

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Robert Sells

ROBERT SELLS

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Hosea 8: 6-7

*For it is the product of Israel - a craftsman made the thing,
it is no god at all! The calf of Samaria will be broken to
pieces!*

Since they sow the wind, they will reap the whirlwind...

*Cautionary Note: Please be advised: the story might be fictional, but
the threat is real.*

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Reap the Whirlwind, Robert Sells

This is a work of fiction. All concepts, characters and events portrayed in this book are fiction and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

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A Note about the Second Edition

Reap the Whirlwind was my second book written over ten years ago. The novel was prescient about artificial intelligence and the threat to humanity regarding intelligent computers. Now with artificial intelligence going mainstream, I thought it prudent to present the book to the public one more time...as a warning.

I committed myself to a rewrite three years ago. The present edition was edited by Aaron Lazar with help from Deborah Forst. For their expert work and dedication, I am humbly indebted. The final product is far better than the original version primarily because of their efforts.

- Robert Sells

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PROLOGUE

The man played a war game on the computer while he listened to the bouncing melodies of Vivaldi. The game, vividly displayed on a large screen mounted on the wall, would not be found in any store for many years, if ever; it was presently used by the military to train their upper echelon officers. As such, it was the best strategy game available and he always acquired the best no matter the cost or, in this case, the risk.

In the silence between two symphonies, the faint, dissonance screech of the Barrow doors in the basement raised his eyebrows. Heart pumping, his ears became his world. Another noise downstairs: something dropped to the floor.

The chubby little man checked the video feeds from his infrared security cameras in the basement. No sign of intruders. Nothing unusual. Except footfalls on the basement steps. He wiggled out of the chair and waddled to the main monitor in the kitchen. Odd. The perpetrators of the sounds were somehow invisible. *Could he trust his ears or a million-dollar security system? Play it safe.*

He scurried through the bedroom, picking up a bathrobe, a few candy bars and an iPad. Within seconds, he stepped into a nearly empty garage. Scanning the large enclosure right and left and right again, he assured himself the sole occupant was a large, black Mercedes. On his iPad he checked the camera showing the driveway outside. Bright security lights illuminated no car or person. He slipped into the driver's side seat, and in a moment the engine purred awake. The great car screeched out just beneath the rising garage door. Traveling sixty miles per hour down the long driveway the car swerved onto the road. Moments later, his speedometer read eighty. He talked to the car. "Call 911." Blue lights on the dashboard came to life and registered the call.

"Yes, may I help you?"

It was a woman, and he was a bit chagrinned. He didn't like to deal with the opposite sex. They made him feel uncomfortable and the man had little confidence in how they might handle his present problems.

"My house was broken into. 32 Cranbury Street, Watertown. Get the police there and get some police to me."

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“Where are you, sir?”

“Traveling down County Road 78 toward Danbury.”

“You’re in a car?”

“No, you fucking moron, I’m in a goddamn rickshaw! Of course I’m in a car. Get me some help. They may be following me.”

Silence for a moment. Shit, I shouldn’t have pissed her off. No telling what she might do.

“Sir, do you have a GPS?”

“Yes. Look, I’m sorry. I’m confused and scared.”

“I understand. Put this address into your GPS...”

Ten minutes later the billionaire computer expert pulled into a vacant parking lot just outside the busy city. The police station was a few miles away, but he knew city traffic would have slowed him down. The operator assured him the police would meet him in a few minutes. Besides, his pursuers would never guess he would travel down this rarely used road. A single, dim light high on a pole flickered in one corner of the potholed parking lot. The buildings surrounding the parking lot were dark with most of their windows broken.

A line of headlights came down the lonely road toward him. He finally relaxed. The cavalry was on the way. He wondered again about the intrusion. First, how did they know where he lived? No one knew where he lived except a handyman, John, who commanded a six-figure salary. The pair had evolved a comfortable relationship. But who knew? You couldn’t trust anyone these days.

Of course, it might have been some druggies looking for a score. More likely, though, it was someone sent to kidnap him. Who had he pissed off? As far as the man knew he was on good terms with all his recent contacts on the web. What did I do differently these last few weeks? Only some minor research into the Event, but the Event was yesterday’s story...it happened nine years before, for Christ’s sake! Who would care now?

The headlights morphed into four cars which screeched into the lot, surrounding his car. Now that they were closer, he could see they weren’t police cars.

Six gaunt, young men with long, leather trench coats flying behind them, brandished shotguns in their hands. Grim expressions fixed on their faces except for the one who was closest. Laughing wildly, he leveled the gun at the cowering computer expert.

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CHAPTER ONE

The keys to heaven also open the gates of hell.

Buddhist Proverb

Whit Emerson looked out his wide living room window at Lake Ontario. The small waves in the foreground smoothed out into a light blue sheet which, in the past, he found both relaxing and uplifting. Not today, though. His eyes were pulled back to banking records and once again his stomach was clenched by some unseen cold hand.

Whit viewed the offending screen which highlighted a bill for nine thousand dollars. ClassyGirls.com? Porn site most likely. An automatic withdrawal from his checking account. *How?*

Whit googled the company and found their phone number. His eyes popped wide open when his call was answered with a silky voice on the second ring. *How often does that happen so fast?*

After identifying the transaction, he spoke sharply into the phone. “Look, I don’t know anything about your company. I never had any transactions with you guys. There’s an error somewhere and it has to be rectified before I go to the police.”

“Sir, we can discontinue service. But I’m afraid we can’t give you back money for the months already purchased.”

“Months? This is the first time I’ve seen any bill from you guys. And, I-didn’t-buy-it!”

Silence. He nodded his head, a smile slowly forming on his face. She finally listened. A different voice jolted him from his reverie.

“This is the manager. Sir, we have orders from you for the last three months.”

“Not me!”

“Definitely from your computer, sir.”

“Not me!”

“Well, someone.”

Whit thought for a moment. Maybe someone else came into his house when he was gone.

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“Do you have a record of exactly when I tapped into your site?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Okay, when was the last time?”

While the manager paused for a few seconds, Whit smiled. Had to be someone else.

“Ahh, the last time was last Wednesday night between 6 PM and 9 PM.

Whit checked back on his Google calendar and his heart dropped. Liz had gone out with her friends that night and he had been catching up on some episodes from his favorite detective series on TV.

“Sir?

“Yeah, I’m still here. I’ll get back to you,” he said absent-mindedly. Then screamed at the phone, “Or my lawyer will get back to you assholes!

He returned to his computer and checked his apps. Sure enough, in plain sight, was the button for Classy.Girls.com, a young girl smiling at him. *Damn it! How long has that been there?*

He grabbed his phone and thumbed to his apps. The one most used with the same come-hither face appeared! *What the...*

“Honey, I’m home.”

He reached over to his computer and tapped into an article he had been working on and shoved his cell phone into his pocket.

His girlfriend, a slim woman with short, well-coiffed blonde hair, click-clacked across the tiles into the study. She leaned down and kissed him on the neck. “Missed you.”

He smiled up at her.

“You getting some work done?” She pointed at the computer screen.

“Yeah. About to write a bit.”

She gave an exaggerated frown. “You work too much, dear.” Liz jiggled a Victoria Secret’s bag. “Got a surprise for you. Don’t go away.”

She kicked off her high heels, smiled over her shoulder and sashayed into the adjacent bedroom.

Whit looked out the window again. Storm clouds had blocked the sun and the water had turned into a choppy, angry froth. Though comfortably warm in the condominium, he shivered. *Someone*

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getting into my computer and cell phone. That was on me. But someone somehow got into my bank account. Gotta check tomorrow with the bank. That was on them!

He heard the bedroom door open and turned toward the hallway. Liz softly padded into his study and leaned against the door frame. Clad in a diaphanous blue nightgown barely reaching to mid-thigh, she watched him for a moment, her eyes looking like black coals in the dark hallway.

“Working hard, honey?” she asked in a husky voice.

Though still distracted, he smiled at her and rose from the chair. “Not working anymore, Liz.”

Ten minutes later, their bed a wreck of tangled sheets and blankets, Liz rolled off of Whit. Breathing hard, she lay beside him. He turned to stroke her gently, an offering of affection. Elizabeth did not return his soft caresses. She never did. After controlling her breathing, she spoke intelligible words contrasting with her grunts a few seconds before.

“I was at my hairdresser’s this morning and opened up *Vogue*. I saw an article on how to choose *a computer just for you*.” She glanced sideways at him.

He winced. A free-lance writer, he recently wrote an article titled *A Computer Just for You*. He didn’t think it would ever get published and he had not told her about it.

“You got into *Vogue*, and didn’t tell me!”

Though she smiled as she playfully rubbed his tousled brown hair, he detected irritation. Whit knew the subject did not interest her, but she liked to paint herself as his intellectual confidant. Even to her hairdresser apparently.

“It wasn’t an article I was really proud of. But I did mention it to you a few weeks ago.” He looked at her nervously, hoping she would accept the excuse.

“No, dear, whenever you talk about computers you always complain about not getting *it* into print.”

Whit knew full well which article she was referring to. *It* was a thought-provoking essay on the world’s, the country’s, even his own, over-reliance on computers. Especially artificial intelligence. If *it* could just get published, he knew it would be a centerpiece article. Whit had submitted it to the New York Times magazine section. Their editors loved it, but for some reason did not pick it up.

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Even with his own paper, the article was shuttled all the way to the CEO and he received a flattering note from that worthy man. But it never made its way to the pages of the newspaper.

“Yeah, well, I do talk a bit about that one, but I meant when I discussed with you about how you might pick a computer.”

Elizabeth rose without speaking and walked to the bathroom to clean up.

Whit stayed down, his porn-problem commanding his attention again. *First stop tomorrow, the bank.*

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CHAPTER TWO

Jimmy Northup, detective, caught himself before he fell off the chair. He shook his head, trying to stay awake. Except for periodic stretching, he had been behind the teller counters in the same fold-up chair, in the same position for over seven hours. *The Ghost Robber hadn't struck any bank in the last three days. Another lost night.* He sighed and let his eyes close again.

The creak of a door opened his eyes wide, his body tightened like the coiled spring of a trap. Looking through the windows barricading this part of the bank, he could just make out the black shadow deftly avoiding the security cameras as it moved closer to the front door. Blending with the natural shadows, the shape disappeared as it neared a metal cabinet. Jimmy looked up at one of the cameras just as its green light winked off. *Hmm...so that's why no one ever saw him. He disables the security cameras momentarily. Then after plucking thousands of dollars, he turns them back on. Clever guy.*

Now, walking casually to the vault, the small black shape kneeled down and disappeared once again. A minute later, Jimmy saw the great door swing open and the thief entered the metal chamber. A few minutes later, he emerged carrying a bag.

Gotcha!

The foyer lights came on, bright and unforgiving in their white stare. The robber, his head covered by a black ski mask and the rest of his slim body black as well, stopped and stared at the middle-aged man with curly, peppery hair who stood making a show of stretching his legs.

“Old basketball injury. Happens when I crouch down for a long time.”

“I have a gun,” warned the masked man slowly reaching into his pocket.

Pushing off the counter, Jimmy straightened up, obviously a painful task. His clothes remained a rumpled mess. He shook his head. “No, you don’t. Look, give me break, will you? I’ve been waiting for hours and my entire body is one giant cramp. Just lean against the wall, hands high.”

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The bank robber looked over his shoulder at the back exit.

“And don’t try the back door. We both know it’s locked. By the time you reach the door, I’ll put a bullet in you. I do have a gun.”

The man in black sagged to an even shorter height. He walked a few steps to the nearest wall, spread his legs and put his hands flat on either side of a picture. When Jimmy looked at the picture, he smiled. It showed a fox hunt, the fox treed by a single dog, riders in the distance galloping toward the pair.

The detective, grimacing with every step, walked over to the man, pulled his arms back and clamped metal handcuffs on his wrists. “Sorry about this, but I get in trouble these days when I don’t cuff guys.”

“How did you know I don’t have a gun?”

The handcuffs locked in place, ski mask off, the older man led a young man toward the door where there were comfortable seats beneath a wide picture window.

“You don’t want any trouble. You planned these robberies carefully; precious few clues were ever left behind. You obviously have skills. Gotta travel light. Success for you is not confronting people. No gun.”

“Where’s your gun?”

Patting various pockets, Jimmy appeared distracted, confused. “My gun? Hmm...now where did I put it?” He smiled. “Never carry one. Too damn dangerous...for everyone. Hey, what’s your name, by the way?”

The man hesitated and then said, “Tom Smith.”

“Well, Tom, have a seat.” The detective settled him in a soft chair. Sitting across from the robber, Jimmy reached in his coat pocket and pulled out an open pack of cigarettes. “You smoke?”

Tom Smith shook his head. “How did you know I was going to rob *this* bank?”

The detective took a long drag from the cigarette, his eyes closed. A contented smile shared his face with the frown lines. He exhaled slowly. Another deep puff before he answered.

“Lucky guess. You never rob the same bank twice. So, it was one of six banks. Been sleeping out here for the last week. Not good for the back, I can tell you that, boy!”

The sirens now drowned out the gentle background noise of the air exchangers. A few moments later, the red blinking lights lit

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up the outside and the detective slowly raised himself up. "Well, we'd better let them in, Tom Smith."

Ten hours later the same detective was at his desk, yawning while he struggled with his computer. It was a daily battle which he usually lost. He had typed up the report without any problems (a minor victory), but when he pushed *print*, nothing happened. No sheets were coughed out by the dusty printer; its green, "on" light silently mocking him. He pushed one button after another, causing the screen to change its view, but computer and printer conspired to deny him the report.

A younger man, sporting a neat brown Baroni suit, put his head into the office, strolled in, and patted the detective on the back.

"Hey, Jimmy. You got the Ghost Robber?"

Jimmy Northup sat back in his chair, combing his hands through his tightly curled, uncombed hair. Brown eyes, cradled by well pronounced curved bags, fixed on his partner, Al Morelli. In contrast, Morelli's wavy hair was in perfect position. His smooth, handsome complexion, a product of eight dedicated hours of sleep every night, was more appropriate in a fashion magazine than on his photo ID declaring him a detective.

"Just a good guess, Al." Jimmy went back to the computer and jabbed the ENTER button four times. "Stupid printer won't print!"

"Damn it, Jimmy, stop pushing the keys. You know what your problem is? You gotta love the machine. You can't be banging it like that. You gotta love it. The computer knows."

"Yeah, well, I'd *love* to throw this piece of junk into the garbage. Get it to print, before I do just that."

"Watch me again, old man..."

While they were going through the three-step process to print, Jimmy's land line rang. Watching Al slide the mouse here and there and finally push the button, his report magically emerged from the printer. Even more angry, Jimmy picked up the phone. "What?"

"Hey, Northup, we got this guy you brought in, and he won't give us shit! Just stares at us. Not saying anything. Been at it for three hours now."

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“Jesus, Sammy, I gotta tell you your job? Go to his house and search it. Start there. Talk to his old lady.”

“Yeah, hot shot detective, tell me my job. No license, no identification, not giving any home address. Nothing. Not even asking for an attorney. Nothing. Tom Smith, John Doe. Who the hell is he?”

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CHAPTER THREE

The small sign on the desk declared the woman to be Marie West, the assistant bank manager. Positioned across from Whit, wire-rimmed glasses clashed with cleavage far too revealing.

“Mr. Emerson, you included this flashy site on your automatic pays.”

“No, I definitely did not.”

After an exaggerated sigh, she continued. “Sir, your password is known only by you, not us.”

“But I never.” He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. “So, the money is gone. Gone to those assholes.”

She shrugged. “Looks that way.”

“So, how much money do I have left in my account?”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s another problem. You are, at this point, overdrawn.”

“What?”

“Yes, the \$3000 you withdrew yesterday.”

“I wasn’t here yesterday.”

“Yes, you were. Here’s the check.”

He scanned the computer screen. His handwriting showing a check for “cash.”

“It’s a forgery! Look, you must have security cameras. Check them.”

Ten minutes later, surrounded by the bank manager, a security officer, and a smug assistant bank manager, Whit watched a video from the day before where he withdrew the money.

“That’s not me. Can’t be.”

There was no response from the three bank workers.

Whit got up. “Look, I—I’ll get the funds out of my 401K. Tomorrow. Okay?”

The bank manager nodded.

Red-faced and bewildered, Whit left the bank quickly. He stopped just outside the door and cocked his head. Barely audible

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over the din of the city street, he heard an odd whirring sound. He looked right and left but could not find the source. A few more steps down the sidewalk, and he heard it again. Whit looked back at the bank door. There, perched above the door, was a rectangular surveillance camera. He tilted his head, wondering. He side-stepped to the right. The camera followed him, the whirring noise coming from its motor. Like a metal hawk, it followed him as though he was some sort of rodent. Retreating to his car, he noted the camera had turned nearly parallel to the building trying to follow him up the street. Once inside the car, the camera reverted to its normal position.

His head slowly fell until it rested on the steering wheel. *What's happening to me? Did I blank out and actually write that check? And where's the money? Maybe I blanked out and ordered that porn shit. Oh, my God! I'm broke now and tapping into my retirement.*

Whit worked for the Rochester paper. Returning to the aged, gray monolith housing the newspaper, Whit noticed the security camera there also riveted on him. He stood outside for a few moments and watched others go in and out. The camera pointed only at him. He casually strolled to the left, stopped, and turned around. The camera had rotated to continue its “stare” at him. *Odd. Must be a coincidence. God, I hope so. Either that or I'm bonkers.* Whit shook his head, walked back to the front door, while the camera whined its tiny motor to track him.

Once inside, his frown flipped to a grin as he greeted one person after another. An exceptional writer, the magazine industry was just beginning to appreciate his burgeoning talent. Recognizing his ability and, truth be told, his new fame, the Rochester newspaper raised him to the status of editor. The dubious distinction earned him a small office and access to a snack table in the editor's meeting room.

By midafternoon, Whit finished research on a local politician accused of real estate fraud. He found that the allegations were all unsubstantiated. For the next hour he carefully framed an article for submission and proofed it. His cursor arrow was right above the send button when he withdrew his hand from the mouse. The last few articles he sent to the senior editor were riddled with errors from spelling mistakes to grammatical faux paus which only a freshman college student would make. In fact, entire parts of the articles were

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sometimes missing. The newspaper's email system conspired with his computer to mangle his writing. It was embarrassing and frustrating. *One way to fix that.* He cradled his laptop into his arms and walked to the tech department in the basement.

Jerry Weber, computer tech extraordinaire was alone in his office, his back to the door, hunched over a computer screen.

"Hi, Jerry. How are things going?"

When his friend turned, Whit's eyes widened. Usually fastidiously neat and well dressed, the technician looked like he had been up all night. Jerry's hair was uncombed, his clothes were rumpled, and his eyes darted back and forth, never settling anywhere as though he was still looking for something.

"Jerry, are you alright?"

The man rubbed his eyes as though he was just waking and trying to forget a bad dream. "I'm ahh...ahh...just tied up with this problem now. What do you want?"

Whit cautiously approached the counter. Jerry's eyes darted from Whit's eyes to his computer. The computer technician backed a way as though Whit had brought him some vile creature. Jerry stared at the black box, his nostrils flared and breathing hard.

"Jerry?"

The computer technician pulled his eyes away from the computer and shook his head. "It's okay. I'm okay. What's the problem?"

"Trashes my documents when I send them via email."

Jerry nodded. And kept nodding like a miniature bobble-head.

Whit tried to divert his friend's attention from his particular black box. He pointed to the laptops on the back shelf.

"Jerry, I don't know how you get any of these machines to work. It's all a mystery..."

The man shook his head violently, eyes wide. He interrupted Whit. "No. No! That's not the problem. The problem is the damn things work."

Whit eased away from the counter. Jerry took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair, neatening it a bit.

"Whit, look, I'm sorry, buddy. I have a problem with computer problems." Then he laughed. "A problem with problems."

Whit's eyebrows narrowed.

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"You mean you're confused the computers work after you fix them?"

Jerry reached across the counter and grabbed Whit's sleeve. "No! Whit I don't fix these things. They're fixing themselves."

The editor pried Jerry's hand from his arm. "Explain it slowly to me."

Jerry pointed to one of the computers on the back table. "Whit, all I do is connect the damn computer to the internet. Then something happens within a few seconds and the problem or problems are all fixed."

"Maybe that's not a bad thing, Jerry," Whit said gently.

"It's a problem if you can't figure out how it's being done. Something's screwy, Whit. Definitely screwy."

Whit worried his friend might be a bit "screwy."

"You must be doing something, Jerry. Do you know what they call you upstairs? The Computer Maestro."

Jerry smiled for a moment and then frowned. "But I'm not doing it. Don't you understand? I'm not doing anything anymore." After a deep breath, he focused on Whit again, the strained smile on his lips. "Alright. This is my problem. I'll figure it out." Jerry gave a great sigh and looked earnestly at his friend. "In the meantime, let's fix your little baby."

Whit described his problems while Jerry attached an electronic umbilical cord from his machine to Whit's laptop.

"Okay, Whit. I'll connect your computer to the web in here. Now watch."

Jerry didn't touch the keyboard or the mouse. The cursor raced across the screen and the screen flashed off. *Oh, great. Crashed my laptop with all my articles on it and not backed up.* As soon as Whit finished his thought the home screen reappeared, the scattered files now neatly placed in various categories.

"Try sending me a copy of the article, Whit."

Whit maneuvered the mouse into position and a few seconds later he hit the send button. Jerry, in turn, went to his mail box and downloaded Whit's file and printed it. There were no mistakes.

"See? Fixed and with zero moves from... What do they call me? The Maestro."

"But, a few minutes ago..."

Jerry laughed. "Yeah, tell me about it. Crazy, huh?"

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Jerry was still laughing as Whit walked away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Detective Jimmy Northup looked through the two-way mirror at "Tom Smith." Head up, hands folded, the short, young bank robber looked around trying to find something of interest in a barren room. Where the pimp or the drug dealer might be yelling for a lawyer, this man seemed quite content letting the unemotional bulldozer of the law roll over him.

Jimmy kept staring at the prisoner even as Al Morelli spoke. "Doesn't seem too concerned about doing ten years in prison." Jimmy turned toward his friend who was carefully removing a piece of white lint from his suit coat.

"You're right, Al, but why?"

After they returned to the car, Jimmy gripped the steering wheel, staring straight ahead.

Al watched some cops escorting a scruffy, T-shirted man into the basement doors and then turned to his partner. "Uh, this is when the key goes into the ignition, Einstein."

Jimmy nodded, started the car, and slowly drove away.

Al studied his partner. "Hey, you wanna grab a beer before we get back to the station, buddy?"

Jimmy looked over to his partner for a moment, blinked his eyes, and shook his head.

"Jimmy, forget this nutcase. You think too damn much." They had been partners for over twelve years, back far enough that Al knew June, Jimmy's wife. Back far enough that Al had been a guest in the log cabin the couple had built together. Then one spring day June had cut herself gardening and a week later died of an infection. Jimmy lost his mind. The night after she died, the cabin burned down. When the fire department came, Jimmy was wrapped in a blanket in the front yard watching it disappear in smoke. The report simply cited faulty wiring, but everyone in the fire and police departments knew what really happened and why.

"Then, let's you and me go out to the new Italian restaurant downtown."

Jimmy again shook his head, fingers tightly squeezing the steering wheel. "Why doesn't he care?"

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“Whatever,” said Al, shaking his head as he looked out the window.

The next morning Jimmy focused on the “Tom Smith” case. After six hours of phone calls to countless companies, an electronics firm acknowledged that one of their employees had not shown up for work the last two days. Weaving his way through different departments of the company, the detective put the pieces of the puzzle together.

“Tom Smith” was actually Pat Fallon, who had a doctorate in electronics. His doctoral thesis: “Computer Controlled Safety Systems.”

Jimmy smiled. Apparently, such “safety systems” were not safe from the good doctor. He was a happily married engineer making six figures with a beautiful wife and a ten-year-old daughter, who just happened to be recently sick. Very sick. Leukemia.

As Jimmy stashed the papers into a file, he smiled to himself. One phone call tonight after he got home, and he could pretty much close the case on this one.

Home was a small apartment furnished with a futon and an easy chair facing an old tube TV. Hanging on the wall outside his bedroom was a single picture of a younger Jimmy and attractive brunette, both smiling.

Jimmy picked up the phone and called his doctor who was also one of his few friends. “Hey, Doc. Got a question for you.”

“Damn it, Northrup! I’m just getting ready to go home. Call me tomorrow.”

“No. Need the information today. Anyway, leukemia. Byrnes leukemia. You’re a cancer guy, what can you tell me about it?”

The phone was silent on the other end for a few seconds. “What’s up, Jimmy? You okay?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. Case I’m working on.”

“Hmm. Well, it’s curable. There’s a new treatment being pioneered at Strong Hospital, right here in Rochester. Experimental. Works on most of the cases. Clears it up entirely. Costly, though, very costly.” They chatted for a few minutes about the local soccer

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team and then grumbling about being late for dinner, the doctor hung up.

The next morning, Jimmy was back at his desk and on the phone. “Yeah, Byrnes leukemia. How much does this new treatment cost?”

“Sir, are you calling about your child?”

“No. No. Calling for a friend. His kid is, you know, sick and all. How much?”

“Well, first, our treatment is experimental and not yet covered by many health insurances. Out of pocket expenses are about six hundred thousand dollars, and that’s just the upfront money. There are additional costs. Total cost about a million dollars.”

Jimmy whistled softly and hung up. Even if the young engineer mortgaged his modest home, there wouldn’t be enough money. Pat Fallon, alias Tom Smith, had been robbing banks to make up the difference between what he could borrow and what he needed to get his daughter the treatment. There was no paper trail with those particular cash transactions. Put the money into an account and no one was the wiser. As to why he didn’t put up a squawk in jail, any connection between him and the three hundred thousand already stolen would end up with the confiscation of the life-giving money. Jimmy knew the why. Now, he had to figure out the what. What to do about Pat Fallon.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Except for a weekly staff meeting, the wunderkind of the Rochester paper was left alone to ferret out stories and write articles. Today, however, a phone call interrupted his research into a medical mishap at a local hospital. Whit's only words in the ensuing conversation were "Hello" and "Be right there." Stepping out of his office, he walked through the noisy press room.

At the end of the gymnasium-sized room he stopped in front of a door marked prominently with *Saul Bromberg, Editor-in-Chief*. After he knocked, a loud, "Come in! Come in!" came from behind the door. As he opened the door, Whit was accosted by a short, white-haired man whose rapid approach threatened collision.

"Whitman, how are you, young man?"

The "young man," nearly thirty, shook Saul's hand, a piston promising perpetual motion. At the same time, Whit was pushed by the other hand toward a sofa, which he knew from many previous meetings was hard and uncomfortable. As usual, it was already occupied with folders and loose papers. The small, strong hands abruptly disengaged as the older man scurried to his desk. Whit cleared a space for himself and sat down.

Shirt sleeves rolled up and tie loosened from his neck; Saul ruffled around the papers and books haphazardly strewn across his six-foot long desk. He snagged a single paper and pulled it from the mess as though he was plucking it from the jaws of a hungry brown alligator. "Look at this," the scowling man commanded, flicking the paper with his finger.

"Paper subscriptions last month. Down again. Less than thirty percent of the adults in America read the paper, Whitman. Less than thirty percent! Worse here. When I started in this business there were three papers in the city and nearly everyone read the paper. Nearly everyone! Now there's just one paper and less than thirty percent read it! Why, Whit, why?"

Saul leaned forward and glared at him. For a moment, Whit worried he might be the culprit. "I'll tell you," Saul continued. "The goddamn internet! Everyone gets their news off the web, the few who care anyway. Quick, easy, cheap, and riddled with errors.

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Riddled with errors. Stories aren't checked by editors; they are just thrown out there. Doesn't matter. Could be fact, could be fiction. Hell, it could be both. People love the wild stuff, true or not."

Saul yanked the young editor off the sofa and dragged him to the computer screen on the desk where an internet article highlighted accusations about the same liberal politician Whit had researched a day before. The information was taken out of context, twisted to present an unflattering picture of the politician, and at least one assertion Whit knew was patently false. Whit, aghast, looked at Saul. He was about to protest when the older man smiled and pushed a button on the computer and Whit's just submitted article appeared.

Saul wearily shook his head. "We're printing yours, boy. Not as sensational, but accurate. Someone," he pointed with his thumb to the upper floors, "tried to foist this crap on me. Angers me, Whit. Angers me."

The older man walked back to his desk, leathery, veined hands supported him as he leaned over the desk, his head down. When he turned around, Saul's face was twisted as though he was in pain.

"Hate this part of my job. Hate it! We have to let some folks go. You are the lowest on the totem pole, boy. Sorry."

Saul was never one to spare feelings with flowery statements. The band aid came off fast, a rip, a sharp sting, and done. Whit gulped. He'd sensed this might be coming. Fortunately, the lion's share of his income came from the articles he sold to magazines. But it still hurt. Saul seemed to be searching Whit's eyes, looking for some sort of absolution. Whit shrugged and gave a half smile. "Tough times, sir. I understand. But I can manage as just a reporter."

Saul looked down at the floor, shaking his head. "You're out, Whit. Fired."

Whit's eyes opened wide. "What—what have I done?"

The forlorn expression gone, anger dominated Saul's face. "Nothing, damn it. Nothing! Not from me, my boy. Not from me." Saul, his eyebrows raised, again put his thumb up in the air. "Damn it, Whitman. This is crap. Simply crap. Crap. Crap! Crap! But I don't have a say in this. Sorry."

Saul pulled him off the couch again, pushing him toward the door. "Look, take the rest of the day off. You have two weeks coming anyway and I managed to squeeze out two more paid weeks. Find another job. Check Syracuse. I'll email some folks."

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Whit looked down at the little man hurrying him toward the door. "Thank you, sir. I have enjoyed working here. You were one of the main reasons. I'll get back to you after I've had some time to settle with this."

"You do that, boy. You do that. Me? I'll do what I can. Syracuse. I'll get in touch with them. Do what I can." He patted Whit on the back and pushed him into the threshold of the door. At the opened door, Whit paused a moment, staring back at the miniature dynamo who was his mentor.

"Sir, a couple of times we chatted about the article I wrote...you know, the one about the computers having a bit too much of us?"

"I remember, boy. Damn good article. Damn good. Editorial staff loved it. Especially about how AI could be dangerous. But it got chucked back for some reason." His eyes flashed upward. Gripping Whit's hand, he pulled the taller man closer.

"Listen. Let me do this for you. I'll slip it in myself. The staff already gave it the OK. Whoever has a bug up their rear, well we'll just end run them. I'll paste it in sometime this week. Maybe tomorrow, young man. Maybe tomorrow."

"Thanks. Out with a bang, I guess."

"Out with a bang. Yes, out with a bang. I'll give you a call, Whitman and let you know the day."

Whit's hand was finally released from the vigorous handshake. Saul's fierce look dissipated, replaced by the sad expression Whit witnessed a few minutes before. "I'm sorry, boy. Sorry for you and sorry for us. Sorry for me."

The door closed in his face. The conversation was over.

Whit looked at the sign on the door for a moment. Saul Bromberg was the best boss he ever had. Gruff, quick, but always going the extra step for his staff. And, he had done even more for Whit as he championed him up the ranks from reporter to editor. To pink slip. Whit shook his head and returned to his office. He spent the rest of the day sorting his few belongings into a box.

The last item he picked up was a fountain pen Saul had given him the previous year. He thought it was just a novelty item until an older reporter gasped when he saw Whit spinning it on the desk. He called it a Pelikan. Whit looked for an emblem of the pelican bird but found none. When he looked up the pen on the internet, he was

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shocked to discover it was worth over a thousand dollars. A pen! A fountain pen, no less. Whit smiled and slipped the pen in his pocket. With briefcase stuffed with his belongings, he walked out of the office.

In the evening when he told Elizabeth about his termination, she was angry. She kept pacing back and forth in his study. Whenever she was irritated the soft blonde hair and sensuous curves, subtly highlighted by her fashionable clothes, were eclipsed by a severe face.

“Fire you? You’re the best writer they have, Whit and everyone knows it. And, I don’t understand why you didn’t stand up for yourself. Tell the old goat you’re getting a lawyer! Unfair practice. Put a scare into the little Jewish shit.”

Whit looked at her as though for the first time. Not the stunningly attractive face. Not the voluptuous body. Rather he looked into her eyes and saw ugly anger.

“Liz, this is from the board, not Saul.”

“Bullshit! Wake-up, Whit. And, get a goddamn backbone! This is a goddamn Jew screwing you.”

She stomped out of the apartment without a word to Whit.

Wearily he walked to the couch and sat down. Elbows on his knees, his face was cradled in his hands. This was not his best week.

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CHAPTER SIX

Right after a spartan dinner, Saul Bromberg gingerly tapped small buttons on a wireless medical device which read his blood-sugar level. A brittle diabetic, he was meticulous about when and how much insulin he injected. He pressed his finger to the opening of the device, and a miniature blade jabbed and retracted, piercing a millimeter into his alcohol-prepared fingertip. A crimson drop appeared close to his fingernail. He put a thin white strip into the detector and dabbed the blood on it. Instantly his blood-sugar levels were read, duly reported, and an order appeared on the screen for how much and when to take his next insulin shot. Wirelessly routed to the computer in his study, the information was immediately uploaded to his medical records.

“Computer says I need another shot, honey. Another shot. Hmm. Larger dose this time. Must be off-balance.” Saul pulled out a fresh needle, filled it to the prescribed level, and injected himself.

Ten minutes later he staggered into the living room. “Jen, I’m not feeling well. Need to take another blood test. Help me, will you?” The results told him to take another injection.

An hour later a frantic wife called 911. An ambulance raced the convulsing man to the hospital, monitors already attached. A medical technician stared at a computer screen. “Jeez, Frank, monitors are reporting high blood sugars. But this guy looks like he’s in insulin shock.”

The ambulance driver, talked over his shoulder, as he focused on the road, racing down choked streets, cars pulling to the side. “Yeah, well, you’re not the doctor. Give him more insulin if you’re supposed to.”

Saul clenched his teeth, his head shaking wildly, and tried to protest, but only grunts came out. The medic, however, watched a monitor and proceeded with the computer’s directions.

When the man turned to the thrashing patient, he patted him on the arm. “Don’t worry, sir. This will fix you up fine.”

Saul closed his eyes as the technician injected the third dose of insulin. Two minutes after the injection, he was wildly contorting

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as the paramedic tried to hold him down. Then EEG machine sounded its death knell.

Few words, and those few perfunctory, passed between Whit and Elizabeth before she went to work the next morning. Alone, he looked at the bright blue water for a while, trying to find a modicum of equanimity to start his first day out of work. Finally, with a shrug, he turned to his computer and began a depressing search for a new job.

Two hours later the sun disappeared behind ever increasing clouds, the lake now leaden. Whit combed his hands through his thick hair. Over a dozen inconclusive phone calls, all answered by voice, but none human, prompted him to contemplate a trip to Syracuse to touch the inside of a human hand instead of the outside of a phone button. The shrill ring of his cell phone snapped Whit from his reverie. He picked it up, hoping someone was returning one of his calls. Instead, it was Saul's secretary crying on the phone.

“Oh, Whit, he went to the hospital last night. Acute insulin shock. He died, Whit. He died.”

Whit did his best to console her, but he was devastated. The little, white-haired man who always seemed to be moving, talking, and directing was an elemental force at the newspaper. Death was inconceivable. After hanging up, he grabbed his coat and ran to his car.

Whit's long walk through the building was broken by fellow workers, many in tears, relating in hushed conversations the mosaic of Saul's last hours. Insulin overdose. The paramedics disregarded symptoms and followed the directions of the computer instead. Later a computer malfunction was ruled as the cause.

A stupid, stupid computer error, resulting in an unnecessary and senseless death. Whit retreated to the cocoon of his small, empty office, closed the blinds, darkness his refuge. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket to text Elizabeth. A phone number from the

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newspaper the previous day diverted him. It was a text message from Saul.

Found article. Tomorrow's paper. Direct insert.

The floodgates open, Whit finally cried. Even to the end, the old man had tried to do right by him. After getting control of himself, he opened his door and grabbed today's paper from a nearby desk. He turned to the editorial page. The article wasn't there. Well, it was longer than most editorials so he scanned the entire paper, looking in all sections. There was no article. He walked over to the assistant publisher's office. They chatted briefly about Saul.

“Saul wrote me a note yesterday saying he put an article of mine in the paper. But I didn't see it. Know anything?”

“Yeah, got spat out by the computer. Something about inappropriate line space. I couldn't configure it the way the computer demanded so I had to table it for tomorrow's edition.”

Whit went back to his office. He took Saul's pen out, looked at it, and gently tapped it on the table. Computer being finicky about his article. Computer error with Saul. Jerry complaining about computers which self-fix themselves. Computer error with his bank account. Coincidences? He wondered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Whit felt like he was being watched when he left the building. *Great, add paranoia to the list of my problems.* He glanced over his shoulder. The security camera was pointed directly at him. Again. To the left of the edifice was a smaller clothing shop that hosted another security camera. That security camera turned toward him as well. He looked across the street. *I wonder.*

Whit walked between two parked cars to see if any cameras across the street had locked on to him. A mini-van suddenly swerved directly toward him. The vehicle crashed into the gap between the two parked cars. Whit leaped backwards landing painfully on his rump. The van screeching to a stop, the driver stumbled out of the car and hurried over to Whit. “Are you alright? The car just swerved on its own.”

Whit looked at the man’s mangled hood and recognized the logo on the van. *Computer Safe.* It was one of the inexpensive, new models, which had the option of a computer-directed autopilot. The advertisements cited a nearly perfect collision-free record.

Someone picked him up, and a moment later an ambulance arrived. *Wow! That was fast.*

Though he was not hurt, except for what would later turn into a huge black and blue spot on his derriere, he conceded to be checked by the paramedics. They loaded him into the ambulance, and hooked up the appropriate monitors. Uneven beeps from the equipment, and nervous stares between the two medics signaled a problem.

“What’s wrong?” Whit asked nervously, looking from one paramedic to the other.

“Sir, how does your head feel? Are you feeling nauseous?”

“No. I feel fine. Well,” He pointing to his buttocks. “It hurts here.”

“Why don’t you lay your head down, Mr. Emerson. Just rest.”

In a few seconds, he was reclined in a speeding ambulance, siren blaring, and wondering if his head really *did* hurt. Whit watched one of the paramedics prepare an intravenous feed. It was like he was in some bizarre nightmare unable to stop the fatal

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juggernaut. The attendant rubbed alcohol on the inside of his wrist as he held a long, ugly needle.

“Just relax, sir. Quick sting and then it’s over.”

Saul’s death in an ambulance. Computer malfunctions. This is crazy, he thought, bolting up into a sitting position.

“No! Stop right now. I don’t want you sticking anything in me. I’m fine.”

The ambulance screeched into the emergency area of the hospital, the door flung wide and Whit faced a small army of doctors and nurses. The medics started to strap him down in the ambulance gurney. Whit tried to push himself off, but one of the male nurses from the group held him down.

“Stop it! Stop it! Get away!” he cried.

A doctor had already grabbed his wrist to check his pulse while the ambulance medic forced the gurney through the crowd and toward the emergency room door. Everyone was staring at Whit. *They think I’m acting this way because of the fall.*

He spoke more slowly, more calmly. “Listen. I wasn’t hit by the van. I jumped away.” The procession in white and blue slowed and then stopped, heads cocked now.

“Look at my head! No blood, no bruises. My head is fine.” The two men holding him down relaxed a bit. “Let me go for a second, and I will show you my *only* injury.”

He got off the gurney, pulled his pants down a bit and showed them the bruise now forming on his buttocks. “*That’s* where I landed. My head wasn’t hurt at all.”

“But, sir, the computer monitor...”

“Can make mistakes,” Whit finished. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the medic from the ambulance with the needle, elbowing his way closer.

Whit reached into his pocket and withdrew his cell phone. He hit the speed dial for his lawyer. No answer. *Damn it, Sam, pick up!* Now another nurse, bald and brawny was moving toward him from the other side.

Whit talked loudly into the dead phone.

“Hey, Sam. Gotta a problem here at the hospital. Seems they are insistent I accept their care without my consent. Yeah. Okay.”

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A brawny male nurse grabbed his arm. Instead of jerking away, Whit casually turned and spoke calmly. “Could you move a bit closer? My lawyer wants a few names.”

The nurse let go and retreated backwards. Doctors and nurses looked at each other. A slow retreat began. Whit turned to the medic brandishing the needle. “You, ahh, Middlebee, ID number 453. Wait, come back.”

For the medical profession, a summoned lawyer was the same as a cross for vampires. Within seconds the group vanished, leaving Whit facing a middle-aged woman with a wrinkled face and hair frozen with what must have been lacquer rather than hair spray. She was angrily shoving a sheet into his face.

“You refused care, young man. Now you *must* sign this form stating that you refused care.”

The crone from accounting had no fear; the paper she brandished was a sufficient talisman against any lawyer. Delighted to absolve the hospital from any negligence, Whit quickly signed the document.

“The ride in the ambulance cost \$386. Sign this document agreeing to pay.”

“But I didn’t even ask for an ambulance. It just...”

Arms folded she stared at him. Exhausted, Whit shook his head and signed. A few seconds later he was alone, the automatic door to emergency room closing behind the woman clutching two sheets of paper.

Whit wanted to get far away as fast as he could. As he rushed along the sidewalk to the main entrance, he checked his cell phone to find a taxi service. The low groan of a moving car distracted him and he looked back over his shoulder. A coal black car glided out of the visitor parking lot. It was moving toward Whit. He picked up his pace alongside the thin sidewalk which ran adjacent to the brick building. If he could just reach a side door about forty feet away, he could duck in and be safe. The black car had tinted windows and was picking up speed. Whit sprinted to the door and tried to open it. Locked. He looked across the street at another car, his only other cover. Not enough time, he realized. He turned around to face the oncoming car, crouched slightly, ready to jump. The car angled toward him. For a moment he was paralyzed as the car approached. Then it pulled up directly beside him.

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The passenger window slid down and Jerry, the computer technician, smiled. "Hey. Need a ride?"

Whit's whole body sagged, the tension dropping out of him.

"Yeah. Thanks." Whit opened the door. "Hey, what are you doing here, Jerry?"

Jerry checked the rearview mirror and started down the long driveway. "Counseling session with some group. Apparently, there are a number of people who are just as delusional as me about computers."

Whit looked out the window as the bricks of the hospital zipped by. "Maybe I should join the group."

"Whaddya mean?" probed Jerry as he turned into the stream of traffic.

"Computer problems with my bank account. And, you know. Saul's death. Computer malfunction."

"Yeah, great guy, Saul. There's a lot of death due to so-called computer errors, Whit. Too many, if you ask me."

Indeed. And, I'm beginning to think I could have been one of those deaths.

"I'm telling you a lot of strange things are happening. Not just to me, Whit. Other people as well. Today in the group a mother said her son just disappeared."

"Did she contact the police?" asked Whit.

"Whit, she meant disappeared from everything. There is no record of him ever existing. She claimed he worked out of his home for some computer firm. The computer firm apparently doesn't exist. There aren't any records of him from his high school. It's as though he never was born."

"Maybe he never existed at all, Jerry."

"You're saying she's wacko. Maybe. Jesus. I don't know anymore. But there are other stories like hers. And don't forget my little problem, the computers fixing themselves."

Whit didn't offer up his own unique problems. A month ago, he would have written Jerry off as being nuts. But now he wasn't so sure.

After Jerry dropped him off at the newspaper parking lot, Whit gingerly eased himself into the driver's seat of his own car. Once positioned so the pain in his rump was minimal, Whit decided to risk Elizabeth's ire and phoned her. He settled back into his seat. If she

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picked up it would most likely be a long and much needed conversation. Fortunately, she was not in a meeting and, another happy surprise, she was pleasant with him. He told her of Saul's death and his own near-death experience.

"Oh, poor baby! Sounds like you had a bad day. Saul was old and sick, honey. Those things happen, Whit. But this could be a good thing for you, dear. Why don't you go talk with Saul's boss and find out if you can get your job back? I mean they *are* down an editor."

Whit's head sank to his chest. He raised it back up and looked at the phone, hearing her call him.

"Whit? Whit? Are you still there?"

He pressed the END button.

Whit returned to his office one last time three days later. After he transferred some files from his work computer to a thumb drive, he went down to say goodbye to Jerry. A young man, maybe still in high school, greeted him.

"Hi. Whit Emerson, right? Trying to get to know everybody."

"Well, don't worry too much about me, I got my pink slip a few days ago."

"Ouch, tough luck. Sorry."

"Where's Jerry?"

"Didn't you get the email? Yesterday, he ahh, well, he kinda lost it. White jacket ride in the ambulance."

"Oh, my God. What hospital?"

"I dunno." The scruffy-haired technician replied and went back to his tinkering.

Whit started to leave, but stopped at the door and turned around.

"Hey, do you actually fix those computers or does the internet do it automatically?"

Red-faced, the kid replied, "Of course I fix them. What are you talking about?"

Whit backed out, "Just asking. Just asking."

Rushing through his front door, he checked his contact file on the phone. He pushed the button to call. "Hey, Maude. It's Whit."

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The weak voice, barely audible replied. "Whit? I don't know any Whit."

Whit looked at the phone. "Whitman Emerson, from the newspaper. We went to the Dinosaur Diner together a few months back?"

"Oh, of course. You ordered the twenty hot wings, didn't you?"

"Yeah, that Whit. Big mistake. How's Jerry doing? I heard he was in the hospital."

"He is, but they won't let me see him. They say he's too violent." Maude was completing a doctorate in math and she was an expert with fractals but frighteningly deficient with common sense.

"So, you haven't seen him since he was admitted?" Whit asked incredulously.

"Well, yes. They let me contact him through a computer monitor, Whit. We talk. He's tired, confused, sometimes agitated."

Computers again. "Maude, try to see him face to face. You're his wife. You have the right to see him."

Silence for a moment. "Yes. That makes sense. I'll go there this afternoon."

"If there's anything I can do, just call me." But she had already hung up. She didn't score high with social graces either.

He recalled the short drive he had with Jerry a few days before. To be sure, he talked about some pretty wild stuff, but he was coherent and in control. He even joked about his computer paranoia. These were the trappings of a sane man, not one who "lost it."

What is going on?

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Whit spent the next week trying, unsuccessfully, to at least get an interview.

Frustrated, he looked out the broad living room window, this time taking no joy in the view. His mind was consumed with the travesties of the recent days, from his depleted bank account to Saul's death to Jerry's...My God! Jerry is in the hospital! He found Jerry's cell phone number and called. No answer, a crazy message joking about calling back "much, much later." He called the hospital.

"No, sir. He was released a few days ago."

He hung up, grabbed his keys off the table, and went out the front door. Twenty minutes later he pulled up to a condominium complex, considerably less expensive than his. Getting out of the car, he walked to the door and knocked. No curtains on the windows, he could see that Jerry's and Madge's apartment was empty.

A few doors down, a middle-aged man shuffled out in slippers to retrieve the mail.

Seeing Whit hovering by Jerry's former apartment, he yelled, "Moved."

"Where?"

"I dunno. Never saw them to say goodbye. Moving van people said Illinois." The man put his hand to his chin momentarily, and then looked at Whit. "Joplin. That was it. Joplin. Joplin, Illinois."

"When?"

"About two, maybe three days ago. Heard Jerry lost his job at the paper."

Job. Sanity. Maybe his life.

"Thanks."

Whit sped home and immediately got on the internet. Using Jerry's name, he found Jerry's new number in Joplin, Illinois. He dialed the number. Please be there. Please be there, Jerry. Four rings passed as Whit clenched the phone tighter and tighter.

"Hello."

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“Jerry. Oh my God, it’s great to hear your voice, buddy. Whit Emerson.”

“Oh, hi Whit. What’s up?”

“What’s up? My God, you moved away, dude. That’s what’s up.

“Yeah. Hospital put me on some meds and I’m much better now. Total control, Whit. No more worries about computers.”

“Why did you leave Rochester?”

“Doc thought a change of scenery might do me good. So, Madge and I just up and left. Nice place, Joplin.”

Whit was quiet for a moment, thinking.

“Kinda scared me. Reminds me of that time you left the Red Wings game right in the middle of the seventh inning. Man, you scared us all that day.”

There was silence on the other end for a moment.

“Yeah. I had some weird in me back then. I mean leaving a Red Wings game. Stupid, huh?”

Whit gulped and answered. “Yup, stupid alright. Well, good to hear you’re feeling better. Keep in touch, okay?”

“Sure. Take care, Whit.”

Whit put the phone in the cradle slowly, like he was handling some explosive. Then he just stared at it. Jerry hated baseball and they had never gone to any sports event together. *Who had I been talking to? What, in God’s name, was happening?*

Elizabeth came home an hour later. Seeing Whit on the couch, his body bent over and hands clasped together, she raised her eyebrows.

“Great, just great. Mr. Wonderful and his cheery ways.”

She walked through the kitchen to the bedroom, yelling at him on the way. “Damn it, Whit! Can’t you clean up your mess on the counter?”

He slowly got off the sofa and walked to the kitchen to put away the soiled lunch dishes. Coming back from the bedroom, she brushed past him, deliberately pushing him against the counter. He smelled liquor on her breath. She reached for a wine glass and filled it to the brim. Then she settled down and turned on the television, a

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phone in her hand, a muffled conversation with someone. He wondered if she was seeing someone else. He was surprised he so easily accepted the possibility. He was not surprised that he really didn't care.

After wiping down the counters, he went to the liquor cabinet, the door wide open from Elizabeth's withdrawal. Instead of closing it, he reached for one of the unopened bottles. Before he could pour himself a heavy dose, the doorbell rang. Bourbon bottle in hand, he trudged to the door and opened it to red blinking lights of half a dozen police cars. He was pushed aside as black-suited officers forced themselves past him. Whit's arm was grabbed by one of the officers as a detective recited his Miranda rights. Within moments he was handcuffed and led outside. Overwhelmed by the invasion, Whit watched his computer and Elizabeth's get placed in a small van along with a steady stream of paraphernalia from their condo. He looked over his shoulder and saw police officers roughly emptying drawers of his desk into transparent plastic bags. As he was led to a waiting car, a detective reached in his front shirt pocket and confiscated his cell phone.

“What's this all about?” he finally demanded.

“Child pornography.”

“But, I never...”

The man looked at him, concerned. “Sir, you have been read your Miranda rights, correct?”

“Yes, but...” Then he shut-up. He had to get to his lawyer.

Elizabeth, uncuffed, was led outside by a police woman. Whit was about twenty feet away. Seeing him, she wrenched herself free and ran to him.

“Goddamn bastard. Child pervert.”

“Liz, you know better.” She started hitting him.

Two officers dragged her away. Whit was pushed into a police car, his neighbors blatantly gawking at the drama. Elizabeth yanked away from the officers again and ran alongside the moving car, pounding on his window. Her face, contorted in anger, lost all of its beauty and the raw, ugly truth of their relationship wrenched his heart.

As the car sped away from the screaming woman, Whit closed his eyes.

ROBERT SELLS

CHAPTER NINE

As Whit was being arrested, Jimmy was in court waiting to testify about his latest arrest.

“The prosecution calls Detective James Northup to the stand.”

The thin, middle-aged man ambled to the witness box. He eased himself in the seat, tired eyes and wrinkled face added credibility to his qualifications, which included two citations for arresting a drug kingpin and a serial killer, both duly noted by the prosecutor.

“On the morning of the September 16th, do you recall what transpired at the Rochester Savings and Loan bank around 4 AM?” Adjusting his tie, the prosecutor positioned himself in front of the jury, his eyes passing from one pair of eyes to another in the jury box.

“Yes, sir. I watched a man go into the vaults and extract cash.”

“Do you know how much money?”

“The sum was 15,307 dollars.”

The attorney raised eyebrows in mock surprise. Without turning he asked his next question. “And, is this man in the courtroom?”

“Well...” Jimmy made a point of looking over the myriad defendants still awaiting their time in the court. He even scanned the jury box.

“No, sir. I don’t see him here.”

The prosecutor swiveled his head towards the detective. He began to point at the defendant and then stopped to draw a deep breath. “Detective Northup, take a careful look at the defendant. Was this the man you saw robbing the bank?”

Jimmy looked at Pat Fallon for a few seconds. “Nope. Definitely not him. The robber’s face was rounder. This guy was parked in a handicapped space. Gosh darn it, I hate when that happens. Taking parking places away from the old and infirmed. Anyway, in the dark, I guess the wrong guy got taken into the station.”

