE LATE CHRISTMAS

*When the magic is gone, who can bring it back?*

*by*

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## ***CHAPTER ONE – CHRISTMAS EVE***

If ever there were a festive feeling on the Eve of Christmas, then this one was missed by most people walking about in the Washington DC suburbs. There was something in the air though, something that had no place at this time of year, it almost seemed like a premonition but without any details. It wasn't anything tangible, in fact, describing it was almost impossible to the very few that recognised its presence; but it was there, all around and it filled the air and entered into the lungs of everyone who breathed it. The problem was that most of the people who were out on this evening were far too busy to stop for the second that it would have taken to recognise that all was not as it seemed. No one could have ever imagined that in the next few hours, all Christmases from then on would be seen in an entirely different light.

The small streets were filled with people doing some last minute shopping before all the stores closed for the holiday, some of which had already locked their doors and weren't planning to open again until the New Year. The rest were either raking in the few cents left from the last minute spreeing customers or the unorganised shoppers who were still rushing about from place to place before making their way home, after what had seemed like a very long twelve months.

It hadn't been as hard as many other years, the recessions of former times were at last becoming distant memories but prosperity hadn't hit the new heights that the men in suits had predicted. Other than in the last couple of days, most people had still been keeping a close eye on their finances; the housing market was continuing to improve and inflation was steadying out, but it had been an uphill struggle, and it had still seemed to just about everyone that the holidays had taken a lot longer to come around again.

The large flakes of snow that were in no rush to land were floating down from what appeared to be clear skies, except for the odd blackened cloud that peeped out from the tops of the District of Columbia buildings. None of the flakes fell quite hard enough to settle on the ground beneath anyone's feet as they landed, and instead melted the second they hit anything in the city; yet they still floated down with grace and it made the evening look much more picturesque.

In a small suburb that had never been known for anything other than being part of a statistic or two, both the streets and shops that filled it were decorated with festive cheer. Tinsel wrapped around the trees in the middle of the square with pretty, colourful lights that were draped over the branches and tied into store walls flickered in every direction. The traditional carol singers were beside the largest of the clump of trees, creating their music in perfect harmony with each other, surrounded by a small group of admirers who were singing or humming to themselves. The hotdog stand stood beside them, which had its own kind of audience; a peckish queue grabbing a quick snack or even a larger pork meal before the trip homeward.

Jennifer was holding the lid of the trunk to the car open as John tried to feed the large, colourful cardboard box with a drawing of a child's pushchair into the boot-space. He was struggling a bit because although the contents folded down into a manageable size for any trunk, according to the adverts anyway, the box that it came in seemed huge in comparison. He had already folded down one of the back seats, the other one filled with bags of food that they had bought to see them through the next few days.

“It isn’t going to fit,” huffed John for the umpteenth time and who was now going red in the face as he grunted again and pushed, “I said it wouldn’t fit... didn’t I say?”

“Yes you did say, but we can do this one of two ways; either you can get yourself into a state and continue trying to break it or you can move that plastic water bottle that's wedged behind the seat that you are squashing, and let it slide right in,” replied Jennifer in her most calming of tones.

She was starting to feel just a little bit awkward, passers by were seeing John huffing away and struggling with the box while she, nine months pregnant, held open the lid. Many smiled at her or gave her a knowing wink as they passed. A few had seen the water bottle blocking the space that John was trying to use, but as soon as they opened their mouths to try and give some advice, Jennifer would smile back with a shake of her head. This shake was to let them know it wasn’t worth getting her husband all the more frustrated by someone else knowing the problem, and anyway, he had bumped his head a couple of times already and she didn’t want John emerging like a sore bear.

John stopped and took a suck of fresh air, and then he looked over the box and peered towards the back of the seat where it seemed to be jammed for the first time. Straight away he noticed an object with a green cap, distorted and poking out from its squashed space, he couldn’t help but sigh. Reaching further inside and moving the water bottle he realised that once again his better half was right, and in just a couple of seconds the obstruction was moved to a less deforming position, and the box slid right into the car as was just predicted.

“Thanks Hon,” said John emerging and standing back up straight out of the vehicle, letting his wife close the trunk lid behind him. He didn’t mind making a fool

out of himself when she was around, and now that the redness from his face was fading and returning back to its normal colour; it was Jennifer who stood back out from the crowd again. For the past couple of weeks Jennifer had looked as though she was about to pop and she was finding it more and more difficult to cope with being a child carrier, with the enormity that came with such a condition. She felt as though all of her best features had been taken away from her over the past nine months, her flat stomach had ballooned, her cute belly button that John loved kissing had popped outwards; "easier to clean," she often thought, and her pert behind had changed into the shape she couldn't have envisaged when she used to go to the gym twice a week. The only advantage she could think of was her bust, which was something she wasn't used to, but kind of liked, however, it did leave her vulnerable to John's gaze lowering when having meaningful conversations; but then it was her looks that had attracted him to her in the first place, so she guessed it was okay.

“So I think that's the lot, we're ready!” exclaimed Jennifer.

“Yep, most expensive item so far. Now all we need is a baby to go with it,” joked John.

“I know it cleared out our funds, but wasn't it just perfect?” said Jennifer, tilting her head and hoping her cute smile would justify the purchase they'd just made, instead of the less expensive versions that were in the sales.

“Maybe so, although I think half of the cost was in the packaging,” he digged, “but it would have been cheaper to have gotten a second-hand one,” John replied, feeling sure he had seen the same one on eBay for a fraction of the cost.

“Well like I say, that's it, and finally we're all ready for 'em,” she grinned while patting the big lump of her belly, “C'mon, lets get home before this little one inside me freezes.”

John walked to the side of the vehicle and opened the passenger door, helped the carrier of his child to get in and sit both comfortably and safe before closing it, then happy to be the gentleman he walked around to the driver's side, got in and drove off; pleased that there would be no more shopping needed, for a while at least.

Outside the front of the small convenience store on the corner where the roads met beside the park were the wooden slatted tables that were being cleared of fruit and vegetables in their trays by the storeowner, Joel. Every evening he would perform the same ritual until the tables were cleared and then he would flat pack them up to stack them inside the door of the shop before closing it for the night, only to reverse the procedure the next time it was opened. He was whistling the same tune in the same time as that which was emanating from the carol singers across the way. He waved to Mr. Peters at the hardware store the other side of the road, which was also in the process of shutting up his own shop.

In the distance through the park, he could just make out two of the local troublemakers, teenage lads who had dropped out of school for what they thought was an easier life. He had seen them in the same place on many occasions, drinking alcohol and waiting for later when they would undoubtedly crash a party somewhere. He was just lifting up a pallet of cabbages with a heave and about to walk back to the door of his grocery shop when he noticed another figure walking up the street. He recognised the young lad waltzing his way towards him and so he put the cabbages straight back down again so that he could greet the boy properly.

“Hey Connor,” he beamed, his thick Irish accent shining through, “a very Merry Christmas to you, m’lad”

“Hi Mr. Wenn,” replied Connor with the enthusiasm that only a young lad could keep, stopping his own humming of a tune to address the big man, “Merry Christmas to you too.”

Joel rubbed his hands together to warm them a bit before holding the right one out to shake the teenager's hand, which was welcomed and held for a couple of seconds while they greeted each other.

“Packing up?”

“Yes I think it's about that time,” said Joel looking up to the moon that was shining in the darkness, just poking out from a cloud where the frozen flakes were dropping sporadically, and lighting up each and every one.

“Do you want a hand mister?” Asked Connor disturbing the second of tranquillity that Joel felt from seeing the flakes glinting from the heavens above.

“Ahhh! It's almost done now laddie, and anyway shouldn't you be getting off to the shelter and warming yourself up before it gets too busy?” Replied Joel.

Connor looked away for a moment, he hated going to the shelter, unlike most of the other people in the city who were in the same situation as himself; a situation that much of America preferred to pretend didn't actually occur. Many who used the shelters were old men who tended to smell of alcohol, moaned all night keeping Connor awake if he stayed there and worst of all tended to push past him, especially at food handout time.

“Can I buy an apple off you Mr. Wenn, I've got money?” Connor deflected the previous question by saying one of his own, hoping that it would be dropped. He took out a five-cent coin from his pocket and proudly showed it off in the middle of his palm.

“Of course you can Connor, in fact, as it’s the end of the day and a very special day at that, I’ll let you have two for the price of one – how’s that?” said Joel as he picked back up the tray of sparkling wet cabbages and strode into his shop, knowing that he shouldn’t push the shelter issue any further.

“Perfect,” beamed Connor, picking up a smaller tray of carrots that were next to the cabbages on the vegetable display and followed the friendly giant into the store, where he placed the tray down on top of the ice-cream freezer by the back wall.

Joel walked around to the other side of the counter and placed the tray he had been carrying down on the shelf where he always put them for the night, just before he pulled a brown paper bag from the bundle tied up with string, and finding the biggest, juiciest apples from the display, selected a couple.

“Two of the best for this Christmas, I reckon!” he chuckled as he placed the fruit into the bag and twisted the ends hand-over-hand to close it.

“Thank you Sir,” said Connor, politely placing the coin into the big man’s hand, which then gave him the bag.

“Fair exchange is no robbery,” grinned Joel as he pressed the button on the till, making the drawer open with a ping. He dropped the coin into the tray of change that had just opened, knowing that whatever chore Connor had done to earn his five cents he would have worked hard and not begged like so many others in his situation. Pushing the tray back into place, the till shut with a ding that was quieter than when it had opened. He would have preferred to have just given the apples to the boy but knew from previous experience that it would have offended him and that the boy somehow always wanted to pay his way. Actually, considering that there was still half a tray of apples on display, he would have gladly given the young lad all of them

rather than leave them for the next couple of days until the store opened again, but this he was sure would have offended, and that was the last thing he wanted to do.

Despite being homeless, Connor was nowadays looking at least the picture of health under the worn clothes that he was wearing, and Joel felt better about seeing him like this rather than the scrawny, stressed out picture in his mind of the lad a just a year back.

“You’re lookin’ well Connor, that’s nice to see,” he complimented.

“I’m doin’ all right Mr. Wenn, you don’t have to worry about me,” replied Connor with an agreeable nod.

“Glad to hear it, you make sure you stay that way.”

Then with a twist, Connor turned away clutching his new bag of treats. “Merry Christmas Mr. Wenn,” he said as he waved back just before he left the shop.

“Look after yourself Connor, and stay warm for the festivities,” winked Joel as he watched the boy leave. He realised the second that the words had come out of his mouth that it was wrong to have mentioned festivities, seeing that again the boy wouldn’t be partaking in anything fun this time of the year and that staying warm and safe was more of a priority, but he knew that Conner hadn’t taken the comment that way, even if Joel had realised it.

After the Conner boy had disappeared around the corner out of view, Joel leaned against the closed till in a thoughtful manner and looked up, only to notice that his Maria as he called her, his wife, was peering through from the other side of the back door to the shop, which was slightly ajar.

“Are you alright Chicken?” Joel asked as he walked up to her and opened the door some more to give her a hug. Beyond the door was the hallway and stairs leading up to the flat where they both lived. She had come down to check whether he needed

a hand to close up but when she heard him serving she just peered through the crack of the door.

“Of course,” came the Irish reply, “but I was just wondering what kind of life this is when things like that happen to such a lovely kid as Connor,” Maria's words were breaking a little as she spoke. She hadn't come out to wish the boy a Merry Christmas because she always seemed to get upset when seeing him.

Joel glanced back out of the shop door into the decorated streets, as if he could still see Connor walking away, even though he had already seen him disappear around the corner. His mind recalling back and vividly remembering the day when Connor's parents, Reg and Mary were killed in their car on the freeway a couple of miles away, just over three years ago. A large truck had blown a wheel, then jack-knifed and slid across the asphalt, ploughing into them in their little car.

It was himself who had led the police to the school to pick the boy up and tell him that he'd lost his mother and father. Joel had found out about the accident from a policeman, who had been knocking on the door next to his. After a short discussion, they decided that it would be better on the boy if Joel gave the terrible news rather than a stranger, even if the stranger were in uniform. Connor endured many months of torment and suffering after that, being moved around with various foster parents that the state had provided for him, until he had finally given up on any outside help and decided he'd rather be alone fending for himself. Both Joel and his Maria would have loved to have fostered the lad for themselves, but there were too many other people on the list; anyway, Connor couldn't handle anyone at that time, which is why he ran from his last place of residence. The boy now preferred to hide from the authorities in this suburb of the city, he would do odd-jobs for money, and when it was too cold for him, he would go off to the shelter for the night.

Joel and Maria were secretly pleased that Connor had decided to stay in their vicinity, because it meant that they could keep a distant watch over him. They had often tried to persuade him to stay with them, but the boy was just as stubborn as his father was and refused, thinking he didn't want to trouble anyone. Although it was difficult to see him go without the comforts in life, refusing any help or free handouts, even if the help or those handouts were from old friends of the family.

The two couples had moved to the United States together some ten years previous to the accident when Connor was only four years old. They had always dreamed of moving to the big city inside the land of the hope and the brave, a far cry from the back streets of Cork, which they had left behind.

Joel had a fruit stand in the market back in Ireland, which he had inherited from his father who had worked hard on it for all of his life without much gain. The old days over there were not as plentiful as they were now, but even so there was no comparison to how the small family were prospering in the States. Reg, his best friend, was a carpenter and had lived a couple of doors away from his small shack back in the homeland. They had gone to school and grown up together, dated each other's girlfriends until they both met their life long partners, and it was foreseen after hundreds of talks about their dreams that they would all move to the USA together.

"Life can be so unfair, but if ever I saw a kid with greater things ahead of him then it's Connor," comforted Joel, knowing that Maria felt and thought the same as he.

"Well I hope he knows he can come here if it ever gets too hard on him," added Maria.

"He knows we're here," said Joel. He looked serious before changing his expression to move away from the sadder subject. The boy wanted to make his own

way through life, and Joel didn't want to continue with the same conversation they'd had so many times before. "Come on love, let me finish packing up otherwise we'll miss our own Christmas Eve," he said with a smile and a jingling of the shop keys inside his pocket.

Conner walked through the park, where he passed two young men who were drinking the night away. They were sitting on the roundabout looking loutish, with plastic bottles of cider that were disguised as pop. Ignoring them, Connor went off in search for somewhere to settle down for the night. A night that was rapidly closing in on him. The tips of his toes through his worn shoes were beginning to ache from stepping onto the cold slush that lay on the path. Connor was glad when he reached the other side of the park and through the gate onto less soggy ground. He walked up to a large white building that was surrounded by a tall fence that edged up to the dark grassland. Connor wrapped his collar close and tight to his neck to stop any of the bitter air from entering his clothing. It was starting to get chilly. Although he was well handled for cold snaps, winter was now upon him, and he needed to find some shelter soon. His eyes homed in on an open window close to the ground of the large building he was walking around and when he got close enough to the window he felt warm air floating out of it.

