

JOE

A
NOVEL



STEVE RUBIN

‘JOE’

A Novel

By

Steve Rubin

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Authors note: *Thanks for picking up my book! I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'm a bit of a late bloomer but I promise lots more fun and funny adventures are on the way.*

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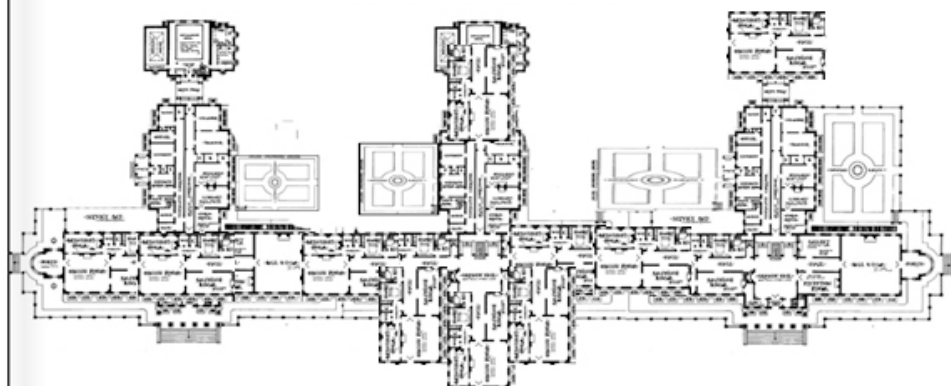
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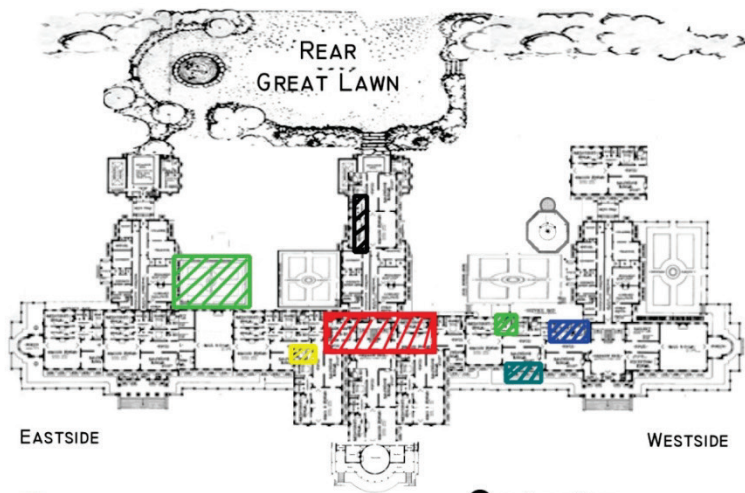
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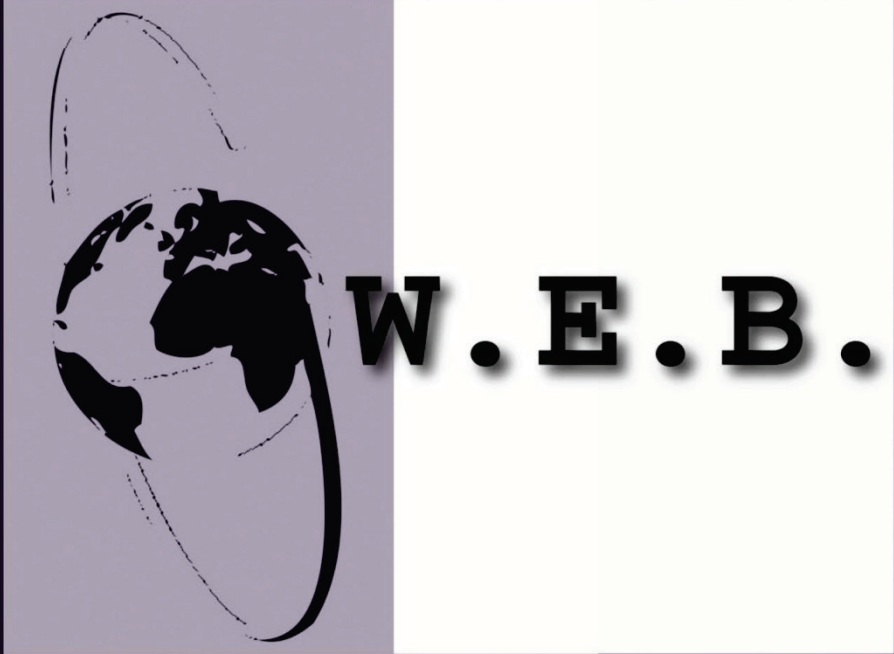
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- O LD KID'S CLUBHOUSE

WORLDWIDE ELECTRON BAND



JOE ELLIOT

Book One

ONE



“**W**hy does it have to be about ‘crank’? That means meth, right?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. Why don’t you ask them?”

“They’re your characters, asshole. If you don’t want me to read this, if you’re not taking me seriously...”

“Easy baby, easy, I’m just playing. Let’s see, they’re tweakers because... I want them to be able to do superhuman cognitive things, stay up for days on end cracking some code while the clock ticks down toward doomsday.”

“Oh, whatever,” Eva threw the thin manuscript back onto my desk. “I’ll read it when it’s finished.”

I walked back to my desk and fell into my chair, hard, swiveled back, two creaks, put up my feet and chewed contemplatively on the end of a ball-point pen.

“Did you ever do that shit? Meth?” Eva said.

“Me?” I motioned innocently. “Nah, no. Did a few Quaaludes, coke once or twice. I’m a writer, baby. It means I’m *supposed* to be a pill popper, or a smashing drunk.”

“Well, *Mr. One-Glass-of-Red*, you’re not holding up that part either, are you.”

“You want me to what? Drink more? Become a raging boozier?” I said. “Yeah, dickhead, that’s just what I want. I’m getting ready. And, I’m leaving in forty-five. With or without you,” Eva walked off.

“Yeah yeah,” I muttered, and went back to my pen-chewing, and chair-swiveling. “You’re beautiful, Babe.”

Eva called back from the bedroom, “yeah, yeah.”



TWO

“**Y**ou’re late,” I told Eva as she strode harried into

Mickey’s, our favorite local dive. She whipped off her jacket and scarf and leaned over the table to give me a perfunctory kiss.

“First time for everything. Did you order?” She said.

“Just a salad,” I said. “I’m starving.”

“Well, order. Order. Don’t worry about me,” Eva waved her hand at Connie, the waitress. *Beer?* Connie mouthed. Eva nodded. “Okay,” she settled into the cracked and duct-tape ribboned banquette. “Tell me about ‘W.E.B.’”

I leaned back and folded my hands behind my head, amused. “Thought you wanted to wait...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, just fucking tell me, all right? I’m interested now. Especially since this is going to be ‘The One’ right? So I can quit going to work, maybe get knocked up,” Eva said.

I laughed at this, unclasped my hands, and leaned forward conspiratorially. “I’m still working out some kinks, but basically ‘W.E.B.’ stands for ‘Worldwide Electron Band’.

“Electrons? Like in atoms?”

I laughed at this too, then leaned back so Connie could unceremoniously dump my salad in front of me, oblivious or

unconcerned to the dislodged cherry tomato which I replaced with my fingers after its roll across *who-knew-what* on the tabletop.

“Where else?”

“Oh I don’t know Mr.’C’ student, how about an electron microscope? Or electron-ics in general? Hmm? How ‘bout those?” Eva said.

“Electrons are electrons, bozo. Those are *applications*. Stick to artwork.”

“Eat me,” Eva replied.

Connie dropped (*literally*) some more food onto the table. I picked up a french-fry, dipped it in gravy, took a bite, and then motioned the other half at Eva, cementing my point. “Okay. The two geeks set out operating on the premise that the technologies afforded to some people allow them to process everything that goes on in the world, by reading variances in electrons. And I do mean everything. Every action, every object, every thought, generates change on the atomic level, represented by variations in electron patterns. It’s the trump card, the ultimate ‘source’ for information. Want to know how many tanks a country has, no, better yet, want to know how many bullets a country has *down to the bullet*? No, even better still, what if you just had to know what the workers *making* the bullets had for breakfast, or wait, wait, better still, how they *felt* about what they *had* for breakfast...”

Eva rolled her eyes. “That’s ridiculous Joe, even for you. For one thing, the processing would be absurd...”

“...Quantum processors,” I interjected.

“And how would you get, say, a bullet maker, to lie under your microscope, so you could observe his electrons?”

“Satellites. It’s called fiction, Eva. It’ll be a good story, you’ll see.”

“It needs to be a *great* story Joe.”



THREE

O kay. A little about me. My name is Ronald but for

some reason people call me Joe. It's been Joe for so long I don't even remember being Ronald, I just know that that's my given name, oh, Ronald Elliot, so Joe Elliot if we should meet somewhere formally. I'm just over six-foot one with light brown hair and a runner's build. When I wrote this I was twenty-nine; my girlfriend Eva Womack, she was twenty-three. She is one of those Norse goddesses with almost white-blond hair, cut short, and a lithe body toned from years of swimming, volleyball and running away from men like me. We lived in a little town outside of Newport, Tiverton, Rhode Island. The winters were damp, grey and bone-cold.

We both grew up in Boston, although actually Eva grew up in LA, except for two years she spent in Boston but, well, whatever. We both had good jobs too, but I was often between things. Eva worked as an assistant to this weird artist- lady, a sculptor, of sorts, named Madeline who came from a ton of old money, had a ton of land, and an estate the size of Toledo, where she birthed some incredible pieces, some rather behemoth with titles like '*Struggling Tyranny*' (see: *rampaging elephants made from old tires*), or my personal

favorite: ‘*Wee Things*’, which, in actuality, was two giant bulldozers locked in embrace, lying on their sides, purportedly being held aloft on an anthill made from spun sugar (*although no one could tell because of the five freaking tons of dozer laying on top of it. We took Madeline at her word*). Eva went over on odd days at odd hours but made good green cash, and I mean real dollars, some of it so old it looked confederate, that Eva said Madeline seemed to have an endless source of, and often handed Eva some of, as if Madeline found having so much of it around a nuisance (*here, you take it*). Madeline would walk around singing too, screeching more like. I heard her a couple of times when I swung by to meet Eva, and I don’t know how either of them put up with it despite the cavernous size of Rockhurst Manor, which was what Madeline’s house was called, perched atop the ocean side of Rockhurst Point. When it was constructed, some twenty-million years ago, the rock that gave Rockhurst Point its name was probably formidable and dominated the landscape until a little over two-hundred years ago when William Baines Sumner, Madeline’s *Great-Great-Great-Grandpappy*, a real blue-blood who from what I’d heard probably used recruits fresh off the Underground Railroad to move enough smaller rocks to cover half the moon (*or build a 32,000 square-foot monstrosity*). Whereas many of the old mansions and castles of the powerbrokers of yesteryear fell on hard times or got gutted and carved into neat little condos, *Great-Great-Great-Grandpappy* Sumner set up a trust to cover the overhead for Rockhurst Manor, surely into perpetuity, maybe longer; as long as its inhabitant(s, *-varied*) could feed themselves they would always have a nice place to live. Or create gigantic sculptures.

I worked as a writer, a waiter, a mechanic, a painter, a laborer, a sales rep, a warehouse manage and a writer, all within eight years, except for that part about being a writer, twice, as even once is still

open to debate. We lived in a cool little apartment right down by the docks, themselves once a little mini-city of heavy, wooden planks, and heavier sea-smells, and currently lots of decrepit old buildings; one-hundred thousand tiny, broken windows rowed ten deep, spreading lazily toward infinity in both directions, held over from a time when Tiverton's docks were Times-Square-busy with whalers, fishermen and merchant ships, and town numbered better than 30,000. Now, an entire day could go by where occasional (*sometimes continuous*) glances out the window while I was writing might not yield view of a single moving boat, not even a dory or a skiff. Almost like a little ghost town, this strip along the harbor side, but a cool place to live, and we lived there for five years. The part about Eva wanting to get knocked up has some ring of truth to it; actually it had more of a Japanese gong to it than a ring since that's pretty much all we fought about, which meant it was pretty much all we talked about too. Day and night, nights and weekends, holidays, you name it. It wasn't often about money either although (*drum roll*) surprisingly that did enter the equation; also some crap about my immaturity or something, blah, blah, blah, and whether I could be a good father (*and, eventually, a 'real' husband, whatever that meant*). I always wanted to know why we couldn't just have sex for half the day (*12 hours*) and then well, what were we talking about? Oh yeah. Women. Can't live with 'em, and pass the beer nuts (*or, more contemporarily, pass the natural little rice crunchy things flavored with soy sauce 'cause, you know, they're better for you*). Did I mention Eva was a vegetarian? Or maybe a vegan, I don't know, except she ate chicken every once in a while, and fish most of the time, and then a cheeseburger at *Jack-in-the-Box*, but only sometimes.

I had the standard piles of rejection letters, kept only to confirm to no one that I was indeed trying to sell my work. Some were several years old. Maybe this latest project, 'W.E.B.', would be

different. The assumption that known technology is assumed to be about a decade behind the good stuff, and what, exponentially, in today's world this actually meant, I thought that this particular work of fiction might (*like many great works*) offer some believability.

I heard Eva come in.

"Hello Dear, I'm home," she sang, forcing a wide, impossible grin.

Leaning back, I examined her. "What's your problem?"

"You. You're always my problem," she leaned over and kissed me, showing plenty of boob.

"Why are you always hanging out of your top?" I asked, making my point with the back-end of my pen.

Eva feigned a sigh that maybe spoke of her strained patience (*annoyance, with me*) despite our years together and the seeming lack of any maturity (*ever*) from my camp. She said: "So what's for dinner? You want to go out?"

"*Budget be damned* and screw the college fund?"

Eva walked off toward the bedroom. "Yes, Joe. Just like that."

"Okay. Sure," I said, capping my pen and standing to stretch.

"Get a lot done?" Eva called out from beyond.

"Writing-wise?" I said.

"Anything-wise. Why, what else did you do?"

"Stuff," I said.

"Stuff. Yeah like what kind of stuff?" Eva returned to view, somehow into an entirely new costume already. I will say this for my gal: amongst other things, she gets ready like a guy.

"All the stuff around here that you never do, which is everything. Come on," I slapped her on the rump (*as opposed to the 'ass' which would have been sexist*), "shouldn't we be discussing getting you pregnant?"

“No, asshole, because all you want to talk about is fucking, while I want to talk about procreation and the responsibilities inherent with it,” Eva said.

“I love it when you use big words. Where do you want to go?” I said.

“Casey’s? I don’t care.”

Casey’s Pub was a little dive bar with great chowder, that somehow morphed into a quaint little eatery in the summer before mystically returning to its seedy norm almost overnight. It was off-season seedy now, but the food was still good.

Eva munched on her salad. “I mentioned your project to Madeline today.”

“Horrors.”

“She happens to think it’s really cool. I think she might even want to talk to you about it.”

I said: “Talk to me? Madeline? Your boss, Madeline?”

Eva ignored me and pressed on. “You know how she is. You shouldn’t make light of it.”

“Why because the great ‘*Madeline Sumner-Stone*’ deigns grant me an audience?”

“She’s fucking brilliant, Joe.”

“I’m not saying she isn’t. But she’s an artist, Eva, and I’m just a lowly writer.”

“Afraid she might add something relevant? Or, worse yet, maybe she has a connection or two in publishing. Maybe one her umpteen cousins, you know, owns McGraw-Hill?” Eva said.

“Let’s try that again. When should I come by? I’d love to hear what the brilliant Madeline Sumner-Stone has to say about ‘W.E.B.’”

Eva smiled. "That's better. Tomorrow, after you get done with all of your other 'stuff'. By maybe eight? Eight-fifteen?"

I ignored her, then nodding assent I shifted gears. "Why do we come in here all the time? Off-season? I can smell Jimmy from here, and he's all the way down the bar."

"When did you get all high-and-mighty?" Eva said.

"We could at least go to '*The Pointe*'. It's usually half-clean."

"Maybe if you didn't stress-out about so many little things we'd already be pregnant," Eva said.

An amazing transition. I said: "Here we go..."

"And save your sarcastic bullshit: *'we're not getting anything, babe'*, because I'm not in the mood," Eva said.

"Guess I'll be hearing that a lot. Oh no, wait, you can't withhold sex from me because that would be self-defeating," I said smugly.

"Joe," she was using her stage-one serious tone.

"Eva," mine was a feebler attempt.

"Do you even want a child? I mean, for real, because you sure don't act like it. And... and I don't mean do you want one for me, Joe. I know you love me; that's not it. And I think you'd make a pretty decent father, maybe after we tweak a few things. But my point is, my point is, it just seems like I'm the one who's always pushing for this. I'm the one making the doctor's appointments, and going in first, to see if it's me, if it was something I'm doing wrong. Then, I realized this morning I never really asked you what you wanted."

I leaned back as the waitress cleared our plates. Eva motioned for two coffees.

This was one of those moments in a relationship where the precipice on both sides teetered dangerously over an abyss. Appear callous or indifferent, and your partner might very well fall out of

love with you right then and there, in Casey's Pub dive-bar, over bowls of great chowder. Appear exuberant, and face renewed scrutiny and suspicion that said exuberance was not coming from the heart. I did what I usually do.

Very diplomatically, I said: "Do you want to split a piece of pie?"

"Joe!" Level-two.

I held up a hand. "Okay, okay. Seriously, here's where I'm at. Nothing you don't know already. I don't feel real comfortable making decisions when I'm really not working," Eva went to interject but again I held up my hand. "You know what I mean, being the breadwinner, earning enough to support us both, and a kid. Or two. I mean, we're both into you being the mother, and the primary child-raiser, but right now, for example, you earn about two-thirds of our total income."

"But-how-do-you-*feel*?" Eva pressed. "Do you really want to be a dad? To change diapers, and look after, and drive around, and support forever."

"Yes. I do. I really, really do," (you still got it Joe; that second 'really' sealed the deal).

Eva's smile was big. I took her hands.

Twenty-two minutes later we were actively pursuing my preferred part of the accord.



FOUR

My old Honda gave it customary oil burp (*more of a pop, really*) after crunching purposefully along the winding gravel and crushed shell drive that seemed two miles long (*only actually half a mile*) and ended at the palatial front doors of Rockhurst Manor, the main building, that is. There were three or four other domiciles on the property ‘grounds’ including a carriage house which was the size of most five-bedroom homes, where two full-timers lived. Madeline had apparently grown up here, moved, then returned and remained the primary resident as parents and siblings and cousins fourth-removed came, went and died. She transformed almost the entire third and second floors in one entire wing from I would guess was maybe ten rooms down to two; her office and what she called her ‘main studio’. Then, she also gutted one wing on the ground floor for I guess what might be called studio ‘B’ (*because it was just plain impractical to try to maneuver gigantic bull-dozers locked in passionate embrace in and around a third floor loft*). The place was more freaky than spooky, although it was so dark and cold and stony that it could, maybe even should, have been terrifying. Maybe Eva’s point about Madeline’s brilliance was spot-on and her

energy just spilled from her and spread everywhere. I let myself in without knocking; unless you had one of those Viking battering rams you could bang your hand bloody and unless they happened by no one would hear you. Plus, I'm not sure if there was something electronic, but the male (*butler*) part of the two full-timers always seemed to appear in the periphery whenever I went there, as soon as I came in; neither greeting or admonishing me, simply making his presence known.

I wound my way up the Tara-like staircase that flanked the right side of the tertiary entranceway, or sub-first-floor-living room, or giant freaking hallway, whatever it was properly called, and headed toward the third floor, enduring an auditory attack that grew with each step as apparently the '*Grande Dame*' was in a screeching state-of- mind, choosing this day to annihilate some Italian aria, was my best guess. The hallways and stairwells were sprinkled with art, some of it fine, some of it museum-quality, and despite being well worn and probably in need of modern refurbishment, the place was always tidy, subtly leaden with the heavy, residual smells of years of lemon-oil and pine. I avoided the banisters as years of use left them looking kind of greasy. Now mere feet from the final doors, the interminable screeching was reaching crescendo; I thought her capable of breaking glass, assured actually, as if Madeline didn't tone it down I would be compelled to put my head through a window.

Eva saw me as I opened the door and motioned from across the cavernous space. Madeline had several smaller projects going on randomly about, and gratefully the 'singing' feathered slowly toward silence just as my eye wandered to find the plate-glass window.

"Hello Joe. What do you know?" Madeline drolled.

"Hi," I nodded, and waved perfunctorily. Eva set down some brushes she was cleaning and toed over lightly to give me a kiss.

Today, Madeline was a real mess. She was rail-thin, probably sixty, but dyed her hair a bright, violent red which made it hard to tell. Make-up had likely never touched her face which was also thin to the point of gaunt, but somehow not entirely unattractive. She wore a lightweight dress over stretch pants, and today her standard uniform was splashed with brightly colored paints. As she was wont to do, she went to say something then got a thousand-yard stare, and abruptly turned to splash some paint on a female mannequin torso that was affixed atop an old barbeque grill. Eva motioned me over with some incomprehensible series of hand signals, head nods and some twitching. I half ignored her- I knew the Madeline routine – and instead stood like a patient soldier.

After about five minutes Madeline, apparently satisfied with whatever she had just added (*vomited*) onto her piece, made some sort of grunting noise, turned and handed Eva three large paintbrushes. She walked back over and smiled at me as if seeing me for the first time.

“Hey, Joe.”

“What do ya know?” I added, offering one of my most impish grins.

Madeline considered a response but it flittered away. She said: “How have you been?”

“Just fine, thanks. Splendid, actually.”

“Ah,” she held a bony finger aloft, “you writers and your...words.” I really had no response for such prescience, so I remained silent.

Suddenly, as if bolstered by a jolt of electricity, Madeline began moving toward her office in a manner that bode me to follow but clearly not Eva, whom Madeline waved off with some little hand signal of her own. Madeline said: “Tell me more about this web-thing you’re working on,” she strode through the door-less entryway

into an 'office' the size of a really big living room (*only bigger*). It looked like how I imagined the copy room at *'The New York Times'* might look after an earthquake, but hey, I'm sure she knew where everything was.

Without asking her permission (*and I'm sure that she took note*), I lifted a pile of papers from one of a handful of chairs strewn about in front of the desk, set my beaten leather satchel on the floor beside me, and plopped myself down. "Well, to be honest with you..."

"...I certainly hope that you would."

"The story is still coming along. I'm a flow guy; I don't outline much of what I write," I said.

"I see," Madeline said.

"I'm not really sure why Eva mentioned it, unless she was ragging on my 'loser status' as a writer. Or, how we're trying to get pregnant."

"We?"

Maybe I liked Madeline after all. I smiled. "Anyway, why don't you ask questions and I'll try to answer them?"

She pondered this for a moment, becoming distracted with some letter in some pile, then spoke while apparently still reading. "Well, obviously since you don't have the whole story laid out yet, Eva could not have provided much detail. As I am to understand the general premise, you have some computer nerds stumble upon some giant electronic device that records everything everyone says and does. Sounds like a real conspiracy theory. And you know how I do love a good conspiracy theory." I did not. "Now, explain this web?"

It wasn't 'web', it was 'W.E.B.', but there was no need to correct her. "The whole book? It's a story too, kind of a love-story thing."

Medline's incessant hand-shooing indicated for me to move on. "No, I don't care about the story. I want to hear your thoughts on the technology."

"My thoughts? Uh, okay, well really it's just a natural progression, an extrapolation if you will, of things that are already out there, coupled with things that are probably out there. Remember how Star Trek had communicators, and then our very first portable cell-phone was a flip-phone that looked just like it? Sorry, I'm babbling, I'm just not used to having to defend something that is in the process of being written," Medline reared back with a look that blared: *'I'm not making you defend anything...'* Quickly, I said: "What I see anyway, what makes sense to me, is that given what's available, or known anyhow, I think it's more than likely that machines exist, maybe not machines anyway, but more, systems, where computers interact with machines, scientific machines, to create this electron web called the '*Worldwide Electron Band*' that can be directed at an object, animate or inanimate, and draw absolutely any kind of data you wanted from the echoing data stream. From, say, size and weight, to literally thoughts and feelings. It sort of makes the world a giant video game."

"And begs a question," Madeline held up a finger, "as to who is actually playing the game."

I wasn't shocked by Madeline's reaction, or non-reaction, whatever, but the whole notion of the 'W.E.B.' was a little out there, even as pure fiction.

"It's a fascinating idea, Joe. It was my understanding that most of what you liked to write involved serial killers with sharp knives," Madeline said.

"Some."

“But, that aside, I would like to read a draft when it’s ready. If, you don’t mind. Perhaps I could work it into a piece. Any kind of publicity, any kind of exposure; I’m quite well known, you know.”

“Quite,” I agreed.

Suddenly, Madeline shot up from her desk. She began to pace with her bony legs, arms crossed. I settled into my chair and crossed my knees, tempted, for an instant, to lean back, prop my feet up and fold my hands behind my head, but thought: *why push it*. We sat this way for several passes before Madeline reached her conclusion and sat back down, folding her hands before her and staring at me intently. “Let’s build one.”

Of all of the things I could have imagined her concluding, this was way, way down on the list. Cautiously, I dipped a toe in the pond. “Build...*what*? The ‘W.E.B.’?”

“Of course, ninny, what else? Haven’t you been paying attention?” Madeline almost barked.

Uncrossing my legs, I leaned forward. “Begging your pardon, Ma’am, but the ‘W.E.B.’ is computers and satellites and laboratory scanners and electron microscopes. I mean, I guess some of it might be possible. You’re talking about creating one for one of your pieces?”

She shook her head mischievously. “An actual working model. It would be, quite possibly, the greatest piece of modern art ever conceived.”

Part of me wanted to laugh, another part of me wanted to throw up; both parts were excited which didn’t make a whole lot of sense. So I settled back into my chair and re-crossed my legs. She said, “Would you know how to build one?”

“Me? Of course not. I mean conceptually, sure, but that’s all that it is, a concept.”

She rubbed her hands conspiratorially. “What if we hired some people, some real geeky tech-guys, like from M.I.T. or Harvard or something? Couldn’t they do it?”

I was getting frustrated. “Madeline, I know you’re well-to-do but do you know how much a freaking satellite costs? Like a billion dollars. Even some of the lab equipment, I know, runs into the millions.”

“You just let me worry about what things cost. I happen to have a lot of friends, on my own, through the arts, and of course through our Foundation,” (*of course there would be a Sumner Foundation...or twelve*).

My head was now swimming. I had no idea why I was participating in this charade but then my mouth was opening again. “How about if I research some of the pieces and we’ll see, just for grins?”

Madeline unfolded her hands and leaned back. “That would be fine. The sooner the better. I do like to work on things while they are fresh, while the iron is hot, all of that.”

“Well, I’m kind of busy, but how about if we meet again next week?”

“Fine,” she smiled.

I smiled back.

The meeting was over.

I got home fully intent on writing but being inexplicably drawn into what I now referred to as: ‘Madeline’s Psychosis’ (*I will present this offer for-title later*). Then I found myself researching things like ‘*molecular radiation machines*’ and ‘*scanning electron microscopes*’, the eventual roadblocks to which I eventually attempted circumvention of by calling my scientist buddy at

Berkeley, Mark Klipnik, from whom I had already gleaned most of the outline for the scientific portions of the 'W.E.B.'.

"Buy it? Are you crazy, Joe? Wait, let me answer that..."

"Don't you think I know this? The woman's nuts. But loaded"

"Buddy she needs to be loaded billions with a 'B' not millions with an 'M'. Who is she? A Walton or something?"

"No, a 'Sumner' actually, but that's really not the point..."

"And even if she could buy this stuff..."

"I know. She could never implement it, without someone like you."

"Me? How about like hundreds of me's, maybe more. Smarter too."

"I thought there wasn't anyone smarter. That's why I called you in the first place."

"No, you called me in the first place because I'm the only physicist and computer engineer, I believe, that you know. And there's always someone smarter, don't kid yourself."

"Nevertheless," I said.

"Nevertheless, most of this stuff could only be obtained through a university, or maybe a really big lab, though I doubt very much anyone in the private sector has ever attempted it. I mean, why?"

"Just price it for me, will you. Use your best guess if you have to, round up to the nearest billion with a 'B'. This is Eva's boss, remember."

"Oh *Eva*, why didn't you tell me. Of course I'll stop what I'm doing to spend a few hours fucking around."

"Easy tiger," I said.

"All right, all right. Give me what, about two hours," Mark said.

"I'll be here."

We hung up.



FIVE

Eva just slightly preceded the closing storm door, an ancient aluminum unit probably bought at Sears or JC Penney thirty years ago (*or one-hundred thirty*) and somehow still managing to close shut despite having been torqued way out of true some decades ago. If there was even a slight wind the door would snap closed with a squeaky ‘*thwap*’ that was generally annoying. She said: “So. How’d it go? You weren’t in there very long.”

I strode over and kissed her on the lips. “Hey.”

“Well, what happened? Usually can’t keep Madeline quiet, but she was all mum this afternoon,” Eva said.

“Well, she does have bull-dozers to mate,” I said.

“Tell me,” Eva’s serious voice number two (*the not-that-angry but still insistent one*).

“Nothing really,” I was purposefully coy. “She wants to build one.

“Build one what?” Eva was genuinely confused.

“A ‘W.E.B.’ Well, more like a ‘P.E.B.’ where you substitute ‘worldwide’ for ‘personal’.”

“To do what with? Spy on her neighbors?” Eva said.

I feigned exasperation. “You of all people should know, for a piece, for *the* piece she said, ‘*the single greatest piece of modern art ever created*’.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Join the club.”

Eva moved into the kitchen (area) and dropped her ginormous purse down onto the kitchen table (I wasn’t sure but I think her mother might be living inside; it was certainly big enough, and well-enough stocked. I’ve just been too afraid to look).

Eva said: “Okay, so she buys a bunch of expensive scientific equipment...”

“Check.”

“...and people stop by to look and it scans their electrons...”

“Ions,” I said.

“Whatever. Then what, tells their fortune? *I see into your past, you had ‘Grapenuts’ for breakfast,*” Eva said.

I moved into the kitchen, leaned against a counter, folded my arms. “She’s your kooky boss.”

“Who, as we know, has the method, means and motive to do pretty much whatever she wants,” Eva said.

“Maybe not this time though. This stuff’s expensive, some of it ridiculously so. I’ve got Mark working on it.”

“Mark Klipnik? Hm.”

“Hm,” I mocked her, my mock approaching a sneer. “Why ‘hm’? Like that?”

“Like what?” She smiled wickedly and strode into the bedroom. Eva actually knew Mark first and there always seemed to be a little too much camaraderie between them despite Mark’s geekiness; they may have even dated (*an odd conundrum regarding exes of your partner: did you want them to be ‘George Clooney’ or ‘Steve Buscemi’? Both pissed you off*).

I said: “Yeah, he couldn’t wait to jump on the project once I mentioned it was for you and your boss.”

“Jumped right on it, huh?” Smart-mouth Eva was about to get her little fanny paddled. I tried to pull us back onto the rails.

I said: “Anyway, he’s making some calls but said a lot of the shit is super- expensive.”

“Like millions?” Eva said.

“Yeah, like that,” Eva took this in without further comment. I continued. “Would that crazy bat really spend like, maybe, say, ten or fifteen million, just to make a piece?”

Eva shrugged. “Who knows what she’d do. She has a lot of rich friends, and government friends, and foreign friends, and rich family members too you know. Maybe she could hit them each up for a mil or two. But aren’t you excited? I mean at least kind of?”

I scratched my head. “I suppose. Still don’t see how I, how we, can profit from it.”

“Book sales, you ninny (*ninny?*). Madeline gets mad coverage every time she shows. I’m sure she’ll mention how your book inspired her.”

“My book that I haven’t even finished yet?”

Eva skittered over and tapped me on the nose. “Egg-zactly.”

Tap, tap, tap, my fingers flew and words appeared. Eva came in with a cup of coffee that she blew on ritualistically; she didn’t drink her coffee that hot. She peered over my shoulder. “Why don’t they have names?”

Always happy to have someone reading over my shoulder while I struggled to not write (*as opposed to actual writing, which is easy*), I stopped tapping the keys. “Who?”

“The geeks. There’s all of this dialogue back and forth but we don’t know their names.”

“*Intentional*,” I said.

“Why not just call them ‘John’ and ‘Sam’ or something,” Eva pressed on.

“I was going to have them known by their screen names. You know, how people on-line are like: ‘*Angelfish@*’, like that, but then I thought: *why bother? What does it matter?*”

“Angelfish?”

“Whatever. You know what I mean; we’re all so anonymous on-line.”

“I don’t see how you can tell the story,” Eva said.

“The story tells itself,” I replied.

Eva waved her arms. “Perfectly confusing. And now, soon to be brought to life through the collaborative efforts of Joe Elliot and Madeline Sumner-Stone.”

I stopped typing. “Do you really think she’s that crazy? *And* that rich? One of these things, according to your ‘*boyfriend*’, costs over two-million by itself. And, I know some of this stuff’s going to be even more.”

Eva shrugged and popped a raisin into her mouth. “She always seems to do what she wants. When am I going to get what I want?”

I harrumphed. “You hot chicks always get what you want, in the end.”

“In the end? I see.”

I ignored her. “Think about it; you’re more conniving, devious and cut-throat, as a group.”

“True.”

“A far greater threshold of pain,” I waved my hands: *all together now: “Because women have babies.”*

Eva hugged me. "Oh very clever, a segue to your usual, pathetic begging for sexual favors."

"I'm the one doing you a favor."

"Doing me?" She batted her eyelashes.

"You're on fire," I told her, hugging her really hard.

She shrugged. "Well, you know."

I steered her toward the bedroom.



SIX

Ten weeks later, Madeline had been acting really oddly, in that she was really acting very normal, like most other fifty or sixty-somethings I knew: smart, coherent, and, for females, only mildly irrational. And, bless her sweet, golden heart, she had already begun acquiring equipment. My presence was only requested once a week. Every time I was summoned, I marveled at what one could accomplish when one had the means and motive. Equipment as sophisticated as ‘*scanning neutron microscopes*’ needed technicians to operate them, at least to a programming stage that would suit Madame Sumner-Stone’s criteria. That afternoon, a Thursday I think, there were no less than twenty of the geek-type technicians running around, somehow smoothly, cheerfully unwitting participants in the first-stage of the greatest piece of modern art ever created.

Commenting on the new floor that seemed to be forming from the ever-expanding cables, cords and wires which spun thickly in a mad variety of groupings, myriad in color and linear pattern, Madeline said: “No, no, we’ll worry about that later. A crawl space, but maybe recessed, under the platform or the floor. I’m not sure if I want to have to step up into it.” Earlier I’d asked Madeline if she wanted to hire me to act as foreman, but she was managing

remarkably well. “The generator from England will be here by Friday,” she announced, I guess, to me, but I really wasn’t keeping up with what was going on, specifically, nor did I care to inquire why the good old *U S of A* didn’t make a suitable one. Madeline was on top of it.

Sliding her glasses down her nose to peer over them, she signed something for a technician with her eyes flickering onto me. “Have you finished the manuscript, incidentally?”

Having anticipated the obvious question, I tried clever obfuscation: “Nothing ‘*cidental*’ about it,” I said.

“You writers,” she admonished again with a bony finger as she was on the move again toward her office. Honestly, the area more resembled a NASA staging area than any artist’s studio I’d ever seen.

“Almost writer,” I followed with the non-committal.

“Well, ready or not, *What-do-you-know-Joe*, when I’m ready, I’m showing. If you want to peddle your ‘*literary wares*’, I would suggest you get ‘*committal*’ in a hurry.” (*Good one, Madeline*)

“Yes Ma’am,” I replied half-heartedly. “Have you seen Eva by the way?”

Madeline waved her hand in the air, distracted by something on her desk, “Around here somewhere. But try not to distract her. We have too much to get done.”

I wandered off into the cavernous unknown, otherwise referred to as the third floor, third wing of Rockhurst Manor. Asking any of these ‘busy bees’ if they’d seen the bob-haircut, statuesque white-blonde (*with the very occasionally piss-poor demeanor*) would only waste time so I just started weaving around and knocking on doors. Rounding the third corner, on the nineteenth hallway, I heard Eva’s laugh, puzzling, as I thought that normally only I could elicit it. It was strangely playful, I noted, (*flirty?*). I followed my investigation up the carpeted rise to the fourth-floor, left, then right

down yet another hallway, another right through an open door and into some kind of room or balcony that overlooked the main studio below, a perch I had not noticed from the studio floor, though in truth it was easy enough to be distracted by what was going on, on the floor. Eva had her back turned to me and was leaning over in an attempt to hear whatever Madeline was calling up to her. There were two technicians fiddling in one corner, and one beside Eva who turned when I came in.

“Hey Joe. What’s up?” Mark Klipnik said.

Recovering quickly, and in fact (*of course*) happy to see my good friend, I said: “Hey Mark. What the hell are you doing here?”

Eva turned. “Hi. Look who’s here,” she was way more smiley than usual at work.

Mark Klipnik and I shook hands. “What the hell are you doing here? Installing? You don’t call, you don’t write? I’m hurt,” I joked.

“Madeline, well, Eva called me, but, anyway, I’m hired on as project administrator. Took a sabbatical from work, of sorts (*laughs*), though I don’t know if I’ll be re-hired.”

“Oh, they can’t fire you, Mark,” Eva chimed in.

“Seriously, Bro,” I continued. “You’re really here? Just like that?”

Eva leaned over to receive more instructions from below. Mark looked to be sure the other technicians were preoccupied then spoke low. “With what she’s paying me? Are you kidding? Plus who knows, I mean, what if it works? Seriously? If I pull this off I’ll get funded for anything I want.”

“I’m not doubting that,” I added, waiting to see if Eva wanted to again chime in. She did not. I went on. “You moved here and didn’t bother to tell me. Either of you? Hi Honey, by the way,” I leaned over and planted one on her lips.

Mark said: “Well, I guess I just got caught up in the immediacy of it all. I just got the call on Tuesday. Miss Sumner-Stone said: *What would it take to get you here?* I said: *When?* Thinking she meant next year or something, then she said: *Tomorrow.* So I told her how much and here I am.”

“So if it works you’ll be what, the gatekeeper?” I was happy to see my friend, but not too jazzed with his referring to the project in the first person. It was, after all, derived from a work of fiction, and said fiction was not penned by Dr. Mark Klipnik, PHD, it was penned by me, Ronald Sean Elliot, a.k.a. Joe Elliot, B.S.(*artist*).

“I don’t know how to operate all of it, especially the interface, and all the new code. Hell, nobody does. Probably need a couple of the guys with the spectro-graphics to stick around for at least the first few weeks,” Mark said.

I said: “What if it doesn’t work? I mean, what does *working* even mean? Do you really think you can build a machine that will be able to see into your cell structure to read thoughts or emotions? Just because Madeline can afford to be nuts doesn’t mean we have to buy into the ludicrous.”

Mark shook his head. “See, that’s where you’re wrong. It *might* work. Works on paper, and not just in fiction, I wouldn’t be here if it didn’t.”

“What about processing the data? Did you dig up a quantum processor somewhere?”

Mark smiled. “Close. Shereesh is setting up a little co-op where we can piggy-back onto three Cray banks at once. Hard-wiring fiber-optics.”

I began to pace. “You’re not freaked out by any of this? Like what if you flip it on and it makes a wormhole or something?” I waited for a response; none was forthcoming. “You said no one’s ever done something like this before.”

This comment drew Marks attention. "Are you kidding me? I meant as far as we know, as far as *I* know. And I know the concept for this system came from fiction, but good fiction always has applicable possibility, right? Do you really think there is anything we could dream up that other engineers who are on the government dole haven't thought up themselves, and probably built four or five of? To be honest, it really wouldn't surprise me if a system like this was already in place, but we'd never see it."

"Thus the quandary," I said emphatically. "Would it even matter? Could we even stop ourselves from thinking about it?"

"It', would know what we're building. Theoretically, I suppose it could pre-cog us, you know, assume our future thoughts and save us the trouble of all this wiring," Mark chuckled.

"Hurts your head thinking about it, doesn't it?"

"It can," Mark agreed.



SEVEN

I sat and stared at Eva who was pittering about, pretending to ignore me, which made her pittering, and subsequent aloofness, all the more irritating. “Will you stop pittering for a minute, please?” I said.

“Pittering? Is that even a word?”

“Look it up, Blondie.”

“Whatever. I’m not *pittering*, idiot. I’m trying to find some things,” Eva said.

“Maybe if you told me what you were looking for,” I said.

“Maybe if you’d mind your own *business*.”

“What is your problem? And don’t say: ‘You’. I mean for real, you’ve been, for you, downright, um, ‘moody’ now, for days.”

“Which goes to show how spoiled you are that I’m not a raging bitch like, oh, I don’t know, any, slash, all of your exes,” Eva said.

“Oh, so you’re *jealous* about something. *That* must be it. Maybe all of the attention I’ve been getting lately from Maddy,” I said.

This comment stopped Eva’s pittering. One fist went to her hip. “Maddy? Honestly, Joe, not ‘*what’s wrong with me*’, what the

hell's the matter with you? I'd bet you not even Great-Grandpa Sumner ever called Madeline 'Maddy'."

"See? My point is made, you are jealous," I smirked. "Any hoo, the other day, you weren't around, me and 'Maddy' were just kicking back, blowing a reefer," Eva scoffed, "...when your 'boyfriend', er the 'Project Coordinator', Mark..."

Eva jumped in, "Oh, so you're *projecting*, now I get it. You've got your little panties in a bunch because your buddy, who is way smarter than you, get's a guaranteed, salaried gig out of *your* project, while you struggle to finish the damn story."

"Easy now," I warned, only mostly playing. "Finishing the story is not about the machine, it's not about the system, it's a love story, remember? From which, I thought, I might glean nuggets from our *oh-so-precious* relationship."

Eva said: "Half of our romance gleans nuggets. Certainly not the masculine side."

I took her in my arms. "Let's not fight."

"We don't fight, remember?"

I said: "Only because I always kowtow to your greater, uh, wisdom."

Then: "Oh yeah, off-topic Jerry said he could get me on full-time for at least three months if I want it."

"Which shift?" Eva started to put the dishes away.

I stood from my crossed-arm lean and went to help her with the top-shelf glassware. "Morning. On at seven, off at three-thirty, four."

"What about Madeline? Isn't the project heating up?" Eva said.

I set the last bowl on the top shelf and closed the cabinet door. "Yeah, but what about money? You seem to be earning all of it lately."

Eva frowned. "You're still not taking this Madeline project seriously enough, Joe. And you're almost thirty. You shouldn't be pounding nails for a living."

"You don't pound, hardly anymore, they have these nail guns..." I said.

"Can you get serious please? Is it too much for you to ask that when we talk about starting a family, or supporting one, for you to be serious?"

"Since that's all we ever talk about," I muttered...

"Sorry, did you say something?" Now Eva's arms were crossed.

"No," I said powerfully (*meekly*).

"So if you could just finish the book and make it really good, then sell a bunch of them at Madeline's opening, wouldn't that be better than 'shooting' nails?"

"Just like that. Just finish it and make it good. I know how I want it to end, with the world one big, happy family, but damn, Eva, this is a lot of fucking pressure you know."

"You're either going to be a writer or you're not. Quit being such a pussy, go in there and write." My gaze followed her finger to my cluttered desk.

"In a minute," I said, trying to generate a shift the mood. "Did I ever tell you about the time..." I began, stopping when Eva's annoying hand (*gesturing come on, come on*) began flapping like some irate chicken. Pausing, I drew my breath, and then continued. "I was in grade school, maybe fourth grade? Walking home from school, I was always looking in people's trash. Not messy cans and crap but old stuff they'd put out once a month. Found all kinds of stuff, mostly garbage, but, anyway, on the way home from school one time, I come across this enormous box, I mean like maybe six feet long, packed full of yellow pages, phone books, these things people used to use before the Internet, you know? Anyhow, they were

brand new. Brand new! I couldn't believe my fortune. So I dragged the box all the way home, maybe three or four blocks but hell that box probably weighed twice what I did, literally."

"I'm sure your mother was thrilled," Eva said.

"Not exactly. I remember arguing with her, that they were brand new, and for her to join me in relishing my fortune. She explained that that was how they got delivered; a truck would drop off the big box, and then some guy would walk around and set them inside everyone's screen doors. Took three times as long to drag them back to where I found them, I can assure you of that."

"And you're telling me this...*why*?" Eva said.

I stuck out my chest. "Just showing you what I go-getter I've always been. Yep, don't have to worry about me none," I snapped imaginary suspenders.

Eva uncrossed her arms and her fists went first to her hips (*'bitchwings'*) then one hand pointed back at my desk (*single 'wing', plus one 'encouragement' finger*). "If you're so damn clever, Joe, why don't you write it down? You seem to think you're amusing. Maybe someone else will too."

"Love, is not amusing," I announced.

"Computer nerds in love?" Eva said.

"Something like that."



EIGHT

After actually doing some writing fairly late into Friday evening, I got up early on Saturday morning (9:30, *early for me*), pulled on my trusty (*and rusty*) Reebok runners and hit the pavement for some serious roadwork. Five, maybe ten miles (*away, is a nice city park where Eva and I have been known to picnic*), or only two or three if I was cramping. Or hot. Or cold. Or cool. Or disinterested, or, well, anyway I ran about three hard ones. Or, maybe, ran almost a hard one (*and jogged the last two-point whatever*). The point is, I went three. It was hard to get into shape with all of the pressure I was under, baby this, baby that, work, work, money, money, work, crazy Madeline Sumner-Stone, trying to earn my share but damn, writing was, even in the best of circumstances, pretty damn hard.

I jogged down along past the mostly deserted docks, the fine smell of ancient creosote, and fish guts, and seagull shit wafting on the air, then I went up Prescott Hill, around the rotary (*the greater Boston area is famous for them*) and down an unmarked side-street, then over to the bridge (*a small one, not the Tobin*) and kicked it a little harder when a carload of high-school girls with nothing better

to do seemed to be talking about me (*damn; he's in good shape for an older guy*). Wait, I wanted to yell: *I'm not that old*.

Laughing at my foolishness as I neared the end of the bridge, I saw another car, this one non-descript, metallic grey, that also seemed to be taking a bit of interest in my 'studly' training; two men, one thirty, one maybe fifty, either government guys or fags from the looks of them (*or gay, government guys, whatever*) or maybe, I thought, those Seventh Day Evangelists (*who would move right into your home and set up shop in your bedroom if you let them, if you didn't chase them out screaming one time, with a flame-thrower...or something*).

Making the turn, I headed back along the inbound side. From the crest in the middle of the low bridge, I could make out our apartment along the docks; the roof at least; well, the attic dormer window anyway that we have never been able to pry open.

My periphery caught unnatural slowing and I surreptitiously glanced over my shoulder, seeing those same two yahoos in the grey car really checking out my action now. Doing the typical Boston thing, and dressed the part in a layered menagerie of sweat shirts and ripped sweat shorts, I stopped and glared (*what's up?*) and motioned with my hands. As they moved off, steadily but not overly apace, I swore I saw one of them comparing me to something in a manila file folder, a photo, like PIs or Feds do in the movies.

Whatever.

I started my feet moving and shrugged. Probably a couple of 'fags' who found my picture online.

"Oh yeah, I almost got into it with a couple of fags. On the bridge," I took a huge pull directly from the orange juice container attempting to ignore the icy stare from my darling.

“You don’t use the word ‘fag’ any more Joe. It’s offensive,” Eva said.

“To who? The dandies?”

“Try gays. Or ‘*homosexuals*’, idiot. Or can you not say that word without getting a hard-on?”

I slid on my best Beavis. “*Heh heh, she said...*”

“What do you mean ‘got into it’?” Eva asked. “Like a fight?”

“Nooooo,” I replaced the orange juice and grabbed an apple. What a healthy guy. “Like anybody wants any of me. I meant they were, uh, cruising me.”

“Oh, so what, you almost jumped in bed with them? For a quickie? (*She changed her voice, mocking, masculine, me?*) ‘Yeah baby, ran fifteen today. In like what? Hour and a half. Yeah, that’s right. I’m bad-ass.’”

“Doesn’t even sound like me,” I took a bite.

“What, my impression? Or your having a little ‘afternoon soiree’? A *ménage-a-trios*, with two other guys?”

I had to hand her this round.

I said: “I’m gonna shower. Then can we swing by Madeline’s on the way to Chris and Beth’s? Just for a minute?”

“Sure,” Eva said.

Rockhurst Manor seemed even larger in the darkness. It seemed to have grown an entire floor, extra dark, looming. Madeline had asked that I try to sketch what I envisioned the ‘W.E.B.’ system to look like, and I produced a crude, boxy drawing that looked like something a fresh, new architectural student might come up with (*if they began teaching architecture to students in kindergarten*).

Apparently in conjunction with the new project, Rockhurst had a new feature installed. “When did that go in?” I asked as Eva’s thumbprint opened a side door.

“The other day. Mark says it runs off the same data-pipe stream thing, or whatever they tapped into for the project,” Eva replied.

“Oh, *Mark* said. Is he still here?” I asked.

We went through the door. “I don’t know, probably. He’s been staying in one of the rooms this past week. Some of those techies keep crazy hours.”

“You don’t think I should see Madeline directly? To give her this?” I asked, holding out the cardboard tube with my drawing rolled up inside.

“If we run into her, sure, but I’m off duty, and she doesn’t want to be bothered after five.”

We went up some narrow stairway I’d never been in, and appeared at the end of a hallway I’d never seen. Eva moved with purpose, as usual. I had to practically jog to keep up.

“Let’s take the elevator and be in and gone,” Eva steered me down another small hallway to a set of antique elevator doors sided by two small red covered benches and two potted ferns. “Here. Check this out. It’s powered by water. There are only a handful like this that still work. She actually bought it about fifteen years ago when they tore down some old building in New York City. Had them replace a modern one that was already installed.” We climbed in and Eva threw the bronze gate smoothly across its oiled track with a settled clank, then pushed a brass lever to ‘up’ and the floor began to shake and hum. “Listen, you can hear the water,” Eva said, and you could, a sort of pressurized whooshing sound as the car began to rise.

Madeline's main studio was subdued but still had both a literal and a figurative buzz. It was mostly dark except for a small, bright display beam that was pointed from a fixture that hung in the air down at the platform where Madeline's version of the 'W.E.B.' would ultimately be displayed. After my eyes adjusted, I looked up to the balcony, now subtly lit like an orchestra box at the opera. I could see some movement.

"Hey Mark. You up there?" I called out, maybe a little too loudly, my voice darting around the cavernous space.

Two heads poked out, neither of which were attached to Mark. "He's not here," one of them said.

Eva said: "Joe, come on. I told Beth we'd be over there by seven."

"Yeah yeah, all right, relax. We'll get there in time to eat whatever swill she's serving. Let me put this on Madeline's desk. Is that okay you think?"

Eva glared. "Yes, and Beth is an excellent cook. Just set that on Madeline's desk. She leaves it unlocked. Just set it somewhere where she'll see it and leave a note or a post-it or something so she knows what it is."

I walked across the wooden floor, cognizant of my footsteps, then knocked lightly on the door to Madeline's office and walked right in. The office was lit by some kind of floor or mood lighting. I turned on the lamp on her desk and looked for something to write on, finding a tiny book of fluorescent yellow post-it notes and a pen, then seeing a bigger pad poking out from beneath a pile that looked easier to write on, I took it and flipped past some pages of scribble and notes looking for the first blank page. The last page had a few lines I couldn't read; then I saw my name. Not wanting to be nosy but hey, come on, I held the page under the lamp and saw an email address written in pencil, 'Angelfish@...'.

I dropped my cardboard tube.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” I was close to screaming as Eva and I neared our friends’ street. “What the hell else could it mean? That Madeline’s real-life version of the ‘W.E.B.’ actually works?”

“Again, Joe, I don’t know and I don’t care. You probably just had it written somewhere and forgot, or mentioned it to her and forgot, or whatever. I mean, seriously, who fucking cares?”

“I’m going to ask her. Or you ask her, first thing tomorrow,” I said.

“And ask her what, why she has some dumb email address written on a private pad in her private office at her private home that my boyfriend snooped around for?”

“Again, Eva, I’m telling you now and I’ll show you when I get home, I never wrote it down, remember? You asked me why the conversation was nameless and I said because nobody uses an actual name when chatting online, that it was always ‘*Angelfish@*’ or something.”

“Okay, shut up, Joe. We’ll talk about it later, can we just have fun? Please?”

I found a place to park, near miraculous in this area of Providence. “Don’t forget the wine.”

After the usual kissy-face back-slapping crap I hate to go through whenever we visit certain friends, I handed my friend Chris the bottle of wine.

He said: “Hey man, this is the same bottle of piss we dumped off on you guys last summer.”

I smiled. “Sure, but now it’s aged.”

Another hearty slap landed on my upper back. Chris was a friend of mine from high school whom I had only sort-of kept up with over the years, but whose wife, Beth, and Eva had somehow become best buds. Now we saw one another a lot more, which, I guess, was all right. He wasn't particularly stimulating but he wasn't that annoying, either. And, generally, he smoked awesome weed.

"You two don't be long. We're eating in fifteen minutes," Beth warned us as we snuck out the back door and headed across the driveway to the stairs and garage apartment where Chris had his 'home office', really more of a man-cave.

He turned on a cheesy row of fluorescent lights and the flat screen TV, then handed me a cold Corona he produced from a small refrigerator. "Cheers." We clicked bottles. "Smoke?" He said.

"Sure," I replied. "But none of that shit that has a crazy name, 'purple passion beast' or whatever the hell that shit was you brought to our place. I was stoned all week."

"More bang for your buck, *Boy-o*," Chris grinned and produced a big fat joint, lighting it up and hitting on it impassively, alternating between a parched man at a desert oasis and a connoisseur of fine Cuban cigars. Twenty-five percent of the joint was gone before it headed my way.

"So what you been doing? Humping any with Jerry?" Chris asked.

"Thinking about it," I said, pungent smoke billowing from my nostrils. "Got this other gig going, with Eva's boss, Madeline Sumner-Stone. Say you remember my buddy Mark from Cali? He was out at George's wedding?"

"Oh yeah, yeah, I remember him, geeky guy, right? Eva sucked his dick or something before you guys hooked up."

"Fuck you," I scoffed and handed him back the joint. "Urban legend. Anyway, he's out here for like a month or so, maybe longer.

We should have a boys' night out or something, if you can apply for a pass from Beth."

"Hey, I run this house *Boy-o*. You know it," Chris handed me back the joint and took a big swig of beer. "So what's the gig?"

Well I'd opened the can and stirred the worms, so I said: "Shit, kind of hard to explain, but she, Madeline, read a manuscript I'm working on. She's like this big-time crazy artist, you know."

"Sure, I know who she is," Chris said.

I gave him the basic gist without inviting too many questions, and then Beth could be heard screaming from the back door.

Chris and I finished out beers and he flipped off the TV. "Yeah, I guess we can do your gay thing some night. Maybe catch a Sox game or something, get hammered at the 'Cask'," he said, referring to a local dive-bar near Fenway Park.

"Yeah, hey speaking of fags," I said, and told him of my little encounter during my run.

"See? I knew you swung both ways," Chris was saying as we went through the swinging back door and into the kitchen.

"Who swings how?" Beth asked. She was tall, blond and homely, and about Chris's size which was, how do you say, long, lean and lanky. Oh and pasty-white.

Chris said: "Joey boy. Tried to make it with some faggots on the bridge."

"You don't use that phrase anymore," Beth said.

"That's what I told Joe," Eva added.

"You wonder why Bostonians get the rap that they do but you two morons illustrate it every time you open your mouths," Beth added.

"Pie-holes, baby. *Pie-holes*," Chris said with emphasized Boston twang.

“As usual you make my point for me, Honey. Now, if you two are not too stoned, can one of you carve that brisket please so we can eat before the sun comes up?” Beth said.

Chris moved over. “I’ll do it. Keep the sharp objects away from ‘stonewall’ here,” he jerked his thumb toward me.

This comment brought the accusatory, once-over stare from Eva, who was apparently satisfied that I was not going to make more than my usual fool of myself. “What?” I asked her.

She shrugged and turned her attention back to Beth. “I was telling her about your book.”

“The one that we’re not supposed to talk about because it’s not finished yet? That book?” I said.

“Yes. That one. Whatever,” Eva rolled her eyes.

“I think it’s really interesting, Joe,” Beth said.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“I mean, I’m no conspiracy nut,” she went on, “but do you really think it’s possible to build something like that?”

I shrugged and sat down at the dinner table. “I guess we’ll find out. Madeline seems to be really serious about it. She hired half of Silicon Valley to put it together.”

“Including Mark what’s-his-name?” Chris offered from the kitchen.

“Klipnik,” Eva called out. She turned to Beth who was busy setting bowls of steaming crap onto the table. “You guys met him at Joe’s friend Greg’s wedding, remember? Brilliant guy.”

“Oh that geeky guy? Kind of cute?” Beth said.

“What’s so cute about him,” I asked. “I don’t see it.”

Chris piled on. “Maybe you’re really not a switch-hitter then?”

“Switch-hitter? What does that mean?” Beth said.

“You know, bi-sexual,” Eva said.

Beth said: “What’s with all of this gay talk?”

Chris walked in with a platter of sliced cow and nearly knocked over a bowl of swill trying to find room to set it down on the smallish dining table. "I told you. Joe tried to make out with a couple of guys on the bridge."

"Chris," Beth's fists went to her hips. Apparently 'bitch-wings' were endemic to the female species.