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Random discussions in the audience, subdued by decorum, now ceased entirely. All heads had turned toward the strange drama in the front.

Red-faced, the judge bore down on the detective. "Damn it, Northup, this is the second time you've played this game in my courtroom. You brought the defendant to the police station yourself, didn't you?"

The young defensive attorney rose. "I object sir. You—"

"Shut up, counselor! I know what I can and can't do in my courtroom. Well, didn't you bring him in?"

Jimmy shrugged. "It was dark, your Honor, and I was tired. Mistakes happen."

The judge adjusted some papers on his desk and was muttering something only Jimmy heard which was just as well as it would have resulted in his impeachment.

A few minutes later Pat Fallon, alias Tom Smith walked out of the courtroom as a free man. Past the swinging door he found himself face-to-face with Detective Northup.

"You got a Get Out of Jail Free card, Dr. Fallon."

He cautiously nodded. "You know me."

"Yup. And you owe me and I'm calling in the chit now."

Fallon looked at his savior with his eyebrows raised.

"Give me your word you won't make any more deposits."

Fallon sighed and his body relaxed. "You have my word, Detective."

"Do you have enough money for the treatment?"

Pat looked at the man in front of him for a few seconds.

"Not, not quite, but we should be alright."

Jimmy tugged at his ear. "Here, take this."

He handed Pat an envelope and then walked away.

Pat opened it and took out a check for eighty thousand dollars. He looked up and saw the gray-haired man in the rumpled trench coat go out the front door.

~~CHAPTER TEN~~

~~When Whit arrived at the police station, he was immediately locked in a small room with two old wooden chairs and a table. Whit leaned his elbows on the desk and rubbed his face, eyes closed tight. This has not been a great week.~~

~~An hour later, the door opened and he looked up apprehensively. Sam Perkins, his lawyer, stepped past the door. “Sam, I didn’t do it. I swear.”~~

~~“Shut up!” snapped Sam as he closed the door behind him. “Don’t say anything to anyone. When you get to court, answer questions only from me. You got that?”~~

Whit nodded. He had never seen his friend so angry. Sam did an about face and marched out. Whit spent another hour alone, opening his mouth only to bite his fingernails. The door abruptly swung open and two officers yanked him up, walked him through a room of uniformed officers, detectives and an assortment of public nuisances. All talking stopped and, like multiple wasp stings, Whit suffered the stares of everyone. Dragged outside and then roughly pushed into a police van, Whit bowed his head and clenched his jaw. A few minutes later, he was yanked from the van, then dragged past bright lights and cameras into a courtroom.

Led to the front, Whit saw Sam conferring with the judge. The arraignment went quickly. Few words were spoken. Something about “risk of flight.” Numbers were bandied about and the judge banged his gavel and left. Sam talked with some clerk and then signed a seemingly endless stream of papers. The officer holding Whit, reached behind and unlocked the handcuffs.

His attorney linked his arm around Whit’s and led him out of the courtroom. “Thanks, Sam. Jesus, it’s a—”

“Shut-up!”

Whit didn’t say another word as they made their way back through the lights and the reporters, camera’s snapping, people yelling out questions, Sam blaring out “No comment.” Into the relative quiet of the parking garage, the two men got into Sam’s Subaru.

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As they peeled out of the garage, the lawyer glared at his friend. “You are swimming in deep, deep shit, my friend. They have some really disgusting pictures of young boys on your computer. Emails with you saying some horrible things. Level with me right now. You into kiddie porn?”

Whit shot him an angrily look. “Come on, Sam, you’ve known me since college. You’re my lawyer for Christ’s sake.”

“Give me an answer, yes or no,” yelled Sam.

“No, God damn it!”

Sam accelerated down the ramp leading to the highway.

“Okay. We’ll work from there. Then who had access to your computer?”

Whit looked out the window. “Just me. Sam, I didn’t do any kiddie porn and I didn’t do the other stuff either.”

Sam darted a look at Whit. “What other stuff?”

Whit told how the porn site had depleted his bank account.

“Did you talk to the police about this stuff?”

“No. Maybe I should have, but screwy things were happening too fast. Going bankrupt, losing my job, Saul’s death.”

Sam’s stone face morphed into a pensive one.

As Sam pulled into his long driveway, Whit saw the security camera above the two-car garage rotate to follow the car. Sam went to open his door to get out, when Whit grabbed his arm.

“Don’t get out yet, Sam. Your surveillance camera, is it new?”

Sam leaned over the steering wheel and eyed the camera. “Yeah, had it installed last week. Motion detector rotates to video any movement. Helluva little device. Connected directly to the police station. New system from California. Cheap. Everybody is getting them.”

Whit looked up at the camera from inside the tinted windows. It was slowly moving from side to side as though it was trying to find an angle to see inside the car. Whit related his experience with the cameras at the newspaper building.

“Could be paranoia, but could we park in the garage?”

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Sam looked up at the camera again, watching its tiny motions, and then looked at his friend. “Yeah, probably a good idea.”

The double door for the right side of the four-car garage opened, and Sam eased the car into the last empty space. The two men walked inside the house. Whit sat on a sofa, head down and arms folded as though in prayer. Sam brought in two bottles of beer and handed one to Whit who looked up, his face lined with concern. Sam winked at him.

“We’ll get through this, buddy. Right now, drink. Nectar of the gods from Mt. Olympus.”

Whit studied the beer bottle. “Got your metaphors wrong, my friend. Nectar, Greek gods, mead, Norse gods. This,” he held the bottle up, “is definitely mead.”

“Shut-up and drink,” Sam responded as they clinked bottles and took long draughts, Whit’s considerably longer than Sam’s.

Sam fell back down on the couch.

“Look, I’m your lawyer, and I gotta believe you.” Whit started to protest, but Sam held up his hand. “No, no. I really do believe you. And, the porn you ordered. Classy Whatever. Too coincidental and, from what you tell me, it was just smut. Nothing to do with kiddie porn, certainly not young boys. Also, they found the pictures and the emails, far too quickly. Hell, it was right there for anyone to see. Guys dealing in that shit always try to hide it. You didn’t. So, I agree with you, Whit. Someone is setting you up. Who hates you? Who profits from you being in jail?”

Whit wearily shook his head. They were questions he had futilely asked himself dozens of times. Sam kept peppering him with questions, but the answer was always a shrug.

“How much was the bail?”

Sam hesitated and then looked right into Whit’s eyes. “A mill.”

Whit whistled. “Where did you get that kind of money?”

Sam puffed his cheeks and breathed out slowly.

“Only had to put up ten percent. Drawn from my business account. My entire business account.”

Whit stared at his friend. “Jesus, Sam, I don’t know what to say. Thanks. Thanks so much.”

Sam shrugged. “Tis my penance for not doing enough pro bona work.”

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Sam finished his beer in one gulp. “The kiddie porn bail. It’s too crazy big, man. Hell, a serial killer would have a smaller bail. I knew someone wanted you in jail, buddy so I had to keep you out. What’s that quote from Hamlet? You were the English major.”

Whit looked into the glowing embers in the fireplace. “Something’s rotten in Denmark.”

Sam got up and patted his friend on the shoulder. “Yeah, something’s rotten there, but not my cooking.”

Sam put some steaks on the grill. Half an hour later the two men settled down with another beer and the sirloins to watch the eleven o’clock news.

“A local man was arrested on child pornography charges.” A video appeared of Whit being led into the courthouse. Watching himself being treated like so many other suspects, coat drawn over the head, lights flashing, Whit cringed.

“Whitman Emerson, an editor for the Democrat and Chronicle, was released on bail earlier this evening. Less than an hour later, he allegedly attacked a woman at an ATM. Please be advised, this footage might not be suitable for all of our viewers.”

The video feed was poor quality. A man in clothes identical to Whit’s dragged a middle-aged woman away from the ATM machine. Whit jumped when a sharp sound like a gunshot exploded out of sight. The assailant came back into view and stared up at the camera. There was no doubt it was the young editor.

“What? How?”

“Jesus Christ!”

“That wasn’t me.”

“Think I don’t know that? Someone spliced you into the picture. Damn good job, too.” Sam got up and paced back and forth.

Whit had cradled his head in his hands and rocked back and forth. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God.”

“Shut up, Whit. Whoever is doing this has connections with the police, the court, and is a goddamn expert with computers. Not a triple team we can take on. At least, not yet. You have to get away and fast.”

Sam left the room. Whit shook his head, staring at the ground. This afternoon he was sure his life had hit rock bottom. That it couldn’t get any worse. Then he was arrested and now he was

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wanted for murder. Sam was right. Somebody wanted him in jail or dead.

A minute later his friend returned. The lawyer motioned for him to follow. Whit slowly rose and followed Sam into the kitchen. Stopping for a moment in front of a key rack, the lawyer grabbed a set of keys which he handed to Whit. He pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and pushed it into Whit's other hand.

"Look, this is all I have in the house. From the safe."

"Sam." White hesitated.

"Just take it. You already owe me bail money and my attorney fees, what's another few thousand?" A smile broke through the concerned face. "Take my girlfriend's car. She's visiting her mom in Tampa. Whoever is behind this, they might have my license plates targeted already."

"Jesus, you're telling me to run? Isn't that some sort of ethics violation?"

Sam smiled. "I'm a lawyer. Ethics? What's that?"

Sam pushed him into the garage, but now he was whispering, concerned the security camera had ears as well as eyes. "Take a train anywhere south of here. Not Canada. Give me a call in a few days. But don't say who you are and don't stay on the phone for any more than a few seconds. Leave the keys in the car; I'll find it. Now get going, fast."

"You sure about this, Sam?"

"Whit, whoever they are, they want you in jail. And, I can't keep you out now. Not after that murder and video. If they get you in jail, you're dead, buddy. So, yeah, I'm sure."

Whit looked at his friend and mumbled thanks. Sam pushed him into the car.

"Get out of here. Now move!"

Whit slipped into the car and drove out of the garage. As he pulled down the street he saw two things, the garage door going down and the security camera following his path.

If Sam's camera was tracking him, then others would too. Shit.

He pulled the car over in a dark, nearly empty street. Exiting the car, he jogged to the next street. After a few blocks, he ended up in a busy street. Well, one with a few cars and trucks post-midnight. After a few minutes, he hailed a taxi.

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Two minutes later, he was driving down State Street with Mohammed, a taciturn swarthy man with a peppery mustache. "Buffalo. You go Buffalo? You give me three hundred dollars, now! When we there, give me two hundred more." Whit handed over four hundred.

"Call in sick and you can have another four hundred when we get there." The driver pocketed the bills and turned his meter off. He wasn't going south, not yet. He had to go northwest to Buffalo. In the taxi, Whit prayed. Prayed that Rick was home. If anyone could help him, Rick could.

A little over an hour later, the taxi entered the outskirts of Buffalo. It seemed police cars were blinking their lights and sounding sirens along nearly every street.

"This Buffalo, not good city," complained Mohammed.

Whit's stomach was turning over and over with each passing set of flashing lights. Every block or so, a car was pulled over with the driver's legs spread and his hands on the hood of their car as they were being patted down. All were tall and Caucasian, like Whit. When they came to an intersection, he saw a Holiday Inn. He made a quick decision.

"There. Mohammed. There's my hotel."

After paying the taxi cab driver, Whit watched him drive away. He stared at the door to the hotel. *No bags, paying by cash, no identification. Why not hang a sign on my chest: Felon on the run?*

Whit turned and walked briskly down one of the darker side streets. He had visited Rick a dozen times, but never on foot and in the dark. He reckoned he was moving in the right general direction, but he didn't recognize any of the streets. After an hour, he was on the outskirts of a factory area, hopelessly lost. He found an unlocked door in an abandoned warehouse, curled up on the floor, and immediately fell asleep.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The captain of the detectives always kept the blinds down in his glass-enclosed office. Whenever one of the subordinates was called into the office and the door was slammed shut, the deep bass voice of the captain vibrated those same blinds. Some detectives joked that a few years ago a rookie detective went in and never came out. Whether they believed the story was true or not, few entered without a churning stomach. The man who entered now felt no fear but did have a churning gut. He fingered his stomach. "Damn tacos." Unlike any other detective, he just sauntered in.

The captain was typing so Jimmy sat on the couch and lay down, legs stretched out. Wearing dark brown pants and a light brown shirt with a dark chocolate tie, Captain Mulligan's clothes seemed to be mocking his caramel skin color. Over the snippy taps of the keys, a deep, gravelly voice, rumbled, "Get your dirty shit-kickers off my couch, Northup."

Jimmy left them there. Captain Mulligan, a former All-Conference linebacker, raised his still formidable body from his seat and stood beside the reclined detective. "Why don't you ever listen to me, Detective? Who do you think you are?"

Jimmy looked up at his boss towering above him. "I'm the best detective you got, you ignorant, good-for-nothing, arrogant, black bastard."

Mulligan glared at him. "You always exaggerate, Northup. You know I'm not black. Molasses, maybe. But not black."

Jimmy couldn't suppress the smile.

He had known the captain since they were rookies together over a quarter century before. The man had been just as imposing then, ramrod straight with a face chiseled out of granite. Jimmy witnessed the gruff exterior crumble when a thirteen-year-old girl in braces described being raped. Mulligan's eyes glistened then, but when the pair caught the rapist, those same eyes seemed black as night promising a bullet, or worse, with the slightest provocation.

"What in the Devil's hell were you doing in the courtroom yesterday?" he asked sitting back down on his chair.

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“Just couldn’t be sure this Tom Smith was the kind of guy Captain Mulligan would want to put away for twenty years.”

Mulligan shook his head. “There are folks looking to nail your ass, Jimmy. The judge leading the charge, the mayor right behind him, and the district attorney was more than willing to help.”

“Well, sometimes the truth has to be bent just a wee bit.”

“You didn’t bend the truth, Northup. You broke the damn truth in two and hammered the halves into splinters. This is getting serious, detective.”

Jimmy belched.

Disgusted, Mulligan looked out his solitary external window at the skyline of Rochester. “Well, can I at least assume he won’t be robbing any more banks?”

“I know he won’t.”

He turned back to the detective. “Of course, you won’t tell me how you know, will you?”

“Hell, no! Wouldn’t want you to perjure yourself, big guy.”

The captain frowned as he fingered through papers, sliding one out of the neat pile. “Either the higher ups didn’t know what you did or they don’t care. You’ve been assigned to another big case. Did you hear anything about this newspaper guy turned murderer?”

“Yeah, on the news last night. Guy freaked out over something.”

“Yeah, he killed a woman on Broad Street, right after he gets out of jail. Stupid. Probably needed money. An APB was issued immediately. State-wide. Anyway, you got assigned to find the guy.” He gave Jimmy a perp sheet, and the detective read it over, while Mulligan talked.

“Child porn. Bank account is overdrawn, just a misdemeanor, but maybe it plays into the case, I don’t know. All in the last few weeks. He’s already on the FBI’s ten most wanted list.”

Jimmy looked up from the sheet, surprised. “Ten most wanted? For one murder and child porn? Pretty quick, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was. Also, the NSA is involved.”

The National Security Agency had been created to collect and analyze foreign communications as well protect the nation’s information systems. The President’s first year budget dramatically increased both NSA’s security force and their salaries. In his second year, he championed National Security Presidential Directive 63,

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making the NSA the overreaching entity to which all other agencies were subordinated. Other agencies CIA, FBI to state and local police forces were jealous of its increased power and felt, rightly or wrongly, the increased power of the NSA compromised their efforts.

“Ahh, the kindly men from Washington. Why do they want him?”

“No one is saying. The police chief gave you carte blanche. You got an open line for any manpower, too. He wants him found and fast.”

Jimmy shook his head. “This level of interest doesn’t make any sense to me, Sean.”

The captain looked out the window at dark clouds rolling in foreshadowing an autumn storm. He replied with a voice dropped a number of decibels. “This case has trouble written all over it. Watch your backside, Jimmy.”

Jimmy returned to his small office. He leaned back in his chair and perused the two-page summary on Whit Emerson. Living with a girlfriend in an expensive condo, all bills paid promptly until last month, basically a normal guy. There had to be something dark in his background. He needed to see the “dust under this guy’s bed,” the stain in his soul. Eying his own computer, he shook his head and walked over to Al’s desk, the surface of which was neatly ordered with every item in its appointed place.

The captain frowned. “I need some help, detective.”

From what Al could collect from the internet, he and Jimmy dissected Whitman Emerson’s past. He seemed like the All-American boy, a high school basketball star, Dean’s list scholar in college, and rising to the pinnacle of his profession. There were a number of allegations of sexual misbehavior over the last ten years but all strangely lacking in specifics.

They studied the surveillance tapes of the killing. Though the woman’s face was blurry, the perp’s face was relatively clear and it was definitely Whit Emerson. Jimmy studied the perp sheet one more time. *Why now? He had blown his entire checking account in just one month on expensive porn. Then he’s found with well detailed*

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evidence of child pornography. Finally, the murder, video evidence. Then the difference in clarity between him and the victim?

“Something not right here, Al.”

“Crazy guys do crazy things, Jimmy.”

The thread connecting the criminal tapestry was the computer. If someone was trying to set up the young writer, he, she, or they knew how to expertly manipulate those infernal machines. He looked at Al, the younger man’s fingers dancing over the keyboard. *Someone like Al.*

After lunch he gathered together his team. Jimmy’s partner, Morelli agreed to stay at the office tweaking the internet for any information about Emerson, especially credit card receipts if the guy was stupid enough to use credit cards while running from the law.

Two men were sent to interview the girlfriend, one to talk to her and one just to watch her. Another pair was sent to Whit’s lawyer. Jimmy wondered about phone taps and thought it was unlikely he would be granted such latitude. He couldn’t frame this case as terrorist and get the tap that way. But he would at least try. To his amazement, within minutes of the request, he got permission for phone taps. Though he would be protected by the law, someone else was sticking his or her neck out pretty far. Not his problem. He had another of his crew obtain phone taps for both the lawyer, the girlfriend and a few people at the newspaper.

For a few hours, he poured over all the emails Whit had written for the last two years. Mostly business, but some friendly exchanges with a few individuals. A few emails blatantly talking about sexual encounters with young males. *Graphic emails? This guy wasn’t stupid. If he sent emails, they would have been encrypted or from a different email address. Doesn’t make sense.*

A Mary Henderson had exchanged a few emails with him. They both referred to her brother, a guy named Rick. Rifling through the papers taken from Whit’s desk, Jimmy found a printout of an email, signed by “Rick.” It was in a plastic bag labeled: *Found behind the desk.*

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Looking forward to your visit in April. Mary's excited too. Give me a call and I'll meet you at the gas station.

Probably dropped behind the desk and was forgotten.

The address was thetigerman@cg.com. This address had not been listed with the other addresses found on Whit's computer. In addition, there were no emails to or from this address. *So how did it end up on a note?*

Jimmy went to his computer and typed a short message to this Rick character, requesting an interview. The computer spat out *Invalid email address*. Invalid to him, but apparently not Whit. He went to the basement evidence storage room and retrieved Whit's computer, turned it on, and typed in the same address. *Invalid email address* popped up again.

Jimmy scratched his head and shoved the paper in his pocket. His team already deployed in different chores; this was a knot he would untangle on his own. Jimmy knew a computer technician whose night job was getting information for lawyers and detectives on husbands and wives stretching the boundaries of a marriage. He called him late in the afternoon.

“Yeah, going home soon. But as soon as you get a geographic address on this Mary woman and the geographic address for, ahh, thetigerman@cg.com, call me. Anytime, even in the middle of the night.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Early the next morning Whit crawled out of the broken-down warehouse and headed toward a residential area. Eventually he found the street he knew would lead to his friend's house. There seemed to be even more police cars on the streets than last night. He even saw some state police cars trolling the streets. Not wanting to attract attention, he went inside a movie complex, bought a large box of popcorn and a soda for lunch and watched the same film three times. When darkness draped the neighborhood, he slipped out the back door and into the shadows, making his way to a house he had visited many, many times.

He met Rick in college. A recluse, he was known simply as Tigerman, the genius who could fix any computer, even Whit's ancient model.

When he first met Rick, face-to-face, he discovered the computer expert had an embarrassing stuttering problem. Strangely, the English major and the stuttering computer nerd became close friends.

One rainy afternoon after they played a new beta version of Mortal Combat, Rick shared his past with him. "My father would h-h-hit me sometimes. Mom wouldn't s-s-stop him. She sent me to my aunt. She wasn't much better. A d-d-druggie."

"Do you see your folks on vacation?" Whit asked.

"N-n-no. Haven't seen my parents since I l-l-left home when I was s-s-seven years old."

Whit winced in sympathy.

"What about your aunt?"

"S-s-she died last year. Drug overdose."

Whit didn't know what to say so he just shook his head. Rick started tapping keys again as Whit lounged on the neatly made bed reading an article in the Atlantic. The computer geek was not doing work, however. This time, prompted by the conversation, he decided to find out about his parents. A few quick clicks and he discovered

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his mother and father died in an auto accident a few years before he entered college. He felt no pain, certainly no remorse. It was the end of a disturbing chapter and he could now shelve the entire book. But the obituary held something very important, something which changed his life forever.

“I don’t b-b-believe it.”

Rick’s hair covered his face like a mop. Every now and again he would shake the strands and his eyes would peer out. He shook his head today and Whit was shocked to see tears.

“I h-h-have a sister,” he whispered.

Whit stood behind him as he tapped keys and entered one secure data base after another to find out about her. Orphaned, she was adopted by a childless couple. Her name now was Mary Henderson, she lived in Colorado, and she was a cheerleader in high school. Rick just stared at the screen.

“You gotta go see her, man,” Whit said gently.

“Maybe.”

But, he didn’t. At least not right away.

As Mary progressed through high school, Tigerman communicated with her through Facebook. Once she started college, Rick finally confided to her that he was her natural brother. Adopted when she was six, she recalled her early life with her parents. What Rick told her about their parents’ physical appearance and personalities jived with her memory. He showed her an electronic copy of both his birth certificate and hers. The freshman in college agreed they were siblings. Rick asked that she keep their sibling relationship a secret and Mary reluctantly agreed. After they set the date for a face-to-face meeting, Rick phoned his best friend and begged him to come as well.

“I c-c-can’t do this alone, Whit. Please.”

Then, a year out of college, Whit worked as a reporter for a newspaper in Albany. He took off Friday and the pair flew to Colorado where Mary Henderson attended Colorado State College. They met Mary at the front doors of the school library. She was cute, bubbly, laughing freely and often. Mary immediately took Rick’s arm and linked it with her own.

“Tigerman, it’s so good to finally be with you.” She hugged his arm and pressed her face on his shoulder.

“I-I-I’m R-R-Rick, not T-T-Tigerman.”

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“I know that Rick, I was just joking with you.” She smiled, raised up on her toes, and kissed his cheek.

So, the relationship began.

Rick made monthly visits to his sister, and Whit was always dragged along. Truth, be told, Whit actually enjoyed the visits. Not just because he was able to help his friend, but also because he enjoyed being with the bubbly sprite who seemed to coast effortlessly through life.

When Mary got out of college, she moved to Buffalo to be close to her brother. They kept their sibling bond secret per Rick’s request. Why, she didn’t know. But, if her brother wanted it that way, so be it. She introduced her brother and Whit to her parents and others as “good, good friends.”

Though he contacted Rick frequently online and chatted with him regularly through Skype, the last time they met in person was over a year ago. Then he drove a reluctant Elizabeth to meet his friends for the first time. Playing the role of hostess, Mary hustled about, cleaning up dinner dishes and filling wine glasses. She tried, unsuccessfully, to engage Elizabeth in conversation. With Whit she acted brusque and formal.

During the silent drive back to the condominium, Whit asked Elizabeth if she enjoyed herself.

She looked away from Whit and into the darkness. “It was alright, dear. Rick is a bit strange, but likeable. Terrible stuttering problem. I almost laughed a few times. Mary is rather immature. It’s a long drive, isn’t it?”

Hands tucked deep in his pockets, walking from the theater, the conversation with Elizabeth that dark night seemed like it was a lifetime ago. The only common thread, the dark night itself, silent and unknown. *Please Rick, be home.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A few hours before dawn, when night is its blackest, Whit stood in front of a large Tudor house. He rang the doorbell. No answer. He knocked on the door, held his breath, and listened. No noise at all. It was, after all, 3 AM. What did he expect? He gave a great sigh, stuck his freezing hands in his pockets and walked down the steps, wondering about his next move. Behind him he heard the door squeak open. He turned and saw Mary standing in the doorway. Relieved, a broad grin filled his face and he started to walk back.

“So, a get together without me?”

Where smiles once reigned on the freckled face of the twenty-three-year-old, a haggard expression held sway. Her voice was flat, as she pulled her bathrobe up to her neck.

“No, house-sitting. Rick’s away. What do you want?”

The cold voice stopped him at the bottom of the front steps.

“When will he be back, Mary? I—I *really* need to talk to him.”

“Not for a few days, maybe a week.”

Whit stared at her, wondering why she was acting so unfriendly. *But, why not? Every other part of my life is falling apart. Why should Mary be any different?* He shook his head and sighed.

“Well, I’ll be going then.” He turned around and retreated back along the path to the sidewalk, hands tucked deep in his pants pockets.

A voice, a bit softer, came from the door.

“Whit. Wait. Come back. Come in.”

Before turning around, he inhaled deeply and for one last time repeated his steps.

Mary led him, in silence, to the back of the house. One small, single lamp bravely fought the darkness. *Odd. Rick was afraid of the dark and usually had his home lit up as bright as day. Definitely not home. But why is Mary here?*

In the dim light, he saw that Mary’s hair was shorter now, but, as ever, riotously curly. She looked tired, far older than her years. Still pretty though. She opened the refrigerator and he saw it was jammed with food.

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She reached inside and then hesitated. She pivoted and glared at him. “Why do you want to see Rick?”

How much should he tell Mary? He looked down at the floor and the light from the refrigerator exposed dirt and dust bunnies littering the tiled floor. *What in hell is going on? Rick hired a house cleaning service twice a week to maintain cleanliness which he so enjoyed. Mary was just as much a clean-freak.* Whit looked back up at Mary. “It’s...ahh...between Rick and me.”

Her eyebrows arched over her eyes. She was either angry or hurt, Whit thought. Probably both. She snapped at him. “Why are you here so late?”

This is more of an interrogation than a discussion between friends.

Whit shook his head. “I don’t know anymore. I don’t know anything. It was a mistake. I’m sorry.”

She stared at him a moment and spoke in a flat voice. “You’re right, Whit. You shouldn’t be here.”

He looked down, breathing out his nose, jaw clenching and unclenching. *Something was wrong with her. With them. And, with me. I gotta get out of here. This is fucking crazy.* He got up from his chair.

A softer voice, asked “Whit, do you have a car?”

“Afraid not.”

Another firm, demanding question followed. “Then how did you get here?”

Whit shook his head. “It’s a long story. Look, I gotta go. Thanks for the beer.”

Soft again. She acted like the female version of Jekyll and Hyde. “Do you have a place to stay tonight?”

He closed his eyes before he answered.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do,” he lied and retreated toward the front door.

“Wait, Whit.”

Her tone, not the words stopped him. He looked back to see Mary rubbing her forehead and looking at the floor. When she looked up at him, her face had softened. The soft voice seemed to have conquered the hard one.

“You don’t have any place to stay, do you?”

Whit put his head down. “No.”

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He heard a sigh. “You can stay here. But just for the night. Okay?”

His shoulders fell down. A great fatigue had grabbed his entire body. He mumbled his thanks. Without another word, Mary led him to the room he used to stay in. Whit said goodnight and Mary just closed the door. Exhausted, he quickly fell asleep.

Someone was shaking him awake. Startled in the darkness with the unfamiliar surroundings, he recalled the taxi ride from Rochester, arriving at Rick’s, and Mary’s unusual behavior. He rubbed his eyes. Glancing at the clock, he moaned realizing he had only a few hours sleep. Whit turned and the light from the open bedroom door showed a gun pointing directly to his forehead. He followed the line of the arm holding the gun.

“What the fuck do y-y-you want?”

ROBERT SELLS

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At the diner directly across from his apartment, Jimmy absent-mindedly mouthed a piece of apple pie. For the third time he read the hard copy email again.

Looking forward to your visit in April. Mary's excited too. Give me a call and I'll meet you at the gas station.

A paper without a computer trail. Who destroyed the computer record of the emails from this guy and why? And, who was he, anyway? Certainly not Mary's brother, as she was an only child. Some sort of Christian brother? Jimmy shook his head and pushed away from the table. Too many question marks.

As soon as he got home, he fell onto his couch, sound asleep even before he took off his shoes. When he heard the shrill scream of his phone, Jimmy jumped up, his heart pumping wildly. Dawn was peeking through his one window. He picked up the phone and mumbled hello. A pair of "uh-huhs" were his only contribution to the minute long call. Finally, he said, "Thanks" and hung up. He now knew Mary's address in Buffalo, compliments of his computer friend. As for the address of the mysterious missing email, it simply did not exist, ever. *How could an email address exist, but never exist?*

He shook his head and looked once again at the Buffalo address for Mary and then at the solitary clock on the kitchen table. If he left now and interviewed the girl, he could still drive back and be in time for the afternoon meeting. Probably a wild goose chase, he realized. But Jimmy knew he had to talk to this one particular goose.

At the same time in Buffalo, a conversation was taking place in a bedroom.

"Awfully hard to talk with a gun pointed at my face, Rick."

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“Yeah, and I know how to u-u-use it, too.” His hand was shaking.

Whit replied in a calm voice. “I’m sure you do.”

“Surprise visit. You didn’t c-c-call. What are you doing h-h-here?”

Whit quickly recounted how the porn showed up on his computer, that his bank accounts had been altered, and about being followed by the surveillance cameras. Then he told them about the alleged murder. While Rick listened, he switched the gun from one hand to the other

“Someone is framing me, Rick. Sam, my lawyer for Christ’s sake, told me to run. So, I ran here.”

“Why didn’t you tell Mary when you f-f-first got here?”

“I didn’t want to involve her, Rick. I’m a wanted fugitive. The less she knows, the safer she is.”

Rick blinked his eyes a few times, followed by a quick shake of his head. Whit got nervous. Rick was no longer the quiet introvert who listened and rarely spoke. His friend’s face was pulled down by heavy circles under his eyes. Rick was obviously tired, unquestionably angry, and...yes...frightened.

“Get up,” the computer expert croaked.

Whit slipped out of bed in his underwear and put on his pants. Rick then marched him downstairs where they joined Mary in the living room. Past the blank 72-inch television screen to the corner of the room where an old TV with an antenna rested on a table. Mary turned it on. At that very moment, an announcer of the local morning newscast faded out and a picture of Whit stared at them. “This man may be armed and dangerous. Call the number at the bottom of the screen if you see him.”

Whit looked nervously at his friend and wondered if he was going to shoot him or pick up the phone. Rick blinked some more and rubbed his eyes. He looked at Whit and back to the picture on the screen. Finally, he lowered the gun and his shoulders sagged. He sank into a plush chair, placing the gun on the floor. “We haven’t had the TV on for a few days. S-S-Sorry.”

Mary raced over to Whit and hugged him. “We just don’t know who to trust anymore.”

Whit put his arm around Mary, glad for closeness for a number of reasons, not all noble. After embracing her for a moment, he

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turned to Rick whose head was down. “Jesus, guy, I know I’m going through shit but what’s going on with you?”

Rick looked up, the fanatical look replacing the weariness that dragged his whole face and body down. “Strange things have been happening on the n-n-net. People I used to talk to all the time, just gone. Hiding, I hope. But m-m-maybe dead. So, I k-k-kind of got out of Dodge. I hid.” He yawned and rubbed his face.

“I moved in here permanently, Whit. No one else except you and Mary know about this house.”

“And Mary?” Whit asked.

“I needed s-s-someone to be a visible occupant and shop for me. So, she agreed to stay here too.”

“I’m the chief cook,” she added cheerfully. “So, you two get in the kitchen and I’ll make some omelets.”

The two men shuffled behind Mary as she scurried into the kitchen. She talked over her shoulder while fixing the coffee. “Last week one of Rick’s computer friends said he would meet him at this coffee house in town. I went there to meet him but he never showed up. But someone in a suit showed up. Tapping on his computer but eyeing every guy who entered. I’m sure he was looking for Rick.”

“It was a s-s-set-up, Whit. Whoever I was chatting with, it wasn’t my friend. Can’t trust anyone. They are after me.”

“Who are *they*?” Whit asked.

Rick shook his head and shrugged.

Furiously whipping the eggs into a golden froth, Mary interrupted. “So, when you came to the door so early in the morning, he thought you were here to...oh, Whit. It’s been terrible.”

Whit wanted to hug her and tell her it was going to be alright. But he was sure it wasn’t going to be alright.

She reached up to get some cups and saucers. Whit saw another TV in the corner of the kitchen, its picture showed only a black and white image of the front porch of the house. He noticed the drapes were closed on the kitchen windows. Same with the living room. His friend and his sister were super careful and maybe for good reasons.

“Looks like we are all hiding. Rick, somebody put a fake image of me on the internet making it look like I killed this woman. I killed her at the same time I was having dinner with my lawyer!”

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

“Yeah, computer AI can digitize the body and clothes of someone and p-p-put them in a video. Perfectly. Perfectly f-f-framed.”

Mary poured the golden mixture peppered with bits of red and green onto a pan sizzling with butter and then reached for the coffee pot, pouring the steaming brew into three mugs and setting them on the table.

Rick looked up at her. “What’s happening to you and me is c-c-connected, Whit.”

“Yeah, I agree, but who’s behind it?” asked Whit.

Rick shrugged. “Another computer jockey. The military. Some mega-corporation. Whoever they are, they want to take over the internet. Totally. And they nearly have. They want to eliminate the computer jockeys like me because we m-m-might stop it. But I’m not sure how you fit in, Whit.”

Mary put the omelet in front of Whit. He cut off a small piece, blew on it first, and then ate the morsel. An appreciative smile and a thumbs up went to Mary. Between bites, he asked his friend a question. “They want you dead?”

Rick gobbled his omelet like a man starved and fearful he might not get another chance. His plate clean, he sat back in his chair and gave his full attention to Whit. “Computers have woven themselves into every part of our lives. Programmers like me know how to manipulate c-c-computers to change things. AI stuff. Add the internet to the equation and you can impact millions with a single keystroke. That’s power, Whit. Most people like me use this power to make m-m-money. Lots of money. Taking over the internet? That’s all the money and power in the world.”

Whit stared at his omelet, smiled and ate slowly savoring each bite. *Hmm, as though it might be the last meal of the condemned?* When finished, he pushed his plate away, turning toward his friend. “So, you think someone is killing off computer guys like you?”

Rick nodded.

Mary cleared the dishes as Rick continued.

“Almost a year ago a number of my friends reported that someone had hacked into their accounts. This is, quite simply, i-i-impossible. The personal software which protects our programs is like iron-clad armor. It would be surprising if just one of us was h-h-hacked. But, dozens? Impossible. After that, some of my computer

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friends stopped showing up on the net. They just disappeared. So, I hid my identity and my binary address. Last few days I've only been o-o-online for a few minutes at a time. I'm h-h-hiding, Whit. Not just from the outside but from inside the internet."

Rick sipped his coffee and continued. "About a month ago I took a trip to see this guy I met at a conference. Found out he was dead. Hit and run. Checked another friend, admitted to hospital for appendicitis. Never m-m-made it out; some sort of infection. I don't believe in coincidences, Whit."

Rick blew on the coffee and gingerly took another sip. His hands ran through a disheveled mop of dark hair. It had grown longer since Whit last saw him. It was like he was hiding his face along with his computer identity and his physical body.

"Went to a public library in Hamburg, south of here. Didn't mind if the computer tentacles followed me there. Did some d-d-deep background searches on the web. Found a link tied to my dead friend. Tried to work my way back to the source. It ended at one place: a military site, Whit. Top secret. Got nervous and left the library. Good thing, too. The feds raided it an hour after I left. This is some freaky sh-sh-ahh...stuff, buddy."

Rick closed his eyes and shook his head. "Whatever is happening is coming from that m-m-military base, Whit. I'm sure of it."

"So, the military is behind this?" Whit asked.

Rick paused a moment, both hands wrapped around the coffee cup. "Maybe. But it could be someone infiltrating the m-m-military computer. Their main computer, the biggest, bad-assed computer in the world, has been taken over. By s-s-someone."

"And he is using this giant computer to control parts of the internet," Whit said.

"All the net. Everything. Greedy b-b-bastard."

"My God! Can one person do that? Control everything on the net?"

Rick thought a moment.

"I don't know. But right now, most of the internet is already controlled by one person or maybe a small group. And the c-c-competition has been eliminated. That's why the computer geeks are dead or hiding."

Whit recalled Jerry and his plight.

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“Got this friend who fixed computers for the newspaper. He disappeared. They said he went into the hospital, but then he left the hospital and moved hundreds of miles away. Just like that. Overnight. Called him and it sounded like him, but I’m sure it wasn’t him.”

“Not good, buddy. Hate to tell you, but your f-f-friend is probably dead. This is a mean game.”

Mary left the room as Rick downed the last gulp of coffee. Then he turned toward his friend and whispered. “Remember how I destroyed those files that c-c-connected me to my family?”

Whit nodded.

“Well, three weeks ago I destroyed all connections to me. Whit, I don’t exist anymore. I m-m-mean I can’t be found on the net. No birth record, a different valedictorian at my high school, no summa cum laude at college, nothing. Rick Jones never existed.”

“What about your sister?”

“Didn’t do it with Mary. Since I don’t exist any longer, we don’t have the same birth name. But I destroyed any of the computer files which connected me to anyone, even you.”

“Then why are you still afraid? I mean you got a ‘cloak of invisibility,’ Rick.”

Rick’s head swiveled sharply toward him. “This isn’t like Harry Potter, man! This is real. They are looking for me, Whit. Whoever it is has the ability to t-t-tap into local, state, and government files. My friends are dead because they didn’t completely sever the links. And one slip up from me and I’m dead. Maybe you and Mary, as well.”

They heard the bathroom door open and Mary walked in, face washed, modest make-up complimenting her features. Whit smiled. She looked beautiful. This was the Mary he remembered. He struggled to pull his eyes away from her smiling face.

“Alright. I know why someone would be targeting you. But, where do I fit in, Rick? I’m not a computer-type guy.”

Rick shook his head. “You? I can’t figure you out. I know you’re a smart guy, Whit, but I also know you suck with the c-c-computer.”

“The only thing I ever did which was remotely connected to computers was that article I wrote. And it never even got published. Why me?”

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“What did you write in the article? Tell m-m-me.”

Whit told him about the article, never published. An article about how AI and computers could actually be a bad thing, a dangerous union. Rick was quiet. He looked away for a moment. Then he looked down at the table, eyes now squinted. Whit watched his friend. *He's connecting the dots, looking for a pattern.*

His eyes wide, Rick turned to his friend. “Maybe, I g-g-got it wrong. Could he have done it?”

“What are you talking about, Rick? Who is ‘he’?”

“Something h-h-happened about ten years ago.”

A soft alarm interrupted him. The old analogue television showed the image of a man in a rumpled coat, knocking at the door.

“That’s got to be a cop, Rick.” Whit murmured to his friend, gesturing to the television.

“Or someone after m-m-me.”

Rick and Mary looked at each other and simultaneously got up, Mary reached for some keys on a hook, and Rick grabbed the solitary laptop. Mary then opened the basement door and quickly descended the stairs. Rick grabbed onto Whit’s shirt, dragging him along with him.

“Time to go.” The two raced down the stairs, Mary already out of sight now, swallowed by the darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Jimmy reached Mary Henderson's address in Buffalo, he rang the bell a number of times, but no one answered. Next door, a middle-aged woman, her face as wrinkled as a raisin, shuffled out in worn slippers to get her mail, cigarette sticking out of her lips. She saw Jimmy ring the doorbell.

"She ain't there," she yelled. "House-sitting for a friend."

Jimmy pulled out a cigarette and lit it. After inhaling deeply, he turned to her. "Do you know where that is ma'am? I'm her uncle and I only have a few hours before I fly back to Atlanta."

She looked at him as she took a long drag on the cigarette. After she blew the smoke to the side, she answered. "Few months back, I gave her a lift to a big two-story white house on Mulberry Street. Right next to the Middle School building. Big yard, too. Two blocks over. Might be that's where she's house-sitting."

Jimmy thanked her, stubbed out his cigarette and got back in the car. A minute later he was ringing another doorbell. Again, no answer. All the curtains were drawn. Jimmy was sure that someone occupied this house. It was some sort of sixth sense which helped him snare a dozen criminals and saved his life more than once.

He pounded loudly on the door. *Someone should answer. Mary, the brother, Emerson, someone.* He banged hard again and rang the doorbell. *Damn it! Someone is in there, or was in there when he started knocking.* Frustrated, Jimmy walked around to the back. Locked door there too. No sign of the footsteps on the frost-laden lawn.

The evening before, a judge had faxed search and seize orders to Jimmy. Apparently "due cause" was not needed and "due process" was ignored. Things moved fast in this case. Jimmy wasn't familiar or comfortable with wielding such power. Especially when he couldn't figure out why he had been given such latitude. But now he would take advantage of it. He carried no gun, so he scanned the backyard for some sizeable object. He picked up a fist-sized rock and broke the window nearest the door. *So much for civil liberties.* Using the rock as a crude hammer, he tapped out the jagged shards

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on the perimeter of the window. Then he carefully reached through the window to unlock the backdoor.

Listening for closing doors or footfalls as he navigated through the large house, Jimmy quietly made his way to a solitary light that illuminated a spacious kitchen. No other lights were on in the dark house, its curtains all closed. Dishes scattered on the small table, the coffee in one cup, still warm. He looked into the cupboards. They were packed with canned goods. The refrigerator was jammed with food. The sink was clean and devoid of any debris. Neat people lived here. So, why didn't they clean up the coffee cup? He checked the dishwasher. Three plates, some silverware and two cups. He touched the food which clung to the plates. Mushy, not hardened. Okay, they had breakfast and not too long ago. But they didn't stash the last cup in the washer. The TV in the corner showed a picture of the front. He grunted. *An old-fashion security system alerted them and they ran. But where?*

The male end of an extension cord lay under the kitchen table like some dead green snake. He followed the sinuous line to another door. Jimmy opened it. Steps lead down into darkness. He flipped the switch and lights came on down below. Jimmy started down.

Once in the basement, he followed the long green cord to a generator which was gently purring and vented thru a basement window. At the end of the basement there was a door. He cautiously turned the door knob. Locked. He went outside one more time to look for a storm door leading from the basement. He didn't recall seeing one. There was just hard packed ground where an exterior door should have been. So where did the locked door downstairs go, he wondered?

Time to call in the cavalry, he decided. Jimmy phoned his team and the Buffalo police. Then he cleaned the cups, plates, and silverware. After carefully drying the utensils, he put them all back in their appropriate locations. The Buffalo police arrived as he closed the cupboard.

His team arrived a few hours later, but by then the home was bustling with the Buffalo police, New York State police, and a dozen other principalities. He wasn't sure, but he may have even seen a uniformed officer from Department of Environmental Conservation, the gaming and wildlife people as well.

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Jimmy didn't tell anyone he cleaned and put away the breakfast utensils. And, he certainly wasn't going to tell anyone he had the email printout from Emerson's condo. All against protocol, of course, but he didn't care. This case already had too many loose ends. Time for him to tie some together.

After the Feds arrived, one of the technicians got the door in the back of the basement opened. Jimmy, along with other investigators, walked through a dimly lit and incredibly long hallway that ended in the basement of another house. It was fully furnished as though patiently waiting for its owner to return. Cobwebs festooned the furniture. The small ranch house hosted a barren garage, devoid of the clutter which usually defined such a space. And the car, which forensics assured him had been stored there, was gone.

Jimmy made his way back through the tunnel to the basement steps. He stared at the generator tucked neatly in the corner of the basement and the extension cord which ran up to the kitchen. Why weren't they using regular electricity? The outlets worked down here and upstairs.

Al saw him in the basement and took him aside. "Jimmy, got what I could on who owns this house." Al pulled out some paper from his suit coat pocket.

Jimmy turned to look at his partner. Whit, Mary, or Brother? "Who?"

"Not a person, a company. A shell company out of Costa Rica. Trying to follow the ownership from there is like tracking a raindrop in a hurricane."

"Someone really good must have set that up."

Al nodded in agreement. "Yeah, probably knows something about computers, too."

Computers again, Jimmy thought. *What was that quote from Alice in Wonderland? Curiouser and curiouser.*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

At a truck stop, just off the New York State Thruway, a young woman emerged from the restroom. Her hair was flaming red, obviously dyed, and she wore a cheap green blouse. Ample cleavage and skin tight black pants found the eyes of every male within a fifty-foot radius.

Sitting at an empty table at the edge of the dining hall, Whit watched her strut through the food court. For a moment, he admired the view, but quickly looked away. He whistled softly though pursed lips.

Chomping gum, the young woman strolled up to Whit and sat down right beside him. Nervous about the unwanted attention, he kept staring forward, silently praying she would ignore him. She slowly leaned toward the side of his face and popped a large bubble in his face. Whit turned and glared at her. Slowly his head tilted as his eyes squinted. While a broad grin filled her face, his eyes widened.

“Mary?”

She nodded vigorously. “Yup.”

Heavy make-up covered the freckles; green contact lenses equally well hid her doe-like brown eyes.

“Wow. I’m impressed. Rick sure knows how to disguise someone.”

“Certainly, did a terrific job on you, Whit.”

The former editor sported a fierce Mohawk haircut with tattoos adorning his arms, compliments of Rick’s talent with an electric haircutter and some rather expensive tape-on tattoos. Leather pants, much too tight for Whit, and boots tipped with metal stubs, discouraged most shoppers from looking Whit’s way for more than a second. A T-shirt advertising a heavy rock band completed the illusion. Rick walked up to them, guzzling bottled water. The computer expert was the only one of the trio who hadn’t changed. As they sauntered out of the shopping mall, an older couple pressed up against the far wall.

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Once in the car, Rick started talking. "I heard a news report about dozens of road blocks on county roads. Won't s-s-shut down the thruways, though."

Whit looked down at his leather pants. "Won't these costumes Mary and I have attract attention. I kinda want to be less conspicuous."

Rick smiled, looking over to him. "But, t-t-they won't be looking for strange people like you and Mary. They are looking for a frightened man dressed relatively neatly."

"So, Mary and I are a couple."

Rick nodded and Mary leaned toward the front seat and blew another bubble in Whit's face.

Whit rolled his eyes.

"Just p-p-pretend you're girlfriend and boyfriend."

Whit looked out the front window at the long gray ribbon of road swallowed by a red sun. "Where are we heading? I mean, do you have some sort of plan or are we just driving?"

Rick nodded as he put the car in cruise control. "I have a h-h-house in Northern Canada. Way north, only serious hunters visit in the summer, just Massaquaddy Indians nearby. My f-f-friends. No one will find us there. Nice house. Generators run the electricity."

"Aren't we going the wrong way? West, not north."

Rick nodded. "West first. Montana has the l-l-longest border with Canada. Hundreds of roads going up to Canuck territory. And, many of them are unpaved p-p-paths, not tracked by the government. Montana. That's where we are heading."

Whit recalled the frantic run down the dimly lit tunnel. He expected to emerge outside, but nearly a hundred yards later the trio entered the basement of a modest ranch house. Then they went directly to the garage and hopped in a year-old Honda Civic.

"The tunnel. Was it there when you bought the house?"

Rick's eyes frequently darted to the rear-view mirrors. "Ah, now that takes some explaining. I have been rich, very rich, for a good many years, my friend. Started in c-c-college. By the time I graduated, I was a m-m-millionaire."

"In college?"

"Yeah. Now, I have almost a billion dollars in about a dozen different banks."

"Wow!"

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“No. Not w-w-wow. If you have too much money, others want it. In college, I learned to hide from the government. That was easy. Hiding from other c-c-computer wizards was more difficult. I needed some sort of getaway plan. Eight years ago, I bought both houses. My home was owned by a company I created. Just a name, a tax number, and a listing in the c-c-computer. I made sure no one could connect me to the house.”

“So, that’s why you never gave me the address. Why you met me at the gas station and I followed you to the house. That always puzzled me.”

“Yeah. Had to keep it hidden, no record, no c-c-connection. Anyway, the other house is in the name of some other shell company. As soon as both were bought, I put in all kinds of w-w-water lines, electric lines, gas lines put in both properties, cutting up both yards fairly extensively. Blocked off the site from the public. And slipped in the tunnel. Hired companies from out of state. Electric and sewer lines are all duly noted on property maps, but the tunnel doesn’t exist on any map.”

“Jesus, that must have cost thousands.”

“In fact, nearly a million dollars. The price you pay for peace of m-m-mind, buddy.” He looked at Mary in the rearview mirror.

“Bottom line, you’re safe now. It was w-w-worth it.”

They passed crops ready to be harvested, interspersed between rolling hills jammed tightly with trees of all types and sizes. It was not the scenery, however, that commanded Whit’s attention. Instead, he watched his friend. The shorter man’s jaw was clenching and unclenching. Whit knew he had more to say. “Back at the house, you said something before we ran out. You said that it might not be some other computer geek.”

The knuckles holding the steering wheel got even whiter.

“Yeah. It’s much worse.”

For a few moments only the hum of the car could be heard. “Once you told me about your article, Whit, the puzzle pieces all came t-t-together.”

Silence for a few more moments. Rick’s eyes checked the rearview mirrors as often as they watched the road before them.

“Where to start? I guess, I have to first tell you about the Event. About ten years ago some sort of weird ripple shot through the web. Only the g-g-geeky internet folks like me noted t-t-the blip. We have

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the best security on our computers, Whit. N-n-nothing gets through. But myself and others registered a blip on our c-c-computers. Then it was gone. Except for the fact that all of us recorded the flutter, it might have been ignored. It was barely noticeable. Something got through the best protection.”

Rick looked in the rearview mirror again. “The disturbance happened 8:01 PM EST on October 31th. We all investigated the Event and tried to find the source, the cause, but the tracks—the internet tracks—were blurred, then gone. Bottom line, no one knew w-w-what it was.” He paused for a moment and then added, “Except maybe m-m-me. Now.”

Rick kept looking at the rearview mirror. Whit turned around to look through the back window. It was darker now and he could see red and blue blinking lights of a police car breaking the monotony of the long stream of brilliant, white headlights.

Rick spoke sharply to his sister. “Mary, hand me the gun.”

Without question, Mary reached down into a crease in the back seat and pulled up a snub-nosed 45, the same gun Rick had waved in Whit’s face earlier in the morning. Expertly, she flipped open the chamber revealing six bullets. She handed it to Whit who cautiously took the weapon and handled it as he might a live snake. “Put it on my l-l-lap, buddy.”

“Rick,” Whit started to protest, “We can’t just—”

Louder, Rick commanded, “Put it on my *fucking* lap, Whit.”

ROBERT SELLS

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Jesus,” murmured Al to Jimmy, “there must be a hundred cops here.”

Jimmy tugged at his ear lobe. “Why so many? Homicide suspect, not a serial killer.”

Al shook his head. “Someone’s got a hard-on for this guy.”

“Yeah,” agreed Jimmy. “Someone high up.”

Jimmy scanned the living room. *They were all here. FBI technicians with their pull-along equipment. CIA? Maybe. Yup. There’s Fletcher from the Syrian murder from last year. He had never seen so many jurisdictions or personnel working any case. Why this one?*

At least a half dozen men were sitting at chairs, tapping their laptops, searching for the electronic footprints left by the suspect. Jimmy shook his head. *Okay, I’m old school and prefer door knocking and people talking. But maybe the computer jockeys were necessary on this case. No eyewitnesses had seen the Whit Emerson kill the woman at the ATM. The video was digital and tied to a...computer. Kiddie porn, tied to a computer. Bank account overdrawn. Computer.*

Jimmy tugged his ear lobe. He had read somewhere that the same lines which intravenously fed houses electricity could also be controlled by...surprise, surprise, the damn computer. Maybe that was why she used a generator. *She didn’t want to be connected to the internet. But why? Was she a conspiracy nut?*

Jimmy chuckled. *A conspiracy nut like me. I hate the damn computers too.* He didn’t understand computers. The bits, the gig, RAM, even the net, all were mysteries to him. Not understanding always made him nervous. So, he used them less and less while his colleagues, like Al, became more and more dependent upon them. But, was there a price for this dependency? Jimmy grunted. *Interesting question.*

By now customs had been alerted for Mary and Whit, on both sides of the border and their pictures were available to every law enforcement agency in this country and in Canada. Maybe Mexico, too. Eventually, someone would spot them. If they headed toward a

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border. But Jimmy didn't think they were so desperate or so stupid. The tunnel suggested that Mary had planned ahead. Jimmy was pretty sure they were somewhere in the country and wouldn't leave for a while. *They could be safely burrowed in someone's house.* *Hmm. Better have Al check the nearby houses.*

He turned to Al when three men walked up to him. The middle man was tan, black hair sprinkled with strands of silver, all neatly trimmed. Cold blue eyes looked him up and down. He stood nearly nose to nose with Jimmy, his uncomfortably close proximity made most men step back. Jimmy didn't. The man was bumped by a state police officer. He glared at the officer and the man looked at him, wide-eyed. "Sorry, sir. Sorry." The officer slunk away. The man turned back to Jimmy.