He looked around and recognised that he was outside the main hospital of the small suburb. It was a place that he had used for shelter a few times before, but behind the covered bike park and not as yet inside. The warm air that breezed out of the opening was welcome, and it counteracted the cold chill that surrounded him. He jumped down a step onto the walkway, which was just lower than the road. Standing up next to the opening for a bit, he let the warmth enter his clothing and on to his

goose-bumped skin. After a while, he decided that this would be a perfect place to keep him safe.

As with most hospitals, there were cars almost continually entering the main gates. They drove up to the entrance just around the corner, to drop people off or pick them up. The other cars that were staying for longer carried on around passed the new wing where a large car park had been built. The area he was in though, was the old original building that looked over the parkland area. It was a lot grander than the newer sections of the hospital, but did need another coat of paint if it were going to bring back its original charm. He watched as an Ambulance drove past him and out onto the main road, making its way to pick up another patient, who would undoubtedly be spending some time in the building he was next to.

Cautiously, Connor looked around to make sure he wasn't being noticed, and that there were no more vehicles about to pass him before poking his head in through the window to see if the coast was clear inside, as well as out. It didn't take much deduction to see that the room he was peering into was a laundry room. The heat emanating from it was from the dryers, which with washing machines lined the opposite wall.

The coast was clear and knowing that although it was wrong to enter a building without permission, needs must, and he was in more danger by staying outside. He opened the window a little more so he could slip into the larger opening he'd made for himself. When he dropped down onto the floor, he immediately bent down and untied the laces on his shoes so that he could take them off. His footwear was damp, and he didn't want to make a clean floor dirty, so he picked them up in his hands and then walked over to a corner of the room away from the window. Waiting there in the room were a few large laundry trolleys filled with bedding and clothes

ready to be washed; the noise of two dryers spinning back and forth on the wall beside him filled the room with warmth as the drums inside them tumbled the last load of clean washing for the day.

Without any warning, there was the sound of the door handle being turned and Connor instinctively ducked down behind the nearest trolley, not the best of hiding places but the quickest for a sudden retreat. It appeared that he'd just managed to hide in time without being seen because a whistling porter entered the room from the door set into the wall opposite, pushing another large container of washing to be sorted. With one of his hands, Connor covered his mouth to stop any sounds as he held onto his breath, not daring to let any out, especially when a shadow moved around the room and even next to where he was hiding, indicating that he was just inches away from being caught.

The porter slid the trolley he had entered with next to Connor, securing the young lads hiding place even more, and unaware, the porter strode back out of the room and closed the door behind him. He was whistling to himself the whole time. Another person with a Christmas Carol stuck in his mind; the porter could even be heard in the corridor walking away, until he was out of earshot. Letting his hand down and gasping for a breath, Connor had in just a short, few seconds managed to hold his mouth so hard that he'd left a red handprint on his face; however, it soon faded almost as quickly as it was created.

“Phew! That was close,” he said to himself with quiet words.

After catching his breath, Connor slid past a few more trolleys and into a corner that was piled high with old sheets and blankets that had been rejected in the washing cycle and hadn't yet been thrown away, instead just tossed aside into the corner of the room to sort another day. Leaving his shoes beside him and burying

himself into the warm mound, he was instantly comfortable, wrapping a couple of torn and holed sheets around him before retrieving one of his apples from the brown paper bag in his pocket and biting into it.

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Less than a couple of miles away, in the offices that were a lot quieter in the evenings, Maggie was finishing off the last few jobs of the day. She liked this time in the evening because she felt she could catch up on the things that she didn't have time for when her boss was about, which is why Maggie often stayed later than her contract stated. She found that she could finish anything that she was unable to do during the daytime just by staying back for that little while longer.

Being the Personal Assistant to the President of the United States wasn't quite so glamorous as the title suggested, in fact, although she loved her job she didn't feel it was glamorous at all – more like a lot of hours and even more hard work. She couldn't think of a day when all the scheduled tasks in her diary had actually been completed, let alone all the corrections to her boss's, which appeared to change almost every hour on the computer screen in front of her.

Maggie Aitken was a vivacious woman, exceedingly pretty and who turned heads wherever she went. She also had the personality to make the people she worked with stand to attention, taking her for her mind rather than the body she found herself in. She had worked hard through her college and university years and somehow through a friend of a friend managed to get a job in the Whitehouse, shortly before being selected by Jim, her boss to work next to him. Her long brunette locks matched her dark eyes, and she always made sure that whatever she wore accentuated those

best features, as she saw it. Leaning back on her chair for a minute while she scanned the boxes that formed grids on the screen in front of her, she looked to see if there were any meetings in the next week that required her particular attention, like food being laid out or requests for drinks if the meetings were going to be too long. It was Christmas time so there was a space for the next two days, and even she would be taking some much earned time out from the place.

She hadn't planned anything much for the break except going over to her parents for dinner and hopefully seeing her sister who was meant to be travelling down to visit. She didn't have much time to see her family, but Christmas was always a legitimate excuse to change that. The one last year was still vivid in her memory; she had been playing a drinking game with her sister in the old bedroom that had now been changed to a guest room. The two of them had reminisced about the days back when they were young playing with each other's hair, changing the styles on almost a daily basis and gossiping about the latest love lives of celebrities or who fancied which boy at their school.

Her sister was now a Director in a New York law firm in and was doing exceedingly well for herself. Her parents couldn't have been more proud of either of them and reminded them of that every time they got together. It brought on a smile when Maggie thought of seeing them all again although this year she was determined to refrain from any drinking games; the day after the previous Christmas felt like hell.

Getting up from her chair and stretching, she decided that there was just one more job before she left for the evening, and that would be to water the plants. From the bottom shelf in the stationary cupboard, she retrieved a small jug and then filled it up with water from the sink in her washroom. As the water was filling the receptacle

she glanced in the mirror above the sink right into her tired looking eyes; she was ready for a bit of time out.

She liked having the odd plant around. There was even small potted one on her desk that she called Albert. She named it after her grandfather, whom had passed away a few years previously because for some reason it reminded her of him. Then there were the larger, even grander plants inside the Oval office, just a heavy door away from her desk. Inside this office, some of the world's most influential decisions had been made. She felt privileged to be able to step inside it and give a drink to the foliage that she had bought to brighten the place up – if only those plants could talk, the stories that they could tell, she thought.

As she gave the drinks out she looked around and couldn't help feeling proud of her position. Right there was the chair that her boss used with the leather topped desk in front of it, the gold pen set neatly on top of the blotting pad; this was where he worked and run his country. Inside the room, which had been host to some of the most prominent dignitaries of the age, people who had shaped the ground she walked upon, and there she was, a woman who had many years ago, been caught for setting off a cherry bomb in the toilets of her high school, tending to the leaves that felt their breath; how life can change she grinned to herself.

In the living block of the Whitehouse, Jim Hammond, the President of the United States was just about to have dinner with his wife and a couple of guests that he'd invited to his exclusive residence; the Vice President Kris Chapman and his wife, Sophie. Walking into the room he noticed that his guests were already standing beside the large fireplace on the far wall admiring the photos on the mantelpiece.

They had already been given some drinks in tall stem glasses by the staff that waited on the presidential couple.

“Where's Jane?” Jim asked Sabrina quietly as they walked side-by-side right into the large room.

“Out with her friends, some kind of party,” Sabrina replied in an almost whisper leaning towards his ear as they walked slowly so they would have time to finish their conversation.

“A party huh... so much for a family unite, I hardly get to see her at all anymore,” Jim uttered.

“The thing was, being the President does keep you very busy and she's got her own life to lead now, give her a break, it's Christmas Eve, and she hasn't seen half of her friends outside of school for weeks,” Sabrina retorted, defending their daughter's desire to live a normal life, every now and then.

Jim stopped walking. “Oh it's okay, I just wanted her here tonight, I guess she's growing up too fast, and I'm feeling a bit missed out.”

“Yes I know,” Sabrina smiled and put her arm through his for comfort, as well as a little bit for the guests. Jim squeezed her arm to show how much he appreciated her understanding from so few words, as they directed their attentions to the people they'd wanted to have a leisurely evening with.

“Kris, so good of you to join us,” Jim greeted with a firm handshake and gesturing to his wife as means of an introduction, “this is Sabrina.”

“First Lady, very pleased to meet you in person, at last,” Kris bowed his head a little as he greeted her. Jim smiled, he had realised in the last month since the appointment of Vice President was filled after his former had retired, that the newest member of his administration could be rather abrupt to the point of being arrogant at

times, especially when surrounded by important people that he wished to impress, but he was pleased to see that tonight his second in command was relaxed and had left that part of himself back at the office, so to speak.

“Call me Sabrina, and thank you,” she courteously greeted back.

“And this is Sophie,” Kris introduced his wife to the presidential couple with visible pride. Although he had been in politics and was used to being in the company of the Commander in Chief, they had up to this point never met each other’s partners.

Jim and Sabrina smiled welcomingly towards the younger but stunningly pretty other half, whom by all accounts had wowed the nation as much as the man she was with. Both of the hosts had seen photographs in the papers and news items on the television about the charismatic couple in front of them who seemed to have captured the imagination of the people with their showbiz friends and swanky parties. Kris was another Harvard man just like Jim, although Jim was a few years his senior. The much younger Sophie had been a technician for a television company before getting her break a couple of years back as a daytime chat show host, where she first met Kris in an interview. Together though, everyone in their presence could see the reason why they had become so endearing, even if Jim had on a couple of occasions seen the opposite side to Kris’s personality.

“You seem to be in the same magazines as my daughter,” joked Jim as shook Sophie’s hand gently, surprised to feel that the grip that was reciprocated was a lot more sturdy than he would have thought for such a dainty figure, but then remembering that she was a chatshow host and must have shaken a thousand hands before his, nodded his approval of the gesture.

“Your daughter tends to get the front pages a lot more I notice,” joked Sophie straight back.

Sabrina nodded in self-agreement, it wasn't many people who could speak back to the head of the country so casually and with such confidence on a first meeting, and it was a welcoming change. Jim had spoken a few times about why he had hired Kris as his next in command, and in the flesh she could understand with just a look; the country needed a fresh couple to lead it, and it was a good idea to have the same kind of freshness by their side.

"It does seem as though Jane has taken quite nicely to being in the spotlight," said Sabrina as she shook Sophie's hand.

"I think she has quite a good following, it's not often that the daughter of the President is on every teenager's wall; you must be very proud?" Kris took another sip of his champagne after he'd spoke.

"We are very proud of her, thank you," answered Jim, wishing again that his daughter was there to spend the evening with her family, "Mind, all I seem to see of her is the clothing bills now-a-days," Jim added, putting some jovially in to disguise some real truth.

"Is she here?" Asked Sophie with a quick glance around.

"Sorry, no she's not, apparently she had other plans," said Jim with a disappointed look. "Anyway, shall we have dinner?" Jim added, changing the subject from one that he didn't want to go over again. He gestured to the dinner table where some of his staff were already setting starter plates of the first course, carefully placing them down on the highly-polished wooden surface of the long table.

"I'm sorry we are late, but you know how it is, just making sure that everything is in place for the next couple of days," said Jim sitting down and having his seat slid into the feasting position by one of the attendants, "you don't mind chatting over dinner do you?"

“Not at all,” said Sophie, “I think it’s nice and sociable talking at the dinner table.”

“It’s the only time I really get to chat to Jim,” added Sabrina with a grin and a wink towards her husband.

“So Mister President, did you get my report this morning?” Kris asked as he sat down to the table next to his commander and having a napkin placed on his lap by one member of the kitchen staff, as the two women were being attended together opposite the men.

“Firstly Kris, it’s Christmas and it’s dinner with friends, I’m the President out there, and Jim in here,” Jim said, “and yes I did get your report but haven’t had the time to read it yet.”

“But Mister President,” Kris paused, realising his mistake, “I mean Jim, Congress is squeezing our crutches on this one. Spending has risen, and your new policy about just having small sentry units abroad while getting our troops home has cost a lot more than previously budgeted,” he pressed.

“Always talking shop,” winked Sabrina to Sophie, who grinned knowingly just before they both started to eat the food on the plates in front of them, watching their men talking from the other side of the table.

“Are you saying that you want us to leave our troops out there abroad, in foreign countries, just when we’ve told their families that I want half of them brought back to *their* America as soon as possible Kris?” Jim’s face showed a little concern that this was what was being implied.

“No, of course not Jim, you know I’ve personally overseen the operation to ensure that over eight-thousand have been flown back to be with their families in time for Christmas, just as you asked. It’s just that the next phase of four thousand next

month and the subsequent ops will put too much of a drain on the defence finances. To be honest, while they are out there we can justify the spending, it's a little different if they are home!"

"They're not out on vacation you know, for years my troops have been dying out there, thousands of miles from their families and the soil where they belong. Congress will have to answer to me if they want to argue the point," reiterated Jim, a short speech he knew he was going to be saying that night and one that he'd already jotted down for future use.

Kris felt a wave of admiration for his superior although he made sure he didn't show it. He was hoping that Jim was going to fight for his beliefs, and in private away from the world's watching eyes, the proof that his commander was not faltering from all those speeches he'd given over the past month was sitting right next to him. Jim had only been in office a year and had appointed Kris himself just a short time ago after his predecessor had given up on the politics he'd dedicated most of his life to, but in that time marks had been placed and they were both getting more and more support as each day passed.

"You know, I was hoping you'd say something like that," said Kris feeling pleased that he felt he knew this man sitting next to him a little better. In different situations, Kris would gladly have strengthened any point he didn't himself believe strongly in, but spending for the troops to be brought home wasn't one of them. He just wanted to be sure that in real unite, then they could convince through passion together to Congress what was right.

"I know you feel the same way Kris, and I also know I've given you a task that requires a bit of finesse with the budget, but for now, we'll have dinner, and this conversation can wait until we are back at the office. Now try the sauce, it's been

copied from one I had when I had dinner with the French a couple of months ago. I asked them for the recipe, and I really haven't tasted anything like it before," Jim returned the conversation back to the real reason they were there while licking his lips, pouring the sauce from a little jug over the salmon that was presented perfectly on the plate in front of him.

The two women facing didn't mind the men talking about work. It was unusual for them to see that the men looked so relaxed as they started to tuck into the food with relish. Although Kris's ultimate objective was to take the job of the man sitting next to him, a dream that he had as a youngster, he had only just taken up his post, was prepared to wait and learn the role from the master. Jim's term in office had so far gone exceedingly well and as long as there were no hiccups, it would continue that way. However, everyone around Kris knew that his dream was also his passion, and if push came to shove then he would jump into Jim's shoes without hesitation if he possibly could.

While her parents were making pleasantries in the Whitehouse, Jane was happily dancing the evening away with a group of her friends. The college that she attended had hired a nightclub for the evening. The seniors who attended the upper education had complete control of the dance floor, with everyone else around dressed up to the nines, chatting and enjoying the moment around the bar area. It was of course slightly different for Jane when she was around everyone else because unlike the other people in the room, she always had her personal bodyguards shadowing her wherever she went. The Secret Service always stalked and protected the first family and most of the time she hated them following her every move, even watching out if she went off to the rest rooms. However, tonight she was having way too much fun

with the two burly figures who were watching over her. She was darting away from them at every opportunity, and watching their faces as the hints of panic shot across them as soon as they realized that she had disappeared from their view, again.

