

The background is a dark, textured surface with various bokeh lights in shades of orange, yellow, and blue. A glowing green exit sign is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, tilted slightly. The sign features a white square, a white downward-pointing arrow, and a white silhouette of a person running. The title 'CREDIBLE THREAT' is written in large, bold, red, 3D-style letters with a white outline, centered at the top. Below the title, the subtitle 'A holiday story' is written in a smaller, red, cursive font. At the bottom, the author's name 'Sidney Williams' is written in the same red, 3D-style font as the title.

**CREDIBLE**

**THREAT**

*A holiday story*

**Sidney Williams**

**Presented as a holiday gift 2011 as part of the Holiday Blog Tour 2011**



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## **Credible Threat A Holiday Story**

**By Sidney Williams**

Dale McKee realized he'd left his commonplace book at security as he stood in line at a Pretzel King near his gate. Before hoofing it back, he triple checked his pockets and backpack, then gave up his spot inches from an array of fresh golden pretzels.

He'd been all over Manhattan the last few days, jotting ideas into the small notebook, which also held several years of random thoughts and notions he didn't want to lose. Short stories had become his focus in recent months, so ideas were valuable.

His friend Wayne, a Chicago writer, had picked up the name commonplace book from the late Karl Edward Wagner, and McKee had used it for his notebooks as well. The name stemmed from early Europe and described accumulations of knowledge or thoughts, so it had always seemed appropriate, even though McKee's was just a small spiral notebook, the much-worn cover now held on with duct tape.

Fighting his way upstream through holiday travelers, all trying to slip shoes back on and laptops back into carrying cases, McKee froze when he saw a heavy, round security officer in rubber gloves thumbing the notebook. The man's brow wrinkled as he read.

McKee watched for a second, ignoring the cursing gazes from those flowing around him. The TSA agent leaned over to speak to a fellow officer. The second officer arched an eyebrow then looked at a page to read for himself. They began to ruffle pages next and scrutinize the cover. Great. Duct tape said crazy louder than tin foil.

More conversation flowed between the officers, then one spoke into a tactical mic at his shoulder. McKee decided it might be better not to approach as he tried to remember the things he'd jotted down over time. Phrases, brief ideas. It would look like an erratic patchwork but surely it would be clear it was just a writer's idea book, wouldn't it?

What else could they make of lines like "self-medicating with gourmet beer"?

He observed a little while longer. Another officer approached. They'd found something they felt represented a credible threat. In a few seconds, men in suits were being shown the same page.

*Read another page*, he wanted to urge them. You're bound to hit something with a zombie mention, and all will become clear.

Sure, if they'd turned to the last page they probably had notes on New York landmarks and ideas from museums. That might look incriminating, but a page or two over there'd be jottings about ... *oh, shit*, computer hackers and assassins.

One of the suits had moved to a land line at the checkpoint.

Maybe it would be better just to get some pretzels as he tried to remember if his name actually appeared anywhere in the book. Or was it just random passwords and the computer key to his Microsoft Office CD?

He hated to abandon his notebook, but maybe it would all blow over. He got his pretzels and a couple of holiday edition magazines from a Hudson News and found a seat near his gate. His flight wasn't for a couple of hours, but with any luck he could be out of here while they still tried to decipher his ramblings.

Once some time had passed, like a few weeks, maybe he could check lost and found and get it back, explaining the whole situation in a more sedate exchange than he might have in some cabinet in the security office with a bright light in his eyes.

Spreading a magazine across his knees, he began to browse ads as he munched his breakfast pretzel. A couple of bites in, he noticed one of the televisions glowing red. Superimposed behind one of the CNN reporters in a huge graphic was: Geschöpf – Credible Threat?

He stopped chewing.

“Officials at New York’s La Guardia airport are currently contemplating a lockdown because a notebook that is possibly the playbook for a terrorist cell identified as Geschopf, which means...”

*...Creature in German*, he recalled having jotted it down at the New York Public Library because it sounded interesting...

“It’s the name of a terrorist cell active in Eastern Europe in the ‘90s. Have they re-emerged for a fresh assault during the busy holiday travel season? Here to discuss this is CNN terror analyst...”

How had it made the news so quickly? Surely they had canned stories on sagging Internet sales or something to fill the news cycle. McKee tossed his pretzel and settled back into his seat, feeling woozy as he watched a cluster of suits and uniformed officers trot along the concourse. A cluster of Europeans, who’d been walking together singing a carol, had to spread to clear their path.

“We’ve just learned officials are searching for a man who might be wearing a heavy cardigan...”

They'd had time to review security tapes? Seventy dollars with a shawl collar went into the can on top of the pretzel. He was just getting seated again when TSA agents started interrogating a woman who'd stepped about twenty feet from a carry on.

"Don't you know leaving your luggage unattended invites...?"

The Europeans who'd been caroling passed again, now more somber, herded by agents with even more somber expressions. Anyone could be part of Geschöpf.

He trailed them for a while then swung into another shop. He slipped behind a white Christmas tree and watched the carolers until they disappeared. Maybe they'd be all right.

This trip had been planned as a vacation piggy-backed on a research excursion because he hadn't been in New York in a while, and he had a couple of ideas that screamed to be set in Manhattan. He'd never intended quite as much drama, just to break a bit of writer's block.

