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The Edge of Madness

Michael Dobbs

Prologue

Arnie Edwards was no common or garden adulterer. He'd recently celebrated his silver wedding anniversary and was no longer in the prime of his manhood, but that left him with a sense of sexual urgency which screamed out for satisfaction. So much to do, so little time to do it, and Washington, DC was a town overflowing with opportunity. For a while, Arnie tried to take advantage of them all, wandering away from the kennel every chance he got. Bit of a selfish dog, was Arnie, and the excuses he made to himself were as prolific as they were predictable. His wife had other interests, was neglecting him, he couldn't remember the last time they'd spent an evening raking the embers. What did he expect when his wife was the President of the United States?

Screwing around by the First Laddie, as Arnie liked to refer to himself, required certain precautions. He couldn't bring the business home to the White House, he was unlikely to get away with booking a room at the Four Seasons under some assumed name, and there were always those wretched guys from the Secret Service hanging around. So when Arnie bumped into a clinically enhanced oil lobbyist from Texas named Gretchen who had her own apartment in the rabbit warren of the Watergate complex, the arrangement seemed ideal. He could pop round to her burrow almost any time. And he did.

Trouble was, her burrow quickly came to seem like home for Arnie in a way the White House could never be, and soon he began leaving his razor and toothbrush behind. He knew he was taking a risk, with his reputation, his marriage, even his complimentary tickets to the Redskins' games. Wouldn't do much for the institution of the presidency, either, but when you're lying between the thighs of a woman from Texas who's licking out your inner ear, you're no longer thinking with the right part of your anatomy. Responsibility? Nothing more than a strange word from a crossword puzzle. Six across, thirteen letters – or was it fourteen? By this time he couldn't even count, let alone reason.

The affair soon got to the point that Arnie was determined to continue with it, regardless. He came to that conclusion one evening after he had rolled over onto distressed sheets and felt as though he were twenty-three all over again. He could take it, no matter what the consequences.

Unfortunately for Arnie and many other people, he had no way of knowing that one of those consequences was going to help kick-start a global war.

There were to be no guns in this war, no missiles, no vapour trails stretching like accusing fingers across the skies, none of the obliterating explosions and sudden bursts of darkness you would expect. Not even a scream. There was nothing, save for the tentative striking of keys on a cheap keyboard. Yet make no mistake; this was warfare, it would bring the world to the edge of damnation. And the brilliance of the whole thing was that no one would realize it was happening.

Yet, like all weapons, the system required testing, and the first place they decided to test it was against the Russian nuclear plant at Sosnovy Bor. She was of the same era as Chernobyl, and her four RBMK-1000 reactors were almost identical in design. The grimy cooling towers of the Leningradskaya Atomnaya Elektrostantsiya squatted on the shore of the Gulf of Finland, scowling in the direction of the ancient Russian capital of St Petersburg that lay only fifty miles to the east.

She was an old lady, so far as nuclear plants went, and like many old women she creaked and complained. Thirty years earlier there had been rumours of a partial meltdown of one of the cores, but in true Sovetskii-style that couldn't conceive of failure, let alone own up to it, the incident was swept aside. Much of the basic plant was all nuts and old bolts that wouldn't have seemed out of place in one of Sergei Eisenstein's black-and-white masterpieces, but after Chernobyl had blown the top off its reactor, the international community had poured millions of dollars into Soviet nuclear plants to ensure there would be no repeat, and Sosnovy Bor had received its fair share. They'd used the funds to upgrade the computers to take away the guesswork, double-banking all the vital equipment and fitting the latest cut-outs and fail-safes.

There was always the problem of the safety culture, of course, getting sodden-brained workmen to take responsibility for fluid spills and dripping pipes rather than wandering off to piss their salaries into the Gulf of Finland, but Rosenergoatom had got round that, not by simply duplicating the important systems but making them entirely separate. So Sosnovy Bor had one set of controls operated by computers, and another operated without computers, a belt-and-braces affair that provided two entirely different means of support and which was regularly tested to ensure both belt and braces remained in prime condition. Only one very small snag in all this: in order to test the safety system, the belt or the braces had to be taken off.