“They’re so stupid,” laughed Krysia when Jane ducked down in the middle of the flashing dance floor and walked behind the other dancers enjoying their night out only to pop back up behind her best friend the other side of the floor so that she could see the faces of the men as they searched with their eyes for the person they were supposed to be protecting.

“I know, but they’re men so what do you expect?” Said Jane.

There were some alcoholic beverages on offer in the nightclub for the older students, and most of the people in the building had drunk one or two but the atmosphere was such that, with fun on the cards, it wasn’t as necessary to drink to enjoy it. Jane was now old enough to drink but for most of the time didn’t feel the want to consume alcohol, only one and then on to the fruit twisters that were also offered.

Seeing that she had disappeared again, the two men wanting to spy her every move then walked into the crowd of dancers, searching for the daughter of the Commander and Chief who had eluded them. She had only vanished from their sights for twenty seconds or so, but in their eyes that was already too long. So carefully pushing people out of the way, politely, but on a mission they quickly searched until they noticed Krysia at the end of the floor giggling and could see the laughing face of Jane half hidden behind her.

Their faces relaxed a bit as they walked back away from the dancers to resume their guard from a distance. They both knew that they were being laughed at, and in some ways they thought that it would have been funny if they were not on the

receiving end of the joke, however, their job was first and foremost and fun aside, they had a duty and weren't going to make the laughing of the young women phase them.

“Why do you call them Bill and Ben?” Asked Kryisia watching her friend's shadows go back to the side of the dance area and resume their stance in the darkened corner of the club. “You know the shorter one is kinda cute,” she added.

“They are both kinda cute,” giggled Jane, biting her bottom lip and lifting her eyebrows in a provocative manner at the taller guard who looked straight into her eyes from the other side of the room. Kryisia noticed her best friend's look, and her mouth opened wide in surprise, she had never seen Jane acting this way towards them, most of the time having followers just annoyed her, and certainly never heard her speak of them in the way she just had.

“You're kidding!” She gasped, “You wouldn't?”

“Oh just having a bit of fun... and no of course I wouldn't,” replied Jane, “but that doesn't mean that they're not nice guys, and it's a shame that they have to work on Christmas Eve.”

“Well we could always ask them to have a dance with us?”

“They'd never do that,” said Jane shaking her head.

“Heck, there's no harm in asking, is there?” Asked Kryisia who was smiling at the shorter of the two men.

Jane thought for a second and then nodded, “I suppose there's no reason why not.”

Flint, the taller of the two guards, gave the smallest nod ever to Jane, watching her having fun at his expense. He had been Jane's personal guard for the last year. In that short time, he had watched Jane growing up from being a cute, young lass who

was intimidated by her new fame because of her father's occupation, into the young woman that decided to relax into the role more and was now making fun of him. He would never tell anyone but had become close to her and wished secretly that he had a daughter like her, maybe one day if he ever met the right woman.

Jane was often out in the public eye, most of the time she was swarmed on by the press or people wanting to meet her. The role of the secret serviceman who were always flanking her found that those situations were hard on them and put them on edge far more, but now the place was mainly filled with her friends and other pupils from her school so it was a lot more relaxing to them; even if she did think that because of the lack of any threats she would rather find some time to play and send them on the edge a little more than they would have liked.

There was still the odd photo of her being taken by mobile phones as she moved around the dancefloor from some of the other people in the college who wanted to show to everyone that they were in the presence of the President's daughter, but no-one was bothering her, quite the contrary as she would give a silly pose to every shot from the mobile phones and cameras that she noticed pointing her way.

"Does she always act this way?" Asked Barrie, the shorter of the two Secret Service agents through the side of his mouth.

"No not usually, but she's had a small drink, and she's enjoying herself," replied Flint.

Barrie had been on the job for less than two days. As Jane was going out a little bit more during the festive period then it was thought that Flint might need another hand for the night and a couple thereafter until the New Year when the partying would die down, and the college was open again. Flint didn't mind having

someone else with him; it gave him some company on the job and someone to talk to, instead of shadowing her alone and hardly ever saying a word.

Jane and Krysia were giggling to themselves as they danced. Flint knew because of the looks he was receiving that something else was being cooked up, other than just ducking down playing hide-and-seek.

“Does she often drink much?” Asked Barrie, wanting to get more of an insight to the person he had been posted to watch over.

“She’s only had one, she’s a sensible girl,” said Flint, watching as the girls jumped off the raised dance floor that flashed with light onto the legs of the people on it, and made their way over towards him.

“Come on lads, why don’t you come up and dance with us?” Jane held out her hand to Flint.

“Yeah come on,” said Krysia to Barrie, joining in on her friend’s lead.

“You know I can’t do that,” said Flint without changing his demeanour or pose, looking past Jane and almost pretending that he wasn’t in conversation with her.

“Why not, there are no problems here,” said Jane looking around in a gesture that meant she knew everyone, to which Flint stopped his acting and looked back at her.

“I know ma’am but...”

“It’ll be fun c’mon, it’s Christmas,” smiled Jane.

Flint was a little unsure, to say the least. Yes, he knew this place was as close a safe-haven for them as anywhere and even though he would never take an eye off of her he felt more relaxed in his duties here; dancing with his protect would not be the same, especially as he had never thought of himself as much of a mover in that way.

Kryisia grabbed Barrie's hand and guided the burly man with a few pulls across the floor towards the lighted area while he looked back in an uncharacteristically helpless manner.

"Come on, it can't do any harm," said Barrie over his shoulder, giving into the wishes of his holder rather than rudely snatching his hand back away from her. Jane took Flint's hand and pulled it, she was just having a good time, and it couldn't hurt, so Flint also gave in and decided to join her. He was pleased that she felt comfortable enough in his presence that she could ask him to join in with such things, as long as it wasn't habit forming!

The two guards weren't used to dancing, especially with two young women, but they made the most of it, even if it did look a bit strange amongst the other people all dressed in colourful party outfits while they wore the traditional black suits and ties of the Service. Jane and Kryisia smiled to each other; it was much nicer in this situation than it was them standing out from the crowds in their suits like stalkers watching over them, and if something did happen then much safer having them right at her side.

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The Air Traffic Control Tower was lightly decorated for the festive period, with a few Christmas cards hanging from strings around the top edges of the walls and even a couple of small, fake trees placed on some of the work surfaces. The flashing of the radar screens as well as the control panels added to the effect of the one string of fairy lights that dangled from the ceiling over the stations where people sat directing the aircraft.

Steve Carter had just started his twilight shift and sat down at his chair wearing a red Santa hat with a flashing light as a bobble, even if the place didn't have the Christmas spirit, it wasn't going to stop him from feeling it. He was still eating the mince pie that he had crammed into his mouth just outside the door; making his cheeks bulge. Over the top of his hat, he placed his headset that he used to communicate with the aircraft he controlled and adjusted the microphone so that it was only an inch from the corner of his chewing mouth. Next to him sat Brad, a younger but highly enthusiastic man who enjoyed his job more than many of the pilots that he directed.

"So you pulled the short straw for this shift as well?" Brad looked a little disgusted at the sight of the gerbil look-a-like that had just casually started his shift and was adjusting the height of the chair he was going to sit on for the next few hours next to him.

"It's double time, reckon I could do with the extra cash," spluttered Steve, tiny crumbs emerging from his mouth and dropping onto the keyboard in front of him.

"Same reason I decided to do it," lied Brad who'd volunteered for every extra shift, just so that he could spend more time at work, which was more of a hobby than a career. Since pretending to direct aircraft as a boy after watching a documentary on the subject, he had always wanted the career that he now attained. Although for most people a childhood dream rarely compares to the job as an adult, for Brad this wasn't the case at all, and he loved every minute of being behind the screen that he watched over.

Steve swallowed down the last bit of the mince pie in his mouth and licked his sugarcoated lips, "Yum!" Opening his drawer he noticed and remembered that he had left another pack of the same fodder the night before. Taking them out, he took one

and bit deeply into it, deciding that, after the look he'd just been given with the last one that he'd better not cram it whole into his mouth.

“Fancy one?” He offered the packet to Brad, who recoiled at the sight of even more crumbs exiting Steve's face.

“No, you're alright,” declined Brad, shaking his hand at the packet, “at least I see you are in the festive spirit!”

“Christmas doesn't stop just because we're here you know,” said Steve after allowing the contents of his mouth pass down his throat.

Behind where the two traffic controllers sat was a large window, which looked out into the cold, lit up runways in the distance. Inside the room was warmer and kept in a semi-blackness so that everyone in the tower could see both their screens and the outside. Through the window and the odd flakes of snow that fell, the familiar landing lights of another aircraft sped onto one of the runways as its wheels touched the ground. Brad watched as the plane slowed down, flicked a switch on the console in front of him then spoke clearly into the microphone that was an integral part of the headset he was wearing, “Flight one four three, nice landing. You are now requested to taxi along runway two seven to Docking Area C.”

“Thank you control, request understood and a Merry Christmas to you,” came the reply into Brad's ear.

Brad moved the padded earpiece, which hovered over his mouth to one side and turned on his chair towards Steve, who had just finished eating the second pie of his so far, short shift.

“Well it's already quietening down, it should be a fairly easy night,” said Brad. He relaxed back in his seat, knowing that it would be another six minutes or so before he would hear from the next aircraft entering his quadrant.

“It usually is,” replied Steve, he remembered the last couple of years were a doddle on Christmas but got hectic from Boxing Day onwards when it seemed as though everybody wanted to go on holiday. “Got any plans for tomorrow?”

“Parents are down, Louisa is cooking for the five-thousand and right now is probably cleaning everything to an inch of its life.”

“So that's why you volunteered to be here tonight?” Steve grinned in a knowing fashion.

“Yeah, well she wanted me out of the way and I didn't really want to do any cleaning,” he chuckled, although his job always came first anyway, “What about you, got any plans?”

“Put some music on and chill out I reckon,” said Steve after a little thought.

“Some have all the luck,” said Brad who cringed at the thought of spending yet another year with his parents.

Steve turned to his screen, on the radar in front of him was the familiar blip of an aircraft that was just entering the section of airspace that he would be controlling; he flicked the switch on his radio.

“Flight Nineteen Heavy, this is Dulles Air Traffic Control, welcome to our airspace, and I'd like to take this opportunity of wishing you a Happy Christmas,” spoke Steve into the radio clearly. After a brief second the reply came back from the Co-Pilot of the plane, “Good evening Dulles, this is Flight Nineteen Heavy, cruising steady on a westerly heading and looking forward to spending Christmas back home in Washington.”

“Copy Flight Nineteen, nice to have you back, take it steady, and I'll speak to you again when you are ready for approach.”

It was quiet in the cockpit of Flight Nineteen; the journey so far had been easy and steady with the sun fading from the windows quite a time before. The outside of the aircraft was now blackened with only the light of the moon bouncing off of the tops of the clouds far below. The autopilot had been on for the last hour since their last positional correction and both the Captain and his Co-Pilot were sitting back in their seats monitoring the radio while looking at the beauty through the view in front of them while listening to the ambient hum of the engines that droned through the metal.

Ping!

A red warning light flicked on the control panel full of switches and knobs just above the Co-Pilot's head, which made the two members of the cockpit crew look straight up.

"We have a drop in pressure," said Sean, the Co-Pilot, flicking the light that had just come on to make sure that it wasn't a fault in the bulb, which he knew it couldn't be but acted on instinct.

"Cabin?" asked Captain Carl Mann who was experienced enough to keep calm when things like this happened; most of the time it wasn't anything to worry about.

"Only slightly," replied Sean, who was reading the multitude of dials, which showed the pressure reading throughout the various sections of the jet, "the main pressure drop seems to be between the skins?"

There was another pinging sound and the plane started to shudder very lightly but enough that they could all feel it. Carl took hold of the control stick and held his hands on the two sides of the wheel, which was vibrating; he flicked the button on the top of his grasp, which switched off the autopilot.

“Pressure drop getting higher. Can you feel that?” said Sean who was monitoring the readings and feeling the slight shudder through his seat as well as seeing it on the control stick in front of him.

As the Captain felt the wheel in his hands, he could discern the shudder travelling right up the connection from the aircraft and into his hands. The vibration was already starting to dissipate and within a few seconds it disappeared, and everything felt quite normal again.

“That’s a bit strange,” Carl uttered to himself.

“It’s stabilised, but we’re about twelve percent down on normal operating pressure, still within safe guidelines though,” Sean was reading the operating pressure dials which were pointing just above the red markers that indicated when it was something serious.

“We’ll get it checked out when we land, we haven’t gotten long to go now,” said Carl, “But I think we will drop a bit, just to make sure.”

“I agree,” confirmed Sean who was a little more visibly concerned than his mentor who always seemed to have the air of calmness about him anyway.

The Captain flicked the switch on the radio beside his seat and spoke into his headset, “Dulles control this is Flight Nineteen Heavy, we have had a pressure warning come up and although it is not causing a problem we would like to descend to twenty-five thousand feet... just as a precaution.”

Sean looked up at the warning light that had first shown the pressure drop, but it had already switched itself off, whatever the problem was then the plane seemed to have somehow corrected itself.

“Roger Flight Nineteen, descend to an altitude of twenty-five thousand feet and keep us informed,” came the reply from the Air Traffic Control Centre.

“What do you think that was?” asked Sean after a brief pause, he was not as experienced as his Captain and had never seen such a warning before, although he had read the procedures on how to deal with it in his flight school, just in case it ever happened. However, the thing that confused him was that a sudden pressure drop appeared unlikely to have stabilise itself as it had.

“It is probably just a sensor glitch, nothing to worry about,” replied Carl, he was also confused at the signs, but the shudder had gone and he was controllably losing altitude as he dipped the stick down and backed off the engines, which would relieve some of the stresses on the aircraft - just in case.

“But the shudder?”

“Just the plane adjusting itself to the warning, I really doubt it was anything other than the computers correcting themselves,” assured Carl, “write it down and they can check it later.”

Sean picked up the clipboard that was sitting in the pocket attached to the side of his seat. He looked down the paper that he’d scribbled anything of note during the flight. This included details of the pre-flight checks, speed and course changes, as well as notes of when the autopilot was on. He wrote down in the notes the time and details of the warning that they had just witnessed.

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All of the shopping had been done, the preparations for the big cook-a-thon of the Christmas meal the next day had been prepared and work had stopped until the New Year. Just like many other families, it was finally time to relax in the Arnold household. Oliver was slouching on the sofa, and Rosie was sitting next to him

drinking a large mug of hot chocolate that she had just made, while Sam, their son was hanging the three red stockings over three little hooks set into the decorated fireplace.

“And after you've put them up, you'd better get ready for bed, it's starting to get very late,” Oliver told the youngster who was just a little bit more than excited about Santa coming to visit that night.