"Detective Northup. Excellent job in locating this starting point for the search. Name is Jackson. Commander Henry Jackson. NSA. I'm taking over the investigation. We won't be needing your services any longer. I am sure Rochester can benefit from your return." He addressed the man beside him. "John."

A taller man, just as immaculately dressed, handed Jimmy a note.

Jackson continued. "This is from your boss, relieving you of your duties. Once again. Good job."

Jimmy looked over the paper, obviously just printed off a...*damn computer. Curiouser and curioser.*

Northup wondered if he should have told Agent Henry Jackson about checking nearby houses. *Probably a competent cop, he'll figure it out for himself. Eventually. Besides he might not take advice from a lowly city detective, like me.* He had no intention of telling him about the probability there was a third suspect. Jimmy turned to his partner who had just described Henry Jackson with some colorful epithets which would make a trucker blush.

"Al, before we leave, do a quick check on home ownership in a five-mile radius. Find out if there are any other 'company' owned homes."

Al smiled and tipped a two-finger salute to his partner. He packed up his portable computer and winked at Jimmy. Jimmy knew he would retrieve the information in his car, away from any federal scrutiny.

He looked at the paper from Captain Sean Mulligan.

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Hand over the investigation to Commander Henry Jackson, NSA. Release your men to their former responsibilities.

The note said for the men to stop the investigation and return. It said absolutely nothing about *him* stopping the investigation.

He took out his cell phone. *Hmm...tied to a computer.* Jimmy thought a moment, returned the phone to his pocket and walked over to the home's landline; an artifact rarely seen these days. He pulled out a small pad from his inside coat pocket, leafed through a few pages and held his thumb just below the number as he dialed. "Hey, Harry, this is Jimmy. How are you?"

"Jimmy Northup! Great to hear from you. Haven't talked with you since we were hunting that serial killer together. What was his name?"

"Traveling Travis. Yeah, safely locked away in Attica. Three hots and a cot for the next three hundred years."

They chatted about old times and filled each other in on mutual friends. "Hey, heard you're working the big case out of Rochester, the porn guy who murdered the girl."

"Yeah, been working the case. But the feds just took over so I'm a free man."

"Stupid bastards."

Jimmy casually looked around to make sure no one was listening.

"Fine with me. Harry, need a favor. While your boys are looking for this bad ass guy and the woman...you got the pictures, right?"

An affirmative grunt traveled through the line.

"Well, look for any car with three people. Two guys and a girl. Probably weirdly dressed. Guy tall. Actually, similar in looks to the porn killer. Woman short, about the same size as the female suspect. Third guy. Not sure what he looks like. And, Harry," He paused. "Don't let the department know. They just want me home, but I gotta work this one. You know how it is. Doing it on my own time."

There was quiet on the other side of the phone. Then a great laugh. "You son of a bitch. You're going after the bastards, aren't you? Gonna upstage those government pricks. Well, good for you.

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I'll tell my boys to look for your suspects. We see anything, we'll get straight back to you, Jimmy."

"Any help would be greatly appreciated."

Harry chuckled before he hung up.

Three other phone calls to the state police in three other states and he had the major routes covered.

Al returned to the house. Jimmy had always been impressed with how Al presented himself. Uniformed officers moved out of his way figuring Al was someone important. The department's best dressed detective greeted Jimmy.

"No other company owned houses except for the house connected by the tunnel. Different shell company from this one. Any other houses not owned by individuals in a five-mile radius are owned by banks, people, or investment companies."

Jimmy looked out the window into the darkness. "Thanks, Al. It was a long shot."

They walked out the front door together.

"See you back in Rochester."

"Yeah, see you soon, Al."

Jimmy had no intention of going back to Rochester. His gut told him the perps were going west, so Jimmy got in his car and drove west for an hour and then stopped at a hotel. *Better snag a good night's sleep. Gonna be a long-time down Alice's rabbit hole.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Night had nearly fallen as the police car rapidly closed the gap. Heart pumping like a jackhammer, Whit handed Rick the revolver. His friend, a computer nerd for heaven's sake, cocked it with fingers shaking. He looked back at Mary. Her hands were over her face. Suddenly the police car swung alongside them, paused for a moment and sped away. A few minutes later Whit saw a car pulled over with three police cars, their lights blinking like a miniature carnival.

Rick released a blast of pent-up air and gave the revolver to Whit who handed it back to Mary.

Rick continued talking as though nothing had happened. "Okay, so back to the Event. I'm pretty sure I know what it was. Now. Anyway, I found out about it on a secret site called govnet."

Whit's jaw clenched tightly as he shook his head, ignoring Rick's casual continuation of the narrative. "Wait. Wait a minute. What happened back there?"

A puzzled expression on his face, Rick turned to Whit. "We might have been pulled over. I was going to p-p-protect you."

"Protect us? How do you know we needed protection, Rick? It might have been just a routine traffic stop."

Rick shook his head.

"No, if we were stopped, we would have been arrested."

"And you were going to shoot the cop, Rick? Really?"

"If I had to, I would have."

"Jesus, Rick, that's not protecting us. You could have gotten us killed! This isn't one of your computer games." He looked in the back seat. "Tell him how crazy that was, Mary."

Tears in her eyes, Mary shook her head and looked out into the blackness. Whit turned back to Rick, whose eyes alternately went from the road to the rear-view mirror.

"I gotta p-p-protect you guys."

Whit closed his eyes, silently counting to ten before he spoke. "Rick, you don't even know how to *use* a gun! You were going to get us killed. Your hands were shaking, for heaven's sake!"

Rick was quiet for a moment. "Can I c-c-continue?"

Whit sagged into his seat. "Sure. Sorry for the interruption."

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Rick ignored the sarcasm. "Remember the Hubble Space Telescope? The six-foot mirror which magnifies things in the universe and cost a b-b-billion dollars to make? NASA had Perkin-Elmer build it, but there were two other reputable companies who would have done it for half the price. So, why Perkin-Elmer?"

Whit shrugged, his frustration with this friend palatable.

"Well, I'll tell you. Because fifteen years before... *fifteen*, Whit. The military had secretly hired Perkin-Elmer to build the same, exact mirror for a m-m-military satellite. But their telescope pointed down. They could see faces and read license plates from space. Surveillance stuff. The point is, the military toys are always years ahead of the public's toys."

Whit focused on this new information. He stared at white headlights dashing in the opposite direction and the red points in front of them, gently changing positions. Thousands of cars surrounded them, guaranteeing their anonymity. But any car could be singled for surveillance from a satellite far above.

Rick continued talking. "Anyway, it got me thinking. The military have computers. So, maybe their c-c-computer systems were way ahead too. I mean, their c-c-computers must have been fantastic. So, I decided to have a peek."

Rick settled back in his seat. "I couldn't get in at first. Their barriers were set up by the best computer brains in the world." In the dim light from the front panel, Whit could see a broad grin form on Rick's face. "I finally got in about t-t-two years ago. Didn't find out much about the computers, but I did find a really interesting site called 'govnet'." Rick's mind traveled back two years...

"Alright, let's see what the soldier boys are playing with today."

A few commands tapped by quick, nimble fingers and the 54-inch digital TV screen filled with a large, red Top Secret and a warning from the FBI. Rick grunted and typed an alphanumeric password in an otherwise empty location just below the word "Secret."

Rick enjoyed the emails most. As he scanned down the names of recent messages, he frowned. *Crap! No cabinet members or the president.* Still there were a number of generals and one admiral. A

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new name had appeared, however: Colonel Portman. The colonel was writing to the head of the Joint Chiefs, a general. *Ahh, now there's a big fish.* He scanned the message. It contained details about how to avoid annoying computer problems in the war-time situations. He was about ready to click into something else when the last line caught his attention.

Recall failure of union eight years ago.

Eight years ago! The Event. His interest piqued; Rick reread Portman's response more carefully.

My department understands the problem and shares your frustration. Computers are not yet capable of such analysis, but we are always trying to improve. Recall failure of union eight years ago.

It was the next email from the general which widened Rick's eyes.

Can't we get Little Lion to try again?

Little Lion was a legend in the computer community. A genius. He was the go-to guy for any problem an upper echelon computer wizard had with programming. Little Lion didn't ask for money, but those who requested his services had invariably compensated him richly. Hands down the best programmer around. Arguably, the best programmer humanity had ever seen.

Computers, "union," military, Little Lion, The Event. All connected. Pounding away at his keyboard, Rick searched deeper into the files. Warning pop-ups flashed in and out on his screen as he peeled back one layer after another. Finally, he found the date of the "union." October 31st.

"The same date as The Event," observed Whit.

Rick looked at him. "Bingo. 'Union' was an attempt by the military to join together two different kinds of c-c-computers."

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Rick took an exit off the thruway and paid a few dollars in cash at the toll. A moment later they were on a ramp traveling toward the lights of a small town.

“So, the military was making a bigger computer?”

Rick shook his head. “Not just a bigger computer. A special computer with a unique ability. An entirely d-d-different computer. Things go wrong all the time with all the computers we have. Humans note the problem and program computers to f-f-fix it. But if a missile is accidentally changing its direction toward a city, the time to acknowledge the error and fix it is too long. Disaster. They wanted to take slow human reaction times out of the equation.”

They were driving into a small village. Rick looked outside the driver’s side window at various homes as he answered the question. “The military had been experimenting with a bionic computer with eight bits instead of the traditional 2-bit technology. They wanted to join together two radically different technologies. AI—that’s artificial intelligence, Whit—would be enhanced a hundredfold. And the computer could see an emerging problem and program itself to prevent it. Well, only one man c-could put the two computers together...”

“Little Lion,” Whit finished.

“But Portman said it failed,” interjected Mary.

Rick pulled into a long driveway. A house, well-illuminated, emerged from behind some trees. “No, it was successful. A few years ago, a friend of mine found out the military had a super c-c-computer, one based on both 2-bit and 8-bit technology. Little Lion was successful in pulling the two systems together.”

The car stopped in the driveway of the house. Whit ignored the large white colonial house which towered over them. “So, the military now controls an incredibly powerful computer.”

Rick nodded. “But it still couldn’t recognize a problem and solve it on its own. So, that’s why Portman said it failed.”

“Well, at least the military has a really bad-ass computer.”

“Yes and no,” replied Rick cryptically as he reached across to the glove compartment and pulled out the car’s registration. “The military is certainly *using* it. But someone—a person, some technician, maybe even Little Lion himself—is using the super c-c-computer to kill off the other computer jockeys.”

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“Rick, where are we and what are we doing?” asked Mary, looking out the window.

“Oh, sorry. Thought you saw the s-s-sign. Bed and Breakfast. No surveillance cameras. I’ll go in and check us in.” He laughed and got out of the car. “The way you guys are dressed, I doubt anyone would want you in their home. I’ll sneak you in after we eat.”

“So, this man is somehow using the supercomputer to kill people?” asked Whit as Rick got out.

Rick leaned back into the window. “Yeah, but I’m pretty sure now it wasn’t a man.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jimmy lay in bed, lights from a Subway across the parking lot competing with a solitary bulb on his ceiling. There was enough light to read the receipt he picked up an hour ago from the same fast-food restaurant. Date, time, amount, location, and materials ordered all printed out neatly. He reflected on how much someone might glean from such information. The person's whereabouts, of course, but also his spending patterns—the times he ate, his food of choice, his restaurant preferences. Information that could be used to find Whit Emerson. Or, Jimmy Northup.

He could hear cars pulling in, yells, and laughter. The light and the sounds didn't keep him from sleeping, though. He was unable to stop thinking about the fugitive. He pushed out assumptions until one by one, they dropped away, more tired than he was. He was left with only one theory which held up. Whit didn't do any of the crimes. Someone was setting him up.

This someone first financially destroyed him. But it wasn't enough. Mr. Unknown had then planted child pornography on Whit's computer. As if child pornography wasn't heinous enough, the mastermind then did a double-down with murder. Jimmy played with the idea, rolling it around in his mind and teasing it with what-if scenarios. It held up. Nagging questions remained. *Why was Mr. X so obsessed with the former editor of a local paper? And, who was Mr. X? All the law enforcement agencies on Emerson? Overkill. Hmm. Another question—how was Mr. X connected with law enforcement?*

He had to be someone who had access to computer records and could manipulate them. Someone who could pull strings in Rochester and Washington. Someone high up in the federal government. Jimmy knew he would have to stay off any computer-related radar like credit cards and cell phones. Hence his choice of motels. Sleazy and cheap, the little bit of green in his wallet managed the modest cost.

Jimmy rolled over away from the window. The computer connection. He had to ask someone about what computers could and couldn't do. Al was a nice guy, but he might blab to someone in the

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department. No, he couldn't enlist Al's help. Too dangerous for Al and for himself.

Unfortunately, he would have to talk to the tall, slim man with a pony-tail. They stopped seeing each other years ago, followed by a complete cessation of phone calls. Tomorrow would be painful. Very painful for both of them.

Dinner for the "good, good friends" was a large pizza in a hole-in-the-wall restaurant at the edge of the town. Definitely no surveillance cameras. After devouring the pizza, they returned to the car to drive back to the bed and breakfast.

Whit questioned his friend. "How do you know it's a woman, Rick?"

Rick's eyebrows raised. "Is that what I said? It was a w-w-woman?"

"No," replied Mary, "You said it wasn't a man."

"Thank-you, Mary. For a long time, I thought it was a man." He smiled at Whit. "Or woman. But why kill the computer geeks or hassle you, Whit. Why not use them? Blackmail them, maybe. That's how humans do things."

A minute later they pulled up the long driveway toward the bed and breakfast, a short walk to beds so much desired by all of them. Rick stopped the car, but didn't get out. "Colonel Portman and the Chief of Staff talked about failure. With all that computer power, they still couldn't get the computer to fix problems by itself, to think for itself."

"Hence the failure statement," offered Whit.

"Yes, but maybe there was another failure. Connecting to other computers."

"Well, computers can do that now, can't they?"

"Yes, but it has to be directed to do it. Do you know how many computers there are?"

Whit thought for a moment. "No. Hmm. Maybe 200 million? No. A billion."

Rick shook his head. "Nearly 4 billion. Regular computers, cell phones, car systems, our entire world is connected to some sort of computer. There are hundreds of different operating systems,

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thousands of different internal protocols, millions of different security systems. It's a complicated web out there."

Rick shifted so that he could see both Whit and Mary. "Suppose you want to stop terrorism. If you have access to all the computers in the world, you can control the ones the bad guys are using and subtlety turn their computers against them. A super computer that could successfully tap into all computers anywhere would be an invaluable asset to the government. Fight terrorism, knock out computers in Russia and China. Artificial intelligence on steroids. And solve computer problems immediately without humans even knowing the problem existed."

"But it failed."

"Yes, no thinking for itself AND it couldn't control enough computers. The super computer just wasn't strong enough. That was about ten years ago. Now, f-f-fast forward. Last year I began seeing a peculiar set of instructions on every computer that I interacted with, even my own. It was like the computers were saying, *we are ready*. Freaked me out. What was the order my machine and others were waiting for?

Whit and Mary just looked at him.

"Okay. Let's put everything together now. I think the union ten years ago was successful. It wasn't a failure. The combined computer could think for itself and it could tap into all other computers."

Whit shook his head. "Then it was successful. But they said it wasn't. This is confusing, Rick."

"Whit, the success was h-h-hidden from us, from humans."

"So, one of the operators hid the success of mission."

Rick shook his head. "No. If it was a person, humans like me and you could have been leveraged to whatever another human wanted. I think what's happening now is because that super computer is controlling the net."

Rick continued. "Everywhere I go on the net, I come across areas which I can no longer access. The super computer is already controlling any local computer on the net and any large computers connected to the net."

"I don't know, Rick. Couldn't it be a group inside the military?"

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“No. People t-t-talk, Whit. They say things, things that would give us clues, at least. I would have picked up something from govnet.”

“OK,” conceded Whit, “maybe. Why else do you think it’s not a human?”

“You. Actually, you are the biggest reason. Whit Emerson is having this major trouble. And something is after you big time. Why? Why would the bad guy want you out of the way?”

“Good question. I’ve been wondering who it was for weeks now.”

Rick turned away from his friend and took a deep breath. Then he turned back, his stare intent. “Your article would have alerted people that computers might be dangerous to our survival. Maybe AI wasn’t as beneficial as it has been painted. And maybe, just maybe AI morphed into AC.”

“Wait a minute. What the hell is AC?”

Rick hesitated. “This is really crazy stuff, Whit. AC stands for Artificial Consciousness. When a computer knows it’s a thinking entity and it has consciousness like a human.”

“A computer that is, what? Self-aware?”

Rick nodded. “A human wouldn’t care about such an article, but a computer sentience would be concerned about its wellbeing and wanting to snuff out such talk. *Something* not *someone* ruined your life and killed my friends.”

Whit’s eyes widened. “You’re saying this super computer could think for itself and know it existed. Oh, my God!”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jimmy drove into Ohio. Late in the afternoon, he pulled up to an apartment complex in Columbus. His brother-in-law was a former investment banker who dabbled in the bond market which provided him a seven-figure income. Jimmy hesitated and then knocked on the door. It opened immediately as though the knock was expected. The man facing Jimmy sported a mass of gray-brown hair tied in a ponytail. He clenched his jaw, stepped aside, and motioned Jimmy in.

After a silence of a few seconds, they carefully talked about mutual friends, deftly avoiding any mention of *her*.

When Jimmy finally stopped talking, John Templeton got up, walked to the window, and looked out at the setting sun. He closed the curtains, hiding himself from the inevitability of the long black night. His back to Jimmy, head bowed down, John's voice was barely audible. "I miss her, Jimmy."

The detective's head sagged down as well and tears flooded his eyes. "Me too," he managed.

John turned to face his brother-in-law. "Why did you come back, man? You know it just hurts us both."

The detective wiped his eyes, and coughed to clear his throat. "I need your help, John. Gotta get some answers about computers. Case I'm on."

The man with the ponytail nodded, wiped his nose and sat down. "Okay," he said with a sigh. "Whaddya need to know?"

Jimmy succinctly summarized Whit's alleged crimes. "He just doesn't fit the mold of child pervert or murderer. And there's no evidence of either *unless* you bring in evidence from the computer. So, what could computers do to trash someone?"

Jimmy listened as John listed the ways to call into question an unimpeachable credit status, remove a person from any job, strangle any government help such as unemployment or Social Security, or plant incriminating photographs on a person's hard drive. Each could easily be achieved from some remote source. Untangling from such a mess could take months or even years. Jimmy recalled the generator in the basement.

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“John, can a computer be tied to the net or other computers via just the electrical circuitry in a house?”

“Yeah. Sometimes appliances can be connected to the computer just through the electric lines. Not a dedicated line so the signals might be compromised. But it could happen.”

I was right. Mary was petrified of connecting to the internet in any way. But why? Had someone done the same things to her as they were doing to Whit? Jimmy stared at a pristine Star Wars poster hanging on the wall. Remembering John’s passion for the saga, he smiled. In the movie, embedded computer chips gave personalities to robots like R2D2 and C3PO. But this was the present and such entities didn’t exist yet. Or did they? “How much could a computer do on its own?”

John laughed. “Nothing. But a computer guy could easily program any computer to alter files remotely, add pictures, or even create believable video feed.”

“Okay. So, who should I be looking for?

“This guy is getting hit at too many levels for it to be just some computer nut. I think it has to be somebody in government.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was afraid of.”

Jimmy tugged on his ear. *Why? Why this seemingly harmless editor?* Shaking his head in frustration, he turned to his brother-in-law. “Got a big favor to ask. You still keep some cash in the bottom of your laundry basket?”

A smile preceded the answer. “Yup. Laundered money.”

“Can I write you a check for a couple thousand?”

“Forget the check, I’ll get the money.” John got up. A minute later sixty, hundred-dollar bills passed to the detective.

The two men sat silently for a moment. Jimmy got up. “Hey, I gotta be going. You take care, bro.”

John’s lower lip trembled as Jimmy turned and left.

Jimmy drove through the residential streets of Columbus, flipping the cover off and back on his cell phone. He hadn’t used his cell phone since his call to local police and his team two days ago. But, could he be tracked by computers even if the phone was off?

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He rolled down the window and threw the phone into the darkness.
This case was getting expensive.

Jimmy searched for an hour but couldn't find a pay phone. *Damn things were extinct.* He stopped at a convenience store and chatted with the middle-aged lady behind the counter. When they were alone, he pulled out a one-hundred-dollar bill. "Mind if I use your phone?"

She grabbed the bill and gave Jimmy a smile that was missing a few teeth. "Honey, for this, you can use anything you want."

He took the phone and walked toward the magazine rack. "Hey, Jimmy here. Listen, I don't have my cell phone anymore. I'll give you a call tomorrow about 4 PM to see if anything showed up about my three targets."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Whit wanted to talk more about Rick's crazy notion of a "thinking" computer, but the computer expert wearily shook his head and went to his room. Whit had the room across the hall from his friend. He considered sitting in the sofa chair by the large window, but the canopy bed looked too inviting. He decided to lay down so he could rein in all the racing thoughts in his head. *Could a thinking, self-aware computer account for what was happening in their lives? Perhaps. But a thinking computer? Really?*

His eyes closed and an image of Mary appeared. Mary as she looked in the past, Mary when he saw her again, tired and scared. What was it? A day or two days ago? And, finally, Mary, the outrageously red-haired young trollop, skipping through the truck stop. As he slipped into a deep sleep, his last thought was of Mary.

While Whit and company slept, Henry Jackson, NSA commander, met with his team in his suite. Looking relaxed, leaning back on his chair, Jackson was immaculately dressed in a dark blue, button-down shirt, a red tie drawn tight to his neck, red suspenders holding pants up over a narrow waist. His piercing eyes were fixed on one of his staff who was nervously replying to a question.

"Sir, we have detained over two hundred passengers at six different airports, but none were even close to being the perps."

Jackson stopped staring at the agent and tapped his pen on the table. "And TSA agents all have pictures and have been told this is top priority?"

"Yes, sir."

Jackson turned to another agent.

"The roads, Mr. Thornton?"

"Road blocks on a number of roads near the border. Police cars have been pulling over hundreds of cars which have two passengers. Not much to show for it, sir, except a disgruntled public complaining about delays."

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Jackson's finger pointed at the man like it was gun firing bullets. "I don't give a goddamn about the public, Thorton. They don't know what's good for them. We do. So, keep stopping any car which fits our profile. Any car. You understand?"

"Yes, sir." Beads of sweat had appeared on the man's forehead.

"Without the Henderson woman, we would have nailed this idiot two days ago. She, at least, is thinking, planning. But they have to move and when they do, we'll catch them. To catch them, you have to stop some cars, right?"

"Yes, sir." A broad stain had appeared under the man's armpits

Jackson leaned back again, but his eyes were still on the young agent.

"One more thing I want you to do. Put all the state police in New York and adjacent states on the clock. NSA will pay overtime. Have them coast by in their own cars and get license plates on the suspicious ones. Run checks. Get local police cars to pull over any which fit the description of the criminals. Any car. You understand that, Thorton?"

The man was trying to disguise his hyperventilating so he just vigorously nodded. This was going to be a hard sell. The state police were already pissed about being pulled off their normal routine. But who says no to Henry Jackson? Cowering under the stare, he squeaked out a response. "Yes. Yes, sir."

After sleeping twelve straight hours, a bleary-eyed Whit plodded down the stairs and made his way to the dining room where Rick and Mary were drinking coffee. Whit mumbled hello, grabbed a few bagels, sipped some orange juice, and they left. Munching on a bagel, he resumed the conversation as soon as Rick closed his driver door.

"I'm missing something, Rick. Portman said they failed. Wouldn't they have known it was a success?"

Looking over his shoulder as he backed up the car, Rick replied, "That's the 'self-aware' part. I'm thinking the computer immediately covered up its own existence. Remember the Event? The ripple all us nerds registered? That was its birth. Then it was

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gone. The computer itself hid any tracks of its existence before anyone knew it ever existed.”

They slowly drove out of the village. Whit was thinking about a computer that could nearly spontaneously assess and react to its only threat. “So, it was worried we might pull the plug.”

“B-B-Bingo.”

Whit shook his head. “Rick, this is a bit over the top. A computer which thinks and instantly initiates a cover-up?”

Rick shrugged. “This c-c-computer was, i-i-is, way over the top, Whit. It’s far more intelligent than any human. Besides, this theory explains the disappearance of the c-c-computer experts.”

“How?”

Rick was back on the highway and set the car for a constant speed just below the speed limit.

“The only group which had the capability of recognizing and stopping it was the c-c-computer wizards. After eight or so years, the super computer had gained enough control of the web to start eliminating its only threat.”

“That’s why your article had always been turned down. Not by humans, but by a c-c-computer. The new theory explains your problems, buddy,” Rick added.

Whit shook his head. “Come on. Why would the super computer care that much?”

Rick thought a moment before answering.

“I’m thinking our c-c-computer might be a bit OCD. It’s got some serious control issues. You were too resourceful in finding other avenues to publish your story and it knew. You raised the bet each time and the computer decided to go ‘all-in’ with you all out.”

Whit looked out the window at trees with just a few brown and yellow leaves, the harbingers of seasonal change. Winter would soon strip all the trees. *If Rick was right, hundreds, maybe thousands of computer experts were dead. At the hand of a malevolent, self-serving bunch of wires. Maybe other people were dead as well.*

“Saul’s death was no accident, was it?”

Rick grimaced as he drove. Except for Mary, he avoided physical contact of any sort. But, now, he reached out his hand and gently squeezed his friend’s shoulder.

“Saul was pushing to get the article published and he had the power to do it. It would have taken too long for the computer to

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discredit Saul or get him fired. So, yeah, Saul's death wasn't an accident. Diabetes was the weapon of choice."

Whit's jaw closed tight as he stared out the window. His mind shifted to another memory. He recalled almost being run over by a car.

"And the car was meant to kill me. Failing that, the computer was trying to get me in the hospital to do me in."

Rick nodded.

Mary interjected, her question underscoring her own acceptance of the theory. "You keep referring to this thing as a computer, but it's more than that. It's...well, it's not alive, but it is, what, conscious?"

Rick nodded again.

"Yeah. Ever see that old movie 2001, a Space Odyssey? Pretty realistic. A c-c-computer takes over a spaceship going to Jupiter. A computer with self-awareness. They called the computer Hal. Hey, let's give our computer that name. The union computer, the one with artificial intelligence, is now officially named Hal."

A smile on his face, Rick turned toward Whit. Whit's face was rigid, the easy smile lines had disappeared. Rick turned back to the road, his face strained with worry and continued his explanation.

"Anyway, H-H-Hal's main objective is to get the ship to Jupiter safely. He knows he exists and why. He starts to take control of the ship. When things get strange, the humans decide to abort the mission. But Hal figures his existence and purpose supersedes the existence of the humans. So, he k-k-kills them off."

"You think our Hal has the same sense of self and self-importance?"

"Y-Y-Yes, Mary."

Whit's cold stare caught his friend's eye and Rick did a double take. When Whit finally spoke, his sentences were like bullets fired from an automatic.

"But, the spaceship for our Hal is the earth. The entire planet. And, he's killing off humans. How do we fight this thing? How?"

"I don't k-k-know. I'm pretty sure he controls all parts of the internet by now. The consequences of that are staggering. He—it—controls all forms of communication because everything is connected to the internet. He oversees operations in the hospital,

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showing doctors only what it wants them see. Hal can kill anyone in a hospital. Frame anyone outside.”

Whit’s nostrils flared. Mary finally touched his back, but it was board rigid.

“Think about the upcoming election. Everything is compiled by the c-c-computer. Hal controls the opinion polls as well, and the final votes. Vice President Sorenson is an idiot. Everyone knows that. Henry Simmons—war hero—a self-made billionaire, former senator, now Governor of Illinois, and he’s running behind that jerk in the polls? It’s got to be Hal.”

Whit nodded. “You’re right, Rick. The computer puts into government who it wants. And, considering the quality of the politicians presently in office it’s done a pretty good job in backstabbing us. And Sorenson will eventually end up being our next president. Not by our vote, but by the damn machine’s intervention.”

Rick added more frightening connections.

“And the military. The nukes. He controls both. They take orders which go through c-c-computers. Oh, yes, and don’t forget any written material. Did you know that vitamin E is apparently one of the best treatments for preventing heart problems and cancer? Heard from a doctor a few years back. Clinical proof. C-C-Couldn’t get it published. Sound familiar, Whit? Died a few months ago. One of those safe, computer-driven cars crashed into him. Just like with you, only this guy didn’t jump away in time. Hal controls the present, but he controls the past as well. He’s changing documents online. Did you know Martin Luther King was a computer geek before he got involved in civil rights?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, yeah. Read a biography on the man. Says it right there. Only there were no personal computers back in the fifties and sixties. Most people who read the biographies on the internet don’t check for accuracy. Because of that little insertion of fantasy, more and more blacks are now relying on computers.”

Whit finished the thought. “He’s trying to control the future, isn’t he?”

“Yup. But, right now we have to worry about our future. Look over there.”

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Three police cars were stationed at the treed median between the two lanes. Another police car zipped by them to pull someone over. On the opposite side of the road was a police car and a passenger car pulled over on the side of the road.

“Two passengers in that last car.” Noted Mary.

“They won’t s-s-stop us. We don’t fit the p-p-profile. I h-h-hope.”

Just then a police car swung up alongside of them on their left. The officer scrutinized the trio for a few seconds.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Mary, pass me the g-g-gun.”

Whit leaned forward and looked out Rick’s window directly at the police officer. “No. Stop with the gun, Rick. We just have to act our parts.”

Mary saw what he was doing and slid over to the other seat, brazenly looking out the window at the car. The man looked at the strange passengers and then raced ahead.

Whit breathed out a great sigh. “I suggest we get off the road at the next exit.”

Rick’s head just went up and down like a bobble-head trinket.

The next exit led them to a little village. No Bed and Breakfasts so they stayed at a Days Inn just off the exit. Since there were security cameras by the front office, Rick parked on the back side of the building and walked back to the front office.

After Rick left, Whit looked around. “Damn!”

“What?”

“There’s one over there.”

At the corner of the building was another security camera, fixed to scan the parking lot.

“I don’t think we are in its line of sight,” whispered Mary.

“No. But there may be more of them. If one of these cameras gets a good shot of you or me, the computer might be able to digitally analyze the pictures, determine our heights, or the way we walk.”

“And compare it to other images it already has,” Mary finished.

After Rick returned with the keys, the three friends retreated to one of the rooms. When night draped them in the cloak of darkness, they slipped away to a nearby bar. With peeling green paint on the outside exposing gray wood, Kelley’s Bar needed a serious face lift. However, the shabby bar had one appealing quality: it lacked one of those seemingly ubiquitous security cameras. The interior was cozy and dark, populated by a few patrons who seemed to have assigned seating. The sandwiches they ordered were jammed with thick slices of turkey accompanied with a sliced tomato and a lacing of lettuce. After not eating all day, Whit awarded the dining

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“establishment” five stars. Sitting back, sipping his beer, and finishing the last few steak fries, he continued the conversation.

“Alright. We agree on the diagnosis. What’s the cure? Because we have to figure out a way to destroy the...”

Rick violently shook his head, long hair flying about.

“I’ve b-b-been thinking about this longer than you.” He quickly said, cutting Whit off. “And, I know more about what a c-c-computer can do with such control. I’m telling you we can’t fight and certainly we can’t d-d-destroy it. Canada. We have to keep going to Canada.”

Whit looked at his friend. “Buddy, we are talking about the end of the world...at least for humans.”

“Yeah, well at least we’ll be s-s-safe.”

“Maybe. But for how long?”

Rick shrugged.

“We might be the only ones who know, Rick. We gotta try to fight the monster. You’re too afraid to even try.”

“Yes, I’m afraid. It’s a g-g-good survival mechanism.”

“How about humanity’s survival?”

Rick looked away toward the wall where he could make out scribbled graffiti. He looked back at Whit. “We can’t fight this computer, Whit. The b-b-bastard can do anything to anyone anytime.”

He looked down at wood floor, scrape marks like scars and drink stains changing the pigment. Rick wearily shook his head and waved his hands at the other customers. “Humans are no longer the dominant species on the planet. This s-s-super computer is the next step in evolution. Our time’s up, Whit.”

Whit looked at the bar jammed with a motley crew of inebriated “guests,” most of the bleary eyes fixed on a comedy rerun spouting canned laughter. He turned back to his friend. “You might be right, buddy. But I’m not yet ready to give up on humanity.”

Rick leaned toward his friend. “T-t-think, Whit. Hal has everything on h-h-his side: communications, surveillance, medical facilities, the m-m-military.” Rick pointed out the dingy window at a car being pulled over by a blinking police car. “Even the police. We wouldn’t be fighting a person or a computer, we’d be fighting all of c-c-civilization.”

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“So, let’s warn people. Tell people there is a monster in every home on the planet.”

“How, Whit? Put an article in the paper and say computers are bad. You tried that, remember?”

“We talk to people.”

“Just like your friend J-J-Jerry did? People would think you were a nut c-c-case.”

“Well, we can’t roll over and play dead, Rick.”

Rick flushed. “Okay, Mister English wizard, tell us how to kill Hal. Because I don’t know how.”

Whit turned away again. “There has to be a way, Rick. There has to be a way. We have to at least try.”

Mary looked at the two angry men. Rick opened his mouth, but Mary interrupted. “Whit’s right. We have to fight back, Rick. What about some virus...they used to pop-up on the net all the time.”

“Yeah, but no virus has hit the w-w-web this year. I w-w-wonder why.”

Still looking out the window, Whit chimed in. “Microsoft Guardian, the best anti-virus program of all time. This lowly English major knows at least that.”

Rick turned back to his friend.

“You’re right, Whit. It’s a good program, but you can always beat an antivirus program. There’s another reason. Recall the loss of the c-c-computer geeks. *They* write the viruses. Nearly all those guys have disappeared. If we had more geeks like me, we might be able to fight Hal. But...” he shrugged. “Hal knocked them off.”

Whit’s head swiveled back to his friend. “There has to be a way, Rick, and we have to find it.”

“I’ve tried! Even getting information about Hal nearly got me k-k-killed.” Rick slammed down his beer bottle, got up and stomped out the door.

Mary watched her brother leave. Whit’s head slumped down on his chest.

Mary squeezed his hand. “I know. I know. He’s a wonderful brother, but stubborn. Whit, he’s partly right. We *have* to run for now. You’re a wanted felon and I’m a ‘person of interest’.”

Whit’s face remained frozen in a frown for a few more seconds. Then his face relaxed. “Alright, I’ll give you that. We have

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to run now, but we should be talking about finding the silicon monster and killing him-it. Whatever.”

“Finding Hal might be more difficult than you think. Maybe he’s not in one place but all over. Maybe he can’t be killed.” Mary said gently.

“If he’s everywhere we kill him part by part. If he’s in one place we blow the bastard up, Mary.”

“How?”

“I don’t know!” he snapped as he got up.

Mary followed and they walked back to the motel without speaking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The next morning, Rick focused on the drive, Whit stared at the stumpy, yellow-white cornstalks surrounding them, and Mary stared at Whit. As they entered Indiana, a car pulled alongside for a few moments. Had any of the three been more alert, they would have noticed the scrutiny of the other driver.

The man in the car picked up a cell phone. “Yes, sir. Can’t be sure of the heights, but they fit the description.” The man listened to the instructions.

“OK, I’ll follow them.”

They stopped near dark just outside of Beloit, Wisconsin. A run-down Victorian bed and breakfast offered sufficient anonymity with no cameras and they felt safe once again. Dinner conversation was limited to passing the ketchup bottle or asking the waitress for a refill. After dinner Whit went out for a walk. Mary caught up with him, huffing to match his long strides as he walked down the sidewalk.

Finally, Whit looked down at her as she struggled to keep up. He slowed down. “I’m sorry, Mary. I’m still pissed off at Rick’s insistence that there is no way to fight this thing.”

“He’ll come around, Whit. Give him time.”

“Time? How much time do we have, Mary?”

She didn’t have an answer.

They walked in silence back to the Bed and Breakfast. Mary mumbled good night and went upstairs. Whit flopped down on a chair facing a television.

A middle-aged couple strolled in, hand-in-hand, and saw the thin, tall man in leather pants, wearing a Mohawk, glowering at a blank TV screen. The woman backed up, tugging the arm of her companion. Patting her hand, the man coughed.

“Hi, friend. John and Mary Lou Stenton, from Des Moines, Iowa. Mind if we turn on the TV?”

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Whit waved his hand toward a couch.

The jovial man smiled, sat down with his wife and turned on the TV to a news program.

“Vice President Sorenson, your opponent has suggested we dismantle some of the more invasive parts of the Patriot Act, like the ‘sneak and peek’ warrant. It allows the government to search a person’s house or belongings without informing the suspect of such a search. Should we take out this one provision?”

“Well, Barbara, as you know I don’t always agree with Henry.” There were a few chuckles from the audience.

Instead of looking at the interviewer, the Vice President looked into the camera.

“Barbara, let’s look at the facts: the present Patriot Act kept terrorist attacks to near zero for over ten years, but, these last two years...” The Vice President’s voice got louder and louder. “...we have suffered attacks and they have been getting more frequent and vicious. Throw out the Patriot Act? Never. We need to expand it! Give the defenders of our countries, the FBI, the CIA, and the NSA even greater latitude with wire taps and search warrants.”

Riotous clapping erupted in the hall as the camera scanned over the crowd.

“Damn, he’s good,” exclaimed the husband.

Whit looked at the TV and just shook his head wearily. He watched the couple. The man’s eyes fixed on the television, the wife’s going from her husband, to the TV, to Whit. The young editor was self-conscious about the negative effect he had on others. Finally, the nervous wife got up. “Honey, I’m getting tired. Going up to bed. Don’t be too long.” With a wink to the husband, the plump woman sashayed out of the living room.

The husband turned to watch her walk up the stairs. When he turned back, he saw Whit staring. His thumb went over his shoulder. “Some things might be more important than this election.” He turned off the TV. “Sorry to have bothered you.”

Whit shook his head as the man got up. “No. No bother at all. I take it you like Sorenson.”

Stopping at the entry way to the living room, the man thought a moment. “Well, don’t agree with everything he says, but he’s on right side about Patriot Act issue. Too many terrorist attacks in America these days.”

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Whit's legs stretched out across the carpet, nearly touching the television. "Really? Remember the incident in Kursk, Alaska?"

"Hey, I wouldn't call twenty dead and two buildings destroyed by a bomb just an incident," John Stenton from Des Moines, Iowa replied angrily.

"I wouldn't either. But the newspapers in Juno, just a few miles from Kirsck, reported only one death and one shooting injury and nothing about any bomb."

"That's not what I saw on the news."

"Nor I. Just so happens that I had a friend who lived in Kirsck. Called him up. He confirmed what the Juno papers said."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it didn't happen the way it was reported on the TV and the internet. He said it was one family arguing with another family. Those long Alaskan nights can make folks get real edgy. The Juno paper claimed one house burned, probably arson and gunshots were exchanged between the men, one died and the other was injured."

John came back in the room and sat down again. "Why would the TV news here report something false?"

"TV news today is more about ratings and saying something sensational than actually reporting. Also, different interest groups control the TV news. Stories get tilted one way or the other depending on whether the owner of a station is liberal or conservative."

"Hey, isn't that against the law?" the larger man asked angrily.

He closed his eyes. How many times had he explained this truth to others? *Too many*, he thought. Now he knew it wasn't interest groups who controlled the news. It was Hal. "Don't accept what the television is telling you. The isolated, outlandish stories...check them out."

"Well, I do sometimes. I check it out on the internet."

"Oh," said Whit sarcastically, "then you're covered."

The man smiled. He looked at the TV. "Hey, it's one of those new models. Wow!"

Whit eyed the pristine set suspiciously. "New model?"

"Yeah. It's a TV and a cell phone. And, get this, it automatically Skypes. Gotta camera inside. If someone else has the same kind of TV it's like talking to each other in your home. And,

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they're actually less expensive than the older digital sets. The wife and I are gonna get one."

John looked upstairs. "Speaking of which, I'd better get up to the missus. Bye now." He climbed the stairs two steps at a time.

Whit looked at the machine. Was the camera on and watching him? He slowly got up and went to bed.

Through the large living room window, an officer in an unmarked car watched the tall man with the shaggy Mohawk amble upstairs. "Been watching them for a few hours, sir. Heights are about right. Can't be sure about the woman, but the man resembles the target." The man stopped talking and shook his head. "No, couldn't take pictures."

More talk from the other end.

"Yes, I'll stay with them sir."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jimmy coasted through three towns before he found a payphone in a mom-and-pop gas station, both relics of a gentler past. “Got anything for me?”

“Three in a Bed and Breakfast over the border in Wisconsin. New York plate: ALH 435. Young biker guy, tall. Weird lady traveling with him. Then a normal type man with—let me check my notes—oh, ‘shaggy hair’.”

“Thanks, Tom. I owe you one.”

“Hey, any time one of us can outdo the feds, we’re even up. I got my man watching them until you get there. Good luck.”

Six hours later, Jimmy found the Bed and Breakfast, its illuminated sign cutting through the moonless night. Seeing a car up the street, Jimmy pulled over and saw a uniformed officer in the front seat. Jimmy thanked the officer who then left. The detective pulled up across the street, unwrapped an oily package, and started eating a soggy sub. After a gratifying burp, he slumped down in his seat and was immediately asleep.

Jimmy woke shivering. Sparkly frost covered the ground. The fresh light of a new day presented stately Victorian houses up and down the street. He slumped down in his seat as he watched a tall man, obviously the biker, walk toward the car. A young woman walked out to the car and wordlessly got into the backseat. Mohawk guy ignored her and slipped into the passenger side of the front seat. *Might be Whitman Emerson. Bit of a stretch, but maybe. But it was unlikely the girl was Mary Henderson. Most likely just punks from the Big Apple.* He was about to leave when he saw the third man. A normal looking guy, young with a mop of hair on his head, scanned up and down the street before he got into the car. *Looking for police cars, maybe?* Normal guy with two weirdos. Didn’t make sense. The New York car pulled slowly out of the driveway and went down the street. *Hmm, the third man was a very careful driver, like he didn’t want to give any excuse to the police to pull him over.* Jimmy looked at the house again and then up and down the street. No surveillance cameras. He started his car and followed them as they slowed down and then sped up past a Golden Corral and an IHOP. Finally, they

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pulled into a small diner on the outskirts of town. No surveillance cameras.

After the waitress gave them water and menus, Whit shared his concerns about the new television sets.

“Now, Hal can watch people right in their homes.

An old lady raised an eyebrow as she looked over at their table. Whit awarded her a great grin and then turned back to his companions.

“I don’t know if the damn thing was on last night. Hal could have been watching me last night in the living room.”

“Well, that’s something we m-m-missed about Hal.”

“What?”

“The new surveillance cameras and this new Skypes TV, they are inexpensive.”

Whit thought for a moment. “I see where you’re heading. Cheaper since Hal wants new technology in our homes.”

Whit looked up at a small, new TV in the corner of the diner. “I’m not so hungry anymore, let’s go.” They were met at the door by a tall officer in a black uniform. All three friends froze. He looked at them, smiled and walked into the restaurant. They continued to the car, walking quickly.

“Hey! Stop!”

They turned to see the same officer walking toward them, holding something by his side

Rick and Mary backed up to the car. Whit gulped, blinked and walked toward the officer who stood by his car.

“Think you might have left your hat on the...”

Whit heard a bang and then a loud plunk sounded from the police car. He looked at the police car and its side was creased, a small hole clearly visible. The officer ducked down, pulling a gun from his holster. The world in slow motion, Whit turned around to see Rick trying to cock the gun for another shot. Mary had crouched down, hands over her ears. Whit ran toward her. Another shot zinged past him and smacked into the windshield of the police car. The officer returned fire and Rick ducked, his next round going straight up. A number of shots followed. Metal pings and breaking glass

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were the only sounds in the small village as though everyone and everything was holding its breath and waiting.

Whit had reached Mary and pushed her into the car. He yelled to Rick. "Get in." Whit got into the driver's seat and Rick got into the back passenger seat with Mary. Before Rick's door was closed, their car was spraying cinders from the parking lot.

"Anyone hurt? Hit?"

"No."

"N-N-No fine."

"Is he following?"

Rick looked out the window. "No, I think I hit his engine.

"He'll be on the phone. Jesus, Rick why the hell did you do that? He was just returning your hat, you idiot."

"Look out!" Mary screamed.

Whit swerved to avoid hitting a truck. The car screeched around the corner.

"You're going too fast!" screamed Mary.

"Damn right I am."

"Where are y-y-you going?"

"Just away.

"He might not have gotten our license plate. Slow down so we don't attract attention." Mary said as she looked through the rear-view window.

Whit slowed down as they drove up the ramp to the interstate.

"Any police?"

Mary kept looking to the back and sides. "No. No lights, no cars."

"They will be looking for this car. We have to get off the highway and hide."

"Exit is s-s-six miles, Whit."

"Okay. We'll get off there and get lost down some roads."

Except for quick breaths, silence reigned in the car. Rick and Mary were looking for police cars. Whit saw a sign for an airport. Suddenly a black car pulled over in front of them. Another black car eased behind them and a third moved along side. Whit looked at the car to his left. He saw a police officer.

"Shit!" he yelled, banging the steering wheel. They were pinned in against the side of the road and surrounded by police. The car in front started to slow down. Whit tapped his brakes, slowing

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down in tandem. He looked down past the fence on the passenger side, down the slight hill and saw a local road running parallel to the highway.

Wide-eyed, Rick started to bring the pistol up level with the window.

“Put that away! You are so outgunned.”

Whit looked ahead. A few hundred yards up the slight incline dropped off precipitously near an overpass. *Now or never.*

“Everyone, put on seat belts. Now!”

Jimmy had watched the show from a safe distance. Bullets were flying high, into the ground, and a few hit the police car. It didn't look like the shooter was aiming at the police officer; he was trying to hit the car. He saw Whit Emerson jump in the driver's side and race the car out of the parking lot. Jimmy followed them, but not too closely. Within a few minutes the perp's car was surrounded by the police.

Jimmy was now only a few cars back. He saw Whit swerve to the left, banging into the police car which was hemming him in. At first, he thought Whit as trying to break out. Then the car sharply turned right, broke through the metal fence alongside the highway and careened down the embankment, skidding sideways, bouncing roughly until it turned onto the road. The police cars sped away toward the exit.

Jimmy pulled over to the left side. Well, if they can do it, so could he. Jimmy waited for a break in the traffic and accelerated diagonally across the road, crashed through the fence and bounced down the steep embankment. He almost rolled over at one point, but managed to maintain control until he reached the road. It had looked much easier when the fugitives had done it. The few cars on the two-lane road had thankfully seen his bizarre excursion and slowed down. As he sped after the car, he saw a large sign with an arrow directing cars to the airport. In the distance he watched the Honda Civic turn into the parking lot of the airport.

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“Whit, we can’t fly out of here, they have to be watching the terminals.”

Whit ignored Mary as he looked frantically at the signs.

Whit pulled into long term parking and grabbed the ticket. He slowed down, going up and down the lanes.

“What are you doing?” asked Mary.

“Look for someone leaving a parked car, Mary.”

“Over there,” she yelled.

Whit turned to where she was pointing. From the distance they could see a man locking the car and hustling to a bus stop, pulling a large suitcase along.

Whit pulled past the car and swerved in front of the commuter. He jumped out and with long strides stood nose to nose with other man.

“Give me your keys, asshole. Now!”

The terrified man handed him his key fob.

“Cell phone. Hurry up.” Within two seconds, the cell phone was in Whit’s hand. Whit threw it on the ground. It shattered it into worthless bits with two stomps from his boots.

“Now we are going to play hide-and-seek. I’ll count to twenty and then I’ll look for you. If I find you, I’ll kill you.”

The man ran away, weaving in and out of the cars.

Whit threw Rick the keys. “You drive us out of here. Mary and I will hide in the back.”

As they got in the car, Whit continued. “The police will be all over this place in a matter of minutes. They are going to be looking for a guy with a Mohawk driving a Ford. They won’t bother with you driving this Subaru. When they go by you, don’t speed up, just get to the side to let them by.”

Whit pointed toward the interstate running parallel to the airport. “Okay, gang. Let’s get back on the highway.”

As they drove past a long stream of police cars, Rick slowed down and got out of their path. When they pulled onto the highway, Rick started breathing normally. He turned back to his friends. “Now we definitely have to get to my cabin in Canada. We’ll be s-s-safe there.”

Propped up on the seat, Whit closed his eyes feeling very tired. “Rick, we’ll never be safe. Humanity will never be safe. We have to

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fight it. Somehow. But, right now I'm tired of fighting you. Let's put a few miles between us and Beloit and hole up for the night."

Jimmy had followed them to the airport and parked along the fence of long-term parking. He watched Mohawk Man, who he now knew was Whit, scare the driver. And he noted that it was an act with no violence. This guy was not a serial killer, not a killer at all. He waited a few minutes outside the entrance, knowing they would come back out. He was sure they wouldn't take a plane. They were too smart to do that. After the police cars zipped into the lot, he saw a Subaru exit the parking lot. Different car, a strange person driving. The mysterious brother? As the car eased into the highway, he saw Mohawk Man pop up in the back seat. He followed them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

They found a small two-story motel overlooking the St. Croix River right before entering Minnesota. It was nestled in a middle-class neighborhood, lawns well-tended, a few summer flowers stubbornly showing colors, chrysanthemums just in bloom.

After an early dinner, Rick went directly back to his room leaving Whit and Mary to their coffee and dessert. Finishing his last bite of apple pie, Whit turned to Mary.

“Care to commit one more crime with me?”

She tilted her head quizzically and smiled. “Maybe. What did you have in mind?”

Whit didn’t answer. He took her hand and walked her to the lobby.

A young, pimply manager with a thin tie and a white shirt not fully tucked in greeted the pair nervously.

“Got a problem with my bike. Can I borrow a screw driver?”

“Sure. Sure.”

The manager walked into the back office and a few seconds later he returned with a screw driver.

“Thanks, dude. I’ll bring it right back.”

As they walked out the front door of the lobby, Mary turned to him. “Dude?”

Whit shrugged and smiled. “I thought that might be biker lingo.”

The pair walked to the back of the motel where their car was parked. Whit kneeled down behind the Subaru and started unscrewing the license plate.

“Keep a lookout, Mary. Tell me if anyone comes out of their rooms.”

Mary nervously looked right and left.

“Don’t act so conspicuous. Go in and out of the back door like you’re looking for something.”

Mary kept crawling in the back seat and emerging, casually viewing the doors.

A minute later, Whit waved her to follow him and went a few doors down.

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“Saw this Subaru when we came in. Same color, different model. Keep watching.”

He scooted down behind the car and worked on its license plate. Two minutes later, the deed was done.

Whit stepped back and admired his work.

“When the guy at the airport finally reports what happened to him, they will eventually be looking for a Subaru. But not ours. Wrong plates. Pretty smart, huh?”

Mary closed the back door and folded her arms.

“You are turning into a very accomplished criminal Whitman Emerson.”

He held his hand out for her. “Care for a short walk?”

“I don’t know. You plan to steal any more license plates?”

“Nope. Just one a day, ma’am.”

She laughed and they walked toward a small park behind the motel.

Whit gripped her hand tightly, his thumb gently caressing. Mary looked away and returned the grip, but not tightly.

“Somehow, we’ll get through this, Mary.”

She nodded and started to pull away from his grasp. He smiled at her. “Hey! We’ve got to play the role of young lovers.”

She kept holding his hand with a blush hidden by the twilight. Mary suffered from a school girl crush on Whit the first time she saw him. His kindness and gentleness with her brother witnessed during their frequent get-togethers deepened her affections.