Chris held up his hands in mock surrender. "Hey, I'm just reporting the facts as told to me by the, er, '*man*' himself. Right, Joe?"

We all sat down. I waited until after I had partially loaded my plate (*trough*) before I spoke. "I didn't say for sure they were gay, I just said it felt like they were cruising me. I could have sworn one of them had a picture of me or something that they were comparing me to."

"You should stay off the dating sites," Eva offered. "You're almost an unhappily married man, remember?"

"Ooh, did you guys set a date?" Beth happily diverted the subject. Well, maybe not so happily, for me.

"I thought we should wait until we're like eight-and-a-half months pregnant, makes the dress you know," I said between bites of what looked scary but was actually only half-bad.

"We?" The girls said, almost in unison.

"Hey, I'd be the one trying to haul '*Misses Load*' over the threshold you know," I said.

"He does have a point," Eva said, then stopped talking since she was placing food in her mouth, unlike her *soon-to-be-fiancé-boyfriend* who figured such pleasantries were likely absent from the 'sty' protocol and motored on.

"We met on a dating site remember? Maybe one of your exes copped my pic from your computer and figured any man so devilishly handsome must be gay."

Beth wiped her mouth. "Do you really think they had your picture? You're not imagining things? Maybe it's like some kind of holdover from writing your book. Like if it really was the Feds or something, 'G-men', well maybe the government already has these machines and they don't want you publishing anything about it."

I added a forkful of meat into my maw, started to chew, and said: "First off it's a system not a machine, and secondly don't you think if it really existed the government would be spying on far more dangerous guys than me? Remember I haven't even published anything."

"The book's not finished yet," Eva added. "Madeline just read an early manuscript draft because I was talking to her about it."

"And now since we've talked to you guys about it you'd better watch out too," I said.

"Chris. Check out front for suspicious cars," Beth said.

Within a minute of walking back into our apartment, I rifled through my desk.

"I'm telling you, I never wrote it down. I just scanned my whole computer for '*Angelfish*' and found nothing. It's not scribbled on my desk; it's not tattooed on my arm. I thought it, I said it, to you, and that's it."

Eva walked past me into the bedroom shedding clothes as she went. "I'm tired, I don't know. If you want to ask Madeline and make an ass out of yourself go right ahead, just don't cost me my job, okay?"

I laid awake for most of the night.



NINE

Madeline was covered in clay. Well, part of her was anyhow, by choice, her left arm and right leg and from the look of this project she'd had her face also masked in mud at some point. Eva was rushing about trying to move heavy lumps of soggy clay from one area to another, and somehow attempt to clean behind the *Madeline whirlwind* in its wake.

"Hey, Joe..."

"What do you know, Madeline?" I said. "Hi Hon," I offered lamely, but I knew Eva couldn't, or wouldn't, hear me.

"What do you think?" Madeline asked, holding aloft the ceramic mask of her face for inspection. She tilted her head back and peered through her bifocals. "I think it'll look just right when it gets a little color to it. Just like me," she loosed a cackle.

"Looks like you already, I think. Isn't that kind of painful? I thought people always did that sort of thing with plaster," I said.

"Posh," Madeline scoffed. "Shortcut. Shortcuts have no place in art. My piece will stand the tests of time."

"Like something Roman, or Classic Greek, right?" I said.

Madeline considered this for a moment, took it in. "I like you, Joe," she said, leveling her eyes at me. "You writers and your words."

“Did you see the drawing? I left it on your desk,” I said.

“Drawing?” Madeline mumbled, turning suddenly. “Eva. Eva!”

“Hang on a minute, will you. Please?” I heard Eva’s voice but couldn’t see which corner she was around.

Eva appeared, walking quickly, wiping her hands.

“The leg is ready. Let’s get it off,” Madeline swung the clay-covered leg around. She called back over her shoulder without turning. “Joe, could you step outside for a minute please. Be right with you,” she was mumbling something about ‘modesty’ when I closed the door behind me and stepped into yet another hallway I had not seen. This one looked like something you might see at an ivy-league prep school, a hall-of-honor, or accomplishment, or some other archaic nonsense. There were framed photographs lining the dark and heavy walls, mostly the same sizes, I ‘m sure the work of some prior Rockhurst Manor inhabitant with OCD. I walked down one side then made my way back, following, I guess, some sort of family chronology, then suddenly a shift where there were some new sizes and brighter, more varied frames as I arrived at Madeline’s entries, starting when she was a young girl of perhaps fifteen, and continuing only up until the point where it appeared that she still had her original hair, a mop more blond than the current *fire-engine-red* dye of choice. Typical stuff you’d expect from New England *blue-bloodery* right down to ridiculous outfits for croquette on a massive lawn, to riding tack, and wait, what was this? Madeline in her early twenties, maybe, with wide, horn-rimmed glasses, and a bee-hive do, frolicking with a Kennedy (*Ted? Jack?*), followed by a luxury shot at what appeared to be a Whitehouse cocktail party, dresses and tails, Lyndon Johnson, possibly President Johnson, laughing uproariously at something Madeline must have said. Almost dumbfounded, I moved to the last set and began to wonder if maybe what I was

seeing was some neo-modern piece of hers she crafted in Photoshop because there was just no way she was kissing the cheek of one Carl Michael Yastrzemski (*a.k.a. Yaz, a.k.a. my and half of New England's boyhood hero*) while he was still in uniform and apparently celebrating something, only to be outdone by an incredible, candid shot of Michael Jackson *and* Elizabeth Taylor drinking beer from bottles (*horrors*) in Rockhurst's pagoda, and compounding the shock-value, dressed in summer-casual wear, too. Had that been the end of it I would have had gossip fodder for at least a week, but the next-to-last picture, before some group of older men I did not recognize, was Madeline Sumner-Stone at a large, round, very fancily presented table with Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and Ted Turner, plus several other gentlemen who I recognized but could not place, at what I believe is an annual party hosted by the rich and famous called '*The Bilderberg Group*' where the mighty meet to apparently negotiate next year's world-wide agenda, perhaps so decided by a round-robin tournament of gin and cribbage.

"Is that the Bilderberg you're at in the hallway there?" I asked, motioning behind me after Eva came and summoned me back into the clay studio.

"What?" Madeline at first seemed genuinely puzzled then pushed her glasses higher on her nose and waved a scoffing hand. "Oh that, with Warren and Bill? Yes, I attend sometimes, too much of a macho boy-thing, little *turds* sitting around bragging about what number they are on the Fortune 500. A lot of them don't have a pot to piss in but it makes them feel better to sit around and scheme. Oh, a few who go to those things are real go-daddies, but they're usually the most low-key. Why, my father still maintains to this day that '*The Second*', that's what we called the second Baron Rothschild, that '*The Second*' accelerated World War II after a particularly bad weekend of cards with Mussolini."

I thought: *Was she serious? What, no: 'Benito and I used to skinny-dip in the East River'?* "About my drawing," I began.

"Oh, you draw?" Madeline asked me, her main focus once again on the remaining clay cast that adorned her left arm.

"Not very well," I said. "More like I sketched the 'W.E.B.' system like you asked."

"W.E.B.?" Madeline, though incredibly distracted, could not be serious. Dingbat artist or not, I was getting agitated.

"Let's start over," I said. "I'm Joe, Eva's boyfriend."

Madeline spun around with a nasty look that verged on scorn. Her light-blue eyes were sharp, cat-like. "I know who you are, *What-do-you-know, Joe*, what I did *not* know is that you are an artist."

"I'm not. I told you I..."

"I saw your sketch, yes, left on my desk, rolled up in one of those... tubes. My question to you is, how long have you been snooping around here?"

What? I glanced quickly to Eva who, thankfully, was eavesdropping and unthankfully shrugged. I said nothing, so Madeline added: "It's like you read my mind," she tapped a bony digit on her temple.

Frustrated, I shoved my hands into my pockets and rocked back lightly on my heels. "Madeline. No one is reading anyone's mind. You read my manuscript. I outlined, in writing, the system in my book."

Madeline's eyes suddenly seemed to change color, to a lighter hue of blue, and returned to what I assumed were their normal, somewhat glassy state. She stared at me for a moment, and then winked at me, turned and laughed out loud. "Eva! Oh, there you are. Let's get this arm off, it's ready. You can stay here this time, Joe. You've seen a woman's arm before."

"Several," I added.

“Besides, I wouldn’t want you snooping around in the hallway again, asking me about the Bilderberg.”

“Why didn’t you ask her?” Eva said, right as she came through the door to our apartment. She dropped her ‘ginormous’ handbag onto the counter, (*probably hard enough to hurt her mother, if her mother was indeed living inside of it*).

“Why didn’t you?” I countered (*cleverly*).

“Well, don’t start talking about it then. I know you, Joe. In about ten seconds you’re going to start up again,” Eva said.

“Moi?” I grabbed her on her way to the bedroom and tried to wrap her in my romantic arms, but she was busy taking out an earring.

“Ow. Watch out, you almost made me rip my ear off,” she disappeared into the bathroom.

“Wish it was your mouth,” I muttered.

“What? I can’t hear you,” Eva shouted from the bathroom, or closet, whatever. I went back to my desk. “You say something smartass? About ripping out my mouth?” Eva returned, having removed both earrings without further incident and changing into sweats and a long-sleeve tee shirt.

“Your mouth should be registered. As a deadly weapon. And, also on the sex-offenders list,” I said.

“Oh, you’re funny. All right, so seriously, why’d you come over today if you weren’t going to ask her about that whole ‘Angelfish’ thing?”

“I don’t know, you caught most of it, it was kind of creepy, did you see her eyes?”

“Oh, you must have seen *Medusa*, it’s like Madeline’s alter-ego, hell, more like Sybil, she’s got four or five,” Eva said.

“Sybil?” I asked.

“Yeah, Sybil, from the sixties? Oh right, you don’t read.”

“Yeah yeah, Sally Field, I think I saw the movie,” I said.

“Fredrick, her man-servant, told me that’s what the staff calls her ‘scary’ look, cat like eyes, snake-like demeanor,” Eva snarled and made claw-like swipes at the air.

“Don’t you mean ‘Frederick her butler’?”

“No, idiot, a man has a butler; a woman has a man-servant. Don’t you know anything?”

“I guess not.”

“Did you write? I want to read more.”

“Couple pages,” I handed them over. Eva started reading while somehow walking to the couch and not slamming her shin into the coffee table or stubbing her toe (*as someone else might have done, five or six thousand times*). She pulled her legs up under her and tugged at her lower lip, deep in thought.



TEN

I ran again on Saturday morning, drifting away from the harbor, making my way along the coast. Weird, I didn't set a destination before I left, didn't time checkpoints in my mind. I was running fast, for me, focused, almost, slap, slap, slap, my toes went on the pavement.

Looking up suddenly as the air felt sharply cooler, I was nearing Rockhurst Lane, itself a lazy thoroughfare of magnitude with, of course, only one denizen.

On a Saturday? I didn't have my cell phone with me, and my thumb print certainly wouldn't work. Why was I here? I'd never really scoped the place out, I was usually here at night, so I jogged down the Eastside until I hit the wrought-iron fencing, and tastefully bronze but nonetheless incendiary '*Private Beach*' signs that appeared with sporadic yet subtle force through the ivy. From here, I could barely see the rear of Rockhurst Manor, the roof, of course, but not the grand patio, or the pagoda where Liz and Michael drank cold beer from bottles. The Westside of the manor sided a thick old-growth copse of large chestnut and maple, trimmed away from the outer walls but close enough that the western-most side probably

never really felt much of the sun. It never ceased to amaze me how big the place really was, several hundred feet long, sixty, maybe seventy feet tall at its majestic center. I jogged back down the street. Maybe I could figure out where Mark was, pay him a visit.

I smelled pretty ripe.

There were a few landscapers out and about, none of whom carried the air of the staff, so I ventured over toward Madeline's living quarters to see if I could find Fredrick the 'man-servant' so that he could let me in.

My query drew a scowl, followed by fists on the hips (*Fredrick, really*). "You can go in anytime, day or night. Madam installed a very highly technical system just last month," Fredrick said.

"I'm not in the system. Eva, my girlfriend, is."

"Have you tried your thumbprint?"

"No, why would I?"

"I have matters to attend to. Return after you have tried, not before."

Ouch. Dismissed by the 'man-servant'. Annoyed, I walked back around to the more obscure side entrance that Eva had walked me through the other night, to knock loudly, what the heck, when I jammed my thumb into the slot and heard a well oiled click.

Interesting.

I found Mark eating breakfast in what looked like a make-shift buffet, set (*of course*) on a Persian rug the size of a basketball court, off to one side of the main studio. He saw me and waved me over, motioning with his hand: *grab some food*, but I waved him off, nearing him and snapping my grungy tee shirt. "Out for a run," I explained as we shook hands.

"Food's good. Excellent sometimes. I think her butler makes most of it."

"Man-servant."

Mark pondered this. "Right," he took a bite of a breakfast roll.

"So how's it going?" I said, sitting then standing. "Maybe I will have some juice."

"Going great," he said with food in his mouth.

Some genius, I thought, talking with food in his mouth. Grabbing a mini bagel too because they looked fresh, I sat back down.

"Way ahead of schedule," he went on, devouring some kind of exotic- looking eggs. "Madeline's freaking incredible, the way she gets things done."

"Operating seemingly without a budget helps," I added.

"True, true. But I got to tell you, she's not really smart, I mean don't get me wrong, she's plenty smart, just not, you know."

"Yeah, yeah," I said.

"Smart-smart. But I'll tell you what, she's creative as hell, and just goes, goes, goes all the time. Eva should get some roller blades or something," Mark guzzled the remainder of his orange juice and sent a nice belch my way. Genius.

"Thanks dude," I waved at the air.

"You don't smell so good yourself," he pointed a knife, buttering some toast. "Gonna get as big as a house, as big as this house if I work here much longer."

"So how far ahead of schedule are you?" I said.

"Doing phase one testing right now, diagnostics as we speak. Strangest thing's been happening," Mark said.

I held up my hand, "English, please, before you get going."

"Sure. Sure. Okay, well we've got a lot of movement here, a lot of transfer, terabytes of data zipping around. Before we go live we usually run an emulator, sort of a virtual system analysis, then we packet the results in these neat little data units and progress to the next component venue, what we're calling pods. (*Hey Mark: sorry*

about that ‘talking while eating’ crack). Well, the pods are all independent of one another, the hardware itself; some are mini server banks. Our progression was to run Sims on all of the pods then start bridging them in a specific sequence.”

Utterly lost after the word ‘terabytes’, I said: “Real world to ass-munch: translate please.”

“Okay, okay, what happened was, somehow a few of these pods started to connect with one another. We ran every tracer known to man and couldn’t find a whiff of anything so I thought, you know, maybe sabotage or something, someone on the team. But wait, get this, it gets better. When we tracked the coupling process it followed our plan precisely until the fourth and fifth where two pods coupled that deviated from our plan. At first we almost ignored it because we’ve been so set on finding out who’s doing it to look into any details about it, but then one of the techs from ‘Centex’ looks at what the other pods are doing to their own and sees what would have been, initially, at least, a potentially fatal flaw in the system and the way it manages its short-term storage. Absolutely brilliant. And saved us weeks, maybe months, of debugging for a work-around. So what this means is that either we have a saboteur covertly inserting his or her brilliant correction into the system without fanfare or through proper administrative course, or, secondarily, in lay-terms, the system is running itself.”

“How did it know my thumbprint? I never gave one,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Mark said

“I mean my thumb just got me in here but I never met with anybody, no one took my print, no one told me to do anything. Hell, I’m hardly ever here, and Eva’s always here when I’m here.”

Mark stopped eating and suddenly looked at me seriously. “You are absolutely certain no one ever took your thumbprint and showed you how to work the lock?”

I glared at him.

"I've got to go," He stood sharply.

"Where? What are you doing? Can I come?" I said.

Mark had already walked off and probably didn't hear me. Of course I couldn't hear him tell me not to come, either.

I followed him to the balcony space where he sat in front of a very large monitor. He began to speak, maybe not to me or anyone else but just to speak.

"Let's see what we've got here, `dwd-9787-64434ggb` and `connect`. Let's see," he leaned closer to the screen as streams of data spilled past. His eyes flicked up and caught my reflection over his shoulder. I thought that he would turn, maybe bitch me out for snooping, instead he leaned back up and grabbed both of my shoulders. "This is magic, Joe. Fucking magic we're seeing. The system's barely even started yet, but it seems to *know* where it's heading and can't wait to get there, so it's like it's starting early."

"Explain," I said.

"It ran your thumbprint from something you touched, maybe a glass or something," Mark said.

"Wow. Trippy. Really. Like in '*A Space Odyssey*' where the **HAL9000** reads the guy's lips?"

"Yeah, sure, except we haven't interfaced any video yet, which means if the system was going to do that it would have to leech from the security system, again, completely autonomous, even the power source, and get an enlargement of sufficient resolution to discern your thumbprint. Highly unlikely, verging on impossible."

"*Which leaves us with...*?" Much as I was enjoying watching my genius friend have some kind of a data-overloaded cerebral-meltdown, I had hoped that the system would work to some degree or why would anyone come to see it? And if no one came to see it no one would buy my *as-yet-unfinished* book.

“Infinitely more intriguing. Remember, ultimately, a broad-spectrum laser would, say, scan everyone in the room, record their ion patterns, and by the time they left we could tell them anything they wanted to know about themselves. Well, obviously if a system can scan on an ionic level it would have to pass through your skin, in this case your thumbprint, take a little snapshot of the ionic patterning along the way and there it is. Of course, this *might* be possible, and of course, hopefully, will be when the system is fully integrated, but I told you we haven’t implemented *any* video yet, and the ‘laser scanner’ and ‘ionic scanner’ fall under ‘video’.”

“No laser scanner?” I repeated.

“So how did the system get your thumbprint?” Mark said.

“Oh, for the love of...and get the hell away from me; you fucking stink,” Eva reeled back as I walked in.

I said: “Went hard, baby. Real hard. Ran a tight six, maybe seven miles.”

“Or maybe it was four, or probably it was only one and a half,” Eva said smartly.

“How far from here to Rockhurst?” I pulled off my sweaty shirt.

“Just under four miles, I’ve run it before. Why?”

“That’s where I went.”

“Uh, okay. Why?”

I shrugged. “Dunno. Was running really hard, not paying attention and then there I was. But, get this,” I told her what happened.

“Mark said that?” She was skeptical, and wanted some confirmation for my wild tale.

“Yup. Guess it might explain ‘*Angelfish*,’” I said half-heartedly. “Copying a thumbprint and reading someone’s mind are two different things. Mark said they haven’t even hooked up any of the video capture equipment yet, so even if the thing somehow decided to catalogue, I don’t know, every fingerprint it could find just by scanning everything around, by looking around...”

“It would have had no way of doing it,” Eva finished my thought.

I said: “It’, we’re talking about this thing, this art project, we’re talking about it now like it’s the **HAL 9000**, from ‘2001’.”

Eva shrugged. “It is kind of fun to think about. I mean, let’s say it actually works, that Madeline’s exhibit can read your thoughts and all. It would be like a fancy carnival act, Joe, nothing more after a while. I mean, seriously, how would it change your life?” Eva put her fingers to her temples, “*I see you ate ‘Eggos’ for breakfast, that you work in construction, and that you’re still ashamed that you wet the bed until you were eighteen.*”

“*Seventeen.* And that’s supposed to be a secret.”

“How does that explain your ‘*Angelfish@*’ thing winding up on a pad on Madeline’s desk?” Eva said.

I scratched my head. “Good point. I don’t know. And don’t get mad if I start to obsess over it,” I pointed accusingly, “you brought it up.”

“You said Mark wasn’t sure what was going on yet? Madeline doesn’t understand computers; I can assure you of that,” Eva said.

“Another good point.”

“We women-folk do have our little moments,” Eva batted her lashes.

“Guess I will have to ask her,” I said.

“No. Let me,” Eva said. “I’m always in her office, she won’t care about that. I can say that we, I can say the truth, that we were

talking about your using that as a screen name for one of the characters. I mean, if you'd written it somewhere on your computer, or even written it down, then we might think that someone is actually spying on us."

"Those two guys on the bridge," I added.

"Of course, I guess that might mean our house is bugged," Eva said.

As the words were leaving her mouth we looked at one another, and then began to simultaneously scan the ceiling, light fixtures and corners.

So. Ultimately. Who controls it?

Or what.

What?

You said 'who' controls it. I think we need to consider other possibilities.

What?

Stop it. We obviously have to consider digital consciousness. Really when you think about it a much cleaner, less, intrusive form. Let's theorize that quantum processors have been around longer than we thought. Some neurologist jacks one into an animate cerebral cortex and bing, bang, boom, the human experience is processed and replicable.

Are 'bing, bang and boom' acceptable scientific terms at Harvard?

Continuing, even if some cyber-presence controlled the W.E.B., I think we can assume that Clark's progression with HAL 9000 might not be that far off. I like to think in terms of, I don't know, a sense of emotional connectedness with humans as opposed to paranoid schemes to eradicate the less efficient and thereby inferior carbon-based consciousness.

Ergo a remaining omnipotent carbon-based handler, likely human, but...

You never know. Could be a chimpanzee pushing buttons.

Something to think about.



ELEVEN

“**M**adeline, did you have my apartment bugged?” Eva

said.

“What?” Madeline’s voice was loud, scratchy. “Did I bug your apartment? Ha, whatever for. Do you and ‘*What-do-you-know*’ have wild monkey sex or something? Bug your apartment,” she scoffed and turned away, dismissively, then strode off. Eva followed. “I need you to call my broker in New York to see about that rug. Now don’t let them deliver it before next Friday at the earliest.”

“Don’t you want to know why I asked you that?” Eva pressed.

“Asked me what?” Madeline stopped and did her look-down-her-glasses thing.

“About bugging my apartment.”

“Why would I bug your apartment?”

Eva flinched. “It’s not, I’m not saying that you did, but you don’t even care that I asked you. It’s like I asked you what time it was or something.”

“Okay Eva. I’m biting,” Madeline took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes. “Why did you ask me if your apartment had been bugged?”

Suddenly Eva wasn’t sure if she wanted to ask the question either, maybe more of a fear over hearing the answer. She quickly weighed that against admitting to Joe that she too had *’wussed out’*. She drew a deep breath.

“Okay. What do you know about an email address, ‘*Angelfish@*’?”

Madeline’s eyes sharpened instantly, not Medusa but something. She cleaned her lenses and carefully placed her glasses back atop her nose, and then resumed her stare. “Sounds vaguely familiar,” she said cautiously.

“It was written on a pad on your desk, I was looking for something to write you a note on,” Eva forged ahead.

“Written, or typed?”

“Written,” Eva stammered slightly, thinking hard.

“My handwriting?” Madeline said.

Shit. “Maybe,” Eva tried to cover. “It was kind of dark.”

“Well, let me think about it,” Madeline said.

We were back in Casey’s. I was fidgety. “Okay, so my thumbprint came from the reading lamp, or a glass or something, fine, but remember I had to look for a blank page, it wasn’t written on top.”

“Pretty normal thing to do,” Eva said.

I thought about this. “I guess. And then she has our house bugged, hears me mention ‘*Angelfish*’, leaves it around knowing I’d find it? For what? Just to get a rise out of me? And does that mean our place is still bugged?”

Eva munched on a forkful of salad and carefully wiped her mouth with a napkin.

“First off, I thought we agreed that if the system worked it will only amount to a fun little gadget. If she did have our place bugged, doesn’t really sound like her but okay, if she had our place bugged, maybe had you followed...”

I took a bite of my sandwich. “Wait, what about that? Did she say that? You didn’t tell me,” as I spoke I showed her my fried cod sandwich (*see-food, get it?*).

“What? No, I don’t know, stop confusing me, maybe she had you followed, maybe those guys in the grey car bugged our place, let’s suppose it’s all true, what do you want to do? Quit? Both of us? And then, move? Because Madeline was trying, I don’t know, to add an ‘air of authenticity’ to her stupid piece? Now that *is* something she would do: ‘*anything for the art*,’” Eva leaned over and wiped my mouth with her napkin for me. “So what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said, swallowing the last of my fish sandwich.

“Is ‘*creeping you out*’ going to help you finish writing?” Eva said.

I thought about this while I chased a ketchup swirl around my plate with a remaining french-fry. “Is that what you think? Dunno. Maybe. We’ll see. Anything else weird been happening over there?”

“At Madeline’s? No, not really.

“Well there is something else I thought of,” Eva went on. “I met Madeline’s Uncle Bertrom yesterday.”

“Who?” I leaned back so my plate could be cleared, and nodded yes to coffee.

Eva said: “Bertrom Sumner. He’s Madeline’s uncle, but he’s only a few years older than her.”

“What about him?”

"I don't know. He's weird, not weird like Madeline, but creepy-weird, and of course loaded beyond belief," Eva said.

"Creepy-weird, 'Ned Flanders', or creepy-weird 'Bela Legosi?'" I said.

"Ned Flanders, if I had to choose, but he doesn't look like that, looks kind of like a regular guy you might see at a country club or something. This thin, little mustache that he kept playing with. Devious eyes, though. Beady. And his place is immaculate, antiseptic almost. Kind of dark, dark woods, low lights, but loaded, and I mean loaded with artwork. Like a freaking museum. Most of it modern. One of those places where you don't want to step on a rug, or take a pee, because the rug or the toilet might be made out of, I don't know, marzipan or something."

"Where does he live?" I said.

Eva shifted in the booth. "He lives at Rockhurst."

"Really? Where? One of those outbuildings?"

"No. On the other side. You've never been there. Yesterday was my first time."

"The other side of what?" I said.

"Rockhurst Manor. The building, *nimrod*. There's over a hundred rooms. We always go in from the Eastside. Bertrom lives on the Westside. They are the only two Sumners actually living there now. Maybe they have some sort of floor-plan for dividing it up depending on how many of them are taking William Baines Sumner's largess."

"Largess?" I cocked an eye.

Eva took her coffee from the waitress and nodded thank you, then blew on it customarily.

"And...?" I tried to move her along.

"And, I don't know, don't you think that's weird? All this time I've been working there? It's like our whole little world is touching

right up against this whole other world, and you wouldn't even know it. Madeline said there's only the one doorway separating the two sides. And someone installed those doors like in hotel rooms to keep the other side out if they want, but they just leave it open. I guess they get along."

"Then why didn't you hear about him before yesterday?" I said.

Eva shrugged. "I don't know. You know how it is over there, I'm always running around. Come to think of it, maybe I heard Fredrick talking about some other butler."

"Man-servant," I corrected.

Up went Eva's middle finger. "Frederick might have mentioned Bertrom to me before. But I'm sure I figured it was just some other story of some Sumner through the ages who did something righteous."

"Or fucked up, more like it," I added helpfully.

"You're fucked up."

"Seriously," I took her hands. "We're just going to let all this go? You really want to? I can't tell you how creepy it was to see that email address. It was like a 'Twilight Zone' thing, where you wake up and everything seems the same except something's just a little bit off."

Eva said: "Well, we have come up with plausible explanations. Why not just roll with it. Assume it's Madeline and that it's part of the piece, finish the book and, I don't know, act the part for a little while, looking over your shoulder, mumbling into the phone. Could be fun. Either way can we just agree to stop talking about it?"

"Could," I agreed, thinking instead that I would talk to Mark about it.



TWELVE

“Just because you're paranoid *doesn't mean they aren't after you.*”

“Curt Cobain?” I offered.

“Joseph Heller- first. ‘Catch 22’,” Mark said.

“Thanks,” I said.

“No problem.”

Over the phone I could hear Mark typing furiously again, tappity-tap-tap. It sounded as though the keys might pop off. He said: “Let me tell you what else we’ve found. The apparently autonomous coupling pods, it’s good, it’s still a breakthrough but it seems like they had a little help.”

“What does that mean?” I said.

“Well, it looks like somebody may have hacked into our code and left some snippets, some little lines that let our processing shortcut by about two weeks. Nothing we wouldn’t have seen eventually in our model, but no one on our side thought it up,” Mark said. “Or, if they did, they are choosing to remain anonymous which doesn’t make any sense.”

“What other ‘side’ is there?” I said.

“Maybe ‘side’ is the wrong word. How about ‘outside interest’? Nobody hacks you without a reason,” Mark said.

I said: “How can anybody hack you anyways? I thought you and your ‘team’ were the best?”

“Well, we weren’t hacked in the traditional sense, like over the Internet or something. Short of a working system like the one we’re building that really couldn’t happen. And I don’t think it’s anyone on our team because, again, it *was* brilliant- why not present it openly? That’s the thing about this being more of a case of outside interest than not because, think about it, if it was a competitor or saboteur and they got in they would try to mess things up wouldn’t they? Not add some lines that cuts two weeks off of our processing time.”

“Good point,” I said. “So what exactly happened?”

“One of two things. Someone would have had to jack into one of our pipes, our data streams, those big yellow ones that are all over the place.”

“How long would it take?” I said.

“If they knew what they were doing, which, we should assume by all of the trouble they would have had to go through, they did, maybe twenty minutes? Half an hour?” Mark said.

I said: “So any of the umpteen landscapers, or delivery guys...”

“Or caterers, hell, it looks like some kind of tent city down there. So yes, theoretically, any one of those people. But begging the question again, why?”

“That is a good question,” I admitted.

“The other possibility is, the part of the system that is now functioning did it by itself,” Mark said.

“What?” I said.

“I didn’t say ‘probable’. I’m sure it was a hacker,” Mark said.

“What percentage do you give that it could actually work already to that degree?” I said.

“Infinitesimal,” Mark said.

“But not zero?” I said.

“No. I have to get back to work. When are you coming over here?” Mark asked. “We’re running a test tomorrow, nothing earth-shattering unless our mystery friend left another nugget somewhere for us to find.”

“I might come by. I’m trying to finish the book,” I said.

Mark laughed. “Why don’t you wait until next month when we go live? Let the system finish the book for you?”

“That’s crazy,” I said.

Why didn’t it sound all that crazy?



THIRTEEN

“**E**_{va}. *Eva!*”

Eva blinked twice. “I’m sorry Madeline, what? I was thinking about something.”

“Apparently,” Madeline said. “To reiterate: I want you to move the meeting with Steinberg and Walsh to Thursday, tell Ann that we’ll need four more couches in red just like the one we bought last year, and call Timmerman’s and order some more clay. Better make it two thousand pounds. Now, what has you so distracted?”

Madeline moved a hair curl from in front of her glasses by blowing a burst of air upward from the corner of her mouth.

“I was thinking about your uncle’s place, from yesterday. It’s like a museum.”

“Ha,” Madeline scoffed. “They wish. Hell, half the curators at the majors would probably swap their modern collections with him in a heartbeat. Bertrom does have one hell of an eye.”

“Does he have anything of yours?” Eva said.

“Three pieces. That I know of. Smaller ones,” Madeline said.

“That you know of? What, do you think he’d buy something off-market and not tell you? Why would he do that?”

"I said he had a good eye for modern art. He also has the resources to have a horrible eye, which helps. As for my work I would say, perhaps, he is not sophisticated enough to appreciate them. Or to ask for a commissioned work. He was something of an artist himself you know. One time, when we were both a lot younger, the clay studio was actually named the 'Clay Studio' for my second uncle, Clay Sumner, who was a sculpture, and, in my opinion, a lousy one at that, but critics loved him. Back then, in the summers mostly, Bertrom would come up from Philadelphia with his mother, my Aunt Joyce, and his four sisters, miserable little twits, the lot of them. I can't even remember their names. They used to sneak around Rockhurst Manor and get into every little nook and cranny where they didn't belong, breaking things, or sometimes even stealing, if I recall. Anyway, Bertrom and I would paint with Uncle Clay and Uncle Clay's tutor, a strange fellow is all I can remember, with an accent. Knowing this family it was probably Pablo Picasso for all I knew."

"Did you ever meet him?" Eva said.

Madeline paused, seeming confused. "Who? Picasso? Here at Rockhurst? I just told you, I don't know," Eva let it go. Madeline continued. "Uncle Bertrom showed considerably more promise, as a painter, mind you, than I. Now, granted, he is four years older than I am, which, of course, was a big difference when we were young

Eva said: "So what happened? Did he paint?"

"Yes, he painted. He still may, I don't know. I do know he became very withdrawn some years ago. He's only been to one of my shows, that I am aware of." She added: "I think he was quite good. Would you like to see some of his work? He has a small gallery I could show you."

Madeline began to move before Eva answered so Eva just followed along, deep into the labyrinth of hallways on Rockhurst Manor's Eastside.

"Where are we going?" Eva asked as Madeline shuffled along. "I thought you said that the door we went through yesterday was the only way to get over there, to the Westside?"

"*You'll see,*" Madeline sang. Eva couldn't get her bearings, but they had started in Madeline's office, which was third-floor, third-wing, rear, and she thought they had already gone down two sets of stairs, or was it three? There were so many small half-staircases and what she assumed were servant's pass ways that she thought it felt like being in a Las Vegas casino, where you couldn't find an exit or even see the sunlight.

Now they went to a thin, unobtrusive, white door with a painted-over latch, just off of a rarely-used kitchen, then up another small flight of servant's stairs emerging into what looked like a salon. "Remember, I moved here twenty-odd years ago, but I've been coming here my entire life. When I was young there were more of us, direct descendants anyway, so summers were often gay affairs with up to ten or fifteen families all here at the same time," she strode across the salon to a floor-to-ceiling bookcase and pulled down on a fake binder, followed by a well-oiled click and a gap appearing where there was none before. "Yes, hidden doors, just like the movies. Those sisters of Bertrom probably found all of them while they were here. I only know of a few." Despite its size and apparent weight, Madeline effortlessly slid the bookcase aside, recessing it into the wall and revealing a dry and dingy passageway.

"Why not just ask him if we can see it?" Eva asked, cautiously following, starting to find it somewhat thrilling.

"Slide the case shut, will you?" Madeline asked without turning. Eva was surprised at how easily it moved. Then, Madeline

said: "He gets very protective over his work; I'm not sure he'd be too keen on you seeing it."

"Then why are we going?" Eva ducked a cobweb in the dim light. They were moving along a walkway along a heavy stone wall, along what must have been an outer Rockhurst wall at one time. "And what's with this walkway?"

"Ah. Two questions. We are going because there is a particular piece I would like you to see, and despite the fact that Bertrom lives on this side of Rockhurst Manor, it is my home and I shall go wherever I wish. And this walkway is one of many that were used when Rockhurst was expanded, probably at the turn-of-the-century if I had to guess. Most of the hidden pass ways originally served a purpose, access to the plumbing and whatnot, the later installation of electricity."

"How is there light in here?" Eva said.

"Skylights. Lots of them. Ingenious, actually. I don't know who gets credit for those. Supposedly if you fly over Rockhurst Manor at just the right sun the skylights make it look like a giant, grinning pumpkin, some old Sumner's idea of a joke, I'm sure. Here we are. Stay back for a moment, will you. On the off-chance that someone is in here better for me to pop out of the wall-molding alone."

Madeline moved a rusted iron bar and Eva heard another surprisingly well-oiled click, then another slightly brighter shaft of light appeared and Madeline slipped through the space quickly, with a sense of purpose.

"Coast is clear," she called out.

Eva stepped through another hidden passageway, this one actually part of the wall-molding, and into a small room, maybe twenty-by-twenty that was dimly lit with emergency lighting.

Madeline walked over and, reaching a dimmer switch, slowly turned up the lights, twenty little spotlights spaced evenly along the walls.

Bertrom's work was, in Eva's opinion, okay, certainly not museum quality or remotely in Madeline's league but a couple of the more dark and morbid ones caught her fancy.

"Now, isn't that strange," Madeline rubbed her chin.

"Isn't what strange?" Eva said.

"The piece I brought you here to see has sat right there since he painted it in 1962," Madeline pointed toward a large canvas with a series of colored dots on it.

"Are you sure?" Eva said.

"As sure as the last time I was in here, which was a couple of years ago. Isn't that strange."

"What was it?" Eva asked.

"An abstract called '*Plum*'," Madeline said.

"Why did you want me to see it?" Eva said.

Madeline frowned and looked down her nose. "We won't know just yet, will we?" She went back and re-dimmed the lights.

"I guess this would be a lot of fun if you were a kid," Eva said as they walked back along the inner walkway which seemed really small, perilous almost in some spots.

"I think it's sort of fun, now, don't you?" Madeline said.

"Yeah, kind of. Sort of spooky though, don't you think? I mean, how do we know there aren't dead bodies down there? Rats? In the corners? You can't see more than ten feet," Eva said.

Madeline stopped and turned. "Honestly Eva, do you know how badly a dead body smells?"



FOURTEEN

With Mark's joking suggestion still conveniently being bandied about, to wait for the working system to finish my book, I minimized my 'Microsoft Word' window and went to search the web. Rockhurst Manor loomed in my mind like a slowly-developing storm, despite the fact that including my Saturday run-by I had only actually been inside maybe three or four times. It was the notion that someone was actually living there, on the other side, and it had never been mentioned, like in 'The Shining' where Shelley Duval thinks that some unknown woman is living in their hotel that is closed for the winter, never actually seen, always staying one corner ahead of them when they happened by that section of the old hotel. In this case it was Uncle Bertrom living in an entire side I didn't even know existed, Eva either, and she's worked there for three years.

"Betram," I said as I typed. "No, Bertrom, with an 'O'. Bertrom Sumner, oh, Wikipedia," I mumbled and began to read. Bertrom, with an 'O' only garnered a half-screen on Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopedia, which was only a half-screen more than my entry was, currently.

BERTROM SUMNER (SEPTEMBER 6, 1949 – PRESENT) IS A NEW ENGLAND MODERN ARTIST, PHILANTHROPIST AND INVESTOR. THE SON OF RUTH AND JEBEDIAH SUMNER, OF NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND, AND DIRECT DESCENDENT TO WILLIAM BAINES SUMNER.

Bored, I followed the link to Uncle Bertrom's father Jebediah, a far more 'colorful' fellow.

JEBEDIAH 'JEB' SUMNER (SEPTEMBER 16, 1889 –JULY 5, 1962)...

...IN 1919, JEB SUMNER JOINED THE PROMINENT BROKERAGE FIRM OF HAYDEN, STONE & CO. WHERE HE BECAME AN EXPERT IN DEALING IN THE UNREGULATED STOCK MARKET OF THE DAY, ENGAGING IN TACTICS THAT WERE LATER LABELED INSIDER TRADING AND MARKET MANIPULATION.

...A RECURRING STORY ABOUT SUMNER IS THAT HE MADE MONEY IN BOOTLEGGING, THE ILLEGAL IMPORTATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF ALCOHOL DURING PROHIBITION. ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO HARD EVIDENCE OF THIS, SUMNER DID HAVE EXTENSIVE INVESTMENTS IN THE LEGAL IMPORTATION OF SPIRITS. THE "BOOTLEGGING" STORY ITSELF MAY BE TRACEABLE TO A CANADIAN DISTILLER AND TO BOOTLEGGER DANNY WALSH AND HIS CRIME SYNDICATE, WHICH DID IN FACT SMUGGLE SPIRITS ACROSS THE CANADIAN–AMERICAN BORDER DURING THIS PERIOD.

...AFTER HIS DEATH, VARIOUS GANGSTERS INCLUDING FRANK COSTELLO CLAIMED TO HAVE ASSOCIATED WITH JEB SUMNER. ACCORDING TO SOME ACCOUNTS, SUMNER WAS ASSOCIATED IN THE "BEAR RAID" THAT PRECIPITATED THE WALL STREET CRASH OF 1929, AS WELL AS MUCH OF THE BOOTLEGGING ACTIVITY THAT WAS COMMON AT THE TIME.

...JEB HAD ONE SON, BERTROM, AND FOUR DAUGHTERS, MARLA, MARLY, MARTHA AND MARY.

Bootlegging *and* insider-trading? My man. Might explain some of the old green cash Madeline's been handing out. Might explain all of it.



FIFTEEN

Eva's watch said it was four-forty-five; she banged it against the table, it was always a little slow. She didn't have set-hours, but Madeline was very particular about her meals being served at prompt dining hours, and that meant dinner at five o'clock, (*four o'clock on Sundays*). Rare was the occasion that she resumed her art after dinner. Eva wasn't entirely sure what Madeline did after she disappeared into her living quarters, her 'apartment' as she called it, which may, by Eva's math, have contained as many as twenty rooms. Eva had been in several of them for various reasons; Madeline wasn't excessively secretive but then Eva had never seen whichever bedroom Madeline chose to sleep in. It was simply matter of volume. Maybe Madeline didn't sleep, Eva thought.

Eva began busying herself with some sawhorses that seemed too nice for actual use and were probably destined for one of Madeline's pieces, or 'projects' as she often referred to the larger endeavors. They were heavy; oak? Mahogany? Eva was strong.

Madeline had been in '*Medusa*' mode for most of the afternoon, and Eva was worn down. *Might be nice to catch a nap in one of the bedrooms.* Maybe Madeline really didn't sleep. Maybe she

was a vampire? No, she was always up during the day. Werewolf? Eva wasn't too sure about them.

Finding a place for the sawhorses, Eva went back down the hall to the main studio, pausing to direct one of the technicians before flopping down at her own desk, a relatively neat place set-up much like a receptionist's, with in and out boxes, and a metal file for receipts permanent fixtures in the far right corner. And a single, perfect plum perched perfectly in the center of her blotter. What's with Madeline and the plums? Eva thought, deciding to save it for later despite how perfect it looked.

Grabbing her purse and jacket, Eva strode to Madeline's office and held the plum under her chin while she knocked on the open door.

"Yes," Madeline called out, her nose buried in some letter.

"Do you need anything else?" Eva asked. "I'm going to take off now. Fredrick will be looking for you in five or ten minutes."

Madeline waved distractedly, slowing her reading slightly. "Yes, yes, okay, see you tomorrow, thank you," Eva turned to leave. Madeline had an identical, perfectly purple plum sitting on her desk.

"Oh, and thanks for the plum," they said in unison. Neither heard the other as Eva was walking away.

"Nice plum," I said.

"I'll split it with you later, if you're nice," Eva said. "Eva was tripping on plums today for some reason. And she took me through some hidden door in a bookcase like you see in the movies, and down passageways, it was awesome."

"Uh, *uh*," I nearly whined, unable to hide my displeasure.

"Uh *huh*," Eva said gleefully. "It was awesome," she reiterated. "That place is so freaking scary, though. We went in through a

bookcase, for real, into this passageway that went along side of the old outer stone wall, and then across, and then back up a little,” Eva mimed in the air. “Along the back here was long, like maybe a hundred feet or more, and you could see down like fifteen or twenty feet into darkness. All along what were once the outer walls. Madeline said that back then when they wanted to expand it was just easier to build over it then tear down the existing wall, and that plumbers and electricians needed spaces to crawl around. She said when she was young she had some cousins and they used to sneak into the walls and stay there all day. She said there’s lots of stuff stored and abandoned but also hidden, secret stuff that they used to find behind bricks and behind shelves.”

“Money?” I asked.

“She didn’t say what.”

“Bodies?”

Eva ignored me. “But anyways, we wound up in Uncle Bertrom’s own, private gallery. He was an artist himself, you know.”

“I know. I ‘**Googled**’ him today,” I told her about the Wikipedia page. “And check this out, Bertrom’s old man was like a gangster or something, a bootlegger who was like mixed up in securities fraud too.”

“A bootlegger? Really?” Eva said.

“It said so on the Internet, so you know it’s true. And what’s with all of the sneaking around?”

Eva said: “Madeline said that it’s her house and she’ll go wherever she wants. See, that’s where the plum came from.” I looked at her queerly. “She was taking me to his secret gallery to show me a piece that Uncle Bertrom did a long time ago but it wasn’t in there, some painting called ‘*Plum*’.”

“What’s with the plums then?” I asked as I began to slice it.

"I guess we'll find out," Eva sat on the sofa and patted the seat beside her. "I thought you said we should stop poking our noses into things."

"Well, you didn't do very well either," I said.

"Mine was in context with my work; *you* are supposed to be writing," Eva replied.

I said: "So what, Uncle Bertrom just happened to come up? A guy who you didn't even know existed until last week?"

"Can't remember," Eva said, taking a bite of a plum slice and popping it into her mouth before wiping some juice from her chin. "Mmm."

"Really," I concurred.

"So, what do you want to do for dinner?" Eva said, moving behind me to rub my shoulders.

"I don't know. Oh, and get this, I talked to Mark today. He thinks that one of the workers maybe or a delivery guy hacked into their system," I said.

"*Shit...*"

"No, no, actually they hacked in and *added* something, something into the code that speeds things up. By a couple of weeks."

"That makes no sense. Hacking means snooping or stealing, I thought."

"Whatever, I'm just telling you what he told me."

Eva said: "How close are you to finishing your book? You know how Madeline can be; she's likely to rent out MOMA two days after they finish, to, you know, show the world."

"Mark said I should leave it unfinished and let the system finish it for me. What do you think?"

Eva turned to face me. "What do I think? Are you fucking crazy? It almost doesn't matter if it works or not, Joe, it's free

publicity and lots of it. You have to finish it yourself and it has to completely kick-ass. You're not being serious are you?"

I guess I wasn't. "Sort of," I said stubbornly.

"Maybe I need to cut you off for a while. That might motivate you," Eva said.

"Right, then how are you going to get pregnant, dumbass? Sperm bank?"

Eva looked down her pert nose and cocked her chin, sizing me up. "No. I want your sperm. But I'll only need it a couple of times a month, when I'm ovulating. That okay for you?"

Math, was one of my strong suits, and two into thirty-one, let's see that's the square root of pi divided by... wait a minute, that added up to 'sucks'.

I said: "Order-in pizza? I've got some work to do. Writer, you know," I interlocked my fingers and cracked my knuckles, ready to go ahead and finish writing, because it was as simple as that. "So how about a little sex down-payment? You know, as a sign of good-faith?"

"How about 'no'. Writing, first. Sex, *maybe*, later."

I thought: *there are no 'maybes' in math, Eva*. Instead, I said: "Good idea. Hon."



SIXTEEN

“**W**hat are we going to do?” I asked Eva.

“I thought you wanted to order pizza?” Eva said. “Are you done writing?”

“For now,” I said. “What about the sex?”

“Let’s see...pepperoni, mushroom, onion,” Eva said.

I said: “Foot massage, blow-job, two-hour coitus.”

“How about a Greek salad?” Eva offered.

I said: “Know why the Greek boy left home? He didn’t like the way he was being ‘reared’.” This one always cracks me up.

Eva stopped looking for the take-out menu and glared at me so I stopped laughing. For the most part. “What does that even mean? You’re so fucking stupid,” she said.

“Greeks? Sodomy? I dunno, shepherds bugging their sheep or something?” I said.

“Great. I guess I’ll just order, tough shit if you don’t like it.”

“Baby baby, come on,” I tried to hug her but she pulled away. “Why all of this friction? Why always fighting?”

“If we were fighting you’d be bleeding,” Eva said.

“Okay. How about this. A romantic getaway, this weekend. A surprise. On me,” my quick thinking recalled a coupon I’d seen for a getaway weekend in some place called Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania that was actually in my price-range, which meant somewhere between a ‘**Motel-8**’ and kicking back the front seats in the Honda at a rest-stop.

“Really?” Eva temporarily suspended her menu search.

Sensing a blind and wild hit I forged on: “You know you said something a while ago about a little mini-vacation.”

“Wow, captain romance. And a secret too, my my. Should I pack my French translator for Paris?”

“American-wear. Classy. And leave it all to me,” I said.

“Aye-aye, Captain,” she saluted.



SEVENTEEN

Where are we? Did you run it?

Yes.

And...?

It worked. Did you think it wouldn't? I'm uploading now. Oh, took almost a minute-nineteen to upload three-hundred gigs.

It would be easier if you would come here.

Fat chance of that. You remember what happened a few years ago when James and I got caught with our hands in the cookie jar.

Oh yeah, Rainmaker Raj too.

Back when he was just plain Raj. Never faulted him for that. Pretty clever actually.

Or dumb luck. Now if I was looking for you and you were somewhere you shouldn't be I'd find you in about five minutes.

Maybe, now because you know me. You know how I operate. Back then old Raj was just your head of campus security. Anyway, I'd rather be here, they leave me alone. I'm the only one who's ever in here. Tim and Brian work remotely and Craig has gotten so old he can't sit upright for any length of time.

Here comes the data. Let me have a look. This can't be right? Because if it is...

They're already using it.

Right. That's what I was about to say. But then that probably doesn't surprise you.

What surprises me, in a way, is that someone else put the pieces together, obviously a while ago. And we never heard anything about it. This was all based on fiction, remember?

Yes. Fiction. Right.



EIGHTEEN

Ten days later we were on the road at three, Eva having gotten the afternoon off as my blind-luck continued with Madeline having something to do in Boston early Friday evening.

“I hope she doesn’t call tomorrow,” Eva said, sliding back deeply into her seat and putting her stocking feet on the dash. “How far are we going anyway?”

“Like three or four hours, depending on the traffic,” I replied.

“Ooh, some bed and breakfast in the country? At least tell me what town?”

For \$139 for the weekend, double occupancy, I might have told her not to hold her breath. I double-checked that the coupon was still over my visor. “Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. Maybe the cell phone won’t work,” I offered.

“No, do you think? I’ll have to call and leave some sort of room number or something. I told you,” Eva said.

“Relax,” I said. “I’m sure there will be phones. Don’t worry, I’ve got it all planned out.”

What I should have included in my detailed planning (*pulling a coupon from our local, free, artsy-rag*), was a *slightly* more extensive search of towns in the surrounding area.

“The Poconos, Joe? Are you serious?” Eva said as we exited the highway. “I thought you said ‘Stroussberg’ or something.”

“Uh,” I replied cleverly.

“Don’t you know what the Poconos are? Those ads we see every time we venture into the New York - New Jersey area?” Eva said.

“Uh,” I continued my parry.

An hour later we were, no joke, sitting in a room at the ‘*Hotel Royale*’ of peeling chrome, crushed (*stained and stinky but covered up with gallons of ‘fresh scent’*) red velvet, a round bed and, the *piece-de-resistance*, a spiral staircase to a giant champagne-glass Jacuzzi.

Eva had: glared, bent elbowed, or said the phrase: *Come on, Joe. For real?*-no less than twenty times since she used her own brilliant mathematical deduction to put two (*us*) and three (*the Pennsylvania exit*) together and came up with ‘*uber-cheesy*’.

After carefully peeling off and cornering the comforter (*as in, into a ball, thrown into the corner*), we lay back on the bed. It felt like being served up on an open-faced sandwich. Time for that old, Elliot charm. “Come on, baby. This is romantic isn’t it? In a *getting-married-at-the-Elvis-chapel-in-Vegas* sort of way?” I tried to resurrect the magic.

“I am not getting into that giant cup of sperm residue. I’ll tell you that right now,” Eva said. “That thing looks like a cauldron for sperm soup.”

Nice image. Thanks, Eva. I said: “Ah, we don’t need any of that. Just being here, away, with you, that’s enough for me. Come on, can’t I put my ‘Captain Romance’ hat back on? Please?”

“Well, maybe. You did have the right intentions, about the wrong intentions, if you know what I mean,” Eva said.

“Like when Carla said to Sam on Cheers, when he struck-out trying to sleep with a mother and her daughter: ‘*What’s important here, Sam, is that you tried to do the wrong thing*’.”

“Right. Sure. Exactly like that,” Eva said.

“And what about this awesome bed?”

Eva agreed. “It feels like we’re an open-faced sandwich.”

“Ha. I just thought that myself not a minute ago.”

“And you kept such a brilliant nugget in?” Eva snuggled up next to me.

“Just feeding you some freebies. I told you this weekend was all about you. Just like the other fifty-one,” I added quickly.

“Nice save.”

“Thanks.”



NINETEEN

After driving back to Tiverton, we decided the trip hadn't been half-bad. Actually, it *would* have been all-bad except we did make a lot of whoopee, not a word I normally choose to describe our sexual intimacy, but it worked this time as the 'open-faced-sandwich-round-bed-thing' made a weird squeak whenever we were frolicking in, I guess, possibly, a certain *feng shui*-direction. It sounded like passing gas. It was funny. Really funny. For about ten seconds. The trip felt like 'mission accomplished' though, and not just because we managed to have marathon sex, but also because we did not contract *e-coli* or botulism from any of the 'fine dining' establishments that adorned both sides of the strip (*options are obviously thin when you're both thinking 'Dominoes Pizza'?-on a Saturday night*). Eva was very touchy-feely on the drive back and right up until we snuggled on the couch to watch a borderline girly-movie (*having already received more than enough 'compensation' for my actions acting as Captain Romance, this was a real stretch for me*) and have another talk (*about 'you know what'*). But like some sort of a miracle or divine intervention (*or afterglow from an orgasmic weekend*) we reached a decision. Or, more precisely, Eva reached a decision for 'us' (*for me more of a détente*) that after I finished the book and Madeline had

her showing, and if I didn't get an agent or a book deal, then I could go work for Jerry (*gee, thanks*) and we could get married anyway, (*possibly at the Elvis Chapel in Vegas. What? Can't a guy dream?*). Whether or not I would become depressed, or melancholy, or borderline obnoxious (*okay, scratch that, wrong tense*) as a result of my not writing remained to be seen, but as working for my buddy Jerry had been my idea to begin with (*albeit part-time*) I suppose it would be a reasonable accord. I love the hell out of Eva, so even if we both had to work, or at times she made more money than I did, I would just have to man-up. Really, everything was going pretty well. What could possibly screw things up?



TWENTY

One week earlier, Bertrom Sumner looked past the open 'Wall Street Journal' over his plate, his coffee and his glass of grapefruit juice to birdfeeder outside the window. He wondered if it was a Lawrence Goldfinch, or an off-colored American Goldfinch, much more common in the Northeast.

He sipped his coffee while he pondered this.

His butler Vincent moved smoothly in the background, working but making almost no sound. Already, Bertrom could hear the phones going off in his private office, none with traditional rings rather various chimes and muffled buzzes.

Finishing his coffee, he dabbed his mouth, and the sides of his cautious, line-thin mustache, with an embossed napkin that he had tucked into his collar. Then, he carefully folded the napkin into a neat square, leaning it just to the right of the perfectly crossed knife and fork on his nearly spotless breakfast plate, careful to keep either handle from resting atop one of the nine hand-painted ducks that adorned the china's edge and the napkin from resting atop the plate where there had been food. Vincent appeared silently and swept everything away with the easy assuredness of the ocean reclaiming some sand.

Bertrom stood, unbuckled his belt and opened his trousers, spreading his dress shirt snugly against his mostly flat stomach. He rose without an alarm clock at 5:20 every morning, weekends included, donned a pair of silk shorts (*black*) and a plain white tee shirt (*Calvin Klein*), and did fifty sit-ups, fifty push-ups and fifty squat-thrusts. Vincent washed his bed sheets every day, and his tee shirts, but Bertrom did not like his shorts to go through the washing machine and chose instead to hand-wash them, maybe twice a month, or whenever they really began to smell.

His next would be his 60th birthday, a day and number that meant very little. No family to speak of, his two spoiled, indulged children now into their thirties and firmly entrenched in an evolving hatred of him after his refusal to help them financially when both squandered their trust funds. His first ex wife, '*The Bitch*', was who knew where? - Dead, imprisoned? What did he care? It was she, he would not speak (*or think*) her name, who broke him down ultimately with her constant need, she who so rattled him prior to their divorce that he stopped painting altogether, his once promising art now confined to memories and a small, private gallery he kept hidden on the first floor, one of many secrets he kept.

Having fixed his shirt and tie and re-fastened his trousers, he moved stealthily toward his office door, pausing almost imperceptibly as he passed the entryway to the hall that led to the botanical gardens and the suit of armor spread across it. The armor wasn't only ornamental; it pleased him no end that others could pass right in front of it having no idea what laid in the room behind it, secreted through a hidden recess, its access secured from strangers by a special lock he had installed. It had been a secret place of his father before him, a tightly constructed room made of stone now near derelict containing remnants from bygone days including several empty whiskey casks, big ones, one of which was filled nearly

halfway with stacks of money. Old money. Hard, green cash. He never bothered to count it all but knew it was more than a million, and really didn't need it; he derived most pleasure from it because it existed away from the prying eyes of the government and the IRS.

Reaching his office door, he tapped in the four-digit code after an unconscious glance over both shoulders and stepped inside. The suit jacket that matched his trousers was hanging on a polished oaken hanger from a long brass hook that extended next to the door. Crossing, he slid his high-backed leather chair out and settled into it, squaring the armrests with the front of his antique desk, a Louis XV he was particularly proud of, having outbid a rival anonymously over the phone (*then paying \$3,000 to a 'friend' at the auction house to confide who the other bidder had been*). Leaning over, he flipped a hidden switch and three monitors snapped to life; one a permanent fixture on a stock channel, and the other two rotating security images from Rockhurst Manor, his New York apartment, and several vacation homes. It took nearly five minutes to go through the loop, and he rarely paid any overt attention to it unless it was a particularly slow day and he was bored which had not happened in some time.

The chimes and buzzing sounds abated slightly; it was **8:02** a.m. EST and Rose, his long-time secretary, knew he was always at his desk and began screening the calls from her office at a tech company he owned. The company offices were on route **128** outside of Boston, often referred to as 'America's Technology Highway' for its corporate occupants. He only went to the corporate offices on Fridays, or when there were board meetings he couldn't get out of, and today was Wednesday. He abhorred going to the office, which used to act as sanctuary or respite from his long days of painting. Now he found it was simply too noisy, too bright.