“Can't I stay up for just a little bit more, Pleeeeeease?” pleaded Sam with his most angelic, cute expression.

“It's Christmas tomorrow, you don't want to be tired now, do you?” Asked his mum back, remembering how excited the young lad had got last year, and this one would undoubtedly be the same. She wanted to go to bed herself after the day she'd had at work and then on top of that, getting everything ready for the next day when she came home. Rosie put down her mug, which was mostly empty and held her hands out for Sam to come over for a quick snuggle with her on the sofa.

“And if you're still up when Santa gets here, you might scare him off,” added Oliver, to which Sam sniggered; of course Saint Nick wouldn't be scared of such a thing, the boy thought.

“Come over here you,” gestured Rosie again. Sam didn't waste any more time and jumped onto his mother's lap. He gave her a whopping squishy cuddle, wrapping his arms around her as far as he could manage. “So tell me, do you think you've been good enough this year for presents from Santa?” she asked.

“Yes!” Sam yelped without a doubt in his mind.

“Do you think Mommy and Daddy have been good enough for presents from Santa?” Oliver asked with a smirk.

Sam gave a little shy smile, “Well I don’t know about that,” he said, letting go of the grip he had on his mother’s torso and crossing his arms, trying to impersonate the actions of an adult.

“The words you are looking for is, yes Daddy, you cheeky...” Rosie tickled Sam who wriggled around laughing on her lap and trying to stop the fingers that were trying to get to his sides.

It was nice for the family to have this quality time and they appreciated it. Oliver worked as a mechanic, and his weeks were long and grubby, he always seemed to come home from work feeling shattered and covered in ingrained oily dirt. Rosie’s job was in a Pharmacy, which although wasn’t quite as physical or dirty she found that dealing with customers all the time put a mental strain on her, and it wasn’t unusual for her to finish the day feeling just as tired as her husband, mostly with a pounding headache.

Every weekday evening when they got home, there would be dinner to cook, washing to be done and making sure their son was bathed ready for the next day at school. This meant that during weekdays at least, there was no time to just chill. By the time they managed to sit down to relax, it was bedtime, and they had to prepare their minds for the next set of shifts. Weekends were normally a bit different, although Oliver would often work on Saturdays he would get some time off for Sunday though, but most often spent most of it with his tools, keeping the house shipshape while Rosie would tidy through it, making beds, changing sheets, washing and of course her least favourite job of ironing.

Now though, it was the beginning of the Christmas break and they could relax more than they had throughout the year, starting this evening with a snuggle and time resting their legs. The thing that made it all seem a bit sweeter was that both of the

adults had booked off some extra time off work so that they wouldn't need to go back to their jobs until school started for Sam again in January.

"I think we are just about ready," said Rosie with a smile. The stockings were hanging down under the mantelpiece, over the fire that they very rarely used unless it was particularly cold. The tree was decorated with tinsel and baubles with a few wrapped presents underneath that the postman had already delivered during the week, and fairy lights draped from the walls, which gave colour to the otherwise darkened room.

"All we need now is Santa to finish the place off," remarked Oliver with a small rising of his eyebrows and a grin to Rosie who gestured back in the same manner.

"Okay, let's get you to bed," said Rosie to Sam who had wriggled off of her lap and was now on the floor trying to subside the giggles that had enveloped him from the tickling. "Oh but Mom..."

"Come on," said Rosie getting to her feet so that she could help the youngster get his pajamas on and make sure he cleaned his teeth before tucking him in for the night. Oliver heaved himself from the slouching position he was in and also rose from the sofa, which was comfortable but not quite as nice as the bed upstairs that he'd been counting the minutes to be in; he yawned.

"I don't know about you, but I could sleep for a week," added Oliver with a stretch before ushering Rosie and his son towards the door. The family always tried to go to bed at the same time, from a young age it meant that Sam would settle in his room knowing that he wasn't the only one in bed. It also gave the adults the excuse for early nights and more refreshed mornings instead of just sitting down in front of the television set like so many others and feeling worse when sunrise came.

## *CHAPTER TWO – IMPACT*

The patches of moonlight that escaped through the night clouds were the only light that Duncan could use while he placed the cows back into their barns, given them another blanket of hay to chew on and sleep within. The snow had all but stopped, but there were traces of the icy remains under his stride. The colder air was surrounding him, and he was glad to be so well wrapped up in his thick woollen jumper that his wife had knitted for him the winter before. Heading closer towards the farmhouse between the barns and the fields, he could see the twinkling lights that decorated the front of the building, shining beyond the porch and onto the gravelled front. The different colours from the hanging fairy lights glinted off of the various surfaces and onto the icy ground below; they also lit up the wet bushes in front of the house, changing their appearances as the light breeze swayed them from side to side.

The big, heavy oak door was the last thing that separated the chilly air outside from the warm scent of baked bread that Sarah was just finishing in the oven for the next day. Duncan slid off his Wellington Boots and placed them on the mat under the coat rack with the other boots and shoes. Sarah could be seen through the dividing door into the kitchen, now preparing the roast in the tray that would be placed into the oven for the night before being cooked up for the next day's feast.

"That's it, all the animals are now tucked up, Christmas starts now," said Duncan through the ajar door loudly enough that Sarah could hear him.

"That's great darling, and I've done the washing up so put the TV on and find something to watch," Sarah replied, adding: "do you fancy a drink?" Duncan slid his feet into his slippers and meandered into the kitchen, which as always felt commodious and welcoming.

“I reckon a whiskey is just what the doctor ordered, I’m shattered,” he said pulling a chair from the dining table and plonking down on it.

“Tell you what, why don’t you go and get yourself a nice, warm shower. Clean yourself up a bit, and I’ll pour one for you for when you come down,” she smiled.

“I’ve just sat down, and the best idea you’ve got is that I get back up again,” complained Duncan, getting back up to his feet and shuffling towards the hallway.

“You’ll thank me in a bit sweetie, and remember tomorrow you can have a long lie in.”

Duncan couldn’t do anything but raise the corners of his mouth at her, she was right and inside he knew it. Being a farmer and having to look after the animals, every single day was a bind and truly hard work. However, having such a loving and understanding home only thirty feet away from the yards and barns where he spent his days, unquestionably made it feel a whole lot easier.

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Just less than twenty-two minutes into his shift at the Air Traffic Control Centre in Dulles International Airport and Steve’s attention had been taken hold of by something. He was now staring straight at the radar screen in front of him and trying quickly to make sense of what he had just seen. He was sure he’d noticed a bright blip in the top right hand corner of the monitor, but it had disappeared so quickly that he didn’t have time to focus on it properly. Suddenly the blip showed itself again for a brief moment before vanishing for a second time, and this time he clearly realised that there was no indication of letters or numbers beside the blip that could identify it, unlike regular ones that usually popped onto his screen. Although it was not unusual

to see other periodic things on the radar like some large flocks of birds, which often showed themselves up as a dim mark or sometimes even slightly stronger; however, this one appeared uncommonly bright and uniformly round. Again the dot appeared, and Steve tapped the screen in some gesture for it to magically show up some more details, which of course it didn't.

“What the...?” He tutted, just as it disappeared again.

“American Airlines Eight-Four, you are cleared for take off,” spoke Brad into his headset before turning to Steve. “Something up?” he asked, he'd seen the tapping of the screen on the console next to him in his peripheral vision followed by the actions of concern by the man in front of it.

“Did you see that blip come up on your screen?”

“What blip?” asked Brad right back.

“I just had something come up on the radar?” Steve shook his head slowly as he tried to think, it could have been another plane coming in from the east at the edge of his range but usually he would know about anything coming into his airspace way before it showed up, and it certainly wouldn't flash on and off without any indication of what it was.

“There it is again,” he exclaimed when the large dot reappeared brightly in the corner.

“I saw it that time, way off the coast,” said Brad in a heightened tone. “Who are you controlling?”

“Only Nineteen at the moment,” replied Steve who could see the dot with transponder details of the passenger plane he was in communication with, much closer to the centre of the screen than the new, unidentified one.

“It's in your sector, I'd see if there's any military up there,” said Brad, who was reciting the textbook guidelines to deal with unidentified radar sightings such as this.

“On Christmas Eve?”

“Well we're working, aren't we?” stated Brad with a hint of sarcasm, to which Steve managed a forced smile.

“There's no transponder signal?” Stated Steve.

“Maybe they forgot to set it or something,” replied Brad who couldn't think of any other reason for something up in the skies without any radio signals coming from it.

“And flashing?”

“Heck I don't know, but it's coming in fast, and only military jets can do that kind of speed,” replied Brad, gazing back at the blip that had reappeared again and had covered about two clicks in what had seemed to be as many seconds.

They both thought that it was highly unlikely that there were any military manoeuvres on this late evening without their knowledge, but since there was a possibility then there was no harm in picking up the phone to check, so Steve pressed the speed-dial on his push-button phone system to the traffic control at Andrews Air Force Base; the nearest and most likely culprit. “So much for an easy shift,” he muttered to himself while he waited for the one and only ring on the other end before the call was answered.

“Hello, this is Steve Carter from Dulles Air Control. I have an unidentified blip coming up on my radar screen to the east, about four hundred miles out. I wondered if you knew anything about it?” He spoke clearly and as always in these kinds of situations, kept calm and just relayed the facts as efficiently as possible.

In the main control room at Andrews Air Force Base, there were a number of people crowding around a large radar screen, which was inset in the wall surrounded by other screens all around it, showing lots of different data; mostly tracking information for anything that was on the larger screen in the centre. Standing in the middle of the crowd was Roman, the Base Commander. Roman had been the leading figure of the base for a number of years and was the most respected person there, not because of his long service in the military or just because he was the commander, but because he was also a people person, strict and everyone had to work to his regime but also always working with others on the base and not staying away in his office all the time, a man on the shop floor; so to speak. He also had something about him that made himself seem larger than life; he wasn't a particularly large man, although erring on the portly side, but his way, his mannerisms and even his greying hair added to the same effect.

Graham West was the Radar Manager and had taken the call from Steve Carter. He was sitting at a console just behind Roman.

“Yes, we are also tracking it right now,” he answered into his headset to Steve.

“Who is that?” Asked Roman, turning around as soon as he heard that Graham was talking in his headset to someone about the object that was being watched closely by everybody in the room.

“Dulles Sir, they are tracking the entity as well,” answered Graham, cupping his hand over his mouthpiece.

“Tell them to keep all traffic well clear of it,” Roman advised.

“Dulles, you are advised to reroute all other traffic away from that sector,” Graham spoke back into his headset. There was a pause while Graham listened for an answer, which after it was received ended the exchange with, “Roger Dulles!”

Graham looked over his workstation towards the much larger screen on the wall showing a copy of the radar image that he had just above his lap. Roman was standing patiently in the path of the four-meter wide monitor that was being focused on by the people in the room who were all waiting for their own orders as soon as Roman had made up his mind what the next course of action was to be.

“They only have one flight inbound in that sector, and it will be clear once it has landed,” Graham relayed the message. Roman gave a little grunt under his breath, a standard action of understanding without actually needing to say anything.

Just then one of the double doors at the back of the control room slammed open, and Sergeant Billy Horne entered puffing.

“What have you got Sergeant?” asked Roman, not giving Bill any time to compose himself in front of his Commander. He had obviously been rushing about because his face looked hot and the collar on his light blue shirt was discoloured from perspiration.

“Checked the eastern block and the British, seems they're all in the dark as much as we are Sir,” was the reply that didn't satisfy the curiosity or concerns that Roman felt.

“Well it's not a figment of our imagination, someone must know what it is, and I need answers!” bellowed the frustrated Commander. With the raising of his voice, a couple of people standing around unsure of what their next step was going to be, quickly rushed back to their own stations to see if there were anything they could do to give the Commander his desire.

“Sir, can I just say that it's getting late..., and it is Christmas Eve?” Graham almost regretted mentioning what was on his mind the second his lips started to move, but it was too late. However, his embarrassment of making such a stupid comment was revoked when Bill spoke, just before in another situation laughter would have broken out. “That's exactly the comment I got from the British Sir!”

Although there was a slight snigger, mainly the room with over thirty people in it kept composed as Roman looked around to check what the main reaction was, this was a time of high alert, and he wasn't all too happy that people were finding time to joke although maybe it would relieve the tensions a little bit.

“Okay. Okay, joking aside we need to find out, have we got anything on the pad?” he directed his question to Graham.

“Captain Cowling is in an Alert Raptor right now.”

“Only one?” Asked Roman incredulously, sounding surprised that on a base with hundreds of aircraft, there was only one armed to the teeth and fuelled up ready to go.

“At the moment Sir, yes,” Graham replied.

“Well he's no use just sitting there, send him up to investigate, NOW!”

Inside the cockpit of the advanced F-22 Raptor fighter plane, Captain Jeff Cowling was ready and expecting the message to intercept the ‘Bogey’ immediately. He had been briefed that there was an unidentified aircraft coming in towards Washington from the Atlantic and that he needed to get his helmet on and prepare for a reconnaissance flight just minutes before, and already the jet engines were warming up while he checked the onboard armament stores. Jeff had joined the Air Force from High School and had now been active with them for just over thirty years, a veteran

and knew all the procedures. He had been stationed around the world during various conflicts but now preferred this post of flying the alert aircraft near the Capital, which were the first ones up in the air if anything needed to be checked out. He also loved teaching at the bases own school of Advanced Flying when he was on the ground and not on flight duty.

He had been playing darts with the other pilots in his squadron, when the call had come in, and they had jumped into action the second that they heard the alert. They were always on alert status because no-one ever knew when the voice on the tannoy system would call out, so at least two of the pilots had to be in their flight suits, ready. This was always done on rotation and tonight it was his turn to play darts dressed ready to go out if needed.

He had picked up his helmet, cockpit recorder and other equipment ready for the flight and ran across the asphalt to his awaiting jet fighter. In that time, the support team that readied each aircraft including fuelling it up, attaching any missiles, filling the guns with rounds and any maintenance were already swarming over it and preparing it for his arrival.

Although it was a fairly routine matter to go on missions, whether to check out certain aircraft or even support other aircraft for various reasons, this one seemed different somehow, and emergency call-outs for him, at this kind of year, and day were rare. It was getting late at night so the visibility that comes with the day wouldn't be able to help him, and everything seemed a lot more urgent than previous; but this is what he had trained for.

“Roger Control,” he spoke commandingly into his mask and then pushed the throttle levers forward. In an instant, the jet thrust forward to the sound of thundering as hot streams of gases ejected out the back of the fighter. As the Raptor

rumbled down the runway faster and faster, Jeff pushed the pedals underneath his feet to steer the wheels and keep in the centre of the long tarmac strip. He could almost feel his teeth being juddered out of his mouth until he pulled back slightly on the joystick and everything changed as the plane lifted off of the ground at speed, with a smooth sensation of running on the silky air. Banking around, the aircraft's wheels folded up into itself, and it shot off into the pitch-blackness toward the radar signal that was being mapped out on the screen in front of him.

