

DIRTY LITTLE SECRET

John Boston

Melissa Jeffries was *incensed*. This assignment was so beneath her. She knew it was payback for calling in sick the day of the shooting at the supermarket. She was actually doing an interview for an internet magazine that made videos. The mainstream media was for baby boomers and people in hospitals, not for people like her. She liked to think of herself as someone who actually *lived the news*, not just report it. She knew it was going to be a bad day when the editor called her at six thirty that morning.

“Hey kid, whatcha doing?” he asked as she scrambled for her phone, still half asleep.

“It’s six thirty in the morning. What the hell do you think I’m doing?”

“I need you to meet up with Stankoven and Butler at the shop. You guys are going to head out to Winchester Proving Grounds.”

“What? Why?”

“The whole base is on lock down. Been on lock down for over six hours. I’m getting calls for wives and girlfriends wanting to know what the hell is going on.”

“Why don’t we just call them and ask them?”

“Cell phones won’t work out there. It’s a top secret research facility. No one’s answering at the main hotline to the base. When someone did pick up, they just said it was an *internal security matter*. Whatever that means.” he said.

“It’s the Army, who cares? What about the Pride Parade today? Who’s going to cover that?”.

“I’ll get one of the interns to do it. Look, it’s probably nothing, but on the slim chance it turns into something, I want you out there to cover it. We’ve been getting our asses kicked by channel 8 news and they’re already out there.”

This was not what Melissa wanted to hear. She had hoped to get a job with channel 8 news in the not too distant future.

“The last time the base went on lock down it was because they couldn’t find a missing gun during some inspection. The whole base was locked down for four days. No one could enter or leave. Guess the base commander lost his job over it.” he said.

“A missing rifle? Who gives a shit? Just buy a new one.”

“I guess you just don’t understand how the military works, Melissa.”

She knew better than to argue with him. She was beginning to despise her job, but it was all she had at the moment. Melissa was beginning to seriously reconsider the age-old adage of putting your family before your career. She was now thirty and didn't even have a boyfriend, let alone a husband....all she had was her microphone and her dreams of one day making it big for network news and being watched by millions instead of the few hundred that turned in every week to watch her on channel six.

She got dressed and met up with Butler and Stankoven who everybody just called *Standy*. They were both old enough to be her father and both men gave her *the ick*. They were both good buddies with the station owner and had worked for Channel News Six for over twenty years. Butler was her cameraman while Standy did the technical feeds to the network. She just did not get paid enough to deal with toxic silver foxes like these two.

"I remember the last lock down the base had. Middle of August, hotter than hell and Butler and I are stuck out here just cooking. All because they couldn't find a freggin 9mm handgun during a surprise inspection. The whole thing was ridiculous. If I didn't need this job so bad I would have just quit." said Stankoven.

Melissa glanced down at her phone and could see she had lost cell service. The van still had a satellite phone that could make calls in case anyone needed to get a hold of them. She wasn't even certain it still worked.

"What the hell does this place do where they need to block cell phone signals?"

"No one really knows. They're supposed to be testing weapons. Every now and then they'll make an announcement about a test. They detonated some pretty powerful stuff out here. I was covering one of their tests and the whole ground shook from the blast wave. You could feel the air leaving your lungs as it detonated. I sure as hell wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that thing.

"I've got to be back in town tonight. I've got plans." she said

"Big date?" asked Butler

"Hardly, my aunt is coming to visit. All she does is down wine and complain about my uncle. I just hope I have enough wine to make it through the night. That woman's liver must look like an old catcher's mitt."

As they approached the gates and speed bumps to the base, they could see several vehicles parked outside in the parking lot. Butler stopped the truck when he saw Dave Wilson from Channel Eight news with his camera crew.

"Dave, I see you decided to take a bite of this giant shit sandwich too." said Butler as he rolled down his window.

"More like I was forced to eat it. I figured this was a big nothing burger, but now I'm not so sure. I think we might have an active shooter on our hands." he said.

"Why do you say that?"