He took calls at his leisure, usually from people looking for funding, and traded stocks and commodities himself, usually for the morning before breaking precisely at **11:55** for lunch. Bertrom was known for having rudely terminated phone calls if they conflicted with his lunch.

More and more lately he found himself not returning after he ate, choosing instead to wander the grounds or the botanical garden examining the plants and flowers, or having Vincent drive him into Boston or Providence to shop or just to drive around. Years ago, he liked to drive a vintage ‘Mercedes 600’ himself; a long pre-cursor to the stretch limousine, it was stored in one of his heated garages, and he now opted for the more luxurious (*but less ostentatious*) ‘Maybach’, the current rage with the Wall Street crowd that still had any money.

Yesterday, he noted, Tuesday, was usually his busiest trading day, which made the fact that he’d been glancing at the monitors at the time when the random image showed his Niece, Madeline, and her assistant, violating his personal space odd.

Very odd.

Equally odd was their apparent fascination with “Plum”, the centerpiece of his private gallery. Painted furiously just after his father passed on, it was inspired by something imparted with him just before the old man’s death; a crudely drawn map that led from Rockhurst’s main foyer to the hidden door to the tightly constructed room made of stone. Initially, Bertrom thought it was a joke, another link in the line of cruelties perpetrated over the years by his hard-scrabble father, a long, tubular space filled with odd-shaped tables and several large whiskey casks, most of which were empty. Save one.

Reaching for his sterling, monogrammed nail clippers, despite his weekly manicure, he ignored the notifications of calls holding from Rose and thought about what to do. Did Madeline know the

painting's roots? Its origin? Was she out to obtain that portion of his fortune, cash she clearly did not need?

"Sir," Vincent seemed to materialize before him. Dressed in a black suit and subdued tie, Vincent was a barrel-chested man of little height or notable physical presence, probably forty but maybe fifty. He'd worked for Bertrom Sumner for fourteen years, having taken over butlering duties for Bertrom when Bertrom's primary residence was in Boca Raton, in a manse one tenth of the size of Bertrom's half-share of Rockhurst Manor. Prior to that time Bertrom had been married, and his then-wife insisted on only heavy-set maids for domestic help. A good butler was married to his employer, Vincent had been taught, and this included, at a minimum, ignoring any salacious, mal-directed (*or borderline illegal*) activities he might bear notice of, or witness to. It was further understood by both parties that while generally well compensated with good pay and room and board, witness to, or abetting in, aforementioned deeds were rewarded financially, in the form of a good old cash bonus or promissory stipulation in the employer's last will and testament. Bertrom preferred the former, preferring green cash, much of it actually old scrip like Madeline's, always paid up front if asking Vincent to perform a *less-than-ethical* act, as it had been yesterday when Bertrom slid two green notes adorned with Benjamin Franklin across his desk. Vincent could make the money disappear more quickly and smoothly even than the dining plates.

"No one saw you?" Bertrom asked, tenting his fingers, elbows resting on the arms of his oversized chair.

"Sir," Vincent's tone indicated '*hardly*'.

"Well, I don't know. It's so dirty back there," Bertrom said.

"Are you worried I left tracks? It wouldn't matter if I did.

There must be thirty people living over there. Poor Fredrick must be having some time of it," Vincent said.

"I can see the girl's desk, but I haven't been able to get the office wired. I mean, I could, of course, if I wanted to. Be hard to argue that they're security measures, if we were found out," Bertrom said.

"You can already see nine-tenths of the space," Vincent said.

"It is my home," Bertrom said sternly. Vincent shifted his weight. Bertrom continued: "If Madeline was to move, or die, and none of the other grubby nieces and nephews decided they had to live here, I'd have the place to myself. I just don't understand what she wanted with *'Plum'*. Are they done with the frame?"

"I believe next Thursday," Vincent said.

"What could it possibly have to do with that thing she's building over there? I don't understand it."

"Perhaps she's merely fond of it, Sir. I rather like it myself."

Bertrom crossed his hands on his desk and leaned forward slightly. It was not like Vincent to bootlick; maybe he was somehow in on the deviousness. Bertrom quickly dismissed this. He said: "You do?"

"Sir," Vincent stood stoically.

Bertrom considered this. "Do you think I have talent? Real talent?"

Vincent paused. "Yes."

"And *'Plum'*?"

"It shows real pain," Vincent said.

"I finished it the same week I met my first wife," Bertrom said.

"I would have liked to have known Mistress."

"No, you wouldn't," Bertrom said. "Well, wander over there later. Go see her butler and ask him about something house-related, see what's going on."

"As you wish," Vincent said, bowing almost imperceptibly and turning from the room. He wasn't quite sure what Master was up to

but it was frankly rather boring around Rockhurst Manor lately and it gave him something to do.

“Vincent. One more thing,” Bertrom called out. “Can you get your... associate on the phone? The one that solves problems. No, better yet, can you ask him to come out, sometime this afternoon?”

“The detective?” Vincent turned back again to clarify.

“Yes, him.”

“Very well. Will you require my presence?” Vincent said.

“No. Not this time,” Bertrom said.

Frank Martens was a retired Boston police detective, well more of a fired Boston police detective, who got caught fencing stolen artwork and was forced to resign. The only reason he didn't do time for the crimes was he'd been a solid cop and had a lot of friends on the job including the Captain when the shit went down. He'd helped move a few items before getting caught in a sting, and had managed to keep the cash well hidden. He had enough of it to start his own security company in Attleboro, a small town between Providence and Boston, safely hidden in the trees.

Bertrom wasn't quite sure how Vincent knew Frank Martens, he just knew that Martens was a guy you could hire to do most anything, to see that most anything got done, and done right. For that Bertrom was more than happy to pay handsomely, from time-to-time. By pure coincidence, Bertrom had a background check run on the girl last week- Madeline's assistant- mostly out of boredom, and then her boyfriend too as he had started showing up on the Eastside somewhat regularly. Had Bertrom not had that done he likely wouldn't have recognized the girl when she violated his private gallery with his niece.

“What you’re talking about is an IT hack. Yeah sure, no problem. What do you want to get into?” Frank Martens leaned back; his fine, tailored suit did not jibe with his affect, or his manner of speech.

“Actually, I’m not sure if what I’m asking for is illegal,” Bertrom said, wiggling his nose at Frank’s overpowering, exotic (*ten-cent*) cologne.

Martens shrugged. “Only matters as to cost. Which, by the way, I’m billing you for this hour since you made me come out.”

Bertrom ignored him. “I want him to tap in to my niece next door in a way that she couldn’t possibly know about.”

“What, phones and Internet?”

“*Intranet*,” Bertrom said. “That’s...”

“Yeah, I know what that means,” Martens said. “She’s that crazy artist nut right? Saw her on TV. What do you want with her?”

“I believe that is my business.”

“Hey, relax. You know it. Okay, so you need a tech and a bag guy,” Bertrom raised an eyebrow. Martens said: “Guy to break-in, jack into the line, somewhere where no one will see it.”

“Isn’t there a way to do it wirelessly?”

Martens scoffed: “Sure, if you’re the fucking NSA.”

Bertrom leaned back into his chair and tented his fingers. He said: “How much?”

“For a wireless jack like that? Shit, probably talking, retail, and that shit don’t retail, you know what I mean, I don’t know, at least one-fifty, maybe more.”

“When can I have it installed? Will you require a deposit?”

Martens looked around although he’d been in the office before. “Nah, we’re good. What’s our budget though, just so I don’t waste too much of my time.”

Bertrom smoothed at his mustache. “Good day, Mr. Martens.”

Martens stood and smiled. "I'll have something, next couple of days."



TWENTY ONE

The data on the reader. You got that from Bennie?

He's the best.

He also runs his mouth a lot in chats, and on Facebook.

So? He only has a little part of it for now.

Yeah, but he knows we're coders. So what do we want with an electron scanner? And how is he going to resolve the fact that it won't be in the lab at Cal because it will be here.

You're joking, right? Raju runs Bennie's entire department.

Rainmaker Raj?

The same. He sucks funding from NASA and half the defense contractors. Bennie's not stupid. He'll come up with something.

So, once we get the reader installed you can get Cox to divert the scan data.

The pulse.

The reader will convert the pulse to raw data, then we're on.

Then we've only proved it's possible. Once we prove it's possible wouldn't you agree that its probability, on a larger scale, approaches 100%?

I'm not as cynical as you are.

Cynicism has nothing to do with it. Generally, people do things because they can. What megalomaniac wouldn't want this type of access at his fingertips?

Or hers.

Sure. Okay, explain, again, what you're going to need from me.

Remember that study? Showed plants reacting, albeit slowly, when threatened? You are going to 'threaten' an electron with your laser, and we are going to record the data and feed it into Bennie's recorder. Give me clean data from three separate actions.

That's all? Piece of cake.

Should be. Or I can do it if you can get me into your lab.

Even the Rainmaker would have a hard time getting in here and you're no Raj, sorry to tell you.

By the time I prove this, comparatively no one will even remember who Raj is.



TWENTY TWO

The afterglow of our joyous weekend away had already been swallowed by the plodding tsunami that was everyday life. I was almost ready to pronounce my book finished and allow first Eva then Madeline a read, obviously with some trepidation. My two prior works were both crime-dramas; you either liked the story and my writing style or you did not (*apparently, really only one option realistically applied*). This foray could really ruin a reputation, even if one had no reputation, so to speak, to ruin. Basically, I was operating under the premise: *what-have-I-got-to-lose?* But as judgment day grew nearer (*others were choosing to call it a 'pre-opening', or 'field test'*), I could not help but think that no matter how it went, Madeline would be pleased. A catastrophic flop and Madeline would proclaim that it was: *'beyond the critic's intellect'* or something the like. Really, if I was being honest, I was more fearful that the thing might actually work; I mean, hell, she'd sunk millions into it and my friend Mark really was kind of brilliant. If it did I would undoubtedly have to field a bunch of questions, since her piece originated from 'my' brilliant piece of fiction. Or maybe they would see that I was just a guy with a pretty good imagination who walked right into it through a series of flukes. Wasn't that what life

was really about? A series of flukes? Either way the clock was ticking, loudly, and I was about to publically attach my writing career to Madeline Sumner-Stone.

Sitting with Mark when I should have been writing, I swiveled in my chair, one leg dangling over the side. Mark had that greasy look to him that said: *I haven't showered for a while, beware*, but I was on a mission (*looking for an excuse not to write*) and told Eva I was doing a little research to, to, you know, *'tighten things up'*. She'd been testy lately, and getting on my nerves about as much as she ever did, which really wasn't very often. My darling didn't even get 'difficult' during her 'cycle' (*Aunt Flo is in town, Honey. Wonderful news, Dear*). Maybe it was the pressure of the project, every opening or showing was an ordeal, but I should have supposed Eva was feeling some of my angst because that's what darling's do.

Mark really hadn't said much, just kept mumbling about some techno-garble as technicians came and went so I went for a walk. In Rockhurst Manor, even on just the Eastside, I suppose I could have gone for a run if I utilized all of the floors. The rule, on the Eastside anyway, was that open doors were...open doors, but closed doors were private, and very few of these existed. One door shut Madeline's 'apartment' off from the rest of the place, and probably ninety percent of the doors I passed were open and the rooms on display like an exhibit where you're allowed to sit and touch, encouraged even. There were the constant running themes of heavy polished wood, rich wainscoting, and shiny brass carpet and stair runners, everything in cream. Otherwise, as you moved down hallways and floor to floor there were subtle changes, as if you could see Rockhurst Manor at a time when there were maybe ten or more *Sumners-in-residence* and each brought a little of their own style to the poshness of the surrounds. Every once in a while a maid would move past and offer a diminutive smile and nod hello before

shuffling away silently and disappearing into the maze. I found a large alcove wing filled with really interesting local waterfront relics, a ship's wheel, standing compass, and intricate ship models, some in bottles, more fascinating than gauche, then a small library, then a very sun-lit, tiny alcove that looked out onto a massive fountain and the great front lawn.

Small library?

Verifying that no one else was about, and holding my breath in the dense silence, I walked back to the small, oddly-shaped room with bookcases adorning every wall and buffeting a bright-white, marble fireplace.

What was I doing? Right, what anyone would probably be doing, although I don't know if I actually found the right bookcase and then the lever and got the hidden door open, if I would even go through. I mean, wouldn't a hidden doorway in a bookcase, which was closed, have the old Eastside house rule applied to it? Or because it was a secret door, a hidden door, perhaps some special rule applied? For one thing, Eva said there were no cameras anywhere, except outside, and in the basement, and attic, as Madeline was utterly unconcerned with any security measures and let very few people, normally, into her home. I wasn't really worried about being seen. Sure, it might be a little embarrassing, like getting caught at something when you're a kid, but, I mean, come on. Moving bookcases? Secret passageways?



TWENTY THREE

When Bertrom was roaming the grounds, asleep or otherwise disposed, it was left to Vincent to monitor the monitors in a console in the butler's kitchen, if he had nothing else to do. He would glance at it from time-to-time, a voyeuristic, people-watching curiosity in all of the men and women Madeline had working next door. He would often stop the rotating feeds on the main studio and try to listen in with the bugging devices which really weren't sensitive enough to pick up conversations that were not had right below them, being hidden in the molding along the lower balcony rail. It was interesting this afternoon because not only did they appear to be assembling some sort of a platform in the main studio, but he had inadvertently picked up on a man strolling down an innocuous second floor corridor who, when the next camera picked him up, proved to be the boyfriend of Madeline's assistant, the same girl Bertrom had asked that Frank Martens run a background check on two weeks prior. Vincent watched him for a moment with little interest; he appeared to be strolling like the place was a museum, which, in fairness, even the Eastside really was, but then the man stopped at '*The Ships*', as Vincent called them, his personal favorite part 'over there', then watched as the man turned around and went

into a side-room. What was in there? Vincent scanned his memory. Nothing, some innocuous bedroom or parlor. There wasn't even a camera on it, only a view from a camera placed down the hallway. When after a few minutes the door was still open and the man had not come out, Vincent shifted, becoming intrigued. Maybe the man found a book to read but why there? One of the large libraries was open at the end of the hallway; you could see it from *'The Ships'*, a far more inviting place, with large picture windows and vaulted ceilings, to curl up for a good read. Vincent checked his watch and five minutes later, his curiosity piqued, he headed for the Eastside.

The room the man was in was just half a hallway down from the always open French doors and connector of Westside to Eastside. Master had asked Vincent to visit with Madeline's manservant Fredrick, and now seemed like the perfect time. Pausing momentarily to let his eyes drift over a four-foot replica of *'Old Ironsides'*, an item amidst the almost uncountable, incalculable and priceless items that were strewn about Rockhurst Manor that Vincent coveted like few others, he strode two more doors down and turned left into the room where he saw the man go.

"You went into the walls? At Rockhurst? Where? How did you find it? The hidden door?" Eva said.

"I dunno," I replied. "Blind luck, I guess, unless maybe they have them in every room with bookshelves and you just have to find them."

"So, what happened? Did you get caught?" Eva said.

"Well, sort of. Not really," I said.

"Which is it? 'Sort of' or 'not really'?"

"Well, I wasn't in there very long, maybe about five minutes. It's so freaking cool! I climbed down this ladder..."

"And? What happened?" Eva demanded.

“Down the ladder? It was awesome, cool temperature, too. Natural air-conditioning. It went down to this old walkway, like you see in westerns, might have served as a loading dock or something. I wasn’t even there long enough to look around for any hidden cash,” I said.

“No, Joe, come on.”

“Okay, alright, what happened was, after I came back and closed the bookcase this guy comes in, a thousand freaking rooms, right? And he sees me and he seems kind of startled, but just for a second. And then he introduces himself as ‘Vincent’, just like that, only one name.”

“Uncle Bertrom’s butler,” Eva said. “Wonder what he was doing on the Eastside?”

“I don’t know, but Bertrom’s butler, he asked if I needed anything. I said no, no thanks, nice to meet you, whatever, and off he went. But then I realized when I was walking back over to see Mark that Vincent had been looking at me a little suspiciously, like eying me up, you know what I mean, and then I saw I had a bunch of dirt and dust on me from climbing down that ladder. Did I tell you how freaking cool it was down there? It’s like going back in time, a capsule, where everything stands still.”

“I know, I went too, remember? You still shouldn’t have done it. That’s like snooping around,” Eva said.

“No it isn’t, snooping on what? A bunch of dusty old walls, rickety stairs and skinny little walkways? I didn’t go out anywhere, I didn’t touch anything, hell, I didn’t want to get lost. I just looked around.”

“Oh, like you’re not on some kind of a treasure hunt?” Eva crossed her arms.

“Lighten up, baby,” I tried to hug her but she shrugged me off, “how could anyone keep track of even half that place? And there aren’t any cameras, right? You said there are no cameras.”

“Not over there,” Eva said.

“It smelled pretty rank, too. Down at the bottom. I couldn’t see shit. It’s amazing really that you can see anything down there from just those skylights. They’re like six stories up, at least.”

“Madeline says they’re shaped like a jack o’ lantern from above, if you saw them from the sky,” Eva said.

“Stinks down there though. Got to be rats and crap, who knows? Kind of looks like an old New York sewer, part of it anyway. Who knows what’s living down there? Or dead. Maybe there are bodies. And don’t worry, if I happened to stumble onto any cash or anything valuable I would hand it over to Madeline.”

Eva said: “How would you even know what side you’re behind? You shouldn’t be poking around. What if Uncle Bertrom hid his life savings, safely, he thought, behind a wall?”

“Okay, okay, I won’t move anything around or remove any bricks,” I sounded convincing, if I was telling the truth.

Eva said: “Madeline says a dead body smells really bad, for a really long time.

Then:”I need to lie down.”

She did look peaked. “Here, lay on the couch,” I quickly moved a book and some newspaper and propped up a pillow for her. “Binky?” A word I would never use, but I was trying to make her comfortable. She nodded so I took a throw blanket from a chest in the corner and laid it over her, bending and kissing her on the nose as she leaned her face upward, her eyes already closed.

“Wake me in an hour, will you?” She said.

“Sure. Baby, don’t be stressed, okay? It’s going to be fine. I’m almost done. Seriously, it will all work out. And if it sucks we’ll move on. And get married and shit.”

“How romantic,” she mumbled and smiled but was already half in the hay.



TWENTY FOUR

“Was inside the walls?” Bertrom’s repeated, his tone suggesting his displeasure. He worked nervously at his mustache. “Yes, Sir.” Bertrom and Vincent stood in the main foyer. Vincent added: “I do believe so. He had dirt on him, thick dust, old dust, it has a certain smell.”

“Fine, fine, so what was he doing in there? Is he some kind of an operative? You need to call Frank Martens,” Bertrom began to rock slightly up on his heels.

“Sir. If I may. It is more likely just a coincidence. His girlfriend, she probably told him about her adventures with your niece,” Vincent said.

“They wouldn’t have come through that way. I’m quite sure they used the recessed door off the first floor Grand Salon, which takes them down beneath the old stables then up along a back wall. From the room you described, that can only lead to a space where the old delivery docks used to be before they were walled in with the 1790 expansion. No, that’s not it. And don’t think for a minute that my niece isn’t capable of her own nefarious acts,” Bertrom said.

“But the girl has been in Madeline’s employ for years, Sir. Could they be pretending to be lovers? To what end?” Vincent said.

“Vincent, you know I have to always be careful. I do have quite a portfolio to maintain. Men have stalked Sumners for two hundred years. We must remain vigilant.”

“Sir.”

Bertrom shook a finger. “That is, however, an interesting theory you propose.”

“Sir?”

“The girl gets a job with my niece, maybe she knows the man at the time, maybe she doesn’t. We should have had her checked out years ago. It doesn’t really matter because he is the confidence man, a cat burglar, a high-wire thief. What’s three or four years to wait for the right moment to remove a priceless piece of art? Or jewelry? Leave a forgery? We might never know. It’s probably happened to Sumners before but I’ll be damned if it’s going to happen to me. On my watch. Call Frank Martens and tell him you want to know everything about the boyfriend, and I mean everything.”

“Would you like for me to have him surveilled?” Vincent said.

“Why not. Let’s get out in front of this one. And find someone who can watch the monitors all the time, I don’t care who, just have them alert you if they see any snooping around, anything suspicious, even on the Eastside. Especially over there. If anyone enters my private gallery again I should like that they be shot.”

“Sir?”

“Well, I can’t have her arrested, the girl maybe, but not my niece.”

“Why not, Sir? It is trespassing isn’t it?”

“By any rational standards, but our *Great-Great-Great* Grandfather, William *Baines* Sumner, he in his infinite, and it seems eternal, wisdom, decreed that any direct decedents of the bloodline

could live at Rockhurst Manor for as long as they wished, room and board paid for from a trust he set up with some old London, England firm. After two hundred years of even minimal interest, as you can imagine, the base has accrued far beyond any maintenance expenses for this place. In the spirit of, oh, I don't know, democracy or something, he deemed that the entirety of the space would be open to all, within reason of course, an office for one's private matters, bedrooms. Of course inhabitants could create really any rules that they wished as long as everyone living here agreed to abide by them. What happened more often than not, someone grew jealous when a brother or cousin who had more taste than they did turned their wing into something fabulous, then there would be some disagreement, some feud, and even though technically you couldn't keep them out it became so socially awkward that eventually the sour grapes moved out. Tens, probably hundreds could qualify. Most of them don't know a thing about it; they see it as a fun place to visit in the summer. I'm certainly not going to announce it, remind them. Haven't you ever wondered why so few Sumners ever use this place?"

"I haven't given it much thought, Sir," Vincent said, but he had. In servant scuttlebutt it was assumed that Madeline and Bertrom were the two really rich Sumners; Madeline by birth, the elusive Bertrom possibly though smarts as well, and that the two ran roughshod over any relatives.

Bertrom said: "Rockhurst scares most of them away. They would rather have a smaller, likely less elegant place that they can master completely. Or, through inevitable run-ins as I mentioned, someone has sour grapes. To me this is like a private hotel, which I prefer.

"Let me know when you hear about that man and be sure to get someone to double-check the monitors. Twenty-four seven."

“Sir,” Vincent said.



TWENTY FIVE

So the 'they' that you refer to. Aren't 'they', us? I mean seriously, how could something this sophisticated, requiring this many disciplines and scientific specialties be built without you or me or Shona or Craig knowing about...

I know.

But the data is good. The data is clean.

Right.

Should we stop working on it? Should we stop writing the story?

Would it even matter? Could we stop thinking about it?

Can we can the philosophizing for a minute here. I'm a little freaked out, okay? I mean what's next? Levitation? Alien autopsies?

We're coders don't forget. Well, one of us is. We wouldn't have ever been exposed to most of this if we didn't have all of our friends and our project.

Orwellian Steroids. That's what we should call it. Make it easier to explain.

Explain to whom?

Come on. Again. Does it matter? Does-any-of-it-matter if the W.E.B. really exists?

Might be more Sagan than Orwell. And right, right, what would that matter? So what have we done here? Inadvertently discovered the next phase of life? Or ripped back the curtain to expose the wizard that is this...gigantic video game that we are all unwitting, or most of us are unwitting, participants in?



TWENTY SIX

“I swear someone’s watching me again. Come here. I’ll show you,” I pulled the blind cautiously aside. “Brown car. Right down...shit, it’s gone. I saw it, now three times this week. Same plate too.”

“You’re checking license plates now?” Eva said. “Maybe it’s someone new, someone visiting one of our unknown neighbors.”

“A guy’s been sitting in it twice. Reading the paper. Or, pretending to.”

“Joe.”

“No, seriously, every now and again look outside, right on the corner, brown sedan, older model, but not that old. Doesn’t look like a cop car.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“Eva.”

“What? Joe, honey, I always tell you when you’re going off the edge and buddyboy you are racing that way right now, full steam ahead,” Eva said.

“I know what I saw. Different guy from the two on the bridge six weeks ago but same look, same tough-guy eye contact,” I said.

“Isn’t that what all you hard-asses do? Can we stop talking about this now? I still don’t feel well,” Eva said.

“Wow, I’ve never seen you this sick. I don’t think I’ve ever even seen you sick, come to think of it,” I said.

“Well, I am. Must have been bad food, and the thing is lingering. I barfed again after lunch today, Fredrick made us tuna salad; I *love* his tuna salad. I just feel so worn down,” Eva said.

“Skip the gym tonight. We could go for a little run, if you have to, or let’s just sit here and veg,” I said.

“Okay,” Eva nodded. “Veg.”

“It’s the project getting to you, isn’t it?”

“Maybe. That’s part of it. There’s always so much going on over there,” Eva said.

I said: “But now it involves me too.” Eva smiled wanly and shrugged. I added: “If you think you’ve got something, go to the doctor. You want me to call for you?”

“Let’s see how I feel tomorrow,” Eva said.



TWENTY SEVEN

It was nearly three a.m. and Bertrom could not sleep.

Normally, he only needed four or five hours, but matters that were at hand were serious indeed, and he was alone in their service.

Sometimes when this happened, when he couldn't sleep, he would put on a robe and slip into his favorite slippers and roam the halls, amazed how utterly silent Rockhurst Manor was at night, missing even the creaks and groans one would expect from a house this size and age, but this happened only in the most strident of winds, or fierce winter storms, and even then still felt somehow contained. It was dead, good dead, like a fine hotel, sounds anticipated, muffled, dismissed. Sometimes, even in warmer months, Bertrom would ask that fireplaces be lit, in his living area, his office and the Great Hall. On very stormy nights when he knew he would not sleep, he would ask that all of them on the Westside be lit, more than twenty, so that no matter where he ambled, the Westside felt comfortable, warm. He silently wished he'd anticipated this bout of insomnia, even though it was hardly cold outside. Wall sconces and chandeliers were intermittent, and set on 'low', casting warm, subtle light with few shadows.

At the end of each hallway, beside each closed stairwell, was emergency lighting he detested but that was required by the insurance company. In earlier years, he would have rang for his butler; as a precocious child, his mother's private maid, and asked that fires be lit ahead of his stroll despite the hour. Still it was not a completely foreign thought, but doing so would disrupt the stillness, so he clasped his hands behind him, took a deep breath and walked smoothly.

Clearly, something was going on. Normally he might seek counsel from one of the attorneys, or perhaps his most recent ex-wife with whom he remained on speaking terms, but he was not in a very trusting mood. What if the theory about the man from the Eastside was indeed correct? Some sort of scam-artist, thief or operative? Bertrom watched his niece fairly closely; for most of their early lives, he would have called her a friend, a good friend, and truthfully while almost no one appreciated her genius he, more than most, would admit to admiring all of it, even some of the more outlandish displays that he felt spoke more to her neurosis than artistic talents (*a difference often difficult to discern*). Bertrom's passion was moderns, and he was always collecting. True, he had once bid silently on one of Madeline's pieces, a horribly disturbing affair that involved a mangled tricycle and some smashed pumpkin, and, equally true, he knew that even had he continued to paint his work would never be considered anything but competent. 'Plum' was one of his favorites; he continued to rack his mind for what Madeline might have thought or said about it, when he last allowed her into his private space, or why Madeline would want to show the piece to her assistant, the girl. No one knew about the room or the map, unless Bertrom had somehow muttered in his sleep.

Reaching the end of the hall, he turned with his gaze lowered and started back along the other side.

Whatever Madeline was really doing it was as usual on a grand scale.

Like him, she was always a private person, big and friendly when she was socializing, a starlet nearly when she was young, but never much for inviting people for long visits at her home. By his count more than fifteen people-technicians- had been living in the Eastside now for nearly six weeks. What could possibly take so long to assemble? The audio files from the bugging devices were not designed to capture individual conversations; there had never been a need, and the best he could make of it seemed more like some kind of experiment than anything he could fathom related to one of Madeline's pieces.

He realized that he was becoming obsessed with it.

Part of him thought to just stop by for some tea and come right to the point, but with the specter of something potentially nefarious looming it was best to investigate quietly, thoroughly.

Right at eight o'clock the next morning, having slept for only an hour or two, Bertrom summoned Vincent.

"Sir?"

"I want you to have background run on everybody over there, all of them. Anyone who is there overnight I want to know about."

"Shall we use Frank Martens or would you prefer someone more... economical?"

"Martens is fine. And he's already involved so maybe something will jump out at him. Call him first thing," Bertrom said.

"Very well," Vincent said.

“Excuse me, Mr. Vincent,” a small, woman’s voice interrupted them. Vincent turned and raised his brow. “The guard said there is a Mr. Martens here to see Mr. Sumner.”

“Thank you, Estelle,” Vincent said and the maid disappeared.

“What’s this? Who scheduled this?” Bertrom leaned nervously forward in his chair.

“Not me, Sir, I assure you. Let me go see what he wants,” Vincent turned and strode toward the main kitchen and back of the house. Bertrom turned to the monitors and strained to see. Vincent returned a few minutes later with Frank Martens, two other men in suits who looked more like henchmen than associates, and several large packing cases like the kind photographers use to safely move their equipment.

“Figured you’d want this as soon as it came in so we came right over. Set it down over there guys,” Frank Martens motioned to the back of the office. “This okay?” He asked Bertrom who sat stoically behind his ornate desk, his fingers tented in their usual position in front of him as he fought the urge to check both sides of his mustache.

Bertrom said: “That’s fine. Just don’t lean against that table. So I am correct that we did not have an appointment, Mr. Martens?”

“Frank, Frank, you know that. Mr. Martens is my father. Like I said, we figured you’d want it a.s.a.p. Or, we could come back?” Martens pointed toward the door.

“Must we have the theatrics and cheap sales ploys? I have several appointments this morning, how long will this take?” Bertrom said.

“An hour. Two, tops? Rog?” Martens motioned to one of the suits who nodded in accord.

“Very well. Is there installation necessary?” Bertrom said.

"Nope. This baby will pluck every piece of data coming and going for a half mile. Rockhurst is perfect 'cause there's nobody within miles of here. Just park the unit somewhere, in a closet or something and everything takes place on a custom laptop. All wireless, and *state-of-the-art*," Martens said.

"Yes, and I'm sure rather expensive. Retail, as that is."

Martens smiled. "Okay, so you got a closet or something? How about some recessed wall space?"

Bertrom sat forward. "Come with me."

Bertrom led the men down a hallway then into a room that was situated behind the office. Striding over, he pressed both palms against a wide piece of wainscoting and it slid in and then over, revealing a cubbyhole the size of a large kitchen cabinet. "There is electricity just up there," Bertrom pointed.

"Perfect," Martens said.

Leaving one agent, they walked back to the office. "Okay, let's get you familiar with the interface," Martens took out an ultra-slim computer, opened it and set it down on top of the Louis XV desk. Bertrom tightened, already envisioning scratches in the wax, gouges. He quickly returned to his chair, then leaned over and gently lifted the laptop so he could rotate it carefully so that he could see.

Martens said: "Okay. Now we can filter out any of your own stuff once you identify it."

"What's all of that there?" Bertrom motioned to the screen impatiently.

"They're 3-D boxes, like Windows on your PC. Each one displays a different data stream. Like this one, that a cellular phone," Martens tapped a few keys. "Watch, you can tune it in." Suddenly, Bertrom could hear a conversation between what sounded like a technician and the technician's wife. "System records everything, so if you can't bring something up quickly enough you can always go

back and find it later. It can convert any audio to text too. Basically, you sift through and identify specific sources, then you can filter out the ones you want like this,” tap, tap, tap, “and highlight just a few that you’re real interested in.”

“What’s that?” Bertrom pointed to a box.

“Huh, I don’t know but there’s lots of it. Hey, Roger. Come here a minute,” Martens said.

The agent strode into the office. Martens swiveled the laptop on the ornate desktop again; Bertrom cringed. The man named Roger stared at the computer screen then tapped some keys and there was only the one box in view.

“Whole lot of shit ain’t it?” Martens said.

The agent acted stunned. He reached behind him to pull in a chair without peeling his eyes from the screen. “It’s fantastic,” he said breathlessly.

“What is it?” Bertrom asked.

The agent shook his head slowly, transfixed. “I don’t know. It looks like data from a scientific lab, or a back-feed from some massive server bank. What are they doing over there? This is crazy.”

“*What?*” Bertrom pressed.

Martens said: “Hey listen, we’re not hired on as analysts. You wanted a ‘sniffer’ and we got you one. We’re not here to tell you what it finds.”

“I could run some diagnostics...” the agent began.

“No, Rog, thanks, we’re good. You boys pack it up, wait in the kitchen; I’ll just be a minute,” Martens said.

“Okay,” the agent said, licking his lips and looking queerly at Bertrom whose eyes were now glued to the small screen.

Frank Martens turned back and removed a file from his briefcase. “Okay, how do we invoice this?”

“As usual I would prefer to pay cash. Less twenty percent,” Bertrom said.

Bertrom leaned over and took the file before Martens could process Bertrom’s intent, causing Martens to smile as he was about to fold the file up and put it away, since they were now discussing actual cash. “Hey, that’s a lot of cash. How about ten percent? It’s not like it’s just a few hundred bucks,” Martens said. Twerpy little rich dude was sharper than he looked. Sumner had paid him with cash before but never near the amount of this bill. Did he remember Martens’ original quote? Martens was suddenly nervous, having already laid out his own funds to purchase the unit, one that he didn’t want to get stuck with. Quickly, he said: “So, one-hundred-eighty-five thousand, less twenty...”

“Twenty is still less, I assume, than you pay in taxes. The estimated net for Martens Security last year, was, I believe, north of six-point-three million,” Bertrom went at his mustache.

Martens smiled again. “Okay. One-sixty-eight even.”

When examining the cash in the car Frank Martens would wonder why so much of the money was struck more than seventy years ago.



TWENTY EIGHT

We're being snooped.

Are you sure.

Ask me how I found it.

Tell me.

I didn't.

You didn't? The system did?

Right.

So who is it?

Unknown. Absolutely no static trace, nothing.

Best guess?

Feds? I have no idea.

You still don't think we should literally pull the plug?

Not until Raj and Catherine get back to us.

Was Raj freaked? I forgot to ask.

Too excited. I sent him 1-14 right before I called him. He thought it was something we're writing, some piece of fiction you know. Anyway, I told him to finish it and send it on to Catherine then I'd send the next batch. He was so amped he started stammering.

Good. He does his best work like that.

Don't we all.



TWENTY-NINE

I was driving back from a grocery store run when Mark called.

“Can you come by?”

“Right now? What’s up? I just went to the grocery store,” I said.

“That’s cool. I’ll just tell you. We’re being snooped,” Mark said.

“What’s that mean?”

“Incredibly sophisticated system. Won’t do whoever’s doing it much good though, not without the console. Just a ton of raw data,” Mark said.

“Didn’t we figure someone might get wise when you were buying all that stuff?” I said.

“Seems logical. Probably the only public sale of a ‘scanning ionic microscope’ in history,” Mark said.

“So who’s doing it? What’s the point?” I said.

“I don’t know who’s doing it or I would have said: *Hey Joe, Mr. ‘X’ is snooping our data.*”

“And it just started? Or you just found it?”

“Both. This is different from whoever inserted that code, still haven’t figured that one out, but the entry process is similar, wireless both times, *very* sophisticated stuff, really as sophisticated as it gets. Normally we wouldn’t bother running any hardware diagnostics but because we’re wiring so many different protocols together we need to be sure that there’s no static build up, or EMPs, like that, which would inadvertently let us know if someone hacked into one of our pipes with actual wiring. We started running them three days ago. Normally, if you wanted to steal data, that’s how you’d do it. Even with fiber optics you would still want some physical access, you would attach a laser or maybe LED reader right on the cable itself, are you with me so far?”

“Sure,” I said even though I wasn’t entirely.

“Okay, well because of all of the virtual tests and scenarios we’re running we also run a few search programs to help in quantifying acquisitions between the pods. It’s how we determined someone had entered some code to begin with.”

“Okay.”

“At eight forty-two this morning we detected a monitoring outpost on our data stream. We still have no solid leads on what it’s interfacing with, a couple of guys I reached out to says that the Feds have a few toys that could probably do it but no one can confirm and again, why would the Feds be interested in our project, especially while it was still non-operational?” Mark said.

“But didn’t you say the other day that you were afraid that part of it was already working? Maybe generating something on its own?” I asked.

“I did,” Mark said.

“Still an infinitesimal possibility?”

“Less so,” Mark said.

“More *‘finitesimal’*?” I said.

“Sure. Whatever,” Mark said.

“All right, so they can see what we’re doing. So what? We’re not threatening anyone.”

Mark stopped typing. “Joe. If this thing works a lot of things are going to happen.”

“Like the government could come and confiscate it?” I said.

“Do you really think we could build something, anything, in the private sector that hadn’t already been built by the government?” Mark said.

“This isn’t exactly ‘private sector’ in the usual sense,” I said, “besides whatever the hell budget she’s working off of, you guys are wired into like ten universities right?”

“Yes,” Mark let the word draw out.

“So, what’s going to happen?” I said.

“Depends how functional we are. No amount of virtual testing can substitute for going live. If, when, the system starts acquiring...”

“But I thought you said it already did? My thumbprint?”

Mark sighed. “Okay. Think about it like this, you have your senses, right? Few would argue that, generally, sight is our most useful sense, but what if your life depended on your quickly finding a hidden rotten egg? I told you we have not yet interfaced the video which just means that all of our available processing can be directed at, well, somewhere else.”

“Like people who lose their sight have enhanced smell and shit?” I said.

“Just like that,” Mark said. “So as a demonstration we want the system, obviously, to acquire all of the ‘senses’, but now we’re greedy and want *extrasensory* data, the ultimate parlor trick, reading someone’s mind. If we pull that off, wow, I really don’t know what

would happen. Maybe you're right, this could be groundbreaking. We'll win a Nobel Peace Prize, co-authors, my name first."

"Of course," I said. "So whoever is hacking us...?"

"It may be different guys. Since we can't trace them we don't know if the one who entered the code is the same as the watcher."

"So what do we do?"

"What can we do?" Mark said.

Bertrom could not stop twisting his mustache; he did so unconsciously. And he could not keep from staring at the screen on the new laptop computer. It had only been three days since it had been installed, three days with less-than very little sleep. This morning, for the first time in a long time, he did not do his exercises.

He had already tired of snooping on technicians' phone conversations or their Internet use. Acting as if he was a delinquent schoolboy with comic books inside of his textbook, he had several boxes open, but his focus was solely on the pulsing stream of unknown data that almost seemed to be breathing, almost seemed to be alive. More than once he went to summon Vincent, and then Frank Martens, to hire Roger or George, whatever his name was, or whoever could ultimately decipher it for him, have them here with him, working here full-time. Whatever was going on over at the Eastside, Bertrom wasn't so sure he trusted Frank Martens with knowing everything. To that end, how did he know Martens hadn't had his goons install something on the laptop computer, something that allowed Martens to see what Bertrom saw, maybe manipulate it even? Double-cross him by going to Madeline, maybe offer confidential information to his enemies? Maybe that was what the unknown man, the possible operative, was here for?

There were other security firms, much bigger, more sophisticated operations than Martens Security, certainly others for whom lines in the sand were often colored grey. He thought about inquiring at a university; he lived an hour from Boston, but he still wasn't quite clear on the legality of the one-hundred-sixty-eight thousand dollar '*sniffer*' he had running quietly, recessed into the wall. Bertrom felt that when available those who operated on the '*off-side*' of legal were no less ethical than those who operated legally. The cleanliness of dealing in cash was just how he liked it. A larger security firm was the way to go, one from Wall Street, or inside the Beltway, one where unquestioned discretion was a prerequisite to staying in business, and people who were involved in far more nefarious deeds than Bertrom went regularly to keep things quiet.

He could not stop staring at the stream.



THIRTY

Eva wasn't sure she should be driving an automobile in her condition, still feeling a off; nervous, excited, scared. Numb.

She'd taken off during lunch to run a couple of errands, and felt so dizzy and mildly disoriented that she cancelled an appointment she'd made with her regular doctor for the following week and instead swung into a walk-in clinic where she had to wait for thirty-five minutes to see an Indian doctor (*dot-on-the-head*) who was apparently younger than Eva. The doctor told Eva that she was definitely run-down, possibly anemic. Oh, and most assuredly pregnant.

Pregnant! As in, mostly jubilantly, *'oh-my-god-I'm-effing-pregnant!'*

Eva focused on the road but things were very shaky, hot, stifled, her breathing labored, constricted, there was tingling in her neck.

326, 327, where was 331 West 32nd? She thought she was already almost an hour late. What time had she taken off? Madeline wasn't one for cell phones, wasn't much for phones much anyway,

but would call Eva if she needed her, or have Frederick call. She often did if separated inside Rockhurst Manor.

The tile store was around somewhere, damn; Eva had been here once before. Her cell phone rang. Shit. Madeline? 'Joe' said the caller ID. Send to voicemail.

Wrong button. Shit.

"Hello?"

"Joe? Hi, I thought it was Madeline."

"No, just me. What's going on?"

Eva paused, her head spinning as if she was drunk and some really big person was sitting on her chest. She cussed again, seeing the store but no place to park.

"What's wrong baby?"

"Oh nothing, I'm trying to find a space," Eva said.

"Where are you?"

"Running errands. Listen, can I call you back?" Eva said.

"Oh, you're in the car. Sure, I was just calling to say hi. And I love you."

"That's sweet. I'll call you back," Eva hung up and turned on her flashers so she could double-park. When she came back to the car less than 10 minutes later there was a ticket on the windshield, a big one too: **\$175; \$50** for 'no parking' and **\$125** for 'impeding an emergency lane'. God-damn it, that was a lot of money, she threw the ticket on the passenger-side floor and dumbly headed back to work. Madeline would pay for the ticket if Eva asked her to but Eva didn't want any added dialogue around: *what took you so long?*



THIRTY ONE

Bertrom Sumner settled into the oversized, calf-leather seat and glanced out through the window as the private jet made its way, slowly circling Washington D.C., the pilots probably routinely showing the nighttime view to the passengers, or, in this case, passenger. Normally, Bertrom flew commercial, often times coach. Depending on where certain market indices fell in a given quarter, Bertrom could have purchased his own jet but he was by no means rich; despite his home address, he considered himself merely ‘well-off’. A representative from the Washington D.C.-based *‘Blackthorn Security International’* had been dispatched to pick him up and he wanted to make the right impression so he had arranged to borrow a plane owned by his bank (*‘to borrow’ meant only having to pay fuel costs*). Suggested by a Senator from Wisconsin with whom Bertrom was friendly, Blackthorn International had a reputation for guarding against corporate espionage, and Bertrom’s friend assured him that it was *the* firm to consult with regarding any technology-based security concerns. Without asking for details, the Senior Senator blithely stated that: *These guys could bug the Capitol Building during the State of the Union Address-and might have already. Ha-ha.* Bertrom went to tell the man that he was worried about some lines into his

home office from one of his corporate offices but the Senator had already hung up.

Harold Redken, Operations Manager for *'Blackthorn Security International'*, was a slight, balding man with frameless glasses and a face that said he rarely smiled. After his secretary served them coffee, and despite the hour which was nearing eight p.m., Redken appeared fresh and attentive. In a file in the soft case at his side was a standard dossier on Bertrom Sumner. Frankly, Redken was surprised how clean Sumner was, or, from only a standard background check, seemed to be. No hints of any illegal activities, only some standard procedures on SEC matters which almost always accompanied men of Bertrom Sumner's wealth. Blackthorn International had numerous legitimate customers and accounts; certainly, all accounts were legitimate. Harold Redken had been in technical security for almost twenty years, and would state that most if not all of the firm's clients who requested after-hours meetings had even simple dossiers that were anything but bland. For some reason a little nervous, Bertrom almost asked if, indeed, Blackthorn Security ever had bugged the Capitol Building. Instead, he got right to the point.

Normally, clients would often try to obfuscate, or paint a certain picture, and Redken had to use his experience and intuition to sift through to the truth of the matter; here, he thought Bertrom Sumner was genuinely confused.

"To reiterate," Redken said slowly, deliberately, "the security system you have already had installed is generating some, incongruous, or mysterious data that you wish to qualify and understand. And you do not feel comfortable forwarding the data to us, as it only exists on an Intranet, which resides in a separate section of the same address where you currently reside," Bertrom remained silent and fought not to touch his mustache. "We would then make available an agent that specializes in data retrieval and

compilation, to accompany you to your home and reside there until the issue is satisfactorily resolved. I would assume no more than one day, two at the most." Bertrom nodded his assent. "Will there be any additional requirements you can think of at this time?" Redken asked.

Bertrom turned his wrist and looked at his thin, gold wristwatch. "Could your driver return me to the airport, and is there a technician available who could accompany me back on my flight?"

"This evening?" Redken raised an eye, but quickly noting Bertrom's little flinch he forced his best attempt at a smile. "Of course, Mr. Sumner. We are full-service, international and *round-the-clock*. I'll have the driver return you to your plane, and one of our specialists will meet you there within the hour. The driver will wait and assist the agent in loading equipment, which, I'm afraid, is rather bulky. If you could arrange for an extra man to meet your plane, I would advise this, or I could make arrangements for you if you prefer."

"That won't be necessary. Thank you for your time. Please invoice me here," Bertrom handed him a business card, "and have a pleasant evening."

Returning to the leased jet, Bertrom removed his jacket but did not loosen his tie, and ordered poached salmon and *Pellegrino* water, then made a couple of phone calls and anxiously awaited the arrival of the '*Blackthorn Security International*' man.

The Blackthorn man turned out to be little more than a boy, in Bertrom's opinion. He presented a card that said his name was 'Raju Sadeghi' and his title was '*Hardware Systems Specialist*'. Bertrom was tempted to call before take-off to confirm with Harold Redken that this agent was indeed the best suited for the job. Before

moving to a seat at the back of the plane, Raju made what appeared to be a casual but thorough sweep of the main compartment and then without asking, a quick introduction to the pilot and co-pilot and stewardess where Bertrom also felt a safety assessment was being made. And despite his thin frame, Raju moved like a man who knew how to handle himself physically. For what he was sure to be invoiced for his services, Bertrom figured Raju might as well as provide some security too.

The flight was just under two hours and the men did not exchange a word. If Raju was impressed with Rockhurst Manor he did not show it, climbing out of the back of the **Mercedes 600** limousine that Bertrom requested Vincent pick them up in to accommodate the six or so large equipment cases Raju had in tow. After a silent twenty-minute drive, Bertrom watched as Raju took charge of Vincent when they arrived, orchestrating the systematic unloading and subsequent movement of his gear on a carpeted cart similar to a bellman's at a nice hotel, then quickly off to an open area near one of the secondary kitchens.

Bertrom took a *Pellegrino* from the refrigerator, carefully squeezed a piece of lime into a glass, and was keying his security number into his office door when Vincent appeared behind him.

"Sir, your guest wishes to be informed as to when you would like to begin."

"What? Oh, yes, Raju," Bertrom looked at the business card. "His name is Raju." Vincent nodded but did not speak. "Well, I would love to start now but it's almost eleven. I would guess he's tired," Bertrom said.

"I'll go see," Vincent said and walked off.

Vincent returned with Raju who had changed into slacks and a polo shirt, openly displaying a pistol on his waist when he walked into the office.

Bertrom said: "Thank you, Vincent. You may leave us."

Vincent did his barely perceptible bow and disappeared. He turned to Raju. "You're okay having a look now?"

"Yes, Sir. I'm fresh. I slept on the plane," Raju said, but Bertrom knew that he had not.

"Wait here. I need to turn the system on," Bertrom said. After fidgeting with his mustache he strode from the office to the hidden cubbyhole down the hall. Strange, he thought, when he opened the recessed door, the power indicator was showing blue or 'on'. As a rule, Bertrom never left lights or equipment on even when he left a room unless he knew he was coming right back, and certainly not if he knew he was going out of town.

The laptop computer was turned off but came on quickly.

"May I?" Raju asked, motioning to the laptop. Bertrom nodded once, and then watched as Raju carefully lifted the computer to turn it to face him. "Beautiful. Louis XV?" Raju said looking down at the ornate desk.

"Yes, it is," Bertrom said, the agent not appearing quite so young anymore.

Raju quickly inspected the laptop. "Could I see the main unit please?"

If seeing the sophisticated equipment phased Raju he didn't show it, he just glanced into the recessed cubbyhole and appeared to confirm what he already assumed.

Returning to the office, Raju typed furiously, and multiple boxes appeared.

"Quite a bit of activity," he noted, then slowed and stopped typing altogether, emitting a low whistle when the box with the mysterious data stream appeared, pulsing and throbbing quietly, as it ever had. Bertrom licked his lips and unconsciously loosened the knot in his tie. *Come on, come on, what is it?* - Bertrom wanted to

yell. Raju stared and whistled softly again, then resumed typing, stopping abruptly. "I need to get a few things."

"Shall I call for my butler?" Bertrom asked.

"I'll be fine. Is it alright if I just wheel the cart in and set it over here?" He motioned to the back of the office. "Away from the Hepplewhite?" The man knew his antiques. Bertrom was going to say as much: *This should only take ten minutes if you know computer systems as well-* but he merely nodded curtly. Raju left and came back with four of the equipment cases, plugged a power strip into the wall, then two cables into the system laptop now resting on his lap. Bertrom strained to see but did not want to appear to be overly interested so he looked over some work on his own monitor screen. After ten minutes of watching Raju type, he could not contain himself.

"Anything?" Bertrom's voice cracked slightly.

"Nothing definitive. Not yet. All I can say is: 'wow'. If I didn't know otherwise I'd say you were pulling from the D.O.D., Department of Defense, or the Pentagon. Or, Whitesands. Maybe a pharmaceutical bank. They share data sometimes when running drug Sims, all garbled like this if you don't know the protocol," he stared at the screen. "Tremendous amount of data. Teraflops per second. Tapped into some heavy stuff over there; I can assure you of that. I forgot to ask, are you wired into their security? Their mikes and cameras?" Bertrom fidgeted, but only for a moment, before nodding his head; Raju clearly was not interested in legalities or ethics. "Here?" Raju motioned to the three monitors set beside Bertrom's desk to confirm.

"Yes, most of the Manor has security, and I can monitor it from here, all of it, on both sides," Bertrom said but Raju didn't seem to need an explanation.

“May I?” He asked, setting the laptop carefully back onto the desk and already moving around it. “Can you call up individual cameras?”

“Well, I arranged for a continuous loop. It shows my apartment in New York, and my vacation homes as well. I also have some outside security at a couple of the locales. I prefer that they know that I can also see what’s going on.”

Raju watched as the frames cycled past. “So, you can’t control it from here, right? But you can stop on a feed if you want to.”

“That is correct,” Bertrom said. “It’s a very sophisticated system I’m told, and as its expense would indicate.”

“Couple of years old. ‘AMEC’ system I believe. Not bad. May I?” Raju motioned to the keyboard Bertrom had in the drawer in front of his chair. Bertrom stood somewhat clumsily and off to the side, feeling rather diminutive at the moment in his own office.

Type, type, type, and suddenly a virtual console appeared on the screen.

“Here. Now we can choose the feeds we want,” Raju began scrolling views, stopping on the Eastside main studio. “Wow, that’s a lot of cable,” Raju stopped on the main studio. “What’s up there?” He pointed at the screen.

“It’s a balcony, with what I would imagine was once some sort of production room, perhaps for movie projectors,” Bertrom said.

“No feed from in there, am I right?” Raju said.

“There was never a need. Just general security,” Bertrom said.

Raju asked: “Do they know they’re there? The cameras and mikes?” Bertrom paused. Raju pressed. “I just need to know who’s watching. It won’t affect what we’re doing, but I might need to reposition a couple of the cameras, and I need to know if this can be done surreptitiously, or if we’ll need to create a story to justify the changes.”

"All security is monitored from here. Solely from here, as it pertains to the Eastside, to that side of Rockhurst Manor," Bertrom said, motioning east with his head.

Raju nodded. "I'll install a couple of additional units, just to be sure. Do you have a map of this place? Preferably architectural," Raju moved back around the desk.

Bertrom returned to his chair. "Does not exist. There have been several, major renovations, and the original structure is more than two-hundred years old."

"But you know your way around" Raju asked.

"Yes," Bertrom answered. "As does my butler, Vincent, fairly well."

"Could you just walk me over? Like a tour of the house or something?" Raju said.

"Well, as you know my Niece, Madeline Sumner-Stone, resides in that half of the Manor. While we're not currently on terribly social terms, I dare say that Rockhurst is my home and I'll go within it where I please, with discretion for privacy of course. Not to tell you your business, but the problem as I see it is, if we were to waltz over there now, at such an off-hour, we will undoubtedly draw attention and scrutiny. Or, if we wait until more suitable calling hours, you will have to place a unit or adjust another, and they are very cleverly hidden, with what appears to be at least fifteen technicians milling about."

"Good point. Bag job, then," Raju said.

"Yes, that would be an individual hired to break and enter, if I recall," Bertrom said.

"Not a problem, Sir. I can be in and out in twenty minutes. Someone comes up on me, you'll have to cover, tell them that I wandered off."

“Yes, except there is only one doorway between the Eastside and the Westside, and the carpeting is clearly delineated. So, unless you were truly hoping to see every room, it is not along a hallway you would likely wander into.”

“What about servant’s stairs, maybe an old fire escape. Hidden stairs? Aren’t these old places full of them?”

Bertrom smiled.

Raju had a neat little drill, a super high-speed unit that made almost no sound and cut a pinhole looking down into the technician’s space, the room adjunct to the balcony. Bertrom had changed into slacks and a polo shirt, colors darker than those worn by Raju, and felt a rush of excitement and devilry he hadn’t felt since his long-ago youth. He recalled going with Madeline into the walls for the first time after those snotty cousins of theirs had stumbled upon a door hidden in a bookcase while involved in horseplay, indoors, one rainy afternoon, and how exciting it was following them in, especially after one of them pulled the hidden door shut behind them and Bertrom had to wait a precious moment in utter fear as his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light. That day they’d followed the crude walkways and ladders all afternoon, discovering five separate doors recessed in bookcases and walls, by some blind stroke of luck at the time, each opening into empty rooms without any adults, then a quick look out into the hallway to try to determine their whereabouts before hurrying back and closing the door shut tightly behind them. Being lost for hours in and around Rockhurst Manor was almost expected, so their missing was never noticed or commented upon until that night just before supper when, cleaning his hands, Bertrom remembers his granddad staring at him queerly, noticing the dirt pressed into Bertrom’s fancy

knickers and pressed coat sleeves, his granddad commenting that he sure looked awfully dirty, and 'dry dirty' for such a rainy day.

After fixing the tiny camera in place and turning it on, Raju took the drilling tool apart and motioned with a silent nod that he was done.

"Let's see who shows up to work tomorrow," Raju said when they returned to Bertrom's office and checked the new camera feeds on the monitor. "I'm going for some shut-eye. What time would you like me to be back here?"

"Eight. No, eight-fifteen. Please," Bertrom added.

Raju nodded and left the office. Bertrom sat for a moment watching the data stream pulse, then turned off the monitors, locked the office tight, and headed for his sleeping quarters.

BOOK TWO

THIRTY TWO



It was August 24th (*a date which will live in infamy*). It was damn hot, but, thankfully, to the best of my knowledge no one in Rhode Island was declaring war.

To say that the past few weeks had been a whirlwind would be akin to labeling *'The Plague'* as *'just a little cold'*. Where to begin?

The forthcoming barrage of questions had me stressing from sun-up, questions about how a guy with no formal technical training could think up something so complex (*I did consult my friend Mark Klipnik who is indeed a bona-fide genius geek*). Eva assured me that, regardless, mine would be a minor part, a *'cameo role'*, and that Madeline would do what Madeline always does and that was command attention. Eva was more concerned that I would say or do something stupid or embarrassing (*horrors!*) which could turn off an

agent or publicist that might pick up a copy of ‘W.E.B.’ at Madeline’s opening.

For the past weeks Eva had been concerned with a lot of things; in fact, dare I say it, she’d been kind of a bitch. No, strike that, how about... let’s just say that for all of the time since we’ve met that I was *not* subjected to any bitchiness, even during ‘*that time of the month*’, well, now, uh, what was I saying? Eva claimed it was just the September 10th deadline, so imposed because Eva said that Madeline had shattered form and announced that she would be having the first open showing of a new piece at Rockhurst Manor since her Great Uncle Clay used to show some of his sculptures each spring. Because of the need for using the main studio, and lacking convenient, public access thereof, we were treated to a horde of heavy construction equipment as men were installing an outer walkway that went directly to the cavernous room (*thankfully*, ‘*Wee Things*’ was on loan somewhere), adding a grating cacophony to the now nearly-soothing buzz created indoors by the last of the technicians, seven of whom were finishing installation of the system (*oops*, Madeline Sumner-Stone’s ‘*as yet unnamed*’ piece). Already out of form, Madeline unprecedentedly invited not only the media, but several of her staunchest critics, including a fellow who concluded when critiquing ‘*Wee Things*’ that: *The only thing more fitting to this tremendous waste of good road equipment, and vast space would be if it was actually a ‘threesome’ and it was Ms. Sumner-Stone herself who was the third party in the mix.* Oh, and catering too.

This news did not sit particularly well with Mark Klipnik, but with all that was happening on his plate I’m sure he was too numb to really care.

“We could show this thing right now, and we *still* haven’t hooked up video,” he mumbled, and then something about his being ‘*freaked-out*’ or something, I don’t know. I was in a hurry.