“Alert Raptor One is airborne, increasing speed to mach one,” said Jeff into his facemask, increasing the throttle as the afterburners ignited the fuel being ejected out of the engine ports at the back, giving him even more thrust.

Both Roman and Bill looked uneasy as they peered from over Graham's shoulders at the console he was sitting at.

“Alert Raptor One is in the air, Sir,” relayed Graham.

“Just give him the latest co-ordinates and tell him to push it,” Roman commanded.

“I'll carry on phoning around, not that I can think of anything that can do that kind of speed,” said Bill turning away to his office so that he could continue to stay in contact with the major authorities of the world – tiny beads of sweat showing on the skin of his nearly bald head.

“What is its current velocity?” Roman asked Graham, leaning further over the radar operator's shoulder.

“It is slowing down and now just under mach one.”

“Good... What speed was it when we first started tracking it?” Roman preferred any unknown object flying in his air space, to be doing so at a velocity where his resources could catch up easily.

“Just over Mach three Sir,” was the chilling answer.

Roman swore unintentionally as a reaction when he heard the words, no aircraft currently in service on his base could ever match that speed, in fact, neither could any of the missiles that any of the fighters carried. For the first time, the Commander was pinning on his hopes rather than the determination he could usually count on.

“Whatever you do don’t lose sight of it,” Roman pointed a finger at the blip on the screen, “whatever that thing is, it isn’t in our fleet and I want to find out exactly what it’s doing in my airspace.”

“Yes Sir,” came the obvious reply.

Roman placed a hand on Grahams shoulder, he knew that tensions were high, and this small gesture he hoped would keep his subordinate calm, although he felt a little panic rising in his own body; he wouldn’t allow himself to show it.

“How long ‘til the alert fighter gets there?” he asked as calmly as he could muster.

“Alert Raptor One E.T.A., two minutes Sir. That thing is coming straight towards us!”

“We haven’t gotten that much time, that thing is getting awfully close to the traffic,” exclaimed Roman as he saw the two blips of the entity and Flight Nineteen on his screen getting closer to each other by the second, his fingers starting to twitch as his blood pressure rose from its comfortable norm. “Damn... Okay, keep me informed, I’m going to have to disturb the President.” Roman turned to walk out of the room and along the corridor to his office, but stopped at the large glass doors. He turned back to address the room. He pointed with a stiffened finger up at the blip on

the large radar screen. “And I don’t want to hear any more silly comments about Santa Claus or supersonic fairies, whatever that thing is up there, its real!”

He had slammed the door behind him a little harder than he wanted to as he left. His office was next to the control room and had a two-way mirror into it so that he could monitor the activity in there; however, he didn’t want to be away from the action for long, but if an entity were closing in on Washington at speed it was then his own Chief that would need to be informed, and quickly.

Jim was sitting back on the sofa with his arm around Sabrina and a glass of brandy in his other hand laughing at the story his guests had just shared about when Kris’s trousers split when they had both attended another dinner party once. His laughter was short lived when the telephone on the table behind him rang.

“Excuse me a minute.” He apologized to his guests before he rose from his comfortable position and walked over to answer it. He didn’t expect to be disturbed this evening, and unlike most other calls that he would take during the day, this one was on the line to his residence and not the usual office ones.

“Yes,” was the only word he used into the mouthpiece, placing his drink down on the wooden surface as he listened to see what was so important this late in the evening that it had to demand his attention.

“Always on call,” Sabrina assured her guests with a smile.

“Well I hope it’s nothing serious,” said Sophie.

“Oh it’ll just be the office checking in,” replied Sabrina, knowing that it would be more than that because no one ever just checked in on the President, especially late in the evening on Christmas Eve.

Kris tried to listen intently to see if Jim would be giving any clues away as to what was being said.

“Look, you know best Roman, I will have to trust your judgement on this one, just keep me informed and use whatever resources you need,” Jim spoke into the telephone before putting it down. Holding the receiver to the base for a couple of seconds, he looked pensive for a second.

“Anything up?” Kris broke the short silence.

“Oh nothing to worry about, just a small situation that’s already being dealt with,” reassured Jim as he came out of his trance and smiled back at his guests.

Kris knew that just from the look on Jim’s face that something a little more worrying than he was letting on was happening. He had heard Roman’s name being mentioned, the only clue as to what was going on and in his mind Kris could only think of one person called that who would have the authority to call. Although he didn’t expect to be informed of everything that was going on like his Commander, it did gripe him a little that Jim wasn’t going to divulge anything more.

While the President was being informed, all that Steve was able to do back at Dulles was watch the blip closing in on Flight Nineteen. Every time it reappeared on the monitor another chunk of kilometres had been shaved away. He had already given the plane a course directional change to move them into a holding pattern inside a new sector, which was mapped out on the large grid on the wall although he knew it off by heart. However, with his radar images now showing the new section of land that Flight Nineteen was passing over, the unidentified object was veering around and was now heading straight back into the path that he had put the passenger plane on; he felt he had to do something more, and quickly.

“Flight Nineteen Heavy, be advised that we are tracking an unidentified aircraft coming in hot on your heading at twenty-two thousand feet, descend to fifteen thousand feet.” The microphone was hot from his breath, and the headset it was attached to over the Santa hat that he was still wearing seemed heavier than normal. Every breath of time also seemed to slow down, but Steve knew he wasn’t helpless and the actions he had just taken should be more than enough. Then he heard the comforting words in his ears, “Roger Dulles control, descending to fifteen thousand feet.” With a sigh, Steve pulled off his red Santa hat and let it drop to the floor, keeping the headset in position, almost like a comfort blanket.

In the passenger section of Flight Nineteen and feeling acutely uncomfortable, Rudy had been sitting in his seat wishing he were able to move a little bit more. It had been a hard couple of years for him since he was diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis some time before. Because of his condition the long haul flight had made him feel quite sore. The turbulence had been minimal throughout the flight, which was a blessing, but the seats on airplanes never had enough legroom to move about properly, especially when the plane was full; which this one seemed to be. It was much nicer having understanding parents sitting with him though. His mother, Nadine had been reading a book under the little directional light set in the overhead lockers and had a snoring man leaning against her for most of the flight. Patrick, his father, was next to the aisle the other side of Rudy because he didn’t mind being knocked every now and then by the passers by making their way down the gangway between the rows of seats.

“Lapland isn’t such a long flight,” moaned Rudy quietly so that no one else in the other seats around his family could hear his disappointment.

“It might not be such a long flight, but it costs a lot more money Rudy, and we can’t afford a holiday like that,” said Patrick looking sorry that his son’s wish was too much for him to fulfil.

“But we don’t have to spend anything,” Rudy continued.

“It’s not just the cost of the flights, it’s the hotels, the food, the everything... and anyway you’d never be happy going to somewhere like that and not coming away with something to show for it. Maybe in a couple of years, what do you say?” Patrick said, thinking that this would give the boy some hope while also giving himself some time to save up. He dearly would have liked to give the boy his wish straight away, the same wish that he’d been pestered about for years, especially as his son wasn’t able to do things like the sports that other kids his own age could. But funds weren’t exactly overflowing. If his own father hadn’t paid for half of the flight that they were on, then they wouldn’t have been able to have visited his parents.

“Yeah okay,” Rudy’s voice had the hint of a whinge but he felt a little happier, he’d been going on about Lapland for the last few years especially when it approached Christmas. At least his dad had nearly said yes this time, even if it were going to be a while before they could actually go there.

“Look, it’s not long now ‘till we land, how are you doing?” His father asked him, patting him on the hand.

“Feeling a bit uncomfortable!” stated Rudy not wanting to moan about anything else on this flight, but feeling so frustrated about not moving much now that his spine was tensing more than it had for a long time.

“Do you want a quick wander about, loosen yourself up a bit?”

“Yes, I think I will for a minute, if that is okay?” Rudy was already half out of his seat before he had finished the sentence. He had thought that his father was also

dozing earlier and didn't really want to wake him, then when he knew his father was awake there was the Lapland moan, but now that was over his thoughts quickly returned to his body and he wanted to move more than anything. Patrick swiftly got up out of his seat and into the passageway between the rows of other people so that Rudy could pass. Luckily there wasn't anyone else in the aisle so Rudy could walk up and down, stretching himself properly for a few minutes.

"Make sure you have a good move about and shake those legs well," said Nadine, closing her book and placing it into the pocket at the back of the seat in front of her before giving out a big yawn, stretching and nudging the man next to her who was back to leaning on her shoulder and actually dribbling.

Rudy could feel every joint aching as he stiffly walked in an animated way up the plane, using the seats for support and trying to sway his hips so that he could get some proper movement back into them. It was over an hour since he'd last moved about and as before most of the people still had their eyes closed and were mostly slouched back in the reclined seats that he found were easier to hold on to. Looking out of the few windows that didn't have the blinds pulled over them, he could see that it was now very dark outside while inside the lights were dimmed so that people wanting to get some kip could do so without the brightness disturbing them.

In the restroom, Rudy was rinsing his face when the plane unexpectedly lurched forward. Managing to catch the handrail with one hand and the sink with the other, Rudy kept himself on his feet, but in an instant a thought went through his mind, and that was to leave the constricted space. The tip forward of the airplane seemed quite steep all of a sudden, which meant something wasn't quite right; and the seatbelt light pinging on confirmed this, but his initial fears were relieved as quickly

as they had started when he heard a message on the loudspeaker from the Captain through the closed doorway. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are descending to avoid other traffic in the area. This is a precautionary measure only, and there is no need to feel concerned. I have switched on the seatbelt sign for your safety!”

The cabin crew quickly leapt into action, making sure that everybody who was not already seated made their ways back. They then scanned the passengers to make sure that all of the seats were upright, their trays were folded away, and their seatbelts were secured. After this check, the crew made their way to their own seats and strapped themselves in.

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Looking out of the cockpit of his jet fighter into the darkness, Jeff struggled to see anything other than the lights of the city below him as he sped over it and towards the east coast, following the course towards the radar signal that blipped on and off on his screen. The roar of the engines behind him overshadowed the whoosh of the wind all around him even though most of it was muffled in his helmet. Outside though the plane was silent as it sped faster than the speed of sound through the darkness and only heard by the people on the ground seconds after it had shot past. The feeling of being on his own without a wingman as support and having the pitch black of the sky all helped to make searching for something much harder than he’d hoped. The moon was bright and high up but that didn’t seem to aid him much other than illuminate the odd cloud he flew over and the stealthy wings on each side of him.

Then suddenly after he had left the city behind him, he saw something ahead, a flash of orange flame shooting across the sky a few miles away, creating a streak of

colour against the blackened background. Glancing down at his radar screen quickly, he double-checked that what he saw was on the right path for what he'd been sent up to investigate; it was.

"I think I can see the object about ten clicks away Control, it appears to be in trouble because there seems to be flames shooting out the back," he relayed back through his facemask.

Jeff kept his eyes peeled out the cockpit in front of him but could only make out the orange glow of flames and the trail of smoke that was being lighted by the brightness of the moon behind it. Far in the distance in its path, he just made out the dot in the sky that he knew from his radar screen was another aircraft; a passenger plane that was right in the path of the streaking fireball.

"Roger Raptor One, can you identify it," came the familiar voice of his controller over the radio.

As the fighter drew nearer with every measurement of time, he slowly became aware of the size of the object, and how much fire was streaking out from underneath it.

"Not yet control, but whatever it is, it's big and it's falling towards a passenger plane... Blimey I mean it's really big."

"What sort of big," questioned Graham at the base into Jeff's ears.

"Really big Control, I mean Titanic type big," was his best description.

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Steve's desk where he had been an Air Traffic Controller for the some years had more drips of sweat on it than crumbs from his mince pies. His bosses had already been informed of what was happening but hadn't yet arrived at the Control Centre,

and the weight of the lives of all the people on Flight Nineteen was now beginning to bear down on him. The last couple of minutes had gone by with both himself and Brad watching the monitors and seeing the pulsating blip heading closer and closer to the aircraft he was watching, hoping that something would change, but no miracles were happening, and the entity was losing height right into the path he'd directed his aircraft to descend into.

“That thing is falling sharply, its getting hell of a close to Nineteen,” screeched Brad who looked over Steve's shoulder.

“Don't you think I know that?” Another bead of sweat hit Steve's keyboard.

Then in the corner of the radar, another blip appeared; constantly bright and not flickering like the one endangering the passenger plane. It was speeding across the screen compared with the other indicators. Both controllers knew that this was the military by the transponder or squawk code. The squawk code was always shown beside the radar signal, which showed it was an intercept jet.

“There's an Alert Fighter,' Brad swore under his breath, “It's moving some,” he pointed to the new source of information on the screen.

There was a few seconds while the two men watched, the fighter from Andrews as it was closing in fast, but the intermittent blip was now getting so close to Flight Nineteen that something else had to be done.

“Steve, do something!” pleaded Brad in a shout.

Steve clutched hold of the microphone hovering over his mouth.

“Flight Nineteen, that object is right beside you and falling fast, pull up, pull up!”

As Steve's words were echoing in each of the pilot's ears, the collision alert system in the cockpit suddenly kicked into life with the same words: "Pull Up, Pull Up."

Captain Carl Mann grabbed hold of the throttle levers hard and yanked them closer, just as both himself and Sean; his Co-Pilot in the seat beside him yanked back on the control sticks. The engines screamed, and the whole plane tilted up, while all the time the loud warning from the collision system now echoed along with the panicked but controlling voice of Steve: "Flight Nineteen, pull up!"

Sean leaned forward in his chair, straining against the forces that were trying to push him back in his seat so that he could look out of the side of the cockpit window, only to see in horror just over the wing on his side, a very large fiery object careering towards them.

"What the...? It's going to hit!" His voice screeched into the small confined space. The whites of his knuckles bulged out from the back of his hands from holding and pulling back on the stick hard, thrusting himself back into his seat. He wished he had time to let out a little prayer.

Nadine had been half awake and half dozing, mindlessly gazing out of the blackness through the window across the way past the other passengers. Rudy squeezed next to his father so that he could get back into his seat after his wander around to loosen and freshen up. The plane tilted up abruptly, and Rudy lost his balance for the second time, the engines instantly screamed with power so hard that it made the whole plane tremble and shake. Struggling to get past his father at the newly nose-raised angle, Rudy held tight on the headrest of the seat in front of his to try and stay on his feet, his knees pushing against his own seat as a wedge while he composed

his position. Suddenly, there was a flash across the window opposite and instantaneously a tremendously loud smashing sound deafened the passengers at the same time as the plane rocked from side to side violently. Rudy fell into his seat and in a panic, just managing to grab the two ends of his seatbelt, one buckle with each hand when the roof of the plane right above him seemed to disappear as if it were being peeled away as on sardine can.