“About an hour ago, that guy over there, named James said that he’s been here all night. His son works at the base. He called his dad and said that he and a few others were locked in an office building. They heard gunshots, so they had barricaded themselves in the office. He made the call on a landline, that’s how he got through, but now his dad can’t reach him. James said about three hours ago that several Winchester County Deputies went through the gate with their lights and sirens on. They went in, but they never came out. One of my guys is monitoring scanner traffic. He says that the sheriff’s dept is panicking cause they can’t make contact with the deputies that went through the gate. They’re assembling a SWAT team to storm the base. The whole thing is just creepy.”

“Jesus, that is creepy. You don’t suppose they were working on viruses or something like that and the virus got out. You know, like in that movie.”

“The whole thing seems to have started in C-Annex. But C-Annex is just a computer lab. They were doing AI research, not viruses research.”

“It’s the military, who the hell knows what they were really doing.” said Butler as he lit up a cigarette. “We’re going to hang around here for a while and see what we can find out. This may not be a waste of a day after all.” said Dave.

Melissa met with James who confirmed everything Dave Wilson had told them. He also added one very important detail that Dave had left out.”

“The front gate. There’s no one guarding it. The guard house is empty. There were guards there a little while ago, but they left in a big hurry. I was the first one here, before anyone else and I’m sure I heard gunshots, lots of them coming from over in that direction.” he said pointing to a cluster of buildings.

“Do you have any idea what the hell is going on inside the base, James?” asked Melissa

“No, no I don’t. I have a gun in the car. I’m thinking of grabbing it and going to look for my son. I can’t just sit out here and wait for the cavalry to arrive.”

“If it’s an active shooter, they might mistake you for the shooter.”

“That’s a chance I have to take. My son is only twenty five. His wife is pregnant with their first child. He’s not going to be killed by some psychopath with a gun.”

Melissa walked back over to where Butler had parked the news van. Several people were gathered in the parking lot. Two other people had come out to the base in the hopes of finding out what had happened to their loved ones. The military was not providing any answers and just seemed to be fanning the flames of speculation.

“Look, here’s what we know. I just flew my drone over the base. Yeah, I know I can get in big trouble, so be it. We need answers. Guys, there’s absolutely no activity whatsoever on the base. Nothing’s moving. I didn’t see one person just walking around. I can see about half a dozen military vehicles and cop cars parked around that C-Annex building, but nothing is moving. Whatever is happening in there, it’s deadly serious.” said Dave Wilson.

“You didn’t see one single person? Nothing?” asked one of the bystanders.

“Not a damn thing. A base this size should have a lot of movement.

Melissa had the satellite phone with her. She immediately recognized the number. It was the station chief, who also happened to be the owner. He wanted to know what was happening. She told him everything she knew. She was also more than a little nervous. She told him she thought it was an active shooter.

“I don’t think that’s it, Melissa.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Cause the highway patrol just set up a roadblock on the road going out to the post from the highway.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“They’ve blocked the road. They aren’t letting anyone in or out on orders from the military. They told us there was some kind of mutiny on the base and that people were killed. Look.....I don’t want you guys out there, it’s not safe. Why don’t you guys get out of there until we know more information.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying put. This is the biggest story to hit this area in years and I want to be right in the middle of it.” she said

“It’s your ass. We can’t even get food or water to you.”

“We’ve got a case of water and a bunch of power bars for such an emergency. I’ll panic when that runs out.”

“Melissa, I don’t have a good feeling about this. I’ve dealt with the military before. They tend not to react very well to anything that puts out a negative military vibe. They are judge, jury and executioner when it comes to journalists like us.”

“Not to worry. I don’t scare very easily. Besides, the Army will eventually show up

Cause this is the big break I’ve been waiting for my whole life, boss man. If there is any shit about to go down, Melissa Jeffries is going right smack dab in the middle of it.

She put her phone down and could see two helicopters approaching the base. They were flying low, as if they were in some kind of attack position. They flew over the people assembled in the parking lot and hovered overhead in the middle of the base.

“I’m guessing this is a little more serious than a missing handgun.” said Butler.

