

An Introduction

“As we acquire more knowledge, things do not become more comprehensible, but more mysterious.”

~ Albert Schweitzer

A Background: Taken From Courtney Hunter’s Logs

My eyes are grey, the colour of winter light. That’s important. On that day so long ago, they were focused on the road ahead as I drove with the blindness of familiarity. My mind was elsewhere until any variation in the morning driving pattern snapped me back to awareness briefly, leaving a Morse code of impressions in my subconscious. I had taken the same route to work for over two years, but that day I experienced a heady feeling of not being connected to the humdrum world around me. It was disconcerting. I no longer felt a part — not by any action I’d taken but by the decision to take action. I remember my heart drummed with the rush of anticipated adventure and a trace of a smile formed on my lips. Indecision, perhaps wisdom, had held me back for many months, but that time had passed. That morning drive committed me to finding the truth.

I am Courtney Hunter and this is part of my story. It is also a part of the story of all of us.

That morning as always, I signalled and turned left off the main thoroughfare onto a straight, smooth, private road that bisected the fields on each side. On one side, the hay caught morning light and rippled with autumn gold. To the other side, the fields still lay under clouds, partially hidden by a bank of mist. A few minutes later, the road I travelled dipped out of sight of the fields into a valley copse of beech and then dead-ended in the parking lot beyond.

The lot was discreetly hidden behind a neat box hedge. For a second I sat, hands on the wheel, staring ahead of me at the greenery. It was the first wall of many, one inside the other like the set of painted wooden dolls I had been given as a child. It was the elaborate walls of defence that had first made me suspect something was terribly wrong at TAP International. The day I was finally looking into it, I remember setting my jaw in determination as I reached into the back seat to grab my briefcase and lift it over beside me before opening the door and getting out. I swung the car door shut and locked it, knowing that my personal mission had begun — my fate sealed with the thud and click of a locked car door.

Several metres past the hedge, a high electrical fence shut off one world from another. I headed over to the security gate and punched in my personal code. A small screen glowed green and I stood directly in front of the camera lens and swiped my ID card through for a facial recognition scan.

Electronic squeals and bleeps came softly from the speaker as the planes of my face were surveyed and a digital map was made of my features to verify against the record in the system’s database. “Hunter...Courtney...you are scheduled for time off,” stated a mechanical voice. “Indicate reason for access.”

I tapped in number 24, the code for required overtime. More squeals and bleeps followed.

“Please stand on the white dot and look into the viewfinder.” Dutifully, I shuffled over and took the correct position, having to raise my petite figure on tiptoes for an iris recognition scanner to photograph my eyes.

I had done my research. The iris is the only internal organ of the human body visible from the outside. This makes it an ideal tool for identification.

The scan would look for the random variations in the visible elements of my iris. The phenotypical features of each individual iris are totally unique for every person. Even identical twins have different patterning. The system, I knew, was almost impossible to fool. It could even pick up contact lenses stained with fake iris patterns. I knew it couldn't detect my emotions, yet it peered inside my being and so instinctively I tried to radiate calm confidence.

"Access granted."

The gate slid open. I stepped in and the gate closed behind me. I now stood in a three by three metre cage like a zoological specimen for the eyes of the security system.

Five steps brought me to the next security check. Without hesitating, I placed my left hand over the red circle that glowed on the screen beside the gate, waiting patiently while my fingerprints were recorded and compared. In an AFI system, a data file of significant loops, arches, and whorls unique to my prints were recorded and compared to those on file. An AFI system did not keep an image of my fingerprints nor could it reproduce them, but using its stored data, it could successfully identify me from millions of others. Another foolproof system of identification. Why?

I heard the power switch trip and the metal cover over the key slot slid back. I inserted my ID card key, waited, then removed it when the screen turned green. The security door slipped open and I entered, standing in the box formed by white lines painted on the cement until the door slid closed behind me. The mechanical voice came again.

"Access has been granted to...one...individual...Hunter... Courtney. It is now safe to step forward. Do not step back. Proceed forward."

I complied, knowing I was crossing through a laser net as I did so. The grid mechanism had received data from the other security systems to allow one break of the laser web. Anyone following would trigger the elaborate security system.

I squared my shoulders and strode down a fieldstone path bordered by high cedar hedges hiding the security fencing on each side. It was a prison walk disguised in country attire. A little further on, the walk split around a guard house and again I showed my I.D. card.

"Hi, Ian," I said into the speaker to the serious looking man dressed in the black jump suit on the other side of the glass. I liked Ian. We often worked together when I required some extra help in the archives. He almost summoned a smile as I handed my briefcase through to him for it to be scanned by the x-ray machine. I thought my voice that morning sounded strangely loud, and tight with tension, but Ian didn't seem to notice.

After a few seconds, Ian Philips waved me ahead to walk through the metal scanner. No bleeps. I was clean. He came out of the bulletproof booth to join me and handed me back my briefcase.

"Hi, Court. The system is showing you as having today off, but it has cleared you for entrance anyway. I bet you were called in because she is coming," he stated, managing a brief smile this time.

