

THE FOURTH AWAKENING

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INTEGRATION PRESS, LLC
CHARLESTON, SC

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Integration Press
2245 C Ashley Crossing Drive - Suite 102
Charleston, South Carolina 29414

ISBN: 1-57242-000-6

EAN: 978-1-57242-000-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009926636

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Cover Designed by Cathi Stevenson
Interior Designed by Gwen Gades

PART ONE

The Choice

*“Life is like a game of cards. The hand you are dealt is determinism;
the way you play it is free will.”*

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

CHAPTER ONE

*"The road to enlightenment is long and difficult.
Bring snacks and a book to read."*

ANONYMOUS

"NELLIE! WHY DO you even bother to carry a cell phone when you never answer the darn thing?"

As usual, with the phone buried in her purse, Penelope Spence hadn't heard it ringing. The familiar baritone on her voice mail brought a smile to her face. Mark Hatchet, Managing Editor of *The Washington Post*, was the only person on the planet who still called her by her old college nickname of Nellie; to everyone else she was, and always had been, Penelope. It was ironic that he should call. She had been thinking about him recently, hoping he would have another assignment for her; maybe this time he had one with a bit more meat on it.

"Call me. It's important. Don't go through the switchboard, use my cell." Penelope frowned. It was an odd request. She dialed his number and he answered on the second ring.

"Mark Hatchet."

"Penelope Spence."

When they were journalism majors at Columbia, they had worked on the school newspaper and been less than friendly rivals for the best stories and the editorship of the paper. After college, as their careers moved in different directions and real life settled in, they became the kind of old friends who stay in touch and talk a few times a year.

"Thanks for returning my call so quickly," he said, a bit stiffly.

"So, what's the big story this time? Problems with the strawberry crop in Georgia?"

"No, a little better than that." Mark's voice was strained and he seemed to be choosing his words carefully. She could hear other voices in the background.

"Want me to call you back?"

"No," he said. "Hold on one second." The background noise faded and Penelope heard a door click shut. "I can't really talk right now, but I have a potential story for you."

"Potential? What does that mean?"

"The story is big enough that it can't go to print without multiple confirmations. So far, no one has been able to get even a single person to go on the record."

"What's the story?"

"Not on this line."

"What do you mean, not on this line?"

Normally their conversations were light and breezy, but not today; he was deadly serious. "Someone may be tapping my phone," he said.

"What have you been smoking? No one in their right mind would tap the phone of a senior editor of a major newspaper."

"Don't be so sure."

"Okay," Penelope said as she sat up straighter. "You've got my full and undivided attention."

"I sent you a package by courier. Inside are an envelope and a cell phone. Do not open the envelope or show the contents to anyone under any circumstances until we've talked. And don't mention this conversation to anyone."

"That sounds ominous."

"This is serious enough to cost me my job if any of this gets out."

Penelope stood up and began pacing in a tight circle. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. I don't want to go into any details until you have the package. But it is critical that no one else sees the contents until we talk. Okay?"

Penelope's brow furrowed so deeply her eyebrows touched. "Okay. But you're starting to scare me a little bit."

"Don't worry," he said with a forced laugh. "There are some issues in

play here that I'll explain when you have it in front of you. This is right up your alley."

"What alley is that?"

"A government cover-up at the highest level," Hatchet answered with a laugh. "Let me ask you a question. When was the last time you had a front page byline?"

Penelope felt a tingle of excitement. "It's been awhile."

"Well, this may be the story you've been wishing for. Promise me you won't open it or mention this conversation to anyone until you talk to me."

"I promise."

The phone went dead in her hands.

The path not chosen. After winning a Pulitzer for investigative reporting at the tender age of twenty-three for exposing corruption in the South Carolina Statehouse, Penelope could have gotten a job with any paper in the country. In fact, many sent out feelers and lunch invitations to see if she would jump. Instead of punching her ticket to a big-time newspaper in New York or Washington, her wedding to Bill Spence was only a few months away and she decided to stay in Charleston and get married.

Their wedding was the social event of the season. With a guest list that included two former presidents and an assortment of senators and congressmen; to change her mind at such a late date would have been the death of her mother.

Two days short of the anniversary of her Pulitzer, her first daughter, Carrie, was born. *The Post & Courier* let her work part-time, for awhile. But with three children born in just under four years, she found herself declining more and more assignments. They kept her technically on the staff for a few years, mostly for the prestige of having a Pulitzer Prize winner on the masthead, but eventually even that illusion vanished.