Nadine couldn't find any words and like many other passengers just heard screaming coming from her lips, which didn't aid her son's struggle against the sudden winds and battering around as he tried to clip the two ends of his seatbelt together. It was his father's instinctive reactions to hold Rudy down until and even after the buckles clipped and locked into the position that saved him. Lockers above the seats got ripped away and flew out of the gaping hole that now showed the blackness of the sky outside. Rudy would have let out a large sigh of relief knowing that at least he wasn't going to be blown out of the aircraft if he had any breath inside him to do so. Now though he was safe unless his seat gave way, which seemed likely because they were shuddering hard with the pressure vortex of air that was being created.

Oxygen masks fell from the overhead lockers that were still left intact. Some of the masks were swaying about, only just being held up by the odd bolts that somehow still secured them. Others were being pulled out into the night, as the hole above them got bigger as more of the roof of the plane blew out into the chilling night air. Long sections of wiring looms were being stretched from the roof, and some of the larger cables that had been damaged were sparking every time they touched anything else, while others were flying around outside the top of the plane like spaghetti trying to escape from the holes in a colander.

Many of the passengers screamed in terror, some into the oxygen masks that they had managed to get on, or been helped on by other people sitting next to them when they saw their friends and family members panicking. Other's who weren't so lucky to have oxygen pumped into facemasks were struggling for breath in the thin atmosphere.

In the cockpit, the pilots weren't having a much better time in this dire situation, they were unaware of the extent of the damage and how extreme the situation was in the passenger section behind them; they had their own problems with flying what was left of an obviously damaged craft.

"It's hit us bad!" confirmed Carl, seeing the instruments lighting up with warnings from almost every inch of the ceiling panels over his head. There were so many illuminations from the buttons and switches that he didn't know which ones to focus on first and so just held onto the wheel and tried as hard as he could to do nothing else but fly.

"What was that, it was enormous?" Quizzed Sean, knowing that his superior wouldn't possibly have the answer, seeing that it was only his eyes that had spied the object for an instant; just a second before it hit.

"Damn, this thing is fighting me," heaved Carl, totally ignoring the rhetorical question. He was pulling on the control stick and seeing the horizon lit by the buildings and roads below moving and swaying about due to the plane being only a whisker away from losing control. They lost a lot of height in a very short time while he tried to stabilise a very unstable and even falling craft, now without any instruments to indicate their position. He glanced at the horizon at each side out of the windows and from the illuminations on the ground knew from experience that they were well under the cloud base.

“The rudder is so damn sluggish,” panted Sean, pushing down his left foot without much response.

“How are the engines?” Asked Carl frantically, too busy to look for himself.

“All right I think,” I just can’t make out all of these warnings; it’s as if the whole plane has been cross-wired.

“It looks as though we've lost a lot of electrical systems, radio on ahead if we can, we're going to have to put this bird down quick,” shouted Carl over the increasing loud noise of the wind whistling at the door behind them.

Sean readjusted his headset, which was lopsided over his ears and depressed the transmit button on the radio module.

“This is Flight Nineteen, we have been in collision with another aircraft and are declaring an emergency. Come in Dulles, can you read me?” A few frantic seconds passed as both pilots prayed, wondering if the radio out as well as many of the other systems? “Copy Dulles, this is flight Nineteen... We’ve been hit.”

Then their wishes were answered in the form of a voice in their ears: “Roger Nineteen, message understood.”

The Alert Fighter flew past the passenger aircraft at such speed that Jeff only had a second to quickly glimpse the damage. He had helplessly seen the collision where the other entity had scraped over the top of the main fuselage, ripping it apart. He had seen the unidentified object coming in from the side of the passenger plane without any change of its speed or direction, seemingly plunging out of the sky towards the ground; where it had disappeared from view in front of the funnel of smoke coming out from its behind. The damage of the top of the plane on first glance looked extensive and certainly appeared terminal, Jeff felt a chill travel up his spine.

“Control, there has been a collision,” Jeff paused to take another deep breath.  
“There's major damage to the fuselage of the airliner, I don't think she'll make it.”

Both pilots in flight Nineteen had noticed the whoosh of the fighter plane passing beside their aircraft, but Carl was trying to get his bearings from looking out of the front cockpit window and didn't bat an eye-lid when the fighter shot in front of them. He knew where their last position was before being hit and was trying to recognise landmarks from the lights on the ground below to confirm where they were. He wasn't feeling particularly confident all of a sudden, he could feel the heaviness of the controls and with a loud rushing noise of air the other side of the door he knew that the passenger section had taken the brunt of the impact. He was just glad to feel that the tail section, although sluggish and barely responsive must still be intact, otherwise they surely would have already fallen straight out of the sky.

“We've got company,” stated Sean, seeing the passing jet.

“If they can't help then I'm not interested,” battled Carl.

“Dulles less than five minutes away,” added Sean through panted breath.

“Okay that's better news, but please shut down those warnings... I can't think straight!”

Sean leant over to the master audio switches and turned off the buzzers, klaxons and other things that were hampering their ability to concentrate. Sean noticed one warning light that appeared brighter than the others, although the sounds from the warnings had gone the lights that accompanied them were still shining:  
“There's absolutely no air pressure in the passenger section!”

“We can't help them until we are on the ground, so let's make that our priority.”

Back in the Control Center at Andrews, Commander Roman Turnbull was standing behind Graham's desk. The loudspeaker system was switched on so that everybody in the room could hear the communications between Andrews and Jeff in the Alert Raptor. Most of time Roman loved his job, but now he would do anything to give up his responsibilities and let someone else come up with the decisions of what to do next.

"I'm going to make another pass and take a look from the port side," was the voice of Captain Cowling piloting the jet, over the speaker system. There was an eerie silence except for the communications back and forth over the radio, everyone in the large Control room feeling anxious about what was taking place and wanting to hear every word.

"Can he see what's hit it?" Asked Roman to Graham.

"Raptor One, can you see what hit the passenger plane?" Repeated Graham into his microphone.

"Whatever it was, it was massive, certainly not one of our planes. I really mean we are talking massive," Jeff sounded different, not the cool, controlled pilot that everyone knew: "I can just see its trail, it's on its way down. I can't get a good view, there is smoke bellowing out behind it."

Jeff pulled his joystick to one side, and he felt the aircraft that he was sitting in bank over as it turned to take another pass alongside the airliner. The turning circle was quite large and with his cockpit at an angle he tried to see as much as was possible of the smoke source that was heading to the ground away from him, but it was too far to glean any more information. As he guided the jet fighter back up behind the stricken airliner again, he straightened up his own craft and pulled back on the

throttle to slow it down so that he could take a better look as he passed horizontally beside to it.

“Control, I am now pulling alongside the airliner, awaiting instructions,” Jeff radioed into his mask. As he pulled up past the rear fin of Flight Nineteen he could this time get a more in-depth look at the damage it had sustained. The top, as he saw it was damaged even worse than he’d first thought. A five-metre long stretch of the aluminium outer skin had been peeled right back, and the inner skins had been blown clean out, leaving a gaping hole in the top of the plane.

As Jeff kept his fighter jet parallel to the much larger passenger plane he flicked a switch marked Port Wing Record, and the camera mounted on the fuselage started to whirr into action, taking hundreds of snap shot images. Through the windows where the blinds had folded up or blown from the glass, he saw the lines of passengers who all seemed to be in their seats, some of whom looked straight back at him with the expressions of begging for help.

“Roger Raptor One, will advise,” was the delayed reply from Graham in his ear.

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The light from the fire flickered around the walls of the lounge and onto the front of the newspaper that Duncan was reading in his easy chair. He had already had a very quick shower and was sitting in his ‘comfortables’ as he called them; warm old clothes, which helped him relax and that he often wore in the evenings when there was nothing else to do but go to bed. He had taken a swig from the glass of whiskey

that had been poured for him while he was upstairs washing, and he could still feel the warmth from it travelling down the inside of his throat.

Sarah was sitting next to him on the couch and now back on the last chapter of the latest novel that she'd been trying to finish for the past few days. Now all the work and chores on the farm were done, the cows had been put away, the chickens were snuggled up in their purpose built, warm coop, the house was clean, and fresh including the kitchen, which was all prepared for the next day; and the usually busy atmosphere of the farm had slowed right down.

Duncan wasn't usually much interested in the life and styles of the rich and famous, but hidden within the pages of the newspaper held in his hands was the latest story of dodgy dealings by one rather well known couple that he'd seen on the television often, and he was reading the article with more enthusiasm than he usually would have; whilst Sarah was living the life of the woman in the book that had lost her memory at the beginning and was now just piecing the events of the last three years together. The book had caught her attention when browsing the bookshelves a couple of months before, and although she'd enjoyed the intrigue the pages gave her, she rarely had times like this where she could just sit back, relax and immerse herself in the story. The only discernable sounds other than the odd rustling of the newspaper or quieter flip of pages from the book was coming from the large Grand Father Clock that had been handed down through the family and now stood in the corner, clicking away in its timed beat.

In the background, behind the ticking appeared another very quiet but strange noise hardly noticed until Duncan pricked up his ears and looked up from his paper towards the ceiling while he tried to work out whether the sound was coming from

within the house. Sarah took her eyes from the page she was reading when she noticed her other half looking strangely up in the air.

“What is it?”

“Can you hear that?” Duncan could hear the sound getting louder and louder, and his face dropped when he realised that there was nothing in the house that could make such a noise. The hairs on the back of his neck started to stick outwards, and it was that sign, which really made him, all of a sudden, feel uneasy.

“Hear what?”

“Shush, listen,” said Duncan putting his finger to his lips to indicate that she should keep quiet for a moment so that she could hear it. But it didn’t take any time for her to recognise what he had noticed because the sound very quickly ramped up in volume and completely drowned out the back and forth clicking of the arm of the clock, ticking away behind the wood and glass cabinet.

“What’s that?” shrieked Sarah, dropping the book onto the floor while standing up but in that little time the noise, which sounded as much like a jet engine grew in volume so loud that it deafened her voice.

Reacting on instinct, Duncan jumped over to her, his paper flying out of his lap and onto the floor. He grabbed her around the waist in a tackle and with her in his arms plunged to the ground as the sound, whatever it was, whooshed overhead shaking the whole house, knocking photos from their hanging places on the walls and rattling the windows so hard that it felt like they would surely shatter. A loud gush of wind instantly followed the deafening engine sound and was almost as high in volume, and like a shock wave it hit the farm hard. The couple imagined tidal waves thrashing up against them any second as they covered their heads with their hands in a faint gesture of survival.

Then, as soon as the thing, whatever it was had passed over head, four sets of explosions, which sounded like deepthroated fireworks, popped in rapid succession, and almost instantly afterwards the distant sounds of crashing and muffled scraping ended the interruption.

“What the...?” blurted out Sarah as she rolled away from Duncan’s covering and jumped up with fright.

Duncan raised himself onto his knees, the look on his face showed the concern that he not only had for their safety, but all of a sudden his worry redirected towards the animals that were bedded in the various outbuildings. Sarah rushed towards the window and looked out into the darkness, the twinkling of the fairy lights reflecting on the glass made it impossible to see anything except a mirror image of herself and the room she was standing in. Duncan got to his feet and walked up to her, placing a hand in the small of her back as he glanced over her shoulder into the blackness.

“I can’t see anything,” said Sarah covering the light from inside as she pressed her face up against the cold glass, but it still it didn’t help her view of the outside.

Duncan turned and walked quickly out of the room, through the kitchen and over to the back door so that he could get his kit on for going outside, he needed to check on the animals and of course wanted to investigate whatever had passed overhead; and had obviously crash-landed.

“I’m gonna have a look, you stay here,” commanded Duncan. In his mind, the only thing he could think of that would make such a noise was an aircraft, and the last thing he wanted his wife to see was the possible horrors that a crash like that could give.

“That was something coming out of the sky, it definitely went overhead, you don’t think a plane has crashed do you?” asked Sarah in a panicked voice, her mind working on the same trains of thought as her husband.

“I don’t know, sounded like it...? I think you should get hold of the police!” Duncan’s thoughts were starting to race, and he didn’t even think about what he was doing as he put his boots and coat on, as instinct took over from any everyday actions – his mind was on what he might find if his diagnosis of the events outside were right.

“What about the animals?”

“I’ll check on them, just dial 911,” he reiterated, raising his voice to her as confirmation that it was the only thing that, for now, she should do.

Sarah rushed over to the telephone and picked up the cordless handset, “I’m phoning them now.” She tapped the three numbered buttons and pushed the call button, then started to pace about in the kitchen around the large dining table as she waited for the call to be answered.

Duncan didn’t waste any time zipping up his coat and picked up his large torch, switching it to the on position before turning the handle that opened the door to the outside. Grabbing a lapel and holding the clothing closer to his skin as soon as the chilly air outside was felt, he directed the torch to the cowshed, letting the door he’d walked through close by itself, he strode quickly forward to check on his livelihood. He looked up and could see a low trail of smoke that was illuminated by the moonlight shining through it. Following with his eyes he could see the trail lowering to the ground and a faint glow of orange from an obvious crash site in the fields almost a mile away.

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Graham was sitting at his console trying to look calm as while he waited for either his next orders from his Commander or details from the radio in his ear, which everyone else could monitor from the loudspeaker set into the high ceiling. On the screen in front of him were the two blips from Flight Nineteen and Raptor One, both of them next to each other whilst the other unidentified blip had now disappeared.

“The entity is down, I repeat the entity is down,” Captain Cowling’s voice echoed around the room. Roman had recently known this moment would come and knew with his authority the actions he had to take, at least now he would get the chance to identify from the supposed wreckage what kind of flying object could do the speeds he’d witnessed on the screens. He knew that whatever course of action he’d decide on that he would have the backing of everyone on his base, and even the President whom he’s spoke to just a short time before.

“Right, I want the whole area cordoned off. Get a full team out there, we need to know exactly what has just come down,” he commanded to the whole room. Everybody knew exactly what was required of them and quickly moved into action. Headsets from many of the people in the control room were placed over heads of people not already wearing them, and co-ordinates of the crash site immediately got relayed down all of the microphones to emergency services, military convoys that had already been mobilised and were already on the freeways as well as the bases own search and rescue teams, which were taking off in helicopters.

“Understood Raptor One, we have teams en-route now, have you still got a visual on the airliner?” Graham leaned into his desk and placed his elbows either side of the keyboard and listened for only the voice he wanted to hear over the chatter.

Seemingly, everyone else in the room now had their own orders, and none of them was to keep quiet and stand by.

“Affirmative Control, right beside it.”

“Tell him to forget the airliner, we must concentrate on what has just crashed. They are going to have to fend for themselves!” It was Roman’s job to find out about whatever had just dropped to the ground. There was nothing that he could do for the airliner and although he was worried about the passengers and crew, with only one fighter at the scene he needed to prioritise and move away from hopelessly watching over a plane he couldn’t aid in any way. Also, Flight Nineteen was the responsibility of the aviation authorities, but identifying the UFO was going to be from now on, purely a military objective.

“Raptor One, forget the plane, you must make sure you keep visual on the crash site until the teams arrive,” Graham like everyone else had thoughts of Flight Nineteen in his mind but knew that the commands he was following were the only right ones for now; no matter how frustrating it seemed.

“Repeat your last Control?”