With hindsight it was a pity that they chose to unbuckle the belt in the middle of a harsh winter when the power demand from St Petersburg was at its height, but you don't put off an important maintenance schedule simply because of a little snow. So the control system that wasn't based on computers was taken out of service. Only for an hour.

But Sosnovy Bor had only a few minutes to live.

The computer systems had been hacked, been lobotomized, but no one in the plant knew it. So they took the first safety system out of operation. Immediately, the second began to misbehave, allowing temperatures in the reactor core to soar. The process was instantaneous and precipitous, and with extraordinary rapidity the temperatures rose above two thousand eight hundred degrees Celsius. At this point the uranium-dioxide rods at the heart of the core started to melt, but there was no sign of this in the control room. The screens suggested the reactor was behaving itself, because the systems controlling the screens had been tampered with, too. The huge secondary array of lights and dials began to light up and flicker but there was always some small irregularity, an oil leak or an open door, and for a few crucial moments no one paid much attention.

That changed when the build-up of steam in the reactor core blew the pressure-release valves. The noise sent out a scream that made all who heard it freeze with terror. Other alarm systems began to sound. Operators began to shout, to panic. The plant's huge turbines began to shake and shudder. Pipes cracked, seals blew. Inside the reactor, the rising temperature meant that more of the water supposed to cool the reaction was turning to steam, which made the temperature rise still faster. It became a race to disaster.

How close Sosnovy Bor came to the point of overwhelming catastrophe, no one from Rosenergoatom was ever able to ascertain, even with hindsight, but it was at this point in the enveloping crisis that the hackers decided they'd overstayed their welcome and put the instrumentation back to normal. At last the terrified controllers could see precisely what was going on, yet even before they could react, the computers did it for them. At Chernobyl it had been too late, even for this, the melting rods in the reactor core had stuck together, preventing the circulation of water between them and so ensuring the core couldn't be cooled down. It blew the entire lid off, leaving the radiation-spewing inferno open to the air and turning Chernobyl into the destroyer of children. But at Sosnovy Bor, the gods were on their side and, with agonizing slowness, the operators watched the reactor-core temperature begin to slip back down. Russia could breathe again. For the moment.

There was no leakage of radiation beyond the reactor circuit, and none to the outside world, but the rods had melted and it was impossible to deal with them. They never reopened that burnt-out reactor Number Three at Sosnovy Bor, they just locked it up and threw away the key. Russia had survived a great terror, yet for some of those who thought about it there was a still greater terror lurking in the shadows. Despite all the analysis and examination and brutal inquisitions of those officials and operators who might have been responsible, the committee of investigation couldn't find out what had gone wrong. They were blind. Which meant, as they quickly came to realize, that they had no way of preventing it happening all over again.

Wu Xiaoling sat twisting the silken ends of the belt on her gown, overwhelmed with a sense of abuse and uncertainty. She was twenty-six years of age, slim yet profiled, exquisitely so, with remarkably round eyes for a Chinese girl. Something Occidental had swum in the family's gene pool during their days way back in Hong Kong that

provided Xiaoling with the allure of someone special, different – not that different was a welcome characteristic in the new China, but that hadn't prevented her from becoming the most favoured mistress of the country's leader, Mao Yanming. Being so close to one so high gave her considerable privileges, but also placed upon her the most awesome responsibility for keeping Mao satisfied. And he was no easy man to satisfy. She had been summoned peremptorily to his private pavilion that was set next to the lake in Zhongnanhai, the protected quarter in Beijing beside the ancient Forbidden City that housed the country's government. As usual she had been met at a side gate to the compound by one of his personal guards who had led her directly to the pavilion, trying to shield her from enquiring eyes, but others knew, of course. Men are such fools; such things can never be kept secret. Even Mao's wife knew, Xiaoling had seen it in her eyes.

