

# The Firewall Sediton

By

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A psychologist, a sociologist, and an economist are playing golf. They're playing behind a blind guy that's holding them up. The psychologist says, "Just think what must be going through his mind."

The sociologist says, "Think of all the complex relationships he had to work out to have a support system that would allow him to play golf."

The economist says, "This is so inefficient! He should be playing at night"!

# Chapter 1

Chicago-2008. A few months before the start of the great recession.

The landing gear dropped. Passengers pulled their seats up straight and looked at their watches as the flight attendants went forward. David and Dori watched the ground from a scratched up, double plastic window on United flight 503 as the 737 flew over Chicago on an unusually low approach. Puffy, stratified clouds looked unpredictable over the famous lake-front skyline. David cursed the sky for blocking all the warm colors out of the incoming sunlight and bringing in another dull gray morning in Chicago. They were glad to be home after suffering three boring days in a New York hotel. The trip was an obligation to attend the wedding of Dori's close friend Jackie. The two girls were neighbors as kids, and now Jackie was the last one of Dori's inner circle of friends to get married except her. Dori was still single, but being engaged to David made it easier to laugh off the occasional joke about her being the last little duck to cross the bridge.

At 29, Dori Goodman didn't show any signs of aging. She looked like the girl next door, a classy combination of undiscovered beauty and casual charm. She wrote 5'4" on any form or record that she was asked to fill out, but she was actually shorter than that. Her health club figure was perfect, and nobody

cared about how tall she was anyway. Her medium length, cinnamon colored hair always fell right into place, naturally framing her tiny face and her large brown, sleepy eyes.

She loved her job, a paralegal position with an old law firm, right in the heart of the downtown loop. Business suits were the uniform of the day there, and she kept it conservative, even though her skirts were a still a little too tight for some of the older women. After work she preferred designer jeans, fancy tee shirts, and pink \$200 cross- trainers. She always looked sharp to David, even in winter, when it seemed to him that every woman in Chicago would just give up and zip herself into full length, goose down coat that looked like a pastel colored body bag. Not only that, they would pull ski masks over their faces and top off the ugly sexless uniform with mirrored sunglasses.

Were Dori not so attractive, people may have wondered if David had an ulterior motive for keeping company with the daughter of a full professor at his own graduate school. He didn't need the help though; his father was on the faculty too, and they were all prominent economists. Although still a graduate student, David Armstrong had already distinguished himself academically. He was especially skilled at the complex mathematics essential to working in economics.

His rural childhood home was middle class, easy, and fun. He grew up watching his father, Dr. Benjamin Armstrong, teach economics at the University of Iowa. Young David was a champion wrestler in high school, an outstanding student in college, very popular with the ladies, and an avid dirt bike racer at the local motocross club. His weekends were full of bone-jarring races and heavy drinking. His father did everything in his power to convince his son and only child to give up the potentially lethal combination. After many guilty feelings and a broken arm, David finally agreed and put his motorcycle in the garage.

The grown up David was an average looking guy, but a bit too impulsive. Naturally toned, he wrestled at his normal weight of

one hundred and eighty pounds, and without visiting the sweat room. By not sweating off any water weight, he put himself at a disadvantage. At five-foot-nine, he was always shorter than his opponents. They could easily drop fifteen pounds in the hot box and wrestle in a lighter weight class. Even so, David rarely lost. Starting at age twelve, his summer job consisted of throwing forty-pound bags of livestock feed onto flat bed trailers; that's forty pounds every ten seconds, one after another, all day, every day except Sunday.

When he wasn't teaching he liked to wear old Levis, a University of Iowa tee shirt, and his old tennis shoes that were stained green around the edges from mowing his dad's lawn in Oak Park Illinois. In the classroom he preferred new Levis, dress shirts, sport coats, and casual brown shoes. If he needed a tie he borrowed one from his father. If a tie was absolutely mandatory and he didn't like the function he was supposed to attend, he might wear an ugly polyester tie that he bought at an Oklahoma flea market, a blaze orange number with a large-mouth bass painted on it.

After three days of sharing Dori with huggy-kissy females he didn't know, David was finally only a family dinner away from having two days off. He could go to Wrigley Field and drink long neck beers in the bleachers with his shirt off. He could go to his friend Mike's garage, drink cold cans of Old Style and help him rebuild his 1942 International Harvester pickup. He and Dori could sip rum and coke while floating on their backs in a backyard pool after midnight. There were no classes to teach until Wednesday, and he was ready to party. His airplane window daydream suddenly evaporated into reality as the ground came up faster and faster, revealing little rusty industrial buildings and strip malls in more and more recognizable detail.

"We're off the lake," he said to Dori. "Look. I can see the university. Look quick."

"Uh huh," she mumbled while fishing around in her purse

without bothering to look up.

“Look,” he said, pointing down. “It's completely surrounded by shitty areas on all sides.”

She squinted at the window. “Yeah boy,” she laughed. “I can almost see the dope dealers on the corners. I heard it used to be a nice area too, and now the slums...they're only a few blocks from the college.” She pulled out a disinfectant wipe and drew it back and forth between her fingers one by one like she was flossing her teeth.

“The college...It's an island,” he insisted, shaking his head in disgust. “An island of privilege in a sea of crushing poverty.”

“No speeches please,” she begged. “And please remember to watch your drinking at dinner with Mom and Dad.” She thought about the last time that he drank too much in front of her family. They had an argument about something really stupid and she was forced to find a reason to leave before dessert.

“OK...OK. I know,” he grumbled, still thinking about the rough streets around the college.

She sat up and tried to get his attention. “Hey buster. The last time...you embarrassed me with that crazy speech defending a certain South American socialist that took over the evil oil companies in South America or something. My dad had a cow. That kind of talk isn't exactly popular with the econ department you know. You got drunk and got on a soap box. Make that a whiskey box.”

David blushed. “Think about what I said. Was I right? Oh God no. Don't defend a populist. All those Nobel Prizes...you know...the great University of Chicago. But forget about a fair exchange of ideas. Academic freedom my ass.” He started nervously clicking his pen over and over without realizing it.

“You need to get tenure first,” she begged. “When you do, you can say anything you want to.”

“Oh yeah right. Like Finkelstein did”? He clicked away.

“Finkelstein! Oh please. Give me a break here already.

Anybody that tries that hard to blow his tenure is TRYING to draw frigging attention to himself. He gets off on the shit he stirs up. Come on admit it. He brought it all on himself."

He laughed a little and said, "You don't have any problem with Finkelstein, and neither does your dad."

"It's his methods. Why stick it in your face like that. He could be a little more sensitive to other people's feelings. A little tact never hurt anybody for God's sake."

David lovingly cupped her chin in his hand and smiled. "OK moonbeam. You're right, but I'm starving. I ain't picky. I could eat anything that's already dead, but I don't think I can make it to your dad's without eating something first. I haven't had anything since breakfast and you ate half of my little sausages." He fixated on a flight attendant's legs for a second before he caught himself and straightened back up.

"I was hungry," she protested.

He smiled at her feigned embarrassment. "We didn't get to sleep until way past one girl."

"You had to watch that stupid movie," she said, remembering them making love and falling asleep together at the wrong end of the bed.

"Yeah, and the end was so...I don't know...I didn't expect the guy to just dump her like that."

"And when you finally went to sleep you mumbled all night."

"Yeah, I know. I suppose so."

"You had the dream again didn't you"? She put her hand on his arm.

"Yeah." He watched the ground coming up.

"You should see a shrink."

"It's not uncommon. Besides that, a shrink would have a frigging field day with it. A boy and his dead mother in a dream about a dead bug is just too Freudian. Nobody does Freud anymore. It just means I miss my mom, that's all." He looked at the runway. "I think we're landing. We're coming in fast."

She looked at her watch and said, “3:30 and change. We have plenty of time.” She checked her hair in a little green hand mirror.

The 737 descended to what seemed like tree top level and sailed past a sea of rental cars. Dori saw another silver jet stopped on a concrete bridge that crossed over a busy expressway. It looked scary with cars zipping by, right under the wings that extended out over edges of the ramp. They were lined up perfectly on approach and the wheels soon hit the runway squawking so loud you could almost smell the hot rubber. The plane jumped up a little and then down hard again, this time for sure. The engines roared as the huge turbines reversed thrust and pulled against the forward momentum.

“Woo, that was some landing,” she said behind raised eyebrows.

“Yeah, I guess so. Welcome to O-Hare. Lets get going. I want a hot dog and a beer.”

“Don't you get...” She looked directly in his eyes.

He fumbled with his seat belt. “I'll be good. Anything for Daddy.” He lied.

“Come on, I mean it.” She looked angry.

“OK, but let's not stay all evening. I promised Mike I'd look at his taxes.”

“On Sunday night”?

“It won't take long and I owe him a favor.” He reached up to the overhead compartment.

“Whatever,” she moaned. “We're at the gate. Let's just go.” She tried to get up with passengers clogging the aisle.

The intercom came on. “Ladies and gentlemen thank you for flying United. We have an announcement. I'm afraid there will be a slight delay at the terminal due to a routine security procedure. You will be allowed to deplane, but I have been informed that the terminal has been temporarily sealed until it is cleared by security. They tell me it's just routine. I can tell you that there is no immediate threat. Again, this is just a routine procedure and we

do not expect a long delay. Passengers proceeding on from this point are asked to also deplane until security has cleared the terminal. Thank you again for flying United.”

“Son of a bitch.” David threw up his hands.

A passenger with a cell phone at his ear waved to everybody and called out. “Wait...wait...some idiot ran past security, then he ran back in the terminal. It's on CNN.”

“Is that all”? Dori couldn't believe it.

Passengers groaned and swore as they dug in the overhead compartments.

“Wait until they go,” said David, waving his hands and sitting down. “There's no hurry now. Same old shit. Some idiot does something stupid and they shut down the whole world. Give me a break. They give the terrorists exactly what they want. They don't have to actually hit us again. They can just sit back and watch us bang into each other like a bunch of fools.”

“Ain't that the truth.” She laughed.

He made a stupid face. “All we have to fear is the president himself.” They laughed. “My fellow Americans, be afraid, be afraid. It's all about them and us. They are against us because they are evil. We are good. It's all about terror, terror and evil. Y'all are with us or agin us. Do what I tell you to do and don't ask questions. We will prevail because I am the decider.” He shook his head and looked down.

“What a jerk.” She made a circle around her ear with her index finger.

“If ever there was a time to impeach, no arrest, a president, this is it. Can I get an amen?” he begged.

“Amen.”

“Amen.” He raised his hand over his head, palm to the sky.

They watched the passengers file out and a few minutes passed. Dori got restless and said, “Come on. It's clear already. Let's get the bags and make sure they didn't get sent to a destination to be named later.” She stood up and flipped the overhead compartment

door. The handle felt damp. She pulled out a disinfectant tissue and wiped it down. A passenger brushed by as she turned sideways and pulled out the carry on bag.

“Come on I'm hungry,” said David, waiting for a teenager to pass so he could get in the aisle. They were among the last to leave, but they made it through the door without stopping.

A crowd of business travelers, vacationers, and students shuffled down the narrow tunnel into the terminal. People were complaining. It smelled like sweat, fresh popcorn and stale carpet. Travelers crowded under elevated TV screens like brokers on a trading floor. Security people walked, not ran, from place to place and spoke into radios that were clipped to their uniforms. A few, who were not in uniform but were obviously security too, carried on what sounded like one sided conversations with themselves.

Dori said, “Let's get the luggage,” and stood on her tip toes, peeking over a thousand heads.

“What for? It'll be packed down there. We might as well find a place to wait. There's a TV in the bar.”

“Shit no.” She stamped her foot. “You get stoked before dinner and you know what will happen.”

“No, no. I just need a beer and a hot dog is all. I'm hungry. I told you.”

“Food first. You're not going to drink on an empty stomach.” She looked worried.

“I said I'd get a hot dog. Can I help it if we get stuck in the damn terminal”? He tried to act silly and lighten her up. “This could be it. We could die. Bruce Willis might come running in here any minute. All bloody. Being chased by a maniac with a dirty bomb and yelling for everybody to get down.”

“Oh Please.” She loved it.

He took her wrist. “Tonight we love. Tomorrow we die. Would you deny me a beer”? He laughed.

“You start drinking four hours before dinner and you ain't going to be in no shape to love anybody by the time I get you

home there Brucie.”

“My lady, I accept your noble challenge. Please, accompany me to yonder watering hole, so I may monitor the danger to your ladyship on the television. After all we are under attack and it is my duty to protect you.” He bowed and swept his arm low.

“There's no place to sit in there.” She laughed, pointing at the line outside the bar.

“None the less my dear, it is our duty to stand watch at the bar, monitoring the unfolding threat to our way of life, unselfishly sacrificing our comfort for the good of our great nation, truth, justice, and the American way.”

“Uh huh, right. Sounds like the boy scouts”?

“Actually Superman. Besides, I have to pee. Be a trooper and dance that sexy figure up through the crowd and get us a couple beers while I go, OK? I could stand there forever, but I'll bet you'll be in the front row before you can say excuse me.” His face beamed with pride.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment? Not only am I reduced to an object, you have me buying.” She wasn't smiling on the outside.

“No here, I'm buying. I've gotta go. Get us a both a couple beers and some hot dogs.” He put his wallet in her hands and made for the rest room while she stood there watching him try to navigate a way around the bottleneck.

The men let her through just like he predicted they would. Her wait at the bar was short, but noisy. The bartender called out over the crowd noise and the TV. “What can I get you mam”?

“Can I get four Old Styles and a couple hot dogs with everything”?

“No hot dogs.” He rushed her.

“OK then, just the beers.” She worried about David's empty stomach, and made a mental note to count the beers and the time. The fifteen minutes it took David to get back seemed like an hour. He walked up and grabbed a beer as she handed him his wallet.

“I didn't think I'd ever get in there. It was agony. It smelled like a locker room.” He took a long drink. “The can was cold and all wet. Just mopped. Where's the hot dogs?”

“No dogs. And you better take it easy.” She could see it coming.

“Look at that.” He pointed at the news ticker running under the main picture on the big TV behind the bar. “The President just named a new stooge to the World Bank. Here comes the new boss, same as the old boss.”

“World Bank, IMF, UN, CIA, PTA, FDA, what does the World Bank do? Who gives a shit”? She looked unimpressed.

“I'll tell you what they do. They find tiny third world countries that have no cash and lots of natural resources. Then they loan them more money than they can ever pay back. They never actually see the money. They give it to contractors to build infrastructure. When they can't make the payments the vultures swoop in and buy the debt for ten cents on the dollar. Then they sue the poor suckers in a US court, drain them dry, and steal the natural resources.”

“Bastards” I'm sorry I asked, she thought.

“There's legislation going on to stop that kind of shit, but fearless leader gets a lot of campaign money from the vultures, and he's sure to veto.” He almost spilled his beer but caught it just in time.

“Ass holes.” She glared at the TV.

“Look,” he said. “Look at those stupid commercials. It's the same ones over and over. The idea is to irritate you so you remember the product. It's worse on the cable channels. Sometimes they actually own the product. If there's an unsold spot, they just throw it in. I hate it when they run the same spot back to back, and it's always one that's been on for years. Over and over and over.”

“Like the guy who screams at you about the toilet cleaner.” She laughed.

“He's got to be the most muted guy on TV.” He poked an imaginary remote at the screen and picked up another beer.

“Hey, that's mine,” she protested. “You had me get four beers and now you're on number three. Shit David. Here we go again.”

“I'll get you another one.” He reached for his wallet, grinning, knowing she would say no.

“No way. You'd drink it too.” She looked at her tiny watch and the public address system came on.

“Attention Passengers.”

“All right,” she said. “Saved by the bell.”

“Attention passengers. The terminal has been cleared by security. We will now resume normal operations. Please check the screens for any subsequent flight delays. Thank you for your patience.”

“Yes”! She clapped her hands. “Let's blow this pop stand.”

“Let me finish my beer. We've got to get the bags anyway.”

Dori took the beer out of his hand and drank it down in three gulps. She pointed to the escalator. “Let's get the bags.”

The crowd in the luggage area made David wonder what kept thieves from simply picking up the bags and walking away. He saw his luggage sliding on a silver chute as it circled around. Nobody checked him as he pulled the bags off the chute and walked up to the train platform. They stood near the tracks and talked about dinner while Dori tried to keep her shoes clean. Even though the trains stopped every fifteen minutes, they let the first two leave without them because they were full. Once aboard the next one they had to surf standing up with nothing to hang on to, a skill David had mastered after his first few weeks in the city.

The ride from O'Hare airport to downtown Chicago is about forty five minutes on a straight shot. Oak Park is on the way and about twenty minutes from the the loop. The little burb is a Norman Rockwell paradise of large Victorian homes in immaculate condition with huge yards. Hemingway grew up there. David's father moved to Oak Park directly from Iowa, but

when David left, not having his father's salary, he moved across the street to Berwyn. It was nice but cheaper. The Yugoslavian heritage in Berwyn was delightful. David lived within walking distance of a family bakery with fresh hot morning sweet rolls and three generations of the owner's family living upstairs.

It was a Sunday afternoon in June and most people were on outdoor decks watching their grand-kids swim in above ground pools with the Cubs on the radio and burgers on the grill. The train made the Oak Park station at just past six o'clock. David and Dori danced down the stairs and started the short walk to his apartment. It was overcast but warm. The wind blew her hair across her eyes and she fought it as they crossed the expressway bridge from Oak Park to Berwyn.

David announced, "The wind is blowing out to the lake. I'll bet they're flying out of Wrigley today," He swung an air bat. Dori pointed at some kids scraping down the sidewalk on skateboards.

"Let's find out," she said, approaching the oldest one. "Excuse me. Do you know how the Cubs did today?"

"Mets won, 12 to 10 in extra innings," complained a helmeted big white kid as he rolled by.

"Thanks," she said grinning at David. They both waved and the kids nodded. "You were right," she said. "Big score."

He imitated a baseball announcer. "It's three balls and two strikes. Here comes the windup, the pitch, and there it goes...back...back...hey hey!...it's on Waveland Avenue!"

"Kiss it goodbye!" she laughed.

"Wrigley is so small, when the wind blows out to the lake, they just fly outta there. A pop up is a homer man. A can a corn." He laughed and shook his head. "I could throw it out of there."

Two blocks later they turned up the front walk to David's rental. The outside was tidy and a distinct contrast to the inside of the place that looked like a fraternity house after a food fight. He kept the visible parts nice because of the neighbors. Dori insisted, "OK...come on. Open the door. We've got to get ready. We have to

make it to Skokie by seven.” He dropped the bags on the porch and turned the key. “Dibs on the shower,” she declared.

“Call your dad first and tell him we might be a tad late because we were attacked by terrorists.” He smiled. “Tell him I saved you like Bruce Willis and I have to wash off the blood.”

She frowned. “OK, I’ll make a quick call.”

“Better yet, we could save time and water by sharing the shower.”

“Oh sure, then we WOULD be late, and not because of any terrorist.” She laughed into the phone while dialing. “What stinks in here”?

“What”? He was already in the bathroom with the water running.

“Something stinks in here. What is it”?

He came back in the kitchen and started sniffing. “Shit. What is that”? He searched for the source.

She ignored him and talked to the phone. “Hi Mom, we’re back.”

“Hi hon,” her mother sounded pleased.

“Mom we might be a little late. The airport had a security delay thing.”

“I know. We saw it on TV. We haven’t even started dinner yet. We’re waiting for you.”

She switched the phone to the other ear. “We’re just getting in the shower Mom. Be there in about an hour.”

“Take your time honey, no rush, we’ll wait for you.”

“OK Mom, thanks, bye.”

