

—GUARDED

by Michael A. Arnzen

The security gate swallows you.

An alarm blares, louder than you expected, jangling your nerves. For just a second, everyone at the checkpoint around you freezes and time seems to halt while the horn rapidly bleats like the high notes from the *Psycho* soundtrack. Then three Transportation Security officers in starched white uniforms step forward and form a phalanx that blocks your path. The one on the left, a black woman whose jaws grind on a piece of Juicy Fruit, manages to lift a smile on one side of her face before asking you to step back. The white bread guy on your right wears his uniform like it's his nicest suit, and he primly steps forward, raising an eyebrow to dare you to resist as he pats the end of his metal detector wand in an open palm, a high tech billy club. The third has his hand open like a talon above his holster. "Step back," he repeats, Schwarzenegger-style.

You blush and apologize, exiting the gate while you check your pockets, avoiding the glares of the people in line behind you. The alarm finally switches off and you can hear some of them grumble and curse. Your hand hits something cold and metallic and you realize how stupid you've been. You drop your keys and a cigarette lighter into a plastic tub, and one of the officers shakes it around as if panning for gold as you step back through the gate.

The alarm blares again, annoying more than alerting—loud enough to erase your brain. The guards' eyes fix on you and you shrug your shoulders. "Maybe it's my belt buckle?"

White Bread waves you over with his wand. "Step over here, sir."

You walk over to a table behind a wall of clear, but thick, glass. The phalanx encircles you the entire way and two more guards join them, militarily alert. Your risk level apparently just went up a notch.

"Arms out," the woman says, chewing her gum between her big teeth.

You stand scarecrow stiff as they wand your limbs like you were radioactive. You watch as others pass through the gate. A few of the people who were in line behind you toss angry glances your way; others avoid looking at you, as if eye contact might set off the alarm again.

You can't believe that you've been singled out like this. Plenty of people passing through the gate look more like terrorists and mad bombers than you do. People with scraggly beards and brown skin and beady black eyes and suicidally dour worry lines. People with bulky outfits and funny hats and bottles of God knows what kind of liquid. Compared to them, you might as well be Uncle Sam himself. You're just an

average Joe. A regular guy. It's not fair.

"Shoes off," Juicy Fruit commands. You lift one leg at a time and try to control your balance as you slide off your sneakers. The concrete is as cold and hard as a prison cell floor when you step down on it.

One of the guards inspects your Nikes. He takes a deep sniff of one and you laugh.

"What's so funny?" White Bread asks, patting your kidney with his wand.

Your eyebrows furrow. You see a bearded man with a turban stroll through the security gate. "Nothing...I just can't believe you're wasting all this effort on me when clearly there are others who..."

White Bread pokes you this time and then turns you around so you are facing him and the other guards. "You have a grudge against the other passengers?" he asks.

Your feet feel cold and bony on the floor. "No, I just have a plane to catch. And I honestly don't know why you've stopped me when there are plenty of people just traipsing right on through the gate who clearly fit the terrorist profile."

"The TSO does not practice racial profiling anymore," Juicy Fruit says, that one-sided smile of hers lifting high enough to show the black-and-pink lining of her upper gums.

"Nope," White Bread confirms. "But *you* sure do think you're special, Mister. And special people are our business." He hands his paddle over to an officer on his left and then pulls on a pair of latex gloves. Every prison movie you've ever seen flashes in your mind. But he doesn't ask you to bend over and instead moves both of his hands toward your face. "Now open wide," he says, as if he were some kind of military dentist.

You clamp shut. It's instinct. The idea of having his fascist fingers probing around in your mouth makes you gag a little.

"Sir, I am just asking you to open your mouth. We need to check..."

You grind your teeth and snap your head side-to-side to mime your reply: *No. Fucking Way.*

White Bread flexes his hands in front of your neck like he'll strangle you. You raise your chin defiantly, and he eventually shrugs. You detect a little smile, in fact. "Fine, we'll play this your way."

Juicy Fruit waves at a gladiator-type nearby, sporting a Kevlar vest and an over-the-shoulder rifle. The gladiator swizzles a toothpick between his lips and sizes you up with the pencil tip-thin pupils of his steely blue eyes. "What've we got now?"

His buzz cut seems to bristle when you grumble at him from behind your compressed lips.

"A defier," Juicy Fruit says, as if it were a real word. "He set off the alarm twice, but nothing turns up when we wand him. We performed a full pat-down and shoe check, but he's refusing oral inspection."

"Is that so?" Gladiator asks, his face an inch from your nose. His breath smells of stale wood and artificial mint and it even burns your eyes a little. But you're not going to open your mouth. You'd rather miss your flight than be violated by these human robots.

Gladiator smirks. Then he looks over at White Bread and winks.

Before you know it, you're being lifted off your feet and ushered behind another