My heart skipped a beat, but outwardly I tried to give no indication that I had been unaware of this information. I gave the Mona Lisa smile, signifying everything and nothing, and took the green security tag Ian offered me. It would allow me to move freely about the green zone sections of the house and estate, and I clipped it to my waistband. "Have a good day," I stated with no further explanation, waiting for Ian to punch in the code to release the last gate that would open Taylor Punga's world to me.

I had asked Ian, when we were having lunch together one day, why such a redundant system of security checks was necessary. He had looked up from his soup with surprise.

“But, Courtney, a hand can be cut off or an eye plucked out. Redundancy is the only viable security.”

I hadn't finished my lunch.

Once through and making my way along the path again, I was acutely aware of my aching shoulders and the sweat between my breasts. I forced myself not to loosen the tense muscles but to walk as I always walked each work day down this path.

Over the last two years, I'd gone through this elaborate security system many times. On good days it was fun, like being a spy. On days when the weather was unpleasant, it was a source of extreme annoyance. This was the first time it had made me nervous. Why did Punga need such a security system? It was redundant in the extreme. What did my employer have to hide?

Learning that Punga was coming to the estate made me consider changing my plans, but I decided I was committed to action and should proceed. I justified this decision by arguing to myself it might also give me the rare opportunity to see my boss, Taylor Alexandria Punga.

I had worked for her for over two years by then, had seen her only twice, and knew nothing about her. That is, almost nothing. My job was to archive the material that flowed in from Punga's busy schedule. In a way, I knew all and understood nothing. Finding out what motivated and financed Punga's life had become an obsession. Taylor Alexandria Punga was an enigma I meant to unravel.

When I was hired, I had been told Punga headed a think tank, but there was something going on in this complex far bigger than I had originally been led to believe. Stories didn't hold together. Places in the vast complex were out of bounds to me and the personnel very secretive. My enquiries had been stonewalled, and so I had made the decision that this was the day that I found out the truth.

From the moment I had met Punga, I had been curious about the tall, aloof woman. Suspicious might be a better word. Punga was far more than she seemed and whatever went on at this establishment was far bigger than I originally thought. I had to admit part of the source of my interest in my boss was the strength of Punga's personality. She simply radiated confidence and energy. That flame of deadly energy fascinated me until I fairly buzzed with curiosity. If energy was strength, Taylor Alexandria Punga was very powerful. I wanted to know how and why.

I grudgingly had to admit that Punga was striking, too, not in a pretty way but with the sort of beauty generated by a powerful charisma. Punga was mesmerizing, controlled, confident in her movements, and very mysterious.

Who was Taylor Alexandria Punga? She seemed to have incredible power, yet she had no title and held no official office. She was immensely rich, and yet had no visible source of income. She was present at every significant meeting in the world — or so it seemed — and yet never spoke or presented at them.

Discovering who Taylor Alexandria Punga was had become my personal project. That was why I had come in to work that day, even though it was my day off.

Access to the house was through a maze created by dry stone walls that edged high beds of flowering trees and plants. Here and there, water danced down garden rocks or goldfish flashed in a still, silent pool, moving from light to shadow. Every previous time I had walked through this beautiful area, I had promised myself if I ever had a house of my own, it would have a mysterious and magnificent entrance like this. That day, I barely noticed it.

As always, I came on the house suddenly from out of the gardens, reaching a stone wall and then having to turn to follow its curve to the brass front doors. Once again, I stood in a white box painted on the flagstone. The tag that Ian had given me automatically fed data into the security system, much like a garage door mechanism. The brass doors unlocked with an audible click.

I pushed through the one on the right and entered a quiet lobby, beautiful in its simplicity. A floor of black stone tile was divided by a long, rectangular pool of water. A rough cut slab of grey granite was the only means across. The walls on each side were polished teak and on the other side of the bridge, a glass wall allowed a view of a huge interior courtyard of thick vegetation. Here, even nature was walled in or out.

Turning left once I crossed the pool would take me into the green zone of the elaborate complex. These were the public areas — library, dining room, kitchen, meeting room, computer room, and staff rooms. Going right would take me into the red zone — the private chambers of Taylor Alexandria Punga and her personal staff.

For a second, I stood on the bridge focusing my thoughts, then I crossed and walked to the left, over the black stone floor, letting the security camera record me. As far as I had been able to ascertain, there was only the one camera in the main lobby. Clearly confident in their elaborate security system, this camera simply recorded who came and went through the door. It had blind spots. Its main blind spot was overconfidence.

I first took my briefcase down to the archival library where I worked and hid it out of sight. The fewer people who knew I was there the better. Not allowing myself time for second thoughts, I moved back up the hall to the lobby. Once under the entrance camera, I flattened myself against the glass wall, as I had planned, and edged along to the far right side of the lobby.