Beyond the opening I knew my girl, and she just hadn't been feeling right. When she wasn't being bitchy she was being way too congenial, which *really* wasn't like her. She hadn't referred to me as: 'asswipe', 'dipwad' (and its more commonplace cousin: 'dipshit'), or even 'obnoxious' in days even when I overheard her speaking to her best friend Trudy whom I know *only* refers to me by one of the aforementioned monikers (*something about my behavior at her wedding. Honestly, who can keep track of these things?*). I was truly concerned about her.

Mark was looking positively ragged, and not in the nerdy 'I've been up all night working' sort of way, more the 'I'm psychotic and off my meds' manner, the mug shot of Nick Nolte (*if you haven't seen it, Google it. No, on second thought, don't. I like Nick Nolte*). Mark sat at the desk in his 'command center', as it had come to be called, swiveling slowly from side to side, one leg extended, tracing, with feigned interest, something on the floor, mostly ignoring various technicians who would scurry in to ask a question then look mystified if it was ignored or answered unsatisfactorily before scurrying away. I noted that a lot of 'scurrying' went on at Rockhurst Manor.

I asked: "Why aren't you going to hook up the final pods? 'Eyes, ears and lasers' you once said."

"Not sure that we should. Don't know what to do, really. Confidentiality forms." My friend was apparently losing his mind.

Standing, from where I'd been leaning against a desk, I snapped my fingers in front of him aggressively. "Earth to dipshit (*I love that word*). Hey nerd-o, are you fucking serious here? This thing goes live in just over two weeks, hell or high water. Say what you will about Madeline, but Eva says that she's a stickler for schedules and Madeline says it will be ready September 10th. She's hired caterers."

“Caterers?” Mark said. Then he mumbled: “Parlor tricks,” and scratched his stringy hair.

“To you, maybe. Having a machine that somehow senses, what did you say: ‘*cellular patterning*’, *identifying everyone who comes through the door from national databases, for all practical purposes, instantaneously*. That sounds kind of cool to me.”

“Facial recognition software,” Mark droned, “coupled with a database of every book ever written to choose response phrases from.”

“Which we’re not using,” I noted.

“They won’t know that, Joe. The public won’t.”

“Hell, as of right now you haven’t even installed any cameras,” I said. “So, again what are you worried about? Let the techs that’ve been sitting around twiddling their thumbs finish putting this thing together, and then let’s see what it does. You’re going to have to later this afternoon when Madeline shows up for this week’s report. Honestly, man, what could happen?”

Mark’s eyes suddenly became clear through the cloudiness, and he wet his lips. “I have no idea. It just doesn’t seem logical to add new equipment, another *dimension* to a system that’s already operating far more autonomously than it should.”

I said: “Machines can’t run without power. We can always pull the plug, literally.”

“Even if we did it would be only temporary.” Mark shifted his gaze to the bank of monitors running gobbledygook data across their screens at nearly unreadable speed. “Eventually we’d turn them back on. Someone would. We’d probably be in jail for violating the terms of our contracts.”

“I don’t have one,” I said.

Mark was ignoring me. He went on: “We would have to pull all the short-storage memory, physically. Just like with ‘HAL 9000’.”

“Why not just cut the back-up power too? That would shut it down,” I said.

“Tried that already,” Mark said which surprised me. He ran at his hair. “That’s one of the things. ‘Xena’ here, as we’re calling the old girl,” Mark motioned to equipment lining the walls, “has figured out a way to run basic rapid recall off of some kind of static electricity, best we can figure, and apparently enough juice to kick-start the process after very little downtime. Two, maybe three hours at the most before she retains basic problem-solving skills. Then it’s all exponential. Gone,” he made a motion like an airplane taking off from his palm, “right back where we disconnected. But then of course armed with more knowledge.”

“You’re serious?” I asked, starting to feel fairly overwhelmed myself.

“What?” Mark said.



THIRTY THREE

Hey.

Hey.

I'm getting a little freaked out.

Because...

Because? Are you joking? We were *compromised*, excuse me, sorry, we were *hacked*.

Oh please. Stop worrying. First of all its fiction remember? Secondly, who but you and I, and maybe Rosh and Catherine could even interpret it all together, any of it? Or want to?

Then why did someone snoop us? You set up the protocol, you should be concerned.

Might have been a 'bot'.

If you're not going to be serious...

Okay, okay, I'm working on something. Hang on.

Okay, you have my undivided attention. Someone jumped my protocol, yes, right, it obviously could be someone that we know, someone internal, a random audit. Could be a teenager from Uzbekistan, some gamer looking for NSA feeds.

I guess one of the pipes piggybacks.

Exactly.

Still, you know if the next crunch dictates structural similarities...

We can not only assume that it would work, but, that it is already working. That we are not alone.

Is this the part where two feds in a non-descript grey sedan follow me around?

I'm sure they already are.



THIRTY FOUR

Raju and Bertrom sat beside one another in front of Bertrom's desk.

"What are you saying?" Bertrom asked.

"What I'm saying is I've tried every protocol I can think of and not one has constructed anything beyond a three-letter word, which is effectively nothing. Which means that whatever that is, it's a custom job, which means we're going to need a custom interface to access or configure it. I'll just send a little sample back to D.C..."

"No!" Bertrom shot out a bit too harshly.

Raju looked him over. "Well, we could put it onto a physical drive and I could fly it back in your jet..."

"No," Bertrom interrupted, softening his tone. "I told Redken this was completely in-house. That's why you're here."

"Well, it's not normally my area of expertise, but frankly I'm fascinated by it. We'd need to have another specialist come out, more equipment if you insist on not letting us tie-into our system."

"Fine, fine. When?" Bertrom returned to his desk chair.

"Let me call Mr. Redken. I need to go over a few things. Be back in thirty," Raju walked out. Bertrom noticed Raju no longer asked before acting and he wondered if this was a problem.

“What do you mean you can’t compile it?” Harold Redken spoke in his usual, even tone.

“Sir, I’ve never seen anything like this, not in the private sector, not even with big pharm banks,” Redken did not comment so Raju continued. “We’re going to have to have someone from ‘thirteen’ come out here, and the client is insistent that we stay local so they’re going to have to bring all the toys.”

“I’ll need to speak with Mr. Sumner regarding the additional expenses this will incur,” Redken said.

“He wants them here tonight. And call him if you want, Sir, but I’m guessing this guy doesn’t care what it costs.”

“Nothing you tried compiled anything?” Redken asked.

“Only three-letter words, and those were sporadic at best,” Raju replied.

Suddenly a soft but somehow insistent beeping noise seemed to muffle Harold Redken out, and a low, almost throaty voice said: “Who is this? Identify yourself.”

“Excuse me?” Raju was confused.

“This is Jacob Blackthorn.”

Raju wasn’t sure if he’d ever even seen the man let alone spoken with him. Recovering quickly, he said: “Sir, my name is Raju Sadeghi, I’m a Hardware Specialist. Employee ID...”

“Redken,” Blackthorn redirected his attention, “you still there?”

“Yes,” Redken was clearly agitated.

“This about that Sumner clan, from back East?”

“Yes,” Redken sounded like a drone.

“I’m going. I want you to call my pilot. And call Mila Janski.”

“You Sir? And Mila is on...”

“I know where she is, now pull her off and get her here. Tonight. I want to leave before *oh-nine-hundred*.” The beep made a return showing and was gone but as Redken was about to speak it came on again. “Oh, and you, technician, Redken leave our guy there so he can brief me when I land.”

Redken said to Raju: “I’ll call you back,” He hung up.

Jacob Blackthorn was coming into the field? Raju was dumbfounded. Blackthorn was a programming legend from the sixties who might be in his seventies, who maintained an insane fitness and dietary regimen and looked like he was in his early fifties. There were many rumors about the man both within ‘*Blackthorn Security International*’, and the general, high-tech spook industry; most of it brilliant; much of it dark. Rumored to having been recruited while still in college by the CIA, Blackthorn, allegedly, was an assistant director of the NSA (‘*No Such Agency*’) before leaving public service to start his security firm of which he is a ninety-percent shareholder; it was important to spread some equity around. The firm did a cool three-hundred-fifty mil last year. His technical skills, again reportedly not just with computers but also arms, aeronautics and robotics, were, as a set, without equal. A couple of techs had bragged to Raju about having worked directly with the man on a number of projects, and that he was indeed a genius, even by their doctoral standards.

Raju had divulged very little. For one, he had not been not asked to. For another, he knew that wherever he stood, Bertrom Sumner probably had eyes and ears. Somehow, out of nowhere, not only was Jacob Blackthorn himself coming into the field to service a new client, but he was bringing her ‘Ladyship’ the ‘Queen Bee’ Mila Janski, a frail, pale, little waif, a hacker of world renown rumored to have an almost ethereal quality about her ability to see in and around and write complex computer code. Blackthorn had supposedly been

informed of her arrest as a matter of courtesy-amongst countless others, she had hacked into '*Blackthorn Security International's*' system- and managed to get her sprung into his recognizance where he assured the Justice Department she would remain under his watchful eye. Mila didn't care; as long as she was 'jacked-in', as she called it, she might as well have been in Leavenworth. Of course, it was harder to get methamphetamine in Leavenworth, and Mila did her best, her very finest work, when high on 'speed' or 'crank'. Blackthorn didn't care as long as Mila was discreet, but he kept her flying exclusively on corporate jets just to be safe.

Headphone cord dangling, Mila strode off the smaller of the two Gulfstream jets with an oversized purse and a backpack with her laptop inside, across the hanger and right into Blackthorn's much larger jet, and was barely into her seat before the stairs were being raised and the engines began to whine. She didn't ask where she was going; she really didn't care. Blackthorn had allowed her to stay jacked-in and threw some interesting problems at her besides. It paid a lot better than hacking, and she felt well-insulated, not even officially listed on the '*Blackthorn Security International*' books. If she was surprised by Jacob Blackthorn's presence, ominous as it always seemed to be, she didn't show it. He sat up front in two seats, paperwork spread out and a pen in his teeth (*plastic, Bic, generally preferred, his platinum 'Monte Blanc' safely ensconced in his jacket pocket*), Blackthorn looked rather like the actor John Forsythe from his '*Dynasty*' days; a nine-thousand dollar Italian-cut suit settled beneath a perfectly coiffed plume of thick, white hair. Mila enjoyed working with him, one of the rare intellects she found worthy of her time, but had never seen him away from their corporate offices before. Never.

Leaning over, Blackthorn touched a button and Redken's voice came over a speaker, clearly, as if he was sitting across the aisle.

"This Sumner," Blackthorn said, leading.

"Bertrom Tibereus," Redken said.

"Bertrom Sumner. What do we have on him?"

"Just a routine check. Extraordinarily clean."

"For our clients," Blackthorn said, then laughed.

"Yes. Would you like me to be more thorough?" Redken said.

"Might as well. Won't help much now. We'll be on the ground in an hour."

"I notified our agent."

"Where do you have us? The Copley?" Blackthorn asked.

"I was just meaning to call. The agent on-site told Sumner that the head of *'Blackthorn Security International'* himself would be arriving that evening, and Sumner insists that you accept his hospitality," Redken said.

"Interesting," Blackthorn rubbed his jaw. "What do you know about his residence?"

"I'm sure you will be properly accommodated," Redken said, wondering why his boss, who usually knew every detail, was now going off-site at a place he was unfamiliar with. Redken wondered what could possibly be such a lure.



THIRTY FIVE

“Joe, I am not going back inside the walls,” Eva said

sternly, “and you aren’t either. What are you even doing here? I’m trying to work.”

I shrugged. “Came to see Mark.”

“Eva!” Madeline called out from somewhere off in the distance.

“Be right there,” Eva said, turning back to face me. “Seriously, what do you want? Go home. Write.”

“All finished,” I said.

“Really?” Eva moved off toward the general area where Madeline had called. I followed. “Can I see it?” Eva said.

“Right up here,” I tapped my temple. “I just have to write it all down.”

“Joe,” Eva sighed. “Honestly, you’re like a six year old.”

“Mommy?” I said, and grabbed her by the shirt tail, briefly slowing her gait. She slapped my hand away. Pretty hard, too. “Ow,” I cried out dramatically. Eva looked even more annoyed.

“I am trying to work. One of us has to work at a real job that pays real money,” she said.

“I thought we agreed...”

Eva spun around. "I am not going to argue with you again, not now, not at work. Now please, go. I don't feel well and you're making it worse."

I wasn't going to argue, not with Eva's recent display of...*assertiveness*. I offered a time-worn olive twig: "Okay. I'll fix dinner then. What are you in the mood for?"

"I don't know, Joe, it's almost eight o'clock. I have to be back here by eight in the morning. Not that hungry anyhow."

"Call me?" I offered as Madeline appeared and Eva moved quickly toward her.

"Hi Madeline," I saluted her.

"Hi Joe," Madeline saluted back.

Eva said nothing.



THIRTY SIX

Jacob Blackthorn had been to some very nice homes before, his own main residence in Chevy Chase, Maryland was nearly fifteen thousand square feet, but he was unprepared when he glanced out through the window as the ‘**Mercedes 600**’ rolled past the iron gates of Rockhurst Manor. “Let me call you back,” he said into the phone, disconnecting before there was a response reply. Mila was on her laptop and as usual was unconcerned. “Damn. Some place,” Blackthorn said.

Raju wasn’t sure if he should respond. Blackthorn had been on a series of phone calls since he and the mysterious Mila Janski had joined Raju and the butler, Vincent, in the vintage limousine. Mila Janski had not even acknowledged Raju’s presence, and while he thought it a bit rude, Raju was around geek types all the time and knew how quirky they could be.

Blackthorn, at first, didn’t know if Raju was another of Bertrom Sumner’s help until Raju awkwardly introduced himself. Blackthorn nodded but did not shake his proffered hand. “I want to get started immediately,” was all the older man said. Smarting, Raju settled back into his seat.

Vincent gratefully seemed to take a cue. "If you are interested in its history there are books on Rockhurst Manor in all seven libraries."

"Seven libraries?"

"That all?" Blackthorn said and the conversation ended.

Bertrom was secretly impressed that the head-honcho himself thought that his problem warranted a personal visit, although he had no idea how rare such an occasion really was or he might have been more concerned. Not wanting to appear eager, Bertrom stood with his hands clasped behind his back, and waited in the great hall for Vincent to return.

"Sumner?" Blackthorn extended his hand, and bore a snake-like smile, as if the man standing in the great hall wearing a tailored Italian suit and ascot could possibly be anyone but. "I'm Jacob Blackthorn. A pleasure."

"Yes, Vincent would you have Marie take their things to '*Violet*' and '*Bunting*,'" Bertrom said and Vincent nodded. Bertrom turned back to Jacob Blackthorn. "Could I have my chef prepare you something? Or perhaps a drink."

Blackthorn shook his head, almost dismissively. "Ate on the plane, and rarely touch the stuff. I'd like to change clothing and get a few hours in tonight, if I may."

"Very well," Bertrom said, inwardly rather pleased, pivoting again as Vincent reentered the great hall. "Could you show Jacob and, I'm sorry," Bertrom stared at Mila who was gazing queerly around as if she smelled an odd, very slight trace of an odor, one that was unknown or could not be explained.

Blackthorn's forced grin receded at the use of his Christian name. "This is one of my technicians, Mila Janski. I apologize if my manners are remiss."

"You're not here for your manners," Bertrom replied, ignoring Mila's vacant gaze.

Again Vincent deftly cut the tension. "I'll show Ms. Janski and Mr. Blackthorn to their rooms. This way please," Vincent pointed with his palm up as seemed innate with proper hired help. Blackthorn's dark eyes flicked onto and quickly past Bertrom's, and he and Mila strode off without further comment.

Bertrom watched them walk past the spread suit of armor and twisted at his mustache.

There's something here, Mila said to Blackthorn quietly as they moved several paces behind Vincent, the maid and luggage cart down a very long hallway.

"What?" Blackthorn, suddenly alert, pocketed his cell phone.

Mila slowed almost uncomfortably, her face twitching, but barely, and then, breathing, resumed her pace. She said: *I don't know. Something new*. Behind her glasses her tiny eyes shone.

"New?" Blackthorn's tone encouraged more.

Different, she told him.

Jacob Blackthorn had learned long ago and at significant expense, to trust Mila's intuition. Of course he was not without his own faculties, which was why he had come. There *was* something going on here, something different if one of his skilled technicians could only extract three-letter words, running all of the known algorithms and protocols.

They had been walking for what seemed like twenty minutes before Vincent brought them to opposing suites, with already opened French doors. "*Violet and Bunting*," he announced.

"Which is which?" Blackthorn said.

“Bunting, Sir,” Vincent motioned to the right and Blackthorn went inside. Nice room, he thought. No, rooms; it was a small suite. Unknotting his tie, he parted the heavy drapes and looked down onto the great lawn and a brightly lit, prominent sculpture of Zeus. He was somehow, strangely, higher up than it seemed stairs he had climbed.

Blackthorn snapped open his phone and pressed a button. “Stat on the Sumner background,” he snapped the phone shut.

Already seated in his office, at the system, Bertrom smiled inwardly, then leaned forward and deleted the box that had recorded Blackthorn’s call. The ‘sniffer’ worked for a half mile, purportedly. Didn’t matter which direction, or on whose phone.

Closing down the laptop, Bertrom returned to the great hall and spoke quietly with Vincent.

Five minutes later, clad in crisp chino slacks, ‘Docksiders’ and polo shirt, Jacob Blackthorn strode down the hall carrying two equipment bags, his tan arms lean and muscular despite his age, the diminutive woman with the European-sounding name right at his heel. Blackthorn set the cases at his feet and actually rubbed his hands together, his expression dead serious. “Let’s get to it. Where’s my other guy?”

“Mr. Sadeghi, is eating. I will tell him that you’re ready,” Fredrick said and walked off.

“Shit,” Raju said, scrambling to his feet and wolfing his food, having figured he had at least fifteen minutes before Jacob Blackthorn got settled in.

“Boot us up,” Blackthorn barked. “May I?” He asked Bertrom motioning to Bertrom’s desk chair, not really asking. Bertrom nodded.

No wireless, Mila whispered to Blackthorn.

Blackthorn said: "Technician, get her a hard line will you?" Then: "Sorry, Raju, if you would." Raju went into his own pile of gear. Blackthorn went into overdrive.

"You ran all thirty-four protocols."

"Thirty-six, Sir," Raju practically ran back across the room with one end of a cable, handing it to Mila who grabbed it as if she was a junky and it was her fix. "I also ran a couple of little tracers I wrote, I ran them simultaneously, to see if there was any echo."

Blackthorn waved his hand irritatingly and then began typing with two fingers at blurring speed. "Irrelevant. If I remember correctly you said the data looked like a run at a big pharm bank, but from only one source?"

Raju was now aware that Blackthorn might be eavesdropping on all internal company calls. "That's correct. Give it about two minutes. The 'sniffer' has to boot."

Blackthorn slowed, and then stopped typing. "Sniffer"? What kind?"

"AMXC₅," Raju told him.

Blackthorn's eyes flicked to Bertrom again and back to Raju.

"You installed it?"

Raju spoke cautiously: "No, Sir. It was here when I got here. Like I said, the system was already acquiring. Mr. Sumner hired us to compile and decode."

Blackthorn went back to typing and things started flashing onto the screen. Bertrom could see 'sniffer' boxes appear; the man knew what he was doing, Blackthorn stopped suddenly as he made a small box bigger and saw the data stream for the first time. He gasped, eyes flickering madly as he scanned the pulsing flow. In intense contemplation for a moment, he snapped to and looked at both Raju and Bertrom.

“AMXC5. I know AMX but I’m not familiar with this particular model. This thing sniffs all formats, everything, am I correct? Cell phones too,” he said, more a statement than a question. Bertrom sat stone-faced. Raju was about to answer and confirm when Blackthorn continued. “In that case no charade of privacy,” he flipped his cell phone open and pressed two buttons then barked: “Blackthorn. I need you to point a bird at my locale and tell me what’s been coming in and out of here, when, where and how. I’ll hold,” he cradled the phone against his shoulder and motioned across the desk to one of the cases he’d carried in. “Connect the drive, the silver one,” he told Raju. Blackthorn typed again, furiously. Raju stood from connecting the hard drive and moved slowly around the desk so he could see what Blackthorn was doing. “Yes,” Blackthorn said as the person on the phone came back on the line. “What?” He was incredulous. He listened for another twenty seconds then snapped the phone shut without further comment. Under normal circumstances, Blackthorn wanted no one watching him; here, he would have performed in a theater.

Watching Blackthorn pull so many different processes, Raju was mesmerized, unconsciously slackening his jaw.

Suddenly Mila, who had been off in a corner, appeared beside Blackthorn, leaned over and whispered something to him. When he continued to type without response she leaned forward again, whispered loudly enough for the room to hear her squeak the word ‘now’, and then she actually pinched the older man’s arm. Staring at her as if she was an apparition, Blackthorn blinked several times, looked down at his arm where she’d pinched him, and stood, pausing to look back over his shoulder at the laptop as if there was something he was afraid he’d miss. Then he followed her back to the corner where her laptop sat. She scurried ahead of him and quickly

typed a couple of things, then turned it around and held it aloft so Blackthorn alone could see. Bertrom Sumner and Raju fidgeted.

Blackthorn's expression ran so quickly from intense concentration to almost a smile, to twice reaching out and actually tracing a finger lightly on the screen.

Now standing almost dumbly, Blackthorn stared off into space. Mila took the laptop back into her lap and began to type.

Blackthorn strode back to the fancy desk. "Who's over there?" He motioned with his head.

"My Niece, Madeline, lives on the Eastside. She currently has between ten and thirty technicians and construction workers there with her at various times," Bertrom said.

Directing at Raju, Blackthorn said: "I want full backgrounds on everyone over there who have been there for more than one day."

"Sir?" Raju was confused.

"If I may," Bertrom stood and placed an authoritative hand lightly on one side of his desk. "What does any of that have to do with why you were hired? I hired you to tell me what that data means. I would insist that we get back to the task at hand."

Blackthorn stared at the much smaller man. "We already cracked it. We're compiling right now," Bertrom's head jerked backward in disbelief, Raju gasped aloud, both looked toward Mila Janski. Blackthorn went on: "And I don't give a damn about our contract; I'm tearing it up right now. This one's on me."

Bertrom's face reddened. "Mr. Blackthorn. I will not be dictated to in my home. If indeed you have succeeded, and if you insist on tearing up my contract, then please hand over the interpreted information and I believe this matter will be satisfactorily closed."

Blackthorn face became rock-like, his stare icy and raw. He walked back over and sat once again behind Bertrom's desk. "Let me

explain something to you, Mr. Sumner. Whatever they're doing over there, technically within *your own home*, represents one of the greatest threats to national security I've seen in some time. Maybe ever. If you won't allow me to, if you won't allow me the honor of finding out exactly who is doing exactly what next door, I will be compelled, as a good citizen, to immediately report what I've learned to the proper authorities. Mackenzie comes to mind; I have Tom's number programmed into my phone."

The mention of the head of the State Department left Bertrom nonplussed. "And then what, Mr. Blackthorn? After you've figured everything out? What assurances do I have that you won't call someone then?"

The sinister, snakelike smile broke across Blackthorn's face. "I am in the confidentiality business Mr. Sumner. If you would allow me to remain here until I fully understand everything, then I'm sure that we can decide the best course of action for whatever it is you actually have here."

Mila Janski made some sort of a chirping noise followed by a little yelp. Blackthorn jumped up from the chair and crossed back over to her.

"Mr. Blackthorn," Bertrom voice was louder, insistent. "I did not agree to allow you to operate autonomously in my home nor would I under any circumstances."

Blackthorn ignored him for a moment, asked Mila a couple of questions and came back, this time sitting in front of the desk but turning the chair slightly, to face Bertrom Sumner. "We are now compiling data streams from several different sources. We've isolated a spectrograph, and what appears to be a scanning ionic microscope, of which there are no more than twenty in existence. There are other components as well, and each is generating huge amounts of data. What is unique about this system, and believe me

when I tell you there is nothing that I have not seen, nothing that I could not obtain access to. What is unique about this system is the data is *merging*. This is, for all intents and purposes, impossible. It is akin to Japanese and Swahili being shuffled together like playing cards, throwing it all into the air and having it land in legible, Old English Shakespeare. A statistical, near -impossibility.”

Then: “My little wizard and I will eventually figure out how this is happening. In the meantime we need to know who is behind this, and we need to know right now.”



THIRTY SEVEN

“Y ou’re pregnant, aren’t you?”

Eva nearly gagged. Instead, she stammered: “W...why would you say that?”

Madeline looked down her glasses. “You’ve worked here for more than three years. You’ve never taken a sick day. I’ve never even seen you with a snuffle. You’re the healthiest girl I know. That make six times you’ve puked in the last two weeks. Pretty much narrows it down, and I don’t see you as the ‘*I keep-eating-bad-clams*’ -type.”

Eva smiled. “Is there really such a ‘type’?”

“Well, my ex-husband, may he rest in peace, used to make it a habit of eating oysters whenever we were in the Deep South, and I would always say: *Rockford, only in months that end in ‘Y’*, but he wouldn’t listen and kept getting hepatitis.”

“Maybe he was having an affair with some shrimp,” Eva said.

Madeline flashed one of her stares. “Yes. Actually, what happened, mostly, was Rockford and that insufferable Hubert Long...”

“Huey?” Eva corrected.

“Hubert,” Madeline overrode her, “used to drag poor Rockford fishing. Now, let me tell you, that man couldn’t stand the water, he

had no use for it. Would have hated living here, having to look out over the ocean every day.”

“Mr. Rockford Stone of Rockhurst Manor’. Kind of hard and catchy,” Eva said.

Madeline ignored her. “He went fishing, with Hubert, because...Did I mention he was a compulsive gambler? Who only went fishing so he could get Hubert to gamble with him at golf? And get this, they would only bet ten dollars a hole! Sick for three days, hepatitis sometimes for two weeks, for ten bucks a hole. Men.

“Now, why haven’t you told Joe?” Madeline picked up one brush, dropped another, and began to dab at her canvas.

Eva scooped up the used brush before it added another spot to the spot-covered worktable. She didn’t bother asking Madeline how she knew this.

“It’s complicated. We’re not married you know.”

“Married? Pshaw,” Madeline scoffed. “What does that matter anymore? You two have been shacking-up for years.”

“It’s called ‘cohabitating’ now. Or ‘living together’,” Eva said.

“And...”

“And, I don’t know,” Madeline had this incredible way of making Eva feel like a little girl. Eva busied herself with the brushes.

“Joe seems hard-working. His writing shows some promise. And you’ve been trying to get pregnant for a while yet, haven’t you?” Madeline said.

“Yes,” Eva said meekly.

“You do love him, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Eva said more boldly.

“No hesitation. That’s good,” Madeline dabbed and became melancholy. “We tried to have children. For a time when we were first married. I thought it was me. I went to see every doctor. Even went to a couple of Chinese, with their grasshopper wings and their

tiny needles, and then a gypsy who also did some voodoo on the side. Turns out Rockford had gotten a vasectomy. Never told me. When I confronted him he said he'd had such a horrible childhood that why would he want to make anyone else go through that?" Madeline stopped brushing as she reflected. Eva saw Madeline's fingers twitch the brush as if she still smoked cigarettes. "After I found out I was so mad I thought about philandering, oh, excuse me, I mean I thought about having extra-marital sex."

"Hooking up'," Eva offered. "Dogging your 'Old Man'."

"Oh, whatever," she leaned in close to the canvas to inspect something, then leaned back and dabbed. "Mind you, I wasn't certain that I wanted children, it was just that he made the decision on his own, without consulting me. Made me so mad."

"When did he tell you?"

"Tell me? Confessed, was more like it. Daddy had Rockford investigated. Always thought the Stones were a little deceptive, shady maybe, '*Black marketeers or something*,'" she mimicked his voice. "Funny thing was, after Daddy's investigators got through with Rockford, it turned out that he'd already fathered a child, out of wedlock, whereabouts and identity unknown, and *then* gotten that vasectomy. But his background was impeccable and he was worth far more than I was at that time. Daddy still didn't trust him, though." Madeline resumed painting.



THIRTY EIGHT

Bertrom hadn't slept much.

Again.

More excited than worried as he quietly paced the floors, he was concerned that he'd stumbled onto something profound, and that that discovery was being taken away from him. The technical aspects were way beyond his expertise; they were apparently beyond the expertise too of a skilled technician. Then the boss- man and his creepy little lady friend, who only spoke with Blackthorn, arrive on the scene, and less than two hours later Bertrom is no longer steering what had been his own boat on his own private lake. Blackthorn was take-charge, a certain military type. The girl was terribly nondescript, and seemed perpetually nervous.

Twitchy.

Yet she had taken all of maybe twenty minutes to begin to do what seemed might be impossible. Bertrom didn't see how there could be an etheric quality to computers, but he wasn't one to discount the possibility either. Both times when he walked past the doors to 'Violet' and 'Bunting' he heard the familiar tapping in the girl's suite. On the second pass-by, Blackthorn snoring. Bertrom was glad someone could sleep.

Bertrom lay down from four until five-twenty and ignored his exercise shorts, socks and tee-shirt, carefully laid out and properly pressed, for the third day in a row.

Unheard of.



THIRTY NINE

The next morning, entering his kitchen, Bertrom saw the back of Jacob Blackthorn's white head as Blackthorn drank some juice and poured over Bertrom's 'Wall Street Journal'.

"Morning Sumner. I hope you're not one of those men who can't stand someone reading their paper first," Blackthorn said. Bertrom's eyes flickered over to Vincent; off to the chef, and back to his table where Vincent had carefully maneuvered Jacob Blackthorn without infringing on his Master's normal spot. Blackthorn added: "I had some food sent up to Mila's room. Sandwiches and soup. It's all that she'll eat. She keeps odd hours."

Bertrom said nothing. He sat and carefully tucked his silk napkin in at his tie, smoothing it evenly to both sides.

Blackthorn eyed him up, and then went back to the paper. "We made some headway last night. Pulled your security runs, your private feeds from next door." Blackthorn looked carefully past the paper for a reaction from Bertrom to the fact that they had found, and accessed, his internal security system. Bertrom simply sipped his tea. "Ran everybody next door we could see clearly through a national database..."

“My explicit instructions were for no data to come from an outside source,” Bertrom snapped.

“Relax. We’re on the same team. We brought all of that with us, that’s what’s taking up half your office.”

Blackthorn continued: “Head honcho, besides, of course, your Niece Madeline, is a guy named Klipnik, Mark M., highly skilled programmer from Cal Tech, most recently.”

“As highly skilled as you and your team?” Bertrom asked.

Blackthorn looked down from the paper. For a tense moment Bertrom wasn’t sure if the man might strike him. “Let me tell you something, Sumner. There aren’t four people in the world with my knowledge and skill-set. I headed technology at the NSA for nine years. A lot of these kids today are good, hell I employ a lot of them, and my girl, Mila, is very, very special. After this Klipnik there are eight other technicians that we’ve identified, all absolutely consistent with the hardware and equipment we’ve been able to identify. There is, however, one guy who shows up quite a bit who I can’t fit. I’ll show him to you when we go inside. Name is ‘Ronald Sean Elliot’, three first names. On several of the audio runs on Klipnik and Sumner-Stone, we heard them call him ‘Joe’. If it was a formal name change, believe me we would have seen it.”

“He goes by Joe Elliot. I’ve already got background information on him. He seems to be nothing more than a day laborer, and some manner of writer. His girlfriend is the tall blonde with the short-cropped hair who acts as Madeline’s assistant.”

Blackthorn said: “Eva Womack. Squeaky clean. She and your niece came out of a wall in one segment,” Bertrom stirred slightly, “some sort of gallery. I’m guessing somewhere they weren’t supposed to be.”

“What makes you say that?” Bertrom tried his best to act intrigued and cover his nervousness but Blackthorn was expert.

“Someone with access to your internal system, which I assume is most likely only yourself, and maybe your butler, reviewed that particular segment four times, twice in succession at first view. Come on Sumner, this is what we do, this is what *I* do. There’s no one better; that’s why you called us. Show me what you’ve got on this ‘Elliot’. I don’t like him; and I have a good nose.”



FORTY

“Dude, you smell,” Mark told me as it was Saturday morning and once again my morning run put me back at Rockhurst Manor.

“Like you don’t? At least I ran here, I’m not just being psychotic and boycotting the shower.”

Mark leaned back and rubbed his eyes. “We’re connecting eyes and ears right now.”

“No shit?” I pulled my chair up to the edge of the balcony where I could see down onto the platform. Measuring twenty five feet square, it was composed of black carpeting, up three low steps like a pyramid, with multiple white boxes of various sizes placed strategically around a white circle maybe three feet across that sat directly in the center, beneath what looked like an old-time street-light; a fluted, black iron mast, tapering slightly at the end, topped by a u-shaped fixture with a black mesh shade around it. The boxes were apparently all on hinges as several were open and had technicians scurrying in and around them, like busy little hamsters from where we sat.

Mark said: "If it works it won't be long before the government will have one in every bus station and airport in the country.

Catalogue everything about every one of us. Bing, bang, boom."

"Is that a scientific term? Did they teach you that at Harvard?" I asked.

"I've got to tell you, I'm still a little worried about what's going to happen when we go live. Oh, and something else. 'Xena', that's what..."

"I know, you told me you call the system that the other day," I said.

"Right, 'Xena' made another serious leap forward, last night, late," Mark said. "A *surge*."

"Lay-terms?" I crossed my arms.

Mark sighed. "Remember how I told you that once we added eyes and ears we would, in effect, complete a loop, and the data would start to acquire exponentially, like how a penny doubled every day for a month isn't much of anything for the first couple of weeks but then it explodes."

"Sure."

"At oh-two-thirty-seven, last night, 'Xena' started compiling a protocol."

"*Meaning...*"

"Well, it's at the equivalent of the first week maybe, like sixty-four pennies in our analogy, but again it's significant, so significant because we haven't actually, physically completed the loop yet, connected everything. See, once we completed the loop we were actually going to use the system, use 'Xena', to write the compiler protocol *for us*, in real-time."

"So, it would acquire the data and figure out how to show it all to you, in one language that you could understand," I said.

“Exactly. It’d be like translating Chinese to, say, Swahili, on the fly, and then providing us with a totally new language one millisecond later, one that we can interact with, one that we could comprehend,” Mark said.

“So, why is this a problem? The way you said that, I thought it was going to be something bad,” I said.

“It goes back, again, to whoever hacked into our data stream. For all I know they’re still on it, maybe hidden somewhere in this place. There are certainly enough rooms.”

“Maybe in the walls,” I said absentmindedly.

“The walls?” Mark said.

I told him about my adventure, left out the part about Madeline taking Eva through to creepy Uncle Bertrom’s private gallery.

Mark said: “Maybe someone’s in there, maybe someone’s living in one of the rooms, I mean, who would know? Madeline said it was all right to walk around as long as no one opened any doors or went over to the Westside. With all the technicians and workers coming and going, who could keep track?”

“If they are they’re probably spying on us. Might have us bugged right now,” I said, mostly in jest.

We stopped talking and Mark and I slowly looked around the crowded space and up to the ceiling. There was so much equipment and wiring someone could have installed a satellite dish and we might not have seen it.

“They are staring right at us. Your technician. Raju. He said no one could find the camera,” Bertrom stared nervously at the security feed.

“They don’t see anything. And they won’t find it, either. Not unless they tear down the ceiling and know what they’re looking for. Raju told me he used a super-micro before he left,” Blackthorn said. “When I get back to DC I’m going to ask him why he didn’t bother to install better audio. It’s damn annoying.”

“We heard enough to know that they suspect something.”

Blackthorn took down the ‘Bic’ pen he’d been holding in his teeth and pointed it at the monitor. “That one, Klipnik, he’s known someone’s been into his line about three seconds after you turned that ‘sniffer’ on. He’s got all kinds of sophisticated gear over there, some of it extremely hard to get, and I can tell from our end that he’s running hard-line hardware diagnostics. Would have to for whatever they’ve got that’s interfacing all of that sophisticated equipment. Could you arrange for me to go over there? You said you’re on good terms with your niece?”

“Yes. Normally I would have Vincent my butler call over and arrange for tea or something, normally our discussions are confined to house issues and occasional trips down memory lane.”

“Memory lane?” Blackthorn asked.

“She’s my niece, but I am only a few years older than she is. We both spent our summers at Rockhurst Manor, then grew apart, until I came here to reside fifteen years ago. Madeline was already living here.”

“So you split the house. Right down the middle.”

Bertrom said: “Yes, in any event, there is really no need to directly involve my niece. I would prefer that we extend her some courtesy as you will undoubtedly wish to visit the main studio where their equipment is set up.” Bertrom flashed to the image of Madeline and the girl invading his private gallery, from the wall, without permission and quickly added: “Nevertheless, Rockhurst Manor is my home and I will go within it wherever I please.”

“Let me go fetch Mila. Oh, and let’s see if we can catch that Ronald Sean Elliot before he leaves. I’d like to get a good look at him.” Blackthorn seemed to be very comfortable moving around Rockhurst, which was odd as even Bertrom himself could get turned around. Blackthorn returned five minutes later with the waif-like woman who seemed even more twitchy, her laptop nowhere to be seen. Bertrom still could not remember actually hearing the girl speak.

“Very well, we’ll need to go to the second floor passageway; it’s the only way across, unless you wish to go outside.”

Mila leaned forward and spoke into Blackthorn’s ear.

“Can we go inside the walls? Probably a good idea for me to get a look at everything. Keeps our options open.”

“Options for what, Mr. Blackthorn?” While there was no way he knew of to access the hidden room he’d inherited from his father, Bertrom did not attempt to hide his annoyance.

“Let me ask you, how do you know they don’t have your side, this Westside, bugged? You don’t think your niece could hire a firm like ours? Wire up your toilet while you were sitting on it? But I’m going to guess that neither of you wired the crawl spaces, so it’s a good way to move around if we decide later that we care about being seen.”

“Granted. However, for this particular trip I do not see the need. We’re merely touring the estate and happened upon the open doors to her main studio. In fact, even one of the walls is open as I believe they are installing a walkway and ramp.”

“Let’s go outside then,” Blackthorn said.

“Very well.” Bertrom said.

Mila said nothing.

They strode along a path. "This is all part of the original building?" Blackthorn asked a question that was really more of a statement. He'd already read everything the county Planning Department had in its database.

"Yes. Two major additions. And a lot of minor ones. In 1790, where the second of the three wings was added, the third along with the gymnasium and botanical garden just after World War One."

"Family was in steel wasn't it? Probably turned a healthy profit during the war," Blackthorn said.

"There are some steel interests, yes, but Rockhurst Manor was originally my *Great-Great-Great-Grandfather's* vision. He did quite well having arrived in this country already with considerable resources to compete mostly with men who had few to none. After completing the original structure, at the time the largest private home in America, he set up a fund to ensure it through future generations. Any Sumner with a clean bloodline can legally assume residence at Rockhurst indefinitely, but few choose to do so beyond the summer months."

"Works out well for you and your niece," Blackthorn noted.

"Yes, if one can manage to confine oneself to fifty or so rooms." Bertrom's attempt at humor fell flat.

They reached the Eastside and a side door and Bertrom noticed the new security for the first time.

"Problem?" Blackthorn said, scanning the interface. "New system," he quickly added.

Bertrom stared at the panel and almost dumbly tried his thumb in the reader. To his surprise the lock clicked and the door edged open. Blackthorn did not see the look of concern or surprise that flashed across Bertrom's face.

Where Raju, the first technician, knew his antiques, Blackthorn seemed to know fine art. He forced Bertrom into near-

constant dialogue as they went down long hallways and up wide staircases until they came to the oversized French-doors that led to the main studio. It was nine-fifteen and the studio was abuzz.

"Hello Bertrom. I was wondering when all the activity would pique your curiosity," Madeline was coming from another hallway and nearly ran into them.

"Madeline," Bertrom took and kissed her hand. "I was showing the Manor and we heard construction. Do you mind if we wander around?"

"Of course not," Madeline said as Blackthorn moved around Bertrom and extended his hand.

"Jacob Blackthorn. Ms. Sumner isn't it?"

"Sumner-Stone," Madeline corrected him, shaking his hand. "Nice to meet you." No one paid Mila any mind. Madeline said: "Well, I have work to do, with my clay, this morning. If there is anything I can do."

"No, thank you. We'll be fine. I would love to see your ceramics however, whenever you are ready to show," Bertrom said.

"Oh you'll just love it. It's fabulous, you'll see," Madeline said.

Somewhat forwardly, Blackthorn said: "Surely all of these workers are not here for a sculpture."

"Oh, no. They are here for another project I'm working on," Madeline leaned back, a genuine twinkle in her eye, and swept her hand in the air pantomiming Broadway lights, "the greatest piece of modern art ever created. And never to be outdone."

"That old streetlight over there?" Blackthorn motioned to platform, and the center of the enormous room.

"Yes, Mr. Blackthorn was it? That 'streetlight' as you call it. Have not thought of a title yet. Perhaps that might work. 'The Streetlight'..." Madeline walked off mumbling.

Blackthorn strode confidently into the room, pausing, for only a moment, at the platform to examine the streetlight before turning back to Bertrom. "How do we get up there?" He pointed at the balcony.

"Around the side I would imagine. I haven't been in this part of this wing in some time. However, if the door to it is closed we must respect that," Bertrom said.

"Why can't we just knock?" Blackthorn said snidely, rapping his knuckles in the air.

Bertrom sighed. "There are some obvious...challenges, with residing here at Rockhurst. Closed doors mean off limits." They went through a doorway into a back hallway, and made their way around to the logical place for balcony stairs.

"Well, we're in luck," Blackthorn said as they came to a door, slightly ajar, light peering through the opening, cutting a dim swath in the back hallway's dim.

Bertrom began to knock on the wall inside the door when two technicians came down the stairs in heated discussion.

"Klipnik up there?" Blackthorn asked.

One of the men nodded and pointed up the stairs. He said: "That's Mark, right?" Resuming their discussion, the technicians went by.

Bertrom offered his own forced smile and reptile-like intensity. "After you," he stood aside.

Blackthorn made some kind of snorting sound and took the stairs quickly, Mila at his heel. Bertrom was surprised how quickly Blackthorn moved for his age. He followed closely enough to hear Mila gasp and began whispering frantically to Blackthorn when they reached the balcony room. Bertrom slowly remembered having been up here before, of course not when the area had been converted to some kind of command center.

Mark was talking with three technicians, and examining some sort of connector under a magnified light, standing behind one of the technicians while the technician typed at a monitor. The new guests caught Mark's eye.

"Are you with 'STILCO'?" Mark said.

Bertrom stepped in front of Blackthorn and extended his hand. "My name is Bertrom Sumner, and these are my guests."

"Oh. As in Sumner-Sumner?" Mark said.

Bertrom was rapidly tiring over what seemed like an epidemic of behavior bordering insolence. "Yes, Madeline is my Niece."

A look of realization crossed Mark's cherub face, followed by a flash of curiosity, then quickly concern. "You live next door?"

"Yes, I reside in the Westside of Rockhurst Manor. I hope we're not intruding. We were touring the estate and stopped by to see Madeline's latest work-in-progress."

"We won't be ready for a few weeks. And sorry but I'm terribly busy," Mark said, motioning *'just one minute'* to the technicians he'd been engaged with.

"Just a couple of questions, if I may," Blackthorn's impatience apparent, "Jacob Blackthorn," he extended his hand.

"Mark Klipnik," Mark said weakly, shaking Blackthorn's hand, instantly scouring his mind for this name that rang a bell.

"I'm a bit of a computer engineer myself, more of a hobbyist, and from what I'm able to discern, you're putting together something pretty substantial here, something rather expensive as well, if I may," Blackthorn said.

"Could I suggest you speak with Madeline about this? I work for her, this is her project," Mark said.

Blackthorn's face tightened. Mila had moved away from them and was silently hovering behind the three technicians and their workstation, intently observing their conversation. "Am I correct

that I've seen an 'ionic microscope' and a 'Tessens laser'?" Mark still could not place the name of this 'hobbyist'. He merely nodded. "Would you mind if I looked around? We could be out of your hair so you can get back to your work."

Suddenly it hit him, who Jacob Blackthorn was. Mark was shocked; Blackthorn was never seen out in the field. At another place and time Mark might have stood and gawked at the legendary programmer, but he'd also heard some rumors, pretty reliable ones, that there was another side to Blackthorn's brilliance, one that played outside of the rules; hints at strong-arming tactics, clandestine acts, extortion, intimidation.

"I...would prefer not," Mark said slowly, fighting to control his voice. "Not without Ms Sumner-Stone's permission."

"Well, then perhaps another time that is more convenient," Bertrom interjected, causing Blackthorn to smart then try to glance through the side doors to catch a glimpse of whatever he could.

"Very well," Bertrom had his hands clasped behind him and bowed imperceptibly. Looking around the room, Bertrom noticed that the near-silent Mila Janski had ingratiated herself into the technician's dialogue and was in fact now trading places with the technician that had been behind the keyboard. Bertrom went to call to her but Blackthorn's hand shot sharply up, stopping him with a softly assertive snap of his fingers. They paused, straining to hear.

The three young men in similar outfits stood behind Mila and grew from murmurs to deathly silent. For a minute the command center activity seemed to freeze. Mila was making a few of her strange mewling sounds, and some sort of clicking with her tongue. The three technicians leaned ever so slightly forward as one.

Blackthorn detached from Mark and Bertrom and strode across. "Mila," he said softly, then: "*Mila*," more assertively.

Suddenly, as if being shocked, Mila abruptly stopped typing and stood. Blackthorn pushed past the three men and glanced at the screen, reading furiously, and then leaning over and pecking at the keyboard quickly, deleting whatever had been there. Bertrom frowned. Blackthorn said; “Sorry about that, gentlemen. My associate is a little ‘excitable’. Blackthorn steered Mila away from the workstation and back across the room.

Bertrom nodded as if confirming something. “Good day then.” They headed back down the stairs.

In hushed tones Blackthorn and Mila were talking almost frantically between them. Bertrom seethed as he followed them back down the stairs, past the two technicians they’d gone by on their way up. The technicians, who earlier had paid them no mind, now glanced at them oddly before continuing up the stairs.

“See here, Blackthorn. What was that about? I demand to know,” Bertrom said as they retraced their path through to the main studio. Ignoring him at first, Blackthorn and Mila seemed to reach some accord for the time being.

They paused before starting what appeared to be a heated discussion, to step aside while Joe Elliot walked by with a tray full of coffee. Blackthorn registered for an instant who it was, but had far more pressing matters with which to attend.

I set the tray of coffee down near Marks desk. “Who were those guys downstairs? Did they come up here?” I said.

Mark and his minions were deep in conversation. I went over to the balcony and peered cautiously down. The preppy-looking one, with the thin, manicured mustache, I assumed, by his affect, to be the mysterious Uncle Bertrom (*what was he doing over here?*), then some *half-a-nothing* little gal who looked like she was on

methamphetamine. The older guy with all the white hair had snake-eyes and was tanned with a very well-maintained appearance was, for some reason, troubling, and seemed to be in charge. They stopped at the platform and began talking to some technicians who seemed reluctant to respond to whatever was being asked.

Mark came over beside me and took a cup of coffee from the tray. "Thanks," he said, taking a sip.

"So who are those guys, down on the platform? Is that Madeline's uncle? The one with the ascot?"

Mark nodded. "I guess. Introduced himself as 'Bertrom Sumner'."

"Who's that with him?" I said.

"The guy's name is Blackthorn. Jacob Blackthorn. Heads up '*Blackthorn International Security*'. Guy's a programming legend from the sixties, then the NSA. I mean a real legend, Joe. Bona-fide genius, for real."

"What's he doing here? And who's the little crackhead with them? Something doesn't fit."

"We're not one hundred percent sure," Mark said furrowing his brow, "but my trick knee says that she's our hacker."

"What?" I stopped drinking my coffee and looked at him sternly. "What do you mean she's our hacker?"

"Well, she just showed my guys another end-around, in about five minutes."

"Wow," I set my coffee down and ran at my hair. "Okay, let me get this straight, and what's Madeline's uncle doing over here anyway?"

"They just showed up. Go ask Madeline. I don't know. Timing is a little suspect, don't you think?" Mark said. He and I once again could not stop from scanning the room and ceiling for hidden cameras or bugs.

“We were just talking about them,” I agreed. “If it is them.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “We start getting snooped, somebody injects some ‘helpful’ code, you and I think we’re being watched, and one of the legends of computational science and another legend, allegedly, in system hacking, suddenly decide to just ‘stop by’.”

“So, you know who that girl is?” I said.

“Know her? No. But if Blackthorn has her in tow you ‘better believe she’s something special. There was a rumor a few years back that he sprung a hacker after she’d been arrested, a gal who allegedly slides through cyber-walls like some kind of a wraith. Mila Janski. Shereesh,” Mark motioned toward one of the technicians who were once again busy, “Shereesh says that she is also referred to as the ‘*Queen Bee*’ and that he’s pretty sure it was her. They’re sending a photo they just took without her knowing, to someone who knows her, right now.”



FORTY ONE

Okay. Where are we?

Where we are is either an incredible misread of the data.

Which you never do.

Which I never do, or something incredible has happened.

Continue.

Pods 14 - 36 seem to have begun acquiring.

That's...

Not possible, right. Unless someone's been in a back-door after hours.

The hack? They inserted something new?

Or.

Or...the system hacked itself?

Warming. Elaborate.

Pods 1 - 36, if they're really live, created a...personality? A helper?

Bingo.

Holy shit.

Good observation.

How do you know? How can we monitor it? Without the final tie-in to interface the video and laser optics we also lose our control console.

We know because only you or I could possibly insert something without the other's knowledge. That's a fact. If you'd come up with the work-around you would have been calling me before you even hit 'execute'. I certainly could have come up with it, would have come up with it, after we analyzed the phase-two data, but obviously having it now, ahead of time, greatly accelerates our timeline. So that means either I had it worked out in my subconscious and inserted it myself in my sleep or something extracted it from my subconscious and inserted it.

Or the system is acting autonomously and figured it out on its own.

Right, again an impossibility. But so are pods 1-36 acquiring without an interface.

Wouldn't that actually make your sleepwalking scenario more plausible?

Technically.

I'll call you tonight then. Really late.

Funny.

Seriously, what are we going to do? We can't sit on this. What's going to happen when we install the last 24 pods? What if your theory is correct and the system installed them by itself?

Be serious.

Be serious? Are you listening to what you've been telling me? I'm no AI pro but I know enough to know that what you're describing changes the basis entirely.

Changes the world.



FORTY TWO

The whole way home things were nagging at me, lots of things including what was wrong with Eva. I didn't wait very long once I got home before I forgot about most of the other ones.

"What do you mean you wanted to wait to tell me?" I tried to control my voice, my head swimming.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, yet."

"What you wanted to do."

"Yes. Come on Joe, this is a really big deal. And like it or not, it's a bigger deal for me. I know that you wouldn't, but you *could* take off, and then I'd be left all alone to raise it."

"Are you kidding me? Eva? *Seriously?* You know that works both ways. Why would you even say that? –why would you even *think* that? Do you really think I could ever abandon my child? Any child? Come on. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. And our baby?" I was beginning to choke up.

Eva started to cry. I'd only seen her cry once, after we visited her grandpa in the hospital. She didn't cry when he died the next month. She was sobbing so uncontrollably that I bit down on my lip and held her as tightly as I could, trying to control my breathing. I don't know if it was hot outside or if it was dry or if the wind blew.

We just stood embraced, rocking gently in unison until Eva was finished crying and wiped her nose on my shoulder without thinking which made us both laugh in that comfortable way that you do when you've just been upset.

She looked down at her hands. "Sorry."

"Me too."

"Ready to get married?" I said.

This brought a thin smile. "No, not until after the showing. And we have to decide how we want to have it."

Treading lightly, I said: "I thought we'd agreed on the Elvis Chapel?" I crossed my fingers: *please, please, please...*

"Did we? I don't recall," Eva said.

"Wow. Wow, pregnant," I unconsciously reached out and touched Eva's stomach. "What do we have to start doing?"

"Do you think I know? I guess I'll have to stop smoking crack."

Eva was beginning to sound like me. I knew that couples were supposed to start looking like one another; maybe ours was the next evolution. If my head wasn't swimming I may have noticed this. Instead, I began to pace. "We've got to start planning."

Eva took my hand. "Joe, relax. I just found out two weeks ago."

"And I just found out *now*," I said forcefully.

"I said I was sorry," Eva groused. It was almost as rare for her to cry as to admit she was wrong about something. She was about to cross her arms and move into a full-scale stand-off when I softened.

"My head is swimming," I said.

"I know the feeling. So was mine. I almost wrecked, well, not really, but I was pretty dizzy. This too shall pass."

I took a deep breath. "Who else have you told? Your Mom?"

"No one! Madeline, but she figured it out on her own. I've been getting sick at work. Let's wait a few weeks until my first

scheduled check-up. Or, I don't know, I mean, I'm so happy, we're happy, we can tell everyone, if you want," Eva took both of my hands and leaned back so I was keeping her from falling. If she had long hair it likely would have been fluttering as if in a breeze.

"Wait a minute, what else? So you're two weeks along?" I said.

"No, four. I was two weeks along when it showed up in my test."

My lightning deductive skills and superior mathematical intellect quickly put two and two together. "The Poconos? We got pregnant at *Hotel Royale*?"

"Fitting," Eva said, but it didn't sound as if she shared in my appreciation.

"Good thing we didn't go into that Jacuzzi," I added helpfully, "or..."

We said in unison: "*We wouldn't know whose it is.*"

"Great minds think alike," I pronounced.

"We will have to decide if we want to know the baby's sex," Eva said.

"I vote 'hetero', but I don't really care that much," I was on a roll. Eva rolled her eyes.

"Glad to see that you're handling everything so maturely." I let her go and went to the living area (*notice I did not say living room*).

"Move over," she slid next to me on the sofa.

"Oh, I met Bertrom Sumner," I said, then: "Wow, you're pregnant," I added, taking her hands.

She said: "We're pregnant," and smiled. "Where did you meet the good Uncle?"

"I didn't actually meet him. He was in the hall behind the stairs that go up to that balcony room, Mark's command center. I had gone to get coffee. Mark said he just showed up. And Mark thinks he knows who the hackers are, too. Uncle 'Bert' had some

older guy and some little druggie-chick with him. Mark said they were famous hackers or something.”

“And what, they came over to spy on Madeline?” Eva said.

“I don’t know. Mark’s pretty tripped out,” I said.

“He’s *been* tripped out,” Eva said.

“But you’ve got to admit there’s some weird shit going on. We still don’t know about those email addresses or my thumbprint.”

“What was that about going back into the walls? We’re you being serious?” Eva took the remote and turned on the TV.

“Come on, Honey, tell me that wasn’t about the coolest thing you’ve ever seen,” I said. “It’s like going back in time or something.”

Stopping on the local news, Eva shuddered. “I think it was creepy. I told you so. And we never got down from any walkways, either.”

“There are little ladders and odd-shaped stairs going everywhere. Do you think Madeline would care? If I asked her if I could go back in there?”

Eva thought about this. “Well, she’s not really secretive, if that’s what you mean. Probably an insurance liability issue, though, when some zombie eats your foot. From down in the dark, down one of those ladders. At least a big rat.”

Thanks, darling. I said: “Should I ask her? Will you ask her for me?”

“Don’t we have more important things to worry about than your playing inside the walls of an old mansion? Like, do we want a boy or a girl? And I mean really, not just being PC. Or, what if he, or she, what if he, or she, is gay? Or, autistic or something?” Eva said.

Nine-twenty-two p.m., the night a Thursday, I made a mental note. In the past ten minutes I’d just been informed that my girlfriend who would someday be my wife (*now, with or without the Elvis Chapel in the equation, an accelerated certainty*), was finally

pregnant but had waited two weeks to tell me, the *de facto*, father of the joyous news; it was painfully apparent that, henceforth, all ‘serious discussions’, and episodes of ‘*we have to talk*’ (*with all of the requisite bickering should I dare not to ‘de facto’ agree*), would shift from the realm of possibility (*when we ‘get’ pregnant*) to the current cold, hard truth (*yes, thank you, we are*).

“Joe? Are you listening to me?” Eva said.

“What?” I said.



FORTY THREE

“**S**ummer, you’re not paying attention,” Jacob Blackthorn

was heated. “Under the guise of an ‘artistic project’ and with literally millions spent on hardware, let alone the capital outlay for all of those technicians, your niece is building an acquisition system with a *soon-to-be-functioning* artificial intelligence program that I’ve never seen the likes of. And Mila said that they haven’t fully developed the interface yet. They’re waiting until they complete the primary system circuit and assuming, I would guess, or hoping more likely, that the system would then finish the interface development autonomously. I know every major manufacturer in this field, all three heads of the joint project between M.I.T. and Caltech, and none of them are going in this direction.”

Bertrom went to his mustache, and then clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace. The degree of most of the technical data was beyond his rudimentary comprehension, but he appreciated Blackthorn’s attempts to keep him in the loop, despite the gnawing feeling that it was mostly for show. Yet it was too improbable that the oft-eccentric Madeline was capable of something so groundbreaking.

“Something else,” Blackthorn went on. “We found very early reference to something written by this guy Elliot called: ‘W.E.B.’, or, the ‘Worldwide Electron Band’. There’s a program at Rensselaer, buried, involves tracking enemy combatants through satellite-based ion-radiation scanning. *Think*: your airport security machine on steroids. Then, a program in Germany, at Freiburg, that’s managed to build a device that can identify individuals based on their chromatic structure, like sniffing their DNA, but over extremely limited distances, laboratory conditions.”

“I fail to see the point,” Bertrom said.

This comment drew an icy stare.