Mao had been waiting for her, but it had become immediately apparent that something was wrong. He had spent no time in small talk, had no little gift for her, but had screwed her roughly, brutally almost. Not that it had ever been Xiaoling's role to complain and in truth there was nothing he did that gave her any pleasure. He was a man of the provinces, not sophisticated, not even very clean. The road from his birthplace in Gansu had been long and dusty, and she was glad for the scent of honeysuckle and sweet camphor that filled these rooms and covered his trail. She had learned many ways of giving him pleasure, of distracting him from those avenues he sometimes liked to explore that gave her none, and she was skilled in easing away his cares with fingers whose touch was as light as an eagle's feathers. That was why he talked, and allowed her to steal his troubles from him, yet today he had uttered barely a word, except to give her instruction, and had taken her crudely, in a manner he knew she loathed. Afterwards she had cried quietly into her pillow while he made phone calls. Then he had returned, taking her again, hurting her, as though he were penalizing her and had seen through her wiles and little deceptions. It was as though he knew.

He had dressed and left, instructing her to remain in the outside sitting room, where she now sat tugging in distraction at her silken belt, staring at the ancient calligraphy scrolls hanging from the walls and the large all-too-modern photo-negative image of old Chairman Mao Zedong inside a heavy black-lacquered frame. The picture had two embellished red eyes. They seemed to be staring at her.

Then the door opened. Fu Zhang, one of Mao Yanming's closest personal colleagues, entered accompanied by a guard bearing a tray of tea, which was placed on a small formal table. Fu nodded a silent instruction and the guard left. Xiaoling disliked Fu, he was insidious, cold, a man who treated with contempt anyone who hadn't been with Mao as long as he had. That contempt increased ten-fold for women, for Xiaoling sensed that he saw no role in his life for the other sex. He was the sort who would prefer to sleep with goats, and probably did, yet now he invited her to join him at the table, where he was pouring tea, almost deferentially. Uncertain, hesitant, she exchanged the comfortable cushioned sofa for the hard, formal chair at the table. He invited her to drink. Pu'er, green tea, very old, as Mao liked it, with a hint of chrysanthemum.

'I have been asked to tell you that our leader has held you in very high regard,' Fu said as she took a few tentative sips. It took her several moments to realize that he had used the past tense. Why? she wondered. She was still gnawing away at the question when, with a rising sense of panic, she realized she could not move. Not her hand, nor a finger. Her limbs were frozen. The tea. The rest of her senses were still active, almost enhanced, her thoughts and sudden doubts scrambling over each other inside her mind, the scent of honeysuckle now almost powerful enough to drown her. And through it all, insistently, she could smell her own fear as with the silken cord of her gown Fu began binding her to the chair, looping it under her arms, tying it behind her, ensuring that she would not slip. Then he ripped her gown wide open, exposing her.

She was screaming inside, but not a sound passed her lips. She could not resist him. For a moment she felt sure he was going to rape her, but no, he was a powder boy, he had no desire for what she had to offer. Then, from a small case withdrawn from his pocket, he produced a knife. A surgeon's knife, hardened, razor-sharp steel that glowed in the sun reflecting from the lake.

Within her mind she wriggled and thrashed, while in the chair she sat as passive as a rag doll.

'You should not have betrayed us,' Fu said, his fat lips wriggling like serpents.

Then he started to carve.

'Ling Chi', they called it. The Death of a Thousand Cuts. Its literal meaning was to climb a mountain, very slowly. It was a form of execution practised in imperial China and not formally abolished until 1905, but even then it continued to be used. It involved cutting the flesh from the body in small pieces while the victim still lived, and was intended to be the highest form of degradation. That's why they had decided to use it on Xiaoling. Despite all their efforts they knew they could never completely erase the marks of her existence or cover up what she had done. She had betrayed Mao Yanming, poured humiliation upon him, caused him to lose face, but there would be no sniggering amongst those who knew or might hear of such things because they would remember nothing but the horror of what awaited those who crossed their leader. It was a lesson in terror they could never forget.

Wu Xiaoling felt no physical pain, but she saw her blood flowing thick and dark from the wounds on her arms, her thighs, and elsewhere. As her head dropped she wasn't even able to avert her eyes. She was forced to watch every moment.

In the few months since Sosnovy Bor was pulled back from the edge of oblivion, there had been other mysterious incidents. These didn't occur all at the same time or in the same corner of the world, but a pattern had begun to develop, one that was as yet so indistinct that almost no one recognized it for what it was. Instead of indulging in thoughts of conspiracy, most people put this plague of misfortunes

down to incompetence. All the fault of the politicians. It was an easy explanation to accept.