No sooner had he spoken than a white flash flew out of one of the buildings and struck one of the helicopters. It turned the Apache helicopter into a giant fireball and sent it crashing onto the road below. The other gunship immediately opened fire on the building, sending several missiles into the building causing a massive explosion. It continued firing for several minutes. The news crew were all in shock. Wilson had been to Iraq twice and seen some pretty nasty sights, but never anything like this. The craziest part was.....*this was our own military doing this! What did they know that rest of us don’t?*

“Tell me you’re getting all of this....FOR CHRIST’S SAKE, TELL ME YOU’RE GETTING ALL OF THIS!” she screamed at Butler.

“I’m getting all of it, Melissa. I can’t believe this is real.”

“Standby is the VPN link, still good?”

“Yeah, we’re linked up to the network.”

“Start transmitting.....Ladies and gentlemen, this is Melissa Jeffries with action news six. Just moments ago, we saw a firefight between the soldiers at Fort Winchester shot down an army helicopter right in front of us. Another helicopter returned fire, destroying a large building. You can see the smoke and some of the debris behind me. At this time, here is what we know. At around five AM this morning three separate 911 calls were made by people working on the base. Five Winchester County deputies responded to the calls and none have been heard from since. There is no movement or activity on the base at this time. Nothing is moving. No one is guarding the front gate. We don’t know if this is a mutiny or something else, but they just shot down a helicopter ladies and gentlemen, this is very serious. I should add, we don’t know who shot down the helicopter. It could have been terrorists who are holding the soldiers hostage. We’ll bring you any new details as they emerge. From action news six in Winchester, Oklahoma, I’m Melissa Jeffries.

“Come on, Melissa, get in!” shouted Stankoven as he opened the door for her.

“Tell me you got all of that.”

“I sure did. I sent it to over fifty networks. Wilson and his crew took off for those rocks about a mile away.”

“Of course they did. Where are we going.”

“We’re going with them Melissa. I’m not going to die so you can get your big break.” said Butler.
“We can’t go back.” she said

“Why not?”

“State Police have road blocked the road going to the base. No one is getting in or out. We’re stuck out here.”

“Oh, great. Like this day could possibly get any more screwed up.”

They heard two other explosions on base and stopped the van to get out and film it. Another missile was fired at the helicopter, but the pilot swerved and the missile narrowly missed. He continued firing at the building, sending a steady stream of red hot tracer fire into the building, causing it to collapse. The gunship flew overhead and disappeared into the distance. Melissa looked at the abandoned cars and the now empty parking lot, then it hit her.

Its my baby. I could be the only one who’s covering the biggest story of the last ten years. There’s no one else. This is my once in a lifetime opportunity.

“I’m going back, Butler.....and so are you.”

“Um...no, I’m not Melissa. Are you nuts?” he said

“Nuts would be passing up a career opportunity like this. Think about it Butler. Billions and billions of people all over the globe are going to be watching this video. They’re going to be watching us. We’ll be the next generation of Woodward and Bernsteins.”

“Who? Melissa, for God’s sake, they just shot down a freaking helicopter. There’s a war going on in there. I did not sign up for this. This is not our war.”

“No, don’t you see, there’s not just a war going on, there’s a story that is begging to be told. Let’s be the ones who tell the story.”

“You want to go in there? After what we just saw? Are you crazy?”

“You know, Butler, you have got the most spineless, worthless shell of a man I’ve ever seen. You’ve never stood for anything, but you and every man like you will go to the ends of the Earth to make sure a woman like me never gets the glory. This is my story and I’m going to be the one to tell it.”

“If you’re right and you do tell it, just what do you think is going to happen? The military will never let you tell it. You don’t understand how these people work.”

“Why does everybody keep saying that? What are you guys not telling me?”

“Remember when Stankoven told you the last lock down here was because of a missing handgun. That’s not entirely true.” said Butler as he nervously lit up a cigarette.

“Okay.”