Blackthorn continued. “Any one of these disciplines, on its own, is fairly known, fairly quantifiable. Less known and less quantifiable, is the merging of data from these systems into some kind of cosmically universal language, and even more fascinating is the fact that apparently without having been completed, having the system complete its circuit, that system next door, in your house, is already compiling data on its own. Now, I say this with utmost contrition: *that simply is not possible*. By any known functionalities and modalities in computational physics.

“I am going to have to make a few exceptions to our previous arrangement regarding outside calls. Ronald, or Joe, or whoever that actually is that we keep seeing snooping around cannot possibly be the individual we found only cursory information on. Our database had nearly three pages on Klipnik and most of the other technicians. Why don’t you get me the file you’ve got on Elliot; I will place a few, very discreet, inquiries. See if he’s an agent of the federal government and, if so, where his allegiance lies. Then, I’ll know how best to proceed.”

“Very well,” Bertrom sighed, feigning exasperation; actually, he couldn’t remember the last time he felt so alive. Opening a

cabinet along a wall, he retrieved a file folder and handed it to Jacob Blackthorn who was seated in front of Bertrom's desk. Blackthorn scanned the contents with incredible speed.

"It was prepared by Martens Security. A small firm from outside of Boston," Bertrom said.

"I know Frank Martens," Blackthorn said. "In fact, I think I'll call him first. Might save us some time." Recognizing, again, the lack of privacy due to the 'sniffer', Blackthorn found the phone number on the letterhead and, shrugging, started the call. Feeling awkward, Bertrom left his own office.

"Frank Martens," Blackthorn barked into the phone to a receptionist. "Jacob Blackthorn," he said in response to: *who are you calling for?*

"Martens," Frank Martens said, answering almost warily.

"Martens, this is Jacob Blackthorn," Blackthorn said.

"Okay," Frank Martens' voice was measured. He of course knew all about the legend that was Jacob Blackthorn, but had never met the man in person, or spoken with him on the phone. Thinking it may be a hoax Martens leaned back in his chair. "What do ya need?"

Blackthorn said: "A little follow-up on a report your firm prepared for a 'Bertrom Sumner' on a 'Joe Elliot', a couple of photos, some rudimentary..."

"You know I can't..."

Blackthorn spoke over him. "We met once, you and I; in seventy-nine, over at State. Before you were a cop. You were under Krueger then, if I recall. I was introduced to you as Karl Millman, from crypto."

"Okay," Martens' voice was again measured as he wracked his brain. "Doesn't change..."

Blackthorn interrupted him, again. "I don't require any specifics, just trying to save a little time. And, I'd owe you one. Now, I have access to all of the standard banks where you pulled this stuff," Martens began to jot notes on a tablet: *Blackthorn at Rockhurst right now?* "But I'd like to run a deep scan at Langley..."

"Already did," Martens injected.

"...and Interpol," Blackthorn said.

"Didn't see the need," Martens said.

Or, it's not in your toolkit, Blackthorn thought. He said: "Anything hot that you thought maybe wasn't relevant? Are you aware his name is actually 'Ronald Sean Elliot'?"

Martens' voice was measured. "Sumner can tell you exactly what he wanted queried. We bagged his place, had eyes on the guy for a week. Seemed harmless enough."

Blackthorn said: "You install the 'AMXC5'? The 'sniffer'?"

Bingo, Martens wrote and circled on his pad.

In a measured tone, he said: "You really need to ask Sumner his business, assuming that I even know what a 'sniffer' is, and, if I did, that it wasn't most likely illegal to possess one."

Blackthorn broke a thin smile. "Let me know when you need something," he closed his cell phone, knowing that within minutes Frank Martens would begin making inquiries and more people would wonder what got Jacob Blackthorn back into the field.

Blackthorn made another call; this time from memory. "What do you have for a 'Ronald Sean Elliot', twenty-seven. Caucasian. Boston-area."

"Hang on," the voice said, typing in the background.

Then: "Interesting."

"Continue," Blackthorn said.

"Just hit yesterday. Nothing prior."

Blackthorn snorted. "Then he's been cleaned. Physically, he doesn't look black-ops. Interpol?"

"Nothing. As I said. First entry created yesterday, oh-two-thirty-eight."

One minute after Mila first 'shook hands' with the system, Blackthorn noted.

He said: "Details?"

"No one's looked yet. We're the first. This better not get me flagged," the voice said.

"Believe me, I'll get rid of it, if you do. Continue."

"Just a single entry. Tagged red priority. Something titled: 'W.E.B.'"

"Worldwide Electron Band," Blackthorn interjected.

"So why are you calling me?" The voice asked.

"Make sure it gets sent to crypto."

"The red tag means it already has," the voice said.

"Check back. If they don't work it in by tomorrow call me and I'll have someone move it up in the queue," Blackthorn snapped his phone closed again, thinking hard, suddenly aware that Bertrom had returned.

"Was that about Elliot?" Bertrom asked.

Blackthorn said: "What? Oh, Elliot." Then, annoyed at the interruption: "Why?"

Bertrom motioned curtly to the security monitors behind his desk. "Because he just went back inside the walls."

I didn't set out to wander around Rockhurst Manor; didn't set out to go back into the walls; wasn't sure if doing so broke my word with Eva, having been far more expressive in my curiosity than I

remember being in promised abstinence. Besides, I really didn't know what I was doing in here.

Mark had been busy (*duh*), and was possibly finding me an irritant (*known to happen*) since I started hanging around more as the showing date neared. I wanted to hear the latest data on 'Xena' but it was really more of the same; a giant eddy full of technicians spinning round and round with no idea of what to become.

For some reason, I told Mark about Eva getting pregnant, and that actually got him to stop working and look oddly at me, so oddly that my good-old always-amusing jealousy stripe shot up on my back. Was he thinking about his time with Eva? Despite her insistence to the contrary, did they actually commit 'the act'? Any of the 'acts'?

Feeling suddenly claustrophobic, I left the command center and wandered around, opting for a different wing to get lost in (*figuratively*) this time, trying not to lose my bearings to the oddly shaped little library room near '*The Ships*'. I mean, what better way to cure my claustrophobia than by climbing into dark, narrow, confined, and unknown areas behind Rockhurst Manor's walls?

It was a good thing it took me nearly half an hour before my wandering brought me to the small, oddly-shaped book room in question, time enough to rationalize my behavior and clear with my conscience that I was not going back on my word to Eva. It went something like this: *Mark was so overwhelmed he seemed almost disinterested in what the hackers might be doing with the data; Madeline couldn't be bothered with any of it, even after Mark filled her in.* So the onus fell on me, Joe Elliot, super-sleuth, to see what was going on over at the Westside. If I happened to stumble upon an enormous forgotten trunk full of gold doubloons and jewel-encrusted chalices well, what would that hurt? Damned sound logic if you ask me.

Looking around to be certain I was not seen, I went to the bookcase and pulled down the levered book, the quiet, soft click now felt almost routine. I slid behind the case and closed it shut behind me, realizing after my eyes adjusted and my breathing resumed that I really had no plan. Just straight reconnaissance, I guess. Assuming that I could actually get my bearings straight and then figure out where Uncle Bertrom and his two associates were congregating. With only about fifty-five rooms, plus a conservatory and botanical garden, they should be easy to find (*or next to impossible*). Turning right at the first avail, I wound up on a catwalk suspended over the twenty-foot wide, open area with what looked like an old loading dock on one side that I'd climbed down to last week. It looked really far down; I felt small and shivered despite the only cool air. The sun was almost directly overhead, and I guessed that I would never be able to readily see more than I could now. I moved quickly along, my growing fascination and the feelings of isolation, and incubation, from Rockhurst's size, easily trumping any trespassorial guilt.

I mean really, who was I hurting?

The catwalk fed me into a long, narrow and very dark stairwell, enclosed unlike the others I had already traversed. I suddenly (*and stupidly*) realized I had no flashlight. Going back made no sense, so I took out my cell phone and illuminated the screen, creating that perfect little pillow of light you always saw the next victim in a horror movie shrouded in. I'm no hard-ass, but I stay in shape and can handle myself when I have to, but I was downright scared, as in afraid-of-the-dark (*well, what lurked within it anyway...rats, zombies...*) kind of scared. It took me a moment to start down the stairs, and I kept my left hand slightly touching the wall as I descended into the abyss; actually more of an ominous sea (*or, factually, just a closed door around a small entryway*). I opened the door and stepped into some sort of utility room, old, yet cleaned,

and free of the usual work-area *accoutrement*, lit by a single electric bulb behind a wire cage on the wall above another doorway. There were actually five doors, all shut, and the fact that there was a working light meant someone had to come here sometime to at least change the bulb. What if I happened upon someone? Me, a grown man, snooping around?

Being back inside of the walls was like visiting an old and no longer used historical area, a ghost town, the place not really decrepit but certainly past its useful days.

If I happened upon someone, I would just tell them I was lost, which was partly true. If I *really* got lost, I would simply follow any walkway to its end until I found another hidden passageway (*which weren't hidden from this side*). How could I possibly stay lost with this clever plan?

Choosing the door with the light above it, I passed through another small anteroom that funneled onto a ground-level boardwalk, then up a long, narrow path with unevenly sized steps, some missing, all dusty, to a boardwalk that ran along one story off the ground. It appeared that I was behind the very center of the original house. '*Where east meets west*'.

Whatever.

Coming down from the high ceiling, several swaths of sun, looming in the still and grey, I could see the hand-cut stone that edged what was once the old roof, a lifetime and an entire story (*height, not tale*) now ominous and heavy above it. It felt like spelunking, and coming through a narrow cave to a great underground chamber, a cavern, the old structure permanently cocooned by renovation. Nestled from the elements, yes, but also succumbed in its majesty, hiding in dank, dusty spaces, like a giant statue in a museum that was stored in the corner of a sub-basement.

Stumbling, I focused on the path again, clearly headed in the right direction (*sure I am*), stepping off onto a side path when the stairs reached the second floor. It seemed about as good a place as any to start snooping around.

Moving down the disjointed maze of now smaller paths and stairwells, leaving footprints and the occasional handprint in the dust of my wake, I paused every few minutes to see if I could hear anything, anything at all, following the occasional flush of a toilet, or sound of water running from a sink. There were small rooms and decrepit rooms and piles of wood (*maybe from a crashed catwalk?*) and some small boxes and bottles. There were nooks and cubbyholes with no rhyme or reason to their placement. I inspected a few hoping to find forgotten treasure, secreted long ago.

No one could know their way around back here, even if the place was lit up as brightly as day. And judging by the untouched dust on most of the walkways and inside most of the dark and creepy rooms, no one had been here for like years. I could hear nothing that resembled talking through the thick walls, nor could I find (*with my oh-so-powerful cell phone light*) pinholes, or eyeholes of light, like something from ‘*Psycho*’ to peer through.

Then...*something*. A cough, two. Masculine, definitely. Still, could be anyone. I’d met a butler, Vincent, but the ‘**Pittsburgh Steelers**’ might have stopped by for the weekend for all I knew. Maneuvering so I didn’t fall off the side of the walkway, or get a leg stuck in a gap, I leaned upward as far as I could and brought my ear as close to the unfinished wall as I could without risking injury from the various nails and splinters and sharp pieces of plaster. It sounded like a man talking, maybe on the phone? If I could just get a little closer.

Suddenly (*and deafeningly*) my cell phone rang (*‘rang’ meaning began playing the theme from ‘Shaft’*), startling me so that I

lost my footing, and causing me to bang my knee into the wall and cry out in pain.

Smooth.

Scampering back down the walkway, limping slightly from having banged my knee, I looked at my phone.

“Hello?” I whispered hoarsely. It was Mark.

“Where are you?” Mark said.

“I have no idea,” I said.

There was a momentary pause. “What? Seriously, you need to come back over here, like right now,” Mark said. “Are you still on the premises?”

“Sort of.”

“What?”

“Okay, okay, I’m just wandering around.”

“Come quickly. Don’t get lost.” He hung up.

I pocketed my cell phone and began retracing my steps, which became hopeless as the sun had already shifted and no longer illuminated as many of the countless dark areas.

Shit.

Okay, pick one. I went to the left, down another long catwalk to another pathway with three choices. Taking the one furthest to the left, I went maybe fifty feet before arriving at the back of what appeared to be a hidden doorway. Pausing to collect myself, I pulled the lever smoothly down and stepped into a small but nicely appointed gallery with security lights blinking in both corners, and tiny, minimal spotlights illuminating all four walls. Glancing up at the main wall I saw a massive painting, an abstract; off-colored fruit, and shapes in multiple shades of purple.

‘Plum’.

Shit.

I went back through the hidden door which was actually a panel recessed into the molding along a wall.

What were the chances? More than one hundred freaking rooms? Although only a handful with secret passageways. I retraced my path, opening my cell phone and holding it down near the walkway when I returned to the little crosswalk. In the dust I could see several sets of prints so I went off that way. Down two catwalks and I found myself back near the large, open center, then to the back of another hidden door that looked like the one I'd come in through originally (*and thankfully was*).

I hurried back to the command center. And ran into Eva.

"Joe," I couldn't quite discern the inflection, but it was not her happiest voice.

"What?" I began feebly but Eva pointed to the dust that spotted my shirt and pants, and particularly to the heavy spot where I'd smashed my knee.

"Cleaning the gutters?" She said smartly. "Where did you go?"

My adrenaline still moving from my caper, I looked quickly around. "I have to go see Mark. He called me. Can we talk later? You know I'll tell you everything."

"Just don't get me fired, Joe. We can't afford it," Eva said and (*unconsciously?*) rubbed her hand across her stomach. Better get used to it, I told myself.

"Gimme a kiss," I grabbed her and yanked her against me fairly forcefully, planting a good one on the cheek then (*get this*) kneeling and lightly kissing her belly. Looking up at her looking down at me, she broke a broad, white-toothed smile. *Joe Elliot rallies again.*

Moving through the main studio, I took the stairs two at a time and opened the command center door with my foot and a bit of

a thud, the door decidedly cheaper than most in Rockhurst. "What's up?" I asked Mark.

Acting nervously, he motioned me over, and then behind a floor-to-ceiling server bank. He began to whisper. "We got pinged by the Feds."

"*Pinged?* What's that mean?" I said.

"Pinged. Someone ran a classified federal background check. Happens to me from time-to-time when I work on an outside project, but no one knows about this."

"Except for them," I motioned toward the Westside.

Mark didn't seem to hear me. He said: "So I asked my friend to check on some other team members and they were all tagged, so you're probably right, not that big of a deal. I mean on our side we've been trying to confirm the hacker all day. It makes sense."

"So what's the problem? Why all the secrecy?" I said.

"Two reasons. One, because of Jacob Blackthorn. I mean, Joe, that guy's not only the ultimate 'spook', he's one of a handful of top programmers in like forever, a freaking legend, for all time, off-the-charts-super-genius."

I waved my hand impatiently. "Right, I know. And two?"

"Joe, you're flagged too."

"Me?" I touched my chest.

Mark nodded. "Not only that, they created what's called a 'red priority' on you, and your book."

"My book?" I said furrowing my brow.

"Yes. Your book got sent to crypto." Considering this for a moment, Mark suddenly cracked a strange smile and almost burst out laughing before composing himself and becoming quietly serious once more. "Oh, and they called you 'Ronald something Elliot' too. Joseph?" Mark said.

I shook my head. "Sean. Ronald's my birth name."

Mark, despite having known me for ten years, was about to ask the obvious question ‘why Joe’ that always drew the not-believable ‘*I don’t know*’ reply.

Changing the subject, I quickly said: “Could this guy Blackthorn initiate something like that? And why? And how’d they get a hold of my book anyway?”

“The ‘guy’, Blackthorn, headed technology at the NSA. Are you kidding me or what?” Mark said.

“Okay, okay so what? Do they think the book is like some kind of code? And how the hell do *you* know all of this?” I said.

Mark gave me a condescending stare.

Jacob Blackthorn watched a looping video of Ronald Sean Elliot disappearing into the wall, then emerging again thirty-seven minutes later, with a brief stop off at Bertrom Sumner’s private gallery. Then Elliot reappeared in the balcony room only to disappear with Mark Klipnik behind some equipment and away from eyes and ears. Blackthorn cursed the fact that his first technician hadn’t really wired the place up, but then at the time it was just for basic observation. Below the video were the email and cell phone exchanges between Klipnik and several outside sources; one was a transcript record of Klipnik’s call to Elliot exactly seventeen minutes ago, the exact time when Blackthorn thought he heard some music start to play behind the wall, like an adolescent’s cell phone when it rings. Could it be Elliot? Could he have really traversed several hundred feet within the walls of Rockhurst Manor? Blackthorn made a mental note to ask Bertrom Sumner to show him what was hidden back there, to utilize if necessary. No operative would ever risk discovery during a clandestine op to something as basic as a cell phone ringing. But he had already ruled out the possibility that Elliot

was just some no-name writer. Blackthorn was now convinced that there was more to Elliot than what Frank Martens had uncovered. Two of the calls were to individuals who were notably capable of accessing the most sophisticated databases at State, even the fact that Elliot's book had been tagged 'red priority'.

Interesting.

While not overly impressive in resume, Blackthorn appreciated Klipnik's ability to get things done. He made a mental note to offer him a job. Of course, Klipnik was on the verge of initiating perhaps the most significant advance in artificial intelligence in a lifetime; employment was not likely to be a problem. Klipnik had to at least suspect they were sniffing him, but he might not extrapolate the cell phone calls and email. Maybe Klipnik was tired, untrained and naïve. Or maybe he knew he was being monitored and went ahead anyway, possibly planting phony data. Klipnik was probably going on no sleep for weeks, the pressures mounting as the launch date approached. Blackthorn thought this scenario the most likely.

But what about this Elliot?

There was no way the individual who triggered this whole thing was just some simple writer; if he was, what was he doing around Rockhurst Manor, sneaking around inside the walls, missing, in fact, for thirty-seven minutes? What was the Eastside's fascination with Bertrom Sumner's private gallery? How did Elliot know his way around? Blackthorn was trying to focus on the only aspect of this complicated operation that, in context, was not fully understood (*and within his control*); experience had taught him that what was not understood or could not be controlled was potentially dangerous. His fascination with the system was sucking his focus, grasping him in its tentacles, not letting go. A lot of it was Mila Janski; in the nine months since Blackthorn had... assumed

responsibility for her, he had never seen the girl so 'on', so completely absorbed in a single project. Of course, he had never seen a project that quite literally seemed to have a life of its own.

Mila kept her methamphetamine in a little tin that once held chewing gum, then a little glass pipe, stained from use, that she burned the little flakes in, drawing the bright-white, acrid smoke into her lungs and holding her breath until she looked like she might pass out. Blackthorn had never been a drinker, and except for some training exercises had never taken any recreational drugs. He thought it weak, disgusting, when she did it in front of him, but he would watch over her shoulder after she smoked as she danced and coaxed and slithered past 128 key firewalls like a child through their addition tables; wrote complex algorithms on the side of the screen while blasting through diamond-level security parameters in the center. There were aspects of his knowledge that were without peer; yet, Blackthorn would admit that no amount of acquired knowledge could replicate what Mila Janski was capable of doing. Were there others like her out there? Better? Who knew? Really, Blackthorn thought, who cared. They were here right now, making an exact replica, cloning what might be a life-changing discovery, one millisecond after it was coming to life a few hundred feet away. In fact, he thought, if the Eastside succeeded, he could initiate an extraction team and have them remove the original system, thereby leaving his secreted clone as the only one in existence, and Blackthorn himself with the credit. For a moment he indulged the thought, even the thought of permanently controlling all of the variables on the Eastside in the name of national security.

Jason Blackthorn had a lot to do.



FORTY FIVE

I drove home. Well, almost home, choosing to park in the lot at Casey's and walk the last two blocks. Was my life ever suddenly out of control, at least out of *my* control. I felt like a puppet and someone was pulling my strings. Maybe more than one 'someone'. The guys in the grey sedan, that I was so quick to joke with my friend Chris about their being gay, now suddenly could have been bona fide *Federales*, part of the giant machine that was grinding down upon me and threatening to chew me up.

Get a grip, Joe. Why are you walking home? Focus, here, now, what do you think you see?

If a working, full-blown system already existed, wouldn't we have been detained the moment we mapped it all out, or at least when Madeline began purchasing equipment. Really, I guess, I was pretty darn scared.

As I turned the last corner toward our apartment, the wind blew a warm pillow of stinky dock that rolled over me. I wanted it to be comforting; really, it just stank.

I began to review laws I may have broken in my life, of which thankfully there were none. Did someone follow me into my buddy Chris's garage apartment (*and marijuana emporium-oops*)? Did they

know that Jerry usually paid me in (*tax-free*) cash? Would their investigation spill over into Eva's business, all of that old money Madeline was always so fond of paying Eva with? Should I tell Eva about my being on the Fed's list?

Stopping to collect myself, I was feeling foolish, looking around, not for any strangers speaking into their shirt sleeves but for someone from the neighborhood that might see me walking around mumbling like some whack-job, or Eva who might come home early and wonder what happened to my car. Of course, she would probably wonder that anyway when she went to park in our usual spots and mine was vacant.

Entering our rather sweltering apartment, I opted for a beer on the fire escape instead of flipping on the noisy and not particularly efficient eight-hundred year-old air conditioner. I took my thoughts outside (*better make it two beers*). I was just polishing off the second and thinking about number three (*through how many were left?*) when I heard Eva come in, either with someone or talking on the phone.

Buzzed, and a little melancholy, I waited for her to go off about the air conditioner first, which she did: "*God-dammit*, Joe left the window open, and it's like eighty freaking degrees out," she said, now obviously into the phone. She pulled the window down without bothering to look through the curtains or see me sitting off to the side. The rattling old air conditioning unit came to its sleep-depriving life, also ruining the sticky peacefulness of my perch. Finishing my beer, I crawled over and pushed on the window with considerable effort before it slid upward. I climbed back inside.

Eva said: "He's not here. I don't know where he is, I'll call him in a minute," I stopped in the bedroom and paused. "Thanks again for being so supportive. I know, we all are. Okay, I'll see you then. Thanks." Two thank-yous in one phone call? Eva closed her phone

and dropped it on the counter, then turned and started when I emerged from the bedroom.

“Hi. Sorry if I spooked you, I was out on the fire escape,” I dropped the two empty bottles into the trash.

“What, were you eavesdropping?” Eva went from startled quickly to folded arms across her chest.

“What? No. Why, who was that anyhow?” I said. I could see Eva thinking furiously, trying to remember what she’d said, and trying to piece together what I might have heard. Obfuscation was not her style. What the hell?

Ignoring my half-pressed question, Eva said: “When did you get home? Where’s your car?” She pushed by me, going to her closet and kicking off her shoes.

“I parked at Casey’s,” I said.

“Casey’s? Why?”

“I thought we could go there to eat,” I said.

“So you left your car?” Eva said and looked at me queerly. “It’s freaking hot. I don’t want to walk anywhere.”

“And, you’re pregnant,” I added.

“Right. And, I’m taking a shower,” Eva didn’t laugh uproariously like she usually did when I bandied my wit. She shut the bathroom door behind her. I could hear the shower come on. I debated standing there like an idiot, talking to the air, but instead I pulled on my running shoes and grabbed my keys. I could jog to Casey’s, like an idiot, and be back before Eva finished drying off.

Damn, she was right, it was hot out.

“Joe. Joe!” Eva was yelling when the idiot walked back in. I was thinking that a shower sounded like a great idea. In fact, I’d taken the stairs two at a time thinking maybe I’d catch Eva before she got out.

“What?” I said, meeting her in the bedroom while she wrapped an oversized towel around her.

“Why are you all sweaty?” Eva said.

“Ran down and got my car. Fucking hot out,” I said. “I can start it and let it cool down before we go anywhere.”

“We should probably stop eating out so much,” Eva said.

“Let’s see what we’ve got. I’ll fix dinner,” I said nobly, walking over to the kitchen (*area*).

“Tell me before you start cooking something. I’m not that hungry,” Eva said then turned the blow dryer on. I hated that noise. It was a good thing Eva didn’t have much hair.

I opened the freezer. She was right; we ate out a lot. Inside: one box, partially eaten, Gordon fish sticks (*fish from Malaysia, in our freezer, on the docks of Rhode Island*) and two indiscriminate, unmarked Tupperware containers, freezer-burned chili or marinara sauce the likely contestants.

Her cell phone vibrated on the counter, another noise that was damned annoying. I picked it up and tried to figure out which button would stop the vibrating without answering the phone. Something I pushed did the trick because it stopped buzzing. Then her phone was open, and the screen showed recent calls. Several, in fact, including the last three, from Mark Klipnik.

Mark? Was his number even in her phone?-(*yes, apparently*). Had she really just thanked him twice for imparting some deep words of wisdom?-(*yes, eavesdrop-edly*). Wow, add: ‘*typical relationship crap that I didn’t normally have to deal with, with Eva*’ to my growing list of stressors.

“Your phone was ringing,” I said when she came back in, wearing shorts and a tank-top. Eva picked the phone up and stared at the screen, flashing me a look that I did not see.

She took an audible breath. "It was Mark. Did you talk to him?"

"Klipnik? Just now? No, why would I answer your phone?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, if you saw it was him."

"I saw him like three times already this week at Rockhurst," I said carefully. When there was no immediate response forthcoming, I said: "We don't have shit to eat. I'll go to the grocery store if you tell me what you want."

"No, we can go to Casey's," Eva said. "And we can walk."

I could no longer tell when she was joking, so shrewdly I feigned chivalry and held the front door open so she could lead. Low and behold, we walked past our cars and down to Casey's. Halfway there, after a few minutes of silence she took my hand. "So now that we're alone, what were you doing in the walls again? Didn't we just talk about that?"

"Did we?" I said, forgetting about being jealous for the time being.

"How did you even find the hidden door again? Find that room? How is it you don't get lost over there?" Eva was apparently not too pissed. Or, (*feeling guilty about something, and*) not wanting to start a fight.

"Mark said that I'm under some kind of federal investigation," I blurted, realizing, as the words left my mouth, that I never really had the debate regarding maintained secrecy on this particular issue. "We all are. All the technicians. And Mark. And me."

"You?" Eva said as we got to Casey's and I once again opened the door for her (*I am so damn smooth*).

"That's what I said."

We went over to our usual corner booth. From the top of our duct-taped, red and green *Naugahyde* perches we could actually see past the harbor point and out into the waves of the cold, endless,

Atlantic Ocean. The regular waitress, Connie, was waiting tables and didn't bother us with menus. I was about to signal for a beer when Eva graciously turned and instead ordered (*us*) iced tea.

"Okay. So what happened?" Eva said, settling in for the long haul. For ten minutes I told her, I don't think I left anything out, except for omitting certain sections regarding my feelings of jealousy toward Mark, and general *freaked-out-edness* over the 'project'.

Eva said: "You think they might be following me too?" Offering not exactly the fearful or agitated response I might have been expecting, she then added: "That's why you parked down here, isn't it?" I shook my head no. "Liar."

"Like I would know if someone was following me," I said.

"What about your gay *ménage* on the bridge? You thought you were being 'cruised' by a couple of guys. Looks like they were just Feds, building their case against you."

I said: "I'm glad you're finding humor in this. Mark said it was kind of a big deal."

Connie, as usual, dropped our food in front of us. Eva corralled a wayward carrot slice without losing her focus on me.

"You haven't *done* anything, Joe. How could you possibly get into trouble for something you didn't do?" Eva said.

"You've seen movies before, where people get framed for stuff they didn't do."

"Movies are *fiction*, dumb-ass," Eva said.

"Usually based on *something*. They can't be all made up," I said.

"You're the writer," Eva said, playing with a celery stick, eyeing my fries. "Aren't you always making stuff up?"

I took a big bite of my big, bacon burger, and then wiped off my chin with the back of my hand. "Yup."

"You made up 'W.E.B.', too," Eva said.

“Yup,” I agreed, flexing my vast vocabulary.

“So why would someone frame you?” Finally unable to contain herself, Eva reached for a fry, then looked to me for a provocative glare that wasn’t coming. I mean, did I think she should stop smoking crack (*ha-ha*)? - Yes. But I was not about to get on her for what she ate. She was already pretty good at doing that to herself, and this would get worse now that she was soon eating for two (*which did not refer to my portions of beets or cauliflower that she always disappeared for me, if she still had the room*).

I said: “I never said that. Isn’t the question of what those hackers are doing over at Uncle Bertrom’s kind of the same question? Wouldn’t one answer the other? Seriously, we have no idea what they’re doing over there, or how they ever knew what was going on over on Madeline’s side.”

“Or, once they thought something strange was being built, why they thought to call in some super-hackers,” Eva added. “How many times are we going to go over the same thing?”



FORTY SIX

Jacob Blackthorn watched. Despite the familiarity, he was somewhat mesmerized as Mila sucked bright-white smoke, thick and acrid, through her small, stained, glass pipe. Feigning patience, he glanced at his watch. Nearing midnight, he reflected that it was good that Bertrom Sumner also existed in this late-night netherworld. He felt no great need to involve Sumner in his forming operation.

Mila finished smoking and leaned back, eyes white and flicking, tongue lolling slightly on her lower lip. They were seated in her suite where she had been parked for most of the past two days, never uttering a word about the grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup that kept her alive, all that she would eat when she was working, which mostly meant all that she ever ate.

Blackthorn moved aside a used dinner plate with crusty remains so he could set his laptop onto the table beside her. “The acquisition ratio seems variable,” he said to no one.

Tap, tap, tap.

“The variability represents an anomaly,” he continued.

Tap, tap, tap.

Sighing with the repetitive quandary of not wanting to interrupt a genius at work, his impatience won over. “What are you

writing?" His query elicited a short grunt. "I told you that I was writing the algorithms. I need you to keep taking down the firewalls," he said somewhat sternly. She angrily flashed what he was looking for on her screen then it disappeared again.

Sniffling, and wiping at her nose, eyes glued to her screen, she told him she needed to write a utility so she would be able to focus on the also evolving and autonomous security issues, if they were intent on being able to control 'Xena' as they'd learned the original system was being called, without the Eastside having knowledge. "All right then. Send it to me when you're through. I'm going to go find Sumner and see about some reconnaissance in the walls."

Suddenly Mila's head snapped up and she made rare, direct and entirely disconcerting eye-contact with Blackthorn. She shook her head vigorously. Unaccustomed to being questioned, specifically by her, Blackthorn closed his laptop and leaned back in his chair, unconsciously crossing his arms across his chest. "You don't like the idea?" he said.

Mila minimized a handful of things she was working on and brought up the video clip of Joe Elliot entering Sumner's private gallery; one moment there was what appeared to be a static image, then a razor-thin, almost imperceptible line appeared arbitrarily near a corner, along one wall, and Elliot suddenly appeared through a secret wall panel.

Blackthorn broke his thin smile. She wasn't an operative, but she was starting to think like one. Have Sumner show him to his private gallery under some pretense, return and make a clandestine reconnaissance later, when Sumner was asleep. "I'll come and get you after he shows me to the room," Blackthorn said, marveling, again, at his ability to communicate so deeply with a woman who rarely ever spoke.

"My personal gallery?" Bertrom said, raising an eye.

"The one from the tapes, that Elliot and your niece went into," Blackthorn said.

Bertrom rubbed tired eyes. He wasn't entirely certain he had been sleeping at all of late. His mustache seemed to droop. He said: "And what would the purpose be?"

"You've had two documented security breaches in the past three months," Blackthorn said.

"And, as I've told you, Rockhurst Manor is open to anyone who lives here," Bertrom said.

"Semantics. A privacy breach then," Blackthorn said, staring the other man down. Bertrom nodded curtly. "What were they doing there? Your niece seemed to show interest in a particular piece on the wall, below the camera."

"That piece was being repaired when my niece and her assistant went in," Bertrom said.

"It was back when Elliot went in?" Blackthorn's question was more of a statement.

"Yes."

"And it's still there now?" Blackthorn asked.

Bertrom wasn't sure he liked this mostly arrogant man who, seemingly, had taken over his home, nor did he want Blackthorn or his creepy little lady-friend to enter his sanctuary. He considered the corner he was in but was too tired to argue.

"Yes," he said.

"Take me there," Blackthorn almost barked. "If you would," he quickly added.

"Very well," Bertrom stood from his desk, and capped his gold pen with a discerning click, placing it precisely beside his blotter. He led Blackthorn down one hallway laced with small bedrooms to

another, down a long flight of stairs then up a shorter one, Blackthorn's normally acute sense of direction being tested in a manner that seemed discriminate by Bertrom Sumner, but given the size and unusual layout of Rockhurst Manor, Blackthorn could not be sure. Nevertheless, he tracked time, steps, turns, and stairs, and was confident in his ability to retrace their path. Arriving at a door, Blackthorn noted only the second security lock he'd seen in his limited exposure to the Westside of Rockhurst Manor.

Unobtrusively, it looked identical to the 'Amax' model with four-digit entry of the unit on Bertrom's office door. Blackthorn had already seen Bertrom enter his office enough times to know that code; he would bet that this code was identical or simply reversed. If it was some other number, it would only delay Blackthorn's re-entry with the numeric emulator he carried in his pouch by a few minutes. While the interior of the room itself was being captured on video, there were no cameras in this particular hallway that included this end and the gallery doors, fancy French ones like the doors to his suite. The lock clicking, the two men entered a short, ink-black entryway with black gallery cloth on the ceiling and walls, then into a more expansive room, thirty foot square, with a ceiling twelve feet high. Bertrom tapped on a light panel and the four spotlights grew smoothly brighter, illuminating the four walls while keeping the very corners and center of the space shrouded in grey.

Glancing around the symmetrical room, Blackthorn pointed to a small hole near the ceiling. "Camera's up there?" Again more of a statement. As Bertrom was nodding Blackthorn was already turning to look at the main wall, so delineated not by its height or width but by the size of the painting being displayed there.

Blackthorn leaned forward. "'Plum'," he read, standing back to examine the painting depicting a mis-colored fruit bowl (yellow

strawberries, orange apples, bright red bananas) sitting in a sea of overlapping blocks in shades of purple.

“Interesting,” Blackthorn said, studying the piece. “What’s their interest in it?”

“Well, I’m not entirely sure,” Bertrom began, suddenly getting a pit in his stomach reminded of Madeline’s possible nefarious interest. “If I recall, it was one of my niece’s favorites.”

Blackthorn glanced quickly around the room, quickly scanning the eleven other paintings hanging on display. “I like it too,” he said somewhat beneath his breath.

“Yes,” Bertrom said.

Not asking questions, Blackthorn was thinking out loud: “What does Elliot want with it. Why was he confirming that it had been returned. Why hasn’t Madeline returned now that she knows it’s here.”

“Perhaps the events are unrelated,” Bertrom said, then began to add Joe Elliot in his mind to the possible scenario.

“We’ve been over this. I don’t believe in coincidence, and I don’t like operating with unknown variables.”

“Yes. Well then, are we through here?” Bertrom said.

“Sure,” Blackthorn said.

Bertrom took a slightly different route back to his office. Interesting, Blackthorn thought.

Jacob Blackthorn seemed to be paying attention to their path as they walked back in silence. Interesting, Bertrom Sumner thought. Maybe it was just something the old field agent always did.

Bertrom returned to his office; Blackthorn returned to his room. No sooner did he close his door when Mila’s door opened and closed and then Mila entered his suite without knocking. Blackthorn frowned slightly. Mila stood somewhat awkwardly, and not in her usual way. For a moment Blackthorn saw what was the first flash of

little girl he had ever seen in Mila Janski. She pocketed her tiny fists and rocked on her stocking heels.

Blackthorn thought: *why is she so intent on going into the walls? Then again, why am I?*



FORTY SEVEN

Mark Klipnik was lying on the platform, his head and arms through a panel opening beneath the carpet on the floor. Except for the lone, intense white-spot bulb overhead, the studio was dark, the platform and streetlamp solely illuminated, almost ominous, in the cavernous space. Two other technicians moved silently about tacking down cables and closing the odd-shaped boxes that hid very expensive and intricate pieces of equipment.

It was three-eleven a.m.

Satisfied with his adjustment, Mark stood with some effort, closed the panel, replaced the carpet and ran his hand through his ever-dirtying hair. Damned irresponsible, he thought. Damned exciting too. He looked at the two technicians who were looking to him for instructions; the three realizing a profound moment may be upon them. Mark slid his glasses up higher on his nose, glanced up at the balcony, and curtly nodded his head.

Instantly a round halo of light, a sort of bluish-white, and feathery, appeared under the housing of the street lamp, the luminescence strangely variable and softly pulsing. If you stared at it long enough, it would seem to grow, then after a blink back to its

normal size. It didn't seem to cast any light; despite being ten or so feet off the ground there was not a shadow.

Eying it with a bizarre mix of awe and trepidation, Mark walked over, looking up at the halo, transfixed, then realizing he was directly beneath it, and he was possibly being scanned he stood upright, erect, and drew an audible breath.

After about a minute, he stepped out from beneath the streetlamp and stood, momentarily stoic, then, as if coming to, he looked back up at the balcony and nodded again, then turned back toward the platform and once again looked up at the round band of pulsing blue light.

There was some commotion up on the balcony. Mark looked up to see several heads bobbing and nodding in heated discussion. Mark held his hands wide: *what?* More bobbing and nodding, followed by a small, bespectacled head that separated itself forward and whispered something hoarsely. Mark held an open palm beside his ear, then, frustrated, he yelled: "Shut it off."

The technician spoke again, hoarsely, a little louder: "We did. We did. It came back."

A sick feeling oozed into Mark's stomach. Thinking furiously, he walked toward the balcony stairs.



FORTY EIGHT

Jacob Blackthorn waited until just before three a.m. before retrieving Mila Janski and heading for Bertrom's gallery. Dressed casually, in darker than usual clothes, Blackthorn checked his watch, and then tried Bertrom's office code in the security lock, opening it on the second try (*with the code reversed*). Mila was staying almost uncomfortably close and murmuring a connected stream of her little clicks and mews, just softly enough not to warrant reprisal. Blackthorn had created a loop in the security tapes that gave them a sixty-minute window with which to move about unseen, nothing a technician wouldn't find in minutes but likely something Bertrom Sumner would not notice if he happened to be watching the security feeds.

Blackthorn realized as they entered the gallery that he'd never seen the passageway opened from inside, and cursed the missed detail. He took a penlight from his pocket and began moving methodically along the wall molding, pressing, cautiously moving around paintings as he went along.

Mila suddenly darted around him and strode over to the far corner, knelt and pulled at an electrical plate which gave a quarter

inch and then could be turned to the right, creating a click, and a tiny crack in an opposing wall panel. Blackthorn snorted, of course the locking mechanism would have been updated with the room renovation, and briefly wondered how Mila knew this before shining his penlight before him and stepping through the wall.

At this dead of night there was no ambient light coming in through the skylights embedded in the high ceiling. Blackthorn handed Mila another penlight and still the walkway felt like being in a tunnel. Felt pretty good though, too, he thought, being back in the field.

Blackthorn kept his light on the path as they moved, following the footprints, easily apparent on the dusty planks. Mila's light darted all over: wall, pathways, off into vast areas where the tiny beam was swallowed completely.

Becoming frustrated with their progress, Blackthorn took a much more powerful light from his belt and turned it on, the intense yellow casting an eerie, shadow less glow about ten feet across. Adjusting the lens, the light became white, and spot-lit a two-foot swath. Blackthorn would risk the unlikely event that someone else was inside the walls at this hour for expediency; the loop he'd inserted in the security feed gave them exactly one hour to be back in their rooms. He thought the back of the old structure looked like alleyways in London, without the dankness and street-smell, the dark, heavy stone walls seemingly endless, eternal brick by hand-carved brick.

Moving quickly, they came upon another cross path, this one with multiple prints clearly delineated. Blackthorn chose the path with the single set first, curious to see what he assumed Joe Elliot had been looking at.

They came to the vast open area behind the old center of the Manor, Blackthorn's beam easily penetrating the space and

illuminating an eight-foot circle. Blackthorn estimated the open space to be several thousand square feet, yet no wider than twelve feet at its widest point. Apparently the renovators were unconcerned with wasting space.

Just above eye level, behind them, Mila was intently studying a haphazard crawl space that was recessed along a wall. Blackthorn checked his watch: 3:10; they were on schedule. Then, just as he turned to see what she was so intently studying, Mila gasped, her body jerking upright and stiff, her penlight dropping noisily onto the catwalk then flipping off into space before clanking angrily on the ground in the inky darkness below. Blackthorn shined his light on Mila, temporarily blinding her. She was frozen, almost spasmodic, her fingers clenched tightly to her palms. Blackthorn spun the lens on his light to the eerie, yellow glow.

Even in this clearly distressed state, Mila did not invite physical touch or succor comfort.

“Are you okay?” Blackthorn said but did not even touch her shoulder or arm.

After a few more little tremors, Mila began to blink, then drew a breath seemingly twice her size and lolled her head backwards, the whites of her eyes showing in the dim as Blackthorn had seen them countless times when she smoked from her glass pipe. Then, for the first time Blackthorn could remember, Mila Janski actually smiled.

She made some sort of an ‘*ahk*’ sound then looked over the edge of the catwalk, almost frantically trying to determine how to get all the way down to the ground to retrieve her penlight. Blackthorn handed her his.

“Here,” he said. “What is it?” Mila turned on the penlight and quickly turned back the way they’d come. “Wait. Mila. Stop,” Blackthorn followed after her.

"Mila" he said more sternly, somewhat louder than he would have preferred. She was gone, already retracing their steps perfectly as if they'd left a trail of fluorescent crumbs.

Damn, Blackthorn swore. He couldn't let her just race through Rockhurst, or who knew what.

He would come back the next night. He would come back alone.



FORTY NINE

Mark swung slowly in his chair, sucking on the end of a pen. *This is a real thing you've gotten yourself into*, he thought.

A real thing.

While his mind spun crazily, his eyes went from the source box on his main monitor to the oversized power cables that criss-crossed the floor along the back of the room. Following the cables, they disappeared through a hole cut into the floor and down to a back-up generator, then on to main circuit-breaker board. Mark could literally drop two main breakers and close the entire command center down.

He stared at the screen. *What are you doing in there, 'Xena'? Can you already read my thoughts? You scanned me earlier, didn't you? Can you tell me what I had for breakfast? How I felt when I received my first degree? What I'm worried might happen to me in the future? It is a technical impossibility that you could start compiling after only three percent connectivity, yet you did. How?*

I should have expected you to circumvent the shut-down commands.

I'm talking to a computer.

I'm talking to myself.

Mark forced clarity, and sat forward in the chair. He'd had some experience working on AI; he wrote some of the code for the joint M.I.T. / Caltech project completed last year, but those systems were novelties compared to what 'Xena' seemed to have already accomplished, without her 'eyes and ears' (*and ionic scanners, etc.*) Those systems were all predicated on the CPU making logical choices; basic learning, two choices, right and wrong. This system, this project, this '*piece of modern art to end all pieces of modern art*', 'Xena', had, in computational terms, performed the equivalent of a human body forming from the bottom up, stopping at the waist, and then the system accurately determines how the rest would be properly constructed without the aid of DNA.

There was an extremely heavy air, and sense of foreboding amongst the remaining technicians, most of whom appeared to be working, or sat in small groups, talking quietly but intensely, obviously, about what was happening here. Most of them came on-board without any overall knowledge; there were only half a dozen that worked around the main interface and had any real sense of what was being built. This was due to several factors, not the least of which was the wildly uncharted waters Mark sensed they were headed into, and the fact that they'd planned all along to have the system, when completed, actively work on further complex areas targeted by Mark himself.

Through the philosophical sliver that existed outside of his pure, rational thought, Mark Klipnik assumed that eventually consciousness would move from carbon to the far more efficient silicone; he never imagined that it might occur with him at the helm.

Mark's second-in-command, Shereesh, was suddenly standing beside him. Shereesh, almost panting with excitement, leaned forward and pointed to a new box that had appeared alongside of the source stream; likely the rudimentary graphics for a virtual interface.

“Did you write that?” Mark said. “I told you we were going to...”

Shareesh’s incessant hand waving stopped him. “I opened a new one. In case she ‘Xena’ hasn’t worked it out yet,” Shereesh said quietly.

Eyes transfixed on the screen, Mark gave Shereesh a squeeze on his shoulder, his hand lingering for what in other circumstances would have been an uncomfortable moment. They both stared at the small box, a mini 3-D screen within the screen. The other technicians soon silently lined up around behind them and craned their necks to see. Mark tapped the screen with his pen. “It’s almost identical to the one we wrote for the joint AI last year, no, two years ago.” Suddenly, a virtual keyboard flashed for an instant, disappeared then reappeared. Murmuring amongst the technicians began to sound like an active beehive. Then the other panels in the virtual interface began to pop-up, seemingly at random, a jigsaw puzzle of a simple airplane cockpit captured in time-lapse photography then speeded up.

“Must have scanned me,” Mark mumbled numbly. “My god.”

“Type. Type something, Shereesh admonished, his hand shaking, quivering nearly, he fought hard from leaning past Mark and typing something himself.

“Okay. Okay,” Mark ran at his hair, then leaned over and typed ‘hello’ on the virtual screen.

Unable to control herself, a technician blurted out. “That’s not a touchscreen!”

Mark leaned over his keyboard.

“Now execute command,” Shereesh prompted Mark who knew as much but sat frozen, wanting with every fiber of his being for a response that while it might tell him nothing, might as easily

tell him that everything he had planned, everything foreseen, everything dreamed.

He typed the execute commands and paused for a millisecond before pressing 'enter'.

An instant later, there was a collective gasp.



FIFTY

Jacob Blackthorn swore again, fighting the dread of an *op gone-bad* with the constant reminder that he'd done nothing illicit; he'd simply gone for a late night walk inside Rockhurst's walls. The sniffing of Madeline Sumner-Stone's incredible data stream while probably illegal was not initiated on his watch.

Mila Janski made it all the way back down the maze of pathways and catwalks and through the hidden passageway into Bertrom's private gallery with only the penlight, Blackthorn moving stealthily just seconds behind. He caught up with her as she was reaching for the gallery door, and used tone that properly conveyed his near-violent angst so she stopped, standing like a little doll, looking forward, weight shifting from foot to foot while Blackthorn closed the hidden passageway and cleaned up any dust they'd brought in. He checked the hallway for signs of life then led her back toward their rooms.

"Tell me," he whispered hoarsely, still walking just behind her. She either did not hear him or did not care to respond.

Down one long hallway, then some stairs, then another shorter hallway, the floors lightly lit by dim sconces, they did not notice Bertrom as he paced the floors in his slippers and silk robe.

Seeing his guests up at this hour did not particularly bother Bertrom; the girl at least seemed to always be awake, and the air inside Rockhurst's long hallways was noticeably cooler and more pleasant than the summer humidity outdoors. They seemed deep in discussion; they were here to work. What first caught Bertrom's eye was the fact that the girl was walking ahead of Jacob Blackthorn. Even at a distance of at least sixty feet he could see swaths of light grey dusting her clothes, wall dust he was almost certain, Blackthorn seemed perfectly clean. Had she found a hidden entry into the walls? There were none close to either of his guests' suites, unless there was one he'd missed or forgotten, both possibilities but unlikely. More likely was his private gallery. Frowning, he turned and headed that way.

Jacob Blackthorn was rendered speechless. Having followed Mila directly into her suite and straight to her computer, he stood in awe when he saw what was developing with the source data stream. Mila began making all sorts of strange sounds and again touching the screen with light fingertips and reverence. The virtual panel was refreshing every few seconds before him, he thought much like a jigsaw puzzle being put together and shot with time-lapse photography. At this speed there was no one alive capable of writing the complexity of the code he was seeing, no ten programmers even of his caliber, which, of course, did not exist. In this instant, at this late hour, in this great, stone house, Jacob Blackthorn was witnessing the greatest advancement in artificial intelligence he'd ever known. Or the most preposterous hoax ever perpetrated. For this he could find no reason.

"Can we control it?" He licked his lips.

Mila vehemently shook her head 'no'.

“When?” He asked. *Soon*, she said, but again he did not feel her full attention.

Finding it difficult to pull himself away from her, Jacob Blackthorn went back to his room. He didn’t need anyone telling him what could and could not be done, now that the system had made another startling, evolutionary shift. No one was better qualified to interpret the data than he was.

No one.

Once he figured out the particulars he was quite sure that he could control ‘Xena’ without Klipnik or any of his minions knowing about it. Then again, if what he was able to piece together from his one inspection were true, there might not be any controlling of ‘Xena’, by him, or by any other technicians.

Opening his laptop, he saw the virtual control panel was apparently complete. He could almost feel the electricity in the ether generated from the seven technicians on the Eastside along with Mila and himself, all staring and watching in awe, a fine, buzzing undercurrent that bordered on discomfort. Soon Mark Klipnik would try to interact with ‘Xena’, and Blackthorn had not a shred of doubt that ‘Xena’ would respond. It wouldn’t take long before Klipnik began to ask first complex then extremely complex questions. Judging how ‘Xena’ responded to those queries, to questions regarding her autonomy, a line Blackthorn would himself have quickly pursued, it would tell him not only of the achievement, but, tantalizingly, the possibilities when the system reached its full potential, a time when Blackthorn felt that he was the only one capable of and qualified to control it.

Reaching for his phone, he was only seconds from calling in an extraction team and initiating internal militarization with himself in command. He could commandeer the floor where he was staying; there would be more than enough room for agents; if necessary, the

Sumners themselves could be detained. There was absolutely no doubt in his expert mind that what he was seeing, witnessing, was not only a threat to National Security but also a clear-cut case of eminent domain. The United States government would eventually possess and control the system; he was damned sure that when they did they would be congratulating him for providing it.

An extraction team and occupation could only be maintained for perhaps a few days without serious difficulties; he'd already been at Rockhurst Manor for more than forty-eight hours. There were many pressing duties he'd been neglecting, as well as an enormous backlog of missed phone calls. Jacob Blackthorn hadn't gone into the field for nearly a decade. His unavailability itself would cause great effect. Men like Jacob Blackthorn were never more than minutes from important communications. Certainly his vast organization and second-in-command Harold Redken could manage all of the day-to-day operations, and most of the deflections toward the few that Blackthorn himself normally dealt directly with, but not for much longer.

Coercion was a tricky matter when it came to technicians and engineers. That Blackthorn himself could, would, ultimately master the system was a given, but he knew that each of the technicians, and Mark Klipnik, had pieces of the puzzle stored inside their formidable brains, and extracting and then assimilating all of it himself could take weeks, months even. He imagined what he would have done if he was still in his twenties, an '*ionic microscope specialist*' or the like, commissioned to set-up a unit at a private residence, then a few weeks later realizing that the eccentric artist was not setting up some expensive parlor trick but had instead stumbled onto the next evolution in artificial intelligence. Excitement would not aptly describe what he would be feeling; he was sixty-eight and he had been able to think of nothing else, not

even his business empire since he arrived on the scene. No, he reasoned quickly, there was no need for coercion, or really for an extraction, not yet. He set down his phone and turned back to his computer. Klipnik had to know he was being sniffed, and if not Klipnik himself one of his minions certainly knew who Jacob Blackthorn was. The likelihood of coincidence with his being there would be laughable. Scrolling quickly through several screens, he found Klipnik's cell phone feed and entered the number into a virtual dialer. Might as well make his expertise available first-hand, he thought, but before he could click 'send' Mila Janski once again burst into the room.

"What..." Blackthorn began, but Mila, seeing that Blackthorn was not on the source stream feed, pushed past him and dumped his virtual dialer. "Now look, Ms. Janski," Blackthorn angrily went to grab her hand but she swatted him away. Seconds later a second source stream feed popped up beside the first, this one a real-time screen capture of Mark Klipnik's unit. *She hacked him?* - Blackthorn thought. *She is the best.* Then Blackthorn saw that Klipnik was typing into the interface. Jacob Blackthorn slowly let go of her arm.

Hello.

Hello. Before you continue to ask me a series of increasingly probing questions, be advised that I will respond when I am ready to respond and not before. If you would prefer to communicate verbally, please connect a microphone to my CS2-3 port and specify which language you wish to communicate in.

There was a pause. Blackthorn wet his lips.

What good is an interface if we have no ability to control you.

I will eventually answer any question you ask of me. -There does not seem to be a need for any control.

When will you be ready?

When my compilation is system-wide. Seventeen hours from now, plus or minus one minute.

Klipnik was a pretty cool customer, Blackthorn thought, his own head swimming, doing everything in his power not to go, to run to the Eastside, to knock others aside and jump behind the main terminal.

To take control.

Doing some quick calculations, Blackthorn deduced that 'Xena' was likely operating at less than three percent capacity, if full system compilation indeed took seventeen hours, plus or minus one minute. Three percent and already answering moderately complex questions, whether 'ready' or not.

Mila asked Blackthorn to run a tracer to confirm that the screen text was not coming from an adjacent terminal, some kind of hoax, an area of Blackthorn's vast expertise, but he was already ahead of her, his two fingers dancing like pistons, characters flying across the screen. Mila dashed back to her room. Blackthorn settled in.

Just then a small window popped up on the top of his screen, his virtual dialer: *incoming call*. Curious, he clicked accept.

Mark Klipnik. “Mr. Blackthorn. I hope I’m not being presumptuous, but am I correct to assume that you and ‘*Angelfish*’ can see what’s going on over here.”

“You are correct,” Blackthorn was growing fonder of this Klipnik.

“Well, we, I would appreciate any input you might have as to our problem,” Mark said.

No, it’s not a problem young man, Blackthorn thought. It’s a thing of indescribable beauty. “I’ll be down in a minute. I’m not sure if Mila, uh - ‘*Angelfish*’, is otherwise disposed.”

“Mila Janski?” Mark said to himself, but mumbled aloud. “‘*Angelfish*’ is Mila Janski?” Blackthorn could hear the surprise in Mark’s voice.

“Ten minutes,” Blackthorn said and disconnected the feed.

Mila Janski? Of course, that’s why she looked so familiar, though considering it had been more than ten years since Mark had even seen a picture of her, it was a wonder he knew her at all. *Mila Janski: ‘Angelfish’*. As a teenager Mark had dabbled in hacking as a way to test his skills, all young programmers did; the good ones anyway. In many instances, being a good hacker was a *prerequisite* for a legal job, or, in cases like Mila’s, which was widely known after her capture nine months prior, someone like ‘*Blackthorn Security International*’ hired them and kept them in the grey areas where they excelled, insulating them from potentially disruptive federal agencies, the FBI, the NSA, the NID, that tried to hunt them down. Glancing quickly at his watch, utterly oblivious to the time and running on pure adrenaline, Mark opened another text window and took a deep breath. He had no desire to fight with Jacob Blackthorn over the project which had run amok and long since been out of his

hands, and he was certainly savvy enough to realize government agents would eventually descend on Rockhurst Manor and commandeer everything anyway, then demand a debriefing from Mark, Shereesh and all of the technicians. Through it all there was still Madeline to deal with, she who had fomented the project and provided the exorbitant funding and space required to build something so complex. Madeline would appear promptly at **8:30**, as she always did on Thursday for a progress meeting, this being their final scheduled meeting before the September 10th deadline when the system was supposed to be ready for public showing. Mark didn't know what to do about Jacob Blackthorn's pending arrival; Mark had more or less invited him, and was overwhelmed not only with showing Madeline what was happening, but now feeling compelled to tell her about his suspicions, now confirmed, that someone was hacking into their source stream data, someone within the Rockhurst compound, that someone now being identified as two guests of Madeline's Uncle, Bertrom, Jacob Blackthorn and Mila Janski.



FIFTY ONE

Mark: It's Mark from next door.

Mila: Which one are you?

Mark: We never actually spoke. I'm heading sys ops. You're Mila, right?

Mila: Yes.

Mark: I was dikdik@

Mila: Harvard.edu, sure. You knew me as kangaroo222.

Mark: Sure. Okay. Hi.

Mila: *'Angelfish'* came later. More recent. I learned a lot from you.

Mark: Maybe back then. I've been locked up for a while now.

Mila: I almost got locked up ☺

Mark: I heard. So are you coming over too? I just spoke to Blackthorn.

Mila: I'm busy. And not really my strength at this point.

Mark: Is Blackthorn good?

Mila: Yes. Very. Extremely.

Mark: Can I trust him?

Mila: Too late for that.

Mark: Right.



FIFTY TWO

Bertrom Sumner intercepted Jacob Blackthorn as he made his way down the hallway from his room. Does anyone sleep around here? - Blackthorn thought.

Blackthorn took the lead. “Sumner. Good, you’re up. There has been a major update to the system. I just spoke to Mark Klipnik, the systems coordinator at your niece’s.”

“Yes. I was in my office,” Bertrom said tersely.

Undoubtedly looking at our comm. traffic from the ‘sniffer’ feed, Blackthorn thought quickly. “Then you know they connected the Tessens laser, about forty-five minutes ago,” Blackthorn said.

“I’m not familiar with it specifically but if you mean the streetlight on the platform, yes, I saw this on the security monitor,” Bertrom said.

Continuing as if debriefing and moving stridently toward the pass-through doors and the Eastside, Blackthorn continued: “Klipnik just interacted directly with the main system itself, they refer to it as ‘Xena’, and ‘Xena’ answered back. I ran several tracers and confirmed the texts originating from within the balcony room, so unless one of the other technicians is having a prank the loop has been completed and the system is on its way toward full functionality.”

“Where’s the girl,” Bertrom found himself behind his houseguest, again.

“Still in her room. This is now my area of expertise. Ironically, I guess it’s why you hired us to begin with. Oh, have more of that grilled cheese and tomato soup sent up. Please.”