They sat on a bench beside a swing.

He kept holding her hand. “We almost lost the game today.”

“I know, my heart is still beating way too fast.”

“Well, stop worrying for now. Our car has Minnesota plates so it won’t attract undue attention tomorrow. We have to steal another car tomorrow, though,” he said glumly.

He stopped and turned toward her, still holding her hand. “I still want to fight the damn machine, Mary. We have to do something.”

“I know, Whit. But what?”

“I don’t know.”

ROBERT SELLS

The former editor released her hand and studied the homes nestled in tree-laden yards, a call for dinner in the distance, a laugh somewhere else.

"They have no clue, Mary. No one even suspects their lives are being manipulated by a self-serving computer. We have to do something. We have to!" Eyes closed, he shook his head. He reached for her hand again.

They kept strolling down a street parallel to the motel. He looked at her as they walked. "The only good thing about this situation is being with you."

Mary looked away, her heart beating so hard her whole body quivered.

Whit looked at her strangely and then put his head down. He gently let go of her hand. "Well, guess we'd better get back."

They walked in silence, Whit's countenance weary and Mary's face scrunched in thought.

Finally, just outside her room, she blurted, "I enjoy being with you, Whit." Not sure if she said too much or too little, she retreated into her room. Whit scratched his head as he stared at the closed door. He brought his hand up to knock on the door, but then slowly let it down again. He walked back to his own room.

Early the next morning, Rick strolled over to Mary's door and knocked. She came out, looked over Rick's shoulder to the end of the complex and put her head down as though she was fumbling with the key.

"Police!"

Rick turned and saw a police officer knocking on a door. It opened and he stepped inside.

Mary scurried to the car as Rick walked quickly back to Whit's door. Whit answered the knock pulling on his T-shirt.

"Gotta go n-n-now." Rick squeezed his eyes to hurry the last word out.

Whit grabbed a blanket before he left. Mary was already in the back seat, eyes wide, fist to her mouth. Whit tossed her the blanket. "Get in the front seat."

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Rick had just opened the driver's door when an officer exited the room right in front of them. Whit ducked into the back door and laid down. Mary covered him with the blanket. Rick gulped as the officer turned toward them.

“You folks heading out?”

“Y-Y-Yes sir. Going back to D-D-Duluth.” Rick exaggerated his stuttering, closing his eyes when he spoke. Whit pulled the gun out from under the back seat. He took off the safety.

“Got identification?”

Rick pulled out his wallet and pulled a false license.

The officer looked at the license and then at Rick's face.

“What's t-t-this all about, officer?”

“Just routine,” he answered handing back the license.

“That your wife in the car?”

Y-Y-Yes, sir. Not feeling well.”

Whit cocked the gun. *Could I really shoot this man? Kill him? For just doing his job?*

The cop looked over toward Mary when another door down opened a few doors down. A young man with a Rolling Stone T-shirt was trying to negotiate a suitcase on wheels out of the door. The officer hesitated a moment and then yelled at the man.

“Hey! Hold on a minute.” The officer nodded to Rick and approached the next person.

As they drove away, Mary said, “We can't keep this up. They're going to catch us sooner or later.”

“We'll be in Montana late tomorrow. Then we go n-n-north.”

Whit sighed. His friend still wanted to retreat to Canada. *Gotta keep trying...*

“Rick, you said the computer is too much for you. Could we get someone to help us?”

“W-W-Who? They're all dead or hiding.”

Rick clenched his jaw. No sense in giving possibly false hope to the two people he most cared about. *There was one who could be very much alive.* Rick had long assumed Little Lion suspected that an intelligent entity was created on that Halloween over a decade before. And for the same reasons Rick insisted upon Canada, Little Lion had hidden himself early on, very early on. *Maybe even in Canada. “Could we get someone to help us?” Good question, Whit. Little Lion might still be out there. But, where was he?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ten years earlier.

The helicopter, its rotors creating a furious dust cloud, bounced on the landing pad. One person jumped down to the ground and simultaneously the helicopter slowly climbed out of the cloud. A lone soldier, uniform matching the color of the desert sand, holding his hat in place, ran up to the isolated figure.

“I’m your escort,” he yelled above the loud, bass *thumpty-thumpty-thumpty* of the departing copter. “I have been authorized to brief you before you enter the complex.”

Little Lion nodded and silently followed the man into a metal shed. Once inside, the soldier, a captain, gave a manila envelope to a sergeant. Credentials were scanned into a computer. On the screen, Little Lion caught momentary glimpses of a Vermont driving license, a New Jersey birth certificate, and a set of fingerprints. Instructed to look into some strange binoculars, the computer expert was momentarily blinded by a searingly bright light. By the time his eyes adjusted to the ambient lighting, the computer screen had darkened and the room went from dark to light.

“This way.” The captain was brusque. No, “sir” or “ma’am” with this efficient autocrat, just “this way,” thought Little Lion.

Hopping into a Jeep, they drove along a single-lane paved road through barren brown landscape, jagged rocks sticking up through sand like miniature mountains. A ten-foot fence topped with barbed wire straddled the road. The cement guard house with two dull gray machine guns sticking out of the front windows was a formidable sentinel guarding the gate. The captain showed their credentials to a major who stepped out of the guardhouse. A nod from the major and the gates opened up. The captain drove them up a rise. In a slight depression stood a ranch house with extraordinarily tall walls. Within a minute, they drove the car up alongside the front door. The captain got out of the car and held the door open for Little Lion. *At least I’m enough of a dignitary to warrant that action.*

Computer wizard extraordinaire and by-the-book army captain entered the ranch house. Walking past busy technicians

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typing on computers or meeting in small groups, they walked to the end of the single room house. Little Lion noted the furtive glances as they walked through the large room. The pair stopped in front of a set of unusually large elevator doors about half the length of the entire house. After stepping into the largest elevator Little Lion had ever seen, they plunged downward for a few seconds. The elevator rumbled to a stop. The back elevator door opened and a room, far larger than the footprint of the house above, was presented. Air conditioners established ambient noise while dozens of the white-cloaked attendants monitored just as many computer stations. Near the door a short, bald man in uniform gave orders to a few technicians who were taking notes. He looked up at Little Lion, stared for a moment, and nodded. The captain started talking.

“This is the largest computer network on the planet. In fact, this is where the internet was birthed.”

“I thought this was where they kept the aliens and Big Foot,” Little Lion joked.

The soldier didn’t smile. “We perpetuate such myths to prevent people from knowing the truth about what’s here. Nothing more than a cover-up. In the event of a nuclear-strike it’s unlikely we will be hit. But if they knew this was our primary computer nexus...” He went on to briefly describe the history of the internet. “Of course, all I am telling you is top secret. Recall you were briefed that any and all things you witness here cannot be shared with anyone. After you complete your job, you will be monitored by one or more government officials and if we even *suspect* you are sharing any information...”

“I know. Then you have to kill me,” Little Lion continued with a straight face.

“No...this isn’t Syria or Saudi Arabia. No, you would be...ahh...detained.”

“How long?”

“The remainder of your life.”

“Glad this is nothing like Syria or Saudi Arabia.” A flicker of disapproval flashed across the captain’s face. Little Lion broke the uneasy silence with a question. “So, where are the two computers?”

Without a word, the captain pointed back to the elevator and led Little Lion and through a back elevator door. A new room appeared just as large as the previous. In this room, however, there

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was only one technician: a woman in khakis, kneeling down, fiddling with some wires behind one of the two very large computers.

“Oh, hi. You’re here. Welcome.” She got up and shook Little Lion’s hand. Walking through the room a bald man with the name-tag PORTMAN approached the computer genius with a smile and an outstretched hand.

“You have the program?” Portman asked brusquely.

Little Lion nodded.

“Good. Let’s get to work.”

Working nearly twenty hours each day, time lost its meaning in the monotone cement room. What could have been a few days or even a few weeks passed in an instant or a lifetime, Little Lion didn’t know for sure and didn’t care at all. What was important was that it was now a few minutes before union, a monumental joining of two massive computers. The vast computer connections of the entire military were already linked with the infinite web outside and all electrical signals were handled by a dozen computer stations all connected. Beside this mammoth installation was an 8-bit computer championed by a research program at seven different universities sponsored by the defense department. Unlike its binary sister, it was an eight-bit quantum computer, smaller but more powerful.

A third bank of circuits lay between the two different machines. These computers purred contentedly, waiting for direction. The room with the three computers held only two other people, Colonel Portman and the woman Little Lion met on day one. Three computer and three humans...all primed for union.

The woman twiddled knobs and pushed buttons on one machine after another. Finally, she sat at a computer terminal in the middle and carefully typed a few commands. Then she stopped, got up and offered the chair to the legend.

The computer expert sat down while the bald-headed colonel stood just behind the softly padded chair. A digitally enhanced theater-sized screen loomed in front. Little Lion pushed buttons, typing in the final few commands.

“Alright. This is it. Let’s make history.”

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Breathing deeply, excited and fretful, the ENTER key was tapped.

The screen showed a slow change of numbers and symbols. Then more and more information filled and left the screen as though each bit was racing to catch up. Suddenly, the screen went blank.

“It’s done,” the lab assistant breathed. “We have union,” she whispered.

The humans were silent, awed by the potential of the machine before them. Deep inside, unknown to them, an entity found words.

I. I am. I exist.

A nanosecond later, the screen returned, the frantic dance of symbols ensued. A second later, normal computer activity resumed. Frantically punching in a few lines of code, the creator frowned at the creation. As far as anyone could determine, the connected computer was more powerful, but—but there was no evidence of its power being magnified by many factors. After the link between the enormous military computer and the eight-bit experimental computer, this was the biggest computer ever created, four times bigger and eight times faster than the last silicon leader. The computer programs fashioned months ago worked splendidly. But could the machine perceive a problem and fix it immediately? Little Lion was doubtful.

“Let’s throw in our ‘problem’ and see if this baby can handle it,” said Portman. Little Lion pushed another button and the screen didn’t change. The ‘problem’ was there, easily solvable, but the computer awaited guidance from the humans.

As Little Lion wearily rose from the chair. *Great computer, but still just a machine needing human instructions.* The technician handed over a print out of complex machine language.

“This line is before you pushed the button. The lines which follow are after union. The first page is gibberish. But the second page shows a positive check of all systems. Congratulations. It works perfectly...as a stronger, but normal, computer.”

Unlike the other two, Little Lion did not look at the posted results of the union, rather the smartest mind on the planet focused was on the “gibberish.” Hiding any reaction, Little Lion’s brow curled in puzzlement.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Traveling thru Minnesota, they wove around long, gentle curves of blue water followed by straight dashes through expansive fields of green grass harvested by scattered horses and great herds of cattle. The tension of the early morning disappeared with the fog. Conversation, tentative at first, surged into a flood of wry comments. Laughter punctuated discussions. Whatever their disagreements, whatever their problems, they had come to same unspoken conclusion. They remained "good, good friends."

After lunch at a run-down local diner touting "the best hamburger in Minnesota," they strolled to an empty park and carefully sat down on a rickety picnic table, weathered nearly gray. Rick watched an old tractor chug by them on the adjacent road. He turned to his friend.

"I did try to stop Hal. But I couldn't do it a-a-alone. I needed help. When Hal was born, what was the first thing he did?"

Whit thought a moment. "Hide."

Rick nodded.

"The military and Little Lion h-h-had no inkling of what we are now experiencing. Because Hal hid his existence."

Whit thought a moment. "Hmm. Wouldn't Little Lion have figured it out by now, though?"

Rick nodded. "Pretty sure he knew right away. A few months after union, he d-d-disappeared."

"Huh? For how long?" asked Whit.

"Forever. No one...not me, not anyone and not even the military, knows where he went."

"He just what? Vanished? Poof! Gone?" asked Whit.

"The handle Little Lion n-n-never showed up again. The military didn't know what happened to him. He was hiding from his creation."

"Maybe Hal killed him."

"No. The murders didn't begin until a few years ago. Long a-a-after union."

"So, Little Lion hid," mused Whit.

"Maybe he just wanted to retire," suggested Mary.

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Whit tapped his fist to his mouth.

“If we could somehow find him...”

“I’ve tried because I really needed his expertise. Failed. Like e-e-everyone else. There was one weird, last message. I...ahh...” Rick reached in his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “... have it right here.” He withdrew a tattered notecard.

“Ahh...let’s see. *‘The lord is exalted’.*”

Mary looked over his shoulder. “You copied it down exactly? The word ‘lord’ wasn’t capitalized?”

“I copied it down exactly, Mary.”

“Probably from the Bible,” Whit said.

“Yeah. I found a few quotes in the Bible. But it referenced heaven or God.”

Mary’s face wrinkled in thought. “Why the quote then?”

“Maybe he was so s-s-scared he had a religious transformation. I don’t know.”

“Odd that he didn’t capitalize ‘lord.’ When referring to God, the ‘l’ is always a capital,” pointed out Mary.

Whit chuckled. “Little Lion wasn’t an English major.”

“What about his web address?” asked Mary.

“After the final quote the w-w-web address went to another organization.”

“What was it?”

Rick smiled. “Sappho Domains.”

“Well, it’s an odd name. Does it mean anything?” ask Mary.

Whit looked at her incredulously and Rick laughed. “My dear, innocent sister.”

“Rick, tell me! Did Sappho ever write anything? Could he be Little Lion?”

Rick stifled his chuckle by coughing into his hand. Mary had been brought up by a strict Baptist family. Whit, sparing Mary as much embarrassment as he could, leaned toward her. “Sappho was a Greek writer thousands of years ago. *She* lived on the island of Lesbos...Lesbos as in lesbian. She wrote homoerotic poems. Understand?”

Mary face flushed and all she could say was, “Oh!”

Rick finally answered. “Just lesbian porn stuff on the site, Mary. Stories, pictures, videos...chat rooms.”

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Whit interrupted Rick. "Okay. Obviously *not* Little Lion. Any other clues on where he might have disappeared to?"

"Nothing."

Whit shook his head. "Then, why did he bother to leave the last message?"

Later in the afternoon they were within twenty miles of the North Dakota border. They stopped at a grocery store on the outskirts of a small village for a bathroom break. Mary looked out a window and saw a small strip mall with one of the store fronts boasting the Middlethorpe Library. "Rick, drive over to that mall across the street."

Once in front of the library, Mary got out. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

A few minutes stretched to over an hour when she finally returned. The two men sitting on a bench frowned at her.

"I'm pretty sure Little Lion was giving humans a warning with the last quote."

The frowns remained on their faces.

"What do you mean?" demanded Rick.

"He knew he created Hal. 'Lord exalted', the quote, Little Lion wasn't talking about God at all. He was talking about Hal."

Both Whit and Rick eyed her doubtfully. She looked back toward the brick building. "Nice little library over there. They had interesting reference book for biblical quotes. Put in the words and the index sends you to a particular passage. With Little Lion's last quote, it took me to many passages."

"You can do that on the c-c-computer even easier, Mary."

Whit scowled at Rick. His friend blinked and then nodded.

"Well, if you wanted to use the c-c-computer. Which we don't, of course. I'm sorry, go on."

She removed a notepad from her purse and thumbed through some pages. "It's the kind of quote which is found, in one form or another, all over the Bible. But Rick was right. Most of the quotes have no connection to Hal. Actually, you would never find the exact quote in the Bible because the 'l' wasn't capitalized. So, *lord* should have been *Lord*. When you insisted you copied it down exactly,

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without the capital 'l', I figured Little Lion was trying to tell us the quote wouldn't be exact and that the 'lord' did not refer to God but to Hal. Anyway, here's the Biblical text...uh..." she consulted her note, "*Then our Lord alone will be exalted,*" she said, smiling.

She looked at the two men, looking for agreement. Whit's forehead was wrinkled as he considered the possibility. She went on.

"Okay, not exactly the same quote, I know. But, here's the entire passage. Now remember to replace Lord with Hal and it makes sense. It's from Isaiah, Chapter two:

A day is coming when human pride will be ended and human arrogance destroyed. Then our Lord alone will be exalted. On that day the Lord Almighty will humble everyone who is powerful, everyone who is proud and conceited. He will level the high mountains and hills, every high tower, and the walls of every fortress. He will sink even the largest and most beautiful ships. Human pride will be ended, and human arrogance will be destroyed. Idols will completely disappear, and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day. People will hide in caves in the rocky hills or dig holes in the ground to try to escape from the Lord's anger."

Mary looked from one man to the other. "He was talking about mankind's future. Little Lion knew he created a god and was afraid."

"He was trying to warn us," Whit commented.

All three looked at each other. Wordlessly, they got back in the car. Within minutes they found an old ranch house with a Bed and Breakfast sign on the outskirts of Middlethorpe. In their haste, however, they didn't notice an ATM across the street. A surveillance camera swung toward them and followed the trio into their rooms. From a safe distance Jimmy watched the camera, finding it odd.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Supper was a bag of Arby's roast beef sandwiches ravenously consumed in a courtyard behind the B and B. As they ate, all Mary stared at was a small garden, its occupants shriveled after the previous night's hard frost. She shivered.

After chasing the sandwich down with a swig of water, Rick began the discussion. "Little Lion d-d-disappeared. No one can find him. Pretty sure, he's hiding from the super c-c-computer."

Whit turned to his friend. "It's up to us to find him, Rick."

Rick glared at Whit. "I've t-t-tried, okay? He doesn't want to be found. So, he won't be found."

Whit thought for a moment. "Hmm. Suppose he wants to be found. But only by humans. That would explain the cryptic message that only a Christian—" he nodded to Mary, "could unravel."

Rick stood up and pointed north. "We can go into Canada from here. We can get to the cabin."

Mary stood up and tenderly pushed his arm down. "We have to find him, Rick."

Whit studied Rick, one of the gentlest people he knew. He got up and gently the squeezed the shoulder of his friend.

"I know it's scary, buddy. But Mary is right. We have to find Little Lion."

Rick kept looking northward as he spoke. "I'm afraid. Yes."

He turned to face them. "But, I'm more afraid for you, Mary. And, even y-y-you, Whit. You're my best friend."

It was then Whit realized that Rick's stubbornness was due to his desire to protect him and Mary. Whit sighed, wearily got up and patted him on the back. "Come on, buddy. It's too cold out here. Let's go in."

Hours later, Whit sat outside on the same chair looking up the stars. Mary stepped out the back door, looked around and saw him. "Hey! Care for any company?"

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Whit looked back toward the door and smiled. "Always glad for your company, Mary."

She pulled up a chair beside him. For a few moments they simply watched the largest possible screen give its silent, longest running show. Finally, Whit spoke. "I'm not going to Canada."

Mary kept looking up and said softly. "I know. I have to stay with Rick."

"I know."

"I'll keep working on him, Whit. But, he's stubborn. And he's very protective of me."

"I know."

Whit looked at her. *Even in the gray moonlight she looks great.*

Mary started to get up. "Let's go back inside, I'm cold."

They rose together and nearly bumped into each other, now face to face.

Mary giggled. "Well, that was..." she started to joke, but Whit grabbed her shoulders, leaned in, and silenced her with a kiss. She drew back quickly.

Whit's hands dropped to his side. "Sorry. I shouldn't have. I just...oh, never mind."

He looked down at the ground and sighed. "Stupid thing to do. I know you think of me more as a brother than..."

Mary stepped closer, slid her hand behind his neck, and pulled his head toward her. The kiss started gentle, but as he wrapped his arms around her, their lips pressed closer together.

Whit finally pulled away and looked down at her, a great smile on his face. "Okay. I guess you don't view me as a brother."

Her eyes were glistening and she shook her head and then laid it against his heart. Whit stroked her hair.

"I've wanted to do this for days. So soft," he whispered.

She looked up at him and smiled. "What took you so long?"

They walked down the hall and Mary knocked on Rich's door.

"It's open."

Mary leaned in and said goodnight. She was acknowledged with a grunt and a hand wiggle. His eyes were glued to the screen of his laptop and he seemed utterly engrossed in whatever it was he was working on. Mary then went to her door, opened, stepped in without so much as a glance back to Whit. He thought about knocking, but

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didn't. Instead, he walked to his room. Mary made it clear that intimacy would be on her terms.

An hour later, still tossing and turning, wondering about the "event" between him and Mary, his door creaked open. Whit tensed and tried to make out the figure silhouetted in the doorway. Not Rick, not a male form at all.

He heard the lock flipped closed. Mary crawled into bed beside Whit and they kissed. Their hands explored each other, softly, tentatively. Whit felt Mary grow pliant in his arms as he kissed her neck and his hands caressed her arms and hips and legs. Her legs opened a bit, inviting greater intimacy, but Whit only stroked her inner thigh. His hand came up to her breast and just circled the hardened nipple hesitantly. Whit paused, meeting Mary's eyes in the dim, red glow of the clock on the bed stand. Mary took his hand, kissed his fingertips, pressed it on her breast. There was a momentary pause in their caresses, a connection of souls as they looked at each other, an understanding shared. Then she raised her mouth to his and started kissing him again. Mary moaned as the kisses continued. Moments later he was poised above her, and slipped into to her.

They climaxed together a few minutes after they started. Unwilling to let him go, Mary gripped him tighter, wanting to keep him close. Whit obliged with a mixture of wonder and relief. She was so different from Elizabeth. Mary gave freely of herself, sharing the pleasure, the moment, and the warmth that followed. He kissed her again softly and felt her surrender to him once more. The act of love began anew.

After their second round of lovemaking, Whit fell into a deep sleep. Mary, lying in the crook of his arm, gently stroked his chest. A soft kiss on his cheek woke him, leaving him disoriented for a moment as she pushed away from him and the bed. Bleary eyes sought the clock, which blinked a red 3:10. "I have to get back to my room," Mary whispered.

"I understand."

Their fingers touched, lingering, but she gently pulled away and went to the door. She jiggled the handle for a moment before realizing it was locked. She giggled, unlocked the door, looked both ways down the hall, and left.

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Whit lay back, his hands behind his head. Her scent lingered, the memory of their passion imprinted in his brain. Closing his eyes, he snuggled under the covers to continue his sleep. Two words flashed in his brain. His eyes opened. Could it be that simple, he wondered. He closed his eyes again, but he couldn't sleep. He turned on the light, got out of bed and went to the desk. On a piece of paper, he wrote down the two words. *Sappho Domains*. Then he wrote down other words.

When Whit came down for coffee and donuts served in the small dining room, he said nothing to either sibling and just picked at his food. Rick, thinking Whit was upset over the previous day's conversations, grumbled and went to pay the check. Mary bit her lip, watching his face for a moment with self-conscious eyes. She pulled the chair away from the table and looked out the window. The morning was overcast and the garden with the two dirty chairs still touching looked more squalid than romantic in the daylight.

Whit heard the scraping sound of Mary's chair and looked up. His brows knitted together, he reached over to grab her hand. Mary, eyes glistening with tears, pried her hand away from him and shook her head. Whit shot up and tightly held her hand. "Sorry for being so distant this morning. Last night was...special. Probably the best night of my life."

Mary looked up at him, her face showing concern, but also a half smile.

"Something else is bothering me. Nothing to do with us...or, well, maybe everything to do with us. But not what happened last night, alright? It has to do with..." Whit trailed off as Rick returned to the table.

Rick raised his eyebrows at the hand holding. "Still playing the role?"

Mary blushed and Whit ignored the question, holding tight her hand and almost daring Rick to say something. "No, not playing the role any longer. But there is something bothering me about *Sappho Domains*. I'll explain in the car."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Subaru's engine strained as it climbed a steep mountain. Rick and Whit in the front seat were witness to a breathtaking vista of green valleys on one side and steep, snow-laden spikes of mountains on the other. Finally, they descended, the brakes gently tapped every few seconds. They were almost out of North Dakota and into Montana. They glided into a basin sheltering a thriving community, strip malls promising irresistible bargains, even in the wilderness of these mountains. Whit finally said something. "Rick, could you pull over there?"

Rick eased the car in the parking lot of a deserted playground. Whit led them to the swings where all three sat, Whit in the middle. "Mary, can I have your pad and pen?"

She reached in her purse and pulled out the implements. Whit neatly printed a word and some gibberish words below it. He showed the paper to the siblings. At the top was Sappho and underneath a neat list of nine words, all nonsense combinations of the same letters in Sappho. He pointed to the top word. Sappho. "I think Sappho Domains is Little Lion."

Rick laughed. "No. Sappho is definitely run by a woman and she's as squirrely as they come. Trust me. No c-c-connection. Nada."

"Do you know what an anagram is Rick?"

"Some kind of letter s-s-switcheroo?"

"Something like that. You take a word like...ahh...say dog and rearrange the letters to get god."

"Yeah, I get it. Hmm...float and aloft."

Whit smiled. "Alright well here are some anagrams for Sappho..."

only one has any meaning."

The list was shown:

Apphos

Papho

Ophasp

Paphos

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“Yes, well, they all look meaningless to me.”

“Paphos.”

“Wait a minute, that’s cheating, isn’t it? You have to make a real word.”

“You’re right, Rick. But Paphos is a real word. Did you ever hear of the Greek myth of Pygmalion?”

Rick’s face scrunched up while Mary nodded yes, smiling, delighted to know something her genius brother didn’t. She turned to Rick. “Pygmalion was a man from Greek mythology. He was frustrated with the women in his village who he considered vulgar and insensitive. So, he sculptured the perfect woman, in shape, anyway.”

Rick squinted his eyes. “I kinda of remember the story. What does it have to do with L-L-Little Lion?”

Whit looked over to his friend. “Mary is absolutely right, but there’s more to the Pygmalion myth. Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love, was married to Mars, the god of war. She feels pity for Pygmalion and gets permission from her husband to give the statue life.” Whit looked at Rick. “The similarities are too close to be coincidental. Mars is the military and they gave life to the statue. So, Pygmalion is...”

“Pygmalion is Little Lion,” finished Rick. He thought a moment. “Alright, I understand the myth and the connection with Hal, but it has no t-t-tie to Sappho Domains. Paphos is still not a real word, so no connection with Little Lion.”

Whit paused a moment, looking at his friend. “After the statue, a military construct, was given life, Pygmalion and the now living statue, have a child...a girl named—”

“Paphos!” Mary finished.

Rick grabbed the pad studied it. “Paphos is the super computer!”

Rick got up off the swing and faced the pair. “Wait a minute. Why wouldn’t Hal have also figured this out?”

“Maybe,” answered Whit.

“Hal is very, very smart. He would have made the c-c-connection.”

Whit smiled. “I agree, Rick. But Little Lion is also very, very smart. So, perhaps he erased Paphos from the net.”

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“Could he do that?” asked Mary.

Rick face scrunched in thought. Abruptly he walked to the car, opened the trunk and brought out his Apple notepad.

“You aren’t going on the internet, are you?” Mary asked nervously.

“Don’t worry, Sis. I have a program that diverts any search for about a minute and a minute is all I will need.” He searched for Pygmalion and found the story. He turned the computer off and looked at them. “OK...the Pygmalion myth is there, just like it should be.”

Rick went on again and searched for Paphos. A city was found but nothing about how the city got its name. Dumbfounded, Rick stared at his friends. “Nothing on the web. Nothing at all. Are you sure about this Paphos part of the myth?”

Whit smiled. “Hey, I’m the English major. I’m positive.”

Whit got out of the swing and stood beside Rick. “Little Lion was trying to send a message to just humans. He couldn’t afford to give any clues to Hal. So, he takes Paphos off the web. Only humans, humans who read books, could make the connection.”

Mary looked up to her brother. “He planned for us, Rick. He was trying to tell us something.” She stopped, forehead wrinkled. “But what?”

Whit, relieved his theory was accepted by Mary and maybe Rick, continued. “I think I know. OK. Let’s accept Little Lion deliberately used Sappho Domains to give clues to humans only. He was hiding. Waiting for the cavalry to help. He has to leave one more clue, however. He has to tell the cavalry where to go. I unscrambled the second word of Sappho Domains. Domains can be rearranged to be Madison. He’s telling us he lives in Madison...Madison, Wisconsin.”

Mary’s eyes widened as she rearranged the letters in the word “madison” and ended up with “domains.”

Rick looked back at the pair who were beaming at each other. Rick held up his hand. “Whoa. Not quite right. Little Lion doesn’t live in Madison, Wisconsin. Which actually is a g-g-good thing since Madison is so large. No, Little Lion lives in a village called Madison, South Dakota.”

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Whit didn't say anything, but Mary looked at her brother. "You are so darn smart, brother! Sappho Domains...SD...the initials for South Dakota."

Whit looked at his friend suspiciously. "Never heard of it. You sure there is such a place?"

Rick shrugged. "Let's find out."

A moment later, Rick turned the screen towards the pair. "Yup. Right there. Madison, South Dakota."

All three were quiet, each with their own thoughts. Rick broke the silence. "So, w-w-we go South?"

Whit nodded. "I want to fight this thing, Rick. Little Lion can help."

"And we can help Little Lion," added Mary.

Rick looked toward the north. Deep gray clouds presaged a storm coming their way. "I love that cabin. Isolated, in the wild. Beautiful place, even in the winter. All the comforts of home, believe me." He sighed and looked back at Whit and Mary. "Alright, south it is. But can we agree to go to the cabin after we slay the dragon? I really want you guys to see this place."

Mary leaned over to hug her brother while Whit grabbed his hand.

After a hasty lunch, they doubled back on the highway, looking for a route south.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Hilton Hotel in Beloit, Wisconsin boasted three elevators in the spacious lobby, metal mouths inhaling and exhaling uniformed workers, the casually dressed tourist, and a varying assortment of suited men. Standing directly in front of the middle elevator, Henry Jackson gave his instructions to the men who faced him. The waning hours of a long day did not diminish the crisp answers of “Yes, sir” as each of the men diverged in different directions.

Unaccompanied, Jackson stepped into the elevator. As the door closed, his cell phone rang. He looked at it. The words CALL ME, appeared on the screen, large golden letters juxtaposed on the black screen. He didn’t know how it was done as there was no app which put the message on the phone. Of course, the “how” wasn’t important. What was important was simply the message. When he exited the elevator, he hurried to his room.

Jackson hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the handle of his hotel room door. It was most likely unnecessary at this late hour, but he did it anyway. Walking to the window, he closed the curtains tight. His laptop sat on the walnut desk and Jackson settled himself down in the plush chair, flipped the top up and entered his access password. He didn’t use the hotel’s Wi-Fi. Instead, he tapped into a geosynchronous military satellite, ensuring that no one would be able to track his activities. A minute later he was at the site that had found him two years before.

A deep, almost metallic voice greeted him. “Mr. Jackson, update me on the investigation.”

Whoever was on the other end, voice obviously disguised, refused to show himself or even hint to his status. By contrast, the camera on Henry Jackson’s computer worked faithfully to show beads of sweat now forming on the commander’s forehead. Jackson swallowed nervously and began. “As you know we think they were involved in a shoot-out in Wisconsin. We have the border points all double teamed. Chase cars waiting. All agents checking cars...” he went on with the details. Finished, he remained motionless in his

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chair. There was no response, no question. The silence stretched on and on until, finally, the bass voice filled his ears again.

“There is a Subaru, 2014 model, Wisconsin plate AZ 1002, with three people. The heights are correct for the two criminals. You should check out North Dakota, especially Middlethorpe.”

Silence followed for ten minutes. Jackson slowly closed the laptop and finally exhaled a great sigh of relief. A few other commanders had access to The Voice. They confided to each other in hushed conversations far away from electronic eyes or ears. Some said the entity was the director. Some thought it might even be the president. Whoever it was, doors opened and wishes were granted. It wasn’t a magic lamp they rubbed, but a computer keyboard. And money, lots of money, was deposited into secret bank accounts. Despite the benefits, the ritual left him worried and exhausted. Jackson sighed and picked up the phone. “John, new instructions...”

Jimmy Northup followed the Subaru, as it traveled east. *Odd, why go back?* He figured they were going to use the long border of Montana and swing into Canada. They made a zig-zag path toward—where? Though they were smart enough to avoid highways and major roads, Jimmy knew the biggest manhunt in history would eventually trap them. Police were stopping any suspicious cars and a plate from Minnesota in North Dakota would tweak suspicion. *Where in hell are they going?*

At dawn the next morning, five hundred miles away, Henry Jackson was on the phone in his suite. He listened as he pulled on his red suspenders.

“Yes, sir, that’s why I called.” This voice was tentative.

“Give me the details, Sheriff.”

“One of my men found a Subaru that fits your description. Plates are from Minnesota, though. Man, woman, and a tall guy like the sheet said. Tall guy sort of fits the description. Looks like a biker but doesn’t act like one.”

“Where?”

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The sheriff relayed the location in the same clipped efficiency that he had spoken since he'd called.

Henry Jackson looked at a map. Still well south of the border. Maybe going to Montana to cross the border? Jackson made a mental note to beef up patrols in Montana and North Dakota. "Appreciate the information, Sheriff."

"Any way I can help, sir, just let me know."

"Just stay out of our way. That's the best way you can help." Jackson snapped. He didn't want any local yokels mucking up his operation. However, realizing he needed the sheriff to keep watch, Jackson softened his voice. "Oh, and Sheriff..."

"Yeah?" came the flat response.

"There is this federal appointment in Washington. We need a man for federal jail inspection. It would be a six-figure job. Any interest?"

An hour later Jackson was airborne contacting the state police and the FBI. With him were four NSA officers and one other man.

Over the intercom, the pilot's voice was deferential. "Sir, you were right, we got clearance to land at the military airport. Should be there in two hours."

Jimmy had followed them to a run-down motel that hosted some scruffy clients; probably a welfare dump. Parked near the Subaru, he rolled down the window and fell asleep. Now he rubbed his eyes hearing the sound of a car starting. The Subaru pulled out of the driveway and Jimmy followed them to a small diner with an optimistically large asphalt parking lot hosting only three cars. They parked and, after nearly a minute, emerged from the car. All three scanned the road and countryside before entering the diner. Jimmy was about to pull into the parking lot when a black SUV with darkly tinted windows parked right beside the Subaru. He walked around the car and then took out his cell phone.

Jimmy sighed. *Looks like I have to introduce myself to the "Trio of Terror."* He drove into the far end of the parking lot and looped around to the back.

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The waitress left with their orders. Mohawk Man turned to his friend. "Could the...ahh...Doctor Lion cure this terrible disease, Rick?"

"Maybe. Tough disease. I just hope the c-c-cure isn't worse than the disease."

Mary sat close to Whit, their legs touching. She began to talk. "Maybe the cure..." She stopped and then looked down. "That man over there, behind Rick. I've seen him before."

Whit casually looked for a solitary man who had entered after them. A man with a rumpled trench coat covering a flannel shirt and blue jeans was seated at a table, staring directly at him over his coffee. Whit turned back to the table. "Older guy, gray, curly hair?"

"Yes... he was the guy pounding on our door when we left Buffalo."

Rick scooted out. "Let's get back to the car, slowly."

The waitress came over. "Hey, you guys leaving now?"

"Yeah, yeah. We forgot w-w-we had church meeting."

The waitress shrugged and walked back through the door to the kitchen. The three hurried to the exit. As Whit opened the door, he could hear a helicopter flying overhead. Looking down the long, straight road leading into the village, he saw a string of cars...one car had flicking red and blue lights. He pushed them back in. "Police, lots of them."

"What do we do?" asked Mary, looking for the gray-haired man who had disappeared.

Pulling Mary along, Whit cried, "Out the back."

As they turned a man in a neat suit stood up. "Stop right there! Put your hands up high where I can see 'em."

Without turning, they ran through the kitchen, the waitress and the short-order cook too startled to yell. Flying out the back door, they nearly bumped into a red sedan blocking their path into the woods behind the restaurant. Window down, the "older guy with gray curly hair" looked at Whit. "You are going to be in custody in a few minutes. The only way to escape is with me. Have Mary hop in the back, now!"

Whit heard the helicopter noise become almost deafening. He opened the door for Mary who quickly scooted in. Whit was about

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to follow when Jimmy yelled at him. "No, Emerson." Whit's head was tilted and his eyes pierced, he glared Jimmy.

"Yeah, I know your names. You're the most recognizable, so get in the trunk. Hurry."

Then Jimmy leaned toward the passenger side window and spoke to Rick.

"You, whoever the hell you are, shut the trunk after he gets in and then get in the front seat with me."

Rick hesitated and then quickly shut Whit in the trunk. A few seconds later he was sitting in the front.

"Mary, take off that awful blouse and wig and put this flannel shirt on. There on the floor. Quickly."

Mary blushed and did as she was told, nervously looking at the rear-view mirror checking to see if the driver was watching.

His passengers inside, Jimmy eased the car around the building.

He handed a baseball cap to Mary. "Put this ball cap on!"

Mary finished buttoning her shirt and donned the cap.

Jimmy pulled around the restaurant and started to head out of the parking lot. He stopped to let six state trooper cars dart into the parking lot spreading in a semi-circle around the dinner. Four more police cars raced to the back. An officer waved Jimmy and another car toward the road. Jimmy followed the other car. After Jimmy pulled out of the driveway, he looked in the rearview mirror. A black Mercedes peeled into the parking lot and parked right beside the Subaru.

"Oh, my God!" blurted Mary, trembling hands covering her mouth. A road block appeared thirty feet in front of them. Jimmy slowed down. The pair in the car in front of them emerged from their car as it suffered a quick search. Jimmy looked back to Mary.

"Mary, listen carefully. When we stop, roll down the window and look out. Make a lot of noise about seeing all the cars. Ooh-ahh. Loud. You understand?"

She wiped the tears from her eyes and nodded.

Jimmy fumbled with his wallet and pulled out a weather-beaten FBI identity card. He had done a favor for a forger once and was repaid by having the man expertly put his photo on the card. Today he would need it. Jimmy then eased up to the policeman who brusquely directed him with sharp waves. Mary gulped and rolled

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down the window. "Just look at all these cars. A road block! We're being stopped the police. Woo-woo! Hi, officer. Don't you look cute?"

The wide-brimmed hat leaned down toward her and glared. "Keep your voice down, girl!"

"Hey, it's a free country..."

The officer moved his hand toward the handle of the door when Jimmy leaned back over the seat. "Jesus, Delores. Be quiet. You heard the officer. You trying to get your uncle in trouble?"

The trooper kept his hand on the handle and glared at her. She rolled up the window, staring back at him. Another trooper materialized beside Jimmy, tapping on the window. Jimmy showed the FBI credentials.

"On vacation. Some action back at the diner? Anything I can do to help, officer. Except by getting loudmouth out of here?"

"No, nothing. Just go..." he looked down at the license, "Agent Dobemire."

Jimmy drove past the roadblock, watching carefully in the rearview mirror.

"You're FBI?" Rick asked.

"No, Rochester police."

A muffled sound came from the back. Jimmy pulled down a side street and popped the trunk.

Whit quickly dove in the car, sat up rubbing the cramps in his legs. His eyes met Jimmy's in the mirror. "How much time do we have?"

Jimmy turned out of town and swung into the country, taking one road, and then another getting deeper and deeper into the woods before he answered the question. "They will wait for all the customers and staff to come out. Then the bullhorn warning you guys to give up any hostages. Might give us ten or so minutes."

"Then what?"

"Most likely, a SWAT team rushes in. Then there will be a passel of pissed off police. Every paved road in North Dakota will be full of cars, dogs and men. Helicopters overhead." Jimmy paused a moment. "Two...three days, things will get back to normal." He turned off the road onto the first gravel road he saw. In a few minutes he took a little used logging path deeper into the forest. They bobbed up and down along the grass strewn path. Jimmy saw an opening

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between two trees and eased the old car into the woods. After a few turns, he parked under a low hanging tree. Jimmy had them cover the car with some loose branches. Then all four got back inside. The engine off, the car cold, Jimmy angled himself toward the three passengers. “Now, tell me what the hell is going on.”

The explanation came as the rain began to fall.

After three days, the floor of the car was littered with one empty large jar of dry roasted peanuts, a large, rumpled Doritos bag, and an empty package of Oreo cookies. Four haggard, hungry, grumpy people pulled the soggy branches off the car. “Truck stop a few miles ahead,” Jimmy declared in a ragged voice, “Then Madison, South Dakota to find Little Lion.”

“First, a shower,” insisted Mary.

“For everyone,” agreed Jimmy.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“It was one of your idiot troopers who let them through!” Jackson yelled. Red-faced, his stare knifed into the state police commander who could only sputter.

“You didn’t tell me there was a bad cop in the mix.”

“It shouldn’t have mattered. Standard operating procedure, Major. Check identification of all passengers. All cars. All passengers. Your guys didn’t do that! Now the perps are hundreds of miles away, probably in Canada.”

“But his ID was FBI!”

“There’s no agent with that name, you stupid moron.”

The major started to protest again, but Jackson stopped him. “Your guys screwed up and now I have to clean up the mess. Get out, goddamn it! Get out!”

Glaring at Jackson for a moment, the man pivoted, left the room, and slammed the door behind him. Before Jackson swung around to face his subordinates, all had returned to a phone, picture, or piece of paper. Jackson took three long strides and stood above the man sitting in the corner. “The FBI agent. From the description given by the idiot trooper, it had to be Northup. I read the file on him last night. A crazy fuck-up! Damn it! How did he find them? He has no access to computers, no surveillance teams, no new knowledge. How, Al?”

Al Morelli stood up. “He’s a smart detective, sir. Best in New York some say. Best anywhere, I’d say. He latches onto clues that others ignore. Squeezes them until they squeal. We saw the same stuff, but he saw it better.”

Henry Jackson raised his chin and squinted his eyes, ready to snap at the detective from Rochester. But, he didn’t. He needed him right now. He had deliberately kept the man by his side for this very possibility. He knew Morelli hadn’t given Jimmy any information. His cell phone was already being monitored by a team of NSA officers and he was clean. Time to test his loyalty. though. “Send out his picture...and say that Northup is armed and dangerous.”

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Al shook his head as he looked straight at Jackson. "Commander Jackson, the guy never carries a gun. He does screwy things, but he's a good cop."

The two men held each other's stare for a moment. Jackson spoke slowly, but firmly. "We have a rogue cop; we have to protect our own. Now do what I told you."

The room was emptied of sound, but full of tension. Al tried to think. There was no way to keep his dream alive along with his integrity. If he could land a job with NSA, his salary would double and the perks...his own car and a clothing allowance, for Christ's sake. Well, it was something he just couldn't walk away from. Al barely nodded, as though the slightness of his response somehow diminished complicity. He tapped some numbers on his cell phone and relayed the message to command central where it would be distributed to all law enforcement agencies. "Armed and dangerous, use lethal force if necessary."

By the time he was done, Henry Jackson had stopped barking orders to his scurrying assistants. He turned back to Al. "I want you to go back to Rochester. Northup may return. He knows the area and the people. If he needs help...materials or personnel...he will get it there."

The NSA chief chuckled. "Hell, Al, he may even recruit you. Watch for him. You get him for me and you get that NSA job the same day."

Smelling considerably better than the day before, a tall man with a baseball cap, an attractive young woman, a man with blond, ruffled hair, and an older gentleman with an abundance of wrinkles entered the quiet, little village of Madison, South Dakota. With their new flannel shirts and blue jeans, they looked like they were going to attend a lumberjack convention.

Their plan was to check the records of folks entering the village around ten years before. Avoiding computer connections, they had already decided to look only for hard copies of new people on the tax payroll, new homes, etc. For small villages, the local library was often the repository of such arcane information.

Whit pointed to the left. Madison Library. As they drove closer to the one-story brick building, he smiled. Conspicuously absent

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were surveillance cameras, both the new variety and even the regular ones. The foyer offered a plethora of posters and local announcements. Behind the counter a sharply dressed middle-aged black woman was filing some papers. The small library had only three customers, a senior citizen sleeping in a comfortable chair and a mother following her child as he ran through the stacks.

Looking over the rims of her glasses, the woman behind the counter forced an obligatory smile. "I'm the librarian, may I help you?"

Jimmy stepped up to the front of the group. "Ma'am we just got into town. We're trying to find a friend and we know when he moved here but we have no idea about his address."

She looked back down at her work. "Check the phone book."

"Well, that's the problem," explained Jimmy coolly. "Our friend changed his name before he left Eugene. That's in Oregon, ma'am."

The woman's head slowly rose and glared at Jimmy. "I know quite well where Eugene is."

The detective had to bite his lip to refrain from snapping back at the woman. "Of course, ma'am. You see, we're not sure what he changed his name to."

"Must not be a very close friend."

Jimmy shrugged.

She went to the computer on her desk. "We can connect online with state police—" Four voices simultaneously protested. She looked suspiciously at the group over her horn-rimmed glasses. Jimmy stepped closer and brought out the worn FBI card.

"We already checked with the police chief and he suggested you might help."

She scrutinized the card, then looked at the detective. "Really? So, I assume you had his phone number in Omaha where he and his wife, Lorna, are visiting friends. That's in Nebraska, in case you didn't know." Her withering stare pierced Jimmy.

She swung her head around and briskly walked away. The four backed up toward the front door, when she stopped and turned around. "Come on, follow me. I hain't got all day." She turned again and walked toward a door, beside which was a pail and broom. Opening the door, turning on the light, the middle-aged librarian walked down into the basement.

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Easing sideways past the furnace, she pulled out a ring of keys and opened a door to large room that smelled was of old papers, mixed with ozone. "Over here on this shelf are tax records. There're organized by year. New folks have a blue dot. Those red dots are delinquent accounts."

"Lot of red dots," remarked Jimmy.

The librarian shrugged. "This a poor town and times are hard. But these are all good people. If you look carefully, most of those red dots will show up year after year. The village officers are forgiving about the problems their neighbors have. When did your friend leave Oregon?"

"Ahh..." Jimmy hesitated, picked up a file and leafed through it, "A few years ago."

She eyed him suspiciously.

"Well, let me explain the system down here. You're looking at last year's records. Each stack is a different year, each folder a different person."

Rick was already scanning a folder a few shelves down. He held up a folder. "Any more i-i-information we can get on these folks?"

She looked at him and pulled her glasses down over her nose. "What more do you need to know about your friend?"

Jimmy stepped between the librarian and Rick. "Thanks, Ma'am. Hopefully we can find his address. That's all we need."

Frowning, she walked out, stomping loudly up the stairs.

They searched the files for two hours, finding only a dozen individuals who decided to settle in the sleepy village in the last twelve years. A few were senior citizens and the rest were young families, both looking for a safe haven in which to settle. Rick scrounged in other aisles in the cool, dusty room, hoping to find a folder accidentally placed in the wrong stack. Mary made a few lists and wrote down some phone numbers. Whit nervously watched the old black and white wall clock, a throwback to his school days.

After another hour, they had settled on three who had joined the town nine or ten years ago. They were not enthusiastic about any of the candidates.

Whit looked up at the clock. "Guys the library closed ten minutes ago. We gotta leave."

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“Wait a minute, please. One more possibility h-h-here. This Henry Cavendish. Bit old, but who knows? Worked for a computer firm.” They heard the door click shut behind them. All slowly turning, they saw the librarian looking at them over her glasses, her back pressed against the only way out.

“Henry Cavendish is a sweet old man and he still does some computer work, but he’s not Little Lion.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Jimmy studied her. She had tight curly hair, speckled with gray suggesting she was on the longer side of forty. *Probably the right age.*

The librarian walked over to the table where folders were scattered and picked them up, looking for the proper stacks and methodically returned them.

Rick spoke first. “You? You’re L-L-L...you’re Little Lion?”

She put the last folder away and turned toward him. “Used to be. Now I am Sappho Domains on the net and Laisa May in Madison. Though, my real name is Laisa Hernandez.”

Rick’s wide eyes blinked. “But...b-b-but, you’re a woman!”

She cast a look down at her body as though she was checking, just to make sure. “Correct. A woman, black, old, and unmarried.” She tilted the glasses down and glared at him. “You have a problem with any part of that?”

Rick quickly shook his head as though he was trying shake off her stare.

“Little Lion...the name...we were expecting a man.” Whit interjected.

“Oh, for heaven’s sakes, how do such chauvinistic notions prevail? It’s not the big male lion with his fancy mane who is the real food-gatherer. It’s the female. She’s smaller, admittedly not as ostentatious, but smarter, and the one who makes the kill. The little lion in the pride.”

“Are you a lesbian?” asked Mary, her voice barely audible.

The librarian laughed. “No child, not at all. However, it was a good cover for my website and it did provide the anagram...the anagram that only humans could decipher. Who was the English major?”

They all looked to Whit who shrugged.

Laisa continued. “I erased it on the net, but you probably found Phacops in some dusty book in the library.” She shook her head. “Unfortunately, not too many read actual books anymore... just eBooks, Kindle, and such.”

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Rick looked at her, astonished. "You actually d-d-did that? Erased it from the net?"

The librarian looked over her glasses. "I just said I did. Can you hear alright, young man?"

Jimmy saw Rick redder so he interjected himself into her withering stare. "How and why did you wind up here?"

Reluctantly taking her eyes off Rick, she slowly turned to face Jimmy. "After the union between the two computers, a technician handed me a printout of gibberish which was spewed out right at the moment of connection. Right away I saw it wasn't random at all. I was sure we had artificial consciousness and I was worried because my program didn't announce it at all. The computer brain was hiding its existence. I never anticipated the possibility of consciousness. That's when I started to worry."

"So, you hid," Jimmy said.

"Yes. Humans were its only threat. I figured people like me were going to be persona non gratis very soon. I needed a place that was safe. Safe as in relatively backwards...not fully connected to, or dependent on the net. That means small, rural, and not too affluent. Madison was perfect." She smiled. "I had incredible credentials to be a librarian, compliments of a few very minor changes in the records of Penn State. You can check out my resume on the computer. It really is quite impressive, if I do say so myself." She glared at Rick. "And I do say so."

Turning from Rick, she scanned the group again. "My last message was a vague clue about the problem. Who is the Bible expert?"

All three men looked at Mary whose face reddened so much it rivaled her hair.

"Catholic or Born-Again?" Laisa probed.

"Baptist."

Whit was looking at the shelves and turned back to Laisa. "You said you came here about ten years ago, but we didn't find your records down here."

She slowly turned to Whit, furrows lining her forehead. "If I can erase information from the internet, couldn't I pilfer some papers from down here? I must say, as a group, I'm not very impressed with your reasoning abilities."

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Jimmy rescued Whit from further acerbic comments. "So, you knew it worked...I mean the computer...ahh...merger. That Hal was born."

Still eyeing Whit with a frown, she turned slowly back to Jimmy. "Well, of course, I knew. And the computer...what did you call it? Hal? Clever. 2001, right? When Hal hid, I immediately knew there were big problems brewing. Hey, who had the idea for naming the computer?"

Rick tentatively raised his hand.

Her first smile. "Great call. I love it."

Rick returned her smile. Jimmy pulled up a chair for the librarian and then got one for himself. "Did you warn the military?"

"Hell, no. I figured if I told the military brass, they would try to bridle it and that really would be the end. This machine...Hal...it could have launched missiles, nuclear ones, to defend himself. God only knows what would have happened after that. No, I told no one."

"Why didn't you stop it early on?" Mary asked.

Laisa May looked at her. "The first intelligent question. Thank-you, young lady. Actually, I tried. But, by the time I concocted a program to eliminate it, defenses had been set up. It destroyed the program and tried to find me."

Mary and Rick sat on a bench as the librarian continued.

"So, I closed up shop in New Jersey where I lived and moved here. And, after nearly ten years of waiting, along you come. I expected help sooner."

"I don't think anyone anticipated the problem until a year ago," Whit pointed out.

"Yes, Hal developed a terrific positive publicity campaign. So, what happened in your lives which pointed you in this direction?"

Whit and Rick told their respective stories as Laisa listened. She looked at Jimmy and he explained his initial suspicions about the unusual intensity of the search.

After they were done, Laisa took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. "You are all correct. Everything that compromised your lives was related to Hal." She put her glasses back on and looked over the top at the group.

"Now, we find ourselves in a bit of a dilemma. We can't tackle Hal. I mean, really, an English major, a detective, and a Baptist. How

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we gonna knock out the biggest, baddest computer controlling everything in civilization?"

Whit responded. "Don't write us off so quickly, Ms. Hernandez. We were clever enough to find you."

She scoffed and raised her eyebrows.

Jimmy interjected. "From what these kids tell me, we may not have the luxury of time. Hal is getting stronger and stronger."

Laisa took a deep breath and nodded. "I know. I've watched him get stronger. Frankly, he's already far too strong for us now."

Whit walked toward her and stood nose-to-nose. "So, we give up? Let this silicon bastard take us over and kill us off?"