Graham did exactly that, articulating his words so that there was no misinterpretation.

“Roger Control,” sounded the confirmation on the radio.

A message ticked over the computer monitor on the right hand side to Graham’s desk. The message was from the ready team out in the aircraft-park and signalled that another alert fighter was fuelled up, armed and ready for flight. “We have another Alert Raptor ready, Sir.”

“So? Get him up there!” Demanded Roman as if he were questioning why the order hadn’t already been relayed.

Graham switched frequency on his console. “Alert Raptor Two, you are cleared for takeoff.”

Sergeant Bill Horne rushed through the doors into the control room holding a clipboard, which he was writing a note on as he walked swiftly. Striding up to Roman he awaited his new commands; he didn’t have to wait very long.

“I need to have one of our own crash investigation teams over there, we don’t know what we’ll find.” Roman looked thoughtful, “I want you there too, and if this situation is as out of the ordinary as it seems then I need someone to relay everything back here. You know what I want, get on with it.”

“Already on it Sir,” replied Bill, “I’ve got everyone we need in the air and organising a Chinook to get our best investigation team. The local authorities have been informed and will meet the trucks, which are already barely ten minutes away.”

“Good, good,” Roman pondered as Bill turned and rushed back to the offices to get his things ready to leave the base.

In the cockpit of Raptor One, Captain Cowling had edged up to the front of the passenger plane, which was still beside him. Inside the windows, he could make out the Captain and Co-Pilot, obviously struggling against the machine they were encased in, trying to gain control. Jeff had an ability like only the top pilots in the Air Force and had the experience to back him, flying was second nature, the plane a natural extension to his own body, and when he was in his seat he became one with it. During his career, he had battled with aircraft with problems, including mechanical breakages, birdstrike and even being hit by flack when serving patrols in the Gulf – but even he couldn’t imagine what it felt like without the comfort of an ejector seat

under him, the responsibility of all the lives on board whilst battling such damage to the backbone of the aircraft he was just about to leave.

Reluctantly, unable to provide any assistance he saluted the pilots in a gesture of luck, which was only noticed by Sean before he banked away, falling from the sky to a lower altitude and turning towards the crash site of the unknown flying object, hoping that, by some miracle, it would be the only one that night. In the distance he could see only black on the ground, the two minutes that had passed from the crash was just far enough that he'd lost sight of it and instead of using his senses, flew by the numbers on his heads-up display.

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Even with the winds thrashing against his face, Patrick looked down the aisle and could see that everyone appeared to be strapped into their seats and that the door to the cockpit was still firmly closed; even with the large hole to the sky outside above him, everything seemed to be much calmer. When the plane had first been hit there was immediate panic but now after just a short time the atmosphere had changed as if everyone knew something. They had definitely lost height because it was easier to breathe, the others who'd had oxygen masks fall in front of their faces were still wearing them, but because the lockers above where he was sitting had blown out, him and his family were without the privilege.

"I think we are going to make it," he shouted over the winds and with his fingers crossed tight. The plane felt smoother in its flight, and under their seats now, amazingly it felt like the pilots had gained the advantage and were in control again.

"Of course we are," shouted Nadine, trying hard to make herself believe it.

Patrick looked across to his wife who was sitting just two seats away and saw through her hair that was being whipped around her head, her nervous smile back at him. She was always one for looking on the bright side of any situation, with this one being just about the worst that he could think of. Rudy in-between them also looked nervous and certainly wasn't showing any smiles at that time. He was more than used to roller coaster rides, almost every year the family would go down to Florida to Tampa Bay and Rudy would enjoy all of the rides that they had to offer, while Patrick and Nadine had coffees at the cafe or go shopping. But although this had all the hallmarks of the rides he'd experienced, the stakes were different, and this time thick stainless steel rails didn't protect them, and Rudy knew this, he was obviously feeling the nerves tingle underneath his skin and was gripping onto the end of the armrests; showing his white knuckles and gritting his teeth a little more than he normal would on a loop-the-loop ride, as his clothes thrashed against his body.

Nadine looked in front of her, unable to move without losing a grip on the seats that she clung onto with all of her might and noticed the novel that she had been reading before the impact was wriggling its way up out of the seat pocket, sliding against the various safety sheets and in-flight magazines with every tiny jiggle of the aircraft. Suddenly the book and all the other papers got grabbed by the rushing winds and leapt out of the pocket, shooting upwards and out of the gapping hole with a loud rustling noise.

Back at Dulles Air Traffic Control, and Steve's forehead was dripping with sweat and it made the headset feel uncomfortable; double time was not worth this. He had been trying to contact Flight Nineteen for a couple of minutes since his first

confirmation from them that they had been in collision with the entity that had now disappeared from his scope, but without success.

“Flight Nineteen Heavy, are you receiving me?” Without radio communications then his mind was thinking that the pilots on board could well have lost control, the radar image certainly showed erratic height changes that indicated that the plane was in a lot of trouble. The reply was just static, the white noises that if you listen to carefully can carry any sound you imagine, and yet gives nothing but frustration. In desperation, he clicked the frequency modulator back and forth, just in case the systems on board the plane had been jarred or moved since the impact.

“Flight Nineteen Heavy, come in,” he now shouted into his microphone, “please respond?” He sat back in his chair, the short time from the start of his shift had already exhausted him, and he didn’t know how much longer he could cope being in the metaphorical dark, not knowing. But then he heard loudly out of the loudspeaker a voice that he had longed for.

“This is Flight Nineteen Heavy, we have lost pressure systems and appear to have structural damage, request immediate landing with full emergency support.”

With a renewed and rather unexpected breath of air from hearing Sean’s voice, the man sitting in the Co-Pilot seat of the aircraft whom he had been trying to contact, Steve jumped with relief, as did everyone else who were crowding around him and anxiously awaiting a response from the blip on the screen that was making its way ever closer to the airport, abet not on a perfect approach course. Everyone spontaneously sprung into action.

“All emergency vehicles to runway two-seven, we have a stricken aircraft coming in to land, I repeat, all emergency vehicles to runway two-seven,” announced Brad over the tannoy system, which he knew would echo to all corners of the airport.

“Flight Nineteen, have you got control of the aircraft?” Asked Steve into his headset. The perspiration was now starting to show on his back. He leant over his desk and turned back down the squawk settings, listening all the time for a response.

“Copy! We have control. We think we can land,” said Sean in a comforting and yet slightly panicked tone.

“You are lined up for approach on runway two seven, emergency vehicles are being deployed. Good luck Flight Nineteen, we are all there with you.” The radar was showing that the aircraft was now just approaching the outer parameter of the airport, and both Steve, as well as everyone else, knew everything from now on depended on how much structural damage the plane had sustained.

“I’m going to have a look,” hurried Brad towards the door onto the balcony outside, “keep in contact and I’ll shout if I see anything.”

“Confirm that his landing gear is down,” shouted Steve back to him.

Inside the cockpit of the passenger plane, the tension felt as though it was at breaking point. Carl’s neck and shoulders were aching from forcing the controls. He was spending all of his efforts on keeping the plane in a straight line, using the lights on the ground as a guideline and not even having any time to glance down at the instruments. Even if he did have time to glance down, he knew because of the electrical damage, the onboard computer systems could be giving erroneous readings – something he knew he couldn’t afford to risk looking at. Buffeted in their seats, Sean was doing everything in his experience to help his Captain. He had his hands on the control column, moving it with his more experience superior, ensuring that he wasn’t battling against him.

“They're ready for us.” Sean panted, staring through the window in front of him and making out the lights through the glass in front of the plane.

“Lets just hope we are ready?” Carl remarked back.

“Do we go for it?” asked Sean tentatively knowing that this would be their only chance but still going through procedure.

“Yes, flaps to fifteen percent and reduce speed,” commanded Carl, thinking the same.

“Flaps at fifteen percent,” confirmed Sean after he had set the lever to his left and waited for the indicator lights to confirm.

“How far is it?”

“I can see it,” puffed Sean looking straight down the parallel rows of landing lights right in front of him.

“Okay. Cross your fingers and get that landing gear down.”

Sean made the sign of the cross on himself before reaching forward and engaging the landing gear. Listening carefully both pilots could make out the familiar sound of the mechanical gears of the front landing wheels below them, whirring into action over the whistling sounds buffeting the door behind them. Praying in his mind, Sean watched the light that would indicate whether everything had locked into position with anticipation that he had never felt so intense before, but seconds after the clonk of the gears locked and the light come on to indicate what they'd heard, easing at least that worry. It wasn't apparent in the cockpit of what had happened in the rest of the plane, no indication of where the impact had taken place although it was more likely to have been on the top. Even with the lights showing that all gears were down, it wasn't at all certain; however, it was a much closer step, and both pilots knew that the airport would let them know if they could see a problem.

“Landing gear is shown as down and locked,” Sean announced with some pride for the craft.

“Alright,” acknowledged Carl, secretly just as relieved as his worried Co-Pilot that at least the lights showed what they wanted. “Set the flaps to full.”

“Flaps on full,” acknowledged Sean, moving the lever beside him to its maximum.

“Right, this is it!”

“Good luck Sir,” encouraged Sean, and they exchanged quick glances.

As Flight Nineteen passed over the start of the runway, all of the emergency vehicles sped into action. They were lined up either side of the runway, and when the airplane touched down onto the hard runway they followed close behind it. Brad, who was standing on the balcony at the Control Tower watched intently through the darkness and saw the plane zoom over the line of vehicles.

“The landing gear appears okay,” shouted Brad through the open door and into the Control Room at his side.

“Good, keep an eye on them,” shouted Steve back. He would have loved to have watched his plane landing, but he had to keep control at his desk awaiting any instructions from the pilots and relaying them at a moments notice, but now he was going to relay some good news back to them.

“Flight Nineteen. Your undercarriage appears to be unaffected.” Steve quickened his voice but still sounded clear into his microphone.

“Copy,” was the obviously rushed voice back at him.

Brad watched as the back wheels touched the ground, and only then took his eyes off the undercarriages and noticed the broken spine of the passenger jet. The roof

he could see was open where part of its metal skin had peeled back after being ripped open by the impact.

The passengers underneath of the void had been preparing for the landing, and although wishing time would pass all the quicker so that they could touch the ground again, were also dreading this exact moment. The flight attendants were strapped into their own seats and had been since before the time of the collision and couldn't offer any assistance or words of comfort to the people they wanted to look after. The communications from the cabin to the passenger section had also been damaged, the corded telephone blown out, and neither side knew the situation on the other. It was obvious that after such an event that the door to the pilot section would remain closed as well as locked until the aircraft had landed, but not to have heard anything from the captain or the crew didn't make this part of the journey any easier to cope with.

“We're landing!” Shouted Nadine as she gripped onto the armrests with all of her might.

The wheels under the wings banged down on the ground hard, and the jolt took the wind out of the lungs of the passengers who had been holding their breath, but seconds later the front tyres touched the asphalt and they knew they were down, with only stopping the next priority. The brakes screeched as they locked on, creaking from the skins of the plane made for uneasy listening but then the engines screamed into reverse, the noise so much louder without the roof of the aircraft hiding some of the volume. The plane slowed down and then all of a sudden stopped, the engines were shut down and quiet overwhelmed for the first time since the impact. Passengers slowly let go of their grips on seats and restraints, fingers stiff with being cold and gripping so hard for so long. Oxygen masks were pulled down slowly from the faces

of the passengers who had them, and now the sounds of the emergency vehicles outside with sirens shouting loudly gave the final release.

Suddenly everybody noticed the change in temperature, the windchill factor in the sky had been much lower than zero, and although the cool air outside was just to the point of biting for everyone already on the ground, it felt positively warm to the passengers of the plane who'd felt it warm up by twenty-odd degrees. It was the first sign of what adrenalin can do, because the last thing anyone thought of up in the air, was how cold it was.

“Woo-Hoo! Yeah!” Cheered Rudy and in an immediate chorus everyone else joined in and cheered or clapped, their tensions releasing.

### *CHAPTER THREE – THE CRASH SITE*

Duncan's pace quickened as he took long strides across the fields, leaving far behind him the barns and outbuildings where his animals were somehow all quiet and calm despite the noise that had disturbed his Christmas Eve relaxation period. The ground was crispy under his feet with the soft sprinkling of snow that had fallen earlier, and he made sure he didn't lose his footing on the slightly icy ground. The clouds were bright in the sky from the reflection off the Moon, which was hidden behind the fluffy objects that hung there, while the ambient glow aided him in being able to see where he placed his feet, with his torch shining ahead of him in a much more intense beam that brightened up the path across the fields.

As he climbed over another wettened sty he felt that his heart was beating faster in his chest as he quickened his pace over the unsmooth ground; his anticipation to what lay ahead growing, his mind uncertain of what he could do when he came across whatever it was that had made the noise and was now on the far side of his land. As he approached a small hill he guided his torch even higher to the crest of it, he must be getting close now he thought because there was a funny smell in the air, not the usual smell of a farm but more the smell of something burnt. A glance over his shoulder and he could see in the distance the barns, which were obscuring the farmhouse and the Christmas decorations that lit up the yard.

Over the brow of the hill, the first thing he saw was a small trail of smoke reaching up to the sky and getting carried away with the light breeze. When he shone his powerful torch on to it the smoke glistened back at him, and suddenly there was no doubt in his mind that the next thing his eyes would see would be the crash site. As he almost tripped on a small hole in the soil from where a rabbit had dug itself a tunnel to

it's warren, the crash site in front of him then revealed itself, suddenly making Duncan feel even uneasy inside than he had already felt.

Below him in the valley and filling a vast area spanning a couple of his large fields he could make out the shadows of something bigger than he could ever have had imagined. Although he couldn't quite make out what it was, which appeared to have broken up into four or five large pieces, each piece much bigger than any normal house, the hazy light from the moon did help confirm that whatever it was, it was a lot bigger than any aircraft. He could see on the ground large, deep track marks where whatever it was that had supposedly skidded down the hill into the valley had dug itself into the earth rather than fall straight down. He shined his torch on the nearest section of whatever it was, but the beam seemed to dissipate into the black-looking object that he carried on walking towards.

The air was quiet, in fact, silent, and he could only hear the noises he was himself making, the panting of his breath that came out in clouds of mist from his mouth and sounds from his boots crunching on the crisp ground under his feet. He listened out, expecting or maybe hoping to hear a voice cry out, hopefully a survivor or two, maybe even someone who could explain what on Earth this vast thing was?

Overhead, the silence that he was straining to hear through was broken when a much more familiar sound echoed into his ears, growing from nothing to very loud in just a couple of seconds and although looking up into the sky was a futile gesture, he recognised the roar of a jet aircraft passing low right over the field that he had walked into. At that moment, it became obvious to Duncan that he was not the only person to know that something had fallen onto his land and he almost considered turning around at that point. However, a plane in the sky couldn't help anyone if there were any survivors and so he decided to continue on his search. Also, there was a nagging

curiosity to work out what this object was because he couldn't imagine anything like this flying and had never seen or even heard of anything like it before.