To replace the cardigan, he purchased a Mets-branded hoodie. Passing on the bag, he slipped it on then stepped back into the hall, pulling his phone out to scan e-mail and check headlines. Nothing new there, but on Twitter #nythreat was trending.

Tweeters were reporting on the carolers and about other TSA activities witnessed around the terminal. They were also Tweeting suspicious activity, though he didn't see his own actions documented.

He willed himself to sit down again but decided against phoning Lana. No need to worry her, yet.

He wondered if she would. Worry. She was supposed to be picking him up when he landed, but she had declined to join him on this trip. He didn't ascribe the word estranged to their *situation*, but the slow drift was ongoing, as if they were on separate chunks of an

ice flow nudged by different currents. He wasn't sure what she'd make of this blunder. She'd probably see it as another hint of his underlying trend toward despair and self-destruction.

A new flicker on TV distracted his sadness. Congressmen were already making appearances, facing cameras and CNN host questions in front of D.C. locations.

"This is one more example of those who hate America attempting to destroy our way of life," proclaimed one Southern politician. "We see new hints of it every day. New threats from new directions. When we decode the messages in this book that somehow fell into our hands, we'll know better what plots lie ahead and be ready to combat them. Those who would strike at us as one of our most sacred holidays approach..."

The ramble lasted a while, but finally he took a breath, and the news host was able to interrupt. "I'm sorry, Congressman, but I need to cut in. We've just learned officials are grounding flights. The busy holiday travel season is just getting underway, but what officials are calling a credible threat make it necessary as they struggle to decipher the meaning in some of the passages."

So Lana wouldn't need to meet him at the airport. That would justify a call. Just to tell her. He wouldn't have to say it was all because of his commonplace book. Just let her know of the delay. Would it free her for other things? She'd already had several days without him, but that's where his thoughts went, for a moment anyway. Always the dark places, she frequently noted.

"Are you seeing the news?" he asked when she answered.

"Who could miss it? I guess you'll be a while longer. Is your Kindle charged?"

He hadn't even thought about reading.

“Yeah, I’ll pass the time. Maybe eventually they’ll get this worked out.”

“Just let me know when you’re boarding.”

A large, brown-tinted image filled the TV screen.

“Officials are looking at a series of paintings, including this one, because of passages found in the notebook that’s halted air traffic out of LaGuardia this morning,” the host reported. “The notebook contains references to the so-called Black Paintings from the Spanish artist Francisco Goya, known as one of art’s Old Masters. Here to tell us more is…”

The on-screen image depicted what looked like cultists huddled around a goat-like figure.

“These are not the typical images you’d expect from an Old Master,” the host said. “Some of them are quite disturbing.”

“Saturn Devouring His Son” faded onto the screen, Goya’s rendering of a scene in Greek myth. It looked like a screen cap from a zombie film, especially when they zoomed in on the god’s mouth, gaping over a bloody limb.

“The Black Paintings were not really intended for public consumption,” the expert said and went on to explain their transfer from the walls of Goya’s house, where he had painted them as his mood about contemporary events darkened. McKee could identify.

McKee had jotted the notes about Goya while at The Art Institute in Chicago. A story fictionalizing events that might have inspired the Black Paintings had seemed interesting. The CNN host was asking if the pictures were Satanic as Twitter messages and posts to Facebook and CNN online were suggesting.



Hunkering lower in his seat, McKee looked first left then right. No one paid any attention to him, yet he felt as if his brain was being ripped open and televised, without the needed commentary that would explain random thoughts jotted for future inspiration.

Lady Gaga began to pulse from his pocket. Lana's ringtone.

"That's your notebook they keep talking about isn't it?"

The Goya references must have been the tell.

"Possibly."

"You need to go explain them what's really going on."

"I think it was too late for that as soon as I left it at the security checkpoint."

"It's only going to get worse. You've created a neo-Satanic terrorist group from Europe that's planning to take the War On Christmas to new levels."

"Oops."

"Go get this straightened out. It's just a writer's notebook."

"Commonplace Book"

"Whatever."

"I may just need to get out of the airport."

She protested as he rang off, but he was already on his feet, moving down the concourse. A blurry security camera image appeared on the television screens at the seating areas on his right and left, almost like some weird hall-of-mirrors. Each screen depicted him in the foreground as the carolers passed.

"Authorities are now looking for this man," a newscaster announced, and a white circle appeared around his on-screen head. "Depicted here with the suspicious group who

may be linked to *Geschöpf*, an elusive organization, once thought to be dormant.

Intelligence communities are scratching their heads about...”

The images switched to another blurry view. McKee at the security checkpoint.

“Here we see the same man possibly putting down what Homeland Security said might be an encoded terrorist playbook for a Christmastime strike on America.”

The white circle highlighted the notebook as he placed it on the metal table so that he could take off his shoes outside the metal detector.

His chest was tightening, but he stepped up his pace, dodging slow-moving travelers towing carry-ons. In a few minutes he was past the security area again, heading for an escalator down toward baggage claim and ground transportation.

They seized him as he tried to plow through one of the revolving doors near ticketing, uniformed officers working with men in suits talking into Blue Tooth headsets.

He started trying to explain as they patted him down and noosed his wrists in plastic.

“He tried to change his appearance,” one of the suits said into a mic. “He’s wearing a Mets hoodie, but it’s him.”

One of them waved a black sedan forward, and the back door opened to swallow him. As he settled into the dark interior, he realized he had inadvertently created his most influential work of fiction.

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