A couple of decades later, after Bill left and she had decided to take another shot at reporting, she was so far removed from journalism that the paper didn't even offer her a job. Advertisers weren't buying ads like they used to and they already had a newsroom full of ambitious J-school reporters who were half her age, and a fraction of her salary. Since her divorce, Mark had been her only lifeline.

While Penelope was raising her family Mark had risen through the ranks of several major newspapers. He ended up behind the big desk at

The Washington Post with some of the best reporters in the world at his beck and call. Over the years he had thrown her a few stringer assignments when he didn't have a reporter in her area. None of it was front page, above the fold stuff, but between her trust fund and what she was getting from her ex-husband each month she was doing it more to stay in practice than for money. Plus, no matter how thin the subject material of the story, Mark was always thoughtful enough to call personally instead of having one of his editors contact her. It was a nice courtesy to an old friend.



PENELOPE SPENCE TRIED to roll the tension out of her neck as she sat cross-legged on her mat. Her morning yoga session, as usual, had been fine. Fully rested from a good night's sleep and before the events of the day began to weigh on her she had been able to clear her thoughts and have, for a moment, that feeling of deep inner peace she had grown to crave. Now, as she tried to relax, her meditation wasn't getting anywhere as the conversation with Mark kept bubbling to the surface and was simply too much for her to overcome. With a sigh she stood up and, arching her back, bent over and put the palms of her hands on the floor while her knees locked. It was nice to feel the old flexibility returning. She wasn't as limber as she had been in her old college dancing days, but a year of yoga stretches had really paid off.

Penelope turned on the radio. The "Oldies" station was playing one of her favorite Eagles songs—*Seven Bridges Road*. Closing her eyes, the incredible vocal harmonies swelled and she began to fall into the music. Just then, her eyes flew open.

She dialed a ten-digit number with a 415 area code that was answered on the first ring. "Hi, Mom." William said.

"Hello, dear." Not being particularly technology savvy, she always had to pause and tell herself it was Caller ID and not their close relationship that allowed her only son to know it was her. "Did Sam get out again?"

"Are you a part of the doggie psychic hotline? We are out looking for him right now."

"We?"

"My new friend Nathan."

"I see."

William put his hand over the mouthpiece of his cell phone but

Penelope was still able to hear him. "It's my mom. She knew we were out looking for Sam...yeah, I know. Freaky, huh?" The muffling went away as William turned his attention back to his mother. "You have any suggestions?"

"Did you try down by the lake at Golden Gate Park?"

"We're driving by Stow Lake right now."

"No, not Stow Lake. Is there a North Lake?"

"Yes, there is a North Lake, but that's at the other end of the park from my place. He's never gone that far before."

"Humor your old mother."

"Okay. North Lake it is."

Penelope loved all of her children, but she had a special bond with William. He was the youngest and last to leave the nest, and she had always felt he needed her a bit more than the girls did since he and his father were estranged.

"For once you were wrong," William said with a quick laugh. "Sam wasn't *at* North Lake, he is smack in the middle of it. By the way, Nathan is now officially terrified of you. Come here Sammy!" There was a pause and a rustling in the background. "I have a very wet and happy dog in the backseat I have to deal with. I'll talk to you later. Bye, Mom. Love you."

"Goodbye sweetie. Love you too!"

Over the years she'd occasionally had visions that involved her children or other close family members. Sometimes they were right, like today; other times they were false alarms. Recently, as she had gotten more committed to her twice daily regiment of deep meditation and yoga, instead of hit or miss she was almost always spot on.

Heading down to the kitchen, she found an invoice on the counter from the pool man and another one from Blue Flame for a refill of her propane tank. Natural gas wasn't available on her street when they built their home and Penelope refused to cook on an electric element. Being only four feet above sea level and located next to the Ashley River placing the tank underground was out of the question. Instead it was behind the house next to the swimming pool. The twenty-five year-old privacy fence around it had dry-rotted and the yardman had recently mentioned that he thought it needed to be replaced before it became a fire hazard.

