

# CALIFORNIA 2020

BEGINNING THE END



**SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF CALIFORNIA**



by

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## Chapter I

### Playing Old Tapes

Unlike the epic tale of two civilizations, this was not the best of times, it was certainly not the age of wisdom and neither was it the season of light. And, as Colonel Richard Dauber sat at his desk, his eyes firmly fixed on the photograph of his wife and children, he was acutely aware that he had let them, his country and worst of all, himself, down.

Six months had passed since the Senate Ethics Committee published its inconclusive findings on what had been a typical Washington 'dog and pony show' of the Democrats attacking Republicans, and the Republicans defending in kind. Few Senators had listened, as Anna Eisenberg, recalled how she had resisted the Homeland Security's order for ZEN to data dive into the proclivities of the world's rich and famous, and the government responded that it had been a theoretical exercise that certainly was

never to be actioned. And, if ZEN had been sent files, then they had been done so by a rogue element in Homeland Security, so there was no need to introduce the Vatican's assistance in the return of the said files, or the death in Rome, by a faulty gas main, of the late freelance hacker, Roger de Courcey.

There had, however, been short-lived moments of excitement, with some heated back and forth jibing, as Colonel Richard Dauber erroneously introduced the investigation of the suspected political influence peddler, Lev Oblomov, the death of the Barbados policeman, and the British Secret Service kidnapping and torturing of the Welsh hotelier. But, that interest soon evaporated and was not reignited even when the panel was made aware of the life imprisonment of the then ZEN CEO, Adam Eisenberg, who finagled a SWAT team's assassination of his partner and co-founder, Amrit Kahn. The good colonel successfully explaining that the intervention showed Homeland Security had efficiently dealt with the potential disaster, and, even if Amrit not been a suicide bomber, he had, along with ZEN's now CEO, Anna Eisenberg and Roger de Courcey, distributed the erroneous, but Top Secret, VALHALLA project files, and, in his eyes, that made them all terrorists. As for Adam Eisenberg's prison term, it was just collateral damage.

However, even with his department exonerated, if there was one thing that still bothered the colonel those many months later, it was

a loose end and he had two. He could possibly have dealt with one, as Amrit, being locked away in a military hospital, would eventually be available for questioning, but the murder of de Courcey still bothered him. Even though de Courcey had made the fatal mistake in claiming, rightly or wrongly, he was the sole possessor of the incriminating data collected by VALHALLA, he should not have been assassinated.

Had the Vatican moved to curtail another damning scandal brought on by the unsavory content collected by de Courcey's hired hackers, should the information be published?

Or, realizing that the program had become an embarrassment, had his own government acted?

Both were more than possible, but his money was on a third possibility.

It was on Anna, who, realizing that the game was over and that de Courcey was a loose cannon, had him stopped before he could somehow drag her and ZEN down. After all, with her husband in prison, she now controlled ZEN's billion-member strong social networking company, and, in front of the Senate Panel, she'd gone on to promise to change the way that ZEN operated, so a program like VALHALLA would be impossible in the future.

Over the months since the hearing, Anna had gone on to make

many of her promised changes, that was, if her PR was to be believed, and not least of all in the way that it collected data, on its many hundreds of millions of OneWorld members.

Dauber knew the mission that had ended those many months ago in Rome, had ended badly.

She'd got the better of him and that still smarted.

He still needed to bring her to justice, and that very morning, as he sat feeling sorry for himself, while staring at his wife and children, opportunity rang in the form of a call from Walter Reed informing him that Amrit Khan had unexpectedly regained consciousness.

Now smiling and energized, as he replaced the receiver, it was time, one way or another, to bring Amrit back into the fold and to clip Anna's wings for good.

As the Marines flanking the colonel came out of the elevator of the fourth floor of Walter Reed, they were greeted by the barrels of the two M16 rifles, in the hands of two sentries stationed outside Amrit 's room. Ordering them to stand down, Dauber entered Amrit's spartan accommodation. The gray walls matched the gray floor, which, in turn, matched the bedclothes. Three gray chairs were bolted to the floor, approximately four feet from the bed and

two-inch diameter black iron bars on the window contributed the only other color in the room.