David was all over the kitchen looking for the source of the smell.

“Smells like something died,” she said.

He pulled open the oven, laughed, and closed it.

“What”? She put on a disgusted face.

“I put a fish in there the other day but forgot to cook it.” He reached in and pulled out a baking sheet with a rancid fish on it

and opened the back door with the other hand.

“Oh David,” she laughed, holding her nose.

He threw the mess in a garbage can on the back porch, baking sheet and all. “I put the fish in the oven and the phone rang. So I turned off the oven and I guess I forgot to turn it back on again.”

She looked skeptical. “I suppose the phone rang after you put these dishes in the sink too.” The sink was full. It looked like every dish he had was dirty.

“I was going to wash them tomorrow. You know how it is.”

“Forget it. Just get in the shower and open the windows. It really stinks in here.” He disappeared into the bathroom. She forced up every window she could. Most of them stayed closed over the years and some were painted shut. Her mind was on the time again. The last time she was at David's place was over a week ago. She wondered if she had left a change of clothes in the bedroom or not. There wasn't time to stop at her apartment. She checked the drawer she kept for herself in his dresser and found one pair of new jeans and several shirts. She looked behind the bed and found a bit of her dirty laundry mixed in with his. David walked in wearing clean boxer shorts, drying his head with a fluffy red towel, and smelling clean with a hint of spicy leather cologne.

He said, “Go ahead and get in the shower. I left it running.”

She slid by, went into the bathroom and called out. “Hey...there aren't any towels.”

“Use this one,” he said, tossing his wet towel around the door. He went into the now breezy kitchen and took a bottle of whiskey out of the cabinet, poured three fingers into an old cartoon jelly glass, added a handful of ice cubes, and filled it with cola. There wasn't enough time to get a good buzz so he drank it quickly and poured another stiff one while poking around in a kitchen drawer for his little silver flask. He found it and screwed the top off. Filling it through the tiny neck was hard without a funnel. It ran down the sides and prompted him to hold the whole thing under

the running water to wash off the alcohol smell. The shower was still running. He went out to the driveway and hid the flask behind the seat in his truck. The booze kicked in and the guilt made him remember to get a hot dog on the way to her dad's house in case dinner was late.

The sight of his tricked out pickup made him homesick. It was a perfect blue 1986 Ford F150 4 by 4 Step Side. *UNIVERSITY OF IOWA* lovingly adorned the rear window. Now he was going to dinner at a place he didn't want to be and it made him a little angry. Who were they to be checking him out over and over? He didn't care if he became an economist or not. He could do a lot of other things without the hassle. He was good at it. His father taught him well but never pressured him to choose economics as a profession. With six years of college behind him he was just tired of being evaluated. What else did he have to prove.

He remembered the talks with his dad over the years about the profession and how important it was. He liked the idea of finding ways to apply rational thinking to money problems, but the ideas of some of the most popular and respected economists troubled him. He knew many people who had lost a job to globalization and he hated the flat earth rhetoric. His dinner strategy that night was to be tactful and put off career planning for another day.

## Chapter 2

Dori opened the back door and sang out, “You ready?”

“Let me close the windows and lock up.” He rushed back in and tried to pull a sticky window down. The others were no better. It took a while, but he got them all down and secured before locking the back door on his way back out. His shirt got tangled in the seat belt as he got in the truck and turned it over.

Dori was already there. “Did you say you were going to work on taxes tonight”? She pulled the mirror down to check her makeup.

“No time. I’ll call him later.” He stomped the clutch and pulled the stick down into first gear.

“You haven’t eaten anything yet have you? I’ll call Mom while you grab something. No telling how long before we eat there. What’s in the cup? Is that straight whiskey? I can smell it.”

“There’s a hot dog stand real close.” He pulled down the driveway, drove three blocks and parked in a bus stop.

Dori made the call while David ordered two hot dogs from a tiny walk up stand. People in Chicago take hot dogs seriously. He laughed at a sign that said: “You can have Ketchup on your dog but we will have to kill you.” David liked mustard, relish, and lots of onion but he only asked for mustard, yet another sacrifice for tonight. He ate the first dog before he got back in the truck and stuck the second one in his mouth like a big cigar as he took off. Dori talked to her mother on the phone.

“He's back now Mom, but he can't talk. He has something in his mouth. Talk to you later.” She snapped it shut.

“Hmmm,” he growled and grinned.

“Take Lake Shore big boy. It's faster.”

A garbage truck got in the way. “OK, hang on.” He grinned like a cab driver in a movie who was asked to step on it. The route was a straight shot east on Roosevelt Road to the downtown loop where they could turn north along the shore line and run that up to Skokie. The scenery on Roosevelt between Oak Park and downtown was depressing. This was the area that burned in the riots of the 1960s. Many of the buildings were gone. There seemed to be a repeating pattern block after block: vacant lot, church, funeral parlor, liquor store. Next block, same pattern, over and over, all the way downtown. One stop shopping for a short desperate life. David contemplated the vacant lots full of glass shards reflecting the late afternoon sun like a field of stars. They were the remnants of thousands of half pints consumed around winter fires in rusty fifty five gallon drums.

There seemed to be a red light every few blocks, but not once were two cars stopped at the same light all the way downtown. Roosevelt was typically deserted on early Sunday evenings. Once they were on Lake Shore Drive however, everything changed. Cars and trucks and buses and lots of cabs passed and changed lanes with wild abandon. This was serious driving. You paid attention and make no sudden decisions. If you missed an exit, the best thing to do was let it go by. Sudden lane changes were a bad gamble. To their right the lake looked like a sea. To the left were high rise apartments for the wealthy with glass front full length lake views, twenty thousand dollar under the street parking spaces, in house grocery, laundry, spa, and banking. David drove by without looking at the money. He just enjoyed the growl of the modified power plant under the hood and scanned the choppy lake all the way up north.

They tried to take a short cut to Skokie and got lost. After

driving around for twenty minutes they saw a familiar landmark and found the right street. David picked a parking spot. A kid driving too fast with a hundred decibels of bass booming in his trunk missed sideswiping them by less than a foot. Cars were parked on both sides of the narrow street. After several tries David managed to parallel park and took a big gulp of his drink before chewing a handful of mints and manually rolling up the windows.

“You'll do great,” she reassured him.

“I'm glad you think so.” He turned the engine off and looked up.

“He don't bite. And he likes you already.”

“I know. Let's get this over with,” he mumbled as he opened the door and stepped out and looked at the house. It didn't seem that special. It was just a big bungalow. The yard was big and in perfect shape, but to him it was not worth anything near what people there paid for a house like that. He knew about location, location, location, but he could get the same house in Iowa City for less than half as much. They opened the gate to the back yard and were greeted by an eager dachshund who seemed to know both of them and rolled over on its back to beg for a belly rub.

“Hello baby.” Dori pampered the dog and laughed in a high voice.

Her mother called out from the back porch. “Mitzi come. Come Mitzi.”

“Hi Mom. It's us,” she announced.

“Come in honey. Dinner is almost ready. Abe! The kids are here”!

Dori escorted David into the dining room as everyone exchanged greetings. The good china was on the table but the atmosphere was informal. It was a warm Sunday and a time for family. Dr. Goodman brought the steaks in from the back yard grill. There was home grown salad and fresh fruit that looked delicious. Dori smelled the aroma of fresh flowers and felt good

about being there. The dog started yipping from just outside the back door.

“Go on Mitzi”! Mrs. Goodman shoed it away.

“No Mom,” Dori insisted. “Let her stay with us.”

Dr. Goodman laughed. “He always was your buddy alright. He still goes right for your room when I let him in. That is, when he isn't stealing my socks from the laundry.”

“He likes you Dad.”

I think I need an insulin shot, thought David.

Dr. Goodman laughed. “There's nothing like showing up in front of a class with one black sock and one navy blue sock and explaining about my little Nazi dog.” Everybody laughed. Mrs. Goodman popped the back door open and the little dog did three laps around the table before snuggling up to Dori's feet.

“Now be good and stay right there,” she warned.

Barbara Goodman was fifteen years younger and a lot more conservatively Jewish than her husband Abe. Her daughter looked just like her but was shorter than her mom. Mother and daughter were close. David was protestant and that was a problem. The very same independence that her mother instilled in her daughter gave Dori the resolve to resist the pressure to marry someone Jewish and started an ongoing circular argument between them.

Abe Goodman looked like a man who was comfortable with his age in his late fifties. The lines on his face made him look wise. His eyes were a sort of brownish blue. He wore reading glasses that hung from a chain around his neck, but never went for the pocket protector. Nightly walks on the Skokie sidewalks kept him trim, along with calorie counting and situps. He walked every night, good weather or not, frequently stopping to chat with families sitting out on their front porches. He liked to remind them that the new subdivisions were usually being built without sidewalks or porches. He was always a good listener, but usually did not linger too long in one place. He remembered the names of all the children, and loved to tell young car lovers about the

classic Jaguar he bought years ago for two thousand and change. The one that was now worth more than the average home.

The steak platter went around with polite formalities and a little more small talk. Dr. Goodman kept the ball in the air. “No sun again today. I saw a study that attributed the higher incidence of depression in Chicago to only one hundred days of sunlight per year.”

“That's Chicago alright,” said Dori.

“I've been to Florida in the summer,” said David. “I'll take Chicago anytime.” He was ready for the insulin shot again.

“Not the winters,” Dori broke in. “I hate the cold. It's a wet cold.”

“Yeah,” said David. “And thank God for the train when the door on my truck freezes shut. I came out one morning last winter, you know, worried that it wouldn't start. Never got a chance to try it. I couldn't even get the door open. The ice on the door was like three inches thick. I just jumped on the train.” He started wondering if he smelled like whiskey.

Dori smiled and patted his arm. “Was it busy”?

“Standing room only all day,” he laughed.

“You mean you didn't get to ski down Roosevelt Road,” joked Dr. Goodman.

David laughed for real and sipped his iced tea. “I saw a bumper sticker on Roosevelt Road the other day. It cracked me up. But not because of the joke. Because I knew the driver didn't...well...have a father in the house.”

“What did it say”?

“Well it was an old Chevy, but it was in pretty good shape. Pretty clean. There were two girls in it that must have like just turned sixteen. They were obviously cruising. The radio was real loud. The bumper sticker said 'Good girls go to heaven. Bad girls go everywhere.' I'm not kidding.” Everybody laughed and David insisted, “If there was a father in the house, and that car was in the driveway, you know. That sticker wouldn't survive one day.”

“Right you are sir,” Dr. Goodman approved. “What kind of music was on the radio? What do you call that stuff dear? Salsa? Samba?”

“It's not important,” she said, waving her hand. “The kids just need to rebel, just like they always do.”

“It's worse than that,” he said. “Some of that noise. Grunge? You can rebel against the laws of society, but not against the laws of physics. Playing a C next to a C sharp is not a revolutionary act. It's just dissonance.” Everyone laughed. He knew David felt uncomfortable and he thought he knew why. It was a vicious cycle. He avoided coming over because he felt funny, but if he came by more often he wouldn't feel that way.

Mrs. Goodman broke in and asked Dori about her job. “And how is work? Are they keeping you busy down there? Are they giving you challenging things to do? I know you like it there, but you're so smart. You could be a lawyer yourself and show them a thing or two I'll bet.” She stabbed a whole potato with her fork. David wanted to visit the flask in the truck.

“I'm fine Mom. I don't just answer the phone and do word processing. I meet a lot of important people. It's really interesting.” She changed the subject. “David has a new paper. Haven't you David?”

He was glad that he had a bit of chewing to do before he could reply because he was not at all ready to talk about it and carefully considered his reply before responding. “Yes. But it's anything but finished. And I'm not exactly sure how it will be received.” Well done, he thought.

“I'm sure anything you do will be well received,” said Dr. Goodman. “But why do you say that?”

“It might be a bit too progressive for U.C.”

“Tell me about it. It sounds interesting.” He sensed he wouldn't like it. He worried about his daughter's future economic security, his own reputation, and his prospects for being a grandfather without raising the child himself.

“It's broad.” David decided to relax.

“I like young people who think big. When you're young you feel like you can change the world all by yourself. How broad?”

“Broad broad.” He smiled inside.

“Broader than a breadbox”?

“Yes.”

“Broader than a new mathematical proof”?

“Oh yeah.” He started to enjoy the tension.

“Is it mathematical or theoretical”?

“That's right. It's theoretical.” Here we go now, he thought.

“Oh why not. Sure. Just because we see you as our math whiz. You know. Don't think we don't respect your theoretical talent. Of course you should do a theoretical paper. Your father no doubt has something to do with it. We have nothing but praise for his theoretical work. Are you expanding on some of his recent work on the relationship between technology and productivity”?

“He doesn't know anything about it.” He laughed to himself and thought, This is the most fun you can have with your pants on.

Dr. Goodman lost it. “I suppose it's the next socialist manifesto then. Shit! Here we go.” He dropped his fork on his plate.

“Hey, look at the time,” interrupted Dori. “Mom, why don't you and I clear the table while these two distinguished gentleman retire to the library and vent all this wonderful testosterone and finish all this lovely male bonding”?

 She stood up.

“Yes dear. That's a fine idea.” Her mother backed her up, but not before throwing a glare at her husband that needed no clarification.

“Yes young man,” Dr. Goodman insisted. “Please come into the library.”

David took Dori's hand and smiled. “If I don't come back you can have my CD collection.”

“Dad please, he didn't kill anybody.” She loved it.

“I'll be the judge of that.” He shook his head and pulled open

some sliding wood doors that retracted into the walls. The library smelled like furniture polish and window cleaner. The interior walls were covered with beautiful hardwoods from floor to ceiling and capped with ornate solid oak crown molding. The wide board floors looked original. The windows were large like you would see in an old school room. They threw a great deal of light on a big wooden desk, the only thing in the room that looked new. Bookshelves with glass doors kept the dust off centuries of accumulated wisdom. The chairs were leather of course, and dark red. There was not, never had been, and would never be, a phone in the room. Dr. Goodman closed the doors and pointed to a chair on the left side of the desk. David sat down like a kid in the Principal's office.

The old gentleman nodded his respect and began. "Let's get right to the point. Are you happy"?

"I'm not unhappy yet."

"Would you rather be somewhere else less conservative? It can't be comfortable for you here. Do you know that they call you Red, Red Armstrong"?

"I'm not red. I'm a moderate. But compared to these dinosaurs I probably sound like a red. To them, if you're against throwing all the social security money in the stock market you're considered red. I mean lets just give everybody a lottery ticket at sixty five, no sixty seven, and send them to the casino." Score one, he thought.

Dr. Armstrong smiled. "Rumors of our fascism are greatly exaggerated I assure you."

"This is the home of the Chicago School. If you want to win the Nobel Prize this is where you want to be. Why wouldn't I want to be here. My father is on the faculty and I get free tuition to boot. I'm dating your daughter. All I have to do is go along to get along and I get my ticket punched right"?

"Sounds like a plan." He was too sarcastic.

"Don't you understand. Every day I walk past the portrait of the

late great Milton Friedman, Nobel laureate and champion of the old Adam Smith laissez-faire school of I got mine you get yours capitalism. I suppose we've learned nothing since then.”

“Young man. With all due respect. Milton Friedman was a friend of mine and you are no Milton Friedman.”

“I take that as a compliment sir. Your rock star of economics was no rock to me. He went wherever the wind blew. He was a Keynesian supporter of the New Deal during FDR. He liked the work. Then, after the war, he becomes a critic and writes a tune for big money that would eventually be the theme song for the neocons.”

“That's a stretch.” He got visibly angry. “He did not go where the wind blew. He was very unpopular for a long time.”

“Not with big money.” David thought for a second. “He said that if quote, free market capitalism, unquote, were quote, introduced, unquote, into totalitarian regimes, then those regimes would fall and everything there would look like the U.S. Now I ask you sir, does that sound familiar”?

“He was a very complex man. He was a humanitarian.”

“He advocated privatization and deregulation. And Reagan, the starter president for the neocons, ate it up. Uncle Miltie didn't approve of the wide ownership of capital. Now what does that mean? I've never heard of anything worse. The higher the concentration of wealth at the top the better? He would be happy now. The top ten percent have half the damn wealth.”

“I don't have to listen to this.” He looked hurt.

“Yes you do. And what about his relationship with Pinochet? And the communist Chinese? I just read that his last e-mail said that the greatest threat to the world economy, like there's one economy for everyone, is Islamofascism. Sweet Jesus. Now I respectfully ask you sir, does that sound familiar”?

Dr. Goodman wanted to appeal to a simple respect for authority. “I do not have to listen to this.”

“No sir you don't. You have your security here. And if you were

to sound like me you'd lose it.”

“And I'd deserve it.” He smacked his open hand on the desk.

There was no more avoiding the Nazi angle. “More than one person in your position used that logic in Germany in the thirties. I'll bet you've lectured more than once about how those people got swept away by the fear.” He stood up waving his hands but got embarrassed and sat right back down.

“This is not Germany in the thirties. This is a democracy.”

“Yes, and I want to keep it that way.” Good shot, he thought.

The comment brought a momentary silence that neither one of them could break. David wasn't sorry he said it but he understood how it hurt. He thought about it for a while and then tried to simplify the problem. “Look. We can't be far apart. It all boils down to what George Soros calls economic fundamentalism.”

“I know I know.” He started tapping his foot.

“The misconception that markets left unregulated will seek an equilibrium. It's a myth. Unregulated markets end up with wide cycles of boom and bust. History proves it. The Chicago school is based on a myth. Surely you agree.”

His anger made him want to change the subject and get on with the pitch. “So tell me about your socialist manifesto. Win me over to the proletariat and together we will liberate the masses.” He smiled.

“Believe it or not, it's not a socialist manifesto. It's an economic system, but it's a mixed economy with lots of room for capitalism and getting rich by hook or crook.”

“Do tell.”

“Yes sir. There is actually more room in my little Utopian economy to make unearned income than in our present American system.”

“Oh my.” He laughed. “I fear you come to bury Caesar.”

“As we all know the big problem with a socialist economy is capital flight. As soon as we start feeding everybody by soaking

the rich, you know, the folks with the big money press a button and wire it off to some third world paradise with lots of slavery and no taxes. Any system with a real safety net needs to leave enough low hanging fruit out there for the rich to play with so they keep the cash at home.”

“Interesting. And how do you do that”?

“The idea is so simple it blew me away when it came to me. I was in a hurry to get to my class and I got distracted by a story about the president actually coming out for the privatization of social security. I mean he really stepped on the third rail. I got so angry. Any high school student knows enough history to know that's a bad idea. What's he thinking about. Then I remembered one of my undergraduate sociology classes. Social stratification. It was mostly about capitalism and socialism. We talked about the advantages and disadvantages of both systems. The big insight at the end was that socialism worked better at providing necessities but it stifled incentive. Like they used to say in the Soviet Union, you know, 'We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us.' Capitalism works better to motivate people to take risks and innovate. Nobody's going to take any risks for little or no potential gain.”

“That's on the mark.”

“Right. But on the other hand, capitalism is terrible at a lot of other things that are pretty important. Profit and health care don't work well together. Get sick with no money and Doc says you're gonna die.”

“I agree on health care No question about it.” He meant it.

“Pensions should be more than a 401k. There's no security in that. Not one day in your whole life do you ever feel really secure. You work every day worrying about the market. What if it falls? What if some ass hole somewhere else in the world gets caught cooking the books and people panic”?

“I'm with you there.”

“Food, clothing, shelter, health care, defense, education, roads,

parks. All the necessities of life are done better with a central, planned, government regulated economy, not an open market free for all. History proves that beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

“What you are describing is a mixed economy, like we have now, nothing new.”