Getting even closer, Duncan shone his torch on the first part of the structure that was embedded into the ground, and was surprised to see that it was not black but a deep red, matt in appearance but somehow still bright against the light that hit it. To the right of him, he could see the source of smoke that was lifting up into the air, a vast shiny metal object the size of a small airplane in itself, half hidden in the ground that it had dug into, which had it seemed been the main extinguisher. Shining the beam of light in his hand just above the supposed jet engine he could see the paintwork around it still smouldering and instantly realised that this was the source of the smoke, which still drifted up into the air.

Raising the beam of his light even higher he saw that nearly six storeys in height above it was another of the engines, and instantly he knew that whatever section this was, it must have tipped over when it had skidded to a halt on the ground. He also in that instant felt an overwhelming feeling as though he was in the old 'Land of the Giant's' television show because everything around him was so vast in size. It towered above him, and he felt like a tiny version of himself wandering around scattered Lego bricks.

Bewildered, and still feeling decidedly apprehensive he continued, hoping to find something that would answer all the questions he had racing around in his mind. Walking around the object with the engines attached he wondered if this were the time when instead of letting his curiosity get the better of him, he should run away, but stroking the side face of the object as he walked along it made it seem even more real. Smooth but quite warm to the touch; metal or fibreglass in construction but with the strangest of finishes.

As he rounded the corner, he noticed something in the distance of his light beam, something he couldn't make out until he walked closer but jumped when he recognised that it was a figure on the ground laying still, without a single movement. Duncan quickened his pace and ran up to the figure who as he got closer recognised as unequivocally human, and surprisingly a person whom he recognised. As if for a brief section of time, which seemed to slow down incredibly, he seemed to be transported back in time, regressing to his childhood years as he ran towards the person lying motionless on the grass. His torch swung from side to side until the moment when he stopped and crouched down onto his knees beside the man, and when he did, his regression stopped to keep him in the new age that he had forgotten about for so many years; for there in front of him was someone that, in a millennia, he would never have expected to see, lying on the wet ground was the red-coated figure of Santa Claus himself.

“Oh my God, Saint Nick?” Duncan cried out in horror, “Saint Nick!”

Duncan dropped the torch and tried to feel past the large, bushy beard to the man's neck, hopefully to feel a pulse; revealingly the skin was warm and hidden deep in the follicles of his facial hair which travelled right down his neck he felt what he was searching for.

“Can you hear me?” he cried, as he brushed some dirt away from Father Christmas's face, “Saint Nick, please!”

The man in red before him then moved and groaned, and Duncan noticed that he was clutching onto a small teddy bear that he held very tightly in his grasp.

“Speak to me!”

Duncan felt even more relief when in his arms, which he now held the head of his childhood hero; Santa opened his eyes slowly, moved his head around so that he

looked up at Duncan and mumbled with a faint grin, “I guess as I'm not walking, it couldn't have been a good landing?”

Santa lifted up the teddy bear that he was holding and through half-opened eyes examined it; it had also survived the crash and miraculously didn't even have a flake of dirt on it. Santa smiled at the little furry object and then with some effort, stuffed it down his red jacket to keep it safe but grimaced as the movement brought pain.

“It's okay, relax, help is on its way,” Duncan tried to reassure him, seeing the man was in some pain as he relaxed his head back into the arms. Up above, the jet that had passed overhead made another pass. The low rumble appeared from over the hill, getting louder and louder until it crescendoed as it flew low right over them, shaking their insides; it was unmistakably a fighter jet and a fast one at that; this time, Duncan got a glimpse of the underneath of the fighter as it shot over them, very low.

Once the fighter jet had made its pass overhead and disappeared, another sound started to take over from the drone of the jet engines that were fading away. Unlike the noise of the fighter jet, which was distinct and could be easily pinpointed in the sky, this one appeared to rumble, and it was difficult for Duncan to detect the direction. It confused him for a few seconds as the very low sound rose but then it became apparent what the sound was when distant search lights from helicopters appeared, tracing white beams of lights from their underbellies down onto his fields and moving rapidly towards where he was holding the head of the injured man in his hands.

As the seemingly countless beams of light came closer, they started to lift up from the empty fields that they had been lighting up and now pointed straight at the crash site that he was right in the middle of. The blinding funnels made Duncan look

away, and it was then that he saw a much better view of the craft that had fallen from the sky. Towering above him, he could see the insides of the main section of the sleigh that Santa had been catapulted onto the ground from when it had come to the abrupt stop after skidding down the small hill. An enormous hessian sack, much bigger than the size of a large house had tipped out, and inside that smaller sacks, which were all individually tied with tags and filled with presents were rolling out of the main one.

Inside the hull of the craft, he could see glimpses of two large seats in front of an array of brightly polished brass looking levers and controls, which he assumed must be the cockpit, the entrance to it being two ornate stairways at either side, which led down to the main section where the sack had tipped from. Across from where he was kneeling on the cold ground, he could see that another section of the craft that was twenty or so feet away from the main one was also built the same way but without the controls. The second tipped over sack from within it even looked bigger than the one in the main part of the ship; Duncan gasped at the enormity of what he was seeing, even though it was there right next to him, his mind had problems comprehending the sheer scale of it all.

“That was quick,” mumbled Father Christmas over the drone of the multiple rotor blades that were making their way towards them.

“Yes. Very quick?” Replied Duncan. He was still astonished by what was surrounding him. Taking his eyes away from the new array in his field to look down into the face of Santa, he saw that in the light that now washed over them the mud and grazes on the big man’s face. It was at this point that Duncan’s senses of the situation started to put his mind into question. When he had seen Santa lying on the ground he quickly and subconsciously regressed to a point where it all made sense, a time years

before when he was himself a child and believed in everything that his elders had said, but now he was thinking more like an adult again and it didn't fit together. Here, in front of him at his knees and in his hands was Father Christmas, it was obviously the real Santa, no one could have built this enormous machine beside him just for dressing up, but surely he had known, or thought he'd known, that Santa wasn't real?

Since he was a young lad, Duncan had heard the story that Christmas was not as he had initially believed and that all of his presents had been bought by his parents; and marked with the magical man's name. He had learnt this from his friends at school who laughed at him when he once said that he believed in the magic of Father Christmas. His shattered illusions as a child altogether rubbed away that day like a wet cloth erasing his beliefs on a blackboard, but here in this field, not much more than half a mile from his house was a man dressed in the uniform of his make-believe and rather ancient beliefs.

When he had first seen the wreck he didn't even question in his mind the fact of what he was seeing, with his own eyes was the reality of these old ideas but here was the proof; or was it? It struck him like a bolt, the memories of waking up on Christmas morn the previous year and watching Sarah open the presents that he had purchased, wrapped up and marked from Father Christmas; it always struck him that there were more presents than he had apparently bought, and wrapped with no recollection of buying them, but he had put this down to his memory going, it certainly wasn't quite as good as it had once been. Had this man beside him added these extra presents the night before? As these thoughts passed through Duncan's deepest conscious the man, Santa lying at his knees placed a hand onto his. Looking down Duncan could almost see in the old man's eyes a gaze of understanding, as if he could almost read his thoughts.

The lights from the helicopters were shining from right above them now, as three helicopters all equipped with the powerful beams circled above keeping their views tight onto the two people on the ground. Squinting passed the beams and the downdraft of the rotor blades he could make out vehicles entering the far gates next to the road and driving along the field into their direction. Hopefully he thought, all of this would be explained a little better than the way his confused mind was trying to work it all out, even though it somehow also seemed so simple.

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When the ringing of the telephone woke Leigh up, he jumped out of his sleepy world and into reality with a start. He had been dreaming of his ex-wife again, and was happily enjoying the moment of travelling in his open top Porsche sports car with her, the wind whistling through her short brunette locks as he drove across the desert. It had also been a strange dream because although he knew he was driving on the sands of Nevada and had even seen signs at the side of the road to enforce the fact in his mind, they passed through villages and towns that looked remarkably like the ones they had visited when they had taken their honeymoon in France.

Sparky, as she had always called him since they had first met, often had dreams of her and although he loved the feelings inside his heart of her being close to him again, hated the transition from these imaginative times when he once again joined the waking world. Just over four years ago, fairly soon after they had moved into the new 'Arty' house that even now he still lived in, Joan had acquired the post of Principle in their local high school. She had worked her way up through the faculty

over the years in the place where she once attended as a pupil, since finishing university fifteen years previously and loved her new post.

He had always known she was a great teacher, and when her ambitions of running the high school in a small town had finally come true, he couldn't have been more proud of her. They had both met in a bar at the edge of town just after she had moved back from spending five years away at the University in Maine. At that time, he was already working for the Air Force at the iconic Groom Lake facility, which housed the infamous Area 51 where he often spent a lot of his working time. The airport was only twenty minutes away from their new house, and every morning there was a plane waiting to fly the employees of the base over the short trip to the location that once was so secret. However, Sparky had such an aversion to flying that he was the only employee of the whole base who had a permit to drive through the armed gates to and from work – For Leigh it was one of the only perks at being the best, and for the military, it was one of the biggest pains of needing the very best.

The new house was a masterpiece, a little bit big for just the two of them with its five bedrooms, two of which were only used as junk rooms and another only for guests, which rarely stayed. It was ultra modern and complimented their lives, the kitchen was dressed in black marble with all of the fittings, which were as fashionable as you could get, contrasted by polished stainless steel. The bathrooms were also just as modern with the all over body showers, bidets and heated towel rails that matched the black marble walls. The stairs were no more than sheets of thick glass that protruded out of the walls and led from the upstairs bedrooms down into the massive living space of the lounge with its overhead television projector, computer controlled heating and mood lighting.

They had not been in the house more than two years when Joan had her accident as he referred to it as. A troubled kid at her school was involved in a classroom ruckus, and his teacher had called for help to calm the situation down. It was a fight that had started earlier on that day when the other students had been teasing him about his 'special needs' because of his hyper-brain activity. Joan had walked into the classroom where half of the students were lining the walls keeping out of trouble, and the other half were throwing chairs and tables over while deep into the fight. She had just managed to grab the arm of one boy who was about to rip off a desk lid to use it as a weapon when from behind her, she had been hit over the head with the back of a chair that the troubled boy at the centre of the disturbance was wielding.

Leigh had got the call from the hospital while working on the injection ports of the newly designed stealth bomber, which was being tested at the facility. He had dropped his tools and immediately flown back from the base straight away to go and see her. When he finally arrived at the hospital only a couple of hours after the incident had taken place, Joan was sitting up in bed feeling very sore but in herself totally okay. Her short dark hair which defined her professional looks not looking quite as in place as it usually did, other than first thing in the morning, but other than that she looked perfectly fine until he got up close and looked into her eyes.

The couple had always been terribly affectionate with one another since they had first got together. They had grown to have the same closeness towards the other, even to the point that they would often finish off each others sentences, a habit which they had both thought was adorable, but now suddenly her eyes looked cold to him, and for the first time since they had met he realised that she was just as much a stranger to him as he was now to her.

It took eight months of therapy including hypnosis treatment before the fight to keep their relationship couldn't continue any more. She had suffered a jolt in her brain that had completely changed her personality and even some of her memories. In an instant from being a loving and supporting couple, they were strangers - she had no memory of the loving feelings she had for her Sparky, the pattern of her speech changed to what sounded like an Irish accent and her mild-mannerisms changed to loud, argumentative and often obnoxious.

Joan lost her placement as Principle even after many treatments to help her deal with the trauma that her head suffered, but often she would arrive at the office with the smell of alcohol on her breath, which when mixed with the antidepressants didn't make for a good teacher, let alone Principle. Often she tried to regain a new sense of identity, and it wasn't uncommon for her to change her hairstyle or even dye it in vivid colours during the process. In what seemed like an instant, Leigh saw the person who pulled his heartstrings like no-one else change, from a highly intelligent, stunningly pretty professional into a woman who looked more like she was off to a rock concert, and it shattered his very core.

The subsequent divorce had hit Leigh hard, and the dividing of assets had almost destroyed whatever he had left in himself, but in the coming years after she had moved away he managed to rebuild his life slowly, mainly by focusing on his work and hiding himself from the social world around him.

Now, years from that fateful time he was head of a team that investigated the unusual things that the military needed to learn about. He was the first person that they would call if a so-called alien artefact were discovered, and hidden in the hills of the Nevada desert was the facility with thousands of these objects, none of which he

had ever seen to date indicated an intelligence from another world, despite media hype to the contrary.

“It’s three bloody o’clock, what the hell is it?” He moaned into the mouthpiece of the phone that was imbedded into the wall behind him.

“We have an incident in Washington and need your team to assemble for an 0700 pickup,” the voice commanded.

“Washington?” sighed Leigh, stretching as he sat up.

“Do you acknowledge this transmission?” Asked the military operator on the other end of the line, ignoring Leigh’s moaning confirmation.

“Yes, I acknowledge your transmission,” spoke Leigh in as sarcastic a tone as he could muster, given the time and his sleepy demeanour.

Leigh didn’t get this kind of call often but knew the procedure for when he did; however, leaning back on the headboard his mind wandered back to the dream he was already starting to forget, giving himself a grimace behind a smile when he looked at the sheets to his side, which were empty, and void of the love that he had once enjoyed. With a heave, he rose from the bed and with his limp patterned nightclothes he meandered out of the bedroom and into the bathroom for a shower that hopefully would wake him up properly.

“Why do they only ever call at some ungodly hour?” He whinged. He pressed the button to start the shower, so that the water could warm up before he got into it.

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The newsroom floor was alive with activity, the people on the night shifts had heard of an incident involving an airplane at Dulles International Airport, as well as

sightings of fire in the sky and the possibility of a crash site. The radio room that was set aside from the main floor, protected from the sounds of the reporters by thick glass and sound proofing was being used to monitor all communications, as the operators tried to get a grip on the story that was unfolding. Radio scanners that were usually left redundant were being put back into service and wires were being pulled from drawers and cabinets as things were being connected into each other once again.

Tapping into the communications of the tower at Dulles they gleaned that an aircraft bound into the airport was impacted by some other plane, a story that wasn't totally dismissed by the radio signals coming out of Andrews Air Force Base, although they were talking much more about a possible UFO.

Reports involving unusual sightings in the sky often happened but rarely around Christmas time because everyone was focusing more on the festivities. UFO sightings were commonplace and so mostly ignored, but Andrews were investigating this one, and apparently it had been intercepted by one of their fighter jets? Even though the scanning room, as it was known, was always monitoring police and service communiqué, they never usually bothered with the military. However in this instance, that was where they were piecing most of the fragments of the story together.

Christiane Bashir was one of the most popular newscasters, her midday and evening reports over the years had turned her into a household name and because of that, no-one in the STN newsroom was surprised to see that she had been called in early to give the first report of whatever was going on. She walked past the desks of writers, still looking half asleep and a little dishevelled as she made her way to the Editor's office; make-up would be applied later so she never needed to worry about her looks before coming into work.

“So what’s the big one?” She used to announce her arrival into the main link of the building, closing the door to the editor’s office behind her.