Penelope sighed. The big house on the river with the swimming pool no one used anymore had a quiet sadness about it. When the kids were

growing up it was the place all of their friends chose to hang out and the walls echoed with music and laughter. Her three children, Carrie, Kelly and William, had all gone off to college and never come back. As each bird flew from the nest the noise level dropped, until now the only laughter came from the ghosts of happier days.

Penelope heard the rumble of the FedEx truck in front of her house. Wiping her hands in anticipation of having to answer the doorbell, she was surprised when the door burst open. In marched her best friend Joey Rickman dressed in full gym regalia, with every item she was wearing carefully mismatched. She had the red, white and blue shipping box in her hand and tossed it in Penelope's general direction.

"Your FedEx guy is cute."

Penelope shook her head as she stopped the box from sliding off the end of the kitchen counter. "He went to high school with your son."

"Oh," Joey said with a shrug as she headed toward the refrigerator. "Thought he looked familiar."

The two women had been friends since kindergarten and their lives had followed very similar paths. After Ronald F. Rickman, Esquire had packed his bags and announced he was leaving Joey for a woman less than half her age, she went through her own personal 12-step program. When the initial shock wore off instead of attending boring meetings, or turning to a higher force, she discovered Dr. Schwartz. If it could be tucked, sucked, lifted, injected, peeled or stretched, Dr. S was always there. She bragged that she had spent enough on plastic surgery to put one of the good doctor's kids through college. Ivy League college.

For those who had not seen her in a few years, the transformation was startling. For the 24 years of her marriage she was Josephine Middleton Rickman, President of the local Junior League and, like Penelope, a member of both the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Daughters of the Confederacy. She was the wife of one of the most successful trial lawyers in the country and a pillar of Charleston's high society. Now she was a tight gym rat with a head-turning body that looked a minimum of ten years younger than the DOB on her driver's license.

Penelope opened the box and dumped the contents on the kitchen counter. She checked inside to be sure it was empty before tossing the box aside. "What have we here?" Joey said, biting into an apple.

"You remember Mark Hatchet?"

“Our age and single; of course I remember him.”

“Single is not the word I would use. Between wives may be more accurate.”

“Well, I just happen to be between husbands.”

“He has an assignment for me.”

“God, I hope it’s more interesting than that last one. What was that? The Vidalia Onion Festival, or some nonsense? A week, all expenses paid, in beautiful Vidalia Georgia at the height of mosquito season.”

Penelope shrugged; beggars can’t be choosers. The onion article made the Sunday travel section and won her a byline in *The Washington Post*. For many reporters, getting an article published in a major paper like the *Post* would be a career moment. For her it was another step back to the world she had grown to miss but that didn’t seem to be missing her.

Because of Mark’s vow of silence, Penelope hadn’t mentioned anything about this when Joey called earlier to confirm their dinner date. Still, Penelope had been secretly hoping Joey might drop by. She hadn’t liked the tone of Mark’s voice, nor the way he had shrouded it in such mystery, and she could use the moral support.

Scanning the contents of the box spread out on the countertop, Penelope found a disposable cell phone and a large white envelope heavily sealed with transparent packing tape. Attached to the outside of the envelope was a handwritten note with instructions to call an unfamiliar phone number with the enclosed cell phone before opening the envelope.

Looking over Penelope’s shoulder and reading the note, Joey said, “Yeah, right,” as she reached for the envelope, but Penelope slapped her hands away. “Excuse me!” Joey exalted as she returned to foraging through Penelope’s refrigerator. “Here’s the reason you’re losing so much weight, you have no food.”

Penelope picked up the phone and began dialing the number.

Hatchet answered before the third ring. “It’s me. Are you alone?”

“No, Joey is here.”

“Hi, Mark,” Joey shouted, opening a cupboard and finding it just as sparsely stocked as the refrigerator.

“Have you opened the package?”

“I haven’t been given permission yet.”

“Like that would ever stop you. I won’t bother to ask you to send Joey

out of the room since I know she'll weasel all of this out of you anyway." He took Penelope's silence as affirmation and continued. "Inside the envelope is information that is so closely held..."

"Is it classified?" Penelope interrupted.

"What do you care? Senator Horn got you Top Secret clearance as the world's oldest intern."

"Ha. Ha. Very funny. I haven't done any work for the senator since he announced his retirement. Besides, there are rules that have to be followed to get clearance not to mention lots of scary documents I had to sign. I really don't want to spend my golden years in Leavenworth."