“All economies are mixed economies. A mix of capitalism and socialism. What happens is we go in cycles. Big up and down swings. When times are good the capitalists push the socialists back and when times are hard the socialists push the capitalists back. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. The trick is to match them up with what they do well. When the mix is rich with capitalism it's hard to get necessities to the poor. When the mix is rich with socialism, well, incentive dries up and capital runs for the third world and cheap wages. The mix that we get depends on a political tug of war. I propose a mix, but a rational mix, with a firewall between necessities and luxuries. We guarantee necessities with a centrally planned government regulated economic sector and leave the luxuries completely unregulated. If you want to make a killing on diamonds go ahead. You can be a monopoly and price gouge and sell crap with no problem. Nobody dies because they got ripped off on diamonds. But if we catch you playing it fast and loose with food, oh my God. We are going to make you wish you were never born.” He felt proud but embarrassed.

“A rational mix. Very original. First problem. Who decides what's a luxury and what's a necessity”? He smiled and held up both hands.

“The people.” David slapped his leg.

“Right back where we started. The people elect a left winger or a right winger and they go to congress and decide a necessity is whatever K Street says is a necessity.”

“Wrong. People vote electronically on individual line items in the federal budget. We have the technology. Is a cell phone a necessity? Is tuition to a public university a necessity? What

about a private university”?

“Now watch it.” He smiled.

“Does the middle class taxpayer need to subsidize the private schools that his children can't afford to go to? I think not. Let the voters decide. Let them decide on every line item.”

“Question number two. What happens if everybody votes everything a necessity”? He smiled, feeling confident of victory.

David was talking to himself now. “Well, here's one the GOP won't like. All those years of listening to the republicans bashing the democrats as tax and spend. And then they get power and trash the deficit not once but twice. They can always find the money for war but never for health care. Under this system we have a mandated balanced budget. We vote on all the line items and if we write more checks than we can cash without borrowing, well, we vote again. And again, and again, until we weed out enough marginal stuff to keep in the things the people decide they need the most. Remember, these are only the things we decide to protect from the capitalists. If cell phones lose you can still buy one and pay market price.”

“Oh my God son.”

“Think about it. People would feel the opportunity cost of a war. Imagine knowing what the war was costing you personally, in dollars, in a day, and what you would have to give up to have it.”

“Oh my God the gridlock.” He smiled and put his hand on his forehead.

“I don't think so. The pressure would be on to find a compromise. Just like when the congress locks up. Because we can't just print more money. Which is of course inflationary. Besides, the big secret is that there's plenty of money in the pot for necessities and the fat cats just like making a buck on grandma's power bill. There's plenty of room for big money to get even bigger on all kinds of crap we don't need. But stay away from the basics of survival or we'll put you in a prison that would

make the neocons join Amnesty International.”

“Question number three. I think you just invented a two tiered system. Americans will never go for that. They still think they have a shot at getting rich and they won't give it up for security.”

“Let them get rich by selling crap we don't need, but stay the hell away from necessities. Even hockey has rules.”

“Not many.” He laughed. “I can see you've given this a great deal of thought. Have you realized that if you publish this, and by some miracle it catches on, that you would be making a lot of people happy and a lot of other people, very, very angry.”

“Uh huh.” They laughed.

Dr. Goodman scratched his head. “Lets see who would not be asking you to dinner. How about the insurance companies and the HMOs”?

“Bring 'em on.” He was still laughing.

“And let's see. I'll bet you'd be real popular with big oil.”

“Oh we need to nationalize that yesterday.” He slapped his leg.

“And who would love you besides the huddled masses. Let's see. Suppose a company was selling cars. How about luxury cars that have GPS, vibrating heated seats, gold inlaid door panels, silver knobs on the console, refrigerated glove compartment, seven TVs, a jet engine that runs on regular gas, goes zero to sixty in three seconds and has four wheel drive.”

“OK. You can sell that.”

“Well, suppose they are charging five times what it costs them to make one.”

“Does it have an air bag”?

“Oh yes.”

“Then more power to 'em.” They both laughed so loud it could be heard in the other room. David grabbed his stomach. “Nobody ever starved because the glove compartment fridge went out.”

The sliding doors parted with a rolling squeak and the ladies intruded without knocking. Dori was tired of holding her ear to the door. “Is everything all right in here”? Both men grinned

through restrained smiles and David assured her that everything was fine. She didn't know if she should be pleased or not. Anything is possible with these two, she thought. "OK," she said, looking at David, and slid the doors shut.

Dr. Goodman picked up where he left off. "What about cars in general. Would they be luxuries or necessities"?

David felt confident. "I can only speak for myself, for my vote. The people would decide. I would say the first, I don't know, fifteen thousand for a car would be a necessity. But anything after that would be a luxury. The same with homes. A two hundred and fifty thousand dollar home is not a necessity, but a modest home with one bathroom would be."

"You sir have never had a daughter," he laughed. "Two baths are not a luxury."

David laughed. "That's your vote. But if you had to give up something even more important to get that, well, it might not be worth it to you."

"People would be forced to deal with the opportunity cost of everything."

"That's right. Necessities anyway. And it would be so much more efficient. And way more rational."

"I see your father here. No more single issue candidates. You don't have to elect a candidate just because he's against the public funding of abortion. You can just vote on the individual issue, the line item in the budget. It reminds me of The United Way. You can check off where you want your money to go."

"Good point! No more wedge issues. I hadn't thought of that." He slapped his leg.

"I like that. I sure do."

"Thank you sir. So you think it would fly"?

"Of course not." He laughed.

David felt like he was falling. "Why not"?

"Because my friend, as soon as it gets out there the spin doctors will make it sound like the commies are coming to take away our

very way of life. They'll bend it, and twist it, and take it out of context, and run it every fifteen minutes on CNN. The media is private. They know that most people consider the news a necessity and would most likely put in the public sector. Right”?

“Right.” He forced a smile.

“That alone is enough to motivate a lot of creative people with a lot of money to complicate your life a great deal. Don't you think? Dirt diggers. If you've ever done the least little thing wrong, they'll find it. And if you haven't, they'll pay someone to say you did.”

He looked whipped. “I suppose you're right.”

“Don't give up that easy son. So America's not ready for rational thinking and opportunity cost. So what. Hell. You sold me. This is great fun. I can see the tricky issue ads now. Hey there Bubba. Did you hear about the red who wants the government to regulate the TV”?

They laughed.

“I resemble that remark sir.”

“Indeed.”

“To tell the truth, I was thinking more about third world countries anyway. I can see it catching on where poverty is severe and multinational corporations are not real popular.”

“I agree. But if you try and publish a paper like that the school will not be happy with you or me. Why don't you hold off until you get tenure. Just publish a nice paper about the economics of privatizing the Illinois lottery or something. They'll love it. You'll get tenure and my daughter will be paying for her wardrobe with your money instead of mine. And you'll find out about the second bathroom. You can put me in the grandpa business. I can spoil the crap out of your kids, and then give them back. Hell of a plan.”

“The second bathroom is that important huh”?

“Not if you don't mind peeing behind the garage on a cold winter morning. Is the paper finished”?

He smiled.

“Uh huh. I'll bring you a copy when I get back to campus. But I'm not big on writing about the lottery.”

“I know son. Please give it some thought. You have a fine future in the department. Be careful. Please go slow.”

David looked at the beautiful woodwork around the bookcases. “I’ll think about what you said sir. I appreciate what you and the faculty have done for me. I really hope it’ll work out.” They stood up, shook hands and opened the doors. Dori was glad to see them emerge from the inner sanctum. Pleasantries were exchanged all around while everybody secretly wanted it to be over. David couldn’t wait to escape. Dori’s mother gave her a Tupperware container filled with leftovers and cookies. The dog followed them to the back gate. Dori tried to decipher David’s grin as they climbed in the truck, but he kept everything to himself until they were near the expressway.

## Chapter 3

Cars blew by the truck. A shock-wave from a semi slapped the ground and blew trash up in the air. David looked for an opening onto Lake Shore Drive.

Dori begged him to talk. “What did he say? Did he chew you out”?

“No. He liked it.” He laughed at her anxiety.

“He what”?

“He liked it. He really did.”

“What did he say”? She had both eyes on the traffic.

“He told me to write about the lottery.” A space opened up and he accelerated onto the expressway.

“What”!

“He told me that if his boss saw it I might not get tenure.”

“Shit! I thought so.” She rolled her window down and the wind blew her hair all over the place.

“I don't care. He liked it. I know he did. It must be good.”

“Did you tell him about the part where three martini lunches with the football boosters wont be deductible”?

“I didn't get to that.” He smiled and pulled out the flask from behind the seat.”

“I didn't think so. You want me to drive”? She knew the answer.

“I'm good,” he said, swallowing straight whiskey.

“At least you waited until after dinner. Be careful.” She

watched the birds on the windy lake. They were suspended in the air like kites. David welcomed the the whiskey buzz with a guilty sense of relief. He felt safe with nobody looking over his shoulder. He wanted the freedom to say and write anything he wanted. He liked teaching, but he questioned his reasons for choosing economics. Was it because his father opened doors for him, or did he really believe it was a noble profession. He was skeptical of the complicated rhetoric. He cared less about what a man said, and more about the fruits of his deeds. Some of the ideas the economists accept without question seemed so ridiculous to him it made the field attractive in a strange way. Debating the old guard would be so easy, but he wondered if they really believed what they said. They could be talking the talk just to go along. He counted his blessings. He could take it or leave it. He didn't have to chase the money. He could turn his math skills into cash in any number of ways without doing something he didn't believe in.

His exit came up. As he turned off the expressway he started thinking about a motorcycle repair shop. He loved to ride and was very good at repairing all kinds of bikes, especially the old classics. There was a man in Iowa everybody called Sarge. He was retired Air Force, a former racer, and a genius at repair. His shop was a hang out for David and his gear head friends. After fixing jet engines for twenty years, motorcycles were easy. He taught repair tricks to the inner circle of racers and enjoyed the praise he got in return. David toyed with the idea of a simple life in his own shop, surrounded by his friends, with no boss, and plenty of afternoon beer in the shop fridge.

Sarge had a good fridge. It was one of those heavy tanks from the fifties with rounded doors and a heavy latch handle. It had a little freezer inside nobody ever defrosted that was covered with solid ice. The refrigerator section worked like the day it was made and would freeze a case of beer anywhere in there if you set the thermostat below five. The door had stickers for oil products, a

large thermometer, and a swimsuit calendar that was permanently open to May 1992. He had left it all in Iowa, his friends, the shop, the races, and the feeling that he was a local celebrity with no need to prove himself anymore. He was trying to be a academic success like his father, and that meant a lot of college. When your father is a PhD, there is no other way.

Dori broke up the dream. "You OK"?

"Yeah, I'm good, I was just thinking." He took another drink, screwed the cap down, and stood the shiny flask up in a cheap plastic cup holder that hung precariously on the driver's window.

"No thinking until we get out of traffic please. I'd like to get there without crashing into an old beater on Roosevelt Road after dark already." She watched an old three color Cavalier in front of them.

"I'm on it. I got you covered." He looked straight ahead.

"Don't worry about Dad. He likes you," she reassured.

"I was thinking about the cycle shop in Iowa City. How do you know he likes me anyway"?

"You're not Jewish."

"That's good"?

She looked directly at him. Mom tries to run off all the guys who aren't Jewish. Dad paid a price for sticking up for you. I assure you sir that you did not come cheap." She laughed.

"I assume you put in a good word for me too."

"There are at least three men in this world who can not say no to me, and he's the other one." She looked straight ahead and waited for it.

"Who's the third"?. He really didn't want to know but had to ask.

"Dan Miller." She loved it.

"Who's Dan Miller"?. He tried to act uninterested.

"My friend from high school. Six five. Captain of the basketball team. Smart. Charming. A great listener. Funny. Rich. Still single...and a fundamentalist Christian that thinks women

should stay home and beat the laundry on a rock.”

“Whoops. So why sweat the details?” They laughed.

“I can introduce you up if you want.” She laughed.

“No thanks. Not my buddy. I like the beer drinking, just watched a Girls Gone Wild video type.” He finished the flask, screwed the top on, and slid it under the seat.

“You were thinking about motorcycles again? I wish I could have seen you race.”

“I haven't been back in a while. How about we make it a weekend? We can camp by the track and do some boon docking. All my friends would be there.”

“What's boon docking?” It sounds kinky, she thought.

“Just goofing around on the trails with lots of beer stops and maybe bets on who can climb that hill or whatever.” He was already there.

“Any bugs?” She was serious.

“Bugs and snakes and cows. Sunburn. Hidden wire fences. Bumpy gravel roads. Pissed off farmers and an occasional dead skunk. If you hit the skunk the bike will stink for a month. Nothing gets that shit off.” He laughed and stopped at a light.

“Then why do it?”

“Because you're free. No worries. No watches. No last call and no TV. A friend of ours actually missed nine-eleven because he was boon docking.” David took off hard, running the gears like he was racing.

“What?”

“He missed the whole frigging thing. I ain't making this up. He took off in his camper and went way back in the woods for a week. He didn't even take a radio. He was just out there fishing and getting high. After about three days he ran out of food but he was fine eating nothing but catfish and sweet corn he poached out of some field. But after a week he ran out of beer and pot so he headed back in. He stopped at a gas station and there it was on the front page big time. The twin towers on fire and a closeup of

Osama yo momma.”

“Oh no.” She laughed.

“Oh yeah. And he swore off drinking.” He laughed and choked and laughed some more. “It lasted all of six days. He fell off the wagon but he sold his camper and went in the army. Knowing him, if he gets anywhere near the enemy they'll surrender. He's a wild man.”

“If you say so,” she smiled. “You just missed the turn.”

“Sorry about that. Short cut! Let me run down this alley. I love four wheel drive.” David shifted down hard and jumped the curb right behind a row of garages. He missed all the garbage cans and remembered to stop before reaching the sidewalk on the other end to make sure there were no pedestrians. He came out on a one way street going the wrong way and behind a small traffic jam leading up to a rail road crossing with a train in it. He looked across the street and eyeballed a grassy hill leading down to an open gate by a one way street in the other direction. The hill was part of someone's back yard. He smiled at her and she instantly knew what was about to happen.

“Don't even think about it David”!

“OH! Now I have to.” He shifted the transfer case into four wheel drive and jumped out to lock the front wheels. The liquid courage felt good as he leaped back behind the wheel and went for it. The truck bounced up the hill throwing a rooster tail of sod ten feet in the air. An old man on the back porch wrote down David's license plate number when the truck slowed down at the gate. David went through carefully so he wouldn't lose a side mirror before screeching around the next corner and casually rolling up the street to his apartment. He parked in back, jumped out, and patted the hood. “Shit yeah”! He looked at his mate for a reaction.

“Officer, I have never seen that disgusting man before in my entire life.” She laughed.

“Yes she has officer. And I can prove it. She has a tiny little

birthmark that looks like a..." He pulled at her shirt and laughed like a happy prankster.

"Stop it! Stop it! And get inside or you won't see my birthmark again." She chased him to the back door.

It was after ten on Sunday evening when Dr. Goodman had to make an unpleasant phone call about his future son in law. He didn't want to do it but he knew it would be better to make it right away and not beat himself up about it. David reminded him of himself as a young man. He too was trying to set the world on fire, back before it all became a matter of career strategy. He didn't remember when things changed. It was just one thing after another. He remembered how happy he was to get his first job when only one in ten people with a PhD had a teaching job. Some were driving a bus, some selling this or that, and all of them wanted a teaching job. To study so long and hard and not be able to do what you were taught to do is a hard blow to the ego. He never had to sell insurance or do anything else outside the field. He got a teaching job right away and never looked back. Why rock the boat. Who was this kid to be so arrogant. He was a spoiled professor's kid who could use a dose of reality. He had to make a report about David's politics to cover his own ass but the kid was lucky it was Abe Goodman doing it, he told himself. He could spin it so it wouldn't be a big deal. He picked up the phone and dialed a number written on a card he kept hidden in his address book. A recording started on the other end.

"You have reached the Central Intelligence Agency after hours switchboard. If you know the extension of your party please enter it now. Be advised that your call may be monitored by our internal affairs department. Please use the standard operating procedure for secure communications." He dialed a long series of numbers several times before he got it right. A voice mail

recording started. “This is Art Lowe. I am away from my phone but you can leave a message and I'll get right back to you. If this is an emergency please call the central switchboard.”

“Hello Art. This is Abe Goodman at The University of Chicago. You asked me to check in with you about my slightly pink future son in law. It seems our hotshot is determined to publish a paper that is not exactly mainstream. Nothing major really. The usual bull shit. Nationalize the oil companies, arrest the neocons and hug the trees kind of thing. I don't have a copy yet. I'll fax it to you when I do. My boss is sure to go ballistic and that should be the end of it. It will never see publication and unless he is completely stupid he'll move on to something else. He's just a spoiled kid. I can handle him. Also, before I forget it, there was a demonstration last week about military recruiters and access to campus. It drew a good thirty five hundred. I faxed you some photos and a copy of the sign up list. There were some new names on it but no new leadership by our records. Call me if you need anything. Bye.”

## Chapter 4

Monday morning was a sleep in for David but not for Dori. She had to work and he would have slept until noon except for the noise of a garbage truck. There was no class to teach until Wednesday. All he had on his schedule was to deliver his paper to Dr. Goodman and the publication committee. He got dressed and went out looking for food. He got lucky and made it to the corner bakery before all the fresh morning pastries were gone. The family that owned it only made enough for the anticipated daily demand, and generations of experience ensured little waste. People in the neighborhood knew not to hop in at eleven thirty and order three dozen donuts for the office. The smell of fresh cinnamon and sugar made him want some strong coffee. He bought three huge cinnamon rolls. The lady dropped them in a white sack and he was off to the train. One of the big bombers got devoured before he reached the platform, and his sticky fingers made it a struggle to get a Chicago Tribune out of the machine. The platform was loud with the sounds of the nearby expressway traffic. The train squeaked in, stopped, and unloaded a few people. Rush hour was over so David could sit down and read all the way to the university. He rode to the loop, changed trains, and headed south. In a few minutes he was standing in the door and waiting to step off the train only few blocks from the college.

To his west was the rough looking south side of Chicago. To the east was the perfectly preserved ornate brick buildings of a

very expensive private university. There was no physical barrier, no walls or guards. The drive by shootings that were common close by did not happen there. It looked like a park that was so green it reminded him of home. This could all be his. All he had to do was play along. He compared it to the Iowa campus that was just as nice and had no strings attached. He looked at the sky. At least it was a clear day for a change. He walked across the green space and up the sidewalk to his destination. He opened the heavy door to the building that was home to the economics department and dodged students with worried faces before rounding a corner and slipping two large brown envelopes into a couple of mailboxes. One was for the dean and one for Dr. Goodman.

He didn't stop to talk to anyone. He just wanted to get back to the train without getting caught in a conversation. His transfer was still good and he was mentally planning the afternoon off. He was free for two solid days. He could go see the Cubs, drink in the bleachers with his shirt off and just step back on the train after the game. He was closer to the White Sox at the time but hadn't attended a Sox game since they tore down the old Comiskey Park in 1991. He had once bought a seat right behind home plate there, on the day of the game, for twelve dollars. The Sox were almost in last place at the time. It was early spring and cold but he was amazed to get so close. The old parks let the fans get a lot closer up behind the plate. There was a big wooden bullpen door in the hall with autographs of old stars carved into it. He wondered if they had saved that door when they tore the place down. It was one of the oldest parks left standing and kids from the south side could watch the Sox and the Yankees for all of three dollars in the bleachers. The new park would have sky boxes for the millionaires.