On the north-east coast of America, in the midst of a summer heatwave that was stretching the resources of the electricity grid to its limit, a power line went down. Nothing unusual in that, the lines get struck by lightning all the time. There are always alternatives, other routes that are made to work that little bit harder, so long as care is taken not to overload them, otherwise they cut out, too ... But imagine you have the capability to model the entire grid system on a computer, to simulate it, or steal its software, to copy the codes that control the switching, to check out its weak points and to see what happens when you take out this line, or that line. If you could do that, then you would become its master. Just flick the right switch at the wrong time, and you could get the whole cotton-picking power system to fall apart like a house of cards.

And that's what happened. At a time when the system was under acute pressure from all that air conditioning and beer refrigeration, and with one line down from a summer lightning strike, another line suddenly dropped out. There was no apparent reason for this, no one ever found out why, but soon power lines were tripping all over the place and large swathes of the east coast were being plunged into darkness. There was no undue panic; hell, it had all happened before, everyone remembered the blackout of 2003. America had been promised it would never happen again, of course, those who were responsible for these things had sworn on a stack of Bibles, but it did. Promises were cheap, yet action costs money, lots of it, and time. When the day came that their time ran out, millions of Americans were left to sit in the dark and sweat.

There were other incidents. The Pentagon, with twelve thousand computer networks and five million computers, was used to hackers having a go at it, but the number of incidents increased sharply. NASA and the Departments of State, Commerce and Homeland Security all reported similar infiltration alerts. Time magazine, in a lead article entitled 'Hack Attack', laid the blame at the feet of the ubiquitous Microsoft that supplied so many of the world's source codes. 'We are placing our security eggs in one basket,' it said, 'and one day someone is going to come along and steal the lot.' Yet it wasn't just in America. The banking system in Georgia was brought to a halt for three days, but not many people cared or even knew where Georgia was. And when the Parliamentary elections in Italy had to be held all over again because the new computer system that counted the votes deposited them in an impenetrable black hole, no one thought too much of the matter. It was, after all, Italy.

For all the misfortunes that struck others, none took the brunt more than Britain. Not all at once, of course, the game was spread over several months so that no one would guess the British were even in play. It kicked off when Egg, one of the country's largest Internet banks, made available its regular monthly statements online, yet when customers tried to access their personal and very private details, they were given someone else's. Intimate financial profiles were scattered around like seed in front of pigeons, and these included not just the Joneses, Smiths and Browns but also many prominent personalities, much to the amusement of many. As a result the News of the World was able to reveal that the Sports Minister was paying regular

monthly sums to an entirely unsuitable female acquaintance, who promptly sold the details of the Minister's off-duty entertainments to the following week's edition. It included a colourful description of the Minister rehearsing his speech for the party conference while stark naked and complimenting himself on the size of his standing ovation. The Minister almost died of humiliation, a process his wife vowed publicly to complete, and much of the country was left crippled with laughter.

The railway system was also crippled. Three times in five days inter-city trains found themselves heading towards each other on the same stretch of line. None of these incidents ended in crashes, although there was one close call, but when the rail operators tried to rectify the faults the entire system went down. For four days not a single train moved anywhere in the country.

Ten days later, it was the turn of the national benefit system to screw up. Payments were still made, but none of them was for the right amount. Some gremlin had burrowed into the accounting software and moved the decimal point around. Pensioners from Cornwall to Carlisle muttered in disbelief, but the First Minister of Scotland had to be recalled from a conference in the Bahamas to cope with the riots that broke out in Glasgow. And south of the border, a highly dangerous sex attacker was released thirteen years before the end of his sentence when his name appeared on the list of prisoners granted early parole. The nation united in outrage.

Yet most people knew nothing of what was perhaps the most serious foul-up. On the London Stock Exchange, in the heart of the City of London, many of the trades began to be recorded twice, which exaggerated the movements in the market, making everything much more volatile. One expects the casino to play by the rules, but suddenly the punters were playing with a marked deck and if that news had got out they'd have stopped playing the game. Overnight one of Britain's most lucrative industries would have been destroyed. That's why the story was buried down the deepest institutional mineshaft. Better to lie, find a quick fix, move on. Even the Treasury agreed.