“Turns out the base commander was a real piece of work. He was having an affair with his secretary. His wife found out and drives right to the base, walks into his office and shoots him right in his nuts. I got the whole story from the base commander’s driver. I tell the station manager what’s going on. I tell him the whole thing is a lie and I can prove it. I had the tape right in my hand. The kid told me everything. Even about other stuff like the base commander covering up drug dealing so he wouldn’t look bad on his annual review. That same night a bunch of men in suits that claim they were from the FBI show up at my house and demand I give them the tape. I made a copy of it, but they don’t know that. They tell me that my cooperation in this matter would be greatly appreciated. I give them the tape. The guy looks right at me and says that it would behoove me never to mention this to anyone. My health could be in serious jeopardy if I was to do otherwise. So, yeah, I’m a spineless coward, but I’m a spineless coward who’s still alive and who’s family is still alive. You can judge me all you want to, I just know the rules of the game. You clearly do not.”

“So, I’m going in there, alone I take it?”

Stankoven and Butler looked at one another. What if it’s a virus? Like in that movie? We don’t know what we’re walking into.”

"I bet every time you pull that tape out and look at it, you wonder how much different the world would be if you had just shown it, don't you?" said Melissa

"I know I'd be dead."

"Sometimes, that's the price we pay for telling the truth, isn't it?"

"I'm not going to die over some story, Melissa."

"Well, I'm going in there. I could use a cameraman."

Stankoven reached into his cabinet drawer and pulled out a small revolver. He took a handful of bullets and shoved them in his pocket."

"We both have to risk our lives so you can have your little fifteen minutes of fame, huh? Melissa I have a wife and kids, you don't. You don't know what it means to have a family and worry about someone other than yourself."

"Are you coming or not?"

"You think we can fit through the gate?"

"I guess we'll find out." she said

Melissa was bound and determined to get to the bottom of this story. They very slowly and cautiously approached the gate but saw no one around.

"Melissa, we don't have to do this. We can turn around and walk away with our lives."

"Jesus.....are there any real men left in this world? I've got bigger balls than the two of you put together." she said exasperated.

"Maybe we just have a much better idea of what we're walking into. I doubt very much this is what you think it is." said Standy.

"I have no idea what's going on, but whatever it is, it's pretty serious." she replied.

"Yeah, no shit." said Butler.

"Do you know how to use that thing?" she said pointing to Standy's pistol.

"Aim and squeeze the trigger. It ain't rocket science."

The three of them stood in front of the metal gate. She looked around and squeezed through. Butler made it through as well, but Standy was too big.

"You're going to have to open the gate." he said.

It took her and Butler nearly half an hour to figure out the gate controls. They unlocked it and opened it slightly so he could squeeze through with the camera.

“Where to now, Boss?” asked Butler.

The three of them were caught off guard by James who came running through the gate to meet them. Standy nearly shot him.

“The hell’s wrong with you? I almost shot you!”

“Sorry, I have to go with you. I have to find my son. He’s in the main headquarters building. It’s about two miles up the road. We can take my jeep.”

The four of them piled in Jame’s jeep and drove slowly down the main drag to the headquarters building of the proving grounds. A few hundred feet in front of the building, they saw several dead bodies laying in the street.

“Are you getting all this. Yeah. You might want to look up.” said Standy.

Melissa glanced up at the sky and could see several drones buzzing overhead.

“That’s a PREDATOR DRONE. It’s got missiles.” said Butler.

“Who cares? They won’t fire on us.”

“How do you know?”

“Because right now, we’re their eyes and ears.” she replied.

The front of the building had a small gate around it, which was now open. There was a uniformed guard laying dead in the street.

“I’m going to take us around back.” said James.

“What the hell happened here?”

“I don’t know. My money is on terrorists. Take over a small army post out in the middle of nowhere. Wouldn’t be that hard to do and it would be great PR.” said Butler.

James stopped his jeep and the four of them got out and went to the back entrance. The door was wide open. They walked slowly up the stairs with Butler filming on his handheld and Standy using the big camera.

“His office is on the second floor.” said James.

He slowly opened the door and could see several spent shell casings all over the floor. There were bullet holes everywhere. He ran from room to room, but there was no one there. The floor was eerily silent.