"Trust me, Nellie. There is nothing in the envelope that will get you into legal trouble. Everything inside is a matter of public knowledge and came straight off of the Internet." Mark Hatchet paused, then added, "And in the off chance it does get you into any difficulty, the *Post* will stand behind you."

"That's reassuring. Will you come see me on visiting days?"

"Of course and I'll even bring you cartons of cigarettes and chocolate bars you can share with all of your new friends... Look, if you're not interested, just return the envelope to me unopened and I'll find someone else."

"Relax. I didn't say I wasn't interested. After our earlier conversation I'm just trying to figure out what you're getting me into here."

"What I've got is the name of one man and the name of the black project they're doing at a hush-hush department of Homeland Security."

"Homeland Security?"

"There is a division called Emerging Technologies..."

"That would be Noah Shepherd's department."

"And that's why no one will ever play Trivial Pursuit with you, Nellie. Do you know him?" Hatchet asked.

"No. I've never met him but the senator had me do a complete profile on him a few years back."

"Find anything interesting?"

"Garden variety upper-level bureaucrat. Yale Skulls and Bones type. His father and grandfather were all in the government, if I remember correctly."

"These days he's one of the big players in town. Shepherd may be the most powerful person in Washington that no one has ever heard of. He's positioned himself so he gets the first look at all new technology that

comes around and then cherry picks the stuff he wants to keep. Many of his projects are cutting edge, high-tech psychological warfare kinds of things. He is a big-time behind the scenes player on the Hill and at the White House.”

“So, what does Shepherd have to do with all of this?”

“He’s slapped a lid on this story and nobody, and I mean nobody, is talking about it.”

“If no one is talking, how did you find out about it?”

“I have a source...”

“Ha!”

“What?”

“You’ve been sitting behind a desk for the past five years. Where in the world would you get a source?”

“You’d be surprised, especially if you knew who it was.”

“So, who is it?”

“If I won’t tell my boss, I sure as heck won’t tell you.”

“Okay, so you have this imaginary friend who gave you this story that no one else is able to confirm...” An early warning signal went off in Penelope’s head. “Hold on,” she said. “You must have fifty reporters who would walk over glass for something like this. Why me? And what’s with this phone?”

“The phone is one of these cheap disposables you always hear about in bad movies, except these weren’t so cheap. I needed ones without GPS and I had to...”

Penelope had spent enough time interviewing people to know when they were trying to avoid answering a direct question. “Wwwhhhyyy. Mmmeee?” she said slowly, carefully enunciating each word.

“Are you kidding me? You’re one of the best investigative reporters I’ve ever known.”

“You have a slew of top reporters on your staff who are better connected than I could ever dream of being.”

“I needed someone I know and trust.”

“And.”

The phone went silent for a few moments as Mark Hatchet gathered his thoughts and selected the right words. “At the personal request of the President of the United States; the heads of Homeland Security, the CIA and the NSA; the House and Senate leadership of both parties; and

the Chairman and ranking member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence *The Washington Post* has been asked, in the interest of national security, not to pursue this story. My publisher has agreed to honor the request.”

“Well, that certainly explains why you didn’t want to go through the *Post’s* switchboard. This Shepherd character must know where a lot of bodies are buried to get that kind of support for a cover-up.” Penelope smiled wryly, as she put more of the puzzle pieces together. “Let me guess why you’re risking your job over this story. I’m betting the Grey Lady up on Times Square isn’t feeling quite as patriotic as your publisher?”

Penelope could almost see the color building in Mark’s face. The slightest mention of *The New York Times* was always enough to set him off on a sputtering diatribe. Today was no exception. “They hadn’t heard anything about it, but as soon as they got the request they put three reporters on it.”

“Gee. And you mainstream media types can’t understand why everyone hates you. That still doesn’t answer my question; why me?”

“I have it from my unimpeachable, imaginary, source that they are transferring the guy who holds the key to this entire story to the brig at the Charleston Naval Weapons Station which, according to MapQuest, is less than 10 miles from your house.”

“So it’s not my worldly charms and brilliant reporting skills but geography that made you think of me?”

“Please. You’re one of the best reporters I’ve ever known.”

“And you’re one of the worst liars I’ve ever known.”

“If you’re not interested...”

“Don’t get huffy. I didn’t say that.”

“Okay. Before you open the envelope, I need to know if you’re in or out.”