Throughout July, in different ways and in diverse places, the country was spun round like a child's top until it was left wobbling on the edge of chaos. And the game had only just begun.

Millions might have died in this game in Britain, but they didn't, that wasn't the plan, although the Minister for Sport came close when his wife threw a large bowl of cereal at him in their kitchen. He ducked just in time. Yet elsewhere there was a handful of fatalities, and most of those were in the United States as a result of the power failure. Two people were killed in a head-on collision in New Jersey that occurred when the lights suddenly disappeared on a stretch of the Palisades Parkway, and a man in Brooklyn succumbed to a heart attack after climbing seventeen flights of stairs because the elevator wouldn't work. A couple in upstate New York suffered carbon-monoxide poisoning after starting up their generator, and in Providence a family of immigrants was killed by a fire that started once the power had been restored. They'd been tampering with their ancient fuse box. Yet the electricity supply wasn't cut long enough for real damage to be inflicted.

The most important casualty, however, was a frail but remarkably spirited woman in her eighties named Abigail. She was feeling unwell and hadn't been on top form for some time, yet she was of a stubborn and independent nature and wasn't given to complaining. But the chest pains were insistent, and so was her doctor. Abigail was quickly transferred from her traditional New England clapboard home in Brookline to the cardiac unit of the nearby Massachusetts General Hospital in downtown Boston, where her doctor assured her she would be in the best possible hands. Despite her condition she remained feisty, issuing instructions, telling the doctors with a hidden smile that they weren't a patch on that cute Hugh Laurie, and above all insisting that they must not inform her daughter until all their test results had come in. No point in involving her unnecessarily, she told them, her daughter had other things to worry about. 'I got the legal right to silence and I'm exercising it,' she insisted.

Everything was done for the old lady's comfort. But still she died, one of the first casualties of war, from an overdose of insulin. When she was admitted she was diagnosed as having suffered a moderately serious heart attack, but the medical staff also discovered that she was acutely diabetic. It wasn't uncommon for a woman in her eighties and the treatment, even for a woman in Abigail's frail condition, was straightforward. Insulin. A regular measured dose pumping sufficient of the drug into her to stabilize her blood-sugar levels.

The dosage was critical. Too little and the blood-sugar level, already high following the stress of a heart attack, would soar. Too much and the blood-sugar level would fall, and since blood sugar is the body's basic fuel, life itself begins to fail. That's why they programmed the bedside computer to deliver just the right amount of insulin rather than leaving the process to the vagaries of human intervention. Life teeters on the brink for many frail old ladies, so she had little resistance when the infusion pump hit her with a massive overdose of insulin. Her blood-sugar level plummeted, and Abigail quickly started to sweat, her pulse racing as she fell into unconsciousness. The nurses on duty at the monitoring station scurried to respond, but it was too late. Within two minutes the patient was dead. They were left with little surprise, only a profound sense of disappointment – and a corpse. The wheel of life had turned one last time for Abigail, then stopped.

There were no recriminations. The medical staff had done all they could, had diagnosed the problem, devised the appropriate treatment, but in the end there was no coping with the vital organs of an elderly lady that had been placed under too much stress. They had no way of knowing that someone on the other side of the world had hacked into the hospital's systems, right up to the bedside of this particular patient, and temporarily boosted the dosage of insulin ten-fold. The nurses weren't negligent, they were simply deceived by readings on their monitor that had also been interfered with; they had no idea what was happening, even when it was too late. They ran a routine diagnostic check on the system, of course, in order to ensure that nothing had malfunctioned, but by that time, like the nuclear plant in Sosnovy Bor, everything was back in order.

Nearly three-quarters of those with diabetes die of heart attack or stroke. Abigail became one more statistic.

She hadn't been an intended target but was what you might term collateral damage. Incidental to the main affair. And it happened so quietly that no one realized she was a victim, she just lay there and died, right under the noses of all those doctors and nurses. The trouble was, they weren't paying attention to her, instead they were concentrating on their computers, just as happens all the time in so much of the world.

So she passed away and was gone, accompanied by nothing more than the routine electronic beeping of her killer. One of those things, if it hadn't been for the fact that Abigail was Arnie Edwards' mother-in-law, and her daughter the President of the United States.