“Where the hell did everybody go?” asked James

“Maybe they went to a shelter? There’s one in the basement. My son told me they had a tornado come through here once and they all had to spend the night in it.” said James.

“This is crazy.” said Standy

“No, idiot.....this is going to make us all famous.” she said, looking around at the cubicles.
“Is that all you ever think about?”

“I wasn’t put on this Earth to shovel everyone else’s shit, Butler. You might like being a nobody in this world. Not this girl.”

“Melissa, we aren’t doing any good in here, let’s just get out of here, while we still can.”

Out of nowhere, a female soldier appeared and pointed her 9mm right at them. The four of them froze. No one said a word for nearly thirty seconds. Standy had his pistol tucked in his pants, but he was also holding the camera. It was up to the pack leader to defuse the situation.

“We’re from Channel Six News. I’m Melissa. We just want to know what’s going on?”

“You’re from the news? Are you serious? You need to get the hell out of here.” said Belle.

“What’s your name?” asked James.

“Belle.....Specialist, Jennifer Belle. Look, we have to get out here, before they come back.”

“Before who comes back?”

“Them.....*the crazy people!*”

“Belle, can you tell us what happened here?”

“What happened? I don’t know, you tell me. I was late to work this morning. My car died, so I had to walk. None of these assholes would come and get me. I’m walking up to the building and I hear gunfire.....like a lot of gunfire. I hid behind some cars in the parking lot. About ten minutes later, I see a big truck pull up and everybody and everyone comes out of the building with their hands on their head and gets loaded into the truck. I see my squad leader and my platoon sergeant, Amanda getting in. Another truck pulls up and takes the rest of them away. Turns out my car not starting saved me. After a while I went inside and saw two dead soldiers and my company commander. He was still alive, but he was on his way out. He was shot a few times. He said they just came in and started shooting. They took the hostages and left. He said he even knew some of the soldiers, but something wasn’t right about them. He kept saying *their eyes.....their eyes weren’t right.*”

“Belle.....where did they take the hostages?”

“To the C-Annex, I think. I’m not really sure. Look, we have to get out of here. Maybe this isn’t just happening here. *Maybe it’s happening at all the Army bases.*”

The four of them looked at one another. Belle did have a good point. Right now, none of them really knew anything. It would explain why the military hasn’t moved in.

“She’s right. We need to get out of here. Melissa, you’re on your own.” said Butler.

“He’s right Melissa. Whatever’s going on here, it’s a little bigger than Channel Six News can handle.”
“Whatever’s happening, it seems to be centered around C-Annex. That’s where the helicopters were. That’s where they took the hostages. It’s all about C-Annex. What the hell is going on in C-Annex?” asked Melissa.

“That’s where Project Five is.” she said.

“What the hell is Project Five?”

“I don’t know, it was top secret. We weren’t supposed to ask any questions. I was told they were just running some very advanced computer programs, you know, using AI and stuff.” she said.

“What the hell does that have to do with what’s happening here?”

“I don’t know, maybe nothing.”

“They were just running computer programs? Not fooling around with dangerous viruses or chemicals?” asked Butler.

“No.....I had to go over there once to drop off some paperwork. It’s run by that computer company *Chromium*.” said Belle.

“Computers don’t shoot people, or helicopters. My money is on terrorists.” said Standy.
“Maybe a bunch of soldiers all around the military just decided to mutiny. Taking hostages to buy them some bargaining power.”

“Yeah, now this is starting to make sense. You’re sure there is no virus?” asked James

“No, everyone was walking around wearing those VR headsets. They were using AI to try and predict wars and stuff. At least, that’s what I was told.”

“There’s no virus. Every year, the families of the soldiers can come onto base. They let families walk right through C-Annex.” said James.

“Okay, if it is some kind of mutiny, why not let them be heard? Let’s find out why they did this. Let’s find out what they want.” said Melissa.

“Melissa, I’m leaving.” said Butler

“Me too. The hell with this.” said Belle.