“In.”

“Don’t even want to think about it for half a second?”

“Nope.”

“This could be dangerous.”

“Don’t care.”

“We’re talking Homeland Security and secret projects.”

“I got that part.”

“You’re not only going to be up against the entire federal government but also some of the best reporters in the business, and they have a head start.”

“So why don’t we get started?”

“And you understand my position....”

“You haven’t seen me in years. Didn’t like me the last time you did. You have no idea where I got this information. I, in no way, shape, or form, represent *The Washington Post*. Yet strangely if anything happens you guarantee that I’ll have *The Post’s* backing.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Ouch!” Penelope turned to see Joey sucking her left index finger. While Penelope was distracted, Joey had claimed the envelope. In her haste to get it open before Penelope turned around, she had stabbed herself with a paring knife.

“Give me that before you hurt yourself,” Penelope said as she sat down the phone. Grabbing a cutting board and the razor-sharp knife from Joey, she sliced the end of the envelope off and pulled out a file folder. It was filled with about 30 pages of background that looked like it came straight off of a home printer. She picked up the phone and tucked it under her chin.

“All right, I’ve got it. What am I looking at here?”

“This is all I was able to piece together before the order came down from upstairs to stop looking. There was a super secret project with the code name ‘Hermes’. Rumor has it they were trying to use a combination of drugs and who knows what to build some kind of super spy or something, until things went south.”

“Don’t those government types ever learn? What happened?”

“That’s what you’re going to have to find out. Apparently, Homeland Security, under extreme pressure from your old buddy Senator Horn, cancelled the project six months ago but the people involved kept it going. Now the rumor is they have made some kind of breakthrough.”

“What kind of breakthrough?”

“I have no idea. Only a handful of people have the details on the project.”

“And no one is talking?”

“Not only are they not talking, no one can find any of them.”

“What?”

“For all intents and purposes, they have all vanished.”

Penelope felt her earlier bravado crumble and be replaced with an uncomfortable knot in her stomach. As she pondered the possibilities

she felt goose bumps rising on her arms. “You don’t think?”

“I don’t know,” Mark said softly. “But considering how much effort is going into this cover-up, we can’t rule anything out.”

“How many people are we talking about?”

“Over 30 ultra-high clearance people have simply vanished, including a Nobel Prize winner. No one has seen or heard from them in nearly six months.”

The knot in Penelope’s stomach wasn’t getting any smaller. Suddenly, her desire to get back into big-time journalism was being hotly contested by her survival instincts. If this story was big enough for someone in the federal government to order the assassination of over 30 people to keep it quiet, then what was the death of one reporter — more or less? She rubbed the goose bumps on her arms and drew in a deep breath. This could be as big as Mark thought it was; it could also be too big for her.

Hatchet knew Spence well enough to understand exactly what her sudden silence meant. He knew she was itching to get back into mainstream journalism, and he would put her on staff immediately if she was willing to relocate to Washington or New York. But that was never going to happen. Still, despite its obvious risks, this could be a career defining story for both of them. He hated putting her in harm’s way, but with his normal resources blocked she was the only one he trusted enough to even consider for the story. “So, what do you think?”

Penelope’s mouth was so dry she reached for her bottle of water and took a sip before trying to answer. “Boy, I’m not sure about this, Mark.”

“I understand completely. Look,” Mark Hatchet felt if he could just give her a gentle nudge she would do what he wanted. “Do this for me. Just go over to the brig and try to talk to this guy, and if it doesn’t feel right, walk away... Okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“If you can get him to talk, heck if you can even confirm he’s in the Charleston Brig, I’ll guarantee you’ll make the front page of the *Post*, and probably every other newspaper in the country.”

“You always knew how to sweet talk me.”

“Who is this guy?”

“His picture is in the file.”

Penelope rummaged through the folder until she found a professional-quality head and shoulder picture of a man who looked familiar but she

couldn't quite place. Fit and a bit John Wayne-ish; he looked like the guy you'd want to do your estate planning, but not necessarily someone who'd be a ton of laughs in Vegas on a long weekend. Turning it over, she read his biography. Her eyebrows went up and a small whistle escaped her lips when she read his name.

"Oh my!"

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www.FourthAwakening.com

US \$15.95

FICTION

ISBN 978-1-57242-000-7
5 1595



9 781572 420007