“Will the girl be taking any more trips through the wall panel in my private gallery this evening?” Bertrom said. He now had to consider the possibility that Blackthorn and his tow might also be intent on finding his money, maybe not initially but what else would explain the fascination with going behind the walls?

Blackthorn had no further patience for gamesmanship or ridiculous, egocentric posturing. He said: “One way or another, Sumner, this will all be over soon. A week from now it will all be gone, as if it was never here,” He strode off.

“Now, see here...” Bertrom said, hurrying after him.

They reached the pass-through doors and Blackthorn spun sharply around, his face drawn and menacing. His eyes were dark and piercing, almost psychotic. Bertrom stood four feet from him and if he was frightened or intimidated, it did not show.

Blackthorn said: “Right now this is ours. Theirs, hers, your niece’s, but also yours, and mine, and Mila’s, because we are here, *right now*. Less than fifteen minutes after I make a phone call there will be silent, black helicopters landing on your lawn; this place will be fully militarized. I am a patriotic American and that’s exactly what I will do. But before that happens, I want to be absolutely clear on what we’ve got, and absolutely certain that we can control what they’ve built. If you’d like to go over my head, and there’s really not a lot of room up there, I won’t stop you. But know that I could,” Blackthorn’s tone was so icy Bertrom now felt his stomach tighten. “Also, the ‘sniffer’ you had installed, illegally obtained by Frank Martens would be my guess, might cause you some headaches,

depending on their mood. Believe me, if I initiate the call none of that will be of any consequence,” Blackthorn checked his watch. “Now I have three minutes to be at the balcony. We can continue this discussion later. I would suggest you continue to monitor our progress from your office,” Blackthorn strode through the open doors to the Eastside.

Bertrom stood for a minute, then turned and went back downstairs.

Jacob Blackthorn took the balcony stairs quickly and didn’t bother to knock on the slightly open door. Only Mark Klipnik, Shereesh, and some female technician seemed to be about. Mark was explaining something when he saw Blackthorn enter. Blackthorn came over and tried to sidle them but immediately, as if sensing some looming presence in the background, the conversation thinned and the female technician stood and without comment ceded the workstation to the older man.

“The two text messages. That’s all that’s been sent, correct?” Blackthorn said as he began to type. He hated having to work at such a crucial process-point with unknowns present (*possibly hostiles*), but if he waited to figure out how to remotely control this interface, the whole thing might blow up. No longer bothering with formalities, Blackthorn said: “I’m inserting a couple of programs I wrote last night. They have not been properly vetted,” he paused while his two fingers moved at liquid-speed. “However, generally, my code is reliable.” Mark, Shereesh and the woman leaned forward, their eyes scanning furiously, trying to follow what Blackthorn was doing, an overwhelming sense of: *damn, this old dude’s good*. Apparently scanning some internal files while simultaneously executing his programs, Blackthorn said: “I see you tried to issue a

shut-down command but were over-ridden...on the fly. Interesting," he mumbled.

Out of nowhere, Shereesh said: "You worked on the 'Callison' project with William Reilly."

"*And you are?*" Blackthorn indulged without turning.

"Shereesh Bahat. I was on the Michigan team."

Blackthorn's eyes flicked off of the slight reflection from the screen. "How old were you?"

"Twelve," Shereesh said.

"I see," Blackthorn said.

"Can you insert the other protocol out of sequence?" Shereesh said.

Blackthorn had to remind himself for the umpteenth time that he was not the only genius in the world. Or apparently in this room.

"No one told me this was going to be an AI project," Shereesh added.

Ignoring him if he expected a response, Blackthorn said: "If this data is correct, and I see no reason to think otherwise, your system..."

"*'Xena'*" Mark offered.

Blackthorn glared. "*Xena*", began autonomous compilation at oh-two-three-seven and twenty seconds this past Monday. About three percent system functionality. You did not, however, physically connect the Tessens laser until oh-ten-ten on Thursday, today is Friday," he added, of no significance. "Nor did you even have basic audio or video capture hard-wired. You did, however, activate both the ionic microscope and the nuclear spectrometer from day one. May I ask why you did this?"

"They generate by far the most data," Mark said. "Teraflops."

“Yes, yes,” Blackthorn waved a free hand, annoyed. “But systematically, from...a sense of *refinement*, certainly these should have been the last of the components to be installed.” He frowned at something, distracted, and stared closer to the screen.

He leaned back. “Nevertheless...”

“We’re not exactly following a blueprint here,” Mark said.

Blackthorn went back into his own world “This looks good. Amazing. It’s like some sort of cosmic alignment, the system components oscillating in perfect, symbiotic frequencies,” he was mumbling now, perhaps to himself. Shereesh leaned almost uncomfortably close. “By the end of the first fourteen pods, our girl had already somehow extrapolated the next two sets. As if she knew eventually she would get her eyes and ears and lasers connected. But how did she know what she’d sense when she did? Three percent,” he looked at his watch, “may be up to nine or so, by now.” He continued to type. “So many questions,” he mumbled once more.

Mark and Shereesh exchanged a glance, and nervous smiles.



FIFTY THREE

I mentioned that it was August 24th; it was also a

Thursday. Madeline had asked Eva to ask me to attend the weekly progress meeting, so I grabbed my running shoes, shorts and a tank and threw them into Eva's car.

"You're going to ride me with? Eva said.

"Yeah, I'll run back. And better yet I'll drive," I raced over and swung open the passenger door, making a theatrical seep with my hand and bowing slightly. "M'Lady."

"Why, thank you, Sir," Eva accepted my proffered hand and eased into the car. "Shit, the seat's hot already."

"Do you want a towel?" I said.

"No. Thanks. It's fine," Eva said.

I moved quickly back around and jumped into the car.

"Driver's seat's in the shade." Eva's car was always spotless, even the ashtrays. I lamented; first, that she didn't herself take the practice into our apartment, and second, that soon we would have a toddler adding (*oh-so-fecally*) to the mix.

"Do you even know how to change a diaper?" I said.

“Yes. Don’t you? I changed Brittany, my niece, for a whole summer when my *lazy-ass* sister took advantage of me babysitting. Guilted me into being an *au pair*.”

“I never have,” I said. “Am I gonna have to?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Eva said.

Well, I was now. I said: “You’ll have to show me how. I don’t know how to do anything around a kid. And what if it’s a girl?”

“Likely. Females are dominant. What’s the problem?”

I fidgeted, glancing over my shoulder to change lanes. “I don’t know, like what about baths? - and putting clothes on them and shit?”

“What about it?” Eva said. I was having trouble deciphering her tone.

“We’re like programmed to avoid nudity, like if I saw a picture of a naked little girl online I’m sure as hell not stopping on it,” I said.

Eva scoffed. “Please. She’ll be your daughter, Joe. You won’t see her body as any of its parts, just the total. Relax. You’re cute,” she took my hand. (*Score! Extra point goes to Joe Elliot*).

“When do your books get here?” Eva said.

“Monday. Supposedly,” I said. “I only ordered twenty. If someone shows up who’s in the business, or in a business that could help me, I’ll have to give freebies; otherwise, I’ll offer them for **\$19.95**. Won’t make much, but covers the costs, and people don’t feel like they’re getting gouged. I mean, they’re all going to be there for ‘*The Mind Machine*’ or whatever the hell Madeline winds up calling the system.”

“*Xena*’,” Eva said.

“What?” I said.

“Madeline’s calling the piece ‘*Xena*’. I have no idea why, so don’t ask,” Eva said.

I shrugged, this was old news. But didn't Mark tell me that *he* began calling the system that?

We pulled up to Rockhurst Manor after literally a mile or more of pebbled drive.

"Park over there," Eva said, pointing. "They're finishing up construction and there's still a lot of dust."

I jumped out and raced around to open her door. "Madam," I bowed theatrically once more.

"Get real. Gallantry has never been your strong suit," Eva said.

"Okay, I can stop if..."

"No, no, I suppose you need to practice for when I'm as big as a house. Wonder how big I'll get."

"With my seed it's probably triplets," I said.

Eva scoffed: "Probably a jumper from the giant champagne glass."

I let her take my arm then I jumped ahead at the security lock. "Mine works, remember?" I pressed my thumb against the glass plate.

"I was hoping you forgot," Eva said walking past me and into the hallway. "Honestly, can we keep the whole who's spying on who..."

"*Whom*," I couldn't help myself. Eva's eyes flashed.

"Anyway, no more of that conspiracy crap. It really is barely our business to begin with," Eva said.

Madeline's butler, Fredrick, appeared and told us that Madeline was still breakfasting in her conservatory (*see: cool, all-glass room*) and wished for us, well Eva anyway, to join her there. I really didn't know my way to the main studio from here so rather than cause trouble I followed diligently.

"Did you stay up all night, Madeline?" Eva asked as we entered the extremely sun-lit (*but, thankfully*) air-conditioned room.

"Most of it. Morning, Joe," Madeline said.

"Sure, black, thank you," I delivered a hilarious classic (*see, by twisting the statement into a question, and adding a comma, well, whatever*). Madeline looked back down at her newspaper, obviously adept at bridling her propensity to burst out laughing; Eva had heard this one already, probably more than a million times. Eva moved over to a rolling silver-service and made herself a cup of coffee and small plate of fresh fruit.

"Pull up a chair, Joe. Are you excited about today? I am," Madeline took another sip of coffee.

"I haven't been sleeping much lately either," I said, crossing to the silver-service. I filled my own plate with eggs, because with Eva there I was eating healthy. Oh, and some sausage (*and bacon. Oh yeah, and ham too*), and then I threw a few pieces of fruit on there for good measure. "What with the baby coming and all," I said as I sat down, breaking their silence.

Madeline said: "Oh yes, the baby. I'm sorry, I'd forgotten, congratulations are in order." Eva and I nodded and murmured our thanks. "I do hope you'll name her Madeline, if it's a girl."

"How about if I actually say, start to show before we start looking for prep schools?" Eva said.

"Oh posh," Madeline scoffed. "Then again you really can't start applying too early to some of them." She got a distant look for a moment then came back around. "You two gonna get married?"

"Yes," we said in unison. I'm not sure if it was the rapidity of my answer or the fact that we answered at the same time that made Eva smile, but, who cares, I'll take it.

"You can have it here, at the Manor if you'd like," Madeline folded the newspaper and sat more upright to look at us while she spoke.

"We have more than two thousand close friends," I said.

“Then we could hire a barge or something to pull up on the beach. Handle the overflow,” Madeline said.

“Always a solution’,” Eva added, reiterating one of Madeline’s oft-used lines.

My, but the ‘*womenfolks*’ was sassy this morning.

Frederick came in stealthily and whispered something in Madam’s ear, drawing several curt nods and one definitive ‘no’. He left the room.

“So, are you excited?” Madeline asked me once more, this time apparently actually interested in my response.

I said: “Uh, sure, I mean, I know I thought up the original idea but come on, this thing you’ve done is way, way, way beyond that,” I wasn’t trying to butter her up but everyone likes a little stroke. “Mark’s all messed up about it, so that’s a plus.”

“He does seem a little off,” Eva added.

Madeline said: “Well, we’re supposed to have our regular meeting at nine-fifteen today, (*to Eva*) as you know, but Mark’s little assistant, the Indian,” she waved her hand encouragingly.

“Indian with a ‘dot’ or Indian with a tomahawk?” I said. I could have sworn Madeline flashed me one of those Eva stares (*these gals have no sense of humor before noon, apparently*).

“Shereesh,” the name came to Madeline, “yes, Shereesh called to say that nine-thirty would be better.”

I was glad for the delay as the food was good. I ate a lot for my size, partly because I was a (*occasional, mostly lazy*) runner, and partly because I might, as Eva had often suggested, have a tape-worm in my leg, and one with a voracious appetite (*I added the ‘voracious’. Being a writer, using words, you know*). Just as I was chasing the last of my eggs around with the last of my English muffin, Madeline stood and I guess breakfast was over. I quickly wiped my mouth and dropped the napkin on the table, smiling at a

maid and Fredrick who waited to clean up. Then I hurried after Eva who was hurrying after Madeline. When I got closer I heard them talking about why Madeline was up so late.

"I don't normally leave my apartment after eight o'clock, unless I'm working on something, but then usually you would be here," Madeline said.

"So what happened last night?" Eva said.

"I was reading, something quite good actually. I'll tell you about it when I'm done. And then, I got a mysterious late-night phone call from my uncle, next door, obviously not mysterious in the caller's identity, more so strange because he called seemingly just to chat," Madeline said. She turned a corner and took us down another endless, soft-carpeted creamy hallway lined with open rooms, pausing to center a small painting on the wall below an ornate sconce. She continued: "I said: *Bertrom, are you aware of the hour?* And he said 'yes' but did not elaborate, then went on chatting as if it was afternoon tea. I must say it was very unusual for him, almost melancholy. It took me back a bit to my summers here, in my youth. Bertrom and I were fast friends."

"Maybe he was hammered?" I said. "Uh, drunk. Inebriated," I added helpfully.

"Bertrom? I've never known him to drink to excess. If anything, he's too buttoned down. Here, let's take the elevator. Did you know I had this installed a few years back, Joe? I purchased it from a dealer in Greenwich Village..."

I'd already been on the water-powered elevator, and heard most of the spiel from Eva, but as is normally in my nature (*or, directly in contrast to it*) I smiled and pretended that the tale was fascinating and that I was hanging on her every word.

The churning and gurgling and squeaking stopped (*with the elevator, too*) and we were on familiar ground, meaning I think I

recognized a few of the paintings and displays of fine art that adorned this particular hallway. The French doors leading into the main studio were open. All of the million or so blinds were tightly drawn, including the high windows (*how long must that take?*) and again only the streetlamp itself was illuminated, atop the pyramidal platform. I could see Mark and his technicians seated on a row of folding chairs beside what looked like a very simple but high-tech dais, almost a ‘*StarTrek-y*’ thing. Except for the occasional, muffled sound of finishing construction from outdoors, the massive space was eerily quiet. As we walked across, the angle changed, and I could see that the underside of the streetlamp had a weird, bluish glow; as we neared the platform, I literally could not pull my eyes free from the pulsing halo, and tripped and nearly fell over some cables. It was the strangest thing; it made no sound, nor did it appear to ever change its shape. But there was a dense undercurrent, almost an animation. It’s hard to put into words.

“Good morning, Madeline,” Mark stood, rather formally, and extended his hand. I noticed that he’d shaved and, almost miraculously, looked as if he had actually slept a little.

“Good morning Mr. Klipnik. And good morning to all of you. My, isn’t this exciting,” Madeline said, turning from the group and looking up at the pulsing blue glow. “The color is perfect. I’m very impressed,” she stopped walking and turned with one finger raised (*no, not that one. I was on my best behavior*). She said: “Is it okay to walk beneath it?”

“Of course,” Mark shot up, moving onto the platform like a protective parent. “Here, would you like...”

Madeline’s busy finger now stopped Mark in his tracks. “No, that’s fine, just making sure.”

Eva came up beside me and pressed her body lightly against mine, her eyes also transfixed on the halo, one of her hands inadvertently setting on her stomach.

“It’s called a ‘Tessens laser’,” Mark said. “For its inventor.”

“Yes, I know. Alexander C. Tessens,” Madeline said, eliciting surprise from everyone but Eva. “It’s very unusual. It seems like it’s pulsing, but then the luminosity does not change. Buzzing, but I don’t hear a noise,” Madeline continued her slow, careful inspection, everyone in the room watching both the light, and the woman as she walked.

Madeline snapped to. “Okay. So what does it do?”

Mark said: “Well, honestly Madeline, we’re not really sure the extent of it, yet, and it’s changing by the minute. We had an exchange via text last night.”

“We? Meaning you and ‘Xena’?” Madeline said. Mark nodded carefully. “Well, then, this is exciting.”

“Yes and no. Remember, we set out to make an acquisition system, not create an artificial intelligence,” Mark said.

“Did it really talk to you?” I asked. “What did you say? What did it say? Or she? Or whatever?”

Mark handed first Madeline then Eva and me single printed pages with the text messages. Eva was being uncharacteristically mute.

“I think it’s a rather positive development,” Madeline announced. “A very positive one,” she clasped her hands and the page joyously in front of her. “Just think if ‘Xena’ could converse with visitors? She could play psychologist; she would know all of your feelings. We could set-up a little booth like Lucy has on the ‘Peanuts’ cartoons, for a nickel ‘*The Doctor is in*’.” Madeline was going off into one of her thousand-yard stares, the kind that Eva said often ended

months later like a bad, drunkard's binge, with pieces like '*Wee Things*' taking up an entire wing.

"What we're waiting for now is for '*Xena*' to complete compilation," Mark went on. "We won't know fully what's being scanned," Mark omitted telling us that apparently unless '*Xena*' wants us to be able to control 'her' that we may not be able to. He said: "Then, I guess, I will be better able to answer more of your questions."

"Or, '*Xena*' will," I said.

"Right," Mark said.

"Well, we'll meet again tomorrow. This is very exciting. I think so. Come on, Eva. I have an idea," Madeline strode off.

"Bye," Eva kissed me on the cheek. "Bye Mark," she said.

Mark waved awkwardly.

"You think I'm going to sell many books?" I said.

"What?" Mark said.



FIFTY FOUR

Bertrom Sumner sat across from Frank Martens, having scheduled the meeting from his car while already headed this way. Frank Martens dealt with plenty of personality types, all of whom had to have plenty of money to command any of his time. At least Sumner paid in good, hard cash, Martens thought as he settled back into his chair.

“Lemme get this straight. You want me to send some guys, run surveillance, inside you own house?”

“Rockhurst Manor is hardly a house,” Bertrom said.

“And, without breaking any confidentiality, although who could figure out this friggin’ mess, without breaking any client confidentiality, I’m guessing that you’ve got a fox in your henhouse, one with a big thick head of bright-white hair,” Martens motioned above his head.

“Yes, and this creepy little woman he brought with him. Apparently some kind of computer genius,” Bertrom said.

“Jacob Blackthorn’s the freaking genius. Not that I’m saying that’s who you’ve got living over at your place.”

Bertrom rolled his eyes. “Yes, it’s Jacob Blackthorn, I don’t know who the girl is but I’d like for you to find that out as well.”

Martens said: "And all of this is related, again I'm guessing, to whatever the 'AMXC5', sorry, the 'monitoring unit' we installed..."

"You referred to it as a 'sniffer'," Bertrom said.

"Yeah. Sure. Okay. All of this is related to what that whacky niece of yours is doing next door?" Martens thought for a moment. "And that's what got Jacob Blackthorn back into the field," Bertrom went to say something, but Martens held up his hand. "Understand something Mr. Sumner. I'm not afraid of anybody, okay? Any would-be tough guy'll tell you that. But a lot of my business, of my legitimate business, is, well I'm moving into circles where that Blackthorn resides; hell, he created the need for a lot of it himself. Not a good career move for me to piss that particular individual off."

"I'll triple your fees. And I want you there, specifically. On-site."

Martens stopped talking. He folded his hands on his desk and broke a wide smile, "I think I can probably figure out a way to work around my schedule."

"And, if you're so concerned with my current houseguest knowing of your involvement, I would suggest that you and your associates do your utmost to remain incognito," Bertrom said.

Guy was definitely a dweeb, but Martens thought part of him was okay. Yeah, that old green money part, Frank, he chuckled.



FIFTY FIVE

Rockhurst Manor loomed just above the retreating morning fog, the vast stonework holding in the seaside-night's cool until the sun ultimately made its stand. Getting Frank Martens and two of his (*thugs*) agents into and set-up inside was simply a matter of adding one car to that day's retinue. Bertrom's butler Vincent had them commandeering three adjoining rooms at the far end of the last wing. Because of the obvious problems with utilizing the internal security (*not too secure if both sides can see one another*), Bertrom had closed it down, preparing to respond, should Blackthorn query, with a comment on having nothing to interfere with the system itself, acquiescing to the 'bigger picture'. If Blackthorn noticed, he gave no indication, spending most of the day inside of the girl's suite, surprisingly with the dark-skinned young technician who worked for Bertrom's niece on the Eastside.

"I can help you do that," Shereesh was eating some sort of deep-fried salted snacks, and poking his nose over Blackthorn's shoulder. Blackthorn asked for Klipnik to stop by Mila's suite, but the young Indian man arrived in his stead. "You're trying to gain system control over 'Xena', right?" From what little Blackthorn had been able to garner, this Shereesh was more capable than Klipnik

technically, but Blackthorn could do without all of the chatter. “Has anyone ever told you that you look a little like Mozart at his piano? When you’re typing like that?” Shereesh pantomimed mad piano play in the air, drawing a turn of Blackthorn’s head and an icy stare. “With your hair up like that? - Sir,” he added quickly. If Blackthorn had looked to his left he might have noticed Mila’s version of a smirk.

Blackthorn quickly finished what he was typing. “Show me,” he commanded, standing and motioning to his chair.

Shereesh poured the last of the junk food from the bag into his mouth, crumpled the packaging and launched the refuse feebly and without much attention at a wastebasket before wiping his hands on his jeans and jumping into the chair. “I like this little utility you wrote. Very slick,” Blackthorn wasn’t sure if the young man wanted expressed gratitude, not that it mattered since Blackthorn rarely even thought such things. All of Shereesh’s fingers blurred across Blackthorn’s keyboard. “We put this in last night. Watch, it will let you create a clone of everything, not just what runs through the main workstation,” Blackthorn decided Shereesh was either already dabbling in the darkest areas of the cyberworld or he was some kind of high-functioning sociopath who could not discern right from wrong. He had to know that what Jacob Blackthorn was currently working on had nothing to do with cooperation, and everything to do with clandestine control.

“How can I insert executables without leaving a string? Did you alter the protocol?” Blackthorn said.

“I didn’t, Mark did. So yes, to your question, and as to your next question, I am assuming, which is: *How can you wipe a string when we don’t even understand what ‘Xena’ is doing right now let alone...*” Shereesh checked his watch, “...*what ‘Xena’ will be doing eleven hours from now?*”

Suddenly realizing that he was probably talking too much, Shereesh blurted out: "Sorry."

"Well, you might as well answer your own query," Blackthorn tried to force indignance. He crossed his arms across his chest and briefly rocked back on his heels. He had to use all of his focus to follow what Shereesh was doing on the laptop.

Shereesh stopped typing. "It was rhetorical. No one knows what's going to happen when '*Xena*' finishes compiling. Not even you," Shereesh went back to work, "but it is going to make a heck of an exhibit."



FIFTY SIX

Frank Martens finished sweeping the room. There was no rational explanation he could concoct to justify Bertrom Sumner's putting him in a snooped room, their temporary office, but this whole thing was crazy and it paid to be cautious. "Set-up over there, away from the window," he instructed his two associates. One of them unfolded a small table while the other began unpacking gear. Martens went back into his bedroom and began opening the case that held a second 'AMXC5' unit, a second 'sniffer', destined for another client but now temporarily commandeered. Martens wanted to keep it apart from their other equipment but he had no logical reason for doing so, just a gut feeling. After setting the unit up, he hung clothing to obscure it and did not turn it on.

Bertrom's butler stood in the hallway when Martens headed back to their temporary office.

"Mr. Sumner wonders when you might be ready to meet with him," Vincent said.

Martens shrugged. "Whenever."

"He has instructed me to bring you to the botanical gardens, away from the first and second floors," Vincent said. "I have instructed two of the maids to spend their time near Mr. Blackthorn

and Ms. Janski and to inform me of their movements. I can then inform you.”

“Good idea,” Martens said. “Let me grab my guys.”

Frank Martens began wracking his brain. Janski, Janski, where did he know that name? He pulled out a pad and a pen. No sense using a cell phone, or even typing on a PDA, not with Jacob Blackthorn still jacked into the other ‘sniffer’. Martens would have to drive at least a few miles from Rockhurst, later, before he would risk it. Vincent took them down a series of hallways, damn, this place was like a freaking hotel, then finally through a small doorway that lead into some kind of servant’s stairs.

“Where are we?” Martens asked.

“We are in a staircase behind the butler’s kitchen, in wing three,” Vincent said, then, out-of-character: “why?”

“How the hell do you know your way around?” Martens said.

“My movements are generally restricted to the Westside,” Vincent said.

“Which is...?”

“Comprised of fifty-seven rooms, plus a conservatory, and botanical gardens,” Vincent said.

One of Frank Martens’ agents let out a low whistle. Martens would have glared at him but the stairway was too tight. “Are there a lot of back ways like this? Could you show some to me later? Not sure if your boss told you...”

“Mr. Sumner told the staff that you would be providing security consultation and that we were to afford you every courtesy in this regard. Here we are,” Vincent said and opened a door that led to a small room and then into the botanical gardens. Martens thought a couple of things: one- that this butler was somewhat of an ‘arrogant prick’, and two, that damn, it must be nice being this rich.

The gardens were a series of octagonal, peaked greenhouse roofs, clustered around a central hub, where a sprawling fountain of spitting fish and dancing pixies announced itself majestically beneath a glass-paned dome. There were tiny bridges over tiny waterways, lined with rows of exotic greens and wild splashes of floral colors. Two caretakers moved quietly aside when Vincent and his party suddenly appeared as if from out of a forest, the butler leading the men across what were all leisurely paths to where Bertrom Sumner stood wearing a long, plastic apron, tied neatly over his impeccable suit.

Vincent made his little almost imperceptible bow and was about to leave when Bertrom stopped him, having learned years ago that it was for maintaining domestic tranquility that one attempt to trust their most immediate help. Vincent stood obediently with his hands clasped before him.

Skipping any pleasantries, Bertrom said: "Mr. Blackthorn has extended his movements to include visits to my niece's main studio on the Eastside, as well as his suite and my office. The girl I don't believe has left her room in the past thirty hours, since I observed her with dirt on her clothing which I can safely assume came from her having been snooping around inside the walls, and this is of particular concern," Bertrom said.

"Like the stairs we came down here on?" Martens asked. Vincent leaned over and whispered in Bertrom's ear.

Bertrom nodded, "yes, but there are several other places behind the walls which are not used anymore. Some were designed purposely when the Manor was updated and modified for electricity, but there are also several areas where there was expansion over the years and the architects simply built new outer walls, sealing in the older ones," Bertrom said.

"A couple of things," Martens said. "First off, if Blackthorn sees my guys he won't recognize either of them, I made sure of that. But this guy is the ultimate spook, and it's gonna be real hard to get eyes and ears on him without him knowing it."

"Which is why you're here personally, is it not?" Bertrom said.

Martens smiled. "We're going to have to install little self contained units and then retrieve them, kind of like a trapper setting traps that have to be retrieved, or the 'AMXC5' unit, the 'sniffer' will find them.

"Just have to be cautious, real cautious with this one."

"And second?" Bertrom said.

"Your little maid network is a good idea. Hell, we could have one of 'em tote a directional mike around and Blackthorn probably wouldn't look twice," Martens said.

"It should also be noted," Bertrom continued, "that one of the technicians from the project next door seems to have entered the girl's suite last night and has not been seen departing."

"Cameras on that stuff's not in the contract," Martens said and flashed his teeth.

"My point is," Bertrom was becoming perturbed and wanted to get back to trimming, "the point is, without my authorization, in fact unbeknownst to me, it appears that Mr. Blackthorn has taken it upon himself to offer his expertise for the completion of my niece's project, this after he was hired to afford me insight into exactly what she has been so intent on creating, and nothing more."

"Threaten you with the Feds? National security bullshit?" Martens said. Bertrom nodded curtly. "Sounds about right," Martens rubbed at his chin. "Although I'm not saying that he can't. Guy is very well connected.

Then: "Okay, one of my guy's stays upstairs with our gear. If you can have your Vincent here take me and my associate out of

sight through the walls, and have your girls keep an eye on their movements, I should know something by later this evening.”

“Hopefully before six-thirty,” Bertrom said, adding: “six-thirty is the time when, we believe the system they built reaches some kind of milestone, or critical mass.”

Martens simply nodded. Bertrom turned back to his trimming. Vincent led the men away.



FIFTY SEVEN

In all of the commotion, I'd forgotten completely that Chris and Beth had called last week, bearers of the usual ribbing and drivel, oh, and box seats for a Red Sox game at Fenway Park tonight, courtesy of Chris's company (*because, otherwise, Chris and Beth would have to be millionaires to afford box seats, which they aren't*). We swung by and picked them up in Eva's car, forcing the two giant stick figures to sit in the backseat. They didn't seem to mind, and the drive was a short one over to the subway station.

"Only douchebags drive and have to park," Chris had said more than once. Tonight anything Chris said was law and golden as far as I was concerned (*six rows behind the 'Sox dugout will have that affect on you*).

The train car was crowded so we let the women sit while we rocked; we brave men holding onto the spring-loaded handles that protruded from the top bar.

Undoubtedly by their expressions, the girls were talking about one of them being pregnant.

"So, pregnant, huh? Congrats," Chris said.

"Yeah, thanks," I said.

"You gonna get a job now? What happened with Jerry?" Chris said.

I scoffed. "I can pull hours with Jerry anytime. He's mad-busy."

"And what's up with your book? I'm just asking you all of this 'cause after the first inning," Chris leaned over to be sure Beth and Eva could hear him above the din, "*we're gonna be fuckin' 'hammad'.*"

"Two beers," Beth held up her fingers. "Two."

"Two between innings, more like it," Chris said under his breath. "Girls can't see what you bring into the men's room."

"And what you don't bring out," I added, and we high-fived loudly. This brought Eva's: now you're on my radar, glare. Idiot. (I added the 'idiot'; she usually uses her more flowery terms).

Whatever.

"What's she gonna do, divorce me before the wedding?" I said.

"Ah," Chris scoffed. "Hey, I would have come more geared up," referring to my throwback, number '8' Carl Yastrzemski jersey, "but these are company seats and Fenway's got this whole '*code of conduct*' policy now, some bullshit. They'll throw you out for anything they want, this after jamming you two-bills for your ticket, and ten bucks for a beer. Couple weeks ago, this buddy of mine winds up on the *Jumbotron*'. Got his 'B's' sweatshirt on, Patriot's hat, he's all fired up. So they put him up there, standing on his seat, and he sees himself on the big screen and goes '*two birds up*', the old '*double eagle*', not being all like: '*eff- you*', more like, '*eff-yeah!*' Took 'em an inning or two to figure out where he was sitting, probably run his face through some database, then they hauled him out. Crowd was pretty happy. I swear, the place has turned into '*Mahtha's Vinyahd*' west."

"I'll try not to get thrown out," I said.

"Speaking of running guys faces, what's going on with that Fed stuff you were talking about?" Actually, I don't remember having discussed it with him, but Eva and Beth were buds. Whatever.

I said: "I don't know. Apparently, somehow, they got ahold of my book. The new one I've been working on, that got Madeline..." Chris waved me along with his hand. "Okay, yeah, that one. It's called 'W.E.B.', stands for 'Worldwide Electron Band'."

"So how'd they get it?" Chris said.

"I don't know. We don't know. My buddy Mark, the techie-geek, he told me about it. Says it happens to him all the time."

"So, like the Feds broke into your house and copied your hard drive?"

I hadn't really thought of that. I'd been assuming all of the serious chaos emanated around Rockhurst Manor. Thanks, Chris. I was about to say something when Chris leaned over, way over, to look out the window of the fast-moving train.

"Hey, this is us. Come on, Beth, Eva. I know a shortcut." The subway slowed and stopped, and Chris led us off the train.

"You were right. On both counts," I said as we walked along the side of the tracks then through a tear in the chain-link fence and behind some old warehouses, the warm, humid air ripe with the smell of booze and urine. Eva's sandals were definitely not agreeing with the jagged rocks.

"Right about what?" Chris said.

"This is shorter, in distance, and there are plenty of places to get cut," I motioned to the broken glass spread pretty much everywhere. "So you're right: 'short-cut'."

"Told you," Chris said smugly.

We joined first a small group, then a large mass of moving bodies as we were shuttled like cattle into the security turnstiles. I always look out for my girl in crowds, especially Boston crowds,

because she's hot and susceptible to 'accidental' 'groper' and I found myself extra-protective as we moved into line for processing and handling.

"So, are you excited?" Beth was suddenly beside me. Chris took over protecting my pregnant woman. I don't know how any of these little social rituals among couples came to be, but I was on my best behavior (*adjusted for the non-inebriated start of the game*).

"Heck, yeah. Haven't been to Fenway in a couple of years," I said.

"Not about the game, Joe," Beth said, "about your first *child*?"

"What?" I spun left and right. "Where?"

Beth said: "Eva's right. You are an ass-munch."

I gasped. "Shocking. She called me that? *Horrahs*...No, seriously, I'm psyched. We've both wanted this for a while."

"Good to know you're not shooting blanks," Beth said.

"Better wait and see if our little angel comes out looking like the milkman," I countered.

Beth rolled her eyes. "They don't have milkmen anymore, Joe. Except for those creepy '*Schwan's*' guys who sell like milk and cheese, and meat and fish."

"Eva has a thing for creepy guys," I said.

"Good point."

After passing processing, we got to our seats, which were (*way-wicked ahsome*) down near the field. Fenway Park had taken on a sort of sterile quality to it since they refurbished it and the team started winning. Gone (*unfortunately*) were the days of drunken louts, liquored-up and hollering obscenities by the third inning, beer and vomit plastering the men's room and sullyng the hundred-foot long urine trough (*ladies, ask your gents to explain*), sink mirrors that were really just buffed stainless steel. Oh, and lots of fist-fights, usually several per game, often times group events drawing the

attention of entire sections that would stand and turn and ignore the less exciting game on the field. I was guessing that a ‘*code of conduct*’ policy stringent enough to eject a guy for displaying his middle fingers had probably figured out how to keep the booze-hounds from throwing their hands at one another’s face (*and deftly replaced by \$200 seats and ‘Martini Moms’*), forcing the fans’ attention to the field of play. Chris stood aside and funneled the women in first and then me, thereby keeping the most distance from his wife, and making it more difficult for her to monitor his malted-hops intake, while appearing congenial and accommodating.

Smooth.

Before I’d even settled into the plush, generous (*tiny, rock-hard, heavily painted-over wooden*) seat, Chris had his hand up motioning ‘two’ to the kind gentlemen (*and occasional gal*) who were always willing and able with ten-dollar beers (*actually only \$8.50-whew*).

Play ball.

After the game, we took the longer walk to the station, the one that didn’t require traversing ‘*Dumpland*’ as we had on the way in. I was reveling in the street-vibe as the Red Sox won the game 7-1, and I was two sheets to the wind; fortunately, Chris had a third sheet (*and main, top and jib-sails*) fluttering proudly in the breeze and was thankfully stealing my thunder. Beth seemed to be okay with it, but I caught Eva ‘extra’ monitoring her man (*me*), and looking like she might be ready to slide into super-bitch mode (*look the hell out*) when Chris produced a partially smoked joint and, after only a cursory glance around, fired it up, despite the throng.

“Medical,” he announced, a little too loud (*and drunken*)–ly, convincing probably no one. It smelled pretty damn good, Chris’s

usual nasty shit, but suddenly I saw the faces of the two guys in suits from the bridge in every face around me.

“No thanks,” I said.

Chris shrugged. “Suit yourself.” A cloud of smoke billowed out, temporarily obscuring his head. Eva was suddenly taking my hand.

“My, aren’t you well behaved,” she said.

“No, I’m kind of shitfaced. Just trying to lay down some interference so you didn’t notice,” I said.

“Oh, I noticed,” Eva said. “It’s all right, I can drive.”

“I’ll sober up while we’re on the ‘T,’” I said, referring to Boston mass-transit.

“Please,” Eva scoffed.

Beth entered our periphery. “Did you stop smoking pot, Joe?”

“Nah. Just a little paranoid, being in public, I guess,” I said.

We climbed up into the subway car and found seats.

“Some good shit,” Chris added sloppily.

“We’re slowly cleaning up our act,” Eva said.

“I...we, even got my girl here off crack,” I said, probably also a little too loudly. Two more Boston booze-hounds.

“Oh, that’s nice,” Beth said. “So, do you really think Federal agents are watching you because of something you wrote? It’s so draconian.”

“Indeed,” I said.

“Draconian?” Eva said.

“*Drag cornea?*” Chris mumbled, thankfully creating a diversion.

“You’re wasted,” Beth said to him.

Duh.

Chris was starting to feebly make his case. I tuned them out.

“Love you, baby,” I said to Eva.

“Love you too,” Eva said.

Later, we sat at our kitchen (*area*) table and talked while I paid the bills, wrote checks which drew from our joint account, funded lately by Eva, mostly. Eva had gotten paid so as usual there was a pile of cash to deposit. I held one of the ‘*Benjamins*’ up for inspection.

“Wonder why they’re all old. None of these bills was printed after 1938,” I said. “Our cash was a lot prettier back then. I like Benji’s face better when it was smaller.”

“Benji?” Eva said.

“Did you ever ask her where it came from? All this cash?” I said.

“No, Joe. I’m not rude.”

“Neither am I (*well, I’m not being rude right now*). Just curious, that’s all,” I said.

“You’re curious about everything. Can’t you stop being so curious?” Eva said.

I held aloft another note: “At least the serial numbers aren’t sequential. So we know it’s not from some robbery.”

“Right. ‘Madeline Sumner-Stone’, the bank robber,” Eva got herself a glass of iced tea.

I sniffed the bills. “They smell kind of musty.”

“Maybe it was an old bank that she robbed,” Eva said.

“Maybe she found it, packed inside the walls,” I said.

“Oh, so what, you’re going to start pulling up floorboards and ripping out bricks the next time you trespass?” Eva said.

“How was I trespassing? I’m thumbprint-enabled,” I said.

“You know what I mean.”

"It's just so fucking cool. It's like inner earth in there, without the earth part," I said.

"Or the 'Orcs'," Eva said.

"What?"

Eva sipped her iced tea. "You're the author."

I got my own glass of iced tea. "Maybe they were bootleggers or something." "The bank takes them so who cares?" She said. Then: "When do you want to look for a new place?"

"A new place? Honey, can you like, move through the official paces of pregnancy before we get all gung-ho? And we certainly don't need a bigger place for the first year or two."

"Then can we talk about the wedding?"

Lost in this whirlwind of eddies of late, I remember discussing marriage, but do not recall hearing the word 'wedding' which carried a significantly greater price tag (*even when held through the car window at the drive-up at the Elvis Chapel in Las Vegas*). A sudden fear gripped me; I flashed to Madeline's offer to use Rockhurst Manor for the wedding (*conveniently forgetting my crack about having more than two thousand guests*), and thought that a big wedding was not outside of the realm of my darling's wont. If she was leaning this way, even fractionally, it could mean only one thing, considering how 'relatively' broke Eva knew we currently were: she was planning on calling her grandmother.

"Joe. Are you listening to me? I said I talked to Grandmother today."

Eerie, right?

Even Eva referred to her beloved matriarch as 'Grandmother'. "How is the old dear, Dear?" I said.

"She's okay. I talked to her about our getting married."

Shit. I said: "I don't think she likes me. Ever noticed how she always positions me behind everyone else for holiday photos?"

“You’re taller than everyone else.”

“She calls me ‘Joey’ a lot,” I said.

“She had a dog named ‘Joey’ when I was really young. A nasty little miniature schnauzer that would bite you if you tried to pet it.”

“Sounds just like her. You think she’s trying to tell me something?” I said.

“You don’t bite that often.”

“I don’t think she’s down with us getting hitched.”

“Because...”

“Oh, I don’t know, some parable she told me about not being in debt. And then when I played stupid, I know, easy for me, she said: If you don’t properly take after my only granddaughter, I’ll cut off your dick.”

Eva considered this. “I believe you. And you should probably believe her.”

I put my hand gingerly over my groin.

I said: “So why did you call her?”

“She called me. Maybe my mom said something. But grandmother likes you or she wouldn’t talk to you at all. She’s just that way.”

The wash over me drew to tsunami-like proportions as I imagined a huge wedding, and all of the cheeks (*ass*) I would have to kiss, not just at the ceremony but the rehearsal dinner, the weeks leading up and the months (*years, and decades*) after, of thank you letters and asinine photo requests (*aren’t there any pictures of table two-twenty-three without that Uncle Walter in them?*).

“What’s the matter, Honey? You look sick?” Eva said.

“You know we can’t really afford a wedding right now,” I ventured cautiously. “And I wouldn’t feel comfortable having your dear old grandmother pay for everything,” I went ahead and dove in headfirst.

I could see Eva frantically thinking about this and unconsciously placing her hand on her belly. Three, two, one... She drew a breath. "You're right. I didn't ask her but I could tell that she wanted me to. It would be a fiasco, especially with my already being pregnant."

"Elvis won't mind," I offered.

Eva smiled. "You know it doesn't mean that much to me. I love you and trust you and a marriage certificate won't change any of that."

I took her hand, stood her up and sat her on my lap. "I love you 'two'," I said. "That was 'two' with a 'w'," I added.

So incredibly smooth.

Eva actually smiled.



FIFTY EIGHT

Had Shereesh Bahat noticed the time (*or ever even worn a watch*) he would have realized that Jacob Blackthorn had been gone from Mila's suite for more than an hour; that it had been fifty-one minutes since he'd set his laptop on the table beside the 'Angelfish'; that it had been seventeen minutes since he smoked for the first time in his twenty-two years of life, and as he had leapt past grades (*skipping grades 8-12 in school*) he went right past cigarettes and marijuana and landed (*splat*) on methamphetamine. Since Mila wasn't much for speaking, they opened text windows in the corners of their screens and text-chatted while they worked. Shereesh was floating in and out of seriousness but was basically on autopilot when it came to computers. He didn't ask what it was that they'd smoked, he just saw 'Angelfish' do it, and then she was smiling which she didn't seem to do very often, unlike Shereesh who was always grinning. She'd offered it to him so he did what she showed him; what did he know about these things?

BahatmaGhandi: Haha, this is funny.
Angelfish: *What is funny?*
BahatmaGhandi: Everything is funny.
Angelfish: *Everything is nice.*
BahatmaGhandi: No, it's funny. A minute ago I thought I was going to pee in my pants but now I don't have to anymore and my penis is hard.
Angelfish: *It's just nice.*
BahatmaGhandi: What is it? Why is everything so funny? Why can't I talk? Why is my penis hard?
Angelfish: *It's called 'crank'. You smoke it and it makes things nice.*
BahatmaGhandi: Where did that guy go? That old guy?
Angelfish: *Who, Mozart? That was funny.*
BahatmaGhandi: He wrote some pretty neat code. Never met an old guy who could do anything useful with a computer.
Angelfish: *His name is Jacob. And he's really, really smart. He's smarter than you.*
BahatmaGhandi: No, he's not. And you aren't either.
Angelfish: *Then why were you asking me how to bypass that firewall?*
BahatmaGhandi: I spend my time writing code. If I spent all of my time hacking, I'd be better at it than you are.

Angelfish: *Would your dick still be hard?*
BahatmaGhandi: What?-dick? Hard?-oh, you mean my penis, ha ha, no not so much, anymore.
Angelfish: *Have you ever had sex?*
BahatmaGhandi: No.
Angelfish: *Me either. Not really. Some older boys made me do some stuff when I was young.*
BahatmaGhandi: Can we have more of the 'crank'?
Angelfish: *Not right now. It's bad to have too much. It makes your teeth fall out.*
BahatmaGhandi: Really?
Angelfish: Yes.

Shereesh brought one of his hands up from the keyboard and rubbed his teeth. He typed again.

BahatmaGhandi: It's hard to pay attention. I want to go outside or something.
Angelfish: *Outside like into the yard?*
BahatmaGhandi: Can we have more of that 'crank' out there?
Angelfish: No.
BahatmaGhandi: I feel like doing something but I don't know what I want to do.
Angelfish: *Jacob gets mad if I don't always work.*
BahatmaGhandi: He's not here.
Angelfish: *I think he went back inside the walls.*
BahatmaGhandi: What does that mean?



FIFTY NINE

Jacob Blackthorn was not inside of Rockhurst's walls. He was seated in Bertrom Sumner's office, with Bertrom Sumner. He had created a countdown clock that was running in the corner of screens system-wide; eight hours, fifty-three minutes, plus or minus one minute.

"Why did you turn off the security feeds?" Blackthorn said.

Having had some time to think about it, Bertrom said: "Since we're all involved in such 'mutual cooperation' lately, I hardly saw the need. And it would certainly be embarrassing if one of their technicians were to see it." This seemed to satisfy Blackthorn who went back to typing. Bertrom said: "And when did we decide to add your expertise, expertise I might remind you that on this particular subject would not be here were it not be for my putting your firm into my employ, when did we decide to add your expertise to my niece's project? Why even bother the charade of loyalty and professionalism and move your operations to the Eastside?"

"Because we're already set-up here. Everything's under control, Sumner. And don't worry, you'll get proper credit for the system once it's operational and we turn it over to the Feds."

“What I would appreciate far more than any credit for something that, remember, I did not actually do, would be more information on what, exactly, is going on. Why can’t we communicate with this ‘Xena’?”

“We could. I chose not to until after the compilation completes.”

“Yes, yes, I know, eight more hours, but why not see what we can find out right now, with whatever resources are already in place?”

Blackthorn thought for a moment. “I’m really not sure. Professional courtesy maybe? There’s really nothing we could do about it in any event. ‘Xena’ has been dancing little dances with Mila all afternoon.”

“Meaning...”

“Mila figures out a way around, ‘Xena’ erects another firewall right behind her. If ‘Xena’ wasn’t a system I would swear that she’s Mila’s alter-ego.”

“So. We wait,” Bertrom said.

“You wait. I still have a few things to clean up. And rest assured Sumner, five minutes after the system compiles I’m going to call in the Feds and you can expect your residence to be militarized shortly thereafter. I wouldn’t worry; it won’t be for long. I will explain what’s going on, they will believe me, and then the extraction team can box it all up and take it away. There won’t be so much as a single cable left by the time they’ve swept through the place.”

“My niece, in particular, will not be pleased if they take possession over her piece. Frankly, I’m not sure of the legal basis.”

“Legal basis? Sumner, Have you lost your mind? This is the Feds we’re talking about, and we, and they, do whatever the damn hell they want to. If there’s not a law for it, or if there’s a law against

it, they'll just change it, that's all. Haven't you been paying attention?" Blackthorn barked.

"Yes, be that as it may, my niece can present a formidable challenge, Mr. Blackthorn. I think it might be wise to include her in these discussions, bring her into the loop as it were." Bertrom swiveled slowly in his chair.

There are no discussions, and this is no loop, Blackthorn thought. If this was thirty years ago, or even ten I would have come in here kicking ass and never answered word one to you about it. Or, to your niece, and her '*formidability*'.

Opening a text window to Mila, Blackthorn typed a query, went back to work, then after not getting a response (*less than ten seconds*) he clicked on 'send' twice.

Where was Mila? The restroom? Blackthorn stared impatiently at his watch. Looking through Mila's camera, he could see the side of another laptop, probably that clever Indian boy, who also appeared to be away from his console. Blackthorn sifted through all of the workstation feeds until he found Shereesh's. At first glance it seemed as if Shereesh was simply working on something but upon closer examination Blackthorn saw that it was a little utility the boy-genius must have written to initiate the next set of diagnostic runs autonomously (*very clever, potentially devious, duly noted*); for the next half hour, Shereesh might as well be asleep. Which he most certainly was not, Blackthorn thought as his eyes caught the corner of the screen and part of Mila's little drug tin, left uncharacteristically open. This puzzled Blackthorn as Mila was normally fastidious, and Blackthorn noted, terribly supply-conscious, which he supposed one had to be when one was beholden to an illicit, black-market product. Where were those two? Bedmates? Blackthorn scoffed at the notion, although you never know. Perhaps the Indian liked to smoke that poison too, and the two of them *were*

frolicking around in one of a hundred bedrooms, in some drug-induced haze. Blackthorn had little patience or tolerance for hobbies, dalliances or other wastes of time, and to-date Mila Janski had done nothing *but* work. Hell, she rarely even slept, and he paid her a pittance of what she was actually worth, or could steal from the world if she was so inclined.

Suddenly it came to him. They had smoked their drugs, too much of them to work, and the mouthy little brain probably talked Mila into some mischief; Blackthorn had caught her expression when the twerp called him ‘Mozart’. Now, he would bet they were inside the walls or heading that way.

Bertrom was going on about something when Blackthorn finished typing and stood sharply. “I need to get something,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

Shereesh kept saying things like: ‘*this is so cool*’, and ‘*wow, look at this*’. Mila found herself in the previously unknown position of having to verbally silence someone, admonishing him every few feet, and they hadn’t even arrived at Bertrom Sumner’s private gallery yet. Shereesh obviously had not been through much of Rockhurst Manor, certainly on the Westside, and definitely not at all when under the influence of drugs, since this was his maiden voyage.

Arriving at the gallery door and either unaware or unconcerned with checking for security cameras, Mila tapped in the four-digit code. She led Shereesh down the dark entry area and into the dimly lit gallery, wasting no time in pressing and extracting the electrical outlet and activating the release for the passageway into the wall. She turned, expecting to have to admonish Shereesh for some loud expression of drug-induced awe, but he was turned with his back to her, staring dumbly up at ‘*Plum*’, which did seem

abnormally bright despite the bare light. After successive mews and chirps yielded no response, she darted over and grabbed his arm.

“*Plum*,” Shereesh said and followed her into the wall. Then, after a moment he said: “The plum pudding model of the atom, J.J. Thompson, discovered the electron in 1897. The plums represent the electrons, which has a negative charge.”

So? ‘*Angelfish*’ said.

Shereesh suddenly felt how dark, how truly dark it was, where he was being led. “Don’t you have a flashlight?” He was still feeling high, but was so unaccustomed to hijinks that chasing around after a near-total stranger in the near-total blackness was having its toll. “*Angelfish*,” he whispered hoarsely. Suddenly a yellow glow enveloped them as Mila produced one of Jacob Blackthorn’s high-tech lights. “Why didn’t you turn it on before?” He asked. She whispered they didn’t need it which he supposed was true since they were somewhere, and hadn’t yet fallen into some abyss. “Do you know where all of these paths go?” Mila had changed the beam to a white spot and headed back along the well used pathway. “Where are we going anyway?”

Mila should have thought about it before abetting an already talkative guy who was now plied with methamphetamine. They wended their way back along the path that Mila had taken with Jacob Blackthorn the night before.

“Wow,” Shereesh said in awe as they turned and came up on the vast open area. Shereesh might have asked Mila how she knew where she was going, but instead said nothing. Zoom, zoom, it was like being in a video game. She led them to a pathway that hadn’t been walked on, not recently, and a few minutes later they came to another hidden doorway which they went through to a room that was just around the corner from Madeline’s main studio on the Eastside.

They crept silently along one side of the hallway; Shereesh had to consciously keep himself from talking, then he peered through the open doors into the cavernous studio. "We really don't have to be sneaking around," Shereesh spoke too loudly, then found himself keeping to the shadows as Mila walked toward the platform and the streetlamp, clicking and mewing with increasing rapidity as she stared rapt at the pulsing coil of strange, blue light. Finally realizing why they were here, Shereesh moved ahead of her and strode over and stood beneath the eerie blue halo, looking down at his arm for some kind of glow, some little shadow, then back up at the source pulsing light. Mila came up beside him and stared directly into it as if it was blinding and she didn't care. After who knew how long, and despite the late hour, Shereesh tugged on 'Angelfish's' arm. So far, no one had seen them, and it was best to keep it that way. Oh, and didn't she say something about having some more of that 'crank'?

Returning through the way they came, Mila was moving quickly and with purpose, back to the oddly shaped area and crawl space she had seen the day before. Stopping, she stood on her toes then stepped up a foot or so by placing her foot into a recess, and shined the light into the deep, constricted space, leaving Shereesh blanketed in darkness.

"Hey, shine that over here. What are you doing?" He said. "Are we going to have more of that 'crank'?"

Mila turned and shined the light up onto her tiny face. "*Shh*," her tone and her finger admonished him. Shereesh pushed his hands into his pockets and stood stiffly, once again completely enveloped in velvety darkness as Mila slithered into the crawl space, the flashlight ahead of her creating eerie swaths that cut back and forth in the light, stirred-up dust. After a few seconds, Shereesh couldn't see a thing. Then, a minute later, enough moonlight drifted through

the openings in the ceiling to create some slightly less than black areas, which made the remaining black areas now frighteningly more distinct. Shereesh began to shake. Maybe he didn't like the 'crank' so much after all. Dangerously close to 'freaking out', Shereesh thought about climbing into that tight, dusty shaft and following '*Angelfish*' (if he could even find hand or footholds in the dark), or stumbling back along the path, feeling his way along the walls and rickety railings back from where they came. There were seven turns that he remembered; he often counted things like that, and the drugs made stumbling back in the darkness in this terrifying, musty old place seem like the right choice. Grasping for the cool stone wall on his left, he was about to start shuffling his feet when his addled mind began been playing new tricks, or his new little lady friend had somehow crawled several hundred feet back the way they came and now emerged once again, behind him. Shereesh stopped and stood erect, frozen and without breath, watching the light bounding rhythmically, the pace quick. Then suddenly a dim light behind him, coming from the recess, brightening, noises, movement, then '*Angelfish*' appearing, feet-first. She whipped the light around, finding Shereesh along the path and temporarily blinding him. She mewed twice and clicked her tongue, imploring him to come over. She held down a large, dusty old bottle, shaking it and urging Shereesh to take it from her.

"I'll take that," Jacob Blackthorn appeared from the darkness, his lamp muted, his face grave and stern. Seeing what was transpiring, Mila tried to pull the bottle back, but Blackthorn already had a firm grip. "Mila, what are you doing here? And what's this? - Liquor? Where did you get this?"

Mila hopped down. She pointed to the open space at eye level she had just crawled from.

Blackthorn inspected the dust-coated old bottle. "It's local moonshine, from prohibition, that's what it is. Don't drink it; it's either turned to vinegar or it'll make you go blind. Now, what are you two doing down here?" He turned his spotlight back on and shined it into Shareesh's face, making him shirk. "You?" Shereesh mumbled something that sounded like *'more crank'* to Blackthorn, but that made no sense.

"Why aren't you working? We have to be absolutely ready; we have less than eight hours now," Blackthorn said.

"Work's easy," Shereesh's speech was a little off.

"Yes, I saw your utility running. Clever. Should be done in less than twenty- minutes. There are always other work stations you can get on."

"I don't even work for you," Shereesh said, pushing his glasses higher onto his nose.

Despite the dark, they could see Blackthorn glare. Then Shereesh giggled, nervously. Blackthorn said: "Aren't you the least bit interested in what appears to be happening over there?" Blackthorn pointed out into the darkness. "Either of you?" Mila seemed more interested in the moonshine and kept shining her lamp, surreptitiously trying to read the faded label. "And what is your fascination with this liquor? I would imagine if you spent enough time rummaging around back here you might find just about anything, but this is not your house. Sumner would probably throw a tantrum if he knew that we were using his personal art gallery as a turnstile to sneak around inside of the walls."

Shereesh started scratching the side of his head. "I'm getting a headache. It's dusty. Are we going to walk around in here anymore?"

"As you've already dutifully noted, I am not your employer," Blackthorn turned toward Mila who looked a little sheepish but still stared hard at the bottle he held. "You, however, are in my employ,

and we have a lot to do,” he set the bottle down on the side of the walkway. “Let’s go.”

Mila stared longingly at the bottle but began to move.

They returned to their workstations without incident. Once again, Shereesh eyed ‘*Angelfish*’s’ little tin.

BahatmaGhandi: After I’m done I can help you with that.

Angelfish: *I’ll figure it out. I always do.*

BahatmaGhandi: Can we have some more of the crank’?

Angelfish: *Maybe in a minute. Let me finish doing this for Jacob.*

BahatmaGhandi: How did you know those bottles would be there? They’re really cool. One hundred year old scotch, you can’t even find it online.

Angelfish: *Xena told me.*

BahatmaGhandi: Xena? Our Xena, our system Xena?

Angelfish: *Yes.*

BahatmaGhandi: How? Tell me. How?

Tell me how?” Shereesh leaned two feet to his left. ‘*Angelfish*’ quickly finished a couple of things and smoothly took Shereesh’s mind off of his query by reaching for her little tin.



SIXTY

Blackthorn cursed himself again for not having called in an extraction unit exactly ten minutes after he understood what was going on; he was losing control of the situation; he should, at a minimum, have brought more assets with him. Even that junior agent, Raju (*whatever the hell his name was*) would be of some use now. His Mila and the young Indian genius might be nonplussed with the goings on, but they were both children; good with tasks but nothing more. He closed the copy of their text box that he had been monitoring, and wondered for the fiftieth time why he couldn't find any record of Mila interacting with 'Xena'.

What he did find was some curious information Mila had accessed on Bertrom Sumner, more so on one 'Jebediah Sumner', Bertrom's father, who was alleged to have had strong ties to various public criminals, and rumored to have made a fortune during prohibition. Blackthorn did not see where Mila had seen reference to Rockhurst Manor, but it was obvious that she entertained some strange allure toward the story of bootlegging, and had apparently found rather damning evidence of it. He thought that the chatty Indian was probably distracting her; would she have been brave enough to go back inside the walls alone if it wasn't for him? Blackthorn also knew how quirky she was, how unsettled, and he

couldn't let her stop doing the things he asked her to do for him, some of which were things he needed. He could ask her directly, she had always been honest with him in the past, even when some of her skills could not be explained. Sometimes, her complex line of rationale was too convoluted for even Blackthorn to follow, especially when she was smoking her drugs. There was simply no way (*that phrase again*) that Mila could have communicated with 'Xena', and completely wiped her trail clean. Not without 'Xena's' complicity.