Amrit, propped up in an electronically folded bed, was quietly laughing at an article in "Wired Magazine" that was predicting the future usefulness of artificial intelligence in fast food restaurants.

As the Colonel showed his identification, having lowered his six foot three frame into the middle of the chairs directly facing the patient, the smile dropped from Amrit's face, as he went on the offensive.

"No grapes?" asked Amrit.

At first the colonel did not respond.

Then he said in a calm voice.

"Look around you, Dr. Kahn, this is not the W Hotel, or some other over-priced boutique accommodation that you're used to. And it's only one step away from solitary confinement in a federal prison."

Amrit changed tack.

"Why did you try to kill me, and why am I being kept prisoner?" he asked, attempting to draw out, from his official visitor, any charges that might be brought against him.

"Where would you like to start Dr. Kahn? Treason? No, it can't

be treasonous to steal Top Secret files from the government when you are not a citizen. So, it would have to be terrorism. That would get you a good twenty-five years in solitary after a swift trial that would have to be closed to the public, for security reasons. Then we have the not so small matter of the billion or two you stole from ZEN."

Amrit started to answer, "But that was for my founder's shares that I was cheated out of and my back salary and I..."

Dauber began to speak.

"Please do not interrupt me."

The colonel could tell from this weak objection that a stronger person would not have tried to explain, but just kept silent. He believed that this suggested that Amrit was going to cooperate, so he continued in a less offensive tone.

"If you explain to me exactly what happened, I'll see how *I* can help *you* in return."

Amrit chose to play the sympathy card.

He told of his years being down and out, having been fired for a work-induced drug habit just before the IPO, of the company he founded, and how he'd only sobered after he'd been tazed for loitering. He spoke of his shock to find how commercial ZEN had

become, and he'd only hacked into their servers to collect what was owed to him, and found it had morphed into the intrusive data collection arm of the government. He told how he'd approached Anna, his ex-partner's wife, and, though initially she'd not believed that the company was spying on its people, she'd changed her mind when he, the colonel, sent her the instruction to implement the VALHALLA global blackmail program. And that was when he and Anna recruited, Roger de Courcey, to disconnect ZEN from the government and defeat VALHALLA.

When Amrit finished, he was exhausted, but relieved that he'd been allowed to tell his side of the story. He felt certain that now he'd explained how un-American VALHALLA had been, everything would be okay; that the good colonel would understand.

He was wrong.

"Would you tell a court what you just told me?"

"I'd happily tell the court about VALHALLA. I'm certain that the American people, that you all so often quote, and care so for much, not to mention the rest of the world, will be intrigued how your president, the Leader of the Free World, tried to implement a plan to blackmail the world's leaders using information found on their computers, cell phones and every other piece of electronics they accessed..... "



He was stopped in midstream.

"No, Amrit, not everything. Just the part about Anna being fully supportive of your criminal actions, and that she was your source for the stolen files."

Amrit's face froze with a look of despair.

The colonel had given his endgame away, and, without a recording device. It was obvious that he needed Amrit's evidence, as he had no way of getting to her without it, and that meant he, Amrit, was now unsafe, that was, unless he turned state's evidence against his friend.

The colonel backtracked.

"You're still not well, Amrit, so this is enough for today. Let's speak in a day or so."

He extended his hand, as he lifted himself out of the chair and tried to appear conciliatory.

"Adam thought that you were having an affair with Anna, and that's why you were shot. He said that you were in position and ready to detonate a backpack by phone at the airport, and that's why you were shot through the window where you stood. But I'd still like to formally apologize to you, even if it wasn't our fault. You probably know it was just a miracle that your raising the phone to

your ear at that specific moment deflected the bullet. Another millimeter, and we would not be here talking."

But his extended hand was not reciprocated. Amrit had already closed his eyes and was thinking of how to get free, and then even.