There was always baseball on TV. And the best place to watch a game on TV was in a neighborhood bar, with people you know, who are also not working on a Monday afternoon. Baseball in Chicago is better in the afternoon. It's a tradition. There have been

night games for years now but millions of people around the country still expect the afternoon WGN broadcast to be an almost everyday thing in baseball season, and a better reason to be in a bar in the afternoon has never been found.

You couldn't just go to a bar, you had to belong to one. David had excellent taste in the selection of a drinking home. To meet his standards a bar had to be dark, cool, and loud. If there is a phone, it must not be easy for someone to call the establishment to see if any particular person is there. There must be Beer Nuts. The rest room must not smell bad. It should be OK to write on the wall of the rest room. The jukebox must be free of Barry Manilow, Neil Diamond, and Celine Dion. It is also forbidden to have wind beneath one's wings. ZZ Top and Sir George of Thorogood are mandatory. Once found, such a prime spot can be a good place to converse with friends, share the news of the day, and watch the Bears kick the crap out of the Green Bay Packers.

David found such a place just across the street from Oak Park shortly after moving to the area. Artie's was owned by Art Carlson, a third generation owner of the same fine establishment. The bar had been there through it all, right through prohibition and two world wars. When Capone moved down the street to Cicero it was a speakeasy called the Roosevelt Tap. It was never raided, even in prohibition. After all that time it was still protected territory. The room was narrow, long and dark at the front, with the bar and booths in the back half. There were booths in the front too but nobody ever used them. When someone came in the front door everyone in the bar could see who it was before the intruder could see who was in there or what they were doing. This layout enabled the regulars to pass a joint around the bar once in a while. If a stranger came in they just put it away. There was pot smoking at the bar but the coke was in the back room. David avoided the back room and that was fine with Artie who appreciated David watching the bar when he made the occasional trip to the office.

All manner of things were hanging on the walls, from pictures

of Artie with celebrities to sports memorabilia. They had a bloody Butkus jersey, a miniature cannon that really fired, and a stuffed armadillo. The actual bar was vintage hardwood and glass, well worn and never refinished. The bare concrete floor was original and clean, as were the brick walls. Artie had a high tech audio visual system that was always on, complete with digital recorder, satellite dish, and a broadband Internet hot spot. The whole world was easily accessible.

There were other things too that were unique and interesting about Artie's. It was known locally as a biker bar. On any given day a half dozen Harleys were parked in the narrow side lot. Being across the street from Oak Park, it attracted lawyers and accountants as well as journeyman tradesmen and other blue collar guys that people would usually associate with such a place. A city worker sat next to a dentist who sat next to a pipe fitter who sat next to an MBA, but they all rode Harleys. There were old bikes that ran some of the time and new ones that cost as much as a new car. There were no Hondas. David was actually a closet Honda guy, a dirt racer who rode Japanese bikes. There were no American dirt bikes and nobody rode dirt bikes in Chicago anyway. He wasn't able to tell personal bike stories like he did in Iowa but he loved the scene and he seemed to fit right in. And he could fix a Harley.

It was a little past noon when David stepped off the train. All he wanted to do was get a little lunch and watch the afternoon game with the roofers at Artie's. The roofers were always there at noon in the hot weather. In summer they would knock off from ten in the morning until two in the afternoon to drink beer and shoot pool. They were real good at pool. The firemen were good too but not as good as the roofers. He stopped at a corner grocery and grabbed a sub, some chips, a candy bar, and a Mexican beer. He had to wait behind some people buying lottery tickets at the checkout and this was especially frustrating for an economist that thought of it as a tax on the mathematically illiterate. It took

longer to get the food out of the store than to eat it and the Mexican beer could have been colder but he didn't care.

When he arrived at the bar a man with a yellow hard hat and rubber boots held the door for him and they went in. He felt the refrigerated air evaporating the sweat on his arms.

"Hey Red," the man said, smiling at David.

"Hey Stan." Everyone at Artie's called him Red to poke fun at his populism. There were republicans and democrats and libertarians and Unitarians in regular attendance, but they all rode motorcycles. Some of them lived only a block or two away but they still rode in on motorcycles. David was waiting for Harley to make a dirt racer that could tear up a motocross course and win but they only made street bikes.

He took a seat on a stool next to the cash register, ordered a draft, and was greeted by Max the dog. If Artie was the boss of the bar, Max was the chief of security. The big dog was a one hundred and fifty pound Doberman that knew the scent of everybody that was supposed to be there. It was taller than a man with both feet up on the bar, and unlike those pin head Dobermans, it had a head as big as a calf. Max was actually a sweetheart but looked like something all together different on a first impression. The mailman never came back to the bar. He just left the mail on a front table. The big dog slept under the bar at night and everyone on the street knew that.

It was a typical day. The regulars rode the bar stools while the roofers kept busy on the pool table. Most of the regulars worked and lived close enough to make it to the bar for the noon hour roll call. Artie had a pizza oven in the back. The roofers were there in numbers or he would be making free pizza for the half dozen of his friends that were at the bar. He never charged for pizza but the guys always put a couple bucks in the tip jar. On football Sundays the usual suspects would slip in the back door just before noon and Artie would lock them in for the game. It was an honor to be included and there were no rules short of celebratory gunfire or

open fires on the bar. There was never any real trouble except the one time. A Chicago running back had broken free and was going for the goal line. Just as he was breaking a tackle on the Minnesota ten yard line the network cut to President Ronald Reagan who was going to make a speech. It was not a happy place. Beer bottles flew. Windows were broken. Artie used a secret exit left to him by his grandfather and bailed out. The guys fixed the windows later that same day but Artie was pissed for a week. Not at the guys. He was pissed at Reagan.

David settled in but suddenly a full range of profanities and threats silenced the crowd. Artie was on the phone and he was pumped. He signed off and slammed the phone down on the bar. "The sons a bitches are going to tear down the spindle"! Moans filled the air. "They're going to build another damn Walgreens in there." Threats and disbelief bonded them all into a band of would be vigilantes. Oak Park had Hemingway but Berwyn had the spindle to make it famous. It was a sculpture of eight cars stacked on top of each other on a stake in a parking lot. It was in the *Wayne's World* and that put Berwyn on the map. Artie poured a draft for everyone in reach and made a toast to the memory of the Car Kabob. "May it always be remembered in the true glory that brought it to life," he said, lifting his glass. Everybody laughed and said Amen.

Since it was a Monday afternoon and the Cubs were coming on, some of the regulars were taking a long lunch. Closest to the register and keeper of the baseball statistics encyclopedia was Stan Adams. He was a thin man in his forties. He knew a lot of obscure numbers and trivia without even looking the stuff up. A concrete and construction man of twenty years, he was active in the union. He voted for Bill Clinton but he was angry about NAFTA and assured the republicans that he wouldn't piss on Slick Willie now if his heart was on fire.

Next to the stat man was Bill Whitehall, a chunky guy in his twenties with close cut brown hair. Big Bill managed a hardware

store in Forest Park, was a born republican, and could always be counted on to help Artie in a debate. He was protestant and married to a catholic. His signature Tootsie Roll Pop stuck out of his mouth and rolled around when he talked. He hadn't smoked in nine years. Poker was another matter.

The center stool on the west side of the bar belonged to Junior Gunderson. No one knew his first name but it was rumored to be Winston, which he denied. A good looking man in his thirties, he had stylish blond hair and blue eyes which he took advantage of. He was a shameless womanizer. There was always an angry blond chasing after him and more than once he left the bar to find his tires slashed. He was catholic and married with six kids. As democrats go he was a Chicago democrat. Most people who live in Chicago are democrats but a lot of them are conservative and would be republicans if they lived anywhere else. Junior made good money as a union pipe fitter and rode a beautiful late model full dresser Harley that he parked by the window and checked on frequently.

Rounding out the west side of the bar, the last stool belonged to Chuck Barnett, the Chicago fireman who was supposed to live in the city limits but didn't. He was listed at the same address as a few other firemen who lived elsewhere and had direct deposit for their paychecks. Picking up paychecks at the bachelor pad used to be a great excuse to have a shift party but direct deposit ended all that years ago. He stood a good six foot four and did construction work on his days off. He was trim in his early twenties and wore his brown hair long and wild. His old hard tail Harley Sportster ran most of the time but was an adventure to ride. The trick was to remember to stay off the front brake. It was tighter than the back brake and when both brakes were engaged together the rear wheel would try and pass the front wheel which is not recommended. David offered to fix it but he declined, saying it was the perfect anti-theft device. He didn't have to lock his bike and was just waiting for somebody to try and steal it. The

perpetrator would be airborne and over the handle bars at the first stop sign. He lived for the Bears and loved to gamble. David saw him as clueless but a good yellow dog democrat. The smoker he drank the more clueless he got.

First chair on the east side of the regular guy's think tank was reserved for Nick Samson. Nick was a retired social worker in his sixties. Being retired and divorced left him free to eat in any restaurant in Chicago he wanted, any time he wanted, and he had the cholesterol level to prove it. He would have been a democrat no matter where he lived. FDR was his hero. He still made the rounds playing blues guitar and loved to jam with Artie when the old gangster played the harmonica. He never called it a harmonica. Artie was a harp player. Nick's nose looked a little funny from boxing in his teens. He had an iron jaw but always got hit in the nose. His hobbies were labor history and political blogging. He was rather successful and well known on a number of popular web sites. He had the time for it and his lap top was always with him. Several DUIs and a minor weapons violation gave him driver's license problems so he rode his mountain bike everywhere. He took it on the train when necessary and knew when the crowds were thin enough to get the thing on board without a hassle. He had a good friend in David who had staked his claim on the bar stool next to his. It was Nick that started calling David Red and it stuck. Each helped the other get home from the bar on more than one occasion. Nick's bike had seen the back of David's truck several times, and David found it back there several times the next morning without any memory of the night before. Dori was not a fan of Nick.

The next stool, and half of the one next to it, belonged to three hundred and fifty pounds of Bill "Bubba" Anderson. Bubba looked like the stereotypical biker with the leather and the tattoos. His personality didn't fit the look. He shaved his head but didn't have to because he wasn't bald. He had just turned thirty, was married with two kids and was a Lutheran. He was also a closet

Minnesota Vikings fan who rooted for the Bears with his fingers crossed behind his back when the Vikings played Chicago. No one noticed that he was the only one who didn't own anything with Bears on it. An avid body builder, he looked like he could walk on to any football training camp and get signed. Everyone knew he was an intelligent progressive democrat, but he got teased like a Bubba anyway. Everybody's favorite Bubba stunt went down whenever a stranger lost his money in the cigarette machine. That happened a lot. After the guy complained Artie would send Bubba over there and he would pick the machine up over his head and shake the coins out. Nobody ever got away with lying about losing change in the old machine even though everybody knew that coins got stuck in there all the time. Artie was simply not going to get a new machine. The roofers knew that if they ran out of smokes it was easier to bum one or go down to the liquor store. Another standing joke was to fake a trip when walking by Bubba's stool and make a comment about how big his feet were. Everybody knew they were size fifteen and he couldn't get shoes just anywhere. He rode a classic old Harley hog and could have been an extra in any biker movie, as long as he kept his mouth shut. He didn't sound like a Bubba at all.

The last two insider stools belonged to the Cantwell brothers, Tom and Frank, the identical twin practical jokers of Oak Park. They were malpractice lawyers and lived next door to each other. Tom had an excuse for being skinny. He was a vegetarian. But Frank was a carnivore and liked his red meat rare, much to the disgust of his brother. No one knew how old they were but it was forty something. They were protestant and had no children. They were still married to their original wives who tried to protect them from each other. Money was no problem. They had enough wealth to be republicans but it was Chicago and they were democrats too. Their motorcycle collection was so extensive that they knew Jay Leno and saw him once a year at a collector's convention.

Cocaine was abundant and it kept their wives happy. Gambling was a problem but not because they bet on the ponies. They bet each other, over everything. Since money was like water, the bets were more about humiliating each other. They bet on everything. The loser would have to do this or that silly thing. It was not uncommon for them to walk over to Artie's on a Saturday night with one of them in drag or in a gorilla suit. They had a tab at a big costume rental place in Berwyn. It was all part of the entertainment.

That's the way it was with Artie's pals. They attended his daily political round tables at his bar on Roosevelt road. Many world problems were solved there with the skill and wisdom that can not be achieved without friendship, loyalty, good judgment, and the occasional round of double shots. Consensus and compromise was usually easy to achieve but Artie was always there to break a tie. The U.S. Senate was not as efficient, and certainly not as much fun. Not one dollar from a K Street lobbyist ever passed across the well worn concrete threshold. Bribes were limited to things politicians had no use for like carburetor rebuild kits, Cub tickets, or the loan of a rototiller. Lawyers were allowed as long as they rode a Harley and didn't sue anybody.

The issue of the day always came from what was in the news. Artie was inspired by a film he saw about the Cubans who moved to Miami and rolled cigars in a big room every day. They couldn't speak English and had no formal education so a guy would sit up on a platform every morning while they worked and read them the entire newspaper. They were a bunch of well informed guys who knew how to vote. Artie started his own version of the idea in the bar and it evolved into an elaborate setup with satellite news feeds and any new electronic gadget that just came out. They had a video recorder. It was common practice to freeze the picture and Google some talking head that was on at the time. They had a CSPAN book that listed the entire congress plus executive branch biographies and committee assignments. If

somebody was introduced to the public as a terrorism expert they got frozen on the screen with a funny expression until one of the guys found out where they were coming from. They knew the think tanks, left, right, and center. Anyone could initiate a freeze by yelling, "Stop the music! Stop the music"!

David noticed that the music had already been stopped and saw Tom Cantwell punching away at a laptop. The picture was frozen somewhere in Africa with refugees on one side of a split screen and tanks and soldiers on the other. David had to speak up because the roofers were banging the pool balls around pretty hard. "What's up Tom."

"Zimbabwe. You know anything about Zimbabwe? They have like four thousand percent inflation. People don't make it to forty. He pointed at the screen. This is on here all the time and I have no idea what's what."

"I think it used to be Rhodesia or something," he said, drumming his knuckles on the bar.

"Yeah. And they gave all the white farms to the Blacks in a big land reform a while back. And now they have to import food."

Artie yelled at the roofers. "Hold it down you guys! Come on"!

David looked at a frozen tank on the screen. "Isn't that where they had like one percent of the farmers owning all the land or some shit"?

"Yeah. Robert Mugabe is the president. He's in hot water for human rights abuses. They used to be a British colony. Seems like they were in bed with South Africa for a while. They got independence in 1965. After independence Russia and China fought over who could get them to go communist first and on what side. Looks like China's got a big hand in there now. Mugabe buys weapons from them with tobacco and ivory or something. I guess there's a movement to get rid of him but he keeps fixing the elections."

"Sounds familiar." They laughed.

"He's busting heads too."

“Meanwhile all the money goes for guns and the people starve.”

“That's about the size of it. He may have started off on the right side of land reform and shit. But some people just don't know when to quit. The end don't justify the means.”

“And I guess we can't go in there because it would piss off China? Sounds like we're internationalists when they're weak and isolationists when they're not.”

He shrugged. “Could be Red. Could be.”

“Good old China.” David drained his beer and set it on the rail.

Artie picked it up and broke in. “You done Tom? The games coming on.”

“I'm good. Go ahead and I'll get one all around.” He put the remote on the bar.

Artie started pouring two at a time. Nick appeared, sat down and said hi to everybody at once. They were more interested in the game coming on the screen but they all said hi back. David's best buddy hit him on the shoulder. “What's up Red?”

“Same old shit.” David smiled and tapped both hands on the bar.

“I read your paper. You a wild man.”

“What did you think?”

“I really liked it. It sort of appeases the right and kicks their butts at the same time. They won't know if they should love you or kill you.” They laughed. “When is it going to be published?”

“I gave it to the publication committee today. But Dori's dad says they won't go for it.”

“Translation, he won't go for it.” Nick scooped a handful of popcorn from a bowl that was an upside down replica of a Bears helmet.

“No. He likes it. He says the dean won't like it though.”

“Oh right.” Nick finished his beer and put his glass on the rail. Artie replaced it fast. They were sitting right in front of the tap. Nick handed Artie a ten and told him to do a round. Artie handed

it back and said, "I got this one. I'm in a good mood." He smiled in a way that hinted his thoughts.

"What?" laughed Nick.

"Let's just say I got lucky."

"All right man. Anybody we know. It can't be anybody that knows these jokers." He pointed all around to a chorus of boos.

Artie snapped a bar rag hung it up. "She's an old girlfriend. She got divorced in California and moved back home. Her name is Carla. She called me up. We went to Chinatown. We came back here and boom a boom boom."

"All right!" Laughed Nick. Everybody clapped and cheered.

The room opened up with hoots and warnings about sex after sixty five. Somebody broke into a hockey announcer voice. "He shoots! He scores!"

Bubba imitated a stereotypical Bubba voice. "Is you OK"?

Artie laughed and flexed a bicep. "Hey! This old Marine's still got a few rounds left in the magazine."

Bubba laughed. "Yeah but are you packin' a 30.06 or a .22"?

"Armour piercing," he insisted.

Bubba proposed a toast. "To Artie. May we all be able to get-r-done when we're sixty five."

"To Artie," they all barked, and drained their glasses.

The Cubs were off to a slow start so Artie turned the volume down. It was common to watch the game with music blasting on the sound system anyway. Nick asked for some Elmore James and got it. The roofers got a call on the cell phone and went off to a job so Nick took the opportunity to ask Artie if it was OK to light a joint.

"Keep it low," he said, "An let me turn on the big fan."

"No problem. Thanks."

Nick lit up, took a hit, and passed it to Artie who did the same and passed it on down the bar. Artie turned up the music and put a fifth of Russian vodka and a half dozen shot glasses on the mat.

"I feel like Russian roulette," he said. "Who feels lucky"?

“Not me,” said Stan.

“No way,” said most of the guys who had to go back to work.

Only Nick and David were free for the afternoon and they were feeling dangerous.

“Bring it,” said Nick.

“Oh shit,” said David. “I remember the last time we did this. At least I remember part of it. The first part, not the last part.” He passed the joint and blew out a cone of thick gray smoke.

“Oh Red,” Artie joked. Dude. You were passed out on the pool table and we should have left you there dude. Because when you did wake up, oh man. You started singing. And then you hurled out the back door. Dude, it was so funny. We put you in a cab but the cab driver came back in because you couldn't tell him where you lived. Nick just walked you home and then he had to walk home himself because he left his bike here. Man you were wasted.” Everybody laughed.

“I don't remember all that. I do remember having like three straight aces.”

Russian roulette at Artie's was a drinking game. There are five number cards and an ace. All six cards are spread out on the bar every fifteen minutes. If you draw the ace you throw down a shot of Russian vodka that the others buy. If you draw a number the cards go to the next man until someone draws the ace, just like one bullet in a six shot revolver. Since Artie drank Russian vodka it was his favorite game.

The first draw went to Nick who drew a number and passed it to David who drew another number. He passed it to Artie who drew a number and he passed it back to Nick who drew the ace.

“Bang!” yelled Artie as he poured the shot and set the timer for the next fifteen minutes.

He threw the shot back. “Oh yeah.” Nick shivered as he put the shot glass back on the bar.

“So bartender. Tell us about the old flame,” said David.

“Well she's not exactly old,” said Artie, grinning hard.

“You rascal you. Are we having a little mid life crisis?” asked Nick.

“How old is she?” begged David.

“Here you go.” Artie put the joint in the ash tray and pulled out a snap shot of someone obviously less than half his age. “Her name's Carla. She's twenty six.”

“Oh man,” said Nick. “What about the age thing dude?”