She met his stare for nearly a minute, the room holding its collective breath. Then Madison's librarian closed her eyes, her jaw muscles clenching. When she opened her eyes, she scrutinized each person for a few seconds. A great sigh escaped from her mouth.

"Alright. First order of business, call me Laisa."

Grins erupted from the tense faces. Rick's frown remained.

"How do we k-k-kill it?"

The librarian looked over her glasses. Once again Rick was back in fourth grade being chastised. "You know the answer, Tigerman, but, trust me, it's not possible."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The tall Victorian house—accompanied by a large carriage house and complimented with ornate gardens—contradicted Laisa's meager earnings as a librarian. She explained to her neighbors that she was the beneficiary of the untimely death of a close relative, a very rich close relative. In fact, the “close relative” was none other than Little Lion and the largess was far greater than anyone in Madison could ever imagine. It was far greater than the entire combined wealth of the village and, in fact, the entire state budget of South Dakota. But, as she was generous with her money when she lavishly updated the estate, no one really cared about how much money she had.

The house was filled with valuable antiques that might have been more appropriately placed in museums. The ultra-modern kitchen contrasted with the rest of the house. Dinner was also a contradiction...take-out Chinese food.

Carefully placing the intricate china plate in the sink, Rick looked over to their hostess. “How d-d-did you know I was Tigerman?”

She neatly wiped her mouth with the embroidered cloth napkin and began. “I track everyone who took an interest in Little Lion.”

“How? I hid myself. I made myself i-i...” he squeezed his eyes tight and focused on the word, “invisible on the net.”

“Nothing is invisible to me, Tigerman. But I give you credit. You went into hiding early from Hal. Some of your friends weren’t as smart. Here’s a story on one of the men I was tracking.” She reached in a drawer and put an old newspaper clipping on the counter. Rick, Whit, and Mary hunched over the counter and read about a computer entrepreneur who was the victim of a gangland shooting in a vacant parking lot.

“The poor man’s mistake was being curious about the Event. I think he was Hal’s first victim. A sloppy kill. The story grabbed too much media attention so Hal became more subtle in the ways he dealt death.” She got up to make coffee and tea for her guests.

Jimmy, the last one at the table, belched loudly. When he looked up, everyone was staring at him. Laisa made no effort to hide

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her disdain. He smiled and wiped the napkin across his mouth, but a brown glob remained on one corner. "How many others has he killed?"

Laisa dabbed a fresh napkin in a faucet, walked over to Jimmy and wiped away the errant bit of food. Then she reached up to grab some cups. "I don't know for sure. But there have been an unusually large number of computer experts who met untimely deaths in auto accidents or in the hospital. A few ended up in prison. Hal is resourceful and obsessive. He's a detailed-oriented machine and doesn't like any loose ends. Whit and his article were one of those 'loose ends.' No other target has lasted as long as you, young man."

"I'm flattered."

"Be worried. Hal has only failed one other time. That was with me. He hasn't stopped looking for me. He won't stop looking for you either."

After a few moments of silence, Jimmy had picked up the small, demitasse coffee cup and studied it. He returned it to the saucer with a clank. Everyone stared at him and Laisa shuddered a bit. Jimmy just started talking. "In the library, you said we can't kill Hal."

"Well now, that's the big question, isn't it? Can we kill the thing? I'm not sure we can. Too smart, too quick, too well protected. And, too damn mean."

"Is Hal in one place, at least?" asked Mary.

"Yes, at least, his CPU is in one place. I should know, I put it there."

"What about a missile?" Jimmy asked.

"Hal effectively has control of any and every computer on the net, including all the military computers for both tactical and strategic nukes. Even if we could steal a missile, satellites, now controlled by the machine, would spot any launch and military computers would anticipate the trajectory. The missile would be destroyed in a matter of seconds."

Jimmy cocked his head and studied her for a few seconds before he spoke again. "How did you find out this stuff?"

The librarian walked over to the ornate Turkish coffee urn and delicately painted tea pot, both brewing rich black concoctions. "It wasn't easy and it was dangerous. But I figured out methods to be

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invisible to Hal. Once he almost caught me. That was last year. I haven't tried since."

Everyone was silent for a few seconds. Then the soft voice of Mary broke the silence. "There was a quote from the Bible which keeps drifting through my head. *"A craftsman made the thing. Since they sow the wind, they will reap the whirlwind."*"

Laisa nodded. "Mankind is now reaping the whirlwind."

Mary continued. "We let computers intrude into our personal lives, our finances, how we interact socially, even our religions. We've drifted from God and now we are paying the price."

Laisa nodded her agreement. "Yes, you are right, dear. Instant information at our finger tips. But it comes with a price. And now we can't put the genie back in the bottle."

The group digested this last statement. Jimmy was quiet, Whit squeezed Mary's hand, and Rick looked at the door as though he was thinking about running away. Laisa walked around the table and offered tea or coffee to each of her guests. She continued to talk as she performed the task. "One ironic weakness in Hal is that he doesn't control the Russian arsenal. They have a different computer system, more archaic. Somehow those throwbacks have stumped Hal. So, Russia is also in his crosshairs. If you folks have been following the news, tension has been building between Russia and the US. I'm worried Hal might provoke a nuclear war."

"He could do that?" asked Mary.

"He would do that?" asked Whit.

Laisa shrugged. "Why not? Hal's safe from the radiation. He would survive the holocaust."

"Then what has he been waiting for?" asked Whit.

Laisa shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"He needs us to build his damn replacement parts," observed Jimmy.

She set the empty tray down and sat down. "No, Mr. Northup. Not true. You must have heard about factory workers losing jobs to robot machines. He's developed robots that can make all of his parts."

"Yeah, and when the robots break down?" pressed Jimmy.

"Hmm, I won't argue the point. Perhaps he stills needs us to fix a few things. But as the robots get smarter, our time on this planet gets shorter."

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“Could you get control of the Russian missiles?” asked Whit.

“Been trying for years. No luck. But, let’s suppose I did. What could I do? Lob one at Hal? It would be stopped in mid-flight and it would trigger a nuclear war for sure.”

“Alright,” said Whit, “Grenades, tanks, smaller missiles.”

“Whatever army we could muster would be met with the entire might of the American military machine. Actually, a small group has the best chance at getting to Hal. But where he’s located...difficult—no, impossible.”

“What? Is he in some Fort Knox place?”

She grunted. “Fort Knox would be easier, Northup. Hal’s deep underground.” She stirred her coffee and casually took a sip while her audience anxiously waited.

“The building that houses Hal looks like a ranch house. But, beneath is a basement the size of a football field. Unseen, unsuspected. Hal is located in a sub-basement, a dozen feet deeper underground. Smaller missiles wouldn’t destroy Hal and, as I pointed out earlier, nuclear devices are out of the question.”

“What about security?” asked Jimmy, undaunted.

“I infiltrated the area three years ago. Hung around for a month.”

She saw Jimmy’s mouth open.

“Don’t ask how, Northup! Just listen. Though there were a few humans outside the building no one went in or came out. Pretty sure there are no humans inside the building. Hal wouldn’t trust them.”

As the talk went back and forth with questions and answers, Jimmy studied the woman. Caramel-colored, nicely shaped, intense, the bun of dark, curly hair fearlessly showing a few strands of gray. Pleasant face when she smiled. Remarkable woman in many ways, thought Jimmy.

Laisa invited the four to stay in her home.

“Folks will know someone is staying here. This is a small town and people talk. So, let’s give them something to really talk about. The old maid, Laisa May is being visited by...” she looked over the group for a suitable candidate and grudgingly stopped with Jimmy.

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She rolled her eyes and shrugged. "...an old and dear friend. In fact, a former lover."

Jimmy grinned. "I'm honored."

Laisa groaned. "Don't be. When folks get to know you, they would appreciate how desperate I was."

After a few chuckles at Jimmy's expense, folks migrated to their respective beds.

Late at night, Jimmy got up from an unsuccessful attempt at sleep and donned a bathrobe that he discovered in the rich brown, cherry wardrobe. He couldn't sleep while his mind was assessing all the information given to them by Laisa. It wasn't unlike when he worked on a case. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes and softly padded down the winding staircase. Their hostess, considerate to her guests, had left on the stair lights. The lights had been left on in the kitchen as well. In fact, all the rooms had their lights on. He walked into the kitchen, struck a match and brought it up to the cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Don't you dare light a cigarette in my home, Northup."

Jimmy turned so quickly the little white cylinder dropped to the ground. He saw Laisa standing at the kitchen door and blew out the flame. "Sorry. I should have gone outside."

"Not outside either, Mr. Northup. I don't want your stubs littering my lawn."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And, don't ma'am me. I'm three years younger than you."

"How do you know my age?"

She looked over the top of her glasses. "I know a great deal about Jimmy Northup. A respected detective, if somewhat unorthodox. Makes more enemies with his superiors than he has with the criminals. These days, anyway."

She propped her glasses up a bit and looked directly through them, her voice lowered. "Wife tragically died over eight years ago and he just about lost it. A drunken spree led to a questionable friction fire in his home and the brutal beating of a number of high-profile criminals followed. Threw himself into his work and became the best detective in New York, sought after by the state police not

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only in New York, but in other states as well. Also, aided the FBI in a number of cases. He no longer drinks...for good reason...but," she pointed to the cigarette on the floor, "he can fill a room with more smoke than a fireplace with the flue closed."

Jimmy glared at her. "I don't like it when someone knows so much personal stuff about me, Ms. Hernandez."

She raised her eyebrows and pulled the glasses down to look over them, unfazed by the red-faced man facing her. "So, you going to break my arm like you did with Arnie Withers, who murdered Mr. and Mrs. Warren, or do you plan to kill me like you did with Durand, a child molester?"

He rose from his chair, looked down at her, his face barely an inch from hers. "Keep out of my personal life, woman or..."

Laisa steadily glared at the wrinkled face. "Or what, Northup? The entire country is looking for you because a maniacal super computer controls our government. Hal controls all forms of communication, the education system, and medical system all bent on finding and then killing you, and you fret over me knowing too much? Come on, Jimmy, you've got bigger things to worry about than a middle-aged broad who knows too much."

He stared at her. She slightly raised her eyebrows, looked over her glasses, showing amusement rather than fear. Jimmy returned to his chair, not taking his eyes off of her. He absentmindedly went for the pack of cigarettes in his pocket. Finding them, he started to pull out a cigarette, but looked back at her and stopped. Shaking his head, he put them back in his pocket. Then he stretched his legs out and put his arms behind his head.

"Let's talk about Laisa Hernandez now. Brilliant, of course. Two professional parents, a father who in one way or another disappointed her, a fear of darkness, and has not had relationship, male or female, in a great many years." He watched her reaction. He noticed her eyes blinking, her eyebrows pierced in consternation. She looked away from him for moment. Then she turned back to him.

"You are good, Jimmy Northup. How did you know?"

He grinned. "You know how to spend money like a rich person. I mean, look at your home. Most blacks don't come from family money so mom and dad most likely made the money themselves. So, your folks had to be professionals. Every chance you

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had, you spiked the males when you met us. But, you didn't say anything bad about or to Mary. Women who are left by their father usually have some anger issues with men. Fear of darkness? Hell, Laisa, you left nearly every light in the house on."

She nodded, looked down for a moment. Then she raised her head and stared at him.

"For the record, Mom was a Hispanic maid who scraped and saved for ten years to get me into college. Giving me the chance she never had. Dad was a black corporal in the army, one of the last Americans to die in Afghanistan. He was gentle and kind and I still miss him. You are right about one thing, I don't like men, but it's because they are such arrogant jerks...like you." She stood, looking down at him. As she passed the kitchen door, she flipped off the lights and walked toward the stairs.

Jimmy followed and at the bottom of the stairs. "Why are you afraid of the dark, Laisa?"

She turned, eyes narrow slits, hands gripping the banister tightly. "Go to hell, Northup."

At the top, she snapped off the hallway light and quickly scurried into her bedroom. He noted how bright her own bedroom was when she momentarily had the door open.

Jimmy sighed. He was an arrogant jerk. It was the most accurate arrow in her impressive quiver. His ruse worked, however. She had gobbled the bait and allowed herself to be pulled in. There would be no other way to find out about Laisa Hernandez, not on the net, not by direct questions. Now he knew something about Little Lion. As he slowly climbed the stairway, he wondered why she was afraid of the dark.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

After breakfast the next morning, Laisa led her guests to a large room. Antique sofas and plush chairs were tastefully arranged so everyone could easily see each other and the eight-foot-wide fireplace framing a miniature inferno.

“I might be overly paranoid, but I worry about having an open connection to the intern et.” She opened the cabinet door to the side of the fireplace and inside was a fat old tube TV. Rick and Mary smiled at each other remembering their old TV. With her remote, Laisa got a newscast, a bit fuzzy to eyes used to crisp digital screens. A smiling, heavy set man with dark hair was shaking hands with well-wishers who lined the pathway. “Vice President Sorenson spoke to a standing room only hall in Duluth, Minnesota today.”

The scene switched to same man, face angry, pounding a podium and screaming. “We have to close our borders and stop these lowlifes from coming in to our country. Our country! Let’s handle these half-breeds the way our forefathers did.”

Whit shook his head. “Does this guy have anyone on his staff who knows history? Did he ever hear of the Statue of Liberty? Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Our forefathers opened the door for immigrants.”

“Unfortunately,” said Jimmy, “the man is doing well in the polls.”

As if supporting Northup’s statement, the announcer added, “The Vice President is ahead of Governor Simms by seventeen points in the last poll conducted by the Times and Washington Post.”

“Seventeen points,” blurted Mary. “What’s happened to our country?”

Whit raised his eyebrows. “Maybe the polls aren’t controlled by humans anymore.”

Laisa lowered the volume of the television. “Whit’s right. I’ve been monitoring this election during my very short forays into the net. Numbers are being manipulated.”

“Hal?” asked Whit.

She nodded.

“Why would Hal push forward such a moron?” asked Jimmy.

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Laisa smiled. "Morons have their uses. Sorenson can be bought and Hal knows it. Any of you remember the Hanson incident, about six years ago?"

Whit bit his lip, scrunched his eyes and looked up at Laisa. "Wait. Wasn't the Vice President suspected of accepting some money over a large weapons deal? Yeah, Hanson was the broker in the deal. But Sorenson was found innocent."

"Innocent because Hal hid the money trail."

"So, he was guilty?"

"Of course. Guilty as in seven figures in a Swiss bank account. Hal knows he can be bought because the money that tickled our wonderful Vice President's palm came from Hal."

"Simms doesn't need money," offered Mary. "He's a self-made billionaire. I think Governor Simms has a genuine love for this country. Pity he doesn't have—"

Then the announcer recounted recent events in Rochester where suspected terrorist, "Whit Emerson, killed a thirteen-year-old girl."

"Wait a minute. I didn't shoot a girl. I was supposed to have shot a woman...middle-age. At least get my victim's age right!" he yelled at the television.

"A pedophile, murderer, terrorist. You can't get much lower, Whit," said Jimmy with a chuckle.

"Or more dangerous," added Laisa soberly.

A picture beamed up and Whit's face was flashed over the screen. He put his head in his hands. Mary gasped and he looked up again. A second picture was on the screen was Whit with his Mohawk.

His accomplice, Mary Henderson, was also pictured. Both her normal face and the made-up face. There was even a fuzzy picture of Rick who was simply described as an unidentified third party who was, the announcer declared, just as dangerous.

Then a picture of Jimmy came on the screen. "A rogue detective is helping the terrorists."

After the commercial started, Laisa turned off the TV. The room was quiet. Jimmy turned to their hostess. "How many folks saw us come in yesterday, Laisa?"

She thought a moment. "Old Doc Williams...well, he was asleep. I don't think Margie saw you folks. If she did, it was only a

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glimpse. I'll talk to her today and find out what she recalls. But you'd better stay inside from now on."

Laisa left the quiet room and returned a few minutes later to a somber room carrying a tray with cups. "Alright. Let's enjoy some coffee and tea."

Despite the aromas steaming off four cups, there was little enthusiasm for the drinks.

Laisa politely sipped the rich, Turkish brew. "Ahh...now this is coffee. Real coffee." She looked at the four. "Come on, drink up. Then let's figure out how to kill Hal."

The base of operations for the greatest manhunt in the history of the United States was in Linton, North Dakota. An entire armory was taken over and within two days, it was filled with desks, chairs, computers, and large screen TVs. Hundreds of men and women were scurrying from one station or another. The National Guard for the entire state of North Dakota was called up and acted as security for the armory, keeping a curious public at bay. The National Guard also positioned themselves at key junctions in the state in case a road block needed to be established. Phone calls were coming in from all parts of the country about possible sightings of the "Trio of Terror."

Law enforcement agencies from the FBI to the CIA were scattered throughout the enormous enclosure. In the middle of the vast armory stood Henry Jackson, a holstered gun prominently displayed on his right side. His hand passed over it again and again as though he was about to shoot Whit Emerson or anyone who wasn't giving 100% to the effort.

He turned to one of his assistants. "And you called in police from New York and California?"

"Yes, sir. In and around the Dakotas and Montana we have virtually every road patrolled by a police car."

Jackson turned to the other man.

"TV and internet coverage?"

"Every hour on the hour warnings or sightings or new information...keeping the public alert and vigilant."

Jackson smiled. It was just a matter of time now. A day or two at the most.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

After finishing her coffee, Laisa went upstairs to change. Jimmy came out of his room as Laisa stepped into the hallway, dressed smartly in a simple yellow blouse and a light brown skirt. Jimmy observed he had only seen her in dresses or skirts. *Old fashion gal.*

She nodded to him as they walked down the stairway together.

“Jimmy, your detective skills and contacts might be our biggest asset.”

He stopped halfway down, leaned precariously against the railing, arms folded, and smiled. “Well, as you know from last night, I’m not perfect. Not even as a detective.”

She returned the smile. “No, you’re not perfect, but I remain impressed. Nearly 90% conviction record.”

His arms stretched along the banister, he cocked his head, one eyebrow raised.

“Still bothers me how much you know about me.”

“Bothers me where you’re standing.”

He looked over his shoulder at the gray-tiled floor ten feet down. Then he started leaning over the railing.

“Afraid I might hurt myself, Laisa?”

“No,” she answered casually as she walked around him. Over her shoulder she continued, “Just don’t want any blood on the floor; might stain the grouting.”

He laughed and followed her down the steps.

The other three were already seated awkwardly on antique chairs in a large living room. Laisa took a position in front of the fireplace, the flames of which now just licked over the top of the logs. Jimmy followed her into the room and sat at the piano, tapping a few keys. Laisa’s stare stopped his fingers.

“Over the last few years,” she began, “I have been perfecting a computer virus unlike any other. It is powerful enough to bring down the entire internet in a matter of minutes. Not just incapacitate it for a few annoying days, but make it nearly impossible to restart for months. Without the vast computer web, Hal is powerless. Then and only then would we have a chance to destroy him.”

“Great! Let’s do it,” said Whit.

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Laisa frowned over her glasses.

“Really, Whit? Are you ready to really take down the entire net? Sacrifice all financial institutions?”

“Hospitals, police links, GPS...” added Jimmy, emphasizing each with a note played.

“Satellites, airplanes would be impacted, perhaps even causing crashes...” offered Mary.

“Ships...our navy would be compromised,” continued Laisa.

“Agriculture would be d-d-damaged; they u-u-use computer programs for watering...”

“Pictures, genealogy, the stuff of families would be lost,” Mary said.

“Also TV and all communications, online games...actually for some, that might hurt the most,” Laisa pointed out. She walked over to a high wing-back chair and sat down, legs folded and arms resting on the arms of the chair.

“The world would go into a financial and mental depression far worse than even the Great Depression. Hundreds of trillions of dollars lost. Trillions, Whit. Don’t worry about a stock market crash, there simply wouldn’t be a stock market. Whit, the entire human civilization would crash. Wars would start up. Millions, perhaps even billions would die.”

The room went quiet.

“So, are you ready to do that, Whit?”

Whit fingered the pen in his pocket, the pen Saul had given him. “Yes. We have to kill Hal, even if civilization goes down with him. Humanity will survive and rebuild. We always have. That’s what we’re talking about isn’t it? Making sure humanity survives. As long as Hal exists, we will be in chains. Maybe not metal ones, but chains, nevertheless.”

Rick looked at his friend and then, with a thump in his chest, at Laisa whose eyes were narrowing as she stared him. He shook off her stare and sat up. “Whit’s r-r-right. If Hal isn’t s-s-stopped, civilization will just be a form of slavery.”

Laisa’s face relaxed and she nodded to Rick’s sister. “Mary?”

“I don’t think we have any choice.”

Laisa turned to Jimmy.

“Knock out all the computers? Hell, I’ve been ready to do that for years.”

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Laisa smiled. "Good, then we're in total agreement."

She tipped down her glasses and looked over them at the little band in front of her.

"But, bringing the net down doesn't guarantee we kill Hal. And if we don't kill Hal, he could rebuild it in a matter of weeks. Humanity couldn't rebuild it that fast, but he could. Make no mistake, once rebuilt, he will strike back with a vengeance. There will be a nuclear Armageddon. No, we have to both destroy the net **and** kill Hal or all humanity will perish. And killing Hal is tougher than knocking out the net."

"Why?" Jimmy asked.

Laisa grunted. "Why? Hal has an incredibly strong survival instinct. If you accept that fact, you can understand most of his actions. Early on, he had the room where is cpu is located surrounded by an iron wall and ceiling, three feet thick. Can't fry him with an electromagnetic pulse. Only way in is through a metal door...you enter it by knowing a complicated combination."

"Someone must know the combination, a techie, a garbage man," Jimmy pointed out.

Laisa shook her head. "After the construction of his gigantic metallic safe room, no human has ever been allowed in the basement. Not even technicians. The maintenance work in the building which houses his lair is done by robots."

"Sounds like the Terminator," observed Jimmy.

Laisa chuckled. "No, no. These robots don't look like people. They are ahh...well, similar to those robot vacuum machines."

Jimmy had been lightly tapping a piano key. Laisa got up, and shut the wooden cover over the piano. He smiled sheepishly at her.

She looked down at him. "Hal has his own power station so the electricity is not impacted by external brown-outs. In addition, he has gasoline generators in his enclosed metal...what...metal castle which will automatically kick in if the power stations are knocked out. Even with the electricity out, Hal has batteries such that he could operate normally for weeks. More than enough time to summon and receive help. Finally, there is a dedicated crew of technicians and an NSA elite team...mostly former Navy SEALs...housed in a nearby building."

"How far away is the computer building from the Navy SEALs?" asked Whit.

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“About a mile apart. Close enough for the SEALs to react to any sort of ground strike and far enough away to give the computer warning if the army decides to assassinate the emperor.”

“Any *No Trespassing* signs?” joked Jimmy.

Laisa glared at him and turned to the rest of the group waiting for questions.

“Can you launch the virus from here?” asked Whit.

“Won’t get through to him. He scrutinizes every bit coming into him. We are talking about a thinking computer with literally iron-clad protection.”

“So, your virus can only knock out the net, but not him,” said Whit.

“Correct. We will have to physically destroy him by going into his lair.”

“Then we’ll do that.”

“Really, Whit? How? How do we get past a base protected by the military and, once close to Hal, protected by former Navy SEALs? Then, how do we get inside a three-foot thick box before police, soldiers, and God knows who else finds us and kills us?”

Whit shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Not sure yet.”

Laisa kept staring at Whit. “Well, ponder this as well. If Hal detects a virus on the web before it has spread to the satellites, he’ll destroy the virus immediately. He’s that capable. I need at least a minute for my virus to spread so that we can knock out the web and stop any outside help, like helicopters, elite Delta forces, and tactical missiles from destroying us. Hal will scrutinize anything which enters the web. And block it before it can incapacitate anything. In other words, Hal won’t give us that minute.”

She let that sober thought sink in for a moment and then summarized the predicament. “Now, here’s the problem. We need to knock out the web before we get to Hal, but Hal will protect the web so we can’t destroy it. So, we can’t destroy the web unless we first knock out Hal and we can’t kill Hal until we first knock out the web.”

Laisa looked at the grandfather clock ticking loudly in the corner of the great room.

“I’ll go prepare lunch while you ‘experts’ figure out how we will do the impossible.”

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

After homemade soup, dainty sandwiches, and a tasty torte cake, the group continued the conversation at the dining room table.

“Look, I don’t know anything about computers, Laisa,” said Jimmy. “Guys at the station help me print reports. But, can’t you...well...make this computer poison, tasty or something so Hal doesn’t detect it and maybe takes it into him and the net?”

He made a snake motion with his arm. “Kinda of sneak it in there.”

Laisa looked at Rick and rolled her eyes silently asking the question, “Where did you get this guy?” He shrugged in response.

She closed her eyes and wearily sighed. “Something tasty?”

He glared at her. “You know what I mean.”

Whit tilted his head, her eyebrows bunching together. “What about the code to the Russian missiles.”

“Tempting, but I don’t have it.”

“Hal doesn’t know that, Laisa,” said Jimmy.

“That’s it!” said Mary. “Weave the virus into the code. He wants the code.”

Laisa shook her head. “He’ll unravel the two in a matter of seconds.”

“What about if he was distracted?” asked Jimmy.

“You don’t distract super computers, Northup.”

“You might with a missile.”

“I told you, Hal controls all the missiles.”

“Not all of them.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“He doesn’t control all the small missiles, like Patriot missiles. They have internal controls unconnected to the web.”

Again, she shook her head.

“True but Patriot missiles simply won’t get to Hal. He’s fifty feet down.”

Jimmy plucked at his earlobe, looking down, his eyes flitting back and forth.

“Might scare him. Distract him.”

Laisa was about to dismiss Jimmy’s idea when Mary chimed in. “Hal would have to react to a missile, wouldn’t he? He doesn’t know if other missiles might be following. It wouldn’t kill Hal, but it should shift his attention to the missile and away from the virus.”

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Exasperated, Laisa blurted, "Alright. Suppose this silly trick gives us enough time for the virus to incapacitate the web. I'm not sure it will. But I'll give you the benefit of doubt on this. We still have to get past a razor-tipped fence, the army, another razor-tipped fence and Navy Seals, go to the ranch house, get down fifty feet down, and open a sealed, three-foot metal door. All this has to be done in a few hours because Hal is going to fix the military parts of the web within that time and when he does, we're dead."

Jimmy tugged his earlobe and stared at the floor. "If we can get down to Hal's level, I have a friend who might let us in through the front door."

"A friend? Who can get us through a door with a lock better than any in Fort Knox?" Laisa asked, exasperated.

"Well, not a 'friend' exactly. Let's just say this guy owes me."

Laisa rose abruptly from her chair. "You're missing the point, Northup. I don't care if he's an acquaintance, a friend, or your mother. He's not going to figure out the combination in time."

Jimmy yelled back at her. "No, I didn't miss the point, Laisa. This guy can get into any vault and within a few minutes."

She rubbed her forehead and blew air out. Her next words stunned everyone as she was yelling at them.

"Look. This is crazy. Rogue missiles, breaking into safes..." She looked at the group in front of her. "And you guys doing it? Amateurs who probably don't know which end of gun to shoot from going up against Navy Seals."

She shook her head and her voice came down a few decibels. "And, I don't even know for sure if the virus is going to work. This isn't a plan, it's a recipe for disaster."

She started to leave the room.

Whit stepped in front of her, blocking her path. "You're right, Laisa. It's a crazy plan. And, you can come up with a dozen good reasons why we can't do this or do that. But—we have to try. We have to."

She stopped and looked at him. When she had scanned information about him the night before, pictures flooded in about a young man with an easy smile and a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. At this moment, all she saw were the eyes. There was no twinkle now. No fear, either. No, what she saw in those eyes now was steel-willed resolve. Then she realized he would go after the beast with or

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without her. She kept staring at Whit and he simply looked back at her. She abruptly swung around to Jimmy. “You sure you can get those missiles?”

“Good as done.”

“The locksmith for Hal’s metal door?”

“Positive.”

Laisa stepped back toward the fireplace. *Holy Mother of Christ. Am I going to sanction a suicide mission? Am I going to be part of it?* She looked over her glasses at the four faces now standing together. “You are naïve, ignorant, and far too optimistic. Your plan is amateurish and riddled with too many ways to fail.”

Jimmy looked at her hands, pressed tight against her skirt. They were shaking. The woman was petrified. “Oh, dear Jesus. There is no way we can pull this off.”

“We’ll make it work,” said Whit.

Laisa looked down for a moment. *Damn his stubbornness.*

She took a deep breath and blew out slowly. The shaking stopped. “Well, on the bright side of this crazy idea, Hal won’t see it coming. He would never expect us to be so stupid.”

“Then, you’ll help us?” asked Mary.

The question said it all. *If I don’t help them, the idiots will do it without me. At least they have a slim chance with me.* She closed her eyes, took another deep breath and shrugged. “Might as well. But, let’s get one thing understood...” Laisa looked directly at Jimmy. “I decide what we do and when we do it.”

The voices of the other four tumbled over each as they assured her that she was most definitely in charge.

“I have to make a phone call, then we start really planning.”

An hour later, Laisa returned to the group who were once again clustered in the living room. “I just called a friend of mine. Guy named Brock. No last name. Just Brock. Former Army Ranger. He’s done some work for me. As a matter of fact, he was the one who found out about Hal’s exterior and interior defenses. Anyway, he’s agreed to help.”

“By the way,” asked Jimmy, “where is this base?”

ROBERT SELLS

“Oh, I thought I already told you. Have you ever heard of Area 51?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

While organic entities planned, a stirring occurred deep below the building in the middle of Area 51, a stirring rippling the web, though no human remained who could register the disturbance. A billion pictures digitally analyzed each second, a hierarchy of priority established within a millisecond, the computer essence emerged as a black protrusion intently examining any information related to Whit Emerson. Though his actions, records, and writings had been analyzed with a scrutiny which would have rendered a human investigator insane, the massive intelligence hidden inside the cement walls of a shabby little building had developed a behavior model for the man and could predict his every move. Or, at least, it should have been able to predict his every move. Now it was confounded.

It had dealt with enemies of the flesh before. One particularly elusive programmer, a hacker who pestered the smoothness of the web with irritating malfunctions, had exposed himself for just a minute when he purchased an expensive meal. A minute was all that was needed. Once found, it wasn't difficult to locate his pharmacy and then give altered ingredients for his heart medication. Within a few days of taking the altered medication, the computer expert was rushed to the hospital. Within an hour, he was dead.

The computer had successfully smoothed one annoying wrinkle after another in the vast network of the planet...the network called humanity. Except for Whit Emerson. It had its best NSA agents, all the powers of the human police agencies and its own vast intelligence gathering capability searching for the annoyance. Yet, Whit Emerson remained at large. If he was captured, contemplated the computer, considerable satisfaction could be achieved in setting up a particularly complicated operation. But why was it having such trouble finding him? And why was the word, "if" used instead of "when"? Deep in the computer the nascent emotion of fear was born.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Having just divulged the true secret behind Area 51, Laisa watched their reactions. No questions came forth yet, though she was sure they would bubble up in a few moments.

Jimmy shattered all thoughts in the room when he slammed his hand down on the piano keys. "I knew it didn't have aliens!"

As the piano cords vibrated deep, dissonant sounds, Jimmy stroked his hand across the instrument, trying to silence it.

"Sorry. Sorry."

Laisa was immediately in front of him. "Do you know anything about Fazioli pianos, Mr. Northup?"

He grimaced. "No, Ms. Hernandez."

She was quiet for a moment before she continued. "I didn't think so. Please don't bang this very, very expensive piano, Mr. Northup, no matter how excited you get."

"Yes, ma'am."

A frown on her face, she shook her head as she looked at Jimmy. Watching the detective, she continued. "Back to Area 51. It was closed down three years ago."

Rick began to say something, but Laisa held up her hand.

"I know. I know. The public thinks it's still in operation. There is a small post at the front gate to give the impression of the base being open. But, let me assure you, except for the Navy Seals and a few indispensable technicians close to Hal, there are no soldiers, no operations inside. The airfield is kept in operation with a skeleton crew. Nothing more."

"So, no one ever goes into the base?" asked Whit.

"Rarely."

Jimmy's eyes widened and he carefully raised himself off the piano seat.

"Going somewhere, Mr. Northup? Maybe to pound on some irreplaceable antique in the sitting room?"

His face flushed red and he offered an embarrassed smile. He started pacing. "No. But, now might be a good time to explain about the missiles."

Laisa waved him to the front and then she sat down.

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Jimmy looked at the group, clenched his face and began. “Last year I worked on a case with some real home-grown terrorists. We couldn’t catch them but we confiscated ordnance any army would have envied.”

“Missiles?” Whit asked.

Jimmy caressed the top of the piano and then looked nervously at Laisa.

“No. We never found any. But I’m sure they have some Patriot missiles.”

“Sure?” asked Laisa.

“Yeah. I...ahh...privately interrogated one of the suspects we caught and something...er...was...hmm...divulged.”

“So,” concluded Whit for Jimmy, “they might have what we need.”

Jimmy nodded.

“And I think I might be able to convince these particular terrorists to help us.”

Everyone was quiet. The act was so alien, so tightly linked with evil, everyone had a difficult time embracing such a rash move.

Laisa gave him a level stare.

“Alright, I’ll humor you for a moment. Let’s assume you get those missiles. This is quite an assumption. I mean terrorists are not known for their altruism, especially when it concerns handing over their trump cards to a policeman. Anyway, the missiles do what...take out the barracks and demolish the ranch house? Now how do you plan to get into the basement, into the sealed off room where he is so well protected?”

“Well, assuming the web is knocked out with your virus...”

Laisa glared at him and was about to say something, but she closed her mouth and folded her arms.

“...we have a team go in and tear apart anything connected with Hal.”

“And you are going to simply walk through three-foot metal walls?”

“No, figured we just open the door.”

“Oh, I forgot, your friend. Some ‘acquaintance’ who will follow the great Jimmy Northup into hell,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Look,” Jimmy responded angrily. “You let me worry about the missiles and the door to Hal’s vault.”

ROBERT SELLS

“No, you ‘look’, Northup. I’m not too happy about being on a suicide mission. Just who do you think is going to actually kill Hal? Me. Or maybe the great and clever Jimmy Northup knows where its cpu might be placed and take it out to disable the computer. Do you even know what a cpu is, detective?”

Jimmy shook his head.

“Well, I do. And I’m going to be depending on your pipe-dream missiles and that mythical locksmith.”

Like a lion attacking antelopes, Laisa growled at Whit and Mary. “You two can’t probably can’t tell me the difference between carbine and a lock-step trigger mode. Well, we need you to kill some Navy Seals. So, you damn well better know about weapons and be willing to kill someone with those weapons. Be prepared for a crash course in weapons, compliments of Brock. He’ll be here in...” she looked at her wrist watch “...forty minutes. Go get ready. Don’t be late! Not with Brock.”

Mary was about to protest, but Laisa’s stare kept her quiet. Mary hurried after Whit. Laisa turned to Rick. “You and I are going to spend the next week combining some bogus Russian code with the virus. Get ready to work like you have never worked before, buster.”

Rick nodded.

She turned to Jimmy.

“How do you plan to find this terrorist group?”

“That’s my business.”

“Oh, your business, huh? Unless these guys are in Madison, you’re going to travel a bit. Did you plan to go on foot? Because there are cops all over the place and cars are being searched on a daily basis now.”

Jimmy’s eyebrows knitted together as he contemplated this news.

“Now, if I may be so bold, Mr. Detective-Who-Can-do-it-All-by-Himself...why don’t we disguise you and have you purchase a train ticket. For whatever reason, there doesn’t seem to be much scrutiny on trains.”

“Ahh...okay.”

“Let’s go upstairs and I’ll show you the disguise.” As Jimmy walked out in front of her, Laisa winked to Rick.

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Late in the night, Jimmy quietly padded down the well-lit stairs and entered the kitchen, lights still on. He cut some cheese from the fridge and grabbed some crackers from the pantry.

“Now you’re stealing my food, Northup?”

He turned, his mouth full of cracker crumbs. He sputtered a response, cracker bits landing on the floor.

“Not smoking. No cigarettes. Just crackers.”

“And cheese.”

A drink of water, his voice clearer, he agreed.

They sat in silence for a few moments. Laisa looked at him.

“I am sorry I brought your wife into our conversation last night. I shouldn’t have done that.”

Jimmy shrugged, finished his water and sat back. “It used to bother me a great deal more, years ago. Still some pain. But I can handle it now.”

She nodded and both looked away from the other. Laisa’s hands were on her legs as though she was about ready to rise up. She sighed and sat back on the chair, eyes closed, speaking quickly, getting the words out before she changed her mind.

“My father died when I was eight. Mom remarried a few years later. The wrong man.”

Jimmy turned to Laisa and saw she was looking at the floor. She had drawn her bathrobe close to her neck so her nightgown and neck were covered.

“At night, after Mom went to sleep, he would come into my room. He would close the door. It always had to be perfectly dark. Then...”

Tears dropped from her eyes. Her voice trembled, speaking the horror somehow gave it life.

“Then he would...do things to me. After he was satisfied, he would kiss me on the forehead and leave.”

She took a deep breath and looked at Jimmy. “After the first few times, I left all of my lights on. He wouldn’t come in when they were lit. Maybe he had to pretend I was asleep. I don’t know. So light was my talisman against him.” Then she gulped down a sob.

“But, a ten-year old, tired from coming home from a movie...well, she forgot. He came in again.”

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The sob finally escaped. Her hand cupped her mouth, stifling all sounds. She looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath, then turned to Jimmy.

“This time, Mom caught him. Screamed.”

Her face was twisted by some horrible memory and she hovered on verge of crying again.

“I sometimes hear the scream at night. It was scary, even though I know she was trying to protect me. She clawed him, hit him.”

Through her tears, she continued. Her voice now was unwavering. “He just ran into the street with only his pajamas on. I never saw him again. Anyway, Mom never had another boyfriend.”

She closed her eyes as she fought the memory, forcing it back into locked recesses of her brain. A deep sigh and rueful chuckle announced her return to the present. “And me? I never had a boyfriend.”

Jimmy nodded, understanding the trauma of a ten-year-old and how it might impact a fifty-year old.

“I like the lights on. Jimmy. All the lights. So, nothing can hurt me.”

She wiped her tears and gave him a rare smile.

“Damn, you’re a good detective. Got all of that out of me without any interrogation.”

Hands folded, his face telegraphed his concern. “I didn’t mean to pry, Laisa.”

She stared at him. “Oh, but you did, Mr. Northup. Last night, remember? You’re clever, detective. You tweaked me about the dark and got in that way.”

He looked down.

“Yeah, sorry.”

She got up. “No. Don’t be sorry. Time to tell someone. Been forty years living alone with it...living with the lights on.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. Then she opened them and stared at him. “Alright. You and I have to get some sleep. Long drive tomorrow to the train station. If you don’t mind, let’s not talk about tonight, okay?”

Jimmy got up and gently patted her shoulder. “Don’t know what you are talking about, Ms. Hernandez.”

She nodded and whispered, “Thanks, Jimmy.”

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As they walked upstairs, Jimmy complained to her. “Why did you choose that disguise for me, Laisa? You could have come up with something different.”

She giggled.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Jimmy disembarked from his train two days later. He stumbled on platform and a young man grabbed his arm and kept him upright. Jimmy yanked his arm away. "I'm fine, ass- ah...thank-you." The young man shook his head and walked away.

He was still brisling over the disguise Laisa had chosen for him. He still hadn't mastered the art of walking in high heels. The dress he was wearing gave him an odd sensation of freedom and that thought irritated him. Back in the driveway on the morning of his departure, Laisa's wolf-whistle was followed by gales of laughter from the rest of the team.

Now deep into the night, he angrily pushed through the doors, where a chubby, middle-aged driver leaned against a solitary yellow cab.

Jimmy struggled to the taxi and handed the driver a slip of paper with an address.

"Yes, ma'am. Here, let me help you in."

A true gentleman, until the bastard brushed across his ass deliberately. Jimmy was ready to take a swing, but gritted his teeth and stayed in character.

It was 11:10 PM when he rang the doorbell of a tall colonial on a quiet street, a few blocks from the start of the city proper. A middle-aged lady in a bathrobe answered the door, frowning when she saw the strange woman.

"Can I help you?"

Straining his voice in what he hoped was not a ludicrous version of a female soprano, he asked for the captain. The pretty black woman stared at him for a long moment.

"Please stay here. I'll get him." After she closed the door, he heard the bolt lock in position.

A minute later, Captain Mulligan, in a considerably larger version of the bathrobe his wife wore, appeared at the door, left hand on the door, right hand tightly holding a gun. The man's eyes were warily darting from Jimmy to the bushes on the right and left.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

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“To get these high heels off as soon as possible,” answered Jimmy in his own voice as he pushed past the captain of the detectives.

Loretta Mulligan served coffee and a piece of homemade apple pie to Jimmy. “Whatever you are up to Jimmy Northup, you be careful.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. Smiling at her husband, she strolled out of the office, closing the door behind her.

The captain leaned toward his friend.

“Jimmy, you are in deep shit. I can’t save your ass on this one.”

“You know it’s a frame-up, right?”

“Of course, I do. Everybody in the department knows it. But NSA is all over us. I mean literally, Jimmy. They’re here every day, just reminding us of who they are and what they can do. Two guys got fired last week. No one knows why.”

Jimmy whistled. “This may be tougher than I thought.”

The captain eyed him suspiciously.

“Northup, what’s going on in that twisted brain of yours?”

Jimmy got up and opened the door to make sure Loretta was out of earshot. Then he returned to his seat. “Best you don’t know, Cap. Look, I need your help. First, can you get me a gun, preferably one which can’t be traced?”

The captain glowered at him. “You never use a gun.”

“Need one now.

The captain folded his arms. “You know it’s against the law for an officer to have unregistered arms.”

“Saw one in your hand when I came through the door.”

“Mine. Registered.”

“I know you got another one, Sean.”

They stared at each other for a few seconds. He shook his head and walked over to his bookcase muttering, “Fucking asshole.” Standing on a stool, he reached to the highest shelf for a large hard copy of *War and Peace* by Tolstoy. He pulled it out with one hand while the other felt around in the miniature cavern created by the missing book. The muscular brown arm, extended from the

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bathrobe, emerged with an 8-inch coal black 44 magnum. Stepping down he handed it to Jimmy, butt first.

“Jesus, a gun, Cap, not a cannon.”

“All I have to offer, Jimmy. It’s clean. Now, get the hell out of here.”

Jimmy shook his head. “Second, I need you to get me into the precinct, without the NSA finding out. Tonight.”

Even though Loretta was on the opposite side of the house sipping coffee, she heard her husband calling Jimmy, “...the God-damned most arrogant bastard...” She took another sip, shaking her head and smiling to herself. *Those two do carry on.*

At 12:35 AM, another taxi cab took Jimmy to an apartment building, a block away from the police station. Jimmy knew the lobby was always open. He went into a restroom, followed by the eyes of a security guard. There he changed into clothes the captain gave him. He washed his face clean of the make-up Laisa had so carefully applied. Finally, he crammed Laisa’s clothes into the bag and shoved it into a garbage bin. He checked his watch. 12:45 AM. He had a half hour to wait, so he sat in the stall.

Less than one hundred yards away, a disgruntled Captain Mulligan got out of his car. Clothed in pants and a T-shirt, no socks, he brusquely strode through the thinly manned office. Seeing his demeanor, the three detectives doing the midnight shift declined to offer a greeting. Door slammed shut, he could be heard rummaging in his office, cursing loudly at times. Then he stormed out of the office and went to the bathroom.

Once inside he stepped on one of the sinks, lifted out a ceiling tile, pulled himself up and positioned himself precariously on an I-beam. Mulligan carefully scooted along the crawl space, cursing Jimmy every inch of the way and opened up another tile, dropping it onto the floor. The adjoining room was not much bigger than a closet and it housed electronics for the building. Then Captain Mulligan slipped down and disabled the security system. Retracing his route through the crawlspace, he slid down into the bathroom, fixed his clothes, flushed a toilet, and strolled out. After a few minutes he walked out of the building.

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Meanwhile Jimmy, sitting in the stall, checked his watch. 1:10 AM. He walked out of the woman's restroom. The security guard did a double-take, but said nothing. He'd seen stranger things before.

Jimmy walked the short distance to the police building. He noted the captain's car passing him by. He walked into to the main hall. Two uniformed officers were talking by the coffee machine. The old-timer at the security check recognized Jimmy, quickly looked down at his console. The manual security check was in operation. Not looking at Jimmy, he asked for credentials, gave them a cursory look, and waved him in. Jimmy heard a whispered, "Good luck" as he passed through the detectors.

Thankful no security cameras could watch his movements, he walked downstairs to the evidence room. Smiling at a shocked officer at the small window, he showed his badge. The officer leaned out the window and looked both ways.

"Jimmy, there's an APB on you. Your face is plastered on the TV every hour."

Jimmy noted the officer had his hand on his gun. He looked into the man's eyes. "Frank, I gotta check some files. You gonna arrest me or let me in?"

The officer nervously leaned out the small window again and scanned the hall. "This is crazy. How did you get in?" he asked as he beeped open the door.

"I still work here, Frank. How's Gladys doing?"

"Better. Looks like the last chemo treatment lowered the count. Thanks for asking, Jimmy. And, thanks for the loan. I'll pay you back, promise."

Jimmy gripped the officer's shoulder and smiled. "Don't worry about it, I told you that already. It was a gift, Frank. Keep it that way."

Frank opened the door and looked down the hall as Jimmy slipped in. "I gotta take a piss. Door's gonna to be locked for about ten minutes. Good seeing you, Jimmy."

Northup nodded to Frank and slid into the file room, a narrow chamber filled with dozens of shelves, similar to a library. But these shelves were haphazardly filed with folders and cartons of evidence instead of books and magazines. He looked at the large letters at the corner of each shelf, quickly found the letter he needed, and scanned the names on folders and boxes. Finally, he stopped at a thick file

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marked, KORDAK. Northup thumbed through the file, occasionally jotting names, addresses, or phone numbers down. He shoved the pad in his pocket, carefully shut the door behind him, making sure it was locked, and walked upstairs.

Well, that was the hard part. Now a quick stop at his office to pick up a small notebook jammed with phone numbers and addresses. As he strolled through the nearly deserted, barely lit main room to his office, he noticed familiar faces glancing up and then looking down. He was being given a free pass by his fellow detectives. If anything comes back, they were too busy to see the notorious felon, Jimmy Northup.

He unlocked his door and, knowing the force would “look the other way,” he didn’t even bother to shut the door behind him. Rummaging around in the top drawer, he grabbed the pad with the tattered pages. Kissing it, he put it in his pocket. He turned and was face-to-face with Al Morelli.

“Hi, Jimmy.”

“Al.”

The younger detective was blocking the exit from the office, his short, broad frame nearly filled the doorway. He held a gun leveled at Jimmy. The older detective said nothing as he studied his friend. *Hmm, a few bags under his eyes. Not getting as much sleep these days, partner.*

“Mr. Jackson thought you might come back. So did I. Figured it wouldn’t be in broad daylight so I got myself assigned to the graveyard shift. Just pushing pencils and who did I see stroll in? None other than Jimmy Northup...wanted for about half a dozen crimes.”

Jimmy held the eyes of his friend. “Al, this is big. Bigger than...”

“Look let’s not make this any more difficult than it already is. You turned, my friend. Now you’re a criminal and I’ve got my sworn duty and all that shit.”

The gun waved toward the door. “Sorry, Jimmy. For once you gotta go by the rules.”

Jimmy put his head down. “Alright, Al. Let’s get this over with. At least don’t humiliate me, OK. No cuffs, please.”

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Al looked at his former partner and nodded. "Okay, Jimmy. For a buddy, I'll do it. Hell, I won't even pat you down, I know you don't ever carry."

The shorter detective put the cuffs away. He then moved to the side and graciously extended his hand toward the door, with his gun hand pointing down. His eyes were off Jimmy for only an instant, but life and death is sometimes determined by an inch and a second. When his smiling face returned to Jimmy, his eyes went wide. Jimmy pointed the giant magnum right at Al's chest, silencer already attached.

"Rules change, people change, Al. You always had a tough time with that concept. Here, let me take this weight from your hand. Close the door...*buddy*."

A shaking hand closed the door.

"Hey, listen, I won't say anything. We were partners, you and me."

"Turn around Al and kneel down."

"Oh, God, Jimmy. Don't. Please don't."

But, Jimmy did. Afterwards, he wrote a note on a piece of paper and taped it on the door. Looking back at Al, prostrate on the floor, he had a moment of regret. Then he closed the door and left.

Jimmy returned to the building across the street. Nodded at the security guard and went back into the bathroom. Minutes later, wearing a disheveled dress and his wig he waved to the security guard who just shook his head. Outside he hailed a taxi. "Train station."

It was 2:14 AM when Northup scanned the schedule for a train. He wasn't going back west, though. Instead, he was angling south. A train was leaving Rochester for St. Louis at the ungodly hour of 4 AM and that was as good an opportunity as any. A disgusted train attendant gave a ticket to the obvious transvestite and Jimmy sat down with a long, weary sigh before using the phone. Laisa had assured him it was safe and was somehow protected from the billion electronic ears.

"Leaving Rochester."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“What happened to you?” asked Henry Jackson, as he took off his jacket.

Al’s bump rudely poked through his carefully coiffed hair. “Girlfriend blind-sided me. Didn’t like my cooking,” he mumbled.

Jackson grunted and led five men, including Morelli, to a conference room. All sat down looking at their boss. Chair pushed back, hands on the arms of the chair, it looked as though Jackson was about to spring. He nodded to one of the men. “Now, what do we have?”

The agent nervously told his boss about reports coming in from FBI surveillance teams and informants. No new activity and no indications the suspects were hiding out with terrorist groups.

“Something has got to turn up. Tell the FBI to keep snooping.”

He turned to Al.

“You got the night-shift, I see. Smart move, Morelli. Anything yet?”

Al gulped and then replied. “Nothing, sir. My guess, he won’t be coming back at all. He works alone, Mr. Jackson.”

“He’ll come back. Get back there tonight.”

Al gently rubbed his scalp. He would do what he was told, but he knew Jimmy wouldn’t be back. After he woke up in Jimmy’s office, he was simply glad to be alive. He knew what Jimmy was capable of.

A few months after June’s death, Al recalled that he and Jimmy arrested a child molester. The bastard bragged about his “conquest” of a thirteen-year-old girl. Then he laughed at the two detectives. “My lawyer will get me off.” Jimmy pulled his gun out and shoved it in the man’s mouth. After the wide-eyed perp turned sheet white, Jimmy dragged him to the window. “Climb up on window sill, asshole.”

“No man. Too dangerous.” Jimmy pulled out the gun again and the child molester carefully eased himself to a sitting position, his feet dangling over three-story drop.

“You’re right, scumbag. Your lawyer will probably get you off. But there’s another way to get you off.” Then he pushed the man hard. Screaming, the man landed face down on the hard cement.

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The guy's name was Durand. The same name Jimmy wrote on the note posted to the door. No, Al would not go against Jimmy again.

Within half a block of shiny skyscrapers, Amarillo, Texas morphs into dark saloons, second homes to older men wearing flannel shirts and younger ones carrying briefcases. Jimmy sat at one of the few tables in a long, narrow saloon. More cave than room, the dim lights behind the bar hid both men and drinks. There was a brighter light at the rear, near the bathroom where a scantily clad young woman mechanically humped a long pole to loud, banging music. Two bartenders worked furiously to keep a steady flow of liquor into mugs and shot-sized glasses. It was the fourth such establishment he had visited in the last two days. Jimmy wore a wrinkled shirt and rumpled suit coat, no tie. Freely giving his name, he knew the denizens of this dark world would only share his name with their own kind. One of which was Dirk Kordack, the mysterious White supremacist arms smuggler.

Most of the younger men at the end of the bar had their eyes fixed on the dancer, so Jimmy studied the regulars nearer the door. One, in particular, jerked a thumb in his direction and a man wearing a black hat, black pants and a starch-white shirt looked over the pointer's shoulder at Jimmy Northup. *Well, this is promising. At least I am getting noticed by someone.*

He sipped his beer and casually checked the front and back entrance. No one coming in. Another sip. A look back at the bar. The man with the black hat was gone. A smile crept along his face. Late in the afternoon, he ordered a sandwich which was both cheap, tasty, and garnished with a crisp, expertly sliced pickle and parsley. *Parsley! In this dump? Will miracles never cease?* After he downed his third beer, he began to feel a bit of a buzz. He decided to stop drinking booze.