“James? How about you?”

“I can’t leave my son here.....I can’t.”

“James, just imagine what your son would feel if you became a hostage right next to him. You aren’t going to do him any good if you’re dead. Your only smart play is to retreat until help arrives. You don’t even have a gun.” said Standy.

James looked crushed. He also knew Standy was right. His only option was to fall back.”

“Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“It just doesn’t seem right to leave my son. Not when he’s being held hostage.”

“James, that’s why you should leave. Hostages aren’t any good if they’re dead.” said Standy.

The four of them walked down the stairs and climbed into Jame’s jeep. It was tight spaces, but they made it work.

“James, hold up.” said Standy

“What?”

“Let’s get a few of those guns, just in case.” he said, pointing to the dead soldiers.

James slowed down right in front of the gate. Standy got out and ran over to the dead soldiers. Melissa decided to grab the camera and do some filming. They were a few hundred feet away from the jeep when the first missile came down and struck the jeep, turning it into a fireball. A second missile came down from the sky and sent metal flying in every direction. Melissa went numb. Butler was dead and so were the other two. She wanted to run over and try to help, but Standy grabbed her and pulled her inside one of the buildings.

“Get off me! I’ve got to help them!”

“You go out there, the next missile could be for you. Don’t you see?”

“See what?”

“We can get in.....*but we sure as hell ain’t getting out.*” he said.

Melissa started to sob. She was more determined now than ever to break this story. The harder the government tried to silence her, the louder she would become.

The government is not going to be able to keep this one under wraps. No how, no way. She said to herself.

They waited several minutes before venturing outside. They saw two humvees approaching and immediately hid back inside. They slowed down to look at the wreckage, then drove off.

Standy was breathing heavily. Melissa had stopped crying. Her sadness and grief had been replaced by anger. It was on the verge of boiling over. She was going to make the government pay for what they had just done. She was going to break this story if it meant death. She was a boss girl and intended to prove it to the rest of the world.

“Well kid, how do you want to play this one?”

“We have to get over to C-Annex. We have to interview them.”

“Melissa, that sounds like suicide.”

“Three people are dead. The whole damn base is dead. We owe it to the world to get this story out and tell them what happened.”

“Melissa, I don’t owe the world a goddamn thing. I divorced myself from the human race a long time ago. I’m not dying for nobody, especially these idiots. Whatever happened here, it’s big.....like real big. Like Belle said, we don’t know how big? The whole country could look like this.”

“You made your choice when you decided to squeeze your fat ass through that gate. Now you have to live with it. There’s no going back now.” she said

“I can see the gate from here. We can make it. I know we can make it.”

“You want to go? Then go. I’m staying here and getting to the bottom of this. Besides, what make you think they’re going to let you leave?” she asked

“I don’t know, but I can’t stay here. I’ve got to try.” he said.

“Even if you make it through the gate, it’s at least a mile back to the van. Assuming you make it to the van, there’s nowhere for you to go. Every road going in here is sealed off. Where are you going to go?”

“If I make it to the van, I can make it back to my house. Back to my wife and kids.” he said.

“You’re going to get killed.”

“I’ll be dead for sure if I stay here. I’m going. By the way, tell everyone at Channel Six I quit, sorry about the two weeks.”

“Standy, you idiot, if you get anywhere near that gate, you’re a dead man. You need to think very hard about your next move, because it could have a very serious impact on your health. Our only move is to get the full story, then let the government know we have the full story and unless they want the whole world to know the full story, they had better let us go. We need a bargaining chip and our story is it.”

“Melissa, the government would kill you and me and then kill our families and friends too. They’re pure evil. I should have kicked them right in the balls when I had the chance.”

“You still do have a chance.”

“Dammit, I knew I should have called in today.” he said and picked up his camera.

The two of them made their way slowly and cautiously over to C-Annex which was about two miles down the road. It was getting dark and the battery on Standy’s camera was getting low.

“We’ve got maybe another hour and this camera will be dead.” he said.

“I guess we better get going then.”