“When you got it, you got it.” Everybody laughed.

“Somebody needs a B-12 shot,” laughed David.

Nick looked at the picture again. She wasn't unattractive. There were circles under her eyes and she looked a little older than that but there was something else. He knew her. He kept it to himself. David looked over. She had a nice figure. Her hair was short and blond with dark roots. “Rode hard and put away wet,” he thought.

“She's a writer,” said Artie. “She writes novels. She drives a cab to pay the rent. She writes some hot stuff too. Sexy stuff. She says she'll write me in the next chapter so I need to make sure I give her my best performance.” They all laughed.

Nick couldn't resist. “You mean she writes those, you know, turn to any page and it's like, 'She ripped the sheet with her sweaty grip as he drove home his throbbing...’”

“No, no,” said Artie, laughing hard, “But she writes some hot stuff. The cab scenes are great. You meet all kinds in a cab.”

“You said you ran with her before,” said Nick. “What happened?”

“Yeah. Before she got married she drove a cab in Forrest Park. She picked me up once when it was raining and I didn't want to ride my bike. We ran together for about six months and then she got busted.” He picked up the roach.

“What for?”

“Passing checks. She was strung out on ice pretty bad but she kicked and got married.”

“Wow.” Nick sipped his beer.

The bell rang. “Time,” said Artie. He passed the deck to David

who drew a seven. Artie drew a ten. Nick drew a four. David drew the ace and Artie poured the shot.

“Make it a double,” said David.

“Shit dude,” laughed Nick.

“Man I've got two days off,” he said. He tipped the shot, wiped his chin, and slapped the shot glass down on the rail.

Carla was too young for Artie and everybody knew it. Something was wrong. It was obvious that he was in horny denial but that was as far as it would go until his friends could find a tactful way to help him. She wouldn't be the first woman to be after him for the coke in the back room but that was too obvious. He was old enough to be her grandfather but the guys didn't see him as the kind of a guy to get rolled by a babe. He was sixty five and alone but he never patronized the hookers. He was even known to give the young ones money and tell them to go home. Artie's business was his business but she was playing a dangerous game and there was nothing the guys wouldn't do for Artie.

“Did you read my blog today Red,” asked Nick.

“Not yet. But I read the one from yesterday about the rape metaphors in the president's war rhetoric. They must sit up nights thinking up subliminal crap that appeals to numb nutted idiots.”

“You liked it”? He dug a handful of popcorn out of a bowl.

“Oh yeah. We started with SHOCK AND AWE and INSERTED our FORCES but there was an UPRISING. The democrats called for WITHDRAWL but the president wouldn't PULL OUT and countered with an ESCALATION and a SURGE. That was classic man.”

“It's funny, but it ain't funny. It got a zillion hits. Today I've got the results of my poll about the things they told us as kids that are supposed to be true...that you no longer believe. People came up with some funny stuff man.” He waved at the boss. “Artie can I use your laptop”?

“Sure but the battery is about half done.” He passed it to Nick.

“Thanks. I only need it for a minute. He started logging on to

his website. Here we go...shit. A pop up. There it is.”

David leaned over the screen and read it aloud. “Things I was told as a child to be true that I no longer believe. The US will never start a war because we only finish them. The US will never lose a war. We will never even discuss a preemptive nuclear strike. When the US wins the cold war and becomes the only superpower we will not try to take over the world.” He laughed.

“See”?

“Oh man. Look at this. The republicans will never allow globalization. The republicans will insist on a balanced budget. How far you get in America has more to do with how hard you work than who your parents are. Extreme right wing rule is not possible in the US. Civil liberties made progress in the 1960s and will continue to improve until they are universally protected and not questioned.” He shook his head.

“Oh shit no. Missed it by that much.” Nick looked depressed.

“Here we go. Separation of church and state will be a no brainer forever. There is little chance that the electoral college will give another election to a candidate that lost the popular vote.”

“My favorite,” laughed Nick.

“We will never repeat the mistakes of Vietnam. Not”!

“Not only did we repeat it, it's the same people that did us again.”

“No shit. Iran Contra too.” David read on. “Telecommunications, energy, and the military industrial complex will be nationalized for reasons of national security. You put that in yourself dude. I know you did.” He smiled.

“Guilty as charged.” He turned around and complained, “Hey Artie. What happened to the Russian roulette. This shit is depressing.”

David laughed and kept going. “Steady man. We will never fight a war with mercenaries. Right. Oh no! The Cubs are due and will win the world series sooner or later. Not funny. A car will

never cost more than a small house. College will be free. Medical care will be free and everyone will be covered from birth to grave. Flying cars.” He laughed.

“Oh man. I was counting on the flying cars.” He started singing the Jetsons theme song. “Meet George Jetson. Jane his wife. Ding ding ding ding ding ding.”

David smiled. “In the year 2000 cars will get one hundred miles per gallon and burn hydrogen made from sea water.” He laughed and coughed.

“Yeah but water costs three dollars a gallon.”

“George Orwell prevented all the crap listed here from happening because we'll all see it coming. Oh I like that. The same with Marx. And last but not least, Habeas Corpus will always be a no brainer.”

“You mean it's not”? He tried to keep a straight face.

David put on a German voice. “Let me introduce you to one of our fine vacation spots in Lower Slavovia. Ve have vays of making you sign zee papers.”

Nick smiled. “Honest man, I was only holding the C4 for somebody else. I ain't even got a garage man. You can call home and ask my wife.”

“Ve have pictures of you in a demonstration for saving ze spotted owls.”

“That wasn't me,” pleaded Nick. “You can't prove it. I want a lawyer.”

“You already have a lawyer. Ve just can't tell you who it is.” They laughed.

“I demand my rights under the Geneva convention.”

“Nine. Nine. Ve do not recognize this Geneva convention. Your rights is kaput.” Everybody heard it and laughed.

“Help Artie,” called Nick. “This ain't Kansas anymore. Where's Artie? I need a refill.”

“He's in the back,” complained Tom. “How do you get a beer in here”?

“I got it,” said David. He jumped behind the bar and started pouring from the Old Style tap. “Anybody else?”

“Hit me,” said Nick. “Give me a couple Slim Jims too while you're back there.”

David looked down the hall and caught a glimpse of the office door. It wasn't completely closed and somebody he didn't recognize had a straw up his nose and was doing a line of cocaine on the desk. He walked over and closed it so no one could see in from the bar. A roofer held up some chips he selected from a wire rack. David made some change and sat back down only to hear some rough talk coming from the office. He grabbed the remote and turned up the Cubs to cover it up.

“Look at the stands,” said Nick. We should be down there.”

“The friendly confines,” said Tom.

“I got busted there once.” Nick laughed.

“What”? David wasn't really listening.

“No shit. I was working for DCFS. We were out in traffic driving around without air conditioning in the car. It was broke and it was hot. The good thing about the job was...you know...you had to get your work done, but when you did it was pretty much up to you. We were eating lunch and we saw the game come on and we were close so we decided to go to the game. We were up there with the bleacher bums with our shirts off... a long neck in each hand...screaming and yelling and having a good old time. We went to work the next day and found out the boss had been watching the game in the office and saw us on her little TV. We got chewed out. You couldn't get away with it now. They got cell phones. That's when we had to check in by pay phone and they couldn't call us.”

“Yeah, and you had to walk to school uphill both ways right?” joked David.

“No they had buses...but gas was 35 cents.”

A deep thud cut through the TV volume as somebody crashed out the back door and left it swinging on the hinges. Somebody

was not happy. David walked over and looked outside. Artie had a short barreled revolver cocked and pointed at his terrified guest.

“Holy Shit! I'll call a cop!” screamed David.

“No cops!” Artie insisted. He moved closer to the man who was now more angry than ever, pointed the gun straight up and screamed. “I'll blow your damn head off! You son of a bitch! Don't you ever put your hands on me”!

“Shit Artie! I told you I'd get you the money...after my old lady gets off work today! OK”!

“What the hell do you think I am, a God damn ATM machine? You come over here like you own the place and try and jack me around like some punk. Do you even know who the hell I am”?

“You ain't shit without that piece!” he screamed, waving him over.

Artie reached in his pocket, pulled out a cell phone, and flipped it open like a switchblade. “I can pick up this phone and make you disappear before the sun goes down.”

“And then you wont get the money,” he begged.

Artie pointed at the door. “I'm going back in here now and make a call. And if that money is not here before I close this bar tonight some gentlemen are going to visit you. And they will not be in a good mood. You understand”?

“I said I would.” He looked down.

“All of it.”

“OK”!

“No more excuses”! Artie stuck the barrel in the air, clicked the hammer safely down, and dropped the gun in his pocket. The guy walked away with his shirt soaked in sweat. “Junkie punk,” mumbled Artie as he went back inside and slammed the door hard behind him. “Jones is one thing, but don't never put your hands on me.”

“Everything alright?” asked Nick smiling, and trying not to say something stupid.

“It's OK,” David interjected. “Some coke head got out of line is

all.”

“Out a line shit,” cried Artie. “He put his hands on me. I should a killed the son of a bitch.”

“Not a good idea,” said Nick. “ You did good. How about we smoke one”?

Artie sighed and tried to calm down. “Yeah. Business looks kinda slow.”

The disturbance in the alley had cleared the place out. It was just the three of them left but the Cubs had actually pulled ahead while they were fighting and they missed the whole thing. Artie started a joint and got out his fancy vodka. They smoked and drank until time got fuzzy. They played a lot more more Russian roulette and went around the cycle a couple dozen times before Nick got the worst of it. Artie made a pizza but Nick was too wasted to eat. He passed out and slept face down on a bar towel all through happy hour and the rest of the game.

The Cubs won 3 to 2. Artie cranked up the tunes as the dinner hour approached and the bar filled back up. It was past 6:30 before David started to worry about checking in. He made a call and Dori was not happy.

“Where are you”?

“I gotta get Nick home. He's not looking so good.”

“You're not in any shape to drive are you”?

“Not exactly.”

She sighed. “And you want me to drive him home again right”?

“I'll do it.” Artie made a *Yes Dear* face and laughed as he polished a beer glass over the sink.

“No you won't,” she snarled. “Call him a cab.”

“I will not. I'll drive him myself. I'll go get the damn truck.”

“Now wait a---” David hung up.

The lock on Nick's bike gave him trouble, but David got it locked to a pole in the alley, making sure to run the chain through both wheels. The front wheel was the quick release type and could be easily stolen. Nick was ambulatory but not well. It took

half an hour to walk the few blocks to David's place. Dori was there waiting for them. Nick came through the front door, fell on the couch, and started snorting. David pulled out his keys and sat down. He scanned her figure with a confident smile.

"Give me the keys," she said.

David handed them over. "You gonna...drive him home"?

"This is absolutely the last time I am going to do this. You have got to pull your head out of your ass." She told herself she wasn't bluffing.

"I'm not the one who's sick." Nick was listening to the whole thing with one foot on the floor to stop the room from spinning.

"You know what I mean," she begged. What in the world are you guys doing over there in the middle of the afternoon? And now you're shot for the day."

David smiled and relaxed. "Oh man, you should have seen it. Some coke head went off on Artie and Artie put a gun to his head and he was gonna blow the bastard's head off right there in the alley. I mean the guy really pissed his pants."

"Oh my God David"!

"It was over in five minutes." He felt a strange sense of sadistic pride.

Dori slapped herself on the forehead like a vaudeville comedian. "See what I mean. you're gonna get killed over there."

"No way. I don't do Coke." He made an innocent face.

"What the hell does that matter? A bullet doesn't care." She teared up.

"Yeah. I know. I'm sorry." He looked away. "Just help me get him in the truck."

She looked at Nick's sedated expression. "I don't think he's going anywhere." She got more and more angry as she watched him fade in and out. "Let's get him into bed."

Their patient was hard to maneuver but they got him half way down the hall before he collapsed into the bathroom and started vomiting over the tub. Dori slammed the bathroom door hard,

stomped through the living room, and grabbed the knob on the front door. She turned back and said, "I'm going home now and I've got your truck keys. When he sobers up tomorrow you'll need to call him a cab. He ain't gonna feel like riding a bike. Have you eaten anything"?

"I'm good," cried David, giving up on the idea of having sex. He stretched out on the couch, put his feet on the coffee table, and looked at the ceiling. He heard the door shut and the car crunching some twigs as she backed out of the driveway.

Both men had a hard time with the spins that night, but Nick was sicker than David and he was getting real familiar with the bottom of David's tub. He settled in with his forehead against the cold porcelain and his knees tucked up under him. Just the sound of Nick's dry heaves made David retreat to the back porch. He could have slept there too, were it not for the mosquitoes. He hid under pillow in his bed to block out the moans and passed out. It was early afternoon when he woke up but late afternoon for Nick. David would have been alright if he would have went right to bed that night, but when he couldn't sleep he started drinking shots and made the situation worse. He got up, walked down the short hall, and saw Nick snoozing on the bathroom floor. He let him stay there for a few more hours until he heard him waking up and swearing about cotton mouth. He helped his buddy into the kitchen. Nick couldn't eat until they smoked a joint so they did. They ate a can of chili and talked about going after Nick's bike. David made two grilled cheese sandwiches with Cheese Whiz and four pieces of dark toast, two of which were end pieces which he ate himself.

David suddenly remembered Dori's exit scene. "She's got my keys. She took my damn keys. I'm on foot."

"You don't have an extra in your wallet"?. Nick scratched his arm.

"I used to but I gave it to her. And she can't even drive a stick shift."

“It's not far,” he said, rolling another joint. Nick couldn't tell if he was dizzy from being sick or just buzzed.

David stood up. “I wanted to make a beer run. And get some real food.”

Nick coughed and passed the joint to David. “There's places to eat all around us. If we're gonna go we better go now before it gets busy and shit.”

“Good idea,” said David as he gathered up his wallet and realized that he had no keys to lock the apartment. “I'll have to leave a window unlocked. I can't even lock the damn door.”

Nick laughed but felt ashamed. “Oh man. We really did it Red.”

David left the bathroom window unlocked but closed. He felt funny pulling the front door shut. He felt like an idiot for not having a spare key. She should have slipped it off the ring when she took the truck keys, he thought. He only had three keys on his ring and she had all three of them. There were two keys to the truck instead of a single master, one for the doors and one for the ignition. They still came that way in 1988. If you lost the door key you couldn't lock the cab. He made a mental reminder to have a spares made.

Their late afternoon walk was hard on the eyes. Hangovers and sunshine don't mix well. A riding mower nearby sounded like a jackhammer in Nick's head. A city bus stopped and let off a kid. The bus made the whole block smell like diesel. It was obvious that somebody had bent the signs at the intersection to reverse the street names. They were loose and David put them back. “Kids,” he complained, knowing full well that he had done the same thing as a kid, and worse. Every corner was modified for wheelchair accessibility, to take the bump out of the curb. He thought about how nice that was for bicycles. Modern bikes are fragile. Old bikes weren't made from expensive light metal alloys. They were heavier and less efficient, but you could bump over a curb with no problem. They were stronger and lasted forever. The old bikes

had kick stands but the new ones didn't because of the weight. He imagined a fat kid eating a super sized fast food meal, but shaving a pound off his expensive bike by letting it lie in the dirt. Welcome to capitalism, he thought.

Nick ducked into a corner grocery store to get some aspirin. He didn't have to buy the overpriced little yellow tin with only a few tablets. Berwyn was a community of frugal immigrants. They got what they had by knowing how to count. The store had a bottle of generic aspirin at less than two dollars for a hundred. There were no fancy displays, no ten brands of tooth paste, but the milk was fresh and not a rip off just because it was convenient. The ceiling fans rattled and squeaked like they were worn out, but the kids were welcome at the candy counter. If the owner knew you they'd cash your pay check. The cash register was a new one, but an antique bronze beauty was still on the counter, showing NO SALE in the fancy glass window. Nick got his change and stepped out front, mumbling something about Wallymart. They crossed the street in the middle of the block. There was a short line going into the restaurant. A man with a handlebar mustache held the door open for a woman with a walker.

The Bohemian restaurants in Berwyn were the only place a guy from Iowa would ever see a menu with liver dumplings and other wonderful things you can't get from a restaurant chain in a strip mall. The locals were in no hurry to let the secret out. Prices were low enough to eat there all the time. They were always busy but not overcrowded. Everything was good and the portions were large. David and Nick lingered through the dinner hour and stayed for dessert. Nick had Chicken Paprikash and David gorged on two servings of Wiener-schnitzel. Dinner was accompanied by bottle after bottle of Czech beer. The Apple Strudel and the ice cream were both made from scratch and they both had some. They ate until they lost track of the time.

The sun went down. They put a big tip under the butter dish and started walking back toward Artie's. It was warm with no

moon. The street lights only reached so far and there were hidden cracks in the sidewalk between the long pools of yellow light to trip over. The streets looked old but clean, with no litter at all. Most of the lawns were the size of a postage stamp and neatly trimmed. Dogs barked to be let in, and the blue green glow of the living room TVs lit up the front windows of the narrow brick homes as the guys strolled along and joked about anything that came to mind. The backyard pools were quiet and protected by bubble wrap solar covers. All the kids were probably inside playing video games. People didn't swim much after dark, except for the occasional newlyweds behind a privacy fence after midnight.

“Look at all these houses,” said David. “They all look alike. Almost anyway.”

Nick put his historian hat on. “These are called Chicago bungalows. They were all made a block at a time. Sort of like an assembly line. They'd dig all the foundations at once, and then the plumbers would come in, then the carpenters, until they were done.”

“That's cool.”

“Most of the original people who lived here worked in a big Western Electric plant in Cicero. They needed nice homes and they had the money.”

“I wonder what they cost back then.” David smiled.

“Probably around five grand. A lot of money in the 1890s.”

“What about now?”

“Two hundred and fifty grand.” They laughed.

David shook his head. “A quarter of a million bucks. You could get two of the same house in Iowa for that. And it would have a big yard.”

Nick nodded. “But dude. We are like ten miles from the center of Chicago.”

“I know, I know. Location.” He stepped off the curb where the sidewalk disappeared into overgrown clover. “What a crazy way

to run a railroad. There ought to be a better way.”

“A better way to do what? Provide housing”? I have a few ideas on that. I'm a social worker. We deal with housing all the time but nobody gives a shit what we think. They just want us to police the poor and keep 'em quiet while the man shoves it up their ass. Rip 'em off and blame the victim. Same old shit man.”

“You said you had a suggestion.”

“Yeah. Lower income people rent. They have no choice but they get criticized for it. It's supposed to be their own fault that they live in a dump that belongs to somebody else because they don't run down to the bank, pull out that extra cash, and buy a house. Ain't that what people think”? He laughed in anger.

David thought about it a minute. “Should we give them classes so they can learn how to buy a house? A lot of people don't know how the system works.”

Nick slapped David's back. “See what I mean. You think it's their own fault for not taking real estate classes.” They laughed. “Even if they can afford it, they don't buy houses because they think it's a rip off. They're not stupid.”

“Bull shit. Buying is better than renting. You don't get any equity when you rent man.”

“There is no damn equity. Here's how it works. You buy a house for fifty grand. You pay x amount of interest and property taxes. You can't ever get ahead. In a few years the thing is supposed to be worth three times what you paid for it. Only you don't want to sell it. You just want to live there for the same monthly payment you started with. But you can't because they raise your property taxes to what you would pay if it really was worth three times as much. After a time you pay more in property taxes than your original mortgage payment. It happened to my parents. They had to sell the house.”

“Shit,” laughed David.