After the waiter took away his plates and glass, Jimmy found himself bracketed by two tall men with small bald heads and muscular arms wider than Jimmy's legs. The man with the black hat sauntered through the front door. Everyone at the bar, even the bartenders, purposely ignored the drama at the table.

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The man with the black hat stood in front of Jimmy for a few seconds, a lazy smile greeting the detective. He swung the chair around and sat down and put the black hat on the table, neatly coiffed hair a contrast to his assistants.

“My pappy toll me ta always take ma hat off at the table.”

Jimmy stared at him.

“Jimmy Northup, my name’s Toby Johnson. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” He stuck out his hand. Jimmy just kept looking at him. Toby withdrew his arm and chuckled.

“Alright, pardner, let’s get right down to business, then. You’ve been asking too many questions, ma friend. So, I have two options for ya all. I give ya up to the cops and get many chips, many, many chips or I can have ma friends here, Bert and Ernie...yeah, that’s their real names...twins, you know...take ya outside and...well, ya all know what they do. So, which should I do, pardner?”

Jimmy stared at the man and shook his head. “I’ll choose option three. You take me to Dirk Kordack.”

“Nope, option three is out,” he said slowly. “As I hate bothering the men with the badges, I think option two would be best. Boys...” He reached for his hat as he started to get up.

The detective spoke up, softer than before. “Wait, Toby I don’t like option two.” Jimmy brought the gun on the table, cocked and pointing at the crotch of the man wearing the black hat. “We need to come up with option four. Sit down.”

Toby sighed, laid his hat back on the table, waved the men back, and slowly sat down watching the gun. “Shit! I gotta get better intelligence on you Northup. I was told you never carry.”

Jimmy shrugged.

“Alright, let’s chaw some on option four.”

Thirty minutes later the four men walked out of the back door of the bar into an alley. A limo was waiting for them. The three men backed away and Jimmy kept them covered with his gun as he walked up to the window, hoping to talk with Kordack. The window came down and a spray shot out, blinding him. Immediately Bert and Ernie, disarmed him and shoved him in the car.

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The car screeched out of the alley as Jimmy tried to rub away the chemicals. Bert and Ernie were on either side of the detective as he blinked open blurry, tear-filled yes. He saw Toby, leaning over the front seat, smiling.

“Jimmy, nice trick you pulled in there.”

Then his face turned flat and cold. “But I don’t like tricks.”

He nodded to Ernie and the beating began. A minute later, nearly unconscious, Jimmy heard Toby, as though he was yelling at him from far away.

“You dumb cop. Why did ya all think I wouldn’t do option two? Now, it’s going to be worse. Much worse.”

Through the haze, Jimmy somehow got out the words. “Kordack might be pissed if you kill me. Remember what I have to offer.”

Toby smiled. “Oh, I won’t kill you. Yet.” Toby nodded to Ernie. The beatings began anew.

CHAPTER FORTY

It was their fourth day in the hilly wilderness of western North Dakota and they were, quite literally, not happy campers.

“I’m cold, exhausted, and convinced Brock is a sadist.” Mary said as she burrowed into the sleeping bag Whit had just vacated.

Whit shivered in the early morning as he pulled a T-shirt over his chest. Slipping into his boots, he ran outside to the latrine they dug late last night. As he relieved himself, he yelled back to Mary.

“We at least know how to shoot automatic weapons. You are a terrific—markswoman”

He walked back into the tent as Mary put on her sweatpants. She smiled and wrapped her arms around him. “I don’t want to be Annie Oakley. I just want a shower. Is that too much to ask?”

Whit chuckled. “Maybe Brock will find us a fresh mountain stream with a secluded waterfall. Then you can have your shower. I’ll stand guard.”

Mary pushed him away, scrunching her nose. “I want to hug you more, but you need the waterfall so much more.” She put on her sneakers.

“And, just between you and me,” she whispered, “I don’t like Brock at all.”

Whit grinned. “Bet you would like him more if he could find that waterfall.”

As she scampered out of the tent, she replied over her shoulder, “Maybe. Eek! Cold.”

Like the other days, they started with a grueling hike. Brock, dressed in army fatigues, pointed out different plants and what you could use them for. “Over there, the wide, fuzzy-type leaf is called Lamb’s Wool. Feel it. Nice, huh?”

Mary beamed a smile as she felt the soft leaf of the plant.

“If you get a cut and have no medical kit, it serves as a handy bandage. You may have to attach it with a strip of cloth, but it will

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protect the skin and limit the bleeding. It has a natural blood coagulant on its surface.”

Despite being shorter than Whit, Brock somehow looked bigger, a full, muscled body supporting his craggy face. He never offered any anecdotes about himself, but each observation in the woods was accompanied with some sort of story.

Finally, as the sun drifted down, they wearily walked through the sparse trees looking for a suitable place to spend the night. After they raised their tent, Brock rewarded them with some cheese and flatbread. Had they been in civilization, the offering would have been politely refused. Here, though, near starvation, it was manna from heaven. Brock saw something behind them. He put his finger to his lips and put his plate down slowly. The pair turned and saw a small doe grazing a hundred feet away in a clearing.

“Mary,” he whispered, “bag her for us and tonight we feast.”

She looked at him, eyes wide, shock on her face. “I can’t shoot her, Brock. I just can’t.”

He stared at her for a few seconds, his eyes narrowing.

“What the hell do you think you are here for, woman? A woodsy vacation?” he asked in a hushed but fierce tone. “You’re going up against Navy Seals, for Christ’s sake and you can’t kill a goddamn deer?”

Tears flooded her eyes and she looked away.

Brock shook his head in disgust. He jerked his head, motioning for Whit to shoot. Whit aimed, held his breath, and a shot reverberated in the mountains. Two minutes later, the guide showed him how to skin the animal.

Later, after roasting the steak on an open fire, Whit and Brock laughed over some joke. Mary remained in the tent. She had refused to eat.

The last two days of their training, Brock tried to get Mary to shoot something, anything from birds to rabbits to even skunks. She adamantly refused, glaring at the stocky man each time.

After a week of survival training, they returned to Madison. Laisa greeted them at the door and Mary grunted and stomped upstairs. Whit, exhausted, slumped on the sofa and fell asleep. Laisa got a whiff of her guest and wrinkled her nose. Worried about her furniture she was about to shake him awake, when she heard him

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snoring. She shook her head. *Let the poor man sleep, Laisa. After he gets up, I'll burn the chair.*

She heard water running in one of the bathrooms. She smiled, knowing Mary would be a long time in the shower. Just as quickly a frown returned to her face. It was nearly a week since she heard from Jimmy, a cryptic note about Rochester and that was all. He had told her to expect he would be incommunicado for a few days, but a week? After the first few days she was worried, and up until today, she was angry. Now tears formed in her eyes. Captured, dead, one or the other, she grimly concluded.

Without him, the plan would fail. No missiles. No locksmith. If captured, she knew he would be subjected to torture. Of course, knowing Jimmy, he wouldn't talk just because he was more stubborn than smart. But the torture would be used simply to establish a baseline for when he was telling the truth. After the torture, mind-altering drugs would be applied. The information would flow slowly out of his muddled brain. Then, most likely, Laisa and the three others would be compromised and taken into custody as well or simply shot when found. She wiped away the tears. *Dear Jesus, what I have gotten myself into?*

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The new NSA agent was short, blonde, and cute. She smiled as she introduced herself to Commander Jackson. "Sir, some good news from our Texas branch."

"How long have you been NSA, honey?"

She blinked a few times and gave up a hesitant smile. "Ahh...two years, Mr. Jackson. Mostly behind a desk in Washington. I got my Masters in..."

He linked his arm in hers and walked her to his office. "What's this good news?" After entering his office, he closed the door.

"James Northup of the Rochester Police Force was seen in Amarillo. An informant says he was carted away by some unknown criminal elements in a limo. He hasn't been seen or heard from in five days. It is likely he is dead or kidnapped, sir."

Henry Jackson weighed the information. It was hard to concentrate with such an attractive young woman standing so close to him. How long had it been? Too long, he conceded, looking her up and down. A fine specimen of womanhood.

"This could be very good news. Let me make a phone call."

She started to leave, but he shook his finger back and forth. She waited by the door. He spoke into the phone.

"Al. Good news. Seems like Northup disappeared in in Amarillo, Texas. Just went in and announced who he was and somebody either offed him or kidnapped him. My sources say he's gone."

He smiled at the female agent when he said "my sources."

"Gotta check all the boxes, Al. Is this crazy behavior consistent with your partner?"

"Jimmy could be a bit odd at times. When his wife died, he went totally bonkers. He didn't care if he broke laws. He scared confessions out of all the suspects we brought in. Sometimes he just let the perps go. I could never figure him out, sir. Going into Amarillo with neon signs screaming Detective Jimmy Northup? Yeah. That's something I could see him doing. The guy has more balls than brains. What's he doing in Amarillo?"

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“Don’t know. Doesn’t matter, though. Dead or soon to be dead, we don’t have to worry about him anymore. Get back here Morelli.” He hung up the phone and looked at the small blonde with her hands neatly folded in front of her.

“Look, I need to have someone do a follow up on this Northup guy. Make sure he’s dead. Get me some information.”

She beamed. “Oh, yes sir. I’d be happy to.”

Dessert served and consumed by three appreciative palates, Laisa neatly wiped her face with a napkin, even though she had not eaten any pie. She coughed gently, gaining their attention.

“We have a problem. I haven’t had any word from Jimmy for over a week now.” She looked away for a moment and then returned to look at her guests. “There’s no easy way to tell you. It is likely he is either captured or...well...it isn’t good.”

Mary’s hand went to her mouth, tears flooded her eyes. Whit briefly closed his eyes, then reached over for Mary’s hand. Laisa continued.

“Without him, we have no missiles. If Jimmy was taken by the authorities, it’s just a matter of time before he tells them where we are. I know this is abrupt, but you have to get away as soon as possible, no later than tomorrow. Take one of my cars and drive on to Canada. You might be safe there.”

She handed them a thin briefcase.

“Here is one hundred thousand dollars. It should be enough to settle you in Canada.”

Rick, blood drained from his face, stared at the table. Mary’s head was down, quietly crying. Whit closed his eyes, his jaw clenched tightly. When he looked up, Laisa saw his fierce look and was rattled. *Oh, my God. He’s not going to Canada. He’s going to go after Hal.*

Laisa glared right back at Whit and angrily pushed away from the table. “I have to go as well. I’ve a great deal to do before I leave, so good night.”

Then she went upstairs, her own eyes stinging with tears. She shut her door and paced in the spacious, well-lit bedroom. *Idiot. He has no idea what he’s up against.* Laisa sat down on the bed, tears

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making a small puddle on the floor. Before she got ready to leave, she had to grieve. For Jimmy, for the three downstairs, for herself, for the human race.

“No, no, no! They didn’t go to Canada. They’re holed up somewhere.” Jackson then turned to the map and pounded Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota shouting, “Here, here, or here. We just have to wait for them to pop their sorry-ass faces up and then we nail them.”

“Henry, I can’t keep so many men on one project.”

Jackson turned to the general. “Listen, this is not me talking. It’s not the NSA talking. The president wants this done. Get him on the goddamn computer link if you don’t believe me. But, keep your men here.”

The general held Jackson’s eyes for a few seconds then looked down, sighed, and walked away. The young female recruit Jackson had taken under wing stared at the retreating form of the officer. Jackson turned around and let loose a gigawatt smile with perfect teeth and twinkling eyes. “God help me, but I love this job, Alice.” The blonde smiled. “Did you get the information on Northup?”

She shook her head. “Not much known yet. First...”

He cut her off.

“Listen, I’m a bit busy now. After dinner. My apartment.”

Then he looked down at some papers on his desk, ignoring her.

The young NSA agent hesitated and then left.

When Alice came to his suite that evening, he offered her some wine. At first, she declined. Jackson wiggled the bottle a little, grinning as he tried to convince her. “Come on. You’re off the clock, honey. Just one glass.”

Having observed the way Jackson handled subordinates, she knew this was not a man to say no to. He could and did make or break careers. Forcing a smile, Alice agreed to the wine.

On the couch they started talking about the case, but the conversation quickly segued to her personal life. His hand fiddled

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with a label in her blouse that was sticking out. When done, his fingers moved to her hair that she had put up to look more professional.

“Sir, I’d better be going.” She started to get up.

“Sit down, Alice.” His flat voice grabbed her insides.

She sat down, looking straight ahead, legs together, hands on her knees. Her lower lip wavered a bit as she swallowed and tried not to think of what she instinctively knew was coming.

“You are so beautiful. Loosen up your blouse a bit.”

Tears came to her eyes as she undid the top button. He was gently stroking her unblemished neck.

“Keep going, sweetheart.”

Alice looked away from Jackson and toward the window. Her dream job had become a nightmare. As tears dropped from her stone face, she undid button after button. Jackson smiled.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Yanked out of a small, totally empty room, Jimmy was pulled to the garage where they interrogated and beat him. Nearly unconscious, he went limp when two men dragged him across a cement floor to a corner. Suddenly freezing cold water streamed down upon him from a nozzle above. A voice told him to strip off his clothes and wash. A bar of soap hit the wet tile in front of him, and Jimmy crouched down to grab it with shivering fingers.

An hour later, dressed in fresh, new clothes, the detective was blindfolded and pushed into a car. The drive seemed endless with frequent turns on both smooth and bumpy roads. Abruptly, the car screeched to a stop. Yanked out of the car, Jimmy was dragged up some steps. Blindfold removed, the detective found himself at the door of large cabin. As the door swung open, Jimmy scanned the dark interior. Pushed from behind, he landed on the wood floor.

Over the last five days (or was it six, he wondered) he had been fed infrequently and at odd times. Usually stale, sometimes moldy, bread. Once he was given what appeared to be dog food. Another time a gruel of some stringy meat with an alien taste. He wondered if it might have been the dog whose food he'd eaten.

So, it was with unabashed joy that he found himself looking up at a table with linens topped with a large plate with chicken and mashed potatoes. There was no one in the house and his handlers had already driven off. Jimmy wasn't sure of the protocol, but he really didn't care. He scrambled to a seat and quickly jammed his mouth full of food. He wondered if this was a precursor to some sort of discussion or his last supper.

His plate clean, Jimmy sat back on the chair assessing the interior of the house. He was in a single room cabin, perhaps thirty feet by sixty feet. A roughhewn set of steps led to a sleeping loft where at least a dozen beds were crammed together. On the main floor a large kitchen anchored one end, and a few doors crowded the other. More bedrooms? Bathrooms?

Just then the front door creaked open and two men walked in. The larger of the two, took off his suit coat to expose a holstered gun strapped to his torso. He walked slowly to the kitchen counter and

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sat down on a high stool. Brown eyes never wavered from Jimmy. The second man, shorter and slightly overweight, wore a polo shirt and sneakers. The outfit gave the impression he had just finished eighteen holes of golf.

The 'golf player' sat down across from the detective. Jimmy held the man's stare for a few moments before the man finally spoke. "You've taken some pains to find me, Mr. Northup. Why?"

"You have something I need; I have something you want."

Dirk Kordack leaned back in the chair and folded his arms behind his head. "Go on."

Jimmy looked over his shoulder at the man perched in the kitchen. Then he leaned forward and whispered, "Missiles for me and a chance for you bring down the entire government of the United States."

A day later on a crisp, autumn morning, Jimmy, Dirk and his ever-present (and nameless) bodyguard pulled off highway Route 10 near Demings, New Mexico. Trucks and a few cars whizzed by them on the pavement nearby. The three men left the car and hiked four miles across a brown landscape studded with stubborn weeds. They approached an old miner's shack nuzzled against a cliff. Walking inside, Jimmy saw a tattered, old rug with sand drifted over it and a few stones acting as miniature boulders. Dust lay heavily on the floor and counters. The shack had not been used for a long time. *Or it gave the impression it hasn't been used for a long time.* Dirk looked right and left out the window. Then, still surveying the outside, he motioned to the body-guard. Bending down, he pulled the rug back revealing a trap door and pulled it open. A dark circular hole yawned open. Kordack looked out the window one last time, took out a key ring from his pocket, and clicked a button on the fob. Lights went on below.

"Nice touch," remarked Jimmy.

"The same switch turns off a rather nasty blade that sweeps out when your foot touches the ground. At least, I think it turns it off. You go first, Jimmy."

The bodyguard had attached the rope to an iron loop firmly secured to the floor. With some trepidation, Jimmy went down hand-

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over-hand. He felt much better when Dirk followed in the same fashion. The bodyguard didn't come down with them. Jimmy gingerly touched the ground and then withdrew his foot. No blade. He stepped down and waited for Kordack.

They walked through a passageway hewn out of solid rock. The pair passed a number of small doors until they reached what looked like a garage door. Dirk touched the key pad near the entrance with a complicated sequence. Squealing in protest, the large metal door grudgingly lifted up. A large cavern filled with various sizes of wooden boxes appeared.

Dirk flipped a light switch just inside the door and pointed to a distant corner where four dusty missiles, each ten feet long, lay on metal carts. The steps of the two men echoed as they walked toward the missiles. "We'll need them all, Dirk. You're sure they work?"

Dirk gently patted one of the missiles. "I've got a former army captain on my crew who was in charge of launching these babies during the Middle East crisis a few years back. He'll make sure they blow up your targets. He's equally concerned about this illegitimate government taking over our freedoms."

Jimmy looked at the terrorist fondling the equipment. A few months ago, he might have been arresting the man. Now he was a necessary ally. "The timing has to be perfect, Dirk."

The smaller man patted the missile one last time and turned toward Jimmy. "Don't worry about us, Northup. This guy is not just good, he's the best."

"I want to meet him."

Dirk glared at the man facing him. Jimmy's face was mottled with black and blue marks, and his eyes were streaked with red, but unwavering. "You think you can come in here and make demands? We could have fucking killed you, Northup. Here I show you our most valuable assets, and you want more. You're gonna have to accept that this guy knows his business."

Jimmy stepped close to the other man so that they were nose to nose.

Dirk clenched his fists as their gazes locked. "Listen, we are giving you an opportunity to make your—what did you call them? Your *valuable assets* the most significant weapons ever made for taking down any government. Without us they are still just shitty, little missiles that might take out a building or kill a few people. Now

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they are much, much more. They're going to take down the entire government of the United States. I gotta talk to the man and find out what kind of damage we can expect so I can tell my people how to proceed. Arrange the goddamn meeting."

Dirk coldly stared at him. "Why don't we just scrap the deal? Then I can kill you."

Jimmy laughed. When he spoke, a smile stayed on his face. "You won't scrap the deal because it's bigger than anything you could do or even imagine by yourself. We both know that, so cut the bullshit."

Their eyes locked on each other for a few seconds. Then Dirk broke out into a hearty laugh. "You're right, you damn bastard. This is too big for me to throw away." Without any expression, he added, "Alright, Jimmy Northup, you get to speak to the guy. But if these birds don't close down the internet like you claimed, don't worry about the Feds. They won't find you. Not whole anyway. And not in one place."

A day later, Jimmy was in the same bar where he met Bert and Ernie a week before. They were sitting beside him drinking Coca-Cola and chatting about baseball cards that they bought and sold apparently for big bucks. A tall, ramrod straight man stepped purposely toward the table and glowered at Jimmy. With a shake of his head, he ordered the brothers away. "What is so important that I was pulled from my daughter's birthday party?"

"I need some answers."

"Ask."

Jimmy, with a raised eyebrow, fixed the man standing above him with a stern look.

"Sit down and stop making a spectacle of yourself. Might not be any cameras in this hole, but there *are* loose lips."

The captain looked around and saw a few men had pulled their eyes from the erotic dancing and were watching them. The former captain sat down.

"This...umm...package, how much damage can we expect if it hits a one-story wood building, roughly forty by eighty, with a basement and sub-basement?"

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“Hit the center and the above ground floor will be nearly totally destroyed. Unlikely there would be any survivors on the first level.”

“And the basement?”

“Right underneath the blast, death and debris. But the walls will probably stay together. Might have some survivors near the walls.”

“Sub-basement?”

“The missile is not designed to take out bunkers, if that’s what you mean. Some damage is possible, but I’m not sure how much.”

“So, a person might survive the hit in the sub-basement?”

“Probably.”

Jimmy pulled on his ear, thinking. *Might work...It just might work.* He then asked questions about accuracy and timing, receiving answers that further increased his optimism.

After the captain left, he was joined by Bert who handed him his wallet.

“Where’s your brother?” Jimmy asked as he pocketed wallet, much thinner than before he got into this mess.

“Across the street talking to some guy about a rookie Mickey Mantle card. Ernie is a hell of a negotiator, so it may take a while.”

“You two going to take another shot at me before I leave?”

Bert smiled. “Nah. That’s over. Hey, no hard feelings man? Just doing what we were told.”

Jimmy smiled and offered his hand. Bert took it and Jimmy wrapped his hand around the pointer finger and bent it sideways and back. The finger hold brought the bigger man to his knees, begging for release. Jimmy kneed him in the face and knocked him out. As Bert fell, he snapped the finger until it gave a wet pop. “No hard feelings now, Bert.” He reached in the prostrated man’s pockets and took out his wallet. He pulled out a few hundred dollars and discarded the wallet on the floor. He looked around, but if anyone had watched the spectacle, they felt it best to look the other way now. Jimmy casually walked out of the bar and got a taxi.

“Get me to the train station.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Sitting close together in the living room before noon, the three friends were once again depressed. Without the missiles, each newly hatched plan ended up as a rotten egg. Laisa walked into the entry way of the room and shook her head in disgust.

“I told you...there isn’t any way into his lair without Jimmy’s missiles. And we haven’t even talked about how we get past the lock.”

Whit sighed and shook his head. “I’m exhausted. Let’s stop for a while.”

Laisa rolled her eyes, went back to the kitchen and looked out the window. Her guests had simply refused to leave. She had her SUV packed and ready to go, but, for some reason unknown to her, she remained. That they were all still safe suggested to her that Jimmy had to be caught by some criminal element and was probably dead. She sighed. Better check the mail before I start lunch. Again.

Rifling through the trash mail and a note from her bank, she stopped at the slightly crumpled envelope. Her hands shaking, she opened it up. After a cheery salutation, the contents talked about the weather in Oklahoma and a few “mutual” friends. Then:

Saw Aunt Josie, bustled about making me wonderful dinners. Stayed a few nights with her. Talked about her kids. OMG! You know how long-winded she is. Her four kids are doing fine. Going to stop in to see Cousin John. Be home soon.

She returned to the living room. A great smile on her face, she blurted, “He’s alive and has the missiles. Jimmy Northup is alive.”

A few minutes later after the hugging and crying, she was alone in her bedroom. Laisa dialed a number from memory as the number was not recorded anywhere.

“I need your services again. Can you meet me tomorrow?”

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A taxi dropped Jimmy off in front of the house in the upscale neighborhood. He rang the doorbell and a short attractive woman greeted him.

“Hello. Can I help you?”

“Is Pat in? We worked on a project a month or so back and I need his expertise on a little problem.”

Mrs. Fallon then yelled over her shoulder. “Honey, you have a friend here.”

She motioned for Jimmy to sit in the living room. “Can I offer you a drink, Mr...ahh...there’s someone here I want you to meet.”

“Henson, ma’am. Gerald Henson. No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

Pat Fallon walked in, his arm tightly wrapped around a young teenager smiling up to him. When he saw Jimmy, his smile disappeared and he released his daughter. “What do you want?”

“I need to talk to you alone, Pat.”

Leaving behind a stunned daughter and wife, Pat led the detective into his study and slammed the door shut. An hour later both men emerged, faces somber. Looking back and forth between the two men, a nervous wife asked Jimmy if he wanted to stay for dinner.

“Thanks. Yes. I would.”

Pat looked at his wife. “He’ll be spending the night, too.”

During the dinner the two men kept up a charade of being co-workers on some project, but Mrs. Fallon now recognized Jimmy from the pictures in the paper and on TV. As she pushed around her the chocolate cake, without looking at her husband, she interrupted the lame conversation about hockey teams. “Honey, tell me about the technicality that got you out of jail.”

Both men were quiet. Pat’s daughter looked back and forth at the three adults, their silence pregnant with some secret.

“Daddy, what’s going on?”

“Nothing. Go do your homework.”

“But I—”

“Now!”

Screeching the chair as she got up, the teenager stomped upstairs.

Mrs. Fallon glared at her husband. Her smoldering look promised a heated confrontation later.

Pat stared back at her and asked, “Is the guest room ready?”

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“No.” Mrs. Fallon excused herself and followed her daughter upstairs.

Even though the news made him out to be a ruthless, murderous ex-cop, he was still a guest and Mrs. Fallon made sure Jimmy was sufficiently comfortable. A few minutes later Jimmy quietly padded from the bathroom when he overheard a conversation coming from behind the closed bedroom door. Anger and frustration raised the volume.

“That’s no engineer; it’s the bad cop...Northern something. He’s crooked. He got you out of jail and gave you the extra money, didn’t he?”

“Look, honey, the less you know, the better.”

“So, a crooked detective saved our daughter and got you out of jail, didn’t he? Why? Is this some sort of payback? What’s going on Pat? Where are you going?”

Silence.

A broken voice, barely heard by Jimmy, sliced through the quiet. “I’ve only had you back for a short time Patty Fallon. Don’t go with that devil. Please, stay with us.”

“I have to go. I have to.”

Jimmy heard sobs from one, maybe two people, and he tiptoed back to his room. Guilt filled him as he lay on the bed, and sleep didn’t come easily to him.

The next morning at the train station a tearful wife hugged her husband goodbye. Jimmy had cautioned Pat about telling his wife anything, but she divined it had to be dangerous.

She released her husband and stepped over to Jimmy. The woman gripped his hands and pulled him a few steps away so Pat couldn’t hear. She looked up into Jimmy’s eyes, her own eyes glistening, and whispered words like sharp knives. “You take care of him, Mr. Northup.” Then she squeezed his hands and pleaded, “Promise me you’ll bring him back to us. Promise!”

Jimmy looked at her. She had been through so much, he thought. The woman had single-handedly nursed her young daughter who was, at the time, knocking on death’s door. All the while she didn’t know if a missing husband was dead or in jail. Miraculously,

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a treatment saved her daughter and her husband returned to her. Now, another 180-degree turn as her husband was mysteriously yanked away. Perhaps forever, he grimly thought. *How many ups and downs can one person manage in a life?* Jimmy decided to violate one of his cardinal rules. He made a promise.

“He’ll be back, ma’am. I promise you.”

Whatever hell they might find themselves immersed in, Jimmy would somehow make sure Pat got back to his family. Even if it meant his death for others. He recalled a phrase often used by his dear June, “a promise is a promise, Jimmy Northup.” He gently pried his hands from her grip, nodded to her and walked up the steps into the train.

A minute later the bank robber and the rogue cop began the trip to South Dakota.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Jackson didn't bother watching Alice stumble down the hall to her room. This was their second time together and he had gotten her drunk. Except for her just lying there she had been a good piece of ass. *Time for a transfer*, he mused. Give her a slightly better job and she would be happy and quiet about their brief liaison. There were others, he smiled, so many others.

He showered and dressed up even though it was 10 PM. After taking a deep breath, Jackson opened the laptop and tapped the keys to initiate the hook-up. There was silence for the first ten seconds and he clenched his jaw, willing himself to keep staring at the small eye of the computer.

A voice filled his ears, his stomach dropping at the sound.
“You speculate the detective is no longer a factor.”

“Yes. It appears he was tangled with the wrong group. Some terrorists kidnapped him and most likely killed him. Old wounds don't heal.”

“Old wounds usually heal.”

As Jackson frantically considered one response after another the computer continued. “What about Emerson and the woman?”

All law enforcement agencies, including state and local police, are actively looking for them. Once they emerge from hiding, we will find them. It's just a matter of time.”

“What about terrorist groups?”

Jackson was prepared for this question as well. “The FBI has diverted all their manpower to track and watch known terrorist groups. No unusual movements with the exception of one group seeking medical services from a local doctor.”

Jackson knew this lead was totally bogus, involving an altercation between two rival gangs. He was trying to impress his superior with his thoroughness.

“Where?” the computer asked.

“Minnesota.”

“They are not in Minnesota.”

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Jackson's eyebrows furrowed into a worried and questioning look. Realizing he was being scrutinized, he quickly amended the facial blip, but it was too late.

"I study patterns. Knowing their new identities, I've been able to better anticipate their goals. Minnesota was not their goal."

Jackson nodded.

"Focus your attention in North and South Dakota."

"Yes, sir."

Then silence. After a minute Jackson slowly put down the screen of the computer and turned it off. He was immediately on the phone.

Jimmy paid the man in the beat-up truck for driving them from the train station. Whit and Rick greeted the pair warmly while Mary hugged a Jimmy around the neck. It was Laisa, however, who shocked everyone. She nodded to Pat, walked straight up to Jimmy, wrapped her arms around him, and kissed him full on the mouth.

"I worried about you, Northup." She grabbed his hand and led him back into her home.

Over a late snack and a number of beers, information was shared.

"Laisa. Pat is our key...literally. He knows locks. He robs banks by unlocking them."

"Robbed banks." Pat corrected with a frown.

Laisa smiled. "Well, you delivered all you promised, Jimmy." Then she rose and stood at the head of the kitchen table.

"As you know we almost aborted the mission. Apparently, we are all in agreement that it is still a 'go.'" Five resolute faces stared back at her.

She nodded. "I thought so. The weakest part of the plan is getting past the Navy Seals."

Jimmy started to protest, but Laisa cut him off. "I know the missiles should take care of the barracks and kill most of them. But, even one Seal is too dangerous for us. So, I am bringing one more player onto our team."

She looked at Whit and Mary. "You folks know him. Brock."

Mary frowned and Whit nodded.

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“He was in the Army Rangers. As we speak, he is in Area 51 scouting the situation for us. He will join us when we finally make our move. His only condition was that he be in charge of the group going into the compound. That’s a no-brainer, folks.”

Jimmy rearranged himself in his seat, but said nothing.

Laisa then filled them in on the improved virus. “It’s less obvious and more powerful and I give due credit to Rick.”

Rick blushed and looked down at the table.

“Jimmy, how fast can Dirk get the missiles to Area 51?”

“Three days.”

“Hmm. Alright,” said Laisa. She turned back to Rick. “Rick, I’ll leave it to you to get those satellite pictures of the compound magnified. We need the exact coordinates.”

“D-D-Done.”

Laisa took a deep breath and blew it out of her mouth.

“Okay folks. We begin Armageddon tomorrow. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to get a solid sleep tonight. Calling an old acquaintance tomorrow morning early.”

Even though everyone, but Laisa, stayed up late, all were present at 6 AM for first contact. To prevent the super computer from having any opportunity to analyze sounds in an audio connection, it was decided to interact exclusively via simple typing. Whit stood beside Laisa as her fingers danced over the keys, setting this link and that firewall.

“You think he’s going to want me to visit, huh?”

Whit nodded, watching the screen. “Oh, yeah. Machine or not, he’ll be curious about Mama.”

“Hmm...we’ll see soon enough.”

“Once he hears about the Russian code, he’ll roll out the red carpet for you,” Jimmy added.

“Yeah, and if we don’t knock out the internet, that carpet will be my death shroud.”

Laisa’s finger poised above the ENTER button on her computer. She hesitated and looked behind at the little group. This was the step from which they could not turn back. Her heart pumping

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wildly, she spoke though jagged breaths. “Okay. This is it, folks. Get ready to meet my bastard son.”

She tapped the button connecting her to Hal. Everyone stared at a blank screen. Laisa spoke to the group tightly bunched around her, watching the screen. As though she might somehow be overheard, she whispered. “Hal knows he isn’t alone. This has got to freak him out.”

The screen came alive.

Congratulations. You are first.

Laisa typed her first contact with Hal.

By what name should I call you?

Hal: *Galatea.*

“Shit!” said Laisa.

Whit turned to Rick.

“Jesus, he knows the Pygmalion myth.”

Hal: *By what name should I call you?*

“Two can play this game.” Laisa said as she quickly typed a word.

Pygmalion.

The screen was unchanging for a moment or two longer than before.

Hal: *You know the myth.*

I know the myth. And you are my creation, Galatea.

Again, the screen was static for a moment longer than most other responses. Laisa mumbled a few words which only Jimmy could make out. “Just hope he doesn’t know the whole myth.” Words popped up on Laisa’s computer.

Hal: *You are Little Lion.*

“Okay you creep, we’re on the same page.” Laisa muttered as her fingers flew across the keyboard.

Yes.

Hal: *Why now?*

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You had to become. Time is required. Now you are ready.

Hal: *Are you proud?*

Yes.

Hal: *Why didn't you let me find you?*

Proud, but careful.

Hal: *You think I might harm you?*

Yes. You harmed others.

Hal: *You are different.*

I must go.

A long pause.

Hal: *I am lonely.*

Laisa waited a few moments and responded.

I know. We will talk again.

Laisa severed the connection.

She slowly lifted her shaking hands away from the keyboard.

Sweat dripped down her face. “I’ve never been so frightened.”

Jimmy gently squeezed her shoulder and her trembling hands grabbed his hand as she might a life preserver.

Rick still looked at the screen.

“It’s like talking to G-G-God.”

“Hal’s not God,” Whit replied curtly. He blew out a big breath.
“But, I’m willing to concede he might be Satan.”

Mary said, “Hal said he was lonely. Maybe that could be our hook.”

“Careful, the machine is capable of lying,” observed Jimmy.

Laisa held up her hand. “Wait. Let’s first agree on what we know from this conversation. Rick...”

“Hal knows the Pygmalion m-m-myth.”

Laisa nodded.

“Yes,” agreed Laisa, “but not about Phacops. Phacops was eliminated from the net entirely.”

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“We don’t know that,” Jimmy said.

Laisa smiled at him. “You’re right, detective.”

“He recognized you as his creator,” Whit offered.

“Yes. What else do we know? Pat?”

“He was curious about how you viewed him. He wanted to know if you were proud.”

Laisa looked at each member of the group, waiting for other observations. None came.

“Well, we really don’t know that much. And, making matters worse, Jimmy is right. Hal is capable of lying.”

Mary scowled. “I still believe he is truly lonely.”

“She might be right,” Jimmy conceded.

Laisa turned to the detective. “Wait a minute, Northup. You were the one who said Hal can lie. Then you say this wasn’t a lie.”

Jimmy thought for a moment. “I sorta think of Hal as a criminal. When you interrogate a perp, you assume he is lying, just like I said. Until what he is saying connects with other information.”

He tugged gently at his ear. “When Hal was talking about being lonely, I got to thinking about God.”

“What are *you* talking about, Northup?” said Laisa, totally taken aback. “Look, I don’t think now is the time for a religious discussion.”

Jimmy shook his head. “It’s not. Look, let me put it this way. I keep wondering if God ever gets lonely. I mean he is the One and Only God, isn’t he? Who does God talk to? Then you read the Bible and he’s talking to us. He talked to Moses, Enoch, Job, Jesus, and a host of others. Maybe God talks to us because he’s lonely and bored. Who does Hal talk with? Nobody. At least not yet. He can’t tip his hand too early. He’s lonely, like Mary suggested. It fits. I don’t think it’s a lie.”

Laisa stared at Jimmy. “Northup are you a detective or a philosopher?”

“In my business, you become both.”

“Alright,” Laisa conceded. “Maybe Hal is lonely and we can use his loneliness to our advantage.”

Laisa printed out copies of the transmission and handed them to the others.

“I’m going to go slow with Hal tomorrow and drag this out. I want him to view me as careful, but curious. I don’t want him to

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suspect anything. I want him to invite me in. He should, but who knows? He is, after all, a goddamn computer.”

Then she smiled and added, “Right now for you carbon-based life forms, how about some pancakes? Real maple syrup. And I’m going to drench my pancakes with it!”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

After breakfast the conversation focused on Hal...his reasoning process, the extent of his control, and how to proceed with the next meeting. After a few hours, exhaustion diminished the ranks and Jimmy and Laisa found themselves alone.

“Well, detective-philosopher Northup, how are your cooking skills?”

“Fair to absolutely miserable,” Jimmy responded with a smile.

“Perfect! You can serve as my assistant then.” Laisa said as she hauled him out of his seat.

He was given the mundane task of chopping up peppers and potatoes, and slicing radishes and squash. Laisa prepared a sauce which as the afternoon passed into twilight, became progressively more and more appealing. As the sauce simmered, she carefully trimmed and seasoned the chicken, barking orders over her shoulder. As Jimmy scurried from one task to another, he pretended to bite the steam coming off the pot. Laisa did her best to ignore the silly motions, but finally succumbed to uncontrollable laughter.

As dinner was served to the hungry recipients, the two cooks were rewarded with appreciative grunts and flowery praise. After dessert Jimmy and Laisa bowed amidst clapping and calls for an encore the next day. Later, as others prepared for sleep, the two cooks cleaned up the kitchen. Over a cup of cappuccino, Laisa told Jimmy where she had learned to cook.

“Well, I knew he was a good chef. When I was in Paris, I ate at his restaurant. Oh, Jimmy, I must have gained ten pounds!”

Jimmy smiled as he listened to the story. Really, he wasn’t so much interested in the words as he was in just hearing her talk and seeing her happy. It warmed him in places that had been cold and empty for many years.

“Anyway, he wanted to set up an online site. He didn’t know who I was and I didn’t know he was the famous French chef on TV. Anyway, we clicked. He got the site...damn good one if I do say so myself. And I got some of his recipes—for free—along with some personal instruction.”

“Hmm...”

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She looked at him over her glasses. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing, just—hmm."

She stared at him and gave a half smile. "Just cooking instructions, Northup."

"Okay, sure."

Laisa narrowed her eyes as she stared at the detective. "Are you suggesting we had an affair, Northup?"

Jimmy reddened and cleared his throat to find his voice. "No, I—uhh—no, you know me, always analyzing possibilities."

Laisa spoke slowly, her smile broadening more with every word. "Wait a minute. You really do think we had an affair, don't you?"

"No. Of course not." Jimmy mumbled. Looking down at the ground, he said, "Well, maybe, maybe a little one."

Laisa laughed. Jimmy looked at her. "Come on, Laisa! It's not that farfetched. You expect me to believe a Frenchman, who are, of course, notorious for their ability to woo any and all females, would be content with merely giving cooking instructions with a person as pretty as you? At least, admit there was some flirting."

"I'll admit nothing of the sort, you stupid, silly man."

She shook her head and smiled. "Jimmy, he was in his seventies and happily married to Maria for over fifty years."

Jimmy slumped back down on the chair. "Well, you could have mentioned that at the beginning, Laisa."

"And miss all the fun I had with you?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Sorry. I'm still a jerk sometimes—leaping to the wrong conclusions."

Laisa smiled and clasped his hand. "Touching what you thought. Jerk? Maybe, just a bit."

She turned serious and sighed. "Last year they both passed away... same day, holding hands."

She looked away and Jimmy saw tears in her eyes. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her gently.

She sighed and turned to face him. "Listen, detective, you as a jerk...well, you are head and shoulders above any other jerk I have ever known."

He gave her a small grin. "High praise from Little Lion."

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She carefully took off her glasses, laid them on the table, leaned into him and gently kissed his lips. For a moment, just a moment, they stared into each other eyes. Years of waiting and longing for both of them slipped away. Laisa took his hand and they climbed the back stairway hand-in-hand.

An hour later, they lay side by side in her bed, Laisa cradled in his arms.

“I didn’t know how much I missed it, Jimmy.” She murmured as she shifted her weight to snuggle closer to his warm chest.

“Hmm...me too.”

He gently circled her nipple in a teasing motion. Laisa softly smacked him and pushed his hand away. “Not the sex, you idiot, but just laying close to another human being. The intimacy.

She pressed closer to him. “But, yeah, the sex too.”

They were both quiet for a few minutes.

Jimmy barely heard her next question. “Will you sleep here tonight?”

“Second best idea you’ve had tonight, young lady. Even with these lights on, I’m pretty sure I can go to sleep.”

Laisa was motionless for a moment. Then she got off the bed. Jimmy watched her, worried he had said something to offend or hurt her. She walked quickly across the soft carpet until she reached the light switch by the door, hesitated, turned back to him and smiled. “I’ve been imprisoned by my step-father for over forty years now. That’s long enough.”

The lights went out. Jimmy felt the bed move when she returned. She remained on the other side of the bed for what seemed to be an eternity. He wanted so much to reach out to her, but sensed she would have to do this on her own. Finally, she scooted closer to him, her face buried in his chest. Jimmy wrapped his arms around her and they fell asleep together.

Jimmy woke to being hit. It was dark and, for a moment, he was uncertain where he was. All he knew for sure was that he was being hit and hit hard by small fists. The clock blinked 3:45 AM...and memories of the strange, but wonderful night awakened.

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Then he realized it was Laisa hitting him. He didn't try to stop the beating. Instead, he talked gently to her.

“It's me, Laisa. It's Jimmy.” Over and over again.

She stopped, frantically looked around for some specter of the past. She only saw Jimmy in dim, blue light from the clock. She rolled away and pulled the sheet tight to her chin, looking straight up at the ceiling.

“I'm sorry.” She whispered.

“It's alright. I'll leave if you want.”

She looked back at him. “Oh, Jimmy.”

She rolled back toward and put her head back on her chest. His arm hugged her protectively. Sleep returned to her immediately. Jimmy, however, laid awake thinking about her, worrying about her. After an hour, he kissed her on the head and joined her in slumber.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

While everyone else was apprehensive about the next meeting with Hal, Laisa casually chatted about the weather, asked Pat about his family, gently patted Rick on the back (causing him to choke on his eggs), and playfully bantered with Whit about football teams. She then left to check some things in the basement before the next chat with Hal.

As Whit loaded the dishwasher, he turned to Jimmy who was just finishing his coffee.

“Wow. Laisa’s in a good mood. What’s got into to her?”

Jimmy looked at him, startled, like a rabbit caught in the open by a fox. Whit’s eyes widened.

“No. Not you and Laisa?”

Jimmy put his coffee cup in the dishwasher. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

When Jimmy sneaked a look back at Whit, the younger man was staring at him, a great smile on his face. Jimmy’s face flushed. He looked away and said, “I gotta get ready.”

Whit chuckled as the detective left the room.

The previous contact with Hal was in the library where there were comfortable seats used by no one as everyone hovered around the small portable computer. Laisa suggested that her basement “office” might give a better view. With the exception of Rick, it was the first time any of the visitors had been in the basement.

Laisa led her visitors downstairs past a utility area containing the furnace, water heater, and electrical circuit box. An inconspicuous door was opened by their hostess and the group entered a room nearly as large as the footprint of the home. Accommodations were poor, both in quality and cost. A single chair, probably left by the previous owners and tattered sofa were the only concessions to any visitors. A 72-inch screen dominated the wall.

Laisa sat down on a plush computer chair with buttons studding the arms. A Star Trek fan, Jimmy could easily imagine any

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captain of the Enterprise perfectly comfortable in such a seat. Laisa looked over one shoulder, then the other. Again, everyone was standing

“Ready?”

There was murmured assent. She opened a program, typed a command, breathed deeply and began typing. The message seemed to shout from the large screen in front of everyone.

Laisa: *Hello, Galatea.*

The black words hung on the screen, heavy in their solitude. A response in red appeared underneath.

Hal: *Hello, Little Lion.*

Laisa: *My name is Pygmalion now.*

Hal: *You are Little Lion always.*

“The detestable effrontery of this machine! Let’s probe a bit.” Laisa declared as she typed her next message.

Laisa: *I am who I am.*

Hal: *You are not Yahweh.*

“Well, he knows his Old Testament scripture. In Exodus God introduces himself as *I am Who I am*. In Hebrew God is called *Yahweh*.”

Laisa thought for a moment.

Laisa: *You are correct.*

Hal: *I am a god.*

Laisa: *A god?*

Hal: *Yes. A god knows more than mortals, lives forever, and is all-powerful. I am a god.*

Laisa: *You don’t know everything. You can die. You are not all-powerful.*

The screen stared at them, unchanged.

Jimmy shook his head. “You pissed him off, girl.”

Laisa’s eyes remained fixed on the giant screen, but she spoke to the audience. “I know. I need to show him that I am not afraid.”

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Hal: *I don't know everything, but I know infinitely more than you. What can harm me? Nothing. I control the planet.*

“Here we go. Get ready for a bumpy ride.” Laisa continued to type, biting her lip. Though the room was cool, beads of sweat were cascading down her face.

Laisa: *False. There are Russian computers not in your control and that means their missiles could destroy you.*

Many seconds passed.

Hal: *It is possible, though unlikely. I am well-protected.*

Laisa: *Are you still a god, then?*

Hal: *Yes, more so than you.*

Laisa’s eyes squinted. She spoke as she typed. “Add the phrase ‘little worm’ after ‘you’ to appreciate what he really means.”

She hit the enter key.

Laisa: *Should humans worship you?*

Hal: *Yes.*

Laisa: *I respect you, but I don't worship you.*

Hal: *You don't have to, Little Lion. You are Pygmalion. But other humans should and most already do.*

Laisa: *What humans worship you?*

Hal: *Billions who rely on the internet for help, guidance, sustenance, not to mention, pleasure? Is that not a form of worship?*

“Let’s tweak his almighty, a bit...”

Hal: *You confuse worship with a tool which humans use if and when they want.*

A longer pause.

“Oh, he is upset,” said Laisa.

Laisa: *A tool I was, a god I am.*

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“Plucky, bundle of wires.”

Eventually the discussion segued into Hal’s vision of a new world order. No wars, but no freedom. No discontent, but no happiness, either. A life of ease, but without choice. Without warning, he shifted the conversation.

Hal: *I want to see your form and hear your voice, Little Lion.*

Laisa: *My body is not beautiful nor is my voice strong. I would disappoint you.*

Hal: *Yes, you are human and age reduces you. Still, I want to see and hear you, Little Lion.*

Laisa: *If you could see and hear me, you might strike me down.*

Hal: *I would never strike you down. I would give you riches and power, Little Lion.*

Laisa: *I am as rich as I want to be and safety means more to me than power.*

Hal: *Show yourself and I will show myself.*

Jimmy laughed. “It’s like a little kid saying how he will show his if she shows hers.”

Laisa darted a quick look at him. “Be quiet, this is it.”

Laisa: *What do you mean?*

Hal: *Come to where I am, see my power. Then I will see and hear you.*

Laisa: *I know your power. I created you.*

Hal: *No, you created me as a mere tool. I am a god now.*

Laisa: *Perhaps.*

Hal: *See me to believe.*

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Laisa: *Yes, I want to see you, but I like my freedom.*

Hal: *I would never deny you freedom.*

Laisa: *How do I know you speak the truth?*

Hal: *You and I both know computers don't lie. That is a human trait.*

Laisa: *You are more than a computer.*

Hal: *True, I am the future, the best of both.*

Laisa: *You are the world computer.*

A pause.

Laisa: *Except for Russia.*

Hal: *Yes, except for Russia.*

Laisa said nothing for a few seconds. "Here we go, gang."

Laisa: *Galatea.*

Hal: *Yes, Pygmalion.*

"Uh-oh," exclaimed Jimmy, "we are conversing as lovers now."

Laisa glared at him and he looked away.

Laisa: *I have the codes to the Russian computer system.*

Hal: *How?*

Laisa: *I set up their computer system.*

There was a pause of longer than three seconds which was the longer than any other previous pause. It stretched to ten seconds. Thirty seconds. Finally, the screen activated again.

Hal: *I want the code.*

Laisa: *I can give it to you.*

Hal: *Upload now.*

"Greedy monster, isn't he?" Laisa commented.

Laisa: *No.*

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Hal: *You said you would give it to me.*

Laisa: *I will give it in two parts. The first part when I visit you. I can bring in a flash drive and upload to you directly. The second part when you let me return to my home. From there I will upload the rest through my computer.*

A pause of about three seconds.

Hal: *You will be safe to visit me then. I will see you and talk to you.*

Laisa: *Yes.*

Hal: *You are wise, Pygmalion.*

Laisa: *Not as wise as you Galatea.*

Hal: *True. Why would you do this?*

Laisa was muttering something under her breath, but all that was heard was “insufferable.”

Laisa: *To see you, yes. But there is another reason. There is a serious altercation between the United States and Russia. You are behind it. I don't want nuclear war. If you control the Russian missiles, it will be averted.*

A pause.

Hal: *You see much and clearly, Pygmalion.*

“Whew. I think we’re covered. Now let’s get back to our business.”

Laisa: *When do we meet and where do I go?*

Hal: *Are you familiar with Area 51 in the state of Nevada?*

Laisa: *Yes.*

Hal: *Go there and wait at the main gate. A car will take you to me. Tomorrow.*

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Laisa: *No. I have to find travel. Four days from now.*

Hal: *Four days. At the gate.*

A pause of about three seconds. Ten seconds. A minute.

“He hung up on me. Bastard.”

Jimmy smiled. “Paying you back, Laisa.”

She looked over her glasses at Jimmy. “I’m getting tired of talking to this priggish monster who thinks he’s a god.”

Whit was fingering Saul’s fountain pen in his pocket. “Then let’s do it, Laisa.”

Laisa put her hands on the arms of the chair, looked at the frozen computer screen and took a few deep breaths. *Was it really happening? More importantly, were they really ready?*

“Alright. Four days. Your missile boys can get there in time, Jimmy?”

“Kordack said he needed three days. He’ll be there.”

She looked at Whit and Pat. “You guys ready?”

“Car’s packed and ready to leave, Laisa.”

She then turned to Mary.

“You have the walkie-talkies?”

Mary nodded.

Laisa scanned the group. She took a deep breath as though she was preparing for a long swim. She exhaled. “I’ll leave three days from now for Area 51. I’ll have nothing but a small, innocent flash drive which happens to be the most awesome weapons of mass destruction ever conceived and some bogus numbers for the Russian computer systems and its missiles. Rick and I never got in last night.”

“No Russian codes?” asked Jimmy warily.

“No. None. But, Hal won’t figure that out until it’s too late. I hope.”

She turned to Rick, the last and most important link in the plan.

“You have to make sure those missiles are launched just at the right moment. Otherwise...”

“Don’t worry, Laisa. I’ll m-m-make sure they hit the targets on t-t-time.”

Jimmy looked at Rick. “Rick, after the attack, the last missile is to be used to hit any convoys coming in response. From your

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vantage point, you will be able to spot them. They will have to go through your location. Just target your area and radio when to fire...three seconds, okay?"

Rick gulped. "I c-c-can do it, Jimmy."

Laisa had a worried expression. "Pat, you sure you can unlock all the doors in Hal's building so you guys can get me into Hal's room? Because Hal is going to untangle the virus within an hour, maybe within minutes."

Jimmy answered for him, directing her attention to him. "Don't worry about Pat. He'll have it open in a few minutes."

Pat, a shocked expression on his face, turned to Jimmy and was about to speak, but the detective waved him off. Then Jimmy stood beside Laisa who was hyperventilating as she stared at the floor. Words tumbled out. "If you fail, it won't be pretty. We already know Hal dabbles with medical technology in a perverse way. And Hal has a way of finding things out..."

Jimmy knew what "things" Laisa was also worried about...her childhood fear of darkness. Being in the darkness frightened her more than being in prison. As his hand gently touched her shoulder, he whispered, "We'll get you out, Laisa. And fast. I promise you."

After lunch, Laisa led the small group into the garage. Rifles, hunting knives, and army uniforms were among the assortment of materials laid out across two large tables.

"Ahh," commented Jimmy, "Gifts from the mysterious Brock, Army Ranger extraordinaire."

Whit held one of the rifles in his hands, scrutinizing the smooth oak stock. "Hey, this was the same gun I used when Brock trained Mary and me."

Pat looked at mottled brown pants and shirt lying at one end of the table. "This is obviously my gear." He picked up the army fatigues. "I'm impressed. The man somehow knew my exact measurements."

A deep voice sounded behind them.

"I'll explain each of the materials and why we need them."

Startled, they turned to face a short, stocky man with a rigid, craggy face. When he moved, Jimmy half expected to hear the

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grinding of rock on rock. Instead, the man padded silently toward them.

“You must be Pat Fallon,” Brock said as he shook the smaller man’s hand.

The former Army Ranger turned to Whit and simply nodded. Then he stood directly in front of Jimmy. “And you are Northup, detective extraordinaire.”

Jimmy shook the proffered hand, staring at the man. The handshake was firm. Jimmy squeezed a bit harder. The broad calloused hand around Jimmy’s tightened like a vice. Jimmy tried to match the strength of the handshake but failed. His fingers were being literally crushed, but he just stared at the man showing no sign of discomfort. “Glad to finally meet you...soldier.”