To be truthful, my heart seemed to be convulsing in my chest, which made me feel lightheaded and slightly ill. If someone had walked into the lobby just then, I would have been hard pressed to explain what the hell I was doing. Not for the first time that day, I felt crazy to be attempting this incursion. For a second, I stopped. I can still recall the sensation of the heat of the sun on the glass wall behind me. I see in my mind how my body divided the light from the window in two, casting my relief as an elongated shadow dividing the lobby in half. It was this shadowy image that betrayed me. The moment of hesitation passed and I steeled myself and moved on into a wide alcove on the far side of the room.

Punga's quarters were separated from the rest of the house by another set of brass doors. I bit my lip in concentration and wiped the sweat from my hands. I had no clear idea what I hoped to accomplish by doing this. If I did find evidence that Punga was up to no good, who was going to believe me? If I got caught, I suspected the consequences would be swift and serious. I had hesitated for months, my common sense and instinct for self-preservation overruling my compulsive need to know who Taylor Punga really was. Until that day.

It was too late for second thoughts. From my pocket I slipped the red tag that I had picked up and kept after it fell from one of Punga's coat pockets the winter before. I took off my green tag and clipped on the red. If the switch didn't work, the security system would automatically sound an alarm and pinpoint my location on monitors. I had witnessed practice drills many times. If the red tag didn't work, then the next intruder alarm would be for real, security personnel would come from literally everywhere and I would be carted off, goodness knew where.

I moved into the white box, the doors slid open, and I stepped into Taylor Alexandria Punga's very private world.

It was disappointing. I scanned the room, recording impressions. I'd entered a lounge area consisting of comfortable, distressed leather chairs and a sofa around a

fireplace. The fireplace was natural stone, the walls silk, in soft, warm tan. The original art on the walls was an eclectic mix of well known twentieth century artists. Over the fireplace was a Jackson Pollack. There were several oils by the Ash Can School, and a sketch I suspected might be a Picasso.

Everything was neat and tidy, and devoid of any personal items. Nothing was worn or scratched. The room looked as if it had been set up by an interior designer just for show. Everything was perfectly placed. Even the stainless steel briefcase bearing the initials TAP was placed with deliberate casualness on the granite block that acted as a coffee table.

TAP! The implications of the briefcase being there exploded into my mind that day and left me feeling faint with worry. I can act foolhardy but I am not a fool. I turned to beat a hasty retreat and found, to my horror, Punga standing right behind me.

Punga's body was lean and muscular. She was dressed in a black jumpsuit and her features were set in hard, classic lines. Startling aqua eyes snapped with anger.

"I can explain," I stammered.

"No, you can't," purred the deep, liquid voice.

We warned you.

She is the weak link.

This is a problem.

Startled, I looked around me. Had I heard voices? There was no one else in the room, only me and the towering Punga, who continued to look down at me with angry suspicion. Someone touched my hair and I nearly jumped from my skin. I whirled around. Still no one.

Surprising.

Perhaps you were right after all, Tap.

This development is alarming.

I looked around in growing annoyance, found no speakers, and then spun back to the tall, silent woman behind me. "Something touched me. What the hell is going on?" I demanded, fear giving me more courage than I felt.

Punga raised an eyebrow and looked at me condescendingly. "I believe that should be my question. You will come and sit in the chair over there," she ordered, pointing to one of the leather chairs near the fireplace.

"No, I won't. I'm leaving," I responded in growing fear as I tried to brush an invisible hand from around my arm.

Fear pumped adrenaline through my system. Things had gone badly wrong almost immediately. I had been a fool to think I could have gotten away with this invasion.

"That would be unwise and futile." Punga shrugged. "You will stay."

I felt my hackles rising. "I apologize for being in a restricted area. I shouldn't have been." I took off my red tag and pulled the green one from my pocket, trying to be assertive and get myself out of the hole I had dug. I tossed the red tag onto a side table and clipped the green one back on my waistband. "There is your tag back. I found the red one when it fell out of your coat pocket last winter. I guess I'm fired, but I certainly am not your prisoner." My speech stopped at the sensation of the cool, invisible fingers once again touching my arm. "What the hell is that?" I cried in frustration, pulling away in fear.

She hears.

And she feels.

She can not see.

Taylor nodded. "Yes. This surprising development supports my theory," she murmured.

I could feel myself starting to panic. Outwardly, I forced myself to remain calm. This wasn't the time to show fear. "What theory? And would you please let me go!" I demanded, violently pulling away from the invisible arm. Released suddenly and unexpectedly, I stumbled against the tall frame of Taylor Punga. Her body was unnaturally warm, like touching the hot sides of a teapot.

"Oh, shit," I whispered as strong hands took my shoulders and pale eyes burned into mine.

"I would prefer we not have a scene, Ms. Hunter. I repeat, please sit down."

That time I nodded, backing away in shock. I swallowed, pulled myself together, and slowly turned and surveyed the room. No one. Gathering my courage as best I could, I went over and sat down on one of the leather chairs with as much defiance in my walk as I could muster.

That would be a day that would change everything, and so it is a good place to make a start. It is nowhere near the beginning of the endeavour, of course. The project had been going on for some time and was near to reaching a climax. It is, however, when I became a significant element in the undertaking, and so a good place to make a beginning.

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