“It was paid for, but they couldn't pay the damn taxes. They're on social security. Everybody's getting ripped and they think it's

great. They think they're rich when their house value goes way up on paper. Who really makes out when houses inflate? The banks get more interest when you buy and the Realtors get fat. Seven percent of a hundred and fifty grand is more than seven percent of fifty grand. Look. Who got hurt when the housing bubble popped? Local governments rely on property taxes man.” He laughed.

David held up a hand in surrender. “OK. What's the plan?”

“When you buy a house...you know...not for an investment. If you intend to just stay there and live in it. You should be able to sign a document guaranteeing that if you sell...well...you'd sell for whatever amount you specify ahead a time.”

“That's the dumbest thing I ever heard man.” David laughed while he considered it.

“I know, I know. But think it through. You can block the property tax increases. The inflated price actually hurts you if you don't sell. You sell at three times what you paid for it but then you have to pay three times more for the next house you buy to replace it. The only gains go to the bank, the Realtors, and the tax man dude. Screw the bank.”

David frowned. “It won't work because nobody would volunteer to go first. It would only work if everybody did it. The only way to do it is for the government to freeze the market prices. Voluntary won't work.”

“Some people would. They'd know that they never want to sell, or at least they'd wait for another house to go on the market that somebody else froze.”

“Never sell. You better be sure you want to stay there.”

“Houses shouldn't have to be investments. Some people just want a place to live without their rent going up and up. Lower income people don't have any spare money. They live check to check. They're not stupid and they're not crazy or sick. Poverty is not a disease. That's what the social workers say.”

David laughed. “Dude. You really are on to something but you

ain't done yet. Nobody's going to freeze the value of their house. Even if it is just on paper. Even if they never want to sell.”

“I'm just a social worker. What do I know”? He laughed.

“No no. I think it's got potential. You're thinking outside the box. We gotta get the details, that's all. My own rent just went up. They ought to sell futures contracts on rents so I could hedge or something.” They laughed and walked in and out of some parked cars for no particular reason.

About twenty minutes later, just down the street from Artie's, David watched a pizza delivery car cruising slowly by the bar like the driver was looking for an address. It's headlights illuminated the windows of a black Ford that was parked across the street. The pizza headlights silhouetted two men sitting in Ford and they weren't getting out. David had a funny feeling that they were casing the bar. He grabbed Nick's arm and pulled him out of sight around the next corner.

“What”?

“Be cool. See that car over there? No don't look. That car has two guys in it. I don't like it. They're just sitting there. We had trouble yesterday and now this. It don't look right. Nobody ever just sits out here. Shit.”

“Na. They're probably just getting high.”

“Maybe. But they ain't moving at all and I haven't seen a lighter glowing in there.”

“Oh let's go.” Nick laughed.

“Look. Oh God. The son of a bitch is looking through binoculars.” David moved farther back behind the corner.

Nick took a quick peek. “Holy shit. You're right. They're casing the damn bar. Let's just go on in and tell Artie.”

“I don't know man. They might leave. I can see what they're doing. I can't believe they're just sitting there right across the street like that. Screw this.” David popped out and walked toward the car with an attitude and a sense of moral entitlement.

“Wait”! Nick had no choice but to follow.

David walked right up and started banging on the driver's window with his fist. He screamed at the startled driver. "What the hell do you think you're doing! Hey! I'm talking to you man! I see what this is! I know what you're doing ass hole!" He yanked the door handle but it was locked.

The electric windows slid down on both sides. The driver had his pistol out. He snatched David's left wrist and pulled him into the window. David instinctively grabbed the gun arm with his right hand and swung it around, lifted it over his head, and twisted it mercilessly before smashing it with all his weight against the partially open glass. The force of the levered blow snapped the arm with a loud sickening crack and the driver shrieked in excruciating pain.

David panicked. "Run Nick!" he screamed, sure that the guy was about to shoot him.

Nick pulled his own gun. "Leave it!" he choked. He held a tiny semi-automatic pistol to the head of the passenger who slowly pulled his hand away from a holster behind his back. "Get out of the car real slow and keep your hands where I can see them." He waived the gun at the driver who was not in any shape to go anywhere and was screaming in pain. "You too mister! Get out!"

"Let me call an ambulance!" begged the passenger.

A man leaving Artie's saw the fight and called the cavalry. Suddenly every man in the bar ran into the street, took one look at the situation and went right back inside. All except Artie who took charge. "Get him inside. Hurry. Come on. Son of a bitch. Call an ambulance." He pleaded with the injured man like he knew the guy and knew what happened. "They don't know. They don't know. I'm sorry man. I'm sorry."

"What?" asked David. "What don't we know?"

"Shut up," whispered Artie. "Get inside before we attract any more attention."

"What's going on"?

"Be Quiet. Get the door." He saw Nick's little pistol. "Put that

damn gun away.”

In they went, rushing by the guys on the bar-stools who didn't say a word. Artie and the passenger helped the injured man into the office and closed the door on David and Nick who were visibly shaken. Nick stated the obvious. “Oh my God man. He knows them you idiot. They're friends of his. Oh my God.”

“Then what the hell were they doing casing the place?” asked David. He tried to conceal his fear.

Nick swallowed. “I pulled a gun on them. I'm going to jail. You broke his arm. We're in big trouble man. Holy shit.”

“I didn't tell you to pull a gun. I didn't even know you had a gun. Where did you hide that thing? Who were you gonna shoot with that little pea picker anyway?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Where the hell did you hide it anyway? I've never seen it before.”

“In my boot. It's been in my boot for years but I never had to get it out until now. Satisfied?” He looked angry and insulted.

“It's a lousy Saturday night special piece of shit. How do you know if it's gonna work? They jam.” David didn't know why he said that. “It could have exploded or something.”

“It's not a piece of shit. It's a Browning. A Browning 25.”

“25! That ain't gonna do shit. I knew a guy. Had one in his tackle box. Used it to shoot big catfish in the head on the Mississippi. Caught a big Flathead once. Shot it with the 25. It bounced off its head. No shit. You're better off with a .22.”

“It ain't for shooting fish. It's for conceal carry. And how was I supposed to know he wasn't gonna shoot you? I didn't want to pull it. Now I've done it. Shit Red. We're toast.”

“Dori is gonna kill me. She's right too. I gotta pull my head out of my ass.”

Nick punched the wall. “You had to be a hero. What were you trying to prove anyway? It ain't your bar.”

David turned to the side. “Well shoot me.”

Nick heard a car crunching gravel in the back alley. “Oh shit. Somebody's here.”

Another big black Ford, just like the one in front, pulled up just outside the back door. Artie and the unhurt passenger came out of the office, opened the back door, and loaded the man with the broken arm into the back seat of the other Ford. The driver took off without a word being spoken. Artie called out to a few cautious regulars who were thinking about leaving. “Come on guys. Get out of the doorway. It's over. Just a misunderstanding. Next one's on the house. It don't mean nothing.” He looked at Nick. “You guys go in the office.”

They were ready for the worst. They went right in but nobody sat down. Artie closed the door, bolted it, and turned up the radio.

“Artie I'm sorry,” pleaded David. “We thought they were casing you out man. After yesterday I...”

Artie motioned for them to sit down. “I know, I know. Listen.” He put a hand on his face like somebody slapped him.

They sat down. “He had binoculars,” said Nick. “And I knew they didn't belong there and...”

“They're cops,” Artie interrupted.

“What”! Nick stood right up.

“Be quiet. Nobody knows.”

“We're screwed big time,” cried Nick. “Shit David”!

Artie looked stressed. “They're cops. I knew they were there. They were supposed to be there. They were supposed to be a little more discreet though. Idiots. I'm doing them a little favor. Believe it or not.”

Nick felt numb. “Are we in trouble”?

“Yes and no?”

“Yes and no what”?

Artie pointed at David. “He just broke the arm of a Chicago cop and you just pulled a gun on his boss. Other than that.”

Nick started shaking and begging. “Oh shit man! No no! Oh shit”!

Artie looked at the door and waved him off. “Be quiet. It's more than that. Listen. For years now the cops have been trying to take down some Colombian ass hole. Big snow man. Last time a cop got killed. Three times they catch him with a shit load of product. He got off the first time. The second time the evidence got lost. Some cops got fired. Some got sent up and it don't make no difference. They get to everybody. Big money. Real power.” He looked at the walls. They were covered with old black and white photos. “This bar has been here for a long time. Nobody ever found anything here. Not even in prohibition. Not just because it's protected territory either. Because we know how to hide things. I know some of these cops from way back. They take care of me. I take care of them sometimes. So they ask me to help them again. I couldn't say no. The ass hole killed a cop. Nobody kills a cop. I told them I'd help them any way I could.”

“Help them how?” asked Nick.

“I'm holding the evidence for them until the trial. I never seen so much snow in my whole life. They know I won't bother it. It ain't for sale. I'm just hiding it.” He laughed.

Nick leaned in and asked, “Who knows you have it?”

“Very few people know. They put some fake shit in the evidence locker. A little coke and a couple hundred pounds of flour or something. Only a few people know. And now you know.”

Nick felt a little dizzy. “Oh my God!”

“Be quiet. The cops outside are just in case somebody finds out about the switch decides to make a move on it. Stupid cops. They better be a little more careful or everybody's gonna know it's in here. Shit.” He threw a paper cup in the trash.

“So. Are we in trouble or not?” asked Nick.

“Like I said. There ain't gonna be no charges. But you ain't gonna be real popular with the Chicago police. They don't forget shit like that. I can talk to them for you and I'll do all I can. But eventually after this is over you're gonna to have to square with

these guys.”

“Shit,” growled David, looking at his hands.

“And one more thing,” said Artie. “When I do pull this thing off the Chicago cops are gonna owe me big time. And that's good. So if you guys tell anybody else about this. Anybody. I'll kill you myself.”

## Chapter 5

Wednesday was a work day for David. He arrived at seven because he taught the dreaded eight o'clock introductory economics class for non-economics majors. Only graduate students got stuck with it. In addition to that, the dean was watching him. It had been reported that David was not sticking to the course outline and was prone to get on a soapbox if the spirit moved him. The young radical grabbed office mail, walked into his empty classroom, sat down hard, and threw his feet up on the desk.

The classroom was an old one with giant windows and a faded green chalkboard. The hardwood floors were original but polished and shiny. The desks were wooden too, with separate chairs. They were not the one piece plastic back breakers common to most schools since the 1960s. The antique overhead projector on the teacher's desk smelled like a hot light bulb. Someone had left scribbles on the board that said office hours were Wednesdays from 11:00 AM to 12:00 PM. The old room reminded him of grade school.

A man from the building staff walked in with a warm, "morning professor." David knew the man who also knew his father. He was a middle aged building maintenance worker in jeans and tennis shoes and known for his conservative reputation.

"Hey Jim. What about those Cubs huh. Two wins in a row. A streak."

Jim, being a St. Louis Cardinals fan, resisted the temptation to break into one of his many Cardinal comeback stories that were so tempting to bring up when talking to a Cub fan. The Cards had won the World Series the year before, but they were in the cellar now so the Cub fans had to talk about it. Jim smiled and let David have his moment, before gracefully changing the subject. “What in the world are you eating professor? It sure smells good.”

“Oh these”? He held up a slice of French toast. “These are really good. And they're easy to carry for breakfast on the run. They're basically French toast with cinnamon and vanilla, but on raisin bread. My friend Dave turned me on to them. His wife Teresa can't eat anything that tastes like eggs, so she uses all kinds of flavors to cover the eggs. You don't need any syrup because the raisins are so sweet. One morning Dave was late so he grabbed one on the run. He ate it cold and discovered the perfect portable breakfast. Try one.”

“OK.” Jim took a bite and smiled. It made him crave coffee. “Hey. These really are good. You could eat it in the car with one hand. Gotta remember. French toast made with raisin bread.” David nodded. “I gotta tell Phyllis. By the way. Those desks you wanted will be here today,” he mumbled, savoring the cinnamon.

“Oh great. Thanks. Where did you find them”?

Jim grinned. “We appropriated them from an undisclosed location.”

“Do I have to sign for them”? David already knew the answer.

“Not unless you want to be responsible for them.” He smiled and cracked his knuckles.

David played along. “What if somebody comes looking for them”?

“Then they won't be here.” He looked right at him.

“Why won't they be here”? He grinned.

“How many degrees do you have anyway”? He laughed.

“Two and a half,” he said smiling.

“Well professor. When they go around and count things that's

called an audit. Auditing is a pain in the ass. When an audit comes due the suits would rather be doing something else so it gets delegated to somebody on my crew who delegates it to a student worker who we keep counting the stuff until he comes up with the count that we already have in our file. See”?

“Of course.” He threw up his hands in a flash of insight.

“The stuff will be here this afternoon.” Jim waved as he left, laughing and shaking his head.

“Thanks Jim,” said David, too late to be heard.

He looked through his mail to see if there was anything about his paper. There wasn't anything from the publication committee, but there was a sealed envelope from the dean. He tried to put it aside, but he couldn't wait and tore it open. It was not good.

*“It has come to my attention that you are not doing your best to maintain a professional environment in the classroom. As you know this program has a reputation to maintain. We have many mutually beneficial relationships with influential and prominent individuals in the private sector, government, and philanthropic sectors.*

*We are all team players here. We respect your enthusiasm and admire your intellectual abilities. When you came to us we were looking forward to your contribution in the application of mathematical proofs. Please remember that we all must do our part to support the overall mission of the department. Please refrain from making controversial statements in class. May I remind you that tenure must be earned.*

*It has been confirmed that a school reporter asked you what you thought of the economic policy of the current administration in Washington and you said, 'I wouldn't piss on those sons of bitches if their hearts were on fire.' Thankfully the editor had the good sense to call me before publication. As you know we have people in the current administration and comments like that are sure to cause them embarrassment and can do nothing but harm our reputation in Washington. In the future I insist that you*

*maintain a professional attitude and refer any and all questions from the media to my attention.”*

Sleepy eyed students stumbled in with Styrofoam cups and backpacks. The room filled up quickly. Since the new desks were not there yet, the late comers had to sit in chairs across the back wall. The bell rang as the stragglers stumbled in and groggy students took out notebooks. Several students switched on digital recorders. David made a mental note of who they were, excluding the ones he knew and trusted. Conservative groups had spies and paid students to record liberal professors.

“How's everybody?” he joked. They all groaned. “You know what. I remember that one of the good things about being a junior or a senior was that you didn't have to take early classes.” They laughed. “Now here I am again at the early class. In my senior year I had no classes at all before eleven and none on Friday all year.” They groaned. “The week was only four days long. Hang in there you guys. You'll get there soon. Thank you all for coming. It's too early to think. Drink your coffee and I'll start with the news.” They responded with light applause. The news was a tradition usually reserved for Friday. “It's gotta be Friday somewhere,” he laughed. “And now. Drum roll please. I summarize. The weird news of the day.” They laughed.

David sat up straight. “First. Ahem. Dallas Texas. Porn star took old friends name.” They laughed. “A Dallas woman is suing a former high school classmate who borrowed her name and starred in pornographic movies. It seems that they used to be friends but had a falling out at one point and after the woman in question made an unusual career choice, hooking, and she decided to get even by using her friend's name. The friend had no knowledge of this because she rarely watched the stuff herself. Some people who knew her watched the movies, saw her name, and began to compliment her on her acting ability.” They laughed and applauded. “She became upset and took legal action. Reminds me of Lynyrd Skynyrd. Legend has it that the boys in a

local high school rock band had a math teacher of the same name. He said they'd never amount to anything and when they hit it big they named the band Lynyrd Skynyrd. I wonder if it's true. Time to vote on the story! OK what do you guys say for Debbie does Dallas?"

"Boo. Boo."

He smiled like Johnny Carson after a bad joke. "Man you guys are a tough room. OK. San Francisco California. Automatic toilet tissue dispenser installed at the airport." They laughed. "Jim Farmer grins as he waves his hand under his invention, an automatic toilet tissue dispenser, as it dispenses exactly five sheets of toilet tissue." They laughed. "Is that anal or what? Can you imagine the memo. 'Due to recent cutbacks and conservation methods employees will please refrain from waving under the tissue dispenser more than three times. Any additional waving must be authorized by your immediate supervisor in advance and documented on form TP-145.' " They laughed hard and a few people stabbed their thumbs down. "Hey don't laugh too soon guys." A guy in the back chuckled on. "Next," he insisted. "Saint Louis Missouri. Dog finally off Missouri state voter rolls."

A woman in the front row said "What...again?" They laughed.

David continued. "Richard R. MaGruff, after fifteen years of casting absentee ballots in state elections, has been removed from the voter rolls. It seems the dog was originally registered by his owner in a protest to show that it was too easy to register to vote in Missouri. I guess he was right." They cheered. "I can see that you guys like the motor voter thing. The animal trick is not new. When I was an undergraduate there was a story about a fraternity that graduated a pig." They laughed. "The guys took turns attending this class or that for the pig...you know...until it had enough credits to graduate. And then it got an English degree at commencement. Read it's name off in front of everybody. They all attended classes for somebody named Earnest Bacon or something. I saw a picture of them holding up the degree." Light

laughter encouraged him. “You know what. I can't see a problem here. Some of us are yellow dog democrats. That means that if the democrats ran a yellow dog against a republican...you know...we would vote for the yellow dog. If a yellow dog can run, then why can't a yellow dog vote”? Everybody laughed. “Actually I'm a dead dog democrat. That's worse than a yellow dog democrat. I'd vote for a dead yellow dog over a republican man. I just hope I never have to.”

A laughing student blurted out, “In Chicago! Anything is possible.”

“Yes sir! In Chicago all dead dogs are urged to do their duty and vote early and often.” They all laughed and David moved on. “OK. OK. Next story. Round Lake Idaho. Paratroopers mistakenly land at prison.” Everybody laughed. “What was that movie about the helicopter prison break? Remember? I saw that. Anyway. Back in Idaho. A unit of fifty military paratroopers landed inside the perimeter of a state prison. Not to quell a riot or attempt a breakout. They just miscalculated the drop zone. The troopers who had rifles that fired rubber bullets were escorted out of the prison without incident.” Everybody laughed. “Can you imagine what went through their minds on the way down. 'Man this don't look right. The guy in the tower is pointing a rifle! Oh boy! No! Don't shoot us!’” David raised his hands in mock surrender. Somebody made a rat-a-tat machine gun sound. “The inmates should have hung up a banner that said 'Mission Accomplished.' ” They laughed a little.

He smiled over the class. “Bush? Aircraft carrier? OK. OK. I saved the best for last. First a little background. This one comes from southern Illinois. Now I know a little bit about this because I have some friends that live in Carbondale that I visit every year and we go fishing. The same thing happens every summer. The people of southern Illinois like to have a joke on people who think they're different. They're not. They don't talk funny or marry their cousins or eat road kill. They're not in a hurry for a lot of people

to move there because it's beautiful. The deer are as big as cows. The bass jump in the boat. And best of all, a nice house goes for about a third of what it costs anywhere else. Not a lot of people live there and...you guessed it...that has its advantages. If a traveler is just passing through...well...it can be funny to act like the stereotypical backwoods...you know.” Everybody laughed. “They trust me down there. It has been revealed to me. And they would deny it if confronted. But it has been revealed to me that these good people have over the generations perfected a certain strategy to cause newspapers in major cities to print tall tales that are locally manufactured and completely false. It's gotta be fun. These myths could only be believed by someone who thinks that the people who live there are as dumb as a box of rocks. Therein lies the fun.

“That's right,” joked a student.