“So, what’s the plan exactly?” he asked

“I don’t know. Make contact with them, interview them, upload the interview, then wait.”

“What if they don’t want to be interviewed?”

“What terrorist doesn’t want publicity?”

“If they wanted to be interviewed, I’m sure they would have gotten their message out. I think this is suicide.”

Melissa stopped and looked up at the sky.

“What’s that noise? It sounds like jet fighters.”

It took him a few seconds to process what that meant.

“Oh shit.” he said.

He grabbed Melissa and pulled her down into a drainage ditch made of concrete. He put his hands over his ears as the jets roared overhead and dropped their bombs on the buildings. Melissa got the entire episode on film. One building after the next was hit and seemed to explode in flames. The blast wave at one point knocked her to the ground.”

“They may as well just give me the Pulitzer now.” she said, crawling back over to Standy.

The entire scene around them was nightmarish and apocalyptic. The base was on fire and everything around them seemed to be burning.

“What the hell are we supposed to do now?” asked Standy

“I don’t know? Those five minutes of film are worth their weight in gold. Does this place have a back door? Maybe a hole in the fence we can crawl through?” she asked.

Standy tapped her on the shoulder and pointed to a figure running towards them, carrying a machine gun. They both grabbed their guns.

The man lowered his gun and began to motion for the two of them to stay low and get back into the drain pipe.

“Dr. David Rykus. Pleased to meet you.” he said.

“You mind telling me what the hell is going on out here?” asked Standy as he turned on the camera.

“I’m not really sure. It doesn’t make any sense.....yet here we are.”

“Do your best. We can fill in the blanks later.” said Melissa

“It’s the project. I don’t know how or why, but yesterday, Dr. Baker tried to make contact with them. I think somehow, they might have gotten out.” he said hysterically

“Wait, slow down.....who got out?”

“Project Five was supposed to be next gen AI. It was said to be smarter than a million geniuses. It was scary what it could do. We’ve spent twenty years and billions of dollars on it and finally we had something to show for it. It could predict sports games, bets, just about anything and it was right ninety nine percent of the time. We began to farm it out to other government agencies. NASA asked us to see if it could find Earth like planets in the galaxy. It found one alright, only it wasn’t what any of us were expecting.”

“What do you mean?”

“It found world and universes right next to our own. We didn’t even have to leave Earth and we could be millions of light years away just by stepping through some kind of portal. Our whole model of the universe and science was completely wrong. In one of these planes, they made contact with native beings. They seemed friendly at first. Boy, did we ever get that one wrong.”

“What are you talking about? What is this place?”

“I don’t know. No one really knows. We don’t know if it’s cyberspace or an actual other dimension of existence. We know we share the same space with one another but we can’t see or feel or touch one another.....until now.”

“How come you didn’t join them?”

“I quit and was going to take a teaching position at a college when it all happened. These beings gave Five the instructions on how to build a virtual reality portal so we could see other’s world. Dr. Baker and Dr. Hunter were the first to try. They thought they were going to win a Nobel prize. That was a week ago. One by one, everyone who used that machine got turned into one of those things.”

“What things?”

“I’m not sure what they are. Aliens or demons or both. I can tell you this: Don’t let them get near you and whisper in your ear. I don’t know what they say, but every time they do that to someone, they take over their body. Don’t let them get near you. Kill them if you have to.”

“Jesus man, are you really serious?” asked Standy holding the camera.

“Take a good look around you, sir! THIS IS SERIOUS! Some of the staff got the message out to their superiors. The military is going to seal off this base. They won’t let anyone escape. I’m guessing there is probably a nuke in our future. Wipe the slate clean and make sure they don’t leave the base. I guess you and I are just acceptable casualties. I’m not sure how they spread. I think they can be spread by TV or internet as well. It might be too late.”

“What about the hostages they took?”

“They aren’t going to be hostages for very long. They are going to be turned into those things. I got a good look at one of them before I killed him. Weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. Their eyes.....God, their eyes.....he had the blackest eyes I’ve ever seen. I was looking right at a monster. I think I know a

way out. There's a small gate about a mile down the road. It leads out into the fields and trees. I know they're watching us. I think we can make it. I was headed down there when I saw you guys. I knew you weren't one of them when I saw your eyes. I'm going to go take a look. You guys wait here, I'll be right back."