Back out in the hall, the colonel was not pleased with his performance. He'd come on too strong and too fast, wrongly assuming that Amrit would cooperate to save his skin. His years of interrogating suspects had counted for nothing, overrun by the annoyance that he could not control. Annoyance at the run-around Anna and Roger de Courcey had given him, first in California and then when they escaped to the Caribbean. Annoyance at the way Anna had traded her get-out-of-jail card, for sharing the VALHALLA files, for nothing of particular value. And positively furious at her, for publicly blowing the whistle on ZEN's interaction with the government, throwing her security director, Don McKesson, to the media wolves and promising to end the intrusive data collection. All in all she made him the laughing stock of the agency, and it was only the president's personal support that had kept him in place, and the soldier in him needed vengeance, before he could move on.

The note, that damn 'get out of jail free' card that Anna had him

sign, as a condition of her helping to interview, Lev Oblomov, had allowed her to go free to create the company that surpassed the imagination of the most prolific empire that the world had ever known. He could only watch as ZEN had thrived, when, by an act of online self-immolation, it should have been destroyed.

She had written to every individual in ZEN's OneWorld, apologizing for Adam's aberrative behavior as co-founder of the company, literally quoting him as saying, 'What did these people expect? They should have realized there was no such thing as a free lunch.' She received well over a hundred million 'thank you' messages, and membership climbed at its fastest pace ever, to reach almost three billion.

A private club, with three billion members, that could be spoken to not only directly, but in nano seconds.

ZEN had become almost unstoppable, so he would have to lean on Amrit, and lean hard.

Recovery for Amrit, as his doctors described his very limited mobility, had not been a walk in the park. His survival itself had been nothing short of a miracle, having died in the apartment where the sniper shot him, and again on the operating table; he'd been in a coma for many months.

And, to make matters worse, he'd woken up in no-mans' land.

The Indian Parliament, informed of his situation, initially showed compassion by offering to pay for a physiotherapist, once one was needed, but had voted to allow his adopted county to proceed with an espionage charge, as they had other interests that were more pressing - the cricket season was in full swing and that, as in neighboring Pakistan, generally took precedence over politics. And now, alone in his sterile room, with heavily armed guards, Amrit knew that he was not out of the woods, even when it came to prosecution. His surmised that, being alive might just be a sufficient embarrassment to save him, might just not be correct.

He needed to rethink his position.

Annaya, the Indian physiotherapist assigned to Amrit had been pleasantly talkative, and he was amused by her recollections of the Senate Hearings. It seemed that Anna had given a good account for herself, but he felt she should have come down harder on the government. They would not have gotten off so lightly for shooting him, and killing Roger, had he been asked to testify.

Annaya recounted Anna's testimony.

"How could a security department, as funded and as extensive as Homeland Security not see that Oblomov was just a simple

businessman?" she asked as she kept on with her criticism. "This government couldn't complete a jigsaw puzzle if it had the box lid. And, Don McKesson, the Company man you put in charge of ZEN's security, couldn't find the car that I was traveling in just fifty miles away from where he was sitting; no doubt with his feet up on what is now my desk."

Anna accepted the guffaws from the public gallery, and when her testimony was over, the applause from the room, though none came from the panel, was heard all over the building.

Through the weeks following his return to the conscious world, Annaya worked tirelessly to improve Amrit's mobility. And, as she did they shared their different experiences of America. He had not yet moved to America when 9/11 happened. She had been already qualified as a therapy nurse in the US, and after the attack, easily passing for a Middle Eastern native, had faced equal measures of unwarranted hostility from some and much appreciated sympathy from others.

While their conversations seemed easy and relaxed, Amrit expected that this was part of the therapy, and that their conversations would be recorded. He wondered if could get her to act on his behalf by speaking in a clipped native dialect, or by communicating by some other method. He felt sure that, if Anna knew that he was still alive, she'd help him avoid not only the multi-

decade jail sentence, but a possible disappearance altogether.

Another month passed.

Then came the day when his frustration became too great and feeling that he had nothing to lose, he slipped Annaya a note, and, away from the camera's prying eyes she surreptitiously read it and just smiled knowingly.

That was too easy, he thought, and he wondered if she was a Company employee, and, if she was, was Dauber to allow him to make his escape, so Anna could be implicated.

More weeks went by and still the colonel failed to return, and worse still, there was no word from Anna.

Had he expected too much from her?

Had he chosen the wrong side?