“These stories usually break in the summer months and have been known to hit the papers as far away as New York. The plot usually involves a large rare animal that's not native to southern Illinois. Sometimes it's a cougar that was allegedly found dead on the tracks. Even I have more than once, since they know I'm not from there, been told of a small Bison herd that roams undetected and is sometimes spotted in a remote bean field. The legend is that a farmer once tried to raise some Bison. The Bison got away and have perfected evading capture. I assure you that both times I was told this...no kidding. The people telling me the story were as serious as anyone could be and could not be moved. Man. No matter how many times I assured them that I did not just fall of the chicken truck.” The class broke into silly laughter. Students in the hall stopped by the door. “Now first class. I must tell you. Swamp Rabbits are real. I know.” The laughter got even sillier. “Yes Virginia...well. There are swamp rabbits. You can't make this stuff up. They study the vicious blood suckers at Southern Illinois University. They're bigger than regular rabbits and they only come out at night. They're fantastic swimmers...wait for it. And

one did attack Jimmie Carter. Remember”?

They laughed and stomped a little. “That's not disputed. But today...drum roll. Here's a new story. I printed it off the net so it must be true. Right”? He held up the page. “Remember. It's summertime now. OK. Here we go. Red Bud Illinois. Giant swamp rabbit kills deer.” They laughed and clapped. “Ray Hoffman, a local farmer, was awakened Sunday by a noise outside his home just north of town on Illinois 159. Hoffman said he saw a very large animal taking down a deer. Ray said, 'it was a rabbit. I know what a rabbit looks like and that's what it was.’” Everybody laughed hard. “I don't care that it was big. It was a rabbit. I know what I saw. It had to be over a hundred pounds. It killed a deer. It was dead. It didn't run off. I saw it. I touched it. It was there when I left it. The coyotes must a drug it off when I was on the phone with the sheriff. By the time the sheriff got there it was gone.’ ” They laughed. “A spokesman for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources told our reporter that swamp rabbits do in fact inhabit southern Illinois but no animal has ever been captured that was over seven pounds. Emil Harris, Mr. Hoffman's neighbor of fifty five years, told our reporter, 'I've known Ray all my life. Never knew him to be anything but a straight shooter. I would trust him with my life. If he says it was a rabbit, it was a rabbit.’ Sheriff Gill Foster could not be reached for comment.” The laughter was deafening, but David yelled over it. “See! I told you. It's summertime. And that's the news from Lake Red Bud, where the women are strong, the men never lie, and the rabbits...are above average.” He traded crazy rabbit symbols with the students before calling for calm. The crowd in the hall moved on, and the class got down to business.

“OK class. That was fun. As you know, today is review day. We have an exam next time and this is your chance to ask questions about the chapters we covered. I graded your papers and everyone did well.” They applauded politely. “Now...I will take questions.” He stood up with both hands on the desk. “Anything at all that we

covered so far. Yes.” He pointed at a male student in the front row.

“Do you think the rise of the neo-conservative movement was a result of the fall of communism?” He smiled.

“When did communism fall? Isn't China communist? I wouldn't exactly call Russia capitalist either. When the wall came down...well. All we heard about was that communism was dead. And even if it did die, what would that prove? Would it prove that capitalism is a better system or is it just a better system at generating military force? Think about it. There was no contest of ideas. There was no vote on what the people prefer. Could it be that they're just poor and we're rich and anything would work here and nothing would work there? Especially when the capitalists are ratcheting up the arms race.” He looked angry. “Remember that socialism is not communism. There are socialist democracies too. People equate communism with totalitarianism. I do think the neo-conservatives used the situation to their advantage. But look. All during the cold war...you know. We said we were not interested in taking over the world. Remember? And that the soviets were. Then as soon as we're the only superpower...that's right. What do you hear but a lot of crap about taking over the world. It's morally wrong and politically impossible. All empires fail. I just hoped we could skip the empire stage.”

The young man hesitated and made sure David was through. “Will that be on the test?” He smiled.

“No.” Everyone laughed. He was a little embarrassed at his zeal. “Julia.”

A woman in the center of the class put her hand down and spoke up. “Did you say we don't have to take the third test?”

“If you get a B or better on the first two tests and pass an oral exam then you don't have to take the final.” Everyone clapped. “That will give you space to cram for your other exams if you get ahead in this class. Ben.”

“What do you think of the way Fox News spins the war?”

Everybody laughed.

“That's an easy question. I actually have it blocked on my TV like you would something you don't want your kids to watch. I heard they can tell what channels you block, and they report the numbers every month. I don't watch Fox.” He pointed. “Barb.”

She spoke slowly and carefully. “In high school we were taught that the Depression was caused by everybody buying stocks fast and loose on ten per-cent margin with little regulation. Milton Friedman discredited Keynes by convincing people that the Depression was caused by a money supply that was too tight. I don't understand.”

“Friedman didn't like the idea of government programs to stimulate the economy. He thought the money supply was everything. Keep in mind that economic theory mirrors the political cycle, and not the other way around. A lot of bright people see the US moving in roughly thirty year cycles, center left to right. If they're correct...well. We must be about as far right now as we ever have been and ready for a swing in the other direction. File the neo-cons next to the robber barons of the last century.” He pointed to the back. “Ben”

“You say that economic theory mirrors the political cycle and not the other way around. Doesn't that mean that economists are just telling the ruling class what they want to hear”? He smiled, and everybody knew he was sucking up.

“No comment. Next question.” Half the class moaned and laughed. The other half frowned. “What does the president do here anyway”? David tried to imitate President Bush. “I'm glad you asked that question because it's a good question, and I'm going to give you a good answer. If that were true it would not be good. You see in America, the people need to know the truth. And the truth is, there are people out there that don't want us to know the truth. The truth will set you free. It's my job, as the commander in chief, to make sure those people, those evil people who would keep the truth from the American people, are brought

to justice.” He smiled. “How did I do”? Everyone laughed. “It's hard to sing off key when you know how to sing. Next question.” He pointed to the front. “Mike.”

A man in a blue suit and a conservative tie cleared his throat. “We talked about Paul Samuelson and his idea of constrained maximization. We talked about the utility of a mixed economy and how that flexibility helps us navigate tough times and frees us up in good times. You said that most economists agree with him most of the time. Since all economies are essentially mixed economies, why do we need to go any further than that”?

“Because economists need the work.” Everyone laughed. “But seriously folks.” David wiggled an imaginary cigar like Groucho Marx. “I think all economies are mixed economies, but ask yourself why that's best. Central planned economies do a better job of providing security and necessities. Open markets are fine for luxuries. We need to build a firewall between luxuries and necessities because they don't mix. Look at our health care system. Profit has no business having anything to do with health care. No money? Doc says you gonna die. And education...shit. Don't get me started on education.” They all applauded. “OK. OK. And what about food? Maybe we don't need caviar in every pot, but a chicken is a necessity. Profit on milk? We can spend billions on free milk for a war, but we charge poor children? There are enough things out there to sell and make money on without gouging old ladies on Social Security when they can't pay their heating bills. Can I get an Amen”?

“Amen”!

“Now I'm not against making money. I like private property, and rumors of my Bolshevism are greatly exaggerated. I assure you. Also, if being a saint was a crime...whoa baby. I'm not sure there would be enough evidence to convict me. But I have enough Judeo-Christian values in me to feel that some of the ways that people make money on other people in this economy are nothing short of a sin. Now I ask you. Who should decide what goods or

services should be a necessity? I say I should. The philosopher king.” He smiled.

“Boo. Boo,” they joked.

“Let me rephrase that. The people should decide. The people in a democracy should vote on what goods and services are out of bounds to cut throat capitalism. A line item veto, but for the people.” They applauded. It was almost time for the bell. “Now if the people, in all their new found power, should vote almost everything a necessity. Well. Then it would be a small matter to crank up the printing press and print more money.”

“No. Boo.”

He grinned. “And right you are oh learned ones. I’m kidding of course. If we vote ourselves the entire treasury then we must vote again, and again, until we balance the budget. That is my position.”

Laughter and applause echoed into the hall. The bell rang. The room quickly emptied and reverted to a quiet, sober place. David looked at the clock and decided to go see the dean before he lost his nerve.

Dean Pete Miller and Ben Armstrong, David's father, were friends. Dean Miller recruited the Iowa professor because of his excellent work on tax policy. His work was attractive to tax hating conservatives, and it helped the dean to persuade conservative donors to give generously. Miller was successful and respected, but his childhood was traumatic. Both parents died in a German concentration camp when he was very young. He was jealous of his brothers. One was a doctor, and the other was a republican senator from New York. He could never quite control his Machiavellian side. He needed more than liked David. To him the kid was useful because of his mathematical skills, but a bit of a loose cannon.

Wednesday morning in the dean's office was like any other day. They were out of coffee, and the boss was not in a good mood. He

had just read David's paper. It called for the nationalization of oil. He couldn't let the paper attract attention. He was in the middle of negotiating a large donation for a new building with some people representing an association of American oil companies. He also needed David's father to help him by publishing more of his work on the diminishing returns of taxation. The energy sector liked the elder Professor Armstrong's ideas on taxes, and were more than ready to invest in them. Dean Miller needed to keep David's father on board, and he knew the mathematical proofs for the work would probably have to come from David. His father had tenure, but David didn't. Everything depended on the Armstrongs. The last thing Miller needed was a controversial teacher making a public statement about the oil companies. "Shirley," he barked at his half open door.

"Yes sir."

"Is Dr. Armstrong here yet."

She went in. "I left a message for him to come and see you as soon as he gets in."

"Send him right in when he gets here."

"I understand. I sent for some coffee."

"Bless you." He sat down and half missed his chair.

A few minutes later the elder Dr. Armstrong knocked on the dean's door. Miller put away his mail and called out in a friendly voice. "Come in Ben. Please, come in."

"Good morning," he said. "I heard you wanted to see me right away."

"Sit down. Make yourself comfortable. I'm afraid we're out of coffee, but help is on the way."

"I'm fine."

Dr. Benjamin Armstrong had made it to the big show. He was a tenured professor at the most prestigious school of economics in the world. He was never controversial, and sensed that the meeting was about his son. He loved him more than his own life. David was an only child, and his mother died of a stroke a decade

before they moved to Chicago. The elder Armstrong was protestant and fiscally conservative, but moderate and idealistic on social issues. He knew that David was skeptical about the field of economics, and he supported him in whatever he decided to do, but he hoped his son would carry on and be an economist. He knew about David's imperfections, but trusted his general character. He loved his son's wrestling, but hated the motorcycles because of the danger. His biggest concern was David's drinking. It had been a problem since his mother died. David was close to his mother. The elder professor never remarried, and didn't date much. He couldn't let go, and he overcompensated by throwing himself into his work.

The dean picked up David's paper and held it out to his friend. "Have you seen this Ben"?

"No," he said frowning. Seeing David's name on it confirmed his suspicions.

"You haven't read it"?

"No. I haven't seen it yet. I knew he was working on something, but I didn't know it was finished. He spends most of his time chasing Abe's daughter these days. Can't say as I blame him."

"It calls for the nationalization of energy." He frowned.

"Oh does it now." He smiled inside.

"Yes it does, and there's no way I'm going to let it out of the publication committee." He picked a speck of lint from his sleeve.

Dr. Armstrong felt confident. "Oh come on. Would this have anything to do with Miller hall? Those oil guys don't care what grad students write anyway."

"We need that building. And I don't care what we name it. It's not about me. It's about the school. We're talking about an awful lot of money here."

"Oh Pete. Do you really think that some guy writing a paper that will be published in a journal that nobody but economists read is going to scare big oil into fearing imminent

nationalization”?

“Who knows.”

“And now you want me to censor him. Like I could. I couldn't even keep him off motorcycles, and you want me to tell him what he can and can not write”? He laughed out loud. The administrative assistant came in with two steaming cups and a curious smile.

“Oh thank you Shirley. Thank you,” said the dean.

She pulled the door almost shut on her way out. Her desk was very close to the door, and her hearing was excellent. Dean Miller took a big swallow and sighed. “That's good. Come on Ben. You gotta help me out here.”

“Come on Pete. You know there's nothing I wouldn't do to help you if I could, but he's a grown man, and he can do whatever he wants to. He's almost thirty. Even if I threw a fit...you know. It wouldn't make a bit of difference. He's thirty. What would you have me do, take away his squeaky toy”? He smiled inside.

“Surely he'll listen to you,” he pleaded. “Ben... I want you to know that you're welcome here no matter what happens. This is your home for life. If he decides to go his own way then that's that, and you and I will go on putting our names on the same papers, just as we always have.” He held his breath.

Dr. Armstrong got angry and tried to keep it to himself. “I know he doesn't have tenure yet. He doesn't care. And personally, I wouldn't mind if the whole oil business got nationalized. We could send them all packing as far as I'm concerned, and they can take their three dollar gas with them. The bastards.”

“Oh Ben relax.” He felt uncomfortable.

“Shit man. I feel like you just threatened me.”

“Ben... I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. But his tenure is not just up to me you know. And I know what it's like to have children trying to make it out there.”

“I don't worry about David. He knows how to take care of himself. He's not even sure he wants to be an economist. I admire

him. He knows something we don't know.”

“You should be proud of him. He's a mathematical genius.” He backed off a little.

“Tell me about it. He's always been that way.”

“It would be such a waste.”

“He doesn't even like proofs. He says it's all smoke and mirrors, a fancy way to prove that  $n$  equals  $n$  in five hundred steps.” He smiled.

“Math skills are very marketable. He could be a fine engineer.”

He thought about Iowa. “You know what he wants to do? He wants own a motorcycle dealership.”

“Oh my.” He laughed.

“He wants to have a pro racing team.”

“Oh my.”

“I don't care what he does if that's what he wants to do.” He got up abruptly to leave, but stopped in the door. “And Pete... If he goes, I go. No shit. OK”?

“Oh Ben...” He stood up. Dr. Armstrong slammed the door as he left. The dean picked up David's paper and threw it to the side. “Damn”!

David ran into his dad coming out of the dean's office, and got a queasy feeling in his stomach. “Is he here?” he asked, looking at his shoelaces.

“You don't want to see him right now. He's not real happy with you. Let's go to my office.” They navigated past a few desks, into the hall, and around the corner. The elder Armstrong fumbled with his keys and imagined how his son must feel. He had done absolutely nothing wrong. This was a test of everything he taught him. He didn't want him to fold, but he wondered if this hand was worth playing. If he really cared about being an economist, if he believed it was a task worth doing, then surely he wouldn't blink. He opened the office and offered his son the big chair. “Sit down Son.”

David got right to the point. “Look at this.” He handed over the

letter from the dean. “This really pisses me off. I feel like the thought police are after me. I can't make a comment to a reporter without checking with the dean”?

“You're overreacting. This doesn't mean anything. Miller has his nose up the ass of more than one political stooge. It doesn't mean anything.”

David felt secure. “This is a university. It's supposed to be a place where people can have opinions even if they're controversial. I don't have to stand for this shit.”

“Tell me about the paper.” He smiled and put his hand on his son's shoulder. It felt solid and muscular like his used to be.

“I was going to show it to you today. I wasn't going to show it to anybody else yet, but Dr. Goodman wanted to see it. I'm sure he went running to the dean too.” David thought about Dori.

“You showed to Abe huh. What did he say about it”?

“I think he liked it. I really do.” He clicked his pen.

“Yeah. My guess is that he's on your side. He's a reasonable guy.”

“He tried to talk me out of it though.” He smiled.

“He just wants you guys to be happy.”

“We are happy.” He held out his hands.

“Let me guess. The paper was left of center and you stressed the need for security over freedom. Remember what Churchill said about that.” He laughed.

“Churchill was born rich.”

Dr. Armstrong thought for a few seconds and then snapped his fingers. “Let me ask you a hypothetical. If you could choose for them, would animals be in a zoo, or would they be free”?

“Free of course.” He wrapped his feet around the chair legs.

“Well a zoo is three hots and a cot. The only way to give animals security is to put them in a cage. If it's not worth it for animals, why is it worth it for humans”?

David had to think for a few seconds. “Humans can't live wild. They're interdependent. They can't survive without a division of

labor.”

The phone interrupted them and Dr. Armstrong picked it up. “Hello.”

It was the dean. “Hello Ben.”

“Hello Pete. What is it”? He sat down on the edge of the desk and put the phone under his chin. David slapped his forehead and made an angry face.

“About David...”

“I’m talking to him right now Pete.” He smiled at his son and David smiled back.

“Good. That’s good. How about lunch today. Both of you”?

“Not today Pete. I have office hours open for grad students.” He switched hands with the phone and shifted his weight. His butt was going to sleep.

“Well soon then. Ben please try to get him to see the big picture. Any other time this wouldn’t be a big deal. I don’t want to block his paper Ben. I really don’t.”

“I know. I know. How about lunch? Me and you. The Founder’s Room. How about tomorrow”?

“Right. How about eleven o’clock”?

“OK Pete. Bye.” He put the phone down laughing.

David threw up his hands. “See”?

“What did you do? I can take care of Miller, but that must be some paper.” He put his hand on his chest. “He’s probably chewing a Valium.”

“I put a copy in your box.” David laughed.

“Nationalize the oil companies huh”?

“Oh yeah.”

“No wonder they call you Red.” He stood up and paced a little.

“What did he say?” begged David.

The old man thought about his job. “He’s supposed to be my friend. He’s never talked to me like that before.”

“You got called on the carpet by Miller. What did he say dad”?  
He clicked his pen over and over.

"I think he was trying to threaten me, but I could see right through that weak ass shit. All he cares about is that stupid building."

"That son of a bitch threatened you"?

"He can't fire me. I have tenure. Screw him. That's what tenure is for."

"But he can make your life miserable," said David.

"Screw him. He needs to grow up. I don't understand him anymore. It's that gold digger bitch he's screwing on the side. What's he trying to prove anyway. She's not even attractive."

David felt bad. "I'm going to withdraw the paper Dad."

He got red in the face. "Don't you even think about it"!

"Bull shit Dad. It's just a paper. I can publish it any time. It ain't worth all this. Let him have his frigging building. I'll piss in the shrubs."

"I'm not going to let him use me to get to you. He knows you don't give a shit about your own tenure. No way. Tell me you won't pull the paper." His expression left no room for doubt. He meant it.

"Sure Dad," he lied. "I won't."

Dr. Armstrong looked his son in the eye. "We should go back to Iowa. This place is overrated. We had it made there."

David swallowed and said, "you got called up to the big show because you deserve it. You're gonna stay here, and it ain't up to Miller." He turned. "I gotta go Dad. You have students waiting in the hall."

He hugged his only child. "OK son."

David slapped him on the shoulder. "That's my Dad. I gotta go."

David went straight over to the publication committee and pulled the paper. He told himself he didn't care, but he did. It was

one thing to risk his own career, but there was no reason to make trouble for his dad. It was no big deal. Nobody but economists would read it anyway, and he could resubmit it later. He told the woman that handed the paper back to him that he needed to do some more minor revisions and left. The walk to the train brought on a strange feeling of relief, anger, and embarrassment. He stepped on the first train and got lost in a blue funk. He watched the streets pass by under the elevated tracks and thought about the cycle shop, Sarge, and the gang.

He got off the train a few stops short of Oak Park so he could look in on Nick and catch a buzz. He would be home. Nick was retired and didn't have to work. David knew he would be in there burning up his computer like a ham radio operator chatting with friends he had never met in person. Nick was a blogger's blogger. He knew how to network. It was something social workers perfected. Nick knew the news before it hit CNN. If somebody recorded a candidate saying the wrong thing and put it on the net, well, he'd see it before the editor at the New York Times. He signed an average of three online petitions a day. The worldwide phone tree was becoming a powerful force in politics, and Nick was in the front row. It was no longer possible for a senator to say one thing to the NRA and another thing to progressives in the same day. Everything was on the record and Nick loved it. He was old enough to remember Vietnam and knew all the war rationalizations, from the domino theory to Kissinger's so called pragmatism. He was a labor historian, a man with a long memory who saved newspapers and never forgot a scandal.