"You trust this guy?" asked Standy.

"I don't know. His story is pretty out there." said Melissa.

"I'm not going anywhere with this guy."

Melissa still had the satellite phone with her and heard it ring. She recognized the number. It was her editor's office number.

"Melissa, my God, are you alright?"

"Standy and I are still alive. Butler's dead, boss. He got taken out by a missile."

"Holy Jesus.....what the hell is happening out there? We've got a total media blackout. Russia and Chinese news agencies just showed images of the bombings from their satellites. They must be having a field day with this thing. I've got every studio boss and station boss in the country calling me wanting any info we have. If you want your fifteen minutes kiddo, this is it." he said.

"Alright. We're going to try and get out of here. As soon as we're clear, I'll transmit. We've got an insider with us who knows exactly what's happening. It's almost too hard to believe."

"Well, what the hell is happening. Everyone seems to think some of the soldiers out there staged a mutiny. No one knows anything."

"No Boss, it isn't a mutiny. I think it's much, much more than that. I got to go. I'll transmit as soon as I can. Wish me luck."

Rykus came running back to them. He was out of breath.

"It's now or never." he said.

"If you're leading us into a trap, I promise that you'll get the first bullet." said Standy.

"Fair enough."

The three of them darted from building to building for the next fifteen minutes. They avoided some of the soldiers who were just standing motionless on the tarmac. They seemed to be awaiting further instructions. Standy pulled back the receiver and was ready to unload on them.

"Don't. I don't want to give away our position. We're almost there." said Rykus.

"They're not even moving. I mean if I'm waiting for something, I'm at least going to sit down." said Melissa.

“We have to warn everyone. We can’t let those things escape from this base.” said Rykus

“We don’t even know what they are.”

“We know what they’re not.....*and they aren’t us.*” said Rykus.

The three of them managed to make their way towards the back gate. The scene in front of the back gate was pure carnage. There were remains of military vehicles and several bodies that had been charred beyond recognition.

“We just have to hope the drones are out of missiles. Otherwise, we’ll be part of this graveyard as well.” said Rykus.

“There, you see it? Somebody made a hole in the fence.”

“Let’s go.”

“The three of them ran as fast as they could towards the small hole that had been cut in the fence. They pushed the charred corpse who had given their life to make the whole, out of the way and crawled through. They ran for the next fifteen minutes until they reached a group of trees. Melissa could see the main road off in the distance. She dialed her boss who immediately answered.

“Let’s do it.” she said.

“We’re on in three, two, one, go!” said Standy

“Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Melissa Jeffries. I’m a reporter with channel Six News. For the last eight hours, I’ve been here at the Winchester Proving Grounds, what I have seen and felt can only be described as *sheer madness*. I know, what I am going to report may seem difficult, if not impossible to believe, but I can assure you it’s true, every last word of it. I’m going to turn this over to.....”

Melissa was cut off and the sound of gunfire erupted all around them. The camera dropped to the ground and a trickle of blood could be seen on the camera screen. There is silence for a moment before we see someone pick up the camera and place it on the fence. We see Dr. Rykus’s face, only now his eyes have turned completely black. He begins laughing and giggling almost hysterically.

“*Fooled you, fooled you, I totally fooled you.*” he said in a very child-like voice.

Melissa is still alive as he picks up her head and whispers in her ear. We see her head shake violently and begins to convulse on the ground. When it is over, she stands up and looks at the camera and starts laughing almost hysterically. She wipes the blood from her face.

“*I like this new body.....I’m going to keep it forever and ever and ever.*” she says in a very child-like voice.

“Hey people? Can you all hear me? Would you like to know a dirty little secret too? It’ll change your whole life. You’ll never be the same again. Just put your ear to the screen. That’s right, just come a little bit closer.....are you ready for it?” said Dr. Rykus as the camera abruptly cuts out.