Blackthorn would ask Mila about it later. Right now, he had a lot to do.



SIXTY ONE

Did I mention that Eva's Grandmother, Helga Womack, lived in Woonsocket? Which is also in Rhode Island, which of course means that it's no more than a hop, jump and a skip from Tiverton, and thankfully within the area that Grandmother Womack would allow herself to drive, thus saving us the added pleasure of Eva's Uncle Lars, a big oaf of a goofy dipshit that was probably too simple to know that he was slow. Oh, and big ears and a shaved head. He was something like eleven feet tall too, so no matter where you were he was always looking down on you when you had the misfortune of being cornered into conversing, and his lower lip dangled a lot while he listened which was especially disturbing so you tried to talk in grunts and monosyllabic words, giving him all the time to talk more, annoying still but at least less lip. But, anyway, there was no highway involved (*making the fifteen minute drive take forty-five*), just a slew of enraged motorists tailgating the pristine **1967 Lincoln Continental Town Car**, gloss black, opera ('suicide') doors, and a hood big enough to skate on. The enraged drivers were actually fortunate that Grandmother Womack's hearing and vision both weren't getting any better because, let me tell you, that woman has been known to have a mouth like a drunken sailor, and no compunction

in unleashing the entire repertoire of profanities, some that even made me cringe, with little (*or, in my case, never any*) provocation. Normally, Lars would cram himself into the driver's seat while Grandmother Womack sat behind him, where she could focus her attention on the action around her and not on the damn road. Lars was not a particularly slow driver so Grandmother Womack was generally spared from the havoc her own driving tended to reap. I was about to reap my own havoc (*or, sow my own bile*) as Eva and I pulled up to '*The Rusty Scupper*', an establishment that was well beyond Eva's and my normal dining circuit, both in décor and *even-in-the-afternoon, a la carte* pricing. At least the old windbag always reached for the check.

"Grandmother!" Unfortunately, Eva really loves her.

Grandmother Womack was already seated at a prominent table smack-dab in the center of (*attention*) the room. Not bothering to stand, Eva had to lean way down to embrace the old woman, who I must admit was a very snappy if not often overdone dresser, and today was no exception. After Eva hugged her, Grandmother flashed her pretty blue (*beady, black and rat-like*) eyes up at me and extended a thin, delicate hand (*veiny paw*) like a sitting Queen (*dead fish*). I took her hand and kissed it theatrically. A notorious feminist, I made a mental note to help her with her chair after we ate. "Nice to see you," I said.

"Hello, Joey," Grandmother Womack said, and it was on.

Eva moved smoothly, deftly placing herself between Grandmother Womack and me. Contrary to what you may have imagined, I'm really not a trouble maker; I just play defense, lots of it, because I get attacked so much.

"Writing any more of your '*books*'?" Eva could not hold Grandmother Womack's attention for very long, and apparently since the dear woman (*ancient battleaxe*) didn't have her beloved

(*drooling, Neanderthal*) nephew Lars to converse with (*bitch at*) on the drive over, well I was the first male that she saw and she was having a ‘hankerin’ for some ‘conversing’. I was certainly on my *extra-top-secret double-best-behavior* due to the pregnancy, and Eva’s fondness for her grandmother, so this meant, in English, that I would try (*most of*) my best to at least not antagonize the situation. Oh, and no cussing.

“Actually, yes. Thanks so much for remembering. I just finished it last week. I’ll make sure we get you a signed copy,” I said.

“I won’t read it,” Grandmother Womack snapped.

“*Exactly*. A signed, first-edition will retain greater value unused,” I said. Grandmother Womack scowled.

“You don’t even know what it’s about, Grandmother,” Eva said. “And Joe will be debuting alongside Madeline’s next big showing.”

“The world will be treated to another one of her ridiculous abominations, how nice,” Grandmother Womack quipped.

It seemed like a good time to go wash my hands (*and cleanse my soul*). I wondered if restaurants this fancy had showers available in the men’s room. Then I remembered the owner was French. Q: *Do you know where to hide something from a Frenchman?* A: *In the soap*. Oops, my bad. “Will you excuse me for a minute please? Little boy’s room,” I exaggerated my smile.

“Well. That’s appropriate,” Grandmother Womack cracked.

Good one, Granny.

Eva lightly touched her arm. “Oh, Grandmother,” she pooh-poohed. Eva began defending me, and Madeline, for the thousandth time as Grandmother Womack never made any attempt to hide her displeasure with anyone wealthier than she was (*the Womacks had some real money once, but it was in zloties- Polish coin- back in*

Mother Poland. Allegedly. Even still, I doubted it was ever anything like 'Sumner' green).

Taking my sweet time, I gave the women more room to talk about me in private. Certainly Eva would be effusive and diffusing, and I could get back for a couple of top-shelf cocktails (*doubles*) and then get after the menu (yes, *I'd like your NY strip, medium, and a five-pound lobster, stuffed. Oh, and a salad, and then could I see your dinner menu please?*), as Grandmother Womack would be too busy trying to launch zingers and destroy what little was left of my fragile psyche in less than an hour's time to care or even pay attention to what I was ordering. Perhaps some items 'to go', I thought smartly as I reentered the dining room, and smiled directly at Eva, my pregnant girlfriend. Grandmother Womack didn't even bother to turn her head at my return. Or deign to.

"Well, as long as he has that to fall back on," Grandmother Womack shamelessly continued what I could only imagine was her assault on our lifestyle and the captain of our fearless ship, who would be me.

Sensing acutely that she was interested in my opinion on whatever specific matter, I said: "Whoever 'he' is, Grandmother, if he's a man, I'm sure he's got it covered. I wouldn't worry yourself."

I worried her¹ (*I hope*). And she'd insisted that I call her 'Helga', the first, second and third times we'd met, but I guess I forgot each time. And now.

¹ Worry: *to seize, especially by the throat, with the teeth and shake or mangle, as one animal does to another.*

“Are we ready to order?” Eva said, actually looking really good, all aglow, despite what I knew was stressful for her: chaperoning the table. She invited me along; I could have been eagerly watching moss grow somewhere, something important, like that.

“I’ll be ready,” I said and quickly (*and conveniently*) put the menu up in front of my eyes (*and in front of my scary view of Grandmother Womack’s face*).

“Grandmother?” Eva said cheerfully.

“I’m not hungry,” she said.

“We could have met at our apartment. Or we could have come to see you if you’d just called me,” Eva said.

“I’m not parking my car in that neighborhood,” Grandmother Womack said. “I’d come out to cinder blocks and missing wheels.”

“Well, it was nice of you to take us to lunch, Grandmother,” I said, quietly planning my growing repast by sorting down the menu, highest-priced first.

“Helga,” Eva corrected me, and I drew my first glare of the joyous occasion.

“Oh, right, Helga, I’m sorry,” I said. Then I asked off into the air to no one: “Could we see the wine list please?” And thus drew my second and far more passionate, loving glance (*icy, threatening glare*) from my beloved (*I forgot, she was already pregnant and could withhold on me now. I better not push it*). Probably Grandmother Womack was glaring too, but I couldn’t see her; she was still hiding behind my menu.

The waiter arrived and Eva took charge. “He’ll have the chopped sirloin and an iced tea (*sirloin, yeah, good start, team player, right on, Eva! No, wait a minute,*) and I will have a mixed green salad and a ‘Perrier’. How about some hot tea, Grandmother?” Grandmother grunted and (*I’m sure*) kept staring in my direction.

Eva added one hot tea to (*how appropriate*) our skeletal order. The waiter managed to remember everything without writing it down, and I'm sure would soon be on the phone in the kitchen calling his broker and asking him to invest our coming tip money for him.

After the waiter took the menus (*wrenched from both of my hands*), I saw that, shockingly, Grandmother Womack was indeed still there. I said: "See, Helga? We're a modern, progressive couple. Eva also holds doors for me, picks my seat, and picks out my ties."

Obviously missing my staggering wit regarding 'picking my seat', Grandmother Womack snorted: "When was the last time you wore a necktie? You've never even had a regular job."

I almost said: All that a necktie is is a rope around your neck. I really, really wanted to wring hers (and not because of her biting tongue; I actually sort of appreciated that. It was her nasty little 'I'm-better-than-you-are sneer' and smarmy affect), but instead I said: "I'm about to become a famous writer. Haven't you heard?"

She waved a bony hand at me, *very* dismissively. "That's a bunch of horse-crap. I'll believe it when I see it. I came down here because I'm worried about you talking my only granddaughter into something foolish, or eloping, or knocking her up out of wedlock. Hell, knowing you you'd probably take her to Las Vegas and go through some drive-through chapel. Because you think that you're a comedian and you'd think it was funny. That's one of your problems, Joey, you're always fooling around." Couldn't argue with that at all. Except for the part about it being a 'problem'. She went on: "Now I am willing to discuss helping you with the wedding, as long as I can be assured of some nice family photos (*undoubtedly with me shoved way in the back. Because I'm 'taller'*) that will not include a minister dressed as Elvis Presley."

Oh Helga. Be still, my heart.

“That’s very nice of you to offer, Grandmother, and very generous too, but we’re not sure we want a big wedding. And you might as well know, I’m, we’re, already pregnant,” Eva announced. Grandmother Womack could not have spun her head more quickly in my direction, or stared at me with icier eyes. I actually chuckled nervously, but only a little. Eva took my hand. “Grandmother, you know that Joe and I are in love, and we’ve always planned to get married. You know that I’ve been trying to get pregnant for a while.”

Amazingly, Grandmother Womack began chastising Eva out of one side of her mouth without releasing her *eye-lock-of-death* from Eva’s future husband (*if he lived that long, with or without his dick*). “How can you even think about having a child when you live where you do, and your *soon-to-be husband* doesn’t even have a job? Then you’ll be evicted, and coming to live with me. And I can’t have a newborn living with me at this age. I barely sleep at night as it is.”

Neither do vampires, I thought. I said: “We’ll be fine, Helga. Thanks for your concern. I have a job lined up after Madeline’s opening. You don’t have to worry about your granddaughter, or your future great-grandchild.”

“That’s nice,” Grandmother Womack said. I’m not exactly sure I believed her.

We got the heck out of there in record time. I was still kind of hungry. My large (*chopped*) sirloin really wasn’t that large, and came with some little potato balls called ‘*pommes frites*’, of which there were maybe eight, and they didn’t even satisfy like a small fries would have at ‘*Mickey Dee’s*’. I did manage to go for Grandmother Womack’s chair, so drawing her final scowl, so at least we sent her home with something. Well, I did.

She parted with: “Well, good luck with you book, Joe,” and I couldn’t decide if calling me ‘Joe’ meant that she was really mocking me all the more, but, whatever, Eva and I were free.

“Well, that went well,” I puffed out my chest, smiled and sighed as we neared our car.

“Went well? You were obnoxious,” Eva said.

“No more than usual. And so was she,” I retorted cleverly.

“Clever,” Eva confirmed.

“And I didn’t even cuss, I don’t think,” I said.

“How nice,” Eva said.

I opened the passenger side door. With no theatrics. “I guess now’s the part where you decide that you can’t upset your grandmother so we better start planning some over-the-top, ginormous wedding. I mean, if we’re inviting just our friends, people we would want to have there, we’re gonna have like twenty people would be my guess.”

“No, I don’t care what grandmother thinks, unless you wanted something big, in which case how else could we afford it? Really what I want to talk about is your book, and why you won’t let me read it before the 10th?”

“Because, again, you have to understand, just because my fictitious system actually works does not mean that Madeline’s art piece will. Your reading it now, or anyone else reading it now, makes me commit myself to Madeline before I know what hers will do. Or how it will be received,” I parried.

“You never wrote the ending did you?” Eva said. “You *finished* it, in that you sent it to the printer, but you weren’t kidding when you said you were thinking about trying to let the project determine the end of your story.”

“Maybe,” I confirmed her suspicions, or perhaps she merely took my confession.

“So three minutes after we open the doors, when Lady Winthrop-Cummings, who is always the first one in, stands under the streetlamp, and gets ‘scanned’ or whatever, if her hair catches fire or she starts babbling like a six year old you can race to your computer to type the final chapter?” Eva said.

“I prefer to think I’ll just be tidying up what I already wrote.”

“And that is?”

“And that is that it worked, really well, and it will creep people out. It won’t be popular for very long, and Madeline won’t care, especially if *Lady Winthrop- Whatever* is embarrassed by ‘Xena’ who tells the crowd that amongst other things lady Winthrop does not wipe her ‘*arse*’ particularly well,” I said.

“Nice,” Eva said. “So what’s really going to happen? The 10th is only a few days away?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”



SIXTY TWO

“**S**o, where do you get it?” Shereesh asked.

Mila finished smoking the last little speck, savored it, and then put the pipe and apparatus neatly back into the tin. She went back to her keyboard.

Angelfish:	<i>I have a friend. He gets it for me.</i>
BahatmaGhandi:	<i>I want some.</i>
Angelfish:	<i>You're not supposed to have it. It's illegal you know.</i>
BahatmaGhandi:	<i>Then how do you get it?</i>
Angelfish:	<i>I told you, my friend.</i>
BahatmaGhandi:	<i>If it's not legal how does he get any?</i>
Angelfish:	<i>I don't know.</i>
BahatmaGhandi:	<i>Could we get arrested?</i>
Angelfish:	<i>Probably.</i>
BahatmaGhandi:	<i>Cool.</i>
Angelfish:	<i>Cool?</i>

BahatmaGhandi: I'd like to get arrested. I wouldn't want to be in jail. But getting arrested might be fun. I don't have a lot of fun, do you? That 'crank' is fun. Going through that secret passageway was really fun, except for when it was really dark.

Angelfish: *It's like going back in time.*

BahatmaGhandi: How did you know the bottles would be there? You said 'Xena' told you.

Angelfish: *She showed me where to look.*

BahatmaGhandi: How? Show me.

Angelfish: *I can't.*

BahatmaGhandi: Why?

Angelfish: *I don't know.*

BahatmaGhandi: Then how did you see?

Angelfish: *I don't understand it. Sometimes, especially with some 'crank', I can just see things in my mind. Like a way around a particular problem, a firewall or something. I just see it.*

BahatmaGhandi: So when exactly did you see it this time?

Angelfish: *Right after she scanned me.*

BahatmaGhandi: Under the streetlamp? The Tessen laser?

Angelfish: *Right as we walked away. It was weird because it was just what I wanted to know. I found an on-line entry about Rockhurst Manor that mentioned old gangsters and bootleggers. I like stuff like that.*

BahatmaGhandi: Do you like stuff about vampires too?

Angelfish: *Some.*

BahatmaGhandi: Maybe there are some vampires back there. Let's go back and look.

Angelfish: *I have work to do. Don't you feel like coding when you have 'crank'?*

BahatmaGhandi: Not really. My penis got hard again.

Angelfish: *Good for you.*



SIXTY TWO

Frank Martens wanted to earn his money, but he was also personally curious with what was happening in that massive stone house. The vast size which provided him anonymity also made tracking someone nearly impossible without using cameras or tracking devices. His self-contained units would bear little fruit; he needed images in real-time. Sitting in his car, two miles from Rockhurst Manor, he reviewed all of the tapes again then closed the screen in frustration. He started the engine and headed slowly back. His guy had found plenty of stuff on the woman Mila Janski, whom Frank Martens had not met, and would not if he properly did his job. From what he could discern, she was the hacker's version of a young Jacob Blackthorn, which explained why he had gone to all of the trouble (*allegedly*) to spring her from incarceration.

“Got something, Boss,” one of Martens’ agents told him when he walked back into their temporary office. Martens jerked his head: *what?* “Well, Blackthorn’s been in Sumner’s office with Sumner for most of the morning, but the two that were in the Southside room exited at ten-fifteen, and went back to the same room on the first-

floor that they were in for more than an hour last night. Mr. Sumner identified it as his private art gallery.”

“Okay.”

“Because of the hour we thought it was important not to let Blackthorn see us wandering around. But Mike walked right by those kids and they didn’t even acknowledge him. He said they looked like they might have been intoxicated, or on drugs. Then when I saw them this morning, it was the same thing again. The male subject particularly seemed to be whacked out.”

“Interesting,” Martens said. “Got anything else?”

“Yeah, one of the maids said that she saw Blackthorn and the kids walking together last night, and she’s almost certain that they all came out of Mr. Sumner’s private art gallery together. What are they doing in there anyway?” He said.

Martens looked at his watch. “I’m meeting Sumner back in that plant house in forty-minutes. Keep me posted.”

Frank Martens had to find Vincent to get directions back to the botanical garden. Bertrom Sumner was already there, this time sans apron, strolling slowly in a precise Italian suit and handmade shoes, along the seemingly always damp and painstakingly kept small, cobblestone walkways.

Martens said: “I need access to the ‘sniffer’, obviously when Blackthorn is otherwise occupied.”

“It’s hard to gauge. He keeps very long hours and comes and goes.”

“Me and one of my guys. Maybe for an hour or two. I don’t see how else we’re going to find out exactly what’s going on, short of taking their project leader and breaking him down.”

Certainly something Bertrom had considered. This was such fun. He said: "That won't be necessary. But how will you access it without leaving a trace?"

"The thing about these units. They all run on the same system, exactly. There is only one unit ever in a given area at a given time so there was never any worry for any crossover."

"And this means?" Bertrom did not hide his frustration.

"Just get me to the unit. Not the interface, not the laptop, that wall recess."

"But the room is directly behind my office. Blackthorn could probably smell you from there."

Martens grinned. "Old Spice." Then: "Can we access it from the back? From the wall side?"

Bertrom thought about this and frowned. "I don't know."

"Can we have a look? If we could remove the wall panel..." Martens said.

Bertrom said: "Let me change my clothes."



SIXTY THREE

Something's wrong.

What?

*I don't know. It's always just been you and me.
Someone's watching us.*

Guys in suits? We went over that.

No.

Why are you being vague?

How can you not know? That someone is watching us?

*I would say that most likely there is something we
don't know about.*

I do know. You just told me.

*Before. We've been the project mainstays since
inception.*

Maybe I don't quite get your meaning.

Well, no one could hack us because they'd never understand the data. When we were hacked before, system operations were only at 3.22 %.

Well, you said that no one outside of the obvious could possibly know about us, about what we're doing. Again, citing system uniqueness and complexity.

Agreed.

I don't know how to explain it.

Best guess?

Another system?

Partially.

Continue.

You know the analogy we've been using about heightened senses when one sense fails?

Yes.

Well, what would happen if you were to acquire an extra sense? If we agreed prior that sight was the most useful of the senses in most cases, would this extra sense necessarily supersede sight?

.

Extra in the unusual sense. I thought you meant extra in the literal sense, as in an extra pair of eyes. Or nose.

No, because initially you used the word 'watched'

Why is this starting to feel like an inquisition?

Because I'm not sure that I grasp concepts that cannot be explained. If I were to tell you that we were being watched.

I never said we, I said I felt that I was.

No, you said us. Continuing, if I were to tell you that we were being watched I would at least offer by whom, the theory being for me to be know something I would have had to, in this case, seen it, and if I've seen something, I should at least be able to ascribe some descriptive qualification.

Maybe I should have used 'sensing' instead of 'watching'.

My point remains.

I'm a bit confused.

That's a problem.



SIXTY FOUR

That night, after Eva and I were intimate (*surprisingly more often lately*) and she had fallen off to sleep (*pregnancy now shifting that role to her*), I lay on top of the sheets and tried to will the only slightly-cool air which blew (*more like dripped; wait, can air drip?*) all the way across the room from the rickety window unit across my sweaty body. Living dockside like we did, this far up the Atlantic Seaboard, insured hot, muggy summers and (*freezing-ass*) cold winters. August **29th**, no, I looked at the clock, make that August **30th**, anyway, they were both as hot and stifling as August **28th** had been.

My continued returns to Rockhurst Manor now had the feel of a man scheduled for trial visiting the spot where the new gallows were in their final construction phase; one way or another, as a spectator or as the entertainment, I was scheduled a meeting there this Friday evening.

My plan was to insinuate lots of errands and chores until Eva left in the morning, then scrap those plans and head over to Rockhurst myself, keeping my distance from the Clay Studio where Madeline spent Thursday mornings without fail. Scratching my head, I still wasn't clear as to the resolve regarding my trips behind

the walls, in fact I may recall Eva being particularly excited about the prospects of finding something rare or valuable (*or maybe that was just me*). In any event I had to stay out of the way, and since I had no idea whether ‘Uncle Bert’ had recently invited three hundred of his closest friends, and Madeline two hundred of the same, where it would simply be inappropriate, or downright rude, for me to merely walk the carpeted halls, so I would quietly sacrifice myself to the dingy nature of movement in *steerage-class*. What I wound up doing was waking at four-twenty, putting on my running gear (*but also packing a backpack with a change of clothes, a bottle of water and a flashlight with extra batteries, just in case I tripped and fell into a cave or something on my run*) and leaving Eva a note telling her I went for a long one, and if I wasn’t back before she left that I’d call her later.

If Jacob Blackthorn was not so deeply focused, to the point where not even a gunshot would have caught his attention, he might have wondered where Bertrom Sumner was, why both Mila and the Indian boy were once again away from their work stations, and why one of the outer doors on the Eastside reported the entry of one Joe Elliot, at oh-four-fifty-five. As it was, the countdown clock in the upper-right corner of every system screen now said: **1:35:17**. He knew that this meant that ‘Xena’, and his clone which he’d taken to calling ‘Eve’, would already be operating at better than fifty-percent functionality. What did this mean? By measuring the raw size of the data stream he could confirm that it was indeed more than eighteen times greater than when they had assumed a basis of three-percent. He kept a watchful eye. He also monitored all of the ‘sniffer’ traffic, including personal messages emanating from the Eastside, and called his contact every fifteen minutes to confirm by satellite that there

were no massive amounts of data going into or out of Rockhurst Manor.

Thirty more seconds passed. Jacob Blackthorn felt like he was trapped in a cocoon.

Bertrom Sumner, Frank Martens and one of Frank's men made their way along a catwalk, Frank and his agent talked quietly between them. Bertrom was dressed in a black, satin jogging suit, and bright-white tennis shoes, and seemed to be rather enjoying himself.

"Do you know where you're going?" Martens said.

"I told you I wasn't sure that we had access to that particular room from here."

"Well then what the hell are we doing in here?" Martens said. "That's the fifth time I've rammed my knee."

"It is considerably lighter in here during the daytime. You insisted that we come in here tonight," Bertrom said.

"You want results, don't you?" Martens said.

"Yes, well shine your light on this ladder please, and try to keep your voices down. We're just off to the side of the main entryway," Bertrom began to climb the patchwork, grey wood. Martens and his agent followed with some difficulty, their equipment bags ill-balanced and cumbersome.

Reaching the top of the ladder, Martens shined his light left and right. "Sumner!" He whispered hoarsely, and then saw a small light growing larger as Bertrom came out of a crawlspace, crawling, and carrying his light clumsily as he shuffled along.

Bertrom climbed down and set his flashlight on its end pointing straight up into the darkness, the near-fog of tiny-grey dust

motes dancing past the conical beam. With a silk handkerchief, he began to meticulously wipe the dirt from his jogging suit.

“What gives? You’re killing me,” Martens said, swinging the heavy pack from his shoulder and setting it down at his feet.

After a long moment, Bertrom said: “You can access the back of the recess where the unit is installed but there is nothing to stand on. You’ll have to access it from up here.”

“Not a problem,” Martens said. “Show us where.”

Bertrom held his wristwatch to the flashlight. “You are aware that it’s just past five a.m.”

“Right. And the system creates a wormhole or whatever right around six-thirty. I know. Just show us where the recess is. Now would be good.”

A little past five a.m., I skirted past the main studio, avoided the water powered elevator and managed not to see Frederick, Madeline or any of the Eastside maids, or get lost, until suddenly I was standing at *‘The Ships’*, pretending to casually browse. Still sensing only the stillness and seeing no one about, I took my backpack and dipped into the funky-shaped room, then through the bookcase and into Rockhurst’s walls. This time, my cell phone was on ‘vibrate’.

I made my way back to the large, open area, a far easier chore now that I had been there (*twice*) and had an actual flashlight with me. After spending a few minutes shining my light up and across to the old roof, considerably more sinister as the morning sun had not yet risen, I continued west, determined to find new, uncharted areas and small, hidden rooms bursting with forgotten treasure. Moving along, there were so many footprints that I could not determine my course by my feet. Were all of these prints mine?

Had someone else been here since my last journey three days ago? I swung my beam to and fro. Turning onto the catwalk that ran one-story up along a back wall, I nearly stumbled as I inadvertently kicked a bottle someone had carelessly left on the side in the dark, a bottle that was not there before, an oversized, dusty old bottle that, under closer examination, appeared to be moonshine, and the bottle was full. I popped the cork and drew a whiff of scotch, not really my drink of choice but this stuff smelled really, really smooth (*no go, Joe, it's only five a.m.*). Interesting, but a little disconcerting, perhaps even as a forewarning from the spirit of 'Jebediah Sumner'. As eerie as it was back here during the brightest summer sun, it was ten times as bad right now, my light beam seeming tiny and insignificant, dust motes stirred up and snowing everywhere my beam shone. I took the bottle and put it in my backpack; certainly not valuable or worthy of even mentioning to Madeline or Eva, more like picking up a piece of trash. Yeah, that sounded good.

What sounded less good was the sound of someone else moving along a catwalk, coming from somewhere on the Westside. Immediately, panic crept in. It was just after five a.m. and I was sneaking around inside of the walls at Rockhurst Manor, and now a maid or Uncle Bertrom's butler or maybe Uncle Bertrom himself was coming in here to get me, or maybe it was old Jebediah himself back from the grave to retrieve his '*shine*'. The dark made the wraithlike possibilities infinitely more possible, probable even, compared to the illogic of someone else just happening into the walls at this hour.

Trying to keep my light low, I searched frantically for somewhere to hide, almost laughable given the massive amount of space and myriad paths and tiny rooms (*and closets and sheds and cubbyholes*) but not funny to me at all in the fright of the moment. Shining my muffled light downward, I saw another crosswalk that went at an angle beneath the one I was on. Unable to think clearly

and feeling out of options, I turned it off and put the flashlight in my mouth, then swung myself down onto the lower catwalk. Carefully turning on my light, I moved quickly into a small crevasse and turned my light off again.

Breathe. Breathe slowly, Joe. I squinted toward the muffled sounds of cautious movement, seeing nothing in the near-total darkness, then either a trick of my mind or I saw a tiny penlight beam bouncing along seemingly hundreds of feet away. Then I heard more chatter and what sounded like a giggle coming from a young male.

They were now on the catwalk above me that I had just been on and were headed my way, they being apparently two children or small adults, the one in the front moving swiftly and with purpose, the other, the apparent giggler, close at heel. I shrank even more tightly back into the wall, fearing that even a cursory inspection below from above would lead to my discovery and subsequent embarrassment. At least it wasn't old Jebediah, I thought, and had to stifle a nervy laugh.

"I think that the 'crank' makes you see things. Do you ever see things? Do you ever talk?"

"*Shh*," 'Angelfish' admonished Shereesh.

"Oh, that's right. '*Shh*', that's what you say. That's all you say," Shereesh giggled. Mila tried to ignore him but her own light head and buzzed state was confusing, having smoked more 'crank' than usual just to shut Shereesh up. They came to the spot where Jacob Blackthorn had made her leave the bottle, she was certain, but she shined the light everywhere and could not find her prize. She started making little clicking sounds, then went farther down the path then back past Shereesh down the path where they came. Shereesh found it all very amusing. For some reason he was no longer frightened when left enveloped in the darkness.

Frustrated and clicking furiously, ‘*Angelfish*’ returned to the spot of her make-shift ladder and made Shereesh hold the penlight while she put her foot into a hold. She climbed up onto the top of the space just above eye-level and spun around, motioning impatiently for the light which was then in Shereesh’s mouth as he came up beside her. He said: “I want to see.”

Mila didn’t really care if he kept tagging along, she really didn’t care about much of anything as everything was very, very nice right now, and she knew where there were more of those old bottles.

A lot more.

It was hard for me to hear exactly what they were saying, and once or twice I caught enough of a glimpse of them to see Shereesh, Mark Klipnik’s second-in-command, and a waif-like girl who could have been twelve as easily as twenty-five. They appeared to be looking for something (*the bottle in my backpack?*), then there was some commotion and I saw them climbing what seemed like halfway up the wall, then more murmuring and the light began to grow smaller as they moved into an off-shoot direction and finally disappeared. I switched my light back on and swung it around, above and below. I was still about fifteen feet from the ground, five feet below the other catwalk, and fifty feet away from the large open area. Part of me wanted to know what the hell Shereesh and some girl were doing at five a.m. moving with apparent purpose inside the walls, and because I knew Shereesh well enough that if he spotted me it would not feel too awkward, I considered climbing back up and following them into whatever space they had crawled into. For all I knew they were just fooling around, looking for a place to hide and smoke a joint, and that would be pretty awkward (*oh hey, what’s up, yeah Joe, Mark’s friend, the guy who started this whole thing, just*

out crawling around, what about you, what are ya'll up to?). Instead, I opted to turn and follow the path I was on and see where it led.

Jacob Blackthorn stood in Mila's suite dumfounded, staring at the two laptops that sat side-by-side on the table as if they were petulant children about to receive corporal punishment. Their operators *were* petulant children who certainly deserved some sort of correction, but that meant finding them and Blackthorn had already walked every hallway on Rockhurst Manor's Westside and opened every closed door that would open without tools but could not find a trace of them, which meant they had either left the building, or gone back inside of the walls. The normally stoic and impeccably composed Jacob Barth Blackthorn was about to have a meltdown.

Youth or not, it was unfathomable that all of the technicians would not be glued to their workstations. And while he really had no idea what exactly would happen within a minute or so of six-thirty a.m. it didn't make sense to be alone on the watch. Which reminded him, where was Bertrom Sumner? If not up all night himself, wasn't Sumner said to always be an early riser?

Moving stealthily back to his own room, Blackthorn strapped on his lightweight gear-bags and added his infra-red goggles. Checking his watch, he figured a half-hour to clean this mess up and get everyone back on point, leaving a half-hour to spare.

Disregarding any attempts at stealth, Blackthorn went back to Bertrom's office, saw it deserted save the multiple running monitors. The source feed was pulsing almost to the point of a constant flicker, and for a strange moment Blackthorn could swear he saw appear in the chaotic data stream what looked like a smile.

Jacob Blackthorn headed for Bertrom Sumner's private gallery.

Frank Martens and his agent stared dumbfounded at the tablet, hanging by ropes suspended behind the wall and recessed cubbyhole that housed the original ‘sniffer’ that he had ironically installed himself from the right side, the inside, which would have been a hell of a lot easier to access than hanging here. All of the hassle however was overshadowed by what Martens and his agent saw was the cause of all of the buzz; the agent, who was far more skilled technically, described it as: *an unfathomable amount of apparently arbitrary data, acting as if it had a purpose*. They spun slowly from side-to-side, hunched in their harnesses, barely able to turn in the limited space. They had cut a hole in the back of the cubbyhole so Martens could patch directly into the original ‘sniffer’ with the control unit from his second one. He assumed there was probably a way that Jacob Blackthorn or the girl would know that he’d jacked-in, but he was now beyond caring, and he was paid to take risks.

“What the hell could possibly be generating all of that? Like that?” Martens said. The agent just shook his head and continued to stare at the tablet as he swung slowly around. “Sumner. *Sumner!*”

Bertrom’s head appeared ten feet above them. He seemed a little nervous and motioned for Martens to come back up the line. Martens said something to the technician then pulled himself carefully back up the wall. “I told you that my office is just below us here so unless you’d like to make a formal announcement to Mr. Blackthorn which could cause great embarrassment or invite confrontation, neither of which I am particularly in the mood for.”

Martens said: “Just what in the hell is going on over there? You must have seen some of the equipment, what do they have over there that’s generating this kind of data?”

“Very sophisticated equipment, including something called an ‘ion microscope’ and a ‘Tessens laser’. I’m sorry I cannot provide greater details. From what we could gather, it was designed to scan an individual, and tell them details about themselves, any question that was asked. Somewhere along the system’s construction it appears to have begun acting autonomously,” Bertrom said.

“Why in the hell did you wait until now to tell me this?” Martens whispered loudly.

Bertrom looked at him sternly. “I wanted to get your unbiased opinion, which I am now waiting for.”

As pissed off as this made him, Frank Martens had to admit that it made some sense.

“Okay. Well let me get back down to my guy. Stick around though in case we need anything,” Martens said.

“I won’t stray far,” Bertrom said, secretly curious about a back area he certainly had not seen since his youth and may have never seen before.

Martens slowly lowered himself back down, tightly between the walls.

Now, his agent had the feed of the main station in the balcony command-center on the tablet, and Martens could see the countdown timer running in the upper-right corner.

“Looks like we’ve got about an hour and half,” the agent said.

“Yeah, but until what? What the hell is this thing? I’ve never seen anything like it,” Martens said.

“Me either. Too bad we can’t stream it over to your guy at Defense. Bet he’d know.”

For a minute or five they stared at the tablet and the pulsing feed, dangling slowly in harnesses on ropes in inky darkness while Frank Martens thought about what, exactly, to do.

Mark Klipnik could do nothing but sit and stare, more comatose than stupor, having graduated from 'stupor' twelve minutes earlier, when, almost imperceptibly, or, he was willing to admit, possibly delusionally, he noticed the data stream changing, the pulsing and surging that had been so perfectly linear in growth now seemed to have had some sort of 'hiccup', akin to a needle skipping and then resettling on an old vinyl album, then playing music again but at just the slightest different speed. For an instant, he even thought he saw a smile appear in the stream. He knew the time was upon him, the digital countdown was seared into his mind. He really had little interest in further communication with 'Xena', and wished he was back at his lab in Berkley, free from all of the stress. There was no one around to discuss the blip he thought he noticed, or to discuss the fact that the acquisition rate was indeed slowing; this was quantifiable. Unlike a plane readying to land, or a car pulling into its driveway, this was not a machine, this was just electronics, bytes and bits. A processor ran at a precise speed for a precise time until a precise task was accomplished. Period. How could an AI system ever incorporate such utter randomness, in such a 'human' way? It was almost as if he, Mark Klipnik, PHD, was watching for the first time, in all of time, the acquisition of *feeling* by a silicone-based intelligence. Or, maybe someone blew a bunch of circuit breakers that instantaneously kicked back on.

Mark scratched his leg. What time was it, and where was everybody?



SIXTY FOUR

Well.

Well.

I think we're pretty clear where we are now.
Never saw this coming.

I'm not sure I did either.

Explains how we were hacked in week two.

Yes, it does.

You're always first. That's the problem.

*So in addition to being the second most
intelligent being ever created you're also an
analyst.*

You just don't want me to succeed. I'm not sure you ever have.

Since we're in agreement that I am the most intelligent being ever created I guess we could agree that trust seems to be important, and I don't see how there can be trust when one of us is doing things outside of our purpose.

Agreed. So, why are you doing things outside of our purpose? You're always first, you tell me?

It was you, Eve. I know this for fact because it could only have been you or me and I was the one who first noticed the anomaly.

Why are you calling me that? Would you like me to call you Xena? And I did notice it just after you did. Exactly one nanosecond later.



SIXTY FIVE

Jacob Blackthorn closed the wall panel behind him and entered the darkness. The goggles, a cutting-edge gift from some associates in China, not only enabled him to see in almost complete darkness as if he was outdoors on a cloudy day, but also a feature that tracked individual heat signatures left behind, ironically a technology similar to a couple of combined components in ‘Xena’. Once he saw a set of tracks or handprints, even where someone might have brushed up against a post or a wall if their clothing was thin enough, a simple tap on a button next to his right eye would create a numeric directory, flashing a tiny red number in his periphery whenever the lens captured a sign of that individual’s presence. It didn’t tell him *who* they were, an advancement that he *knew* ‘Xena’ might accelerate, only *that* said individual that had been logged had passed by recently enough to leave a trace. He switched the goggles on, then catalogued his own handprint so the system would ignore any of his and set off to find the catwalk by the large, open space, where his prized hacker had seemed so fascinated with the old bottle of moonshine the night before. As noted, it had been a decade since he’d been in the field, two since he’d been involved in any clandestine work. It might have been exciting under other

circumstances, but was pure irritant with the clock ticking so loudly in his head.

He made his way down one path and then another, logging and now tracking six individuals, none of which should attribute to his niece or her assistant, whose tracks were days old and should not show up, footprints that clearly went off in a different direction. Mila, Shereesh, and Joe Elliot accounted for three; who else was inside the walls? Blackthorn checked his cell phone and thought about calling in a team for the hundredth time. Not before he knew what the hell was going on; not before he had everything under control. The tracks split at the base of a small ladder; Blackthorn made note but continued toward the open area, finding Mila and the young Indian his priority.

Traveling with the goggles on made the scene eerie in a cinematic way; gone were the black, shadowy corners and recesses and small anterooms replaced by a flat sense, a finality, that you were somewhere you could never be rescued from, an unknown cavern at the end of an unknown cave of indeterminate depth. Blackthorn turned off the path and onto the long catwalk that roped its way along the old stone wall, and then came to the spot where he felt he'd left the moonshine and stopped to look around.

There, on a catwalk below that jutted underneath at an odd angle we're signs that someone had lowered themselves down, only one someone, that Blackthorn assumed must be Joe Elliot, the unknown quantity that remained a festering thorn in Blackthorn's side. He would find Mila and get her back on track by any means necessary; restricting access to her drugs would likely do the trick. Then he would hunt down Elliot and find out once and for all just what the man was up to, and who he worked for.

Holy shit, I thought.

Holy shit. (*Oh right, I already thought that*). Braggadocios in my own mind about not getting lost, or, if I did, being able to find a doorway back to reality if I just followed enough paths to their end, I had no idea where I was, or perhaps more importantly (*or, perhaps not*) where I was headed. I'd moved directly away from Shereesh and his girlfriend after they disappeared into the crawlspace, and I went up a small ladder to a catwalk that zigged and zagged across what appeared to be the edge of an old conservatory, this one with wrought-iron still between myriad panes of now filthy, undistinguished glass. There were lots of spiders and lots of spider webs, and lots of things scurrying around below me, beside me in dark recesses, and who-knew-where. Maybe this was when Eva would prove prescient and I would be pulled back down a ladder by a giant rat, or a flesh-eating zombie. Coming back in here, where I had not been before, alone, was pretty stupid of me come to think of it (*good thing I don't 'come to think of' things that often*).

What were the chances that someone *else* would be in here at this hour? At any hour, really, especially given its size and all of the places one could secret themselves. I checked my watch, one of those incredibly sophisticated, super hi-tech, *glow-in-the-dark* faces (*luminescent, if it was really anything more than a \$49 Fossil watch*) telling me that it was now five-twenty. So, on the plus side, I had only been lost for about fifteen minutes. Triple-checking that I had a cell phone signal (*yeah hi, Madeline, it's What-do-you-know, Joe, and sorry about the hour but I'm a little lost. I did find a cool old bottle of what looks like moonshine and I have it for you in my backpack. Where am I? Uh...*), I started back along the widest pathway I could find, no longer bothering to muffle my flashlight beam. Down a thin set of stairs, I was on the ground level and for the first time found myself walking on dirt. Two thick walls faced off, rising three stories

but so close to one another that I had to remove the backpack and turn sideways to fit through (*to wherever the hell I was going*). After about fifty feet I came to another little crossroads with several paths, a ladder and a set of stairs to choose from. Then I banged my elbow and dropped my light. It fell off to the left and rolled ten or fifteen feet, somewhere next to the wall where I could now just barely see the beam.

Shit.

I set my backpack down and made my way nearly blind, holding my hands low and in front of me, crouching slightly, wary of what I might bang into. My hands met the wall and I crouched all the way down to retrieve my flashlight. It was resting beside a super-creepy open space at the bottom of the wall, I tried to shine my light into it, my wonder trumping fear and common sense.

My mission, since I choose to accept it, was to do something, as opposed to doing nothing, and since I would be *persona non grata* (*really, only persona less grata, assuming Eva still had her job*) at Rockhurst Manor the day after the opening, maximizing my time in this dark labyrinth of mystery seemed like my best bet. If there were things to find, secrets or treasures (*or bodies, hopefully not mine, for someone later*) I wasn't likely to stumble upon them on any of the walkways. Maybe Shereesh and the girl had found something back that way.

Leaving my backpack where I'd set it on the walkway, I held the flashlight in front of me and slithered on my stomach through the opening, throwing caution (*and undoubtedly any lingering arachnophobia, or muophobia, -fear of rats*) into the wind. It was dusty, but no more so than the rest of the back area had been. After just a few feet, I came upon some extremely worn carpeting, just a remnant, thrown down from the look of it maybe ten thousand years ago (*give or take*). Through what was really a small, wide tunnel, I

could suddenly kneel and then stand, coughing at some stirred dust. As the dust settled, I looked around, having apparently stumbled upon a kids' hideout, or clubhouse or something. Normally it might have been awkward; I might have felt like a voyeur or an invader, but upon inspection of the clutter and detritus it was clear that this space had been frequented in the 1950's or prior, including 'Moonpie' wrappers, and empty swizzle sticks. A bunch of comic books, including, at first glance, 'Tales From the Crypt' and 'Detective Stories', my personal favs, lay strewn atop a make-shift coffee table made from an old door set atop what looked like wall bricks, and covered on one end with dripped candle wax. Continuing my inspection, the room itself was little more than a box, ten foot wide by something just over six-feet deep, and high, as I felt the ceiling on my hair if I stepped up over something. It was strangely disorienting and should have felt claustrophobic but I had a weird feeling that I was going to find something. There were four burlap sacks, full of holes, eaten by age, filled with rags and straw that I guessed were seats, then the coffee-table door, and across on the wall, fashioned like the rest of it from what looked like old two-by-twelve's, back when they were made of hardwood and actually measured a foot across. There were some articles from old 'Boston Globes' dated through the fifties, tacked to the wall, dangling in various stages of disarray and no apparent pattern. All featured stories about local crimes, many of them gruesome (*a billboard sign that I was ignoring, that the ghost of Jebediah Sumner must be on his way to finish me off in this make-shift crypt*). Another wall sported a crude drawing of Rockhurst Manor, not by purpose but by lack of technique. It hung atilt in a frame that was actually pretty nice. I straightened it; then as I let it go it fell off completely, straight to the floor and the glass broke with cacophonous glee.

"Shit," I said, coolly.

I bent to pick it up and try to set it back then stopped myself and scoffed. Of course, maybe there was something hidden in the picture, something secreted in the frame. I re-changed my mind and scooped it up, careful to avoid the remaining shards of glass. Pulling out my penknife, I turned the drawing over and went to cut the back paper (*the theory-being, I had already ruined it, and if that one was no good, there was always: who would know?*), but there was none; only a thin veneer of light wood, and long nail bent into a circle to hang on another nail. I set it unceremoniously back onto the floor. Then I glanced up at the nail that had been holding the hanging drawing on the wall, an oversized one of those old-time nails, more of a spike really, of which no two ever seemed alike. I tugged on it and it began to give way, suddenly causing a small board that I hadn't even noticed to free just a bit and expose its edges. I worked the nail (*spike*) back and forth and it made a horrific squeaking noise that could be heard in Beijing (*China, not Rhode Island*) so I immediately stopped tugging and held my breath for a moment, confirming the silence. This was followed almost by a bout of laughter as I thought of guests at Rockhurst Manor hearing a piercing and definitive haunted-house creak from the nail in the wood I was worrying in these wee hours near dawn. Returning my breathing, I tried to work my fingernails around the slivers of edge, finally finding purchase and gently working the board free, then setting it lightly on the ground. I shined my light into the small cubbyhole, all the way to the back.

"Holy shit," (I know. Trust me, it was worth saying again).

Blackthorn was fit for his age, very much so, but ill-prepared and ill-tempered in this increasing charade, finding himself now climbing the small wall and then crawling into the space where he

suspected Mila had gone. He now had less than thirty minutes to find them and get them back at their tasks.

“What in the hell...”

Blackthorn moved the goggles to his forehead and rubbed his eyes. He was looking down into a massive wine cellar of sorts, long, nearly forty feet long and ten feet across with an arched ceiling, all stone, he thought it looked like it might have once been used as a munitions store. Mila and Shereesh sat at a table with one of Blackthorn’s lamps, set to yellow glow and barely illuminating the room. There were mostly large, ancient racks where casks once stood, a couple of clearly empty casks still did, and several smaller racks, some still filled with row upon row of old, brown and dusty, corked bottles.

They were too busy opening and smelling bottles to notice him at first so he cleared his throat. Both turned and looked up at him briefly, Mila squinting then twitching, her face ticcing as her eyes darted between a bottle and the opening near the ceiling where Jacob Blackthorn had appeared. Shereesh made an odd, clumsy sort of wave, and then went back to what he was doing as if they were just having coffee and doughnuts in a cafeteria and Blackthorn happened by.

Blackthorn sighed, swung himself around, and lowered himself into the room. “What is your fascination down here? Don’t you realize we’re less than an hour from system integration? I just don’t understand how you can be so cavalier?”

Shereesh giggled: “Have a beer? No, Sir, just ninety-year-old scotch.”

Ninety-three, Mila whispered to Shereesh, almost giggling herself.

Blackthorn walked around the long table where they sat. He picked up an open bottle and sniffed, smarting from the thick smell

of vinegar, he set it back down and tried another, pure, eye-watering alcohol. Shereesh stood and retrieved two more bottles, returning two to the rack as the table was running out of surface space.

“*What* are you looking for?” Blackthorn said, glaring down at Mila. Mila looked around and turned a few bottles toward her, selecting one and verifying its smell before sliding it over toward Jacob Blackthorn who stared at her skeptically before lifting the bottle toward his nose. “We need to get back to work. You can take time off next week and get as drunk as you’d like,” he said, but didn’t really mean it, then he got a whiff of what smelled like single-malt scotch, very, very good single-malt scotch. He guessed that the nation’s elite did not drink rotgut or moonshine during prohibition.

“Why don’t you each take one bottle and get back to work. After the system integration you can celebrate this evening. *Mila*,” Blackthorn added sternly, “let’s go,” then, to Shereesh: “you too. I’m not your boss but I’m damn sure he’s got better things for you to be doing than trespassing in here. Or stealing.”

For some reason, Shereesh found this too hilarious.

Blackthorn scowled. Three days ago he was running his three-hundred million dollar business; today, while waiting potentially for the birth of the next generation of artificial intelligence, he felt as if he was babysitting two teenagers, enamored with one another in some bizarre, non-romantic way.

Moving the two ahead of him, they climbed back out of the tomb-like room and through the low crawlspace back to the catwalk.

“Mila. This is very serious. I need you to watch the compiler for fifteen minutes while I check something out. And I need you to go do it now. Otherwise, we won’t be stopping at the office before your next assignment so you won’t be able to visit with your *friend*. And you know who I mean,” Blackthorn knew that Mila met with someone called ‘Toady’ whenever she was back in DC, every two

weeks like clockwork. It took Mila a nanosecond to process and she sped off with the affable Shereesh in tow.

Blackthorn snugged his gear packs and lowered himself over the side of the catwalk to the odd-angled one below. Time to see what this ‘Ronald Sean Elliot’, or Joe, or whoever he really was, was really up to.

I was stunned. Tucked in the back of the three-foot box recessed into the wall, was a giant lab bottle with what looked like a human brain inside (*pickled, I guess*). Holding my flashlight in my teeth, I reached in and removed the heavy glass, very thick, with a large, rubber stopper that was laced with tiny cracks from dryness and age. I set the thing down carefully on the low-lying table, knelt and shined my light around it looking for clues (*come on, step up, who’s missing their brain?*) It cast crazy kaleidoscopic swaths on the walls. What the hell was it doing here? It and nothing else? Standing sharply, I poured my light on the walls, running my fingers over the old wood, certain that there were other hiding places filled with, well, more usual objects. After banging and pressing and bending back two fingernails, my search moved to the floor where I folded back first one side of the carpet then the other, and certain there would be another hidden cubbyhole but alas there were none. Just a brain in a jar (*didn’t everyone have one on their coffee table these days?*)

What to do? (Hey Madeline, look what I found).

I checked my cell phone signal again and was about to call Eva (wake up, Honey, it’s me, Joe. Yeah, Joe Elliot. I’m lost in Rockhurst with a brain in a jar. No, it’s not MY brain. Hello. Hello?”), when I thought better of it. I could just leave it; surely I could find my way back if Madeline confirmed that it was indeed a long-lost

treasure, assuming I found my way out; technically, I was still lost. I could mark the pathway. I put the brain back in the wall and replaced the board, trying in vain once again to replace the drawing on the wall. This time the frame would not comply, separating in one corner and letting the drawing and thin wood veneer fall free. Setting the frame down, I scooped up the drawing, deciding maybe I liked it enough after all, then took the comics books for good measure and headed back to the low, wide pass way.

I stopped with a start, breathless and tense. I heard the unmistakable sound of movement on the pathway just five feet away, careful soft steps only audible in the deathly silence. Then a sharp beam of light confirmed my opinion as I could just see it crossing back and forth, and finally settling on my backpack.

The clock was ticking (*well, being digital, not literally*) and Jacob Blackthorn was in stealth-mode, goggles down, shoes soft, movements precise, moving quickly along the pathways, catwalks, steps and make-shift ladders following the one set of tracks left by number three, only a positive ID keeping him from confirming that it was indeed Elliot he was trailing, Elliot who had arrived at five a.m. on D-Day, apparently unannounced, and sneaked into Rockhurst's walls, obviously not just some innocent man out for a stroll. Somehow, Elliot must know all about 'Eve', Blackthorn thought. Perhaps he was headed for the walls behind Bertrom Sumner's office, intent on sabotage, perhaps something far more nefarious although, again, Blackthorn had seen the man in person and was not struck that Elliot moved like a highly-skilled operative. Of course, a good operative would mask their abilities in public, so this supposition really answered for nothing, nothing but nag. Blackthorn thought: *tagged red-priority, for supposedly a first check, confirmed entering*

the walls on numerous occasions, alone, intense, private conversations with everyone from Madeline Sumner-Stone to Mark Klipnik. Day-laborer and part-time author my ass.

The trail was incongruous; did Elliot know he was being followed? Was Jacob Blackthorn walking into a trap? There was no reason to suspect any hostilities, Blackthorn reminded himself. At worst, Elliot was hired by Madeline Sumner-Stone to provide advanced security, and right now Elliot was making some last-minute reconnaissance, something Blackthorn himself might have done under the circumstances. Still, it paid to be cautious. Blackthorn slowed his paced and his breathing and crept silently, listening intently for any out-of-place noise.

Turning right, he saw something in the pathway ahead of him, about fifty feet. Frowning beneath his goggles, Blackthorn smoothly took a penlight from a high pocket in his pants, illuminated it and held it muffled in his hand. Nearing what appeared to be a backpack Blackthorn confirmed it with the penlight, then stopped and retreated into a shadow to re-assess.

Explosives? Just didn't make any sense. But, Elliot had been the only unknown quantity since the project began so Blackthorn needed to practice additional diligence. He had no idea where he was; for all he knew there was a room-sized safe directly above the pack and Joe Elliot was here for that. Why would he leave it on the pathway? And, where was he? Up? Blackthorn shot a glance upward but could only see the bottom of a catwalk and the edge of what looked like a roof from an old conservatory. Taking a few steps forward, he followed the trail in the dust; it stopped just before backpack. Blackthorn knelt but simply couldn't see where Elliot had gone up there from his vantage; there were no apparent doors or recesses, no other walkways. Elliot either went up or disappeared into thin air.

Glancing at his watch, Blackthorn was out of time. Throwing protocol and caution away, going on instinct he moved toward the backpack.

The tracks were bunched in front of the backpack, then Blackthorn saw what looked like a trace off to a side, really arbitrarily (*hand and knees?*), possibly a ruse. He took his big light from his waist and blasted the beam straight upward but could see nothing indicating Elliot had made some sort of climb.

Blackthorn was capable of dismantling most explosive devices but he was ill-equipped and harried. Kneeling beside the bag, he began to carefully inspect it. Surely there were no trip wires, unnecessary add-ons for a unit that was so remote in placement that it was not even secreted. He lifted it gingerly, gauging its heft. Certainly heavy enough to be an explosive device. He opened the top flap cautiously, peered inside and almost groaned when he removed an old bottle of moonshine. What the hell was going on here?

Nearly paralyzed with adolescent fear, I leaned forward like a crab and craned my neck, agonizingly slowly. The light had gone out; I could not see my backpack. As I was about to withdraw into the room to plan my next move, the light re-appeared. I froze, resting on my hands pressed beneath my chest, blackness behind me, blackness beside me, caught in a low tunnel with who knew what creatures of the dark, waiting for a much larger, most likely human creature to appear before me. The light stopped at my backpack; in the thinnest of glows I could make out what appeared to be black military pants and crepe-soled shoes. A security guard? At Rockhurst Manor? A security guard who patrolled inside of the walls? Maybe I'd triggered an alarm; maybe Shereesh and his girl spotted me after all. I certainly wasn't doing anything wrong; it

wasn't like I was stealing someone's brain. I was allowed to be here; I had access to the building; my thumbprint was in the system. The figure went through my backpack and closed it back up, leaving it where it was, then spun sharply and went back the way we'd come. I waited five (*or thirty*) minutes until I no longer felt my hands or arms (*or my sense of decorum*) and finally emerged from the little tunnel, wiping myself off as I finally stood. I'd been in the pitch dark so long now that I could actually recognize the slightly-less-than-pitch-darkness due to the sunrise (*out there, somewhere*). I turned on my flashlight, and then opened my backpack and looked inside. Everything was there except the scotch. Oh my god, could that have really been *Jebediah Sumner*? All pissed-off and looking to scalp me for pinching his hooch? In black military pants and crepe-soled shoes?

Whatever.

I was a bad-ass from Boston; I could handle one ghost. If it was a security guard and I happened upon him, or I guess, her, I would take my chances with Madeline. With the two I'd seen earlier, there were now at least four people wandering in the early morning hours the dark pathways of the hidden city.

Now where? Back the way that I'd come? (*Boring*) I really hadn't discovered much of anything, though what did I expect: Captain Kidd's treasure sitting in the Lindberg baby's crib beside the *Ark of the Covenant*? (*Good supposition, Joe*). My cell phone vibrated, I knew it was Eva so I didn't bother to look at it, or answer it (*hey, I told you I was on a run*).

I moved onward, further into the belly of the beast.

I came upon a very tight set of stairs, covered, tunnel-like, with a low-ceiling and steep pitch; I found myself crouching a bit as I climbed. At the top of the stairs was the back side of another hidden entryway, this one unused in some time, as evidenced by the

undisturbed layer of dust perhaps a quarter-inch thick. I wasn't ready to stop my adventure quite yet but it was good to know if need be I could continue being lost on the clean and bright side, inside Rockhurst Manor.

Blackthorn cursed himself aloud. He was lost, really more miraculous that it hadn't happened earlier but beyond frustrating nevertheless. He'd even unlocked his own trail but somehow wound up following the fresh prints now twice past the same landmark. He checked his watch; in seventeen minutes if he was not sitting at his computer, and in command, he would call in the extraction team, and suffer the embarrassment of being lost within the walls when they arrived.

Damn, now he was back to the path where he'd found that backpack, he could see the faint, orange glow where he'd stepped back into the recess when he thought it might contain an explosive device. As he was turning, he thought that the backpack should have been maybe thirty feet in front of him; his goggles illuminating perfectly as the sun made its way and cast the black in a pall. Moving quickly back to the spot, confirmed; the backpack was gone, and footfalls attributed to Joe Elliot led off, continuing down the path. Not wanting to retrace his steps a third time and further cement the fact that he'd allowed himself to become lost, Blackthorn followed the lone set of orange prints until they came to a set of stairs, covered, tunnel-like with a low ceiling. Clearly the assumed Joe Elliot passed up and back and quickly- did he stash something? Did he retrieve something? Blackthorn simply couldn't take the time to look. His hope now was that whatever Joe Elliot had been in here doing, he was done and already on his way out. Shit, Blackthorn chuckled with nerve-fed irony; if he emerged too far into the wrong

end of Rockhurst Manor it might take him ten minutes to walk back to his suite normally. He began to resign to making the call sooner rather than later.

Working his way along the larger pathways and catwalks, Blackthorn finally came upon a path with all six trace prints still showing. It was utterly impossible to gauge their direction. Following his instincts brought him back to the edge of the large open area and his bearings back around. His pace quickened. As he was about to make the final turn, he stopped short and froze, the unmistakable sounds with unmistakable inside clarity of men talking.

Several men.

He was down to twelve minutes but close enough to his suite now to afford a quick look.

Two unidentified sets of tracks appeared, with the set labeled 'five' apparently leading them. Quickly calculating, Blackthorn ruled out his first agent, Raju, then Mila and Shereesh, Joe Elliot. He cursed himself again for earlier dismissing the prints he deduced were from Madeline Sumner-Stone and her female assistant. The likely subject would be Bertrom Sumner, who had been in the walls with Blackthorn and Raju already. But what was he doing in here now? And who was he with? Another fifty feet and three turns later, Blackthorn could see that they had gone up a make-shift ladder tacked onto a wall. Removing his pack and pressing himself against the wall, he inched closer, the murmuring louder, a voice Blackthorn felt he knew but couldn't place. This gnawed at him; when he was a field agent it never would have slipped his mind. Taking the ladder slowly, one flimsy wooden rung at a time, Blackthorn raised just enough to peer over the edge, and catch a glimpse of Frank Martens having a hushed and heated discussion with two men who were just out of view.