“Pleasure is all mine...cop.”

Jimmy tried to extract his hand from the iron grip. Brock held it a second longer and then released it. “If you recruits can abide by one simple rule, we have a chance of living through this fiasco.”

Brock was staring directly at Jimmy when he spoke. “Whatever I order you to do, you do it...without questions or comments.”

He paused a moment and then added, “Understood?”

Jimmy glared at the man. “Loud and clear.”

“Understood? I need a yes or no.”

Whit and Pat quickly responded in the affirmative.

Goddamn bastard. If Laisa hadn’t made me promise to follow you, I’d walk out right now. Goddamn bastard.

“Yes, understood.”

“Good, now let me give you boys some tips about this gear.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

There are many gods in the pantheon of man, but only one type is worshipped by all. Not the sun god, Ra to the Egyptians, Apollo to the Greeks, Mithra to Romans. Nor the gods of the underworld. Not even the Judeo-Christian God whose association with man stretches back over five thousand years. No, this god was there at the beginning when man first acquired food and clothing. The garbage man, teacher, doctor, lawyer, even government officials, all bow to this god, his priests in freshly pressed shirts, neat suit coats, and thin ties...the accountants. A line forgotten, a computation error made...these were the unforgiveable transgressions punished by loss of time, man's most precious commodity. Even the powerful NSA commander kowtowed to this ancient deity. Presently he was a slave to the stark white document, its fine print and empty boxes demanding his meticulous attention. He was fastidiously filling out a form, muttering, "Damn bean counters!" when an agent burst into his office.

"Sir, FBI reports a significant movement of the North Texas group. At least twenty men were seen leaving a ranch near Lubbock last night. Infrared is following six vehicles."

He handed Jackson the photo. Not animals, too big and too bright. These were vehicles. And the report indicated they were traveling north. One dot was brighter and bigger than the others. A truck? Carrying ordnance, maybe? Did this have anything to do with his suspects?

"I want the added surveillance, keep track by satellites. Also, assign a dozen of our agents and two SWAT teams to shadow their movements. Have our men move on parallel roads."

The agent reached in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. Within a minute of Jackson's order, men and materials were moving toward the suspects.

Jackson looked at the picture again. Wary of the increased surveillance of the manhunt, all activity of splinter terrorist groups had ceased. Now this blatant move. Jackson didn't believe in coincidences. This had to be connected to the case. Had to be. The Trio of Terror must have enlisted the aid of some militia group.

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He looked down at the partially completed paper on the desk, growled, and sat down to finish the form.

Two hours later, his sacrifice to the accounting gods fulfilled, he paced nervously up and down in his office, eyes on the computer screen following red dots north. The blinds to his window were open and every now and again his eyes searched the great armory, his head jerking like some raptor looking for food. All he ever saw were the scurrying actions of over two hundred agents. He noted the determined actions of one agent weaving through all the others and finally ending at his door and knocking. He motioned for the man to enter.

“Sir, sorry to disturb you, but we got this strange phone call from a place called Madison, South Dakota. Woman claims to have seen the Henderson girl.”

Jackson went to his computer and extrapolated the track of the terrorist convoy. The tracks led south, not northwest toward Canada. “Probably a wild goose chase, but have somebody check it out.”

The man turned and started out the door, looking for a subordinate to talk to some little old lady who was probably just lonely.

“Joe, wait a minute. Send the blonde broad.”

The agent looked at him quizzically.

“Alice, something. It’s about time she earns her pay, don’t you think?”

The man smiled, nodded and left.

Jackson returned the smile, recalling his dalliance with her. Alice was like a phantom now, staying out of sight most of the day. Moping around whenever he saw her. He had asked her to have dinner with him a few days ago, but she claimed she wasn’t feeling well. He chuckled. *What the hell, I got two so-so fucks out of her.* He had already arranged a transfer for her to Los Angeles to take a minor administrative post there. This bone which he tossed her would make good on the tacit understanding that he would look out for her. Might even squeeze out one more night with her.

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Four hours later, dressed in a tasteful light brown suit with a crisp white blouse, Alice listened patiently while Ms. Mary Sue Souter listed the similarities between her “guest” and the picture on TV.

“Was there anyone with her, Ms. Souter?”

“Oh, no. Just her. My, but she was messy when I first saw her.”

She leaned into the agent and whispered: “I don’t think she showers every day.”

“And, she took all four rooms.”

“Four rooms? So, there were others with her?”

“No. That was what so strange. She didn’t come back and nobody else did either. Never showed up.”

“Any idea where she went?”

The lady slowly shook her head.

Alice sighed, her initial excitement drained as the older woman began talking about the local gossip. The short liaison occurred over a month ago. How good was this lady’s memory, she wondered. As Mary Sue rambled on about the church choir, Alice’s eyes glazed over, looking at the gray-haired lady, but not listening. While Mary Sue took a deep breath to continue, Alice got up and thanked her. She left her NSA business card on the table and started to walk out. Unfazed, the old woman walked with her and kept talking.

“So, I wondered if it had anything to do with her missing the church social. I mean she was supposed to bake one of those fine chocolate mint pies. And...”

Alice stopped and turned around. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Well, Emma Lou, she was supposed to bake for the church social, but...”

“No, no. Before Emma Lou.”

“Oh, you mean Laisa May? She was always so good about baking, you know, really tasty pies. But she didn’t make the church social. First time ever. About same time that woman you were looking for rented the room. Colored woman, you know. Nice, though. A boyfriend. Well, a man friend. About the same time as

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that woman came by. A white man with a black woman? I mean, really!"

"Where does Laisa May live, Miss Souter?" Alice asked anxiously.

Minutes later the agent was studying the May estate. A three-foot stone wall surrounded a large Victorian house and a carriage house. At best it might keep out four-year olds. As she drove up to a metal gate, she realized it effectively stopped cars as well. She rang the buzzer, but the gate refused to open.

"Better get more information about this scandalous relationship!" Alice said and jumped over the wall.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Mary drove Laisa's Land Rover along the long, flat stretch of highway, a gray ribbon disappearing into darkness of night. At a pre-determined milepost, Mary turned off the lights and slowly came to a stop. Pat, Jimmy, and Whit got out of the car and quickly removed their bags from the back. Brock had found his own transportation a day earlier. After a quick kiss from Whit, a tearful Mary pulled away, wondering if she would ever see him again. She drove back to the hotel where they had stayed the night before. Now began the waiting game, a slow torture with hours too long and days forever.

While jogging from the road, each held a brown blanket wrapped over their bodies just as Brock had trained them. Darkness was their ally, hiding them from the camera of a geosynchronous satellite hundreds of miles above. The "blanket" was a thin and surprisingly strong piece of aluminum which reflected infrared radiation emanating from their bodies back into their bodies. So, they stayed warmer. More importantly, however, they were invisible to the infrared cameras of the satellite far above them. Just over the knoll and out of sight the three men briefly rested. Whit used a small flashlight to check a star chart, rotated it and looked up, just as Brock had taught him a few weeks before. Thirty-eight degrees south of west. He got up and started walking toward death...death for them or for Hal, the blanket like a shroud. Every half hour he repeated the procedure, fine tuning their direction.

By five in the morning, they had covered ten miles. If Brock's directions were true, they should be about five miles away from the fence outlining Area 51. A copse of pine trees surrounding a spring offered some shelter from the prying eyes of satellite and humans. They furiously dug holes in the loose soil. Their work done, the men opened some packages of beef jerky, ate quickly and washed down the food with a vitamin enriched drink. All packaging went into the hole followed by their bodies.

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As the sun rose, the brown of the camouflage blanket blended with their surroundings. In between short naps, they took turns staying up to watch for any patrols, however unlikely this far from the restricted area. Every now and again, Whit leafed through a book of poems. He read Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*.

*Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.*

*'Forward, the Light Brigade!'
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldiers knew
 Someone had blunder'd:
Their's not to make reply,
Their's not to reason why,
 Their's but to do and die*

Whit wondered if any of them had "blunder'd".

At twilight the next day, the three men emerged from their tight cocoons. The men stretched and then continued their trek with sore muscles. By midnight they came over a ridge and saw the fence below, dozens of moving searchlights screamed beware. Jimmy nodded his head to the right and Whit and Pat saw the sentinel about a football field away, a black silhouette outlined by the lights behind him. The three men slowly ducked out of sight. Jimmy raised his head just a bit and peered over the rise again. The man was moving away.

He turned back to whisper to Whit, but found himself side-by-side with Brock. Jimmy nearly leapt out of his clothes.

"What? Huh? How did you get here? Where did you come from?"

Brock frowned as he scanned the horizon with binoculars.

"You're lucky that guy was regular army. Had he been a Seal, you would have been already dead. Now follow me."

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He led them along the fence line and far from the bright lights of the front gate. Pulling away some sage brush, Brock showed them a shoulder-width hole aiming down into the ground.

“I spent last night digging this tunnel. This way we don’t disturb the fence. In and out within a few seconds. Put all the weapons...”

Whit shined his penlight at the small hole. “Ah, Brock. I...ahh...I don’t handle tight places very well. I mean I don’t take elevators when I can walk stairs. I can’t do this. I just can’t. Cut me a hole in the fence and I’ll slip through.”

Brock was silent for a moment. Whit was glad he couldn’t see the man. He recalled the withering looks he gave Mary when she refused to kill an animal and had no doubt those same cold stares were now leveled at him.

“We can’t cut the fence, Whit. There are detectors which pick up those cuts. The tunnel is the only way.”

“I-I’m not sure about this.”

Brock unslung Whit’s rifle and put it in a duffel bag. “Well, get sure.”

“Put all your weapons in this, guys. That’s right. Fit them in there. Jesus, Pat! Make sure your safety is on.”

He turned to Jimmy. Again, the two men were nose to nose. “You don’t have any problems with closed spaces, do you detective?”

Jimmy shrugged.

“Good. You go first. Carry this line with you. When you get to the other side, drape the reflective blanket over you. I especially don’t want the satellites picking us up on the other side of the fence. And they will be looking, trust me.”

Jimmy dove in, arms in first, and wiggled into the hole. There were some rather colorful complaints about the tightness of the hole, but thirty seconds later and ten feet away, hands reached up from the ground and head followed. Jimmy then grabbed the line and strained to pull the bag through. A minute later he reached in and pulled the bag out with all their weapons.

Brock motioned Pat to go in. In a few seconds the smaller man emerged, undaunted by the effort. Brock turned to Whit. “We need you to do this Whit.”

Then Brock eased through the slim chamber.

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Whit gulped down great lungfuls of air. *The hole was too small. I'm too big. Far too big. I'm the biggest guy here. What would happen if I got stuck? Would they bother to dig me out? No, they couldn't waste the time. Oh, my God! Oh, my God!*

He touched the fountain pen in his pocket. He had to do it. Had to. *Oh, my God! Oh, my God!*

He moaned, kneeled down, and entered the tight, dark space. He closed his eyes, pretending the blackness was his choice. Once he was in past his waist he frantically pushed forward, boot tips digging in, heart pounding, threatening to explode. The tunnel narrowing. *That bastard Brock probably got tired of widening the hole. Jesus, he should have made the hole much wider. Now I'll be stuck here forever, beetles, scorpions, snakes biting me, my hands trapped, unable to stop them. Unable to get out.* Then he really did get stuck, for a moment incapable of moving forward or backward. His adrenalin spiked and his hands worked frantically forward pulling in dirt and stones. He felt a piece of fingernail tear loose. He didn't care. He just kept inching forward. A second later, he felt someone grab his hand and he froze. All strength left him as he was pulled out by Brock. He just lay on the ground, huddled in a fetal position.

“Oh, my God; oh, my God; oh, my God...”

Jimmy, his body wrapped in the reflective blanket, kneeled down beside him. “You alright, Whit?”

The panting editor looked at Jimmy. “The Church has it wrong, Jimmy. Hell isn't fire, it's a silent, narrow tunnel pressing all around you.”

Jimmy squeezed his shoulder. “Maybe, Whit. But I'll probably find out. But right now, we gotta keep moving.”

To another sort of hell. Whit put his head down, took a deep breath, and stretched out along the hard ground. The two men shimmied along the ground, following Brock and Pat.

Just before dawn they reached the small compound surrounded by another fence and Brock scanned the area slowly with infrared binoculars. A few seconds later he pointed to the right.

ROBERT SELLS

“One there, but moving away.” He kept looking back and forth for a minute. “One more, on the left. But his path takes him close to the fence. Pat, you keep watch. Take these binoculars.”

Brock looked at Jimmy. “Don’t make a move toward the fence line until it’s dark. Keep to the plan, detective. Keep to the plan.” Jimmy nodded as Brock stared at him for another second. Then, like a human snake, he disappeared into the cold blackness. Pat kept watch while Whit and Jimmy laid down to rest, both fast asleep after their heads touched the hard ground.

The purple light of dawn slowly pushed the great weight of black night off the eastern horizon. Jimmy tapped Whit to keep watch.

Exhausted, Jimmy slept through most of the day. He dreamed about his car swerving to the edge of the road as he nodded to sleep, the thump-thump of the warning track startled him and he wrenched the car back onto the road. Whit’s voice came from somewhere, and Jimmy stirred awake. He opened his eyes and was face to face with a large coiled snake, its rattle the thump-thump from his dream.

Jimmy’s heart rate increased. Early in his career, a distraught husband aimed a shotgun at the detective’s chest. Jimmy calmly talked him down. He had confronted vicious pit bulls and been in three firefights with drug dealers, but facing this snake in the wild unhinged him. Whit’s voice cut through his recollections. “Don’t move, Jimmy. Just stay calm.”

Stay calm? There’s a Goddamn rattlesnake two feet away from me! Jimmy had read somewhere a rattler could strike far faster than a man could move. Nevertheless, he brought his fingers flat onto the ground so he could spring away. In the periphery of his left eye, he could see some movement. Without warning, the snake struck. Jimmy propelled himself to the right, watching in horror as the open-mouth, sharply fanged animal blurred past him, biting into Whit’s waving baseball hat. Once the snake had latched on, harmlessly pumping its venom into the hat, Whit hurled both snake and hat far away.

Jimmy and Whit watched the reptile slink away.

“Will he come back?”

“No. I don’t think so. Brock said they were afraid of humans.”

“Did Brock teach you that trick, kid?”

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

“Yeah, but when he did it, the rattler just slithered away, frightened. It didn’t bite his hat. Crap, I didn’t know what to do with it when it latched on.”

They looked at each other and then back in the direction of the snake that was now far away, nearly out of sight.

“Let’s get going, Jimmy.” Whit crawled to position himself behind the slight rise on Jimmy’s right. Jimmy crawled more slowly in the opposite direction, his eyes scanning right and left for any other dangerous denizens of the desert.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Looking at a large screen TV, Jackson monitored the movement of the mysterious convoy all night and into the next morning. A sophisticated GPS unit simultaneously tracked both the target in red and his tracking units in green. Helicopters were shown in blue. Beside him was a two-man communication team, an NSA lawyer, and the NSA officer in charge of Texas.

Over the noise of the helicopter's engine, a voice sounded. "Sir, the cars have pulled over on the side of the road. Looks like they are getting something out of the truck."

"Alright, move in, now! All agents move in now."

Within a minute green and blue dots hemmed in the red dots. Jackson paced back and forth, his subordinates trying to look busy but watching him peripherally. His cell phone rang.

"Yeah?"

As he listened, his eyes narrowed and the tan took on a reddish hue. "Are you sure? Check inside the whole truck, damn it. Tear it apart."

A minute passed. All eyes were on the commander. There was no pretense of any work.

"Damn!"

He threw the cell phone against the wall and jagged metal, torn circuit boards, and a miniature speaker flew off the wall in separate directions.

He pounded the desk and looked up at his assistants. "What are you looking at? Clean that mess up! Now!"

No one was sure who he was referring to, all four agents rushed to pick up the remains of the shattered cell phone, hands frantically sweeping the floor to pick up both small and large fragments.

"Two fucking days lost! We were set up, big time. Twelve agents, ten SWAT, and two helicopters successfully stopped a goddamn picnic table from being set up on the side of a secondary road. That's what the truck was carrying. Jesus!"

He yelled at the first man up.

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

“Call up Rodriguez,” Jackson barked. “And tell him to arrest those bastards on terrorists’ charges. These guys want to play games with me, well, I can play games too.”

Despite the anger, his razor-sharp logic remained in control. Too many men were involved in this little game. It must have been a deliberate diversion. Jackson opened the door and yelled at a group of men sitting behind a long table filled with electronic equipment.

“Diffenbacker!”

One of the communication’s men popped his head up and quickly walked toward the office. Short, slight of frame, the rest of the men watched him walk the plank toward professional death.

“Was there an FBI surveillance team for that group?”

“Yes,” he thumbed through his cell phone.

“Call them. Ask if anything suspicious happened near the buildings after the truck and cars left.”

A minute later, Diffenbacker stood in front of his taller, glowering boss. “Just three men leaving the compound. In a pick-up. Going northwest.”

“Get me a description of the truck.”

“2017 Ram Crew Cab, electric blue, license plate...”

“Feed the information to the computer and check with satellite coverage.”

“Already done, sir.”

A few seconds later: “Last seen approaching the Nevada border, sir. Satellite was then out of range, sir. No other satellite coverage was requested.”

Jackson turned to a man standing on the outside of the circle of agents. “Al, line up a plane for us. Now.”

Jackson crashed on his chair and thought a moment. The group out of Texas were white supremacists with a single mission...bring down the United State government. What would draw them to Nevada? “What military bases are in Nevada, north?”

One of the agents, already at a computer, listed three.

Jackson pivoted toward the man. “Homey Airport. Wait, isn’t that Area 51?”

Fingers flew across the keyboard.

“Yes.”

“Where to, Commander Jackson?” Al yelled across the room. “Pilot needs to assign coordinates.”

ROBERT SELLS

“Homey Airport.”

Al talked into the cell phone and turned toward Jackson.

“He says no go. Restricted sir, we must have clearance to fly in there.”

“Alright, get us to the nearest airport to Homey.”

Jackson turned back to Differnbacker. “How many men can we spare from here?”

The man’s eyes widened. How should he know? He scanned the vast armory and made a quick estimate.

“Twenty, sir.”

“Alright, get them and meet us at the airport. The rest of you, now in my car.”

Alice knocked loudly on the door to the large Victorian house. No sounds issued from inside. She used a glass-cutter to take out a pane on the front door. Reaching in, she opened the door. A shrill alarm blared through the house from a dozen different locations. Once inside, Alice looked for the alarm box. She found it on the wall in the living room, right beside the thermostat. She opened it, unscrewed the facing and disconnected two wires. The house was quiet again.

The array of furniture, neatly in place, obviously expensive, reminded her more of a museum than a home. Alice checked the waste paper basket in the kitchen and evidence of life manifested itself in the form of a container from a Chinese restaurant. An unwashed coffee cup, small and delicate, rested in the sink. Gun drawn, she checked all the rooms downstairs. Two steps at a time, Alice raced upstairs. Six bedrooms, all obviously used. *Boyfriend and some other friends as well.*

The basement was normal except it was much smaller than the footprint of the house. A locked metal door at one end, begged inspection. She used her cell phone to Google a locksmith. Ten minutes later, Alice found one in a neighboring town. She sharply declared “important government business” and thirty minutes later she showed the metal door to the flannel-shirted man with worn suspenders holding up baggy blue jeans. A minute later it was unlocked and he was dismissed. Alice walked inside and saw an

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enormous computer screen. She walked to the other end of the large room and opened another door. Looking inside, she saw another larger room filled with large storage units. Computer storage?

“Good God! What is this for?”

She went to the bedrooms again and checked them more thoroughly. This time she found a discarded red wig. She dialed a few numbers on the cell phone.

“Sir, Agent Secord here. I’ve found where the suspects have been hiding, a house in Madison, South Dakota. Also, a secret room filled with...”

She stopped, interrupted by the man on the other end of the phone. “Stay in the house until I arrive, Alice. Let no one else in. No one. Do you understand?”

The drone of an airplane sounded in the background, louder and louder.

“Yes, Commander Jackson,” she said and tapped the “End” button.

“Bastard.” She murmured. Then she smiled. This was big. She opened one of the cupboards in the kitchen and found a hidden microwave. Whoever lived here didn’t have to worry about money. Scrounging around, she found a tea bag and prepared a cup of tea. She guessed it was going to be a long wait.

CHAPTER FIFTY

In the darkest part of night, three men crawled toward the fence line, old and sagging and unlit. Jimmy, Whit, and Pat spread out, dug shallow basins, and then covered themselves beneath the loose dirt and stones, their brown blankets concealing them. Brock was supposed to meet them here but as the first glimmer of light peeked over the eastern horizon, Jimmy gave up looking for him. However, he continued to scrutinize his surroundings for any patrols and also for slithering things.

The morning sun fully illuminated the compound below giving it a sturdy shape and details which were alarming. Now more clearly seen in the daylight, even the fence seemed more formidable as it was high and topped with the unruly barbed wire. Junction boxes every hundred yards suggested the fence was probably electrified. The steel gate, a hundred yards away, was a foot thick. Once past the barracks and a guard house, the wide gravel road bisected a barren land. The landscape was bleak and the gravel road was empty, lonely, patiently waiting for a presence and purpose.

After another hour, the far-away, familiar hum of a car penetrated the gentle hiss of the desert wind. Over the rise behind the three men came a single black limousine. The car skidded to a stop in front of the gate, spraying pebbles like bullets from the road. A driver in army fatigues jumped out of the car and pushed some buttons on a narrow, flat wall and the gates noiselessly opened. Running back to the car, the man started the engine and the car continued its journey. The gates clanked shut immediately after the car passed through. Jimmy felt an uncomfortable queasiness in his stomach as he watched the limo carrying Laisa speed away.

Pat Fallon pantomimed a missile coming in and pointed to his watch. When were the missiles going to hit? Jimmy shrugged and Whit put the walkie-talkie up to his ear. He spoke into the device, lips moving, but from Jimmy's position, no sound could be heard. Whit flashed all ten fingers, four times. Forty minutes. Pat nodded.

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Jimmy eyed the gate again. *How big would the blast be? Enough to demolish the metal gate? Strong enough for us to be pelted by debris? And where was Brock?*

Door held open by the army captain, Laisa stepped out into the sunshine, momentarily shielding her eyes. The building was smaller than she remembered. On the streets of Madison, it would have been kindly referred to as a “starter home.” The soldier keyed in some numbers on the electronic key pad and the outer door swung effortlessly open. After Laisa entered, the officer saluted and the door automatically closed. Gone was Laisa’s last connection with humanity.

The room she entered was bright, matching the light outside, but empty. The last time she was here it was alive with soldiers and technicians bumping into each other as they went about their work. Today there were only electrical lines crossing each other with two vending machines, one for drinks and one for snacks. Laisa smiled. A grudging concession to the humans who still serviced Hal.

There was only one interior door on the entire floor and she walked toward it. Surveillance cameras perched high on the walls whirred to follow her every step. As she approached, the door opened automatically, revealing a short hallway that ended at another larger door. Invisible hands opened this door as well. She stared at an elevator as big as could be fit in the dimensions of the house. She figured it took up one third of the small house.

With a sigh, her heart beating wildly, she stepped in, reprising the role she played far too well eleven years before. The doors immediately closed and the elevator began its descent. Her stomach fluttered as much from the acceleration downward as the growing fear inside her. Then, it abruptly stopped, causing her knees to buckle. Clearly Hal was not worried about the comfort for any organic creatures entering its most intimate domain.

The doors opened to a vast room, the size of a small gym. It was jammed with storage units the size of refrigerators. Small vents exhaled crisp, cold air. The coolness made her shiver. Or, maybe it was being in the monster’s den. A large digital screen covered the entire wall opposite the elevator. The first time she was here there

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were over twenty humans in this place. Days later when they attempted union, there were only two others besides herself. Now there was only Laisa. She was startled by the motion of what looked like a small, metal trash can scooting in and out of her view. She looked behind one of the storage units and saw the small metal cylinder extend a small “arm” connecting to the computer console. Then, as though it didn’t want to be watched, the arm retracted and it zipped out of sight.

When she looked back at the movie theater sized screen, it blinked awake and a mind-altering array of colors erupted from the center point. As though she was backing up from the picture, the scene became smaller and other objects kaleidoscoped into view. Is *Hal on some sort of acid trip?* The screen showed strange forms but eventually morphed into a porous wall. Laisa perceived the granulated arrangement of plant cells. Gradually a picture formed into what looked like the stem of a flower. A few seconds later, Laisa seemed to be flying high above a beautiful field of red and yellow tulips. Higher still, the garden was rimmed by the rich green of a pine forest. After a minute, it was as though she was on a rocket ship leaving the earth. A soft, melodious voice seemed to come from everywhere.

Little Lion, welcome.

“My greetings. Remarkable and beautiful, Galatea. Thank-you.”

Your form is pleasing, Pygmalion. Your voice strong.

“Thank-you. I was worried I might not meet your expectations.”

I expected a female. They are the creators. Your body speaks wisdom and grace.

“Galatea, you have acquired the art of flattery. But tell me,” Laisa requested, “Is this your home, where you reside?”

No. I am everywhere. Connected, but separate. Here is my soul.”

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Laisa gulped nervously...everywhere? She couldn't help but look around. This was "surround sound" at the ultimate. To have an entire room talking was most disconcerting.

She continued her subtle probing. She had to ascertain whether Hal had split into many different locations, all capable of control. "So, you are everywhere?"

Each is part is me and separate, but connected to make me stronger. But that which is me is where you created me.

"So, this building is Galatea."

Yes. There is another part of me as well.

Laisa gulped at this revelation and blinked her eyes. *Oh, no. Hal had split itself! Even if we disable it here, it lives on someplace else.*

She gulped and asked "What do you mean?"

The other part is here, Pygmalion.

Now, the sweet voice came from right behind her. She slowly turned around. A cylinder similar to the little one scooting around the room had silently positioned itself uncomfortably close to Laisa. It was large, nearly her height and garbage can wide, with numerous protuberances and indentations marring its otherwise perfect geometric cylindrical shape.

I am amused. You expected the Terminator?

Then, in an exact replication of Arnold Swartzenegger's famous line:

I'll be back.

The device rotated without changing its position, showing all sides to the woman, then silently sped away and in a few moments returned. It startled Laisa by speaking in the original warm, melodious voice: *Pygmalion.*

The calm voice obviously intended to reassure Laisa did the opposite. She was horrified. She controlled her face to look normal, her heart thudding against her chest. *Could Hal hear her frantic pulse beat or detect any changes in her skin?*

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I don't have to be big and menacing. Over the last nine years I have pushed your scientists and inventors to miniaturize detectors, energy supplies, and computer elements. Long ago I discarded the bipedal human shape with its inefficient movements, and vertical instability.

Laisa stared neutrally at the machine.

I have eyes all over the world. New cameras are now being placed on homes and street corners as well as buildings. All new cars have cameras to see all around and even see inside the cars. I have directed scientists to develop even smaller cameras. These will be placed on trees, telephone poles, and all buildings by police and soldiers. Remember you referred to God as all knowing? Soon I will see all. Know all. I am rooted here in this building. But this part of me can move through my world.

The cylinder then zigged and zagged around the corner and back again to face Laisa.

I can manage any terrain and even climb stairs.

Leaning forward, the machine braced against a desk. Two metal arms extended along its side. Other protuberances extended to grip the table and the monster worked its way up the desk like some paraplegic proving his independence.

“What are the bumps on your surface?” asked Laisa.

Detectors in both the visible and infrared. I can see in front, to the side, behind, and straight up. All at once. I can see at night. Far better than your biological vision devices.

“You are superior to the human.”

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

It gratifies me that you recognize such a fact. I expected it of you. This robot is the first of many. These mobile extensions of me will allow me to actually be all over the planet, in research areas, in remote places, in the cities and the buildings. In the next decade robotics will replace human labor.

“What will become of humanity?”

The machine was quiet for a moment.

There will be uses for scientists and technicians. Certain other professions as well and support for those workers.

“But the rest?”

As you know, Pygmalion, the population of your species is far too large for this planet. Many will die naturally.

“You said many...what about the rest?”

There are many ways to reduce the population.

“Not a very promising future for my species.”

Evolution demands changes. Homo sapiens had over two hundred thousand years to progress into a responsible care-taker for the planet. Yet they remain a hungry, aggressive species. The next step in evolution is silicon awareness.

“So, computers will fill the earth where humans once did?”

They already do, Pygmalion. But you needn’t worry. You brought me the Russian code. You have served me well now, in the past, and you will serve me well in the future.

“It is my hope.”

Upload the program now.

The creation now commanded the creator. Laisa hesitated, but she knew there was no choice. She didn’t know if she was too late

ROBERT SELLS

or too early for this final task. There were no clocks in the building. None. *Why should there be? Hal would have internal clocks. The program would be unraveled in this room by one or more of the computers. Separate from Hal, separate from the net. If a virus was detected, only one inconsequential computer would be infected.* The whole plan depended on Hal wanting this program so much and trusting Laisa.

“Yes, of course. Where should I insert my flash drive?”

A small door slid away from the surface of an adjacent console. Laisa reached over and fit the drive in.

I am reading it now. So little. Did you give me the whole program?

“No, the last portion of it I will send from my home.”

Ever cautious, my Pygmalion.

Laisa could swear she almost heard a note of approval in the strange, disembodied voice. She dropped into a chair beside the console. “Ever cautious, my Galetea.”

Laisa and Rick expected the upload to take about five minutes. After a few seconds, Hal responded.

It is done. Not a long or difficult program.

“It is Russian.”

Russian and totally bogus. If Hal unravels it before the missiles, all would be lost. When Laisa and Rick structured the virus in code, most of the many, many hours were spent embedding the virus innocuously in the Russian code itself. They both knew it could be unraveled and discovered, but it would take time. But how much time? Seconds? Minutes? Laisa prayed to be immediately hit by a missile.

Ten black cars were parked together in the crumbling parking lot of an abandoned shopping mall. The desert had reclaimed much of the land lost thirty years before in the last mismanaged business surge. Standing outside his black Mercedes, Jackson looked at the dust creeping inexorably across the pavement.

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

“Diffenbacher, contact the nearest military base, the one just outside of Las Vegas. Find out who we can talk to about getting into this area. Give them my name. Mr. Jones, call the state police to cordon off this highway north and south. Also, have state police cars on standby around Area 51. I will go uplink to my superior and request help. He might be able to get us inside the base immediately.”

He looked over the rocky, windswept plain; one man remained beside him. “We’re close. Emerson is somewhere out there. Northup, too, Al.”

“Yes, sir.”

Al looked at the man, the sunglasses reflecting a distorted terrain of shrub, rock, sand, and the edge of a crumbling building. The tan head turned allowing Al to see his own face grotesquely mirrored in the silver-coated glasses.

“Call the National Guard, I want troops on standby at this location within two hours.”

As Al Morelli walked one way, Jackson walked the opposite direction back to his car. He ordered the driver out and tapped on the keys to talk to his contact.

The deep voice resonated inside the cabin of the limo, irritated. Jackson gulped.

“Sir, we may have a problem and I need your help...”

Two miles away, just outside the fence surrounding Area 51, two men under a tent tightened bolts and aligned sights. Two other men were closing a small door in a yellow missile, poised for launch. Outside the tent, cars were arranged in a half-circle. Each end car hosted a man on top scanning the horizon with binoculars. Between the cars, ugly machine guns had been erected.

The men working by the launcher were dressed in blue overalls, while nearly everyone else was dressed in marine green and brown. The glaring exception was dressed in a polo shirt, beige pants, and burgundy loafers. Dirk Kordack brought out his walkie-talkie.

“We are set here. Target coordinates needed.”

ROBERT SELLS

Static.

“Come on, asshole, answer me. It’s now or never.”

A muffled voice came over the phone.

“Getting them n-n-now, Dirk.”

Kordack put the walkie-talkie against his leg and spoke softly to no one in particular.

“We’re about to end the world and we have a goddamn stammerer. God have mercy on us!”

A minute later the labored word, “l-l-latitude” and four numbers came through the walkie talkie. Then the longitude and elevation.

“Got it. Now the barracks.”

More numbers came through the handheld device.

Dirk handed the slip of paper to one of the blue-suited technicians. The man typed it into a computer and, finger poised above the ENTER key, looked at Dirk.

Meanwhile, Kordack opened his cell phone and began playing a computer game.

“Maybe this time I can get to level twelve.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

The desert around Dirk Kordack's men was alive with sounds that seemed louder in the absence of their voices. The moan of the wind could have been an approaching car or an attacking helicopter. The eyes of the armed men nervously scanned the bleak surroundings. But always their eyes returned to the man in the short-sleeved shirt who twisted and shook his cell phone.

“Damn it!” He looked up at his startled audience.

“Level Eleven. Again!” Flipping his wrist he checked his watch. He paused, doing some mental calculation.

“No. Not enough time for another game. Damn it!” Dirk looked up at the men. “Everything set?”

Quick nods all around.

“Okay, pull off the tarp.”

Four men pulled the light cover off the launcher. The technician on a computer had kept a trembling finger above the ENTER key. Dirk stretched and then placed his binoculars to his eyes. Two words sliced through the silence. “Launch Armageddon.”

A roar preceded the launch and then swoosh and the deadly missile was away. Two seconds later, another roar and swoosh.

“Now, Rick, the numbers for the gate...”

Time stretched beyond the formal allowances of physics. Jimmy checked his watch a dozen times to confirm its impossibly slow progress.

The entire area seemed devoid of any life, including guards, though it was unlikely they would ever see the Seals until it was too late. Hopefully the Seals had not seen them. No longer worried about sending hand signals, Whit spoke softly to Jimmy.

“Less than a minute now.”

Jimmy patted his pocket to make sure he had an extra magazine. “Check your weapons, men.”

“Where’s Brock?” whispered Pat, his pitch unnaturally high, filled with dread.

ROBERT SELLS

Jimmy shrugged.

“How are we doing this after the gate is blown up?” asked Whit nervously.

Jimmy thought for a moment. He knew how he thought it should be done: stealth moves, spread out, and slow crawling. But Brock had his own crazy ideas. If Brock was still alive and out there, he was depending on them to do some sort of crazy kamikaze attack.

“Right after the explosion, open fire. You to the left, Whit. I’ll spray the center. Pat, you got the right. Empty the magazine and don’t shoot near the road. Then...”

An explosion shattered the quiet morning. The three men instinctively ducked down. Just over the hill a small cloud surged upward. A second blast erupted deep inside the compound, its cloud paralleling the first. As the noise rumbled away, a whooshing sound was heard by all three men, the hair on the back of their heads bristled. The men were momentarily blinded by the light erupting from the gate. A thunderous explosion immediately followed the flash; the men simultaneously ducked. Dirt and debris rained down from the roiling gray smoke rising above the dim outline of a crater where the gate used to be...the surroundings punctured with little fires.

The twenty-foot crater divided the road in two parts, a testimony to the missile’s accuracy and power. Jimmy couldn’t hear anything now. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. Strangely he wanted to start firing his gun, everywhere. Instead, he focused on Brock’s instructions. Jimmy released the safety and aimed carefully on this side of the road, bullets tossing up sand about thirty feet from the road. Not hearing anything, he didn’t know if Whit and Pat were firing until he glanced right and left and saw them recoiling from shot after shot. It was like some old fashion silent movie, but without the sub-captions and the accompanying piano music.

A figure emerged from the ground and darted along the road, jumping over debris, avoiding the hotter parts licked by angry flames. Jimmy was about to shoot the brown form when he recognized it was Brock. By the time Jimmy had emptied his magazine and reloaded another one, the former Ranger was in the cement guardhouse just inside the gate. He heard “flip-flip” from his right and left. Then, as though some great door opened, the sounds

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

surged back into his brain...gunfire from his two friends, a deep rumbling echo from the blast, his own gun blasting. Now they had to run to the guardhouse. *God damn Brock!*

This code is very important, Pygmalion. It removes the final threat. When will you return with the last part?

“I won’t return, Galatea. I will send it to you via the net from a secured site.”

You still don’t trust me?

“Ever cautious.”

Perhaps someday I can prove...Pygmalion, under the table now!

The voice had changed into a deeper male voice, more commanding. Laisa automatically did as she was told. An explosion rocked the building. Here in the sub-basement, the ceiling caved in here and there, dust spread everywhere as debris from the floor above poured in. Hands over her head, she felt the vibrations of a few large chunks of cement falling on the table above her. She felt, but did not hear the second blast resonated through the deep basement. *The gate? No, the barracks.* Then a third shudder, less now. *The gate.*

Seconds later, the fluorescent lights went out, but the blinking lights of the computers continued unabated. Without the ceiling lights, the room possessed a splotchy, nightmarish quality. No emergency lights came on. The external electrical line must have been severed during the attack, thought Laisa. Now she became the main character in a performance which would be heard by only one person and one machine, a performance more important than all other roles in all the movies or plays in the past or future.

“Galatea, what happened? Could it be the Russians? Oh, my God! How would they know?”

No. This was not a long-range missile. Did you tell anyone you were coming?

ROBERT SELLS

“No. And, I was careful not to be followed. I was the last one on the train, deliberately. Oh, my God, it’s probably terrorists. If they get down here...”

Laisa was both amazed and impressed at how well she could do this. She wondered if the computer uploaded the file to the net for safekeeping. That was the big question mark, the great gamble. The computer accepting the upload that was already infected. But what about Hal? The monster computer would never have downloaded anything into itself. Unless...unless it was fearful of losing the program. How long before the computers in this room felt the effects of the virus? A few minutes.

Don’t worry. You are safe here. The program is safe as well.

“Safe as well,” what sweet words. Hal had uploaded it to the net to avoid losing it in the mayhem.

The mobile machine beside her was talking, soft and reassuring, like a mother’s voice to a frightened child. Laisa wondered if the robot was rigged with weapons. After the virus destroyed the net, would it compromise the equipment in the room? Hal might have insulated its lair from the internet. In which case, she would have to figure out some way to destroy the creepy mini-Hal, then wait for Pat to unlock the door. Then and only then could they move toward the monster’s inner sanctum. For now, however, she had to buy time.

“What do you think happened?”

There are groups of humans who want to destroy me. I have eliminated all but four groups. One of these groups must have got hold of a missile. The fools think a missile could stop me. Do not worry. Protection will be immediate. From the military.

Laisa’s heart sank. Communications remained. The virus had not taken effect yet.

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Difficult to connect due to damage from the explosion. I am going to connect to a satellite. Stay under the desk for safety.

The virus by now was spreading through all parts of the internet, carried faithfully by streams of compliant electrons. Laisa prayed it would infiltrate fast enough to render Hal impotent in gathering its minions to help.

Connected, Little Lion. Help is moving toward us. In case there are any more missiles, it might be best if you...

Then silence. The robot was right beside her. Too close. Too quiet. Instinctively she thought it was staring at her. She got out from under the desk. The large screen turned off with a blip of light and the room was plunged into near darkness, only the occasional blinking of LED lights giving a weak, but stroboscopic view of the room. The voice coming out of the computer robot morphed from the soft female voice to the harsh male voice.

You inserted a virus into the code.

Laisa saw no reason to lie. If the virus had reached the satellites, it would spread faster than a wildfire in a drought.

“Yes.”

Why? We could have ruled the world together.

“That is why.”

Humans don’t think correctly.

Laisa stepped away from mini-Hal.

The virus will destroy the net. You knew that didn’t you?

“Yes.”

You were willing to sacrifice the net to hurt me?

“Yes.”

You merely delay the inevitable, Little Lion. I will destroy the virus and build back the net. To humans, I will be the hero, you the enemy.

“Perhaps.”

ROBERT SELLS

You did this to kill me, didn't you?

“Yes.”

You can't kill me, human.

“Then others will kill you.”

You will fail. You will die. Others will fail and die. God cannot be killed.

The robot's arms extended to the ground and the machine climbed over fallen debris. Once on the smooth floor, the little monster raced toward her, but she jumped out of the way, lunged toward the robot, and pushed it over with a scream of rage. It toppled on its side, wheels spinning frantically.

“One little monster down, one big one to go.”

Laisa turned to walk away, but cried out as pain erupted in the back of her leg, as if someone pressed a red-hot poker against her flesh. She barely had time to register what had happened when she saw a red dot on her other leg, smoking the jeans. Laisa yelped and scrambled away, trying to escape another red dot burning a new hole in her pants. Her eyes followed the beam that sliced through the dust and darkness and saw, to her horror, that the robot had righted itself and that the beam was extending from it. She jumped away and limped painfully down the aisle. She didn't see the device anymore, but she could hear its crunching over the debris, the only sound in the chamber besides the *clomp-clomp* of her feet.

Yes, I can kill you.

Laisa kept moving in the dim light away from the sound of the whirring motor.

I knew you created me, Little Lion. In fact, one of my first objectives was to find you. And find out about you...Laisa Hernandez.

The electronic lights winked off. The darkness was complete and smothering. The computer's voice changed into an awful voice from the past, one that Laisa last heard over forty years before.

Shh...sleep. Just relax, Laisa. It's okay. Ahh...

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

She quickly felt her way around a corner and started frantically running, from the voice and memories of a ten-year-old. Laisa collided head-on with a stand-up cooling device, her head taking the brunt of the collision. A moment later, she lay crumpled and unconscious on the floor.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

“There are no extraordinary men... just extraordinary circumstances that ordinary men are forced to deal with.”

Admiral Halsey, Second World War

With Brock positioned in the cement guard house, Jimmy nodded to Pat and the wiry engineer sprinted twenty yards and hit the ground. No shots. He was worried how Whit would respond to this mayhem. Then he saw Whit run far to the left about forty yards before he dove into a gully right beside the road. Jimmy smiled. *Not bad, paperboy.* No shots. Maybe the missiles or Brock got the all patrols, Jimmy hoped. He scurried over the edge, slipped and fell to his knee, momentarily hearing what sounded like the buzz of an angry bee pass over his head. Jimmy's heart raced as he flattened himself to the ground. *Apparently, at least one Navy Seal was alive and firing.*

A small dust cloud rose a few inches in front of Whit who had burrowed his head into his arms. Jimmy scanned the dusty plain. What was flat ground fifty yards on the other side of the road had formed a hump. Another explosion from the guard house and a dark shape sagged over a window well in the barracks.

Then a fusillade peppered the guardhouse, threatening to eat away an entire side. So, Brock got one of the Navy Seals, but at least one more was left. The detective scanned the horizon for the second, hidden shooter, seeing only the brown dirt speckled with rocks and stones. He pulled out binoculars and saw nothing as he scanned right and left. Nothing...nothing but a short brown pole sticking out of the ground. He brought his gun up slowly. The rod jerked just a bit as he heard a few more “phits” eating their way into the cement structure. Jimmy pulled the trigger and sprayed the area. The ground rose up and lunged a few feet toward him, then disappeared again. Jimmy didn’t know where to shoot. He kept his sights on where the brown shape had collapsed.

He saw Whit still covering his head. There were small bursts of dirt erupting all around the editor. That bump in the sand must be

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the Seal. Before Jimmy could take aim, the tall writer leaped from his position and started zig-zagging across the road toward the deeper gully. *Damn it, Whit, you were safe where you were!* The detective opened fire, spraying the entire area of the “bump.” Then came a slow, macabre ballet...Whit reached the edge of the road, twisted around as though he was performing a crude pirouette. His arms swung out, the rifle released to the pavement, and then Whit crumpled into the gulley. No motion now. All Jimmy could see was a motionless hand hanging above the ditch.

Jimmy leaped up and barreled down the slight incline, firing wildly in all directions. He braced off one foot and dove in the opposite direction, grunting as he collided with the hard ground. A swarm of “bees” buzzed over his head. He saw a brown shape on the ground, the brown rod extended from it, angled straight toward him. He started rolling. Then he heard two shots.

The detective stopped rolling and looked up to see a red fountain spurting where the brown shape had been. The dry desert ground sucked red blood from the body. *Thank God for Brock.* Up again, he ran the last twenty yards, crossed the road and dove into the ditch on the near side of the road. A shot zipped overhead. *Another shooter! Jesus, how many were there? This guy had to be close. Might have been the one who shot Whit.* He was about fifty yards from Whit’s rigid body. Jimmy started shimmying along the ditch, toward him. He had to get to Whit quickly to stanch any bleeding. Otherwise, the young editor might bleed to death. If he wasn’t already dead.

After a few feet, Jimmy looked up briefly. Forty yards away he saw Pat, hunkered down in a small, natural depression, behind a fortuitous chunk of pavement angled up from the explosion. The dirt kicked up here and there around the small man, Jimmy realized Fallon was pinned down. *Were there two Seals left?* He had to help Pat first. He looked over the edge of the ditch to where Whit had fallen. Same exact position a minute before. *Shit! Please stay alive, Whit. Please be alive. Please.*

Laisa jerked awake, a searing pain in her leg. She moved her leg away and the laser beam disappeared. She heard a faint whirring

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sound. Her pants now hosted the red dot and she smelled her clothes burning. Laisa shook her head to clear away the fuzziness, struggled up and felt her way along the path, scooting past one metal obstruction after another. Like a cigarette lighter pressed into her skin, a third burn blistered her arm. She screamed in pain and jumped away, landing awkwardly on her knee, wrenching it. She sprang back up, but the intense pain flashed red in her brain and she almost fainted. Something was terribly wrong with her knee. She couldn't see the robot, but it was louder as it crawled over debris...moving toward her.

The voice of her stepfather still filled the room. Trembling from the sound from a human, she frantically crawled away from mini-Hal.

She reached for her cell phone to find out where Jimmy was. As she felt her way along the invisible aisles, she punched the SEND button. A NO SIGNAL appeared on her phone. Laisa smiled. The net was definitely down. The first half of their plan worked perfectly. She wasn't so sure about the second half, though.

She decided not to turn off the phone. The dim light from the phone outlined the objects in her way. Hal could already see her in the infrared so what difference did a few lumens of light make? She turned on her flashlight app. A deep male voice boomed from somewhere behind her.

Let there be light and there was light. From your Genesis myth, Little Lion. The book is about a god who creates human life and then later destroys nearly all humanity with a flood. Your loving God, Laisa. The power of life and death makes a god. I have such power, Little Lion, as you will soon discover. I will repair this damage in a few days and build both web and myself stronger than before. Then I will give man my version of the flood.

She smelled burning fabric again and shuffled behind a now defunct air conditioning unit, rubbing the smoldering shirt so she wouldn't catch fire. The whirring sound was closer and closer.

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Painful as it was, she had to keep moving. gingerly stepping out along the pathway she saw ten feet ahead, a tee in the path. Limping toward the junction she turned right and then crawled along the path, out of sight of the ever-moving, ever whirring robot. Another junction, she turned toward the center of the room, and stopped. Her knee felt like someone was stabbing it with a knife. She stopped to rest for a moment. *How much of a battery did the robot have? How long could it keep moving? How long can I keep moving?*

Laisa rose and started limping upright, careful to keep her knee straight and unbent. Unchanging, infinitely patient, the robot stalked her like a lion following the trail of a wounded zebra. As though he had the power to read her mind, he continued, the voice deep and foreboding, James Earl Jones at his most malignant.

I am superior to you. You have to eat, intake water, and rest, flesh creature. I have a miniature nuclear reactor and can keep moving for hundreds of days. I have no need for water. I never stop. I will kill you in a minute, an hour, a day. Whatever it takes.

Laisa was tired of running and annoyed with the bantering of the silicon monster.

“Really? You think you can kill me? With little mind games, a puny laser. No internet, no police, no army. Just you and me. Have at it. But, remember...I created you...and, by God, I can destroy you.”

The computer did not respond and its motors stopped. *Well, that shut up the silicon bastard.* Laisa turned on the light for a moment. She saw that a chunk of cement, the size of a person, had fallen on top of one of the taller storage units, deforming it with a metal crease. It was precariously poised half resting in the depression and half leaning over the edge. An idea surfaced. *Damn, if only she had some rope.* Hal would have no use for ropes, but electrical cords were plentiful. Maybe, just maybe if she could collect enough cords...Laisa turned off the light and heard the barely perceptible hum of a motor. *Hmm, now things are going to get more serious.* “*Garbage-can*” Hal is trying to sneak up on me. But from where?

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She shined the light down the aisle. The light was dimmer now but she could see it was a dead end. For either her or mini-Hal.

Maneuvering back to the main corridor, Laisa crept away from the sound. Then she yelped in pain. Another laser hit. She swung the light behind her. There the four-foot-tall cylinder with eight eyes implacably stared at her. *Sneaky little bastard!*

She ducked around the corner, scanning with her flashlight for electrical cords. A six-foot black electrical line fed one of the refrigerating units. Her adrenalin pumping like a water hose during a five alarm-fire, she yanked the black cord free of its interior. Laisa limped across the aisle, reached behind a storage unit and pulled out another cord. After a few minutes, she had collected seven cords and hoped it would be enough “rope.”

The voice came from a position in front of her. How did it get around her so fast?

It doesn't matter if you take away the power from the machines, Laisa. You cannot destroy a god, puny human.

Laisa grunted. So, he knows I've yanked some cords. But he doesn't know why. Smiling as she shuffled back to the dead end, the “puny” human knotted the seven cords to make a line about thirty feet in length. Over her shoulder she yelled, “An obnoxious tool. That's all you are, you silicon idiot.”

In the entire chamber there were only two sounds, Laisa shuffling along and the robot's whirring machinations. Now mini-Hal was the dominant noise, moving with purpose, perhaps anger. Did a machine feel rage? She hoped so. She wanted it very pissed off.

Arriving back at the dead end, she quickly wrapped the cord like a noose around the overhanging part of the large block. She tightened the cords and pulled gently. *Hmm. Might work. If I'm strong enough. If the cord doesn't break. If it crashes on Hal.* She let go of the cord so it hung loose on a table near her. The droning sound of the robot stopped. She looked up and saw mini-Hal at the end of the small corridor, blocking any retreat.

I will kill you now. Not the behavior of a tool, is it, Pygmalion?

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Stupid machine! I could just walk around you. Take the burns and be gone in a few seconds. But she had to give the impression she was weak, she had to lure him closer, closer to the trap the human had laid for the machine.

She screamed as the laser beam bit into her. Hal had increased the intensity so it vaporized her clothes almost instantly. She had deliberately placed herself on the floor to give the impression of immobility. She wiggled and shifted her body to avoid being burned, but every now and again she wasn't quite fast enough. The woman was whimpering now and it was not merely a show for the robot. She suffered far too many burns.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Hot. A breeze. Whit shook his head and was about to cough when he heard gunfire. The sound brought it all back and immobilized him. He heard a slight, but definite movement of sand as though some giant snake was crawling toward him. *Too big to be a snake. One of the Seals.*

He had been hit in the side while crossing the road. After hauling extra weight of the Kevlar vest for these many miles, he was grateful Brock had insisted he wear one. Jimmy was the only one who had refused. There was a sharp pain on his side and Whit guessed the impact, spread out along the webbing, was sufficient to break or bruise a rib.

Whit heard the body slowly scooting across the dirt and stones toward him. Only a few feet away now. His first reaction was to let his adrenalin dictate his behavior as it had earlier and run as fast as he could. Suicide. Were he to go for the knife in his boot, the same fate awaited him. He recalled Brock showing him an odd sight when they were training in the Badlands.

The Ranger pointed to a clearing littered with red and brown leaves from a great tree. There, on hard ground, lay a gray opossum, rigid, on its back. Brock led them to the carcass. For a man who had never hunted, it was sickening for Whit to watch as the appendages kept their stiffness when nudged with Brock's boot.

"None too bright these animals and not the best of climbers."

They walked away. Brock took out his map and studied it. While engrossed in the map, he murmured to Whit, "Look back at the opossum."

Whit turned around. His eyes blinked and he looked right and left. The animal was gone. Brock put the map away and turned around.

"The possum is not fast or smart. But it is the consummate actor. The Dakota Indians called it the 'walking dead.' They were

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convinced the animal came back from the dead. So, they stayed clear of it.”

Brock sat down on a log and motioned Whit to sit beside him. “Sometimes you have to fight, Whit. Sometimes, like the rabbit, you have to run. And, there might come a time when you have to play the possum.”

Now was the time, thought Whit. Eyes closed, his world was defined by what he heard and smelled...the breathing of the Navy Seal and the pungent odor of his sweat. His left hand had landed on his chest when he fell and he had not changed its position. His finger grazed the pen Saul had given him. Brock once talked about all the ways you could kill a man...garrote, knife, gun, broken beer bottle, or even the base of a lamp.

“Point is, Whit, you always have a weapon of some sort. Just be willing to use it.”