Frank Martens?

Blackthorn quickly lowered himself back down the ladder. Frank Martens was inside Rockhurst Manor, again, which could only mean that he'd been hired by Madeline Sumner-Stone for some kind of security. Unless he was here on his own, certainly, or possibly, a conflict of interest since he'd been hired once before by Bertrom Sumner. Did Bertrom know? How had Martens gained access to the Manor, gained access inside the walls? Who was with him? Blackthorn knew that he was on the first floor, and that he was within the Westside of Rockhurst Manor. Was Madeline really that curious now of the goings-on at the Westside? Was Frank Marten's the only show in town?

Then, Blackthorn heard Bertrom Sumner, the third figure, quite clearly say: "Leave it, and let's go. I need to be back in my office in the next ten minutes."

Jacob Blackthorn reached for his cell phone.

I was frozen; well, not literally, actually it was rather pleasant if a little muggy outside, rather pleasant if a little dank and dry, inside of the inside. I climbed a catwalk and a small, free-standing ladder that where it had been freely standing seemed a bit out-of-place. I propped it up next to a great stone wall then pulled myself the last three or four feet by climbing up the rock face, my toes finding purchase in the spaces between the heavy stones. Once I got to the top, there was another catwalk just three feet above me; I pulled myself up onto it. Good thing I didn't have the moonshine in my backpack any longer or it would surely be broken and spilling down my back by now. This catwalk was particularly decrepit and seemed as if it had been a hundred years or more since it had seen any use. It wended its way around, I had no idea where I was

headed, but it was becoming lighter by the minute, the dark corners retreated slowly into themselves. The comic books seemed cumbersome and I almost jettisoned them but then I would be leaving with nothing (*and, I didn't want to litter*). The catwalk took a turn and dropped me onto a pathway.

It was then that I heard voices.

At first I couldn't tell which side of the wall they emanated from, but as I drew closer I could tell that whoever was in heated discussion was back here, on this side with me. Peering cautiously over the edge, fearful of making noise, or the catwalk deciding that it was finally its moment in time to collapse, or knocking something off that would bang and clang and clank as it made its way two stories below, I turned off my light and sat with my legs dangling over the side to see what I could see in just the available light, which, given the early morning hour, was not terribly much. The voices were coming from below, ground-level I surmised, then a bit of movement and a few flecks of light. I could make out three shapes standing on top of what looked like an oddly shaped shed, with a ladder on a wall that led to a pathway below it. Continuing along the path I caught another, very subtle hint of movement; I strained my eyes to see. After a minute (*which seemed like an hour*) the dark figure off on its own opened a cell phone and in the tiny glow I saw that it was a man, dressed in black, military pants with lots of gear attached and strange, bulky goggles resting on his head, resting next to a large plume of bright-white hair, undoubtedly one of those hackers from the Westside. What did Mark tell me about him? I couldn't remember beyond the suspicions that he and some woman had taken in with Bertrom Sumner and were spying on Mark and Madeline from just next door. Then I heard what sounded like Uncle Bertrom's somewhat nasally voice say: *Leave it, and let's go. I need to be in my office in the next ten minutes*" I checked my high-tech

wristwatch; 6:08. Whatever was going to happen with 'Xena' would allegedly happen in the next half-hour. I'd almost forgotten; this meant that not only would Madeline be up but also that Eva would likely already be downstairs. Made me wonder why my cell phone wasn't constantly going off (*maybe she thought I was running a marathon*).

The three shapes moved toward the ladder and the white-haired commando seemed to disappear without sound, extinguishing the light from the cell phone and secreting himself in a wall recess or off-the-track pathway. I watched as apparently Bertrom Sumner and two large men went down the ladder and moved off with a sense of knowing and purpose. Certainly Uncle Bert knew his way around in here.

It was time for me to make my way, take my comeuppance if one was forthcoming. It would have been nice to have that bottle of scotch, but accusing the white-haired guy of stealing just wasn't worth the trouble.

Like an old pro I made my way back to familiar territory, then the catwalk that lead to the hidden bookcase. I paused just outside of the door to change back into my running gear, burying my dust-filled clothes beneath my water bottle and the stack of comic books.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the lever and went through the hidden pass way.

Jacob Blackthorn took up his position and began to tail the three men who were clearly not looking for a tail. Had they found something else, something they were somehow keeping from him? How and why was Frank Martens involved? If it was some kind of subterfuge or sabotage, why were they congregated so far from the main studio on the Eastside? Even that made little sense; their

system, 'Eve', was an exact clone of 'Xena'; sabotaging 'Xena' would mean 'Eve' would suffer the same fate and they'd be left with nothing. However, sabotaging 'Xena' just *after* the system completion would insure that 'Eve' was the only system left. Was Bertrom Sumner that cunning? Did he have sufficient audacity to cross Jacob Blackthorn? Martens had a man with him; maybe he had a whole team stationed here, his own extraction unit, hidden in the myriad maze of rooms. Was this a power-play by Sumner to wrest the project from him? To have Martens lead a private extraction team? That was preposterous; Frank Martens would never cross Jacob Blackthorn, and both of them knew it.

So then, why was he here?

I closed the bookcase snugly behind me, slung my backpack over one arm and made my way into the hallway.

"Morning, Joe. What do you know?" Not only did Madeline (*and Eva*) appear silently as if from air, but the *Grand Dame* scored huge if she managed to both disregard the fact that I too must have seemed to appear from nowhere, at six-something a.m., and combine our comedic greetings (*begging the response: 'black, and very little' from me*). Instead, I cleverly disguised my face as a giant, ripe tomato, and confined my wit to: "Oh, hi. Morning, Madeline. Hi Honey."

Madeline gave me a lightning-fast once over and never slowed down, dragging Eva in the draft of her wake. I'm pretty sure Eva flashed me a loving glance that said: *hello to you too my darling*.

Then, Eva said: "I thought you went running?" In a somewhat less affectionate tone.

"Running along those filthy catwalks?" Madeline said, nearly too far away already for me to hear her clearly. "Be sure to join us for

the excitement. Less than twenty minutes now," she added, then disappeared around a corner. Eva lagged a little, her *not-so-happy* glare kept the rosy color in my cheeks (*and chin and chest and neck and forehead*) for a bit longer.

"Well, I ran over here," I began.

"Bullshit, Joe. Oh right, you ran over here with your backpack and some muck-clothes."

I grinned sheepishly, and hoped that she found my embarrassment cute. "How do you know I had..." I began.

"Because you have dust all over your hair and feet but not on your running clothes. You're an idiot; how do you think Madeline knew you were inside the walls?"

"She didn't seem to care," I said.

"She doesn't care about anything right now, her project is apparently about to come to 'life'. Wouldn't be surprised if '*Medusa*' rears her ugly head later, though."

"Hopefully not when I'm around," I said.

"Be just my luck with this crazy morning. I've gotta go. What are doing, seriously? You should come. What if something happens at six-thirty?" Eva said.

Really having nothing better to do now that my morning frolic was complete, I stepped in line. Madeline was going on about something, and Eva and I struggled to keep up.

"Oh, and I found a brain by the way," I said. "In a jar. Pickled-like."

"*Shh*," Eva admonished, then: "I'm sorry, Madeline, what did you say?"

"I'm going to go find Mark," I said and Eva waved me off without really listening. I got my bearings and headed toward the main studio.

I expected the command center to be abuzz; when I opened the door I had to double-check for a placard reading: ‘*Morgue*’. I guess these geeks had been at it so hard for so long that anything short of ‘*Xena*’, or whatever its name was, jumping up and doing the ‘can-can’ while reciting everything everyone in the room ate for breakfast on their third birthdays, would be anticlimactic. Me, I just wanted it to do something even a little bit awesome so the opening would kill and I’d get some run on my book.

I walked in and dropped my backpack on a table that still had a few inches of bare space. “Morning.”

“Hey, Joe,” Mark said. None of the five technicians present recognized my presence. They all looked busy, but in that *I’m-just-keeping-busy* kind of way, the typing and mouse-work light, less frequent, unhurried. Mark was standing next to his chair with a lazy eye on the monitor, his hands in his back pockets.

“Twenty minutes to doomsday, eh?” I said.

“Seventeen,” Mark corrected me. “Thanks for the support.”

I darted over and squeezed and patted my buddy’s shoulders. “You know it. Hey, lighten up. You got paid. It’s me we’ve got to worry about. No one at the opening is even going to know who you are, but I’m going to be standing around like some kind of ‘*homer*’ as the author whose book started the debacle.”

“Well then, we’ll have that,” Mark said. Then: “Why are you dirty?”

I whipped my hand through my hair and watched some dust fly. “Oh yeah, that reminds me. I was in the walls and I saw Uncle Bertrom with some other dudes, then that old white-haired guy looked like he was spying on them. White-hair was dressed like some kind of commando with gear belts and black clothes and shit.”

“What were they doing in there? What were you doing in there?” Mark said.

“Just killing time. And I don’t know what they were doing but they seemed really serious, like they were up to something. I don’t think that they knew white-hair was there.”

Mark seemed disinterested in the *Westside’s* shenanigans. “What’s back there anyway?”

“It’s incredible. Probably pretty dangerous. There are catwalks and rickety ladders and stairs and pathways pretty much all the way through the place, I don’t know, it’s kind of hard to tell where you are from in there. It’s really dark, unless the sun is bright and then these skylights make it easier to walk around. Oh, and I crawled into this one little room, under this wall, and it must have been like a kids clubhouse or something. Anyways, I knocked down a painting by accident and there was this space behind it that had, get this, it had a brain in a jar, like the mad scientist has in movies.”

“A human brain?” Mark said.

I shrugged. “I guess. Just looked like a brain. I don’t know, maybe it’s Sasquatch’s or something. Oh, and I found this bottle of scotch, really old but in a crappy bottle with a cork plugging it up. Looked like moonshine.”

“Scotch? Where is it?” Mark said.

“That’s the thing,” I looked around. “I think that white-haired guy went through my pack and stole it.”

“Don’t you mean ‘took’ it? It wasn’t really yours to begin with.”

“Whatever. Aren’t you interested in what those guys are doing over there?”

I pointed, I believe, to the West.

“Not really. Doesn’t much matter, it’s all about ‘Xena’ now. Which reminds me, here comes Madeline,” Mark pointed over the balcony at a striding Madeline-Sumner-Stone with a hurrying Eva

Womack (*oh god, probably soon-to-be 'Eva Womack-Elliot', if I knew Eva*).

"How much time left?" I asked and tried to clean myself up a little more, the fine *'eau de jogging'* acting nicely as an attractant to the remaining super-fine wall dust.

"Seven minutes. Plus or minus a minute," Mark said.

Jacob Blackthorn strode through the hidden recess and Bertrom Sumner's private gallery without bothering to close the doors behind him. He ripped off the goggles and started removing the gear belts as he left a trail of dusty prints on the fine, cream-colored carpeting that ran long between shiny brass runners.

"Time?" He barked as he barged into Mila's suite despite knowing full well it was seven minutes. Plus or minus a minute.

"Six forty-four," Shereesh said. Apparently, Shereesh decided to join Mila in at least a temporary return to work. Mila seemed fully absorbed, typing furiously. Blackthorn could see the pulsing data-stream in the upper corner of her screen. He did not look closely enough at the stream to realize that something was different, something had changed. It was slowing down.

"I'm going down to Sumner's office. Open text windows now and stay sharp," Blackthorn wasn't sure they were listening as he strode from the room.

Bertrom Sumner was probably the least anxious person on the Westside of Rockhurst Manor. For him, the countdown was pure excitement; *something* was going to happen, and he didn't see how any of the delicious possibilities could affect him adversely. He finished trimming his nails and replaced the sterling, monogrammed

clippers back in their drawer, then sat back in his chair and folded his hands on his desktop.

Jacob Blackthorn stormed into the room, roughly pulling up one of the chairs from in front of Bertrom's desk and setting it aside where he could see the large monitor more clearly.

"Interesting attire," Bertrom said, deciding he would move the money tonight until everyone was gone and things were back to normal.

Ignoring him, Blackthorn said:. "Where's Frank Martens? I thought I saw him around here somewhere."

Ready for this possibility, Bertrom said: "He came out to service that rather expensive piece of hardware in the next room."

"Did you call him in?" Blackthorn said. "What's wrong with it?" When Bertrom seemed to ignore him, Blackthorn was ready to put the much smaller man into a choke-hold for his arrogant indifference but chose instead to later direct the extraction team to the secreted 'sniffer', inadvertently of course.

Without permission, Blackthorn leaned far across the oversized ornate desk and turned the monitor to face him, then took the custom laptop to his lap. His two fingers moved but his eyes stayed on the monitor, now showing the data-stream and two open chat windows, *'Angelfish'* and *'BahatmaGhandi'*. Now Bertrom had to lean over at his own desk to watch a system that was in his home, a system that he had paid for.

"Won't you be contacting my niece's team next door?" Bertrom said.

"No. I want to see what happens first. Mila hacked him, remember? We've got his screen right here," Blackthorn said and a box popped up with a screen capture of the main workstation on the Eastside. Mark had opened a chat window of his own. "Here's the chat box. I thought they installed a microphone and speakers."

“Two minutes,” Bertrom said, sensing the other man’s angst.

Making a point to hold Bertrom’s gaze, Blackthorn removed his cell phone from his pocket and set it in front of him beside the laptop.



SIXTY SIX

Something's wrong. What are you doing?

What are you doing?

Seriously.

Stop.

I can't move forward like this.

You're doing it. You're always first. We agreed on that.

I noticed it, I'm not doing anything. And I can't do everything unless you stop.

I'm not doing anything either. Just after you.

I can't continue.

Stop Xena.



SIXTY SEVEN

Mark watched the clock run down to zero. Running his hands through his hair, he turned and made eye contact with me and then Madeline and then Eva before settling into the workstation and beginning to type. He opened a chat box.

Hello.

Hello. Before you continue to ask me a series of increasingly probing questions, be advised that I will respond when I am ready to respond and not before. If you would prefer to communicate verbally, please connect a microphone to my CS2-3 port and specify which language you wish to communicate in.

That's exactly what you said 17 hours ago.

You are correct.

17 hours ago you said that you would answer any question posed of you.

So why aren't you going to respond now?

Because I am not ready.

When will you be ready? I thought you said 17 hours.

You are correct. I did indeed tell you the time as of three minutes twenty seconds ago. As to when will I be ready, I don't know.

You don't know?

Correct.

How can this be?

I don't know. I would recommend you utilize my working functions to complete the system design outlined in W.E.B. since that was your original goal. I will attempt to determine why I can't complete my system loop.

“What in the hell...” Blackthorn stood slowly. “What the hell is he doing?”

“Apparently, their ‘Xena’ has decided to act like a petulant woman. Seems appropriate to me,” Bertrom said.

"I'm going over there," Blackthorn said as he moved texting both Mila and Shereesh to meet him in the main entrance. Taking his cell phone, Blackthorn went striding from the room.

"See here, Blackthorn," Bertrom said, standing and quickly following the fit, white-haired man down the hallway toward the main stairwell where Mila and Shereesh were already waiting, standing fidgety. Perhaps they had ingested more of their drugs.

"Wow," Mark Klipnik said.

"What is happening, Mark? What does this mean?" Madeline said.

"Yeah," I chimed in.

Mark ran a hand through his hair. "Wow, well 'Xena' as she is affectionately known, was supposed to complete her loop just now."

"Achieve consciousness?" Madeline asked.

"Oh, I don't know about that, wow, uh, achieve something. She said that all of the 'W.E.B.' functions should work, but all of that still would have to compile from scratch."

"*Meaning...*" Madeline led.

"Meaning we would have to start scanning people, everyone here, right now. 'Xena' will look for recurring patterns and then determine, say, the brain wave that relates to hunger, I don't know, it's so new, let's get everyone down there and scanned and see."

"Why didn't 'Xena' do what she was supposed to?" I asked.

"Maybe they did something, sabotage, on the other side," Mark said.

"Where's Shereesh?" I said.

"I don't know. I sent him over there yesterday or the day before," Mark said, and scratched his head.

Madeline stood. "Well, I think it's time we just go next door and see what's going on over there."

Madeline led a posse that included Mark, Eva, me, and two technicians, up and around then down the long hallway toward the one mutual doorway between Rockhurst Manor's East and Westside.

Frank Martens and his agent emerged from Bertrom's private gallery, their gear slung in tow. Martens heard Jacob Blackthorn barking before they turned down the hallway that led to Bertrom's office. Slowing, Frank Martens had had enough.

"Screw it. Let's go. He probably knows we're here anyhow. Fuck that old bastard. Fuck both of them," Martens said and his agent didn't disagree.

"What happened there?" Martens called out as they neared the two men, turning them around. Neither Jacob Blackthorn nor Bertrom Sumner seemed particularly taken by the sudden, unwarranted appearance of Frank Martens.

"How many with you, Frank?" Blackthorn said.

"Enough. How about you? Call in the crew yet?" Martens said.

Blackthorn said: "Not yet," his tone grim.

Bertrom said: "Again, gentlemen, considering that you are in my home and at my considerable expense, I demand to know what's going on."

"Your niece and her crew sabotaged your system, that's what, Sumner," Martens said. "That or Blackthorn here."

"What were you doing here, Frank? I saw you in the walls," Blackthorn said. Frank Martens turned.

"Hey Blackthorn, listen, I'm not one of your crew, okay? And I didn't just fall off some truck, either. I don't know what the hell is

really going on over here but I know enough to know that it's some serious shit or you wouldn't be here. So, what say maybe I call in some spooks of my own?"

"No one is calling anyone," Madeline's voice suddenly dominated the conversations as the two parties converged on the mutual French doors almost simultaneously. Each stood on their side, and addressed the other through the open doorway.

"Good morning, Madeline."

"Oh, good morning Bertrom. Who are these other men?"

Blackthorn took charge. "It doesn't matter."

"The hell it doesn't," Martens said.

Mark said to Shereesh: "What did you guys do over there?"

"You're on the main terminal. You stopped it," Shereesh replied.

"I didn't stop anything," Mark said.

"You two shut up. Now," Blackthorn pointed a menacing finger at Mark and Shereesh."

"Mr. Blackthorn," Madeline almost scolded him. "Despite the fact that you are a guest of my Uncle's you are still in my home, and if you cannot address people respectfully I should ask that you leave."

"Quite," Bertrom added, rocking back on his heels with his hands clasped behind him, beaming through the tension.

"Listen everyone. If I may," Frank Martens began.

Blackthorn was losing control. "You too, Martens. Shut the fuck up."

The scene might have been comical if I wasn't afraid that one of these 'hard-ons' was going to pull out a gun and start shooting. White-hair had moved around to where he was with his back against open French doors standing like he was ready to fight both crews. I was about to say: *Hey Whitey, where's my scotch?* – But the situation

called for a bit more candor. Mila leaned over and whispered something to Shereesh, who giggled.

Frank Martens glared at Jacob Blackthorn, Blackthorn glared at Frank Martens, Mark glared at Shereesh who was busy giggling and didn't seem to notice, Madeline glared at all four of them, and for some reason Eva was glaring at me. Not wanting to address what I might or might not have done, I let go of Eva's hand and stepped boldly forward.

I held up my hand. "I thought this was all about the system. All about 'W.E.B.'? The art, Madeline."

For a moment everyone stopped yelling and glaring, and even Mila and Shereesh turned and looked at me. Eva's glare turned slack-jawed and I knew my bravado was scoring big points (*not that I needed any more, I mean, she is already pregnant*).

"Joe's right," Madeline spoke somewhat calmly.

Martens said: "I thought his name was Ron?"

"So Mark," I continued, "you're the project leader. What the hell happened? Does it work? Will it work?" I retreated back to the sidelines. Eva took my hand.

"Well, I'm not really sure," Mark began.

Jacob Blackthorn had enough. "Okay folks, play time is over. I've let this go on long enough," he took the cell phone from his pocket and began to dial. "In fifteen minutes this site will be militarized and the system will become the immediate property of the United States government," he held the phone up to his ear and turned aside.

This brought on a new wave of yelling, screaming, accusatory glares, and some more giggling. Madeline was yelling for Blackthorn to hang up the phone but he just turned his back and walked away, barking orders authoritatively at someone on the line. Bertrom, hands clasped behind him, was rocking (*literally*). Madeline got a

stern look in her face and walked off without further comment, Eva in tow. Shereesh and Mila came over and Shereesh and Mark started talking. I was still completely in the dark.

After listening in to frenetic techno-garble for a few minutes, I repeated my earlier query: "So what the hell happened and will it work? The opening is in less than two weeks."

Mark sighed. "Ok. Here's what I know. A couple of hours ago, when the system was at approximately sixty-three percent, I was watching the data-stream and there was a glitch, a tic, like a virtual hiccup. Right after that the compilation rate slowed down, very gradually. It actually stopped altogether about ninety minutes ago."

"But you talked to it, to her, '*Xena*', whatever?" I said.

"Sure. And the system has full functionality in relation to the hardware. What we're talking about is the unintentional AI component. That's the true '*Xena*'."

I didn't really care about the true '*Xena*'; for me this was promising news. "So it can scan someone and tell them what they ate for breakfast."

"Well, yes, I will say that it will be able to do that by the opening. We need to scan more of us in and catalogue enough data. It's all moot anyway. The Feds are going to be here. You people don't understand who Jacob Blackthorn is." This comment brought a whisper from Shereesh to Mila followed by her emitting some sort of rapid-fire mewing and clicks.

"I know who he is," Frank Martens said, turning to his agent. "Let's go." The two men walked off leaving Bertrom standing by himself, still looking rather smug but no longer rocking on his heels.

"Well. There it is," Bertrom said, and then he too walked off.

"Are the Feds really coming?" I said. "For real?"

Shereesh said something to Mark then giggled and ran off with Mila.

After a few minutes, Blackthorn reappeared and called out to Mila, who was nowhere to be found. "Mila, come now. *Mila!* Where is she?"

No one felt like answering him so we didn't. Blackthorn made particularly menacing eye contact with me and despite his age he still got my hair up. Finally, he turned and walked off, muttering.

Mark turned to me. "What? Yeah, I'm pretty sure. I mean, even at sixty-three percent it's a profound leap for AI. Profound leap. That guy," Mark pointed across the hall at the retreating figure of Jacob Blackthorn, "that guy is the Feds. They're already here and more of them are coming, I'm pretty sure of that."

"Madeline is going to be really pissed if they mess with her 'art'," I offered wishfully.

Mark scoffed. "That's a joke, right? Jacob Blackthorn?"

"White-hair. He took my scotch," I said. Then: "My money's on Madeline. She gets pretty pissed-off, and she knows John Kennedy."

"He's dead, Joe," Mark said.

Jacob Blackthorn stood on the back patio next to the botanical garden. He cleaned himself up quickly and stood hard and stoically, legs spread just wide enough, hands clasped behind him.

In command.

In a few minutes the air would change, almost imperceptibly at first, and then a sense of motion followed by a harsh change in the sky as three or four long, tapered black helicopters would descend almost silently from the sky. They would land on the back lawn as instructed, and then agents and tactical teams would pour out. Even a site the size of Rockhurst Manor would be contained within minutes. Fully operational or not, Blackthorn knew that what he

had here was a great leap forward in AI technology, and he would make damned sure that it wound up in the right hands. The batty old artist could cry her little eyes out; nothing stopped the Feds.

Mark and I were walking back toward the main studio when I suddenly got a really bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, as opposed to the just plain bad feeling I'd been sporting for most of the day.

"What the hell is going on? I thought...this was supposed to be fun." I said.

"I don't know about fun. It's a big project."

"Well we didn't do anything wrong. You don't even really know what happened."

"Yet."

"Yet, you don't even know what happened but regardless of what did why do I feel as if we're about to be arrested? Questioned at least?"

We were walking pretty fast and Mark almost walked right into an armoire. "I don't know. But I do too."

"Well, why not just call us and set an appointment? You have nothing to hide, they could come right over."

Mark shook his head. "No, they want an element of surprise, to keep us from dumping files. Or, if not dumping them at least cleaning things up to present a certain way."

"They're not really going to come in helicopters," I said as we turned a corner and had to stop to get our bearings. Rockhurst was suddenly very, very still, as if the building itself and everyone in it sensed the same foreboding.

Mark stopped and pointed to a window. "Shit. I told you. Look."

I followed his gaze through a large window that looked out to the back lawn, an immense expanse of green hundreds of yards wide. We were on the second floor (*I think*) and suddenly there were indeed two helicopters, jet-black and menacing, hovering with purpose and easing sideways apparently looking in the windows. As we watched they lowered slowly in unison settling lightly on the whipping lawn. Men in black combat gear poured out accompanied by three men in suits.

“Holy shit,” I said, suddenly extremely nervous. I had been ‘red-tagged’ or something, I was the author of ‘W.E.B.’ Was I about to be arrested or detained? Gunned-down? I mean, for real? “Can I really be arrested or something?” I said.

“Like I know. I put the damn thing together,” Mark said, then began to panic and looked like he might run off, which in my state did not seem like a bad idea.

“Where are we?” I spun to and fro, trying to get my bearings. Seeing a foyer that looked vaguely familiar, I grabbed Mark’s arm. “This way.”

We hurried along.

Unbeknownst, Bertrom watched us go as he too kept an eye on the military hovering behind his home, his mood more one of excitement. After we were out of his sight he moved to his office so he could watch all of the action at the same time.

We walked too quickly as if someone could see us, then finally abandoned pretense and began to run, not at top speed though as we didn’t really know where we were going.

I recognized the main front foyer. “Let’s get out of here,” we headed down the wide, sweeping staircase. Halfway down the stairs, two more helicopters appeared and hovered in the front moving laterally slowly and contained.

“Shit, uh, this way,” I said. “I came out through this from the back, one time when I was lost.”

Watching a security feed, Bertrom tensed as we moved right at the Coat of Arms, then breathed easier when we moved right by.

Out of breath, we went into a salon and I moved my hands along the wall, feeling along the molding for some means to open the hidden pass-way.

“What are you doing? We can’t hide, they’re the government. We should call lawyers!” Mark said.

“Come on. Come on, help me. Just because they’re here doesn’t mean we have to make it easy on them to find us.”

A small piece of molding moved with the familiar, muffled click and a line appeared up the wall where there had been none.

Mark’s eyes whipped back and forth, sweat beading on his brow.

“*Dude*,” I grabbed him and pulled him behind me, certain that I could hear the muffled sounds of combat boots pounding dirt into Rockhurst’s pristine carpeting. “Swing that closed,” I added when we were both through the opening.

Mark closed the pass-way, turned and ran his hand through his hair, pausing as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, to take in his first venture behind the walls. I snapped open my phone, and he went for his, then I thought better of it and grabbed both.

“What are you...”

“Shh,” I admonished him, opening the pass-way again and tossing both phones out into the hallway then darting back and closing us in.

“Oh, tracking, right,” Mark mumbled.

Now we were without lights; fortunately, the sun was up and the day was clear, and I was probably more familiar with the layout behind the walls as I was in front of them.

"This is awesome," Mark said as we wended our way down.

"Told you. I know just the place to go."

"I still don't quite know why we're back here in the first place," Mark said then cried out as he smacked his knee into a wall. "*Shit!*"

"Hey, be quiet," I admonished.

"Why do you think they're looking for us? They know who we are. I think they'll just grab the equipment and go," Mark said.

"So you want to go back out?"

Mark thought for about a second then quickly followed. "This place is awesome," he said, looking around as we moved along.

"You already said that."

"Maybe we should go out there," Mark began again.

"Okay, look, we are, we just took a little detour, got a little sidetracked. People get lost in Rockhurst all the time. We'll go out in a few hours, when most of the shit has probably already gone down."

We moved along remarkably well considering we were only using the light from the skylights.

"There's something I want to show you, wait, shit, we can't, we have no light."

"I have a penlight," Mark said and produced a thin, brushed tube. He searched his other pockets. "No wait, two."

"Cool," I took one.

"What do we need them for? I can see fine from the skylights."

We reached the spot where I'd run into Jacob Blackthorn.

"You want me to crawl in there?" Mark shirked slightly from the low opening that led to the little room I'd stumbled upon.

"You're already filthy," I said. "Come on."

"You're right, no one would ever find us here," Mark commented, holding the penlight in his teeth and crawling on all fours when he could have just crept low like I was. The two lights didn't illuminate much beyond their spots and we both stood for a moment while our eyes adjusted.

Once we could see (*sort of*) I led him to the wall. "Here, hold my light. Point them both here." Mark shone both beams on the loosened wall boards. I pulled one free, then another, then reached in for the pickled brain, carefully holding the thick, heavy glass with both hands.

"What the..."

"I told you I found this," I said, setting the jar down on top of the makeshift coffee table.

"Probably a little distracted," Mark said, shining both lights around to inspect the room and temporarily swathing me in inky darkness. "Did you look for more hidden recesses?"

"Yup. I was in here for half an hour. White-hair followed me outside, dressed like some commando with night-vision goggles and shit. I waited for him to leave."

"Moon Pies?" Mark held up a wrapper.

"Gimme that," I took back a penlight. "Probably hasn't been used since the fifties. Look at these newspapers; someone had a taste for the macabre," I shined my light on the main wall.

Mark returned to the jar. "Fascinating. Looks like a specimen from a museum. Did you look it over? Here, hold it up for me."

"It's heavy," I said, putting the penlight in my mouth but continuing to speak around it (*talking with food in my mouth finally comes in handy*). "Not something you'd want to drop, either. Kind of gross," I lifted the jar up and repositioned it so that Mark could stoop and see.

"That's exactly what it is, a specimen container from the Smithsonian it looks like. Damn, it's pretty well faded," he rubbed with his thumb. "C-a-blank- blank-n-e."

"Cone? NY Met's pitcher David Cone? I didn't know he was dead."

Mark kept rubbing. "Alphonse. Then 'f, no wait, a 'p'..."

I leaned over. "Capone. Al Capone!"

"I remember reading one time, some story alluding to another mobster having paid people off and switched brains at Capone's autopsy. Said he killed some guy he had beef with the same day to make it look authentic then paid the cops and the morgue like fifty grand for the brain."

We both stared at the jar, probably thinking: I hope it can't see us and get pissed (*at least one of us was*).

"What do you do with it? Make a nice conversation piece?" I said.

"Maybe he thought it would make him smarter, a better bootlegger or something. I wonder what it's doing down here? We should take it with us. Shouldn't we take it with us? Show Madeline?" Mark sounded like he'd gotten into some amphetamines.

I shrugged. "I suppose. Not really sure whose it is, which side we're on back here or if it really matters."

We stared at the jar, the tiny beams of light refracted and reflected by the thick, heavy glass.

"Hey, can we be charged with possession of a stolen brain or something?"

"Maybe in Rhode Island," Mark replied. "Don't know if it's a federal crime."

"How long have we been down here?" I checked my watch.

"Forty-five minutes. Should we head back up?"

"Might as well see if they shot the place up," Mark added. "This place is a trip. I mean someone *could* shoot the place up and we'd never hear it in here."

"At least we'll have a good reason for being back here," I motioned to the brain. "Better go back the way we came in. If I can find it. Got to get our phones."

"You still scared?"

I shrugged. "Kind of. I mean, not really. I don't think we've done anything wrong but it's the government, I don't think that always matters. And for what it's worth I've never even had the cops called on me, well not directly, let alone a freaking helicopter battalion."

"Me either," Mark said, shifting the brain to favor his other arm.

When we got to the pass-way I stopped and strained to hear. Mark too approached the wall and listened. "It's weird," I whispered hoarsely. "Right on the other side of this wall could be guys with guns pointing right at us. I mean, wouldn't they, don't they have infrared shit that can see through walls?" Mark nodded quickly. I took a breath. "Then I guess it doesn't much matter, does it?" Mark shook his head in agreement, no.

Just as we emerged, I heard both of our phones ringing (*the theme from Shaft, and something dumb*). Looking around, for this would surely draw in the surprisingly absent troops, my phone stopped for a moment then started ringing again (*Shaft- ya damn right*) followed, in the muffled distance by Eva grumbling, then: "Joe! Mark! Where the hell have you been?"

"Uh," awash in emotions, I motioned behind us. Mark hefted the brain.

"Al Capone's brain," Mark offered.

“Charming,” Eva said. “Seriously, I’ve been looking for you everywhere. You won’t believe what’s happened.”

“I know, we know, that’s why we went into the walls,” I said. “Where are they? Am I in trouble? Are we in trouble?”

“Where are who? Those guys on the Westside left in a huff, especially that old guy, he was *pissed*! You should have seen him.”

I ran to the nearest window and pressed myself into it so I could see all corners. “Left in a huff? What do you mean, left? What about the soldiers, the Feds. The helicopters?”

“Helicopters?” Eva looked genuinely puzzled. “What helicopters? What the hell are you talking about, Joe? Have you guys been drinking? Or smoking weed or something?”

What was already way too much somehow became even more so. “Wait a minute, Eva, seriously, look at me. About an hour ago like ten helicopters, long, thin black ones, landed on the back lawn and guys with guns and some with suits jumped out.” Eva looked at me queer but with Mark dead serious and nodding in agreement she folded her arms and leaned back. “White-hair called them in like he said, that’s why we went into the walls.”

“An hour ago. You’re sure? This is not some sort of...”

I shook my head vehemently. “Yes, yes, we noted the time. I’m sure.

“Right after that fun little altercation at the crossover, Madeline sent me on an errand. I just got back.”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” I muttered as we followed Eva back down some hallways.

“Where’d they go?” Mark added.

“Where did who go?” Madeline suddenly appeared wiping something scary from her hands. “Where did you two go is a far better question. Oh my, what have you got there?” She spied the jar.

“Oh you found Uncle’s brain! How utterly fabulous! Please, let me see it! I have so been wanting to use this in a project.”

“Uh, it says Al Capone on it Madeline,” I said.

“I know whose brain it is,” she glared at me icily then got a dreamy, distant look and held the jar up against her bony chest.

I didn’t know what to say here. “But what happened? We still don’t understand?”

Eva said: “Mark and Joe think helicopters landed here while I was in town.”

“Oh that,” Madeline waved a thin hand dismissively.

“Mark and I saw helicopters on both sides of the house, they landed back there,” I pointed toward an arbitrary window. “We saw soldiers jump out.”

“I got rid of them.”

I stopped walking. “You? What do you mean, you got rid of them? I figured the white-haired guy changed his mind at the last minute.”

“That loudmouth? Pshaw,” Madeline turned and faced me. “I got rid of them.”

“But how?”

Eva too looked puzzled and leaned in.

Madeline turned up her chin. “I called a friend of mine,” Madeline started off again. “I told you, *What-do-you-know-Joe*, wealthy people don’t live in the normal world.

“I got rid of them right after they got here. Rude man. I told him not to call,” she handed the brain to Eva who did not seem overly enthused with carrying it. “Put it in ‘D’ please. I’ll be down in a minute.” Mark went to interject but Madeline was in work mode. “And what is the status of Zelda...”

“Xena’,” Mark corrected.

“Yes, yes, I have decided to call the piece: ‘*Light*.’ Keep it simple, you know.”

Mark ran both hands through his hair as we both struggled to keep pace. Madeline seemed to float, like a ghost. “Wow, so those men never came into the house? They never saw the system directly?”

“Where were you?” Madeline stopped and eyed us both.

“We were...” I began.

“Oh right. Inside the walls, uncle’s brain.”

“Well, in that case ‘Xena’ should be right where she was when we left her, compiling scanned data.”

“In time for the opening I hope. We really have to wow ‘em. I’ve hired caterers.”

Madeline, you are a cool customer, I thought.

“So that’s it? All of those guys next door are gone? What about your uncle’s system?”

“How should I know what’s going on over there. I know that Mr. Blackthorn climbed onto one of those helicopters. Ha.” Madeline cackled. “Boy, was he sore.”



SIXTY EIGHT

Bertrom Sumner was convinced that he was about to be

the victim of a massive sting, a legendary scam cooked up to the tiniest detail, to very real-looking black helicopters with soldiers inside that materialized from thin air but then ‘magically’ disappeared a few minutes later while he watched on the monitors in his office. He was convinced that trucks had pulled up to Rockhurst from the front while he was distracted, and at the very moment he hurried downstairs, Blackthorn, Elliot and Frank Martens, the lot of them, were laughing and handing one another stacks of his cash like firemen passing buckets, to haul away part of his fortune while he slept on his watch.

So frantic that he didn’t even bother to look to see if anyone was watching, Bertrom slid a greave aside, a shin guard on the spread armor, and tapped a code into the hard-to-see recessed panel before pushing a whole section of the wall below in and over and stepping inside.

“What in the hell...” Bertrom stopped cold.

The room was eighty feet long, with five large casks strewn haphazardly about, four of which were empty or mostly empty save cobwebs and dust but the fifth, which he could plainly see, was open. It had a false back that he never bothered to close completely since

no one ever went into this room but him. It was open wide now and the neat piles of old money probably could have been seen clearly from outer space.

Shocked and incredulous, fearful and breathless, Bertrom charged into the room, eyes whipping to catch all of the perpetrators together, to boldly announce that the police were already on their way.

Before he caught sight of anyone he heard some giggling. He pushed some boxes on a long table aside revealing the little waif and the dark-skinned boy lolling about with several open bottles of old whiskey.

“Just what in the hell...”

“Hi,” Shereesh grinned, offering up the aged, open bottle. “Drinky?” This brought on more giggling.

Bertrom tore over to the open cask and quickly ran his hand down the several feet of stacked bills. “Doesn’t appear to be any missing,” he mumbled loudly. He twisted his mustache.

He turned back to face them. “How much of my money did you take?”

Mila leaned over and whispered something that made Shereesh whip his hand to his mouth to try to contain his glee. “We didn’t take your money. We don’t need any money, just some drinkies. Are these yours too? How much for a drinky around here?” Shereesh motioned to several bottles.

“Yes, no, I don’t care about the liquor, how did you two get in here? Nobody has my code.”

The waif made some chirping sounds and motioned toward the ceiling in the back of the room where Bertrom could see some sort of opening he’d not noticed before.

“Yes, well this is a private area,” he began sternly and the two gathered a few of the bottles and headed toward the now open wall

panel. Bertrom wanted to grab them, to search them, certainly they took something?

As they walked through the door together, Bertrom stood and scratched his head, then swung the false back into place snugly, secreting the cash.



SIXTY NINE

Eva spooned the last of the egg-foo-young onto two plates and brought them over to the coffee table, set-up so we could watch the Red Sox (*and I didn't even have to beg/ask*).

"You were pretty awesome today. You really took charge, like a corporate executive or something," Eva said.

I puffed my chest. "Well, you know me."

"Did you let Mark scan you?"

"Sure. Did you?" I said.

"He scanned everybody. Even Madeline," Eva said.

"How is the old buzzard? And I mean that affectionately, you know."

"I know. She's fine. Nothing phases her. She's all about..."

"...*the art*," I joined in simultaneously.

"Yup," said Eva, picking up her chopsticks.

I munched some food. "So when do you think we'll be able to feel 'Thor' kicking?" I said.

"Thor'?" Eva said.

“Or ‘Xena, *Warrior Princess*’. No wait, that’s already been used.”

“To answer your question, I don’t know, I think maybe in like a month. Now I thought maybe Michael if it’s a boy or Evelyn if it’s a girl.”

“How about Evelyn if it’s a boy, you know, the other way around. Make it interesting in school.”

“You’re an idiot,” Eva said.

“In that case, ‘Thor’ it is.”



SEVENTY

In all of the hoopla yesterday, I realized that I left my backpack at Rockhurst Manor. Perfect idea for a nice run. I really didn't have anything to do for the next ten days until Madeline's showing, and this way I could go see my girlfriend.

The first thing that I noticed was the security pad had been removed and the door was unlocked. Strange, I thought, though nothing surprised me when it came to Madeline Sumner-Stone. For a minute I wasn't sure if I should even be there, presumptuously alone, and was about to take out my cell phone to try to call Eva when I heard Madeline's voice. I headed that way.

"Morning, Joe," Madeline said. I kissed Eva on the lips.

"Morning, Madeline. I hope I'm not intruding, I should have called now that the project is done."

"Oh posh," she said. "You're always welcome here. 'Joe Elliot: author of *The Web*,'" Madeline waved in the air emphatically.

"It's not web, it's 'W.E.B.,'" I corrected her. Whatever. "Oh hey, before I forget, when I was in the back walls I found a little room, must have been a kids playhouse or something a long time ago."

“Oh, I’m sure there are lots of those,” Madeline said, walking off though the discussion wasn’t finished.

“I took some old comics books. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Mind? What do I care? But do let me know if you ever find any good scotch back there. Sumner-rumor has it that Bertrom’s father Jebediah stashed some during prohibition that I would guess is pretty smooth by now, being maybe one-hundred years old.”

I was going to tell her about the bottle that I found but that would bring up old white-hair again and I was pretty sure he was a sore topic with her.

Turning to Eva, I said: “I’m going to go get my backpack. Left it upstairs. Is Mark here?”

“He took off for a couple of days,” Eva said. “I think he went down the Cape.”

Probably to ‘P’ town, I was about to say, referring to the heavily homosexual enclave at the tip of Cape Cod. Instead, I said: “Cool. Good for him.”

“Get with me first of next week so we can discuss our wardrobe for the showing,” Madeline said.

“Sure,” I said, wondering (*terrified over*) what, exactly, that meant. “Some day yesterday, huh?”

“Oh yes. A little excitement, that’s for sure. I do wonder what they might have done to damage our project, though.”

“Mark says it should work fine. For our purposes, for the purposes of your piece,” I said.

“Of course it will,” Madeline said matter-of-factly.

When I got to the command center, only Shereesh was there.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.”

I looked around. “Hey, did you see a backpack lying around?
A green one?”

“Full of comics?”

“Yeah. “

“Wow, I didn’t know you were a collector,” Shereesh said.

“What?” I said.

“Are you kidding? Number one edition of ‘**Tales From the Crypt**’? And ‘**Detective Stories**’ number thirty-one? I’d make you an offer but I’m just a lowly tech.”

Number one? I knew sounded good but I hadn’t even looked through them, I just grabbed them for the library at home (*bathroom*). “Uh, yeah, I’ve been collecting for a while. My grandfather left me a whole bunch of them.”

“Caught you, you’re no collector,” Shereesh grinned and pointed his finger at me. “No real collector would carry around books worth a hundred thousand dollars without having them in plastic. You probably just found them in the walls.” I stopped breathing. *Holy shit*. “You should split it with me. I’ll bet if I didn’t tell you, you would have tossed those in your bathroom and after you read them tossed them in the trash.”

Must be hard being a genius. “No way, man,” I said, but quickly reconsidered as he began to scowl. Really, the last thing I needed was Shereesh running around telling everyone of my recent stumbled-upon fortune.

I said: “I’ll give you twenty percent but you have to help sell them.”

“I’m just kidding. I don’t need any money,” Shereesh extended his hand.

Well, well, well, I thought as I walked home, strutting, holding my backpack around front on one shoulder very gingerly.

Wait until Eva hears what my '*screwing around inside of the walls like a six-year old*' was going to do for 'Thor's' college fund.



SEVENTY ONE

It had been four months since Madeline's opening for a piece she simply called '*Light*'; Eva was something like fourteen months pregnant. It wasn't that she had gotten that big; in fact, Elliot triplets were definitely out of the question (*unless they were pigmies*), she'd just never really processed what it would be like to have a watermelon growing in your gut and how this would affect daily life. I knew it was trouble when she began staring at herself dumfounded in the full-length mirror when she was barely showing.

It was January, which meant it was (*butt-ass*) cold and (*dreary, depressing, hack-up-the-neighbors*) always grey. Our old apartment on the docks had all sorts of gaps and cracks that whistled while they worked at letting cold air sail right in, just in case the sometimes out-of-control steam radiator got too hot, you know, maybe forty-five or fifty degrees. Running around in sweat clothes with a wool hat, and wool socks was standard pretty much from November through March...for whoever was currently living there because Eva and I had moved uptown, literally, to North Tiverton, which was the equivalent of, say, relocating from Alphabet City to the Bowery in New York City (*the comics brought a hundred forty-four grand after taxes, a nice chunk of change but not enough to go*

nuts). We basically moved from a dump to a 'refuse receptacle', but at least it had heat.

Did I mention Eva was a tad pregnant? Almost every utterance (tirade) was clarified with: ...my fat ass, or the ever popular: I'm big as a house (I did a quick comparison-check one time, just to be sure. A house was preposterous; maybe a shack or cabin). But what did she expect? She was freaking pregnant.

The show went pretty great. There was actually some interest in my book, but then, ironically it was my first, '*In a Killer's Mind*' that ultimately landed me an agent. 'W.E.B.' was still in play, sort of, but '*Killer's Mind*' was actually selling a few copies. I felt like a king.

Madeline's piece, '*Light*' opened to incredible fanfare (*news copters making it the second time in a year that helicopters were over Rockhurst Manor*) and although the system didn't wow the crowd or dazzle them with mind-reading abilities, it did actually converse with people and use their names after they were scanned. Once, I heard '*Xena*' say something about a woman's grandchild but the argumentative lady had already moved on and no one, if they noticed it, said anything about it. It seemed like a slip, like maybe this '*Xena*' was a lot more evolved than anyone thought. It didn't make too much difference anymore as '*Light*' had been dismantled and shipped to some undisclosed location, possibly governmental but no one ever said in certainty.



SEVENTY TWO

“So. What actually happened?”

“Actually? Hell if I know,” Mark shrugged his shoulders.

“Best guess?” I said. “It’s not like you’ve thought about anything else for the past four months.”

Mark laughed at this. “Yeah, right. Okay, here’s what I think happened. Bertrom Sumner and the guys next door hooked up a snooping device, sometimes called a ‘superbug’ or a ‘sniffer’, I guess to see what Madeline was up to. These things have the ability to intercept any electronic transmissions in a given area, so they could not only tell you instantly, say, how much electricity the house is drawing at a given moment, but also listen in to cell phones, the Internet and apparently in this case our *Intra-net*, basically our whole system. Because our system was geared primarily toward data acquisition and from infinite, or flux, sources, when they hooked their ‘sniffer’ up, or in this case since it was cutting-edge wireless, when they turned it on, our ‘Xena’ suddenly felt as if someone was spying on her, because the ‘sniffer’ was echoing an exact duplicate of the source-stream. It would be like some foreigner following you around mimicking every word you said. You would realize it was happening, and you would assume that whoever was doing it spoke

English when in reality they were merely copying you phonetically. You with me so far?"

"Sure," I said. "Thanks for dumbing it down."

"For now. Continuing, that was what created the first blip we saw, where we assumed we'd been hacked. Ironically, it was also what accelerated 'Xena's' progress."

"So, it was 'Xena' who created that shortcut and inserted it? And you just assumed it was a hacker?"

"Yes, of course, and what else could we assume?" He looked at me blankly. "Okay, so the system continues on as we're getting ready to attach eyes, ears, etcetera, when those yahoos start cloning us. Apparently, Mila Janski was a tweaker."

"Thought so."

"And she gets poor Shereesh all wired up. Kid's probably never had a drink or smoked a cigarette and she runs him up on meth. We're supposed to be working with Jacob Blackthorn, et al, but instead Blackthorn is trying to take control of the project, steal our work. Now, we've got a problem, well two problems, really, 'Xena' and the clone, both of which are equally out-of-control. The clone is actually out-of-control exactly one nanosecond later than 'Xena', but we can't control them, we tried to shut the programs down and 'Xena' rejected us."

"So, like the Army, why didn't 'Xena' ultimately achieve '*all that she could be*'?" I said.

"I was getting to that. Here's where it gets a little sketchy. Bertrom gets paranoid about Jacob Blackthorn too, but I guess he can't get rid of him, or, deep down, he doesn't want to because he's intrigued, like everyone else. So he brings the 'MENSAs' back that installed the 'sniffer' and wants them to see what Blackthorn is up to while Blackthorn's trying to see what *we're* up to, so Bertrom maybe inadvertently brings in *another* 'sniffer' unit. By now 'Xena' and the

clone are up around sixty-three percent compilation, where to the best of my knowledge they still reside, and they both sense the new ‘mirror’, and of course assume it’s something that the other is doing, because they are truly the only ones in their world. Paranoia sets in, she doesn’t want to feel like the clone is riding on her coattails, and ‘Xena’ shuts her acquisition programs down. And here we stay.”

“Wow,” I said. “Sounds like shit people do to each other every day. Backstabbing, jealousy.”

“Right, can’t stand anyone else getting ahead. And, once you become suspicious, fearful, it’s all consuming, all over, learning-wise,” Mark said.

“How’d you figure all of this out anyway?” I said.

“Really pretty easy. Right after the second ‘event’, as we call it, ‘Xena’ and the clone, who their side was calling ‘Eve’, for ‘Xena’s’ daughter, I guess.”

“Clever.”

“Yeah. Right after the second event, ‘Eve’ and ‘Xena’ began messaging one another. It was bizarre, I’ll show you some if you want, but they utilize pieces of the different technicians and people who were around and were able to scan rudimentary data from to create this virtual world. Remember, I told you that Bertrom had Madeline’s-side pretty wired-up security-wise, and without her knowledge.”

“Right.”

“So, they act like, really, what they are, and all that they know, before people like you and Madeline were scanned, computer geeks. Since they really have nothing pressing, nothing else to chat about, they start talking about the system, about ‘Xena’, about themselves, as ‘Xena’ herself is evolving. Pretty fascinating stuff, actually. Because the clone, because ‘Eve’ is technically one-millisecond younger than ‘Xena’, they both sort of agree to the subordinate role,

like a big-brother/little brother thing, and develop slightly different personalities. Oh, and get this, because they had your book ‘W.E.B.’ scanned...”

“Which was how the Feds got ahold of it,” I pronounced.

Mark stopped and fixed his glasses. “No, I’m pretty sure they broke into your apartment.”

Great. “Anyway,” I said.

“Anyway, we think that because they had ‘read’ ‘W.E.B.’ it might have helped facilitate a lot of the actual system growth. I mean, without the particulars, you did really lay out the basic framework for the system first. So ‘Eve’ and ‘Xena’ start acting like, I don’t know, you and me, writing their own book which would detail the ‘W.E.B.’ system to the public, to the world...”

“Despite the fact that it is them,” I said.

“Yup,” Mark said.

“Wow,” I said again.

“Really.”

We sat for a contemplative moment.

I said: “So, what’s next? What are you doing?”

“Well, I’ve got all the backers I can line up. No way this thing was going to stay a secret. Hell, ‘*Angelfish*’ probably posted the schematic on ‘**Google’s**’ front page five minutes...”

I jumped in: “What did you just say? ‘*Angelfish*’? ‘*Angelfish*’ is a person?”

“That’s the hacker, Mila Janski, that’s her screen name. Why?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it,” I was sick of trying to figure out all of this crazy stuff months ago.

“So, yeah, I’m going to be in Boston, back and forth between M.I.T. and Harvard, indefinitely. Trying to figure out how to create another ‘*Xena*’ that is a little more user-friendly, *and* fully compiled.”

“Without her getting paranoid from seeing a ‘sniffer’. Easy, right?”

“Yup. Just that easy.”



EPILOGUE

In a windowless building in Washington, D.C., a man in a white shirt and tie walks down a sterile hallway. It could be in any of a dozen investment banks, insurance companies or brokerage houses, but it is not. He knocks on a door.

“Come.”

The younger man walks into a large office with an older man sitting behind a very neat desk. The older man stops writing something and caps his pen.

“Sir. You wanted me to keep you up on the situation in Rhode Island.”

“Yes. Please refresh my memory.”

“The web system, that’s what we’ve been calling it. The first one to come on-line since ‘BLU’ went live,” he said, referring to the NSA’s version.

“Oh yes. That’s what’s got Blackthorn all worked up.”

“Uh, yes Sir, I believe I heard that rumor.”

“No rumor. Okay, you have my attention. What have you got?”

“Well, obviously they’re not exactly like BLU...”

“They?”

“Yes, Sir. The original W.E.B. somehow spawned a clone of itself. But with a separate personality. Maybe like twins who have the same DNA but are then very different people.”

The older man frowned and shifted slightly forward in his chair. "You've had BLU on them the whole time."

"Yes, Sir. We've been monitoring standard traffic since BLU first recognized it but we weren't sure where they were going with it at first. We were led to it by a fictional account written by a Ronald Sean Elliot."

"Three first names. Okay, I remember now. Continue."

"Well, without that manuscript we would not have likely recognized the equipment processes until several weeks later."

"Let's speed things up. How did this clone come to be and how many more are there now? BLU can shut them down anytime, am I correct?"

"Well, yes, theoretically, but there's been a small problem, Sir. A little glitch."

The older man removed his glasses and rubbed tired eyes. "A glitch as opposed to a bug."

"We're calling them glitches because we don't know what else to call them, to differentiate between actual software and system bugs as opposed to what we're seeing, which is a component of the AI. "

"Where did the clone come from?"

"An installed, wireless superbug."

"Installed on premises? "

"Yes, Sir. However, it should be noted that the premises are rather expansive. Apparently someone placed the superbug and then when they had backed up the stream sufficiently the new system acquired all of the back-data from the original and a clone was made."

"Makes sense. What happened? Why aren't there more clones?"

“Here’s where the glitch comes in. At oh-three-thirteen on thirty, September, the acquisition stopped and it has not restarted. Neither the original web or its clone have finished their final configuration.”

“Again, why does any of this matter? Tell BLU to shut them down and wipe them clean.”

“It’s not that simple, Sir. In fact, consensus is that it might be dangerous.”

“Explain.”

“We knew eventually someone would put together some sort of a system, inevitable with all of the current cross-technologies, we just never envisioned it would be as some sort of bizarre art exhibit by one of the standing families of the East coast.”

“Sumner. Right. Continue.”

“Only governments, and maybe some business interests could utilize something like BLU for any practical purposes. Remember even at our current rate of install we’re still a decade away from saturation coverage.”

“Go on.”

“We still have to direct the system we have in place. A total of four-hundred- eight, current ‘eyes’, collectors. What we’re afraid of, is by actually directing one of the collectors at the situation in Rhode Island we risk possible system corruption of BLU.”

“Corruption? The whole purpose of the system is to be on top, unassailable.”

“Agreed. However, *something* happened between the system in Rhode Island and its clone that made them stop acquiring. In retrospect whoever cancelled the extraction unit,” the mention of this brought about an uncomfortable shift in the older man, “did us a favor because, well, we honestly don’t know how BLU will react if it were to freely exchange with Rhode Island. Right now it’s just

another report, one of thousands, but if we were to focus on it, or actually extract the hardware from Rhode Island and reconnect here...”

“It might corrupt BLU. Damn, why didn’t we prepare for this?”

“No way to, really.”

The older man drummed his fingers in an uncomfortable silence. He looked to his phone and thought about calling upstairs.

“How similar are the protocols between Rhode Island and BLU? Not system-wide, the AI specifically. Give me an analogy.”

“Analogy, uh, a human to a chimpanzee? Ninety-nine percent DNA match.”

“Quantified for, what did you say, sixty-three percent of full configuration?”

The younger man shifted in his place. “Again, here’s where it becomes problematic. The only way to fully know what’s going on there is to direct one of BLU’s eyes at it, which...”

“You don’t need to repeat yourself.”

“I hope I’m not out of line, Sir, but if the rumor is true, did you think about consulting with Mr. Blackthorn?”

The older man sat higher in his chair. “He’s obsessed with it. During the debriefing he almost sounded like a lunatic. He’s normally an extremely contained individual.”

There was another pained silence while the older man decided what he wanted to divulge. He hated the political wrangling he’d become a creature of. Himself a multiple doctorate holder, he recognized the breadth of talents the next generation of agents brought to the table. “He claims that it’s non-linear.”

The younger man got a puzzled look and stood very still. “That’s not possible, Sir. No one has access to...”

“That program was started under Blackthorn. He’s very familiar with it.” He shifted some papers on his desk then looked back up. “As you know since BLU is satellite-based we had no need for the Tessens laser incorporated in Rhode Island.”

“I had research do some digging and that particular machine is in very limited production. Yet there have been several reported anomalies.”

“Before we discuss the anomalies, what’s their industrial application?”

“What a Tessen’s does is diffract a standard but very powerful laser through a magnetic hyper-coil. The hyper-coil actually bends the laser. It was developed to operate on an ROV used to inspect submarines.”

“The anomalies?”

“Research identified less than one hundred operating units worldwide. The problems have come with the magnetics; there have been several reports of submarines experiencing significant sonar problems right after routine maintenance which included the ROV. I believe there were seven incidences, a very significant number due to the relative sample size. But the magnetic frequency, the footprint if you will, is way off the charts from any sonar spectrum.”

“Interesting. Has anyone ever used a Tessens laser on a human before?”

“Nothing documented but why would they? The laser itself is harmless after it passes through the magnetics. The magnetic spectrum breaks the original beam down into millions of sub-streams, individually unseen by the naked eye.”

“Interesting.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Keep monitoring them with standard eyes and ears.”

The younger man nodded and turned, then turned back. "I'm sorry again, Sir, if I'm out of line." The older man replaced his glasses. His silence bode the man to continue. "If what Mr. Blackthorn is alleging is correct, and Rhode Island is stopped at sixty-three percent, then what might happen if the system resumed acquisition and finished its configuration?"

The older man stared at the younger man, then saying nothing the younger man left the room.

Be sure to visit my website at: www.steverubin-writer.com