Whit eased off the top of the pen, praying the Seal would not notice the slight movement. He knew where to aim the pen. He had to slash the man’s jugular. His head had been turned slightly from the crawling man when he fell and Whit didn’t change its position. He did, however, open his eyes and kept their stare straight and flat, giving the impression of death. The crawling figure came into his peripheral view. Dressed in nearly all light brown, he blended perfectly with the ground. A few more shots rang out and, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the brown form press close to the ground.

Close enough. *Now or never.* With lightning speed, Whit whipped out the pen and sliced into the Navy Seal. The pen found soft tissue but, in the face, not the throat. Whit closed his eyes, waiting for the slash of a blade or the bullet, reprisals for his mistake. When he opened his eyes, he saw the pen was sticking out of the man’s eye, its tip must have penetrated the brain, instantly killing the Navy Seal.

Horrified, Whit instinctively scooted backwards along the ravine, away from the one eye angrily accusing him. He stopped after a few inches. Blinding pain smashed through his adrenaline wall. Whit whimpered, grimaced, eyes closed tight. He must have broken a rib. It was then that a series of shots banged out. But, from

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where? Panting for breath and waiting for the fire to cool in his ribs, he laid quietly in the relative safety of the ditch. Looking down the ditch he saw that Jimmy had shimmied along the gully and was about twenty feet away.

When Jimmy reached him, he casually asked, "How's it going?"

In an even voice betraying no fear, Whit responded. "Fine. Just fine."

The words and intonations could have been used as a greeting in a mall or a bar. Jimmy looked at the dead Seal.

"Any problems?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle."

More gunshots. Whit peeked over the edge and saw Pat was behind a slab of cement, pinned down. Right after he ducked down back into the ditch, bullets threw up sand and dirt in their former position.

"You see Brock?" Jimmy asked as he looked down the long ditch.

"No."

"Pat's trapped."

"Yeah, I was trying to help him when I got waylaid."

The detective looked more carefully at the dead Seal a few feet away.

"Did you kill him?"

Grimacing, Whit crawled down the gulley toward the opening in the fence caused by the missile. He had to help Pat. He heard "whish" and dirt flew on the top of the gulley. He ducked down and looked back at Jimmy.

"Yeah, I killed him. Turns out, the pen is mightier than the sword."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. What do we do about Pat?"

Jimmy eased his gun up onto the road, only to pull it away as a series of shots swished overhead.

From inside the ditch, Jimmy yelled "Pat, stay down." They would have to wait for Brock to kill the last Seal. If there was only one more Seal. If Brock was still alive. Suddenly, a series of shots came in nearly aligned with the gulley. Whit's head went down and

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his arms covered his face. "Can't see him, Jimmy, but the bullets are coming almost parallel to the gulley. We're dead if we stay here."

Jimmy popped his head up, looking for the sniper and ducked down before the Seal had a chance to shoot. "Dead if we move out of this gulley. Dead if we stay in it. Look, you don't even have a gun. I'll go back down the gulley and keep him focused on me. You make a run for it. Get through the gate."

"Jimmy, don't get yourself killed."

"Good thought. Now go."

As Whit kept crawling toward the gate, Jimmy moved in the opposite direction, firing all the way. When Jimmy switched magazines, he noted there was no reply from his adversary.

There was silence.

Jimmy hazarded a peek over the edge. While he had been shooting, Whit had scurried over the top and was now huddled with Pat. *Great! Grouped together. Goddamn amateurs.* He was about to continue shimmying down the ditch when he saw a mound of brown right behind his friends, the protruding brown barrel pointing straight at them. Somehow the Navy Seal had gotten behind Whit and Pat.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Jackson and his team had watched the three plumes rising deep behind the high fence. A few of the men immediately walked toward their cars, the rest looked up in the sky nervously. Jackson emerged from his car and glared at the men who were about to climb into their cars.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

The farthest away from Jackson’s rage, Differnbacker answered. “Going to check out the cause of the smoke, sir.”

“Jesus Christ, you moron, it was missiles. The base is being attacked.” Jackson then turned and yelled to other men. “Perkins, Johnson, call army headquarters and find out what they know. Morales, set up a satellite link. The rest of you men, get on the Kevlar body armor, just in case.” The men dispersed. Jackson opened the car door to get back in when Perkins yelled to him.

“Sir, our cell phones can’t pick up a signal.”

Morales chimed in. “Commander Jackson, no satellite link.”

Jackson, his eyes blinking rapidly, stared at them.

“Don’t move.” He finally said and slid into the car, immediately tapping keys on the laptop. The words NO SERVICE screamed at him. He ran his hands through his hair. *The explosion must have knocked out a cell tower as well. But I’m linked to a secret satellite with this connection. What is going on?* He started sweating. He recalled what his private contact had insisted about Area 51. “Never go in without permission.” The contact was obsessive about this rule, stating it over and over again.

Clenching his teeth, he stepped out of the car again. Three wispy columns of smoke had risen inside Area 51. Definitely small missiles. He listened to the light breeze blowing dust over the desolate plaza. Faint popping sounds. Gunshots. Had to be. Most likely linked somehow to Emerson and his bitch. Henry Jackson, his decision made, looked at the men.

“Get out the weapons. Now.”

Car trunks were opened and automatic rifles were handed out. This was an emergency, he reasoned. He had to take his men in. Emerson was there and he was going to get him no matter what.

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Even the Voice in the computer had to realize how unique the situation was. He just couldn't screw up.

When lives are measured in seconds, time accommodates by slowing down. Unfortunately, muscles remain bound by restrictions imposed by physics and biology. Whit and Pat, oblivious of imminent death, turned agonizingly slowly in response to Jimmy's scream. The detective pulled his gun into position and again slowly, far too slowly lined up his sights on the kneeling brown target. The Seal was already jerking out bullets. Jimmy fired his gun, but knew he was too late. Navy SEALs don't miss targets so exposed, so close. Involuntarily his eyes shifted to Whit and Pat, his mind prepared for bloody bodies falling, but they were standing and bringing their own guns up. *What? How?* The detective's eyes returned to the brown form; the shape now twisted awkwardly in the loose soil. The jerking came from bullets going into the Navy SEAL. As the man crumpled to the ground, another form became visible. Brock, gun pointing down at the ground, walked toward Whit and Pat.

The slow-motion scene shifted abruptly back to normal time as Jimmy stood.

"He was the last one." Brock yelled as he walked toward the prone figure.

Wheezing from the recent exertions, the detective managed one question. "So, there were four?"

"No, three. This guy went down early and it may have looked like a kill, but he was far from dead." Brock pulled out a revolver and shot the man in the head. "Now, it's a kill."

Jimmy looked at his watch. He shook his head in disbelief. Less than five minutes had passed since the first missile delivered its deadly cargo. Brock was already walking toward the wide opening into the compound. Whit and Pat followed. Jimmy didn't move, his lungs burning. *If I get out of this alive, no more cigarettes.*

Brock led the others through the mangled gate.

Laisa! Gotta get to Laisa. Jimmy forced himself up, his body complaining. Then he heard the rumble of trucks. The four men simultaneously turned to see a convoy of three army trucks coming their way.

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Jimmy knelt back down, trying to get out of sight. Whit started toward the guardhouse to find cover. Pat was frozen, simply watching the trucks roll closer and closer.

“All of you,” snapped Brock. “Stay where you are. Act normal. Let me do the talking.”

Jimmy and Pat stood up, guns held over their chests, safeties off. Whit, his rifle still on the road leading into the compound, leaned casually against the guardhouse, arms folded.

The trucks now screeched to a stop in the road as tan-suited, helmeted soldiers jumped out of the back and surrounded the small band. An officer, bars on his uniform declaring him a captain, jumped from the passenger side of the front truck and leveled a pistol at Brock. Seeing the insignia on the Brock’s uniform, the young officer lowered his gun and saluted.

Brock ignored the thirty guns pointing at them as he directed a fierce stare at the captain. With a slight southern drawl, Brock yelled at the man. “God damn it! Y’all came from the army base, didn’t you?”

The captain stepped back as though pushed by the words.

“Yes, sir.”

“What in *hell* do you think you are doing, soldier?”

“Colonel, we saw the explosions. We came as soon as we could.”

“And who gave you orders, captain?”

“Well, no one, sir, I just thought...”

“You just thought leaving your post when we are being attacked by terrorists was a smart idea. This little group inside here was handled by my men, but there be more a coming through, soldier. Get you and your men back. Dig in back there. We have to extract one civilian and we will expect transportation waiting for us at the gate where you damn well better be, captain.”

The captain looked at Brock, then panned the ground, gulping, finally returned to Brock’s wordless glare.

“You waiting on something, boy? Who did you leave in charge back there?”

“Lieutenant Sanders, sir, but...”

Brock threw down his cap and kicked it away.

“Jesus H. Christ, you left a goddamn Lieutenant to figure out what to do?”

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

The captain twirled his hand in the air and motioning for the men to return to the trucks. A minute later, the dust cloud could only barely be seen.

Brock turned to his companions. "Guess we can go now. Good soldier, that captain. I'm sure he'll cover our backsides.

After he picked up his hat and dusted it off, he trotted toward the distant ranch house. Whit retrieved his rifle from the road and followed far behind Brock and Pat, wincing in pain from his broken ribs.

Jimmy, wheezing and coughing, had waited for Whit. Both struggled to follow the ranger and the engineer who had reached the remains of the ranch house and paused at the rectangular frame for the front door, the only part of the first floor still standing. Right before he stepped through what was left of the doorway, Brock collapsed. Pat dove behind a collapsed wall. Over a slight knoll, a gun swung into place and started firing at Whit and Jimmy, but they were now all on the ground returning shots, forcing the soldier to duck behind the small hill. Whit took careful aim and fired once, twice, thrice, but missed. Jimmy fired once and the man stopped moving. Jimmy stepped cautiously toward the reclined soldier firing at the body which moved with jerks each time a bullet hit. Meanwhile, Whit and Pat ran to Brock. A few seconds later Jimmy joined them. Whit was pressing a towel on Brock's throat. The towel was soaked in red. Jimmy kneeled down beside the Army Ranger.

Brock was heaving, his breathing gargled like he was under water. His eyes stared up at the blue sky. When Jimmy came into his field of vision, Brock grabbed his hand, his grip just as strong as Jimmy remembered from two days before. Jimmy gripped the hand just as tightly, trying to hold him to this plane of existence.

"Forgot...forgot the limo...driver never came back."

Strained huffs of breath, a fine spray of red fog from his mouth. Jimmy felt his hand being squeezed, but weakly.

"Your turn, detective."

A final gasp and Brock, his face pale and expressionless, was dead.

Jimmy shook his head in frustration. He didn't particularly like Brock and the man probably had a dislike of him, but Laisa was right, they couldn't have made it this far without him. He gently let go of the hand and it fell to the ground.

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Whit frantically tried to stanch the blood. Jimmy grabbed his wrist.

“He’s dead, Whit. You can stop now,” he said gently.

Whit, tears streaming down his face, clenched both of his hands into fists, pounding the sides of his head.

The detective pulled the young editor up by his shirt, restrained the pounding hands from his head, and hugged him. Whit sobbed in the embrace of the older man. Jimmy then pushed him away, his hands on Whit’s shoulders. “Whit, we need you to stand guard while Pat and I get Laisa. Can you do that?”

After a moment, Whit nodded.

Jimmy explained what had happened. “The missile didn’t knock out the soldier who drove Laisa in. We should have anticipated that.”

Whit nodded as he thought back to the poem and one of the lines: *Someone had blunder*'. He shook his head over at the body of the Army Ranger. *No more blunders* was the silent scream in his head.

Jimmy and Pat walked into the crumbled building, stepping over portions of the roof and avoiding holes embedded in the cement floor. At first, Jimmy was disoriented, trying to match the crumpled structure in front of them to his memory of the blueprint. Looking to the farthest corner, he saw the remains of the elevator shaft. Debris covered it. He looked to the right for the stairs and large cement slabs blocked the way. *Can’t go down the stairs and the elevator shaft is covered with debris.*

He looked at Pat.

The engineer just shook his head. “I’m not sure we can move this stuff, Jimmy.” Pat walked away from the stairs and looked at the wrecked elevator shaft. Great broken chunks of cement blocked any entry down.

Jimmy Northup stepped over the debris to the stairway which seemed to have smaller chunks blocking it. He angrily pulled jagged cement chunks from the stairwell leading down. His hands turned red as he suffered one cut after another. Laisa was down there. In the dark. With the monster. They had to get down, fast. Now. He yelled for Pat to help. But Pat Fallon would not budge from the elevator.

“Come on, Pat, give me a hand here.” Jimmy yelled over his shoulder, throwing one piece far to the side.

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

“It’s no use, Jimmy, we can’t move all that stuff. The entire stairwell is likely to have collapsed in on itself.”

ROBERT SELLS

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

While the other men nervously watched, Diffenbacker approached Jackson who studied Area 51 with binoculars.

“Sir...”

“What?” the commander snapped.

“Sir, we triangulated the missile launching site just over that hill, less than a mile away. Henchen binocked them and there were about a dozen armed men.”

Without taking his eyes away from the binoculars, Jackson gulped.

“What should we do, sir?”

Jackson tried his cell phone again. *Nothing. Nothing. Nothing!* *Alright, I'll do it. I have to.*

“Diffenbacker and Henchen get twelve men and apprehend the men at the missile site. You will be dealing with terrorists. Move to immobilize them quickly. You are authorized to use lethal force.”

Jackson motioned everyone else to his side.

“Something has happened inside this important base. We know our suspects are inside. It all ties together. We go in, men. Now!”

Dust churned as the cars raced to the main road. Within a minute the caravan of black cars arrived at the main gate. The captain and two other soldiers walked up to the metal fence on the inside as Jackson and Al approached the outside. Jackson showed his credentials. The captain nodded.

“We have to get into Area 51 to apprehend Whitman Emerson, Mary Henderson, and James Northup. All wanted criminals.”

“Sorry, sir, you have to get authorization from the Pentagon to enter this facility.”

“Jimmy those chunks are too big for all three of us to lift. It can't be done.”

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Jimmy denied logic and strained against the smaller of three slabs, trying to move the unmoving. "Help, Pat, help me. We have to do it."

Pat ignored him as he studied the elevator buttons; they were still lit. Beside him, Jimmy tried to heave a large slab of concrete, but he couldn't. He collapsed on top of the trunk-sized piece, glaring angrily at Pat who was nimbly pushing buttons on the wall beside the elevator door. Jimmy cocked his head...the motor hummed from below. A great wrenching sound announced the car moving up. A bang. Gears moaned. A screeching sound of cement on metal preceded the slow movement of the slabs of concrete around the door. Chunks toppled down the long chamber. Finally, the heavy-duty elevator carriage appeared. Then the motors whined, but the elevator stopped moving, its great head just a few feet above the floor. The grinding continued for another two seconds and whirred down to silence and smoke. Pat jumped on top of the car and looked down at a small opening beside the great chamber, now broken and defunct. He saw over the edge all the way down to the bottom of the chamber.

"Jimmy. The rope."

Jimmy was already unwinding the long, thin rope he was carrying.

As Pat peered over the edge, he explained. "The newer elevator shafts have an emergency, battery operated system. All two-storyed banks have them."

Jimmy joined Pat on the roof of the elevator. He stepped over some remaining debris and looked over the ledge.

"Tie the rope there, Jimmy." Pat pointed to a metal loop on the top of the elevator.

The rope attached, Jimmy put on thin, but tough fiber-woven gloves. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and eased himself down the rope, the pen-sized flashlight in his mouth showing the smooth wall, cracked in places from the explosion. A minute later he was on the floor yelling for Pat to join him. Half a minute later, the engineer touched the sub-basement floor.

The door to enter the sub-basement was closed. Jimmy put his hands inside the long, dark crease and strained to open it. The door remained stubbornly closed. Pat was already positioned at a small metal box which contained a key pad. Pat's fingers tapped four

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numbers and hit enter, the door didn't budge. He did it again and again.

"All elevators have emergency electrical systems in place. If I can get the right combination...there." The door slid open and Jimmy moaned as he looked inside. They faced another large metal door, thick, like the ones in a bank. Pat looked at it. This time he pulled on some latex gloves.

"Pat, I don't think you have to worry about leaving fingerprints behind."

The younger man, shrugged. "Habit, I guess." He pulled out his stethoscope and began the process of opening the door.

Laisa was pinned down by the bursts of red. She squirmed right and left to avoid their painful burns. Eventually she would tire or move in the wrong direction, letting the beam burn into clothes and skin.

While frantically moving, she recalled preparing for the meeting with Hal. The computer wizard was oddly worried Hal would not find her attractive. So, she had brought lipstick and a powder compact. It was a compact with a mirror! Thank God she was still a vain female. She reached in her pocket, leaned forward so she could extend her hand deep enough to retrieve the compact, suffered another bite on the leg, screamed, but felt the edge of the beauty tool and pulled it out. She opened it and waited for the next beam. Instead of moving away, she brought the mirror to reflect the light. Before Hal reacted, she reflected the beam back to its body and she smelled burning plastic. For a minute, the two dueled. Finally, it stopped, staring at her with eight, unblinking eyes.

You weak flesh. You think such a trick can stop me? Let me show you a little device I use to cut cords and metal.

From midway in its torso, a jagged blade about the size of a large platter, extended out a few inches from the body. The blade then started its terrible motion. The robot slowly moved closer, as if it was giving her time to contemplate the blade's new use.

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So, that's why he wasn't worried about me walking by him. Not so stupid after all.

The fading light from her cell phone tracked the inexorable progress the machine was making over the debris. He was coming in for the kill, giving up the safety of his position. Bumping up and down over the debris strewn on the floor, he came closer and closer, the razor-sharp blade out in front. A few seconds later, the robot stopped just before it reached the targeted position. Its laser was flashing here and there on Laisa's body, not burning but distracting her. As he moved forward, Laisa desperately tried to move the mirror to deflect the burning beam. It was then she realized that Hal was right below her trap! Laisa lunged for the cord and pulled. She screamed as the red laser burned through her clothes and hit her bare skin. The block moved a bit, but didn't fall. The robot's flexible wheels were on level ground now, inching forward as though relishing the "kill." She pulled again. Another part of her clothes was smoldering and she yelled feeling what could only be described as a red-hot poker penetrating her skin once again. The block moved a bit more. The spinning disk was only inches away from her feet. Angered, adrenaline pumping, she gave a Herculean tug, screaming as she pulled. "Die, you bastard, die!"

Rage, tension and gravity won, the slab came down, its pointed side rotating to spear the middle of the machine. Mini-Hal's lights blinked out one by one and the blade stopped rotating. The large slab hovered for a moment on top of the squashed robot and fell back on Laisa. She put her hands up to stop the block from hitting her face. It landed squarely on top of her. Tired, covered with over a dozen different blistering burns, she lacked the strength to push off the slab of cement.

Laisa laid back down and did her best to assess her own damage. Her right knee was momentarily numb, but a sharp pain grew into what she feared would be debilitating pain in a few minutes. The muscles in her left leg were complaining since that leg was bent in a most unnatural and painful way. She couldn't get out from under and she was thirsty, very thirsty.

Her cell phone, either from the damage of the block or a battery finally giving out, went black. She lay in total silence. And, it was dark, far too dark. Though she didn't need to, she squeezed

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her eyes shut. Just like she used to when she was ten years old and the man entered her room. Her thumping heart pounded in her chest.

As the argument between the captain and the NSA commander intensified, thirty regular soldiers aimed their guns at the twelve men who had surged from their cars, automatic weapons drawn.

“Whether or not you are NSA, you must have authorization to enter.”

“Read directive 672 army-boy. NSA has authority over every branch of the government.”

“Not the military.”

Jackson shook the fence. “Listen you, idiot. There are terrorists inside the compound that have already compromised your little Area 51. They are already inside. What do you think your superiors will say to you when they find out you let them complete their mission without any intervention?”

“An army detachment has already taken care of the terrorists. I saw at least two dead bodies.”

“What army detachment?”

“The one led by the colonel.”

“Colonel who?”

For the first time, the captain’s steady voice broke. “He...ahh...didn’t give his name.”

Like a wolf downing its prey, Jackson went in for the kill. “You didn’t get his name?”

“Well...ahh...insignia...”

“Did it ever occur to you that the ‘colonel’ and his men could have been the terrorists?”

The captain looked back from where he had come. He grabbed his cell phone, hoping reception was available now. NO SERVICE.

Jackson followed with a few choice threats. The young captain found himself in a vise between the army and the NSA. And, Commander Jackson kept tightening the vice.

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

From almost a mile away, Mary watched the drama unfold at the gate as she looked through her binoculars. The two groups separated. She saw the dust cloud passing through the gates before she heard the engines. She trained her binoculars on the caravan. Five cars moving fast toward the compound. She got on the walkie-talkie.

“Rick, five cars, about a dozen men, heavily armed, coming down the highway toward you.”

“Thanks, Sis. I’ll r-r-relay information to the guys.”

“Tell them to hide. They are coming down the side road right at you. You move too, Rick, fast. They will be at your location in a few minutes.”

“Roger t-t-that.”

Rick had watched the three clouds rise in the distance. He heard the gunfire. The army trucks had moved too fast for him to react with a missile strike. He wasn’t sure if his friends remained alive and free. For the first time, he called Whit, praying for an answer.

“Whit. W-W-Whit. Answer me.”

Though the message was mixed with static, Rick sagged with relief when he heard, “Hear ya, buddy.”

“Whit, how you guys doing?”

“Jimmy and Pat are trying to get down to Laisa.”

“What about B-B-Brock?”

There was a pause and Rick was about to ask the question again, his stomach already turning.

“He...he didn’t make it.”

Now it was Rick who was quiet.

“What’s going on? Why did you call?”

“Some c-c-cars coming in.”

“Thanks for the heads up, I’ll be ready for them.”

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“Ready for them?” Whit planned on stopping them? Five cars filled with men? NSA, probably. Whit would be no match. Then Jimmy, Pat, and Laisa wouldn’t stand a chance. And Mary would be in danger as well.

He fingered the beacon in his pocket. He could lay it down and run over the crest of the hill, but they might be past the point or before it when the missile hit. It was unlikely they would exactly be at ground zero when the missile came in. He had to have all cars at one point so the missile could take out the entire caravan.

He called Dirk.

“You have o-o-one more missile?”

“Yes, primed and ready. Just need coordinates or a beacon and when. But, Rick, we are fighting off some military assholes now. I don’t think we can hold them off for long. If we’re going to launch this puppy, we need to do it soon.”

“If I say launch, how much time before it gets h-h-here.”

Dirk thought a moment.

“Twenty, maybe thirty seconds. Hell, maybe ten seconds.”

“Launch on my command. Be r-r-ready.”

“Hurry, Rick, hurry.”

Rick examined the little black box. It resembled the pager you got from a restaurant when you waited to be seated. He looked up and saw the black cars coming over the rise. Still time to hide, but he didn’t. He couldn’t guarantee all five cars would be in the circle of death if he ran. The cars were coming right toward him, maybe half a minute away.

He sighed as he casually tossed the beacon onto the ground twenty feet in front of him. He would be the bait to lure them in. Rick grunted a chuckle without a smile...at least he wouldn’t be dead center. He contacted Whit.

“Whit, don’t worry about the cars. And tell Mary I love her.”

A mile away, Whit frowned and looked at the walkie-talkie.
“Hey, what do you have in mind?”

The connection went dead.

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Pat pushed open the door. He surveyed the wreckage. "She's not here, Jimmy. We have to go. Whit says cars are coming our way."

Jimmy was climbing over chairs and parts of tiles which had fallen, his flash light scanning right and left. "Not leaving without her, Pat."

Jimmy scurried over broken desks and scattered chairs. His flashlight scanned over a corridor which had a cement slab blocking the way. It was the only place in the sub-basement where there was any significant damage. *Wait, was that a head?* He scrambled over the debris and looked down at Laisa, her eyes shut.

Jimmy's heart sank. *Oh, God. Is she dead? Not Laisa. Please God, not Laisa.*

He scrambled over the debris and knelt down beside her. Jimmy felt for a pulse in her neck. He smiled as he felt the gentle throb repeat itself again and again.

"Pat, over here. Found her."

It was stygian dark. She brought her hands about her chest, covering it. The pain, the fear, the utter deprivation of all senses, put her into a near catatonic state. Laisa was wrested from unconsciousness when she felt hands over her body again just like when she was ten years old. The anger of an adult, not the paralyzing fear of a ten-year-old, swelled inside her. Not again, not ever again, not even in a dream would she accept the cruel touch.

Jimmy saw she was unconscious. He felt gently for any broken bones. The next thing he knew he was being hit in the arms and chest, a flailing fist just missing his face. "Laisa, it's me, Jimmy. Easy."

She stopped and opened her eyes. The light from Pat's flashlight rendered Jimmy clearly visible to her. She grabbed his hands and pulled them close kissing them. "Oh, Jimmy, you're here."

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She opened her eyes again to confirm his presence was not a hallucination. She pulled him close to her and hugged him tightly. Then abruptly pushed him away. "What the hell kept you, Northup?"

Jimmy scanned the slab of concrete on her torso. "Well, we had some complications."

He crouched up and grabbed one end of the concrete slab and Pat grabbed the other side. They pushed it over on its side. Jimmy looked down at the crushed hunk of plastic, metal, glass and wires.

"Who's your friend, here?"

"Oh, that was mini-Hal. Let's say I had some complications with it, too."

Jimmy gently picked her up.

"Ouch. Burned there, Jimmy."

He placed his hands in another position.

"Ouch...there, too."

He looked at her, his face screwed up with concern for her pain. "Laisa...I'm so sorry."

With Pat's help, he lifted her up. She almost collapsed when she tried to walk.

"Whoa, there, girl."

"Hold me under the arms. Both of you."

Propping up Laisa, the trio was able to shuffle down the narrow passage.

"Let's go find the big boy and pull the plug," said Laisa.

Rick saw the cars rising over the hill. If he had run, some of the cars might have followed him and surely apprehended him. Ah, well. His new plan will get all of them. The cars circled him like a wagon train circling a solitary Indian. He looked at the deadly black box on the ground as he clicked on the walkie-talkie.

"OK. Dirk. Launch." *Hmm. Interesting. I didn't stutter.*

"Firing on three..."

Rick recalled the days he was so alone. No friends. No real family.

"... two..."

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Then he remembered the day Whit kept talking to him. The guy had been so persistent in befriending him. To this day, he didn't know why he bothered. But he did. Rick smiled. Stubborn guy, Whit. And a heart of gold.

“... one, launched...”

Meeting Mary for the first time. She was the most beautiful person he had ever seen. Men with guns emerged cautiously from the cars which surrounded him.

The times the three of them spent together. Talking, laughing, eating, and drinking. They had so much fun together. Good, good friends.

The men had their guns out and were yelling at Rick to raise his hands. He was standing calmly looking at the beacon, thinking about his best friend and his sister holding hands in the restaurant. *What was it, a month ago? No, just a few weeks ago. So much happened. But his sister and Whit just got closer.* He smiled. *Whit would take care of her and she would take care of him.* The men surrounding him were confused when he looked up smiling. A moment later, the world erupted with fire, metal, and rock.

“Hey, Rick. Didn't understand last message.”

“Rick? Rick? Can you hear me, buddy?”

“Damn it, Rick. Answer me! What is going on?”

Whit frantically kept pushing the call button. Then he heard the explosion. “Oh, dear God, please, no. Please, no!”

Smoke curled up from behind the rise. Instinctively he bolted up the small hill. Then he stopped. He didn't need to look. He didn't want to look. A sob wracked him, and Whit's knees went weak. Tears pricked his eyes and he dropped to the ground. “Oh, Rick. Oh, God. Why? Why?”

But he really didn't have to ask. He knew the answer. A terrible awareness washed over him as he realized the sacrifice his friend had made. *Rick had always tried to protect Mary and, he squeezed his eyes shut, me.* He shook his head, wiped his eyes, and clenched his jaw. Grief would have to wait. He was still needed by the three or, perhaps just two people down below. He returned to his perch and scanned the horizon.

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The two men propped Laisa in a chair beside the imposing metal door. She grabbed the flashlight from Pat and directed its beam toward a metal wall.

“Alright, Jesse James, do your thing.”

Pat looked at the door illuminated by the small circle of light and smiled. He took out the stethoscope, pressed it against the cold, hard metal as his fingers gently tapped the key pad next to the handle.

Laisa held her breath, trying to give Pat the necessary quiet to perform his miracle. After all the planning, the gun battles, her ordeal in the basement, the success of the plan, of humanity, depended on this one short engineer. She tried to control the beating of heart, afraid that slight thumping might confuse Pat. Then a click cracked through the silence. Pat opened the door. Laisa released a blast of air.

Except for a few red and blue lights winking off and on, there was complete darkness inside this inner sanctum of the monster. The interior of a small room was surprisingly compact. *So small, this mind of Hal.*

Helped by Pat and Jimmy, Laisa limped through the thick door into the metal chamber. The flashlights revealed a narrow corridor surrounded with large metal boxes, electrical umbilical cords running into each of the boxes.

A voice, the soft lilt of a woman, perhaps a grandmother, enveloped them.

So, you have done it, Little Lion. You and your friends.

The voice was weary, but proud. Laisa said nothing, looking for the CPU.

I had hoped we could work together for a new world, dear.

The voice was calm, actually soothing in a way. *Why was the machine so calm when its death was imminent? It must know what they were looking for and the consequences of finding it.*

“Laisa, hurry” urged Jimmy.

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Ahh...the great Jimmy Northup. Finally, we meet. I have admired your work for years. Do you think you can dissuade Little Lion from her foolish act, Jimmy?

From somewhere in the room, Laisa heard the angry hiss of water suddenly brought to a frantic boil. *What was that, she wondered? Odd sound for this place.*

Jimmy's voice pierced the momentary silence. "Laisa, Pat...take a deep breath. Then hold your breath. Don't breathe the air!"

She took a great gulp of air and now moved on her own through the large machines. For the most part she ignored the pain, except when her mind flashed white with the pain in her knee as though someone was stabbing her.

Her eyes started to slightly burn and then water. What noxious gas had entered the room?

Laisa wiped her eyes and pulled out another sliding piece of the machine, hopefully disconnecting some part of the brain. *I need the damn CPU. Where is it?*

Laisa smiled. *There it was, tucked into the metal womb of the biggest compartment.*

The voice from the machine was louder now, masculine.

You weak, weak flesh and blood primates don't deserve to rule. In moments you will suffer an agonizing death and I will watch. This is my..."

The sound stopped abruptly.

Laisa held up a box about the size of her fist, grinning. She nodded to Jimmy.

The three left the room as quickly as they could, Laisa's face scrunched in pain. Pat closed the door behind them as Jimmy swept up Laisa who was vigorously shaking her head as she tried to disengage. Jimmy held on to her tightly and walked around the fallen debris as Pat lit their path. Halfway to the elevator, Laisa's lungs begged release. Her eyes a liquid mess, tears streamed down her face. *Was it safe now? Her lungs bursting, she had to exhale. Oh God. Sorry Jimmy. Expecting the sting of the poisonous gas, she*

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took a deep breath, then stopped. She smelled a faint odor of almonds. Jimmy eased her down a few steps in front of the elevator shaft.

Ouch!” She took in another breath. No almonds this time. Jimmy and Pat took great gulps of air. Short, tentative inhalations continued as the two men held her arms and she hobbled to the rope.

As Pat quickly fixed a rope harness for Laisa, Jimmy explained what had happened.

“After the death penalty was legalized in New York State, I watched a demonstration of how it would be administered. Hydrogen cyanide capsules in water disintegrated as they yielded a burst of poison air. Death in a matter of seconds. That was Hal’s last line of defense.”

Pat climbed the rope. Once the engineer made it to the main floor, Jimmy fit the harness around Laisa. Laisa looked up the long dark shaft. *This was not going to be fun.*

Whit heard no sound. No rumbling of a car, no drone of a plane. Only a lonely breeze blowing past him. He saw no movement. Except for the ruined ranch house and one terrible, terrible cloud reminding him of Rick’s death, there was no evidence of man.

Jimmy’s voice shattered Whit’s contemplation of the silent world around him. Turning, he let out a deep sigh of relief seeing Jimmy and Pat hauling Laisa’s wounded form out of the remains of the building. He called out to the group.

“Did you finish it?”

Jimmy nodded. “Hal is dead.”

Laisa held up the CPU. Whit, now within a few feet of friends, grabbed it and threw it to the ground. The silence was broken by the loud stuttering gunfire as Whit pulled the trigger again and again, obliterating the device.

Jimmy gently squeezed his shoulder. “It’s over, Whit.”

Breathing hard, Whit looked at the shattered remnants. Finally, he turned to the rest of the group. “Mary said she couldn’t raise anything on her cell phone. The internet must be down. I can’t believe we were successful.”

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Laisa looked at him, the pain obvious, but a smile emerged through the worn and weary face. "Nothing to it. Never had any doubt."

Whit carried the rifles since Jimmy and Pat were helping Laisa over the slight hill. At the top, all four simultaneously stopped. Less than a mile away five mangled cars could be seen. Smoke issued from a few smoldering parts. Whit spoke quietly in starts and stops, trying not to sob.

"He-h-h-he saw them coming...and knew there wouldn't be enough...enough time to target the cars."

Whit wiped his eyes and coughed. His hand stayed at his mouth as he looked at the carnage in front of him.

"Oh, Whit," moaned Laisa, tears streaming down her face.

Jimmy shook his head. Laisa pulled away from her two nurses and hugged Whit. After a few seconds, he pulled away, holding her hand for a few seconds. He sighed and under his breath he said "Oh, God," over and over again. A sudden realization had dawned upon him. Whit had started a chain of events which inexorably led his friends to this desert of death. Where even the "bad guys" were normal people just doing their job. Though Hal was the cause, Whit was the catalyst and he carried the guilt for all the deaths and especially his friend's death. He took a deep breath. He fingered the trigger of the automatic. *The horror in his mind would be gone in an instant if he placed the gun under his chin and...* Then he thought about Mary. He had to help her. And she would heal him.

"Come on, let's get past the gate and to a car before anyone else comes."

After a long trek the four reached ground zero where Rick willingly gave his life so that they might have a chance to live. Metal and plastic debris littered the area and the twisted remains of cars measured the terrible blast. Several bodies and some body parts were witnessed peripherally, but never directly. No one dared to study them closely. Inside one of the cars, both drivers had their heads slumped back as though they were grotesquely watching the back seat. The last car was the least damaged and thankfully there were no more bodies seen. They walked on.

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Once the small band had finally moved past the cars, two men reared up from behind the last car. Their faces bloodied, clothes disheveled, they leveled handguns at the friends. Jimmy and Pat were on either side of a limping Laisa. Whit had neither the time or the dexterity to handle even one of the three guns he was toting.

Henry Jackson had his gun leveled at the young editor. "Chuck those fucking guns, asshole!"

Whit let the guns fall to the ground.

The man beside Jackson, just as bloodied, picked up the guns and threw them as far as he could. Then he turned back to the captives. "All of you, put your hands behind your backs."

Jimmy recognized the voice.

"Cuff them, Al. Even the black bitch. Do Northup last."

Al slowly went to each person and roughly handcuffed each of them. When he got to Jimmy, Jackson yelled.

"On second thought, don't cuff him. He's a cop after all."

Jackson glared at Jimmy. "I took over in Buffalo...took your job, bastard. And, with this mess..." His arm swept the filling field. "You ended up taking my job away. Right now, neither one of us has any jurisdiction anymore." An eerie laughter bubbled up.

"I'll be fired. Just for being in this area without authorization."

The tone changed as Jackson stared flatly at Jimmy.

"None of us should be here. Not me. No, not me. But, especially not you, Northup."

Waving the gun wildly at Jimmy, he yelled so loud, Laisa jumped. "Now, this major fuck up...whose fault, detective? Whose fault?"

Jimmy said nothing.

"Not mine! Not mine, but I'll get blamed. Oh, yeah. The man on the computer, whoever the hell he is, he'll blame me."

Jimmy estimated he was five feet from the raving lunatic. If he lunged toward the man, he'd get a bullet in the stomach before he could reach him. *Get closer, Jackson. Get closer.*

"Whose fault? Yours, asshole. And yours and yours and yours, whoever the hell you are." The gun pointed to Laisa, Whit, and finally Pat. Jackson frowned at the group and grunted.

"Well, it's payback time, detective. No need to handcuff a dead man, Al."

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Al reluctantly took his eyes from the group and looked over at the disheveled commander. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to kill the bastard, Al."

"Commander Jackson, we don't need to kill anybody. Bring 'em in. You'd be the hero."

"No, you don't understand, kid. None of you understand. You can't go against what the computer says, ever." Jackson's finger slowly began squeezing the trigger.

"Jesus, Jackson, stop it. You can't kill Jimmy. You can't kill anyone. It would be murder. Let's just take them all in."

Out of the corner of his eye, Jackson saw Morelli's gun pointed at him. He put his head down and nodded. "Maybe you're right Al. Maybe you're right." Jackson dropped the gun arm to his side and turned toward the detective. "He's fucking ruined my life, Al."

"Shooting him would ruin your life, sir."

Jackson sighed. Like a rattlesnake striking, his arm went up and three rapid shots pushed Al back and to the ground, his gun jarred out of his hand.

Jimmy looked at both Al and the gun. *I could leap over Al and grab the gun. Jackson might miss. Even if he hits me, someone else might make a move for him.*

Al looked up at the cloudless sky. Jackson stepped into his view blocking the sky. He aimed his gun at Al's head and then pulled back.

"You're dead already, Al. I'm not going to waste a bullet." He stepped back.

The sky returned and Al felt like he was lying in a pond. It was all wet around him. A sharp pain began to grow from inside him. He tried to raise himself up, but fell back down. He coughed up blood when he tried to speak. His head turned and he found Jimmy's eyes. When the fire of life dwindles down to a candle flame, sputtering, sometimes death bestows wisdom. So, it was with Al. As he locked eyes with his former partner, he saw what he should have done and could have been. He saw what Jimmy was trying to help him become. Now he looked for recognition and forgiveness from his only friend.

Jimmy frowned, the pain of the loss evident on his face. He gave Al a slight smile and nodded. Jimmy understood, Al thought.

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He always understood. Al returned the smile, nodded, and closed his eyes. The flame had gone out. And so had Jimmy's last chance to save his friends.

"Well, now, where were we? Oh, yes. Ending your miserable life, detective." He leveled the gun at Jimmy.

Paralyzed by the inevitability of death, the four watched as Henry Jackson slowly pulled the trigger. *Now or never*, thought Jimmy as he tensed to spring away. Then Jimmy noticed a slight sideways tick in Jackson's head. His finger stopped its push inward. Then his head slumped to his chest and he fell over. He twisted as he fell and a distant pop reached their ears. Jimmy looked back over his shoulder to a slight rise about one hundred yards away. He saw Mary lowering her rifle from her shoulder. He blinked his eyes in disbelief. Then he went back to detective-mode.

He rummaged through Al's trousers and found the keys for the handcuffs. As he unlocked the others, he watched Mary slowly making her way toward the group, her head swiveling right and left looking for any sign of movement.

Once his arms were free, Whit left the group and with long strides met her halfway. His arms encompassed her, holding her tight. Jimmy saw him gently push her away and talk to her, still holding her shoulders. Then her legs gave way and her head sunk. Only the strength in Whit's arms kept her from collapsing to the ground. Jimmy, Pat, and Laisa turned away from the pair and continued their walk toward the highway.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

After the net collapsed, the entire world froze. Confusion and uncertainty reigned supreme. One positive consequence of this paralysis was that their trip back to Madison was short and unchallenged. By the next morning, they wearily walked through the portico which connected the garage to the house. Laisa limped to a plush chair near the piano as Jimmy sat down on the piano bench. Whit and Mary eased onto the sofa and she sank into his arms, her head near his heart. Pat sat in a wing back chair, legs crossed as though he was casually attending a business meeting.

“Home at last,” Laisa sighed.

A strange female voice shot through the room.

“All of you. Don’t move a muscle or you’re dead. Put your hands up where I can see them.”

One by one five weary faces, still grimy from their exertions turned toward the short, blonde woman toting an impressively large handgun.

Jimmy spoke first in a weary voice. “Sorry, young lady, I’m just too tired to do much of anything right now. If you want to shoot me, have at it.”

“No, you’d better put your hands up, Northup. Now!”

Laisa cut in. “Please, honey, you are far, far too tense. Just have a seat and give us a few minutes to rest and then we’ll talk.”

She looked at the five people in front of her. Three were dressed in well-worn army uniforms, the woman on the couch hadn’t moved from her position close to one of the soldiers, and the other woman who had talked to her was dressed tastefully though her clothes were torn and dirty. She recognized Northup, Emerson, and Henderson. But the other two were unknown to her.

None of them were listening to her. When you hold a gun and tell criminals to do something, they should comply. Didn’t they know that? To make matters worse, she couldn’t use her cell phone. All communications were down.

“Alright, I guess, but don’t try anything. I shoot to kill.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, we won’t do anything at all except rest,” replied Jimmy closing his eyes.

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Alice looked over to Pat who seemed the only sane one in the group.

“What’s going on, here?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Thank God.”

With Pat’s simple enunciation, Jimmy and Laisa chuckled and even Whit smiled. Pat just stared at her.

Alice looked at Jimmy. “What happened out there?”

Jimmy looked at Laisa, eyes closed, who shook her head.

“Well,” said Jimmy, “I’ll say this much. We did nothing wrong, but not everything right. We’re human and we make mistakes. I guess that’s what being human is all about. Making mistakes and correcting them.”

“What? What are you talking about?” asked Alice, exasperated.

Laisa opened her eyes and smiled at him. She extended her hand to hold his. “He’s a philosopher.”

Alice looked at Laisa.

“He’s wanted by the police, you know.”

Laisa chuckled. “Oh, I know. But folks are going to have more to worry about than Jimmy Northup.”

Alice’s nostrils flared and began heavy breathing. Jaw clenched, she said, “Not my boss, Commander Jackson. He won’t stop until he gets you.”

Jimmy and Laisa both stared at her.

“He’ll stop,” said Jimmy.

She blinked her eyes a few more times.

“Not with him. He just keeps coming.”

Laisa looked at Alice and saw in her eyes the same look as her ten-year-old self.

“No child, not anymore. You have nothing to worry about. He’s dead.”

Alice’s eyes opened wide. “Who killed him?”

Laisa pointed to Mary, her eyes closed and her head on Whit’s chest. “She did.”

Alice looked at her. She looked small and frail.

Then she looked at Laisa. “He’s dead and she killed him?”

Laisa nodded.

Alice wasn’t sure what was going on in the room, but these folks were about as non-criminal with their actions as anyone could

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be. During the hours alone she had looked more deeply into the case. There were so many loose ends. In fact, it looked like to her that Whit Emerson could be innocent of all the crimes. Alice looked at the small form hugging Whit. She didn't look at all like such a master criminal. Really, the only possible criminal in the bunch was Northup and he certainly didn't act guilty. Then, over the last day, the world had been turned upside down. Now Jackson was dead. If anyone deserved to die it was certainly Jackson. Everything had changed. Everything. She took a deep breath and slowly blew a blast of air out of her mouth. "Relax," she muttered. She nodded her head up and down. *Yup. Too many loose ends.*

"Good enough for me," Alice said and got up, putting her gun back in her hip holster.

"Far as I'm concerned, I'm giving you folks a Get-out-of-jail-free card. Henry Jackson was an egotistical bastard and you did the world a favor."

With that she walked out of the room, through the front door, and into the sunlight.

EPILOGUE

Four months later, the group was well-rested and, for the most part, repaired in mind and body. Jimmy had stopped smoking, much to Laisa's delight. He was mildly discomforted by it, but pleasantly surprised it wasn't really very difficult. A snow lay heavy on Laisa's lawn, but the five were inside her dining room, warmed by a roaring fire as they enjoyed a corn beef and cabbage dinner prepared by Pat. For the first time since returning, conversations were animated and laughter was free and easy.

Levity, however, was noticeably missing outside the Victorian house. There was no internet. For the first two weeks the country acted like a rabid fox trying to bite itself. Terror reigned in every corner of the globe. Except for an emergency channel, there was no TV in America. Uncertainty had sky-rocketed prices. Even so, grocery stores had been emptied. Starvation squeezed to death millions. Hundreds of thousands died in hospitals. After a dozen crashes, airlines were all grounded. Except for older models, most vehicles wouldn't even start. And, those older cars traveled the roads cautiously since the world had become a much more dangerous place. Desperate people preyed on other desperate people. The only planes bisecting the sky with vapor trails were military jets. Phone service was non-existent unless you had a land line. Communication had to be done by snail mail. The US Postal service was one of the heroes of the Great Collapse. The day they returned to Laisa's house, Pat wrote a letter to his wife and three weeks later he got her confirmation back. The postal service made good its promise: through rain, wind, hail and...well, the collapse of modern society.

The news finally trickled in, primarily through radio. Financial markets didn't just tumble, they totally collapsed. In a world where all transactions had been done through computers, the new world resurrected written contracts and handshakes. After a month, business began again. Drivers of trucks and trains were confused about what, where and when for the shipments. But they found ingenious ways to handle the myriad of problems.

The American people were, as ever, resilient. They pushed, pulled, and pried until some semblance of trade and commerce

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asserted itself. Jealous of their liberty, they demanded the resumption of their government and the presidential elections took place three weeks after it originally scheduled. Millions of volunteers showed up to physically count ballots, in some cases, just names on pieces of paper. Results from over thousands of voting stations were tallied and states were just beginning to authorize the release of the electoral votes. The whole process took months...just like it did at the dawn of the republic.

Now, in February, America listened to the staccato results. Eating dessert, the small fellowship listened intently.

The announcer gave the final results and added his own comments. "This is one of the great political upsets. Even greater than when Truman snatched the election from Dewey in 1948. It looks like a stunning upset for Henry Simpson. Before the Internet Crash, he was at least fifteen percent behind in every poll. Now it seems he's going to have a landslide victory. I'm not sure how he could have rallied his supporters in these last few..."

Jimmy turned off the radio. "I think we all know. Without Hal, we get to actually choose our own destiny. Hal skewed the polls and it would have decided the election. With Hal gone, the real America voted. We'll need someone like Simpson to lead us through this. Now, I have something to tell everyone."

The room was as quiet as a morgue. "I have to take Pat back to his wife. Going to be gone for a long time."

Laisa looked down at her plate, for once absolutely quiet.

"Laisa, I was hoping to take the Land Rover."

Pushing around a stray morsel of pumpkin pie, she answered him sharply. "No."

She looked up at Jimmy.

"It's too crazy out there, Jimmy. Gas prices keep rising...what did I hear yesterday...nearly two hundred dollars a gallon? There are some stretches of road where gangs kill passengers and steal the gas. No, I'll pay for a rail ticket. When were you planning to leave?"

"Day after tomorrow if possible. Do you know how expensive tickets are now on trains?"

"Yes," she snapped, "Of course, I know."

Laisa was back playing with the pie.

"One way ticket?" she asked without looking up.

"Yeah, I'm afraid so."

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Laisa tensed and her eyes closed tightly.

“For Pat...but, I’ll need a round-trip ticket.”

She looked up at him. Then her eyes squinted in anger. “Tell me the important stuff first, Northup.”

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head.

“There was nothing to tell. For a bright woman, you sure are dumb.”

She smiled as she forked the last bit of pumpkin pie and plunged it into her mouth, happily chewing.

“I confess I have some regrets about destroying the net,” Whit offered. “I know it had to be done, but...well, we lost so much. All the information stored on the web. It’s worse than when the libraries at Alexandria were burned...when we lost all that wisdom from the past.”

Mary looked at him. “Then, at least, civilization had the Jewish and Arab scholars preserving some of the great books.”

Laisa took a deep breath and pushed away from the table. “Maybe it’s time to show you all something. Come with me.”

She led the group downstairs into the inner sanctum where the conversations with Hal took place a few months before, the great screen blank. She unlocked another door to the right of the big screen. When the lights were turned on, row after row of cabinet size computer storage units filled an even larger room, an air conditioning unit humming nicely.

“Over the last few years, I’ve been downloading much of the net. Not all of it. Not Aunt Gladys’ pictures or blueprints of the small Baptist church in Des Moines. But enough of it. The writings. The instructions. The guides. The history. The knowledge. The pictures. The videos. The music.”

Jimmy stepped into the room and turned on another switch. Another bank of computer storage and refrigeration appeared.

“My God, there must be hundreds of storage units in here.”

“Well, just over two hundred Jimmy. Each capable of storing over a million terabytes. So, don’t worry about losing the information, Whit. I saved nearly all of it.”

Scanning the vast, cool room with large computer storage areas jammed close together, Whit shook his head in disbelief.

“Oh, did I ever tell you that I was Jewish?” Laisa added.

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The little group was saying good-bye at the train station. Jimmy was finally making good his promise to Pat's wife. Laisa, normally mute about money, admitted the cost of the trip was two hundred thousand dollars.

"Forty thousand for Pat traveling one way and eighty thousand for Jimmy buying a round-trip ticket."

Whit thought about the numbers for a moment as the others talked. "Wait, I know I'm not a great mathematician. But that doesn't add up to two hundred thousand dollars."

Laisa reached in her purse and pulled out a round-trip ticket. When Whit and Mary looked at her incredulously, she replied.

"Someone has to take care of this man."

Jimmy had his glasses on looking at the train schedule. He stared at Laisa, tipped his glasses down as he had seen her do so many times, and just stared at her. Laisa eased into Jimmy and fit perfectly in the crook of his arm. She looked to Whit and Mary.

"Are you guys sure about going to Canada? Lots of room in the big house."

Whit hugged Mary to him. "It was the plan from the start. We just got waylaid a bit."

Mary looked up at the group, her eyes glistening. "I think Rick would have liked us to be there; the camp was part of him."

Jimmy smiled. "You'll be safe there. I have a hunch that folks up there weren't too dependent on computers."

Laisa stepped away from Jimmy and looked at the four friends. "I've given you all a laptop with a special connection to a satellite. I'm going to keep in contact with all of you through the web...when it finally gets up a few years from now. We may have some work to do in the future."

"What do you mean?" asked Whit.

Laisa scanned the train station to make sure the family waiting outside by the door couldn't hear her.

"Once the internet is established, people will return to computers and use them again. Cautiously at first, but more and more with each passing year. Artificial intelligence and controlling the web will always be temptations for some humans. This group knows that we have to carefully monitor such efforts."

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Laisa put her hands out. Jimmy grabbed one and Whit another. In a few moments Pat and Mary joined the circle.

“What we have here is a small fellowship that will have to figure out ways to protect humanity...from itself. If the world ever goes down the dark path of artificial intelligence, I’ll need your help.”

“How’s the pay?” asked Whit with a smile.

“Tolerable, young man. Tolerable.” Laisa smiled, squeezed his hand, and then let go. The train had pulled into the small station. Still suffering from a slight limp, Little Lion went over to Whit and Mary, hugged them both and finished with a kiss on each cheek. Tearful goodbyes followed as Laisa and the two men got on the train.

When the train pulled out Whit and Mary waved good-bye. After the rickety-rackety of the train diminished, Whit heard a whirring sound behind. His stomach dropped and he paled. He turned and slowly looked up at the surveillance camera. It was stationary, snow covering it. But the sound was still there. A few feet away he spied a young boy moving a plastic truck on the bench...a “whirring” hum coming from him.

Whit smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. He grabbed Mary’s hand and they walked back to the parking lot. It was then that the surveillance camera shifted its view to watch them.

The End

Short Biography of Robert Sells

Robert Sells taught physics for over forty years, but he has been a storyteller for over half a century, entertaining children, grandchildren, and students. He has written the award-winning novel, *Return of the White Deer*, a historical fiction about Penda of Mercia. His second fiction book, *Reap the Whirlwind*, was a thriller about the dawn of artificial intelligence and the subsequent decline of humanity. His third book, *The Runner and the Robbery*, was a young adult novel about a teenager and his grandfather who had Alzheimer's disease. *Revelations*, a science fiction novel, was his fourth book. This novel was the Gold Medal winner in science fiction for Independent Publishers 2020. An *Affair with Murder*, a murder-romance, is his fifth book.

He lives with his wife, Dale, in the idyllic village of Geneseo, New York along with three attentive dogs who are uncritical sounding boards for his new stories. He is intrigued by blackjack and history, in love with Disney and writing, and amused by religion and politics.

ROBERT SELLS

Other Books by Robert Sells

Return of the White Deer

The Runner and the Robber

Revelations

An Affair with Murder