Nick's apartment was a mess. It was well beyond that lived in look, and it was approaching the hard to find things stage. There were no file cabinets, only stacks of books and mountains of paper that had to be moved around if you wanted to sit down. All the flat places were covered with stuff. The surface of the dining room table hadn't seen a meal in years. Eating was a tray on the knees affair, and done in front of the TV or the computer. The

bedroom functioned as giant clothes hamper. His bed was buried under a pile of dirty jeans and tee shirts. Nick slept on the couch. After three marriages and three divorces, he was still waiting for his mother to clean his room.

Nothing decorated the walls except his degrees, some posters, and some snapshots. There was a picture of his parents, a group picture from work before he retired, pictures of bands he had played in over the years, and a poster of BB King endorsing his Gibson guitar. One poster simply said *"Being a republican will not make you rich, but being rich will certainly make you a republican."* There were more magnets on the refrigerator than things on the inside that were edible. Forgotten potatoes in the lower plastic drawer were growing shoots. New flakes of ceiling plaster peeled regularly from above the arched doorway between the kitchen and living room. The walls looked yellow near the ceiling where the smoke lingered, but white from there down to the floor. Nick used to live with a cat-box ammonia smell. The cat was gone, but he still burned incense out of habit.

David stepped in the door and found his buddy just as he expected, at the computer, printing something out from an online encyclopedia. Nick had a TV talking head pundit on freeze frame. The guy was spinning on CNN under a caption that identified him as a terrorism expert. "Look at this shit," he insisted. "Terrorism expert my ass. Last week he was an expert on global warming." They laughed. "They move this shit past people so fast they can't even check it. So what's up Red"?

"Same old shit man. Nobody calls me David anymore."

"You working today"? He wiggled the mouse and watched the monitor.

"Already been there. Class was cool, but I got a nasty letter from the dean."

"So what did you do now man, blow off the faculty meeting again"? He laughed. "Wanna smoke one"?

"I made the meeting. I wrote a paper that's a little left of

center.” He smiled and made a cutting motion across his throat.

“Oh my God yes. Did you start the revolution”? He spun his chair around.

“You'd have thought so. He freaked. Pissed his pants. He didn't like the part about nationalizing energy. I'm public enemy number one.”

“Oh no. Were you followed here”? He laughed and passed David a silver hemostat clamped around a big roach.

David reached for it through a spiral of skunky green smoke. “Shit no. The dean tried to make trouble for my dad.” He blew out a long gray snake and passed the clip right back.

“No Way! Over a frigging paper! He's got tenure man.” He coughed grunted.

“I pulled the paper. I don't want to bother Dad.”

“Whatever. So what does it mean”? *Ting. Ting.* He tapped the hemostat on a crystal ash tray to flick off the ash.

“It means I can't publish it yet.”

“Publish it where?” he asked.

“You know. In a journal.”

Nick thought a minute. “Why don't you just publish it yourself”?

“What”? David sounded interested.

“Blog it. There's lots of blogs for economists. There's lots of blogs that hate big oil. Give it to me. I'll do it. I'll get the thing out there man. I'll make a web page for it and network it to the search engines. How about WWW dot screw the dean dot com”?

“I never thought of that.” He smacked his thigh a little too hard. “Screw the dean. I just want people to read it anyway.”

“Welcome to cyberspace dude.” Nick laughed and choked a little more on the smoke. “Watch this.” He clicked his mouse at high speed until a web page loaded. “Now let me get to my page. There. Look at that. Three thousand hits and change. It's a spot I did on mercenaries and the war.”

“How long has it been up there”? David leaned in to the

monitor.

Nick laughed and passed David the last part of the roach. “Not even four days yet.”

“That's great.” They laughed.

“A lot of people are pissed about privatizing the army. Private contractors can make a grand a day. How would you feel if you were regular army, on your third frigging tour, and making peanuts? Any paper against privatization will attract attention dude.”

David smiled. “That's so cool. I never thought about publishing it myself. Let me go get it before I change my mind. Be right back.” He went straight for the door, waved a salute and walked out.

Nick waved. “Take my bike dude”!

David made it home on the bike in about twenty minutes. He fired up his computer and sent the paper to Nick's email. He found a note from Dori waiting for him too. It was an offer he couldn't refuse, so he answered it before starting back to Nick's. It took a few minutes longer on the return trip, pedaling sidewalks, and exploring alleys along the way. He rolled up on Nick's front yard grass and called out as he put the bike down. Hey! You want me to lock this thing”?

Nick yelled back. “No! I need it later! I need paper”!

David walked in the open door. The printer was working hard. He smiled at the machine and asked, “Did you get it”?

“I already read most of it. It's fantastic. I love it. Firewall. That's sexy. Rock and roll dude.”

“You really mean it?” he begged, a little embarrassed.

“I love it. It's really gonna piss off big oil all right. All I gotta do is stick it in their face.”

“Where will you post it”? David admired the freshly printed

sheets.

“Where ain't I gonna post it. People will be quoting it all over the place. You watch. And every one of them will have a Hyperlink to the full paper. This stuff catches fire.”

“Awesome.” David smacked his hands together. “Screw the dean.” He started to worry about the consequences.

“Glad I could help dude. It's turning out to be a weird day all the way around. The news is crazy too. Did you hear about the Colombian?”

“You mean...”

“Yeah that Colombian. The son of a bitch got bailed out. I talked to Artie. Nobody knows how. Everybody was against it. Artie thinks they got to the judge. Wouldn't be the first time either.”

“Son of a b-bitch,” stuttered David.

Nick shook his head. “I mean the guy is out walking the street. He doesn't know that Artie has the coke. I can't see that it changes anything though. I mean even if he gets off, what are they gonna do, give it back to him? As long as they don't know the junk in the evidence room is fake.”

“What happened to it before...you know. In the other case when it disappeared before?” David thought about the cop he hurt.

“It just disappeared,” laughed Nick. “Poof.”

“Well shit. Whoever took it either sold it themselves or gave it back to the bad guys.”

“So?” asked Nick.

“What if it happens again? What if some bad cops raid the evidence room again man? If they can get to the judge then maybe they can get in there again dude. If the coke is fake and they try to sell it or give it back, you know. Everybody's gonna know the real shit is somewhere else.” David felt queasy.

“Artie's sure nobody's gonna find it.” Nick thought about the bar in the old days and Artie's family of gangsters.

“All the Colombians have to do is find out that Artie has their

product, and he's done. What if the cops that switched it decide to sell him out”?

“I think Artie knows which cops are clean. I know he knows the ones that aren't.” Nick laughed.

“Yeah.” David smiled. “It's a family tradition.”

“That's right.” Nick pantomimed a machine gun. “Rat-a-tat-tat. Chicago typewriter man.”

“What do they know about the Colombian?” asked David.

“Sure. I was reading about him up on here this morning. I marked it. Here it is. Carlos Rodriguez. Although that may not be his real name at all. The BBC says he's a regular baby eating terrorist. He seems to be able to do the Teflon thing in Chicago and New York. Charged with distribution a bunch a times, but shit always happens. People in Columbia seem to disappear when he doesn't like them too. He's a former enemy of Pablo Escobar. He's not in the Cali or Medellin cartel. He's rumored to have been involved in Iran/Contra. They think he's into smuggling drugs into Africa these days. The surveillance budget in Africa isn't very big. He brings it in on the west coast in a big boat, and then the little boats just go out and pick it up in an ocean drive through lane. You know. In international waters. One stop shopping.” Nick squinted at the screen. “He got charged once in New York a few years back. He got acquitted. Been charged twice in Chicago. Evidence disappeared the first time. Lots of cops fired. Some got sent up. On the last Chicago bust a cop got killed. Shot in the face during a raid. Nobody saw who the shooter was. Lead flying everywhere. Rodriguez lost two of his own men. None of the guns recovered matched the ballistics of the one that got the cop. They're still looking for the gun. The shooter probably escaped out the back. I can't believe they gave the son of a bitch bail in a case with a dead cop. Somebody must have really greased the judge.” He backed away from the screen.

David shook his head. “He's probably on a plane to Columbia right now.”

“No way man. He can't leave the country. He can't even leave town.”

“Glad I'm not Artie man,” said David. He thought about a shootout scene in *Miami Vice*.

Nick saw David's anxiety. “There's a cop watching the bar twenty four seven. Plus, Artie has probably got more firepower himself than anybody knows about. He's got more friends than enemies.” Nick rubbed his tired eyes.

“I wouldn't want to tangle with him,” laughed David.

“I heard that.” Nick did the machine gun thing again.

“Still,” said David. “If I were the cops, I'd want better protection for the coke than those two jokers we bumped into out front.”

“Yeah. But they're just there to watch. The bad guys don't know Artie has the stuff. Anything out of the ordinary and the Chicago cops would be in there thicker than the chase scene in *The Blues Brothers*.” They both laughed.

David couldn't resist. “Unnecessary violence in the apprehension of the Blues Brothers...has been approved.” They laughed like schoolboys and slapped each other on the back.

“Wait a minute,” said Nick. “That dog won't hunt.”

“What”?

“Look. Artie told us he's hiding the stuff for the cops, so it won't fly away before the trial. Right”?

“OK.”

“Well that's bull shit. It wouldn't work in court. There's no chain of custody with the evidence possession. The bad guys could just ask them to prove it's the same coke. They couldn't prove it after they moved it.”

“What”?

“People get off on this mistake all the time. You need an unbroken chain of custody with the evidence to get a conviction. Whenever the cops take some evidence into possession they have to be able to account for where it was, who had it, and who had

access to it, from the time they get it until they take it to the trial. Every time it moves from this guy to that guy it has to be signed for and witnessed. If the defense can prove that there was one minute where it couldn't be accounted for, or whoever had it wasn't authorized to have it, then they have to throw the evidence out, and the defendant walks. Artie's a coke dealer. He's not authorized to hold evidence. If that gets out in court then the guy walks."

"Shit you're right. Son of a bitch." David stood up, pulled a dirty sweater off his chair, and sat back down.

Nick thought about the possibilities. "Maybe Artie lied to us"?

"No way," said David. "I'll bet the cops won't tell the court they switched it or something. They're taking a chance. Nobody knows except a few people."

"And us dude"! Nick looked worried.

"Shit dude. If the cops did switch it...you know. Then it means we know something that could get the sons a bitches off. Why would Artie tell us? Even after the guy got sent up...shit. If he ever found out that we knew about the switch he'd send somebody after us." David clicked his pen over and over.

"Artie wouldn't do that to us man. I trust him. Please stop that." He pointed at David's clicking pen.

"Sorry dude." David stopped it. "I think he either lied to us about the switch, and it didn't happen, or he screwed us big time by getting us involved."

Nick stared right into David's eyes. "WE got ourselves involved. We made a big scene dude. Artie just had to think fast. He had to tell us. It's not his fault."

"I don't like it. It don't add up" David started to click again, but caught himself and put the pen in his pocket.

Nick felt a headache coming on. "Do you really think the cops would risk blowing the trial by switching the evidence, and then switching it back, and just hoping the defense doesn't find out"?

"They'd do anything to bust a cop killer," said David. "They

don't care.”

“But just think how much that information is worth to Rodriguez. If he can get somebody to steal the evidence for him...you know. Like he did before. If he's got that kind of inside juice. Surely somebody on the inside would tip off him about a switch in exchange for a reward. I hope the cops are careful about how many people know about it.” Nick shuffled around his desk looking for aspirin.

David tried to break it down. “So what do we know. We know that a switch would be very risky. But if there was a switch then we are one of the few unlucky people who know about it. We'd have to keep the secret to ourselves for the rest of our lives. And if Rodriguez ever found out that we knew... Shit. He'd come after us hard.”

Nick swallowed three aspirin without water. “Artie has to believe it. Why would he tell us there was a switch, if there wasn't one”?

David got his pen back out and spun it around his fingers like a drummer spinning a drumstick. He didn't want to, but he was soon clicking again. He thought hard. “Maybe he believes the cops, but Artie's hard to fool. Surely he'd know about the chain of custody...evidence thing. He'd confront them about it. And even if he believes them... Even if he thinks there WAS a switch... Then would also know that he's always gonna be in danger of being discovered by Rodriguez. He don't want to be on no Colombian shit list dude.”

“But the cops could have him over a barrel,” said Nick. “He might have no choice but to cooperate. Even if he doesn't like the set up.” He looked at David's clicking pen. “Now give me that thing. You're driving me crazy.”

David ignored the request. “Well then. I have a few questions for Artie.”

“What makes you think he can even tell you the truth”?

“I don't know, but I've got to ask. And I trust him.”

Nick shook his head. "He's a coke dealer. I like him too, but he's a drug dealer man. Don't expect too much."

David shrugged his shoulders. "I know."

Dr. Goodman was enjoying the nice weather as he walked across campus on his way to the library. He admired the students moving along the symmetrical walkways with trees and shrubs carefully planted in every little available space. The lawns between the old brick buildings were being carefully maintained. The sound of mowers and weed eaters buzzed in the distance. The senior professor wasn't too old to be distracted by the summer shorts on the young women, but he was old enough to admire them in a benign way. He couldn't decide if he missed all the libidinal madness or not. His wife had great legs, but she was so modest. He was the only person that ever got to see them. He married well, and never forgot how lucky he was.

He started climbing the long concrete stairs at the library when his cell phone started playing *Satisfaction* by the Rolling Stones. There were students all around who laughed at his embarrassment. His face got red. He hurried to get the thing open and stop the music. His daughter loved to change the ring tones when he left it lying around. She had hoped it would go off in a meeting or some other embarrassing situation like it had several times already. He was careful to check the thing periodically, but she was intermittent and relentless. He stepped behind a giant ornate column and answered it. "Hello."

"Dr. Goodman"?

"Yes. Hello." He leaned against the cold stone.

"This is Art Lowe."

"Yes. Hello Mr. Lowe. What can I do for you"? He knew the guy. It was the was the CIA. "What is it"? He looked at his shoes.

He was talking to the CIA about his future son in law, a man that he admired and made his daughter happy. He needed to convince the guy that David was no threat, and he needed to find a way to get out of amateur CIA watchdog duty forever. There had been CIA contacts on campus since the start of the cold war, and he was one of them. It was the patriotic thing to do. He never took money. But now, with the way things were going in Washington, he felt like Big Brother. He thought about Germany when Hitler rose to power, slowly bleeding away civil liberties. He knew what he had to do, but he felt bad about it. He had sent David's paper in to be checked out by the spooks.

“Dr. Goodman. Thank you for sending us the paper on energy nationalization. It was certainly interesting.”

“It's no big deal. He's already withdrawn it. He's a sensible man. The dean talked to his father. He won't rock the boat for his dad. Case closed I hope.”

“He withdrew it? That's good. Nationalization of energy. That's all we need. He has no idea.”

“No idea what”?

“No idea how bad an idea that really is. National security. Who's going to want to invest in oil exploration without a profit motive? The tree hugging punks would be all over congress to hold back on new exploration. We don't need anybody stirring up students. We already haven't built a new refinery in ten years. Not in my back yard you know.”

“Sure.” He ground his molars a little.

“We're at peak oil. The last thing we need is a lot a crap about nationalization.”

“Right.”

“Are you sure he's done with this”?

“Yes sir. I'm positive. He just wants to be a theorist like his dad. He needs to stick to what he does well. Which is numbers. Mathematical proofs.”

“Good. Keep on top of these things. It's people like you who

make what we do possible. What about campus demonstrations? Anything going on? I haven't talked to you guys in a while."

"Most of the anti-war stuff is run from downtown. We have a lot of students involved, but so does every other university. As you know there was a little acting out the last time, but nothing important. Nothing like Miami. Not many arrests. Somebody burned an American flag with an Israeli flag. More people tried to get arrested than got arrested. If they were looking for 1968 then it didn't happen."

"Yeah. Chicago cops. It ain't their first rodeo. They did a great job."

He suddenly realized that he had chewing gum stuck under his left heel, so he started looking around for a place to scrape it. "The next march is coming up in a couple weeks. Veterans against the war. Code pink. Stop the war coalition. Same people." He scanned the campus lawn.

"No problem. I hope there's no violence. They're just kids."

"Actually it was a pretty good cross section last time. Families. Labor unions. Parents of deployed soldiers."

"Hey. Can you hang on a second? I have a call coming in."

"Sure." He moved the phone to the other ear.

"OK. I'm gonna take this call. I'll be right back." The CIA hung up.

Shit, he thought. He knew the guy was making a note. He was personally against the war and afraid to say it. If a tenured professor can't speak up then who can.

The phone rang. "Dr. Goodman."

"I'm here."

"I need to go. Can I get back to you later?"

"No problem, sure." He was relieved.

"OK bye."

He snapped the phone shut, put it in his pocket, and went inside the library. He sat down in a cubicle next to a bust of President Lincoln and pulled the phone back out. It took him a good forty

five minutes to fix the ring tone. He succeeded in changing it, but had to close the phone quickly after it started playing Bach in the quiet library.

Dori surprised David by ambushing him at his front door as he walked up the sidewalk. She sat on the front steps and teased him. “Hey. Remember me? Want your keys back”?

He felt like a man that was about to get lucky. “Why didn't you go in”?

“I never break into a strange man's apartment. It might give the wrong impression.”

“I'm not strange. I don't need the key. I left a window unlocked.”

She laughed. “No telling what I might have found in there anyway.”

“Did the Bears cheer-leading squad jump out the windows when you came up”? He took the keys and turned the lock.

“No.” She smiled.

“Good. Then the coast is clear.”

“What have they got that I ain't got”? She put her hand on her hip and posed.

“Nothing. In fact I'm kinda partial to your pom poms.”

She slapped his back. “Let me in big boy or lose me forever.” They laughed. He wondered if he had cleaned up any better than the last time. At least there's no fish in the oven, he thought.

David shut the door behind them, scooped her up in his arms and started for the bedroom. He laughed and grunted like a Neanderthal as he kicked open the bedroom door.

“Hey! Stop already. Ain't you gonna seduce me?” she insisted.

He put her down on the bed, kissed her neck, and said “How was your day”?

She pulled him closer, climbed on top of him, and said “OK.

I'm seduced.”

They made love, but only after throwing a dozen motorcycle magazines and assorted laundry on the floor. David had a long daydream about having a son as they cuddled in the afterglow. He was still thinking about it when she took her clothes into the bathroom and didn't come out for what seemed like a long time. He got impatient, considered urinating behind the garage, and thought about what her dad had said about daughters and multiple bathrooms. A few minutes passed. She came out fully dressed and brushing her hair. David scampered toward the bathroom. He jumped around her like a running back while laughing and moaning and holding his crotch. “He's right,” he laughed.

She kept right on brushing. “What's so funny honey?”

He spoke through the closed door. “Nothing. Something your dad said. I thought you'd never get out of here. My eye balls are floating.”

She wasn't really listening. “You gotta feed me. I ain't no cheap date.” She knocked on the door.

“Your wish is my command.” He flushed, washed up and came out looking refreshed. They hugged and kissed in the hall. David hung on longer than usual and thought about having a son again. “I Love you,” he said without joking.

“You better.” She pushed him away and smacked him hard on the butt.

It shocked him. He was trying to show her that he just took the relationship up to another level but she missed it. He left it alone, went to the kitchen, and picked up a phone book that was at least five inches thick. “What you feel like tonight princess? We can go out or eat in.”

“I don't care. I'm just hungry.” She put her hand on her stomach and jumped on the couch in the living room.

He thumbed the yellow pages. “Pizza OK”?

“Sure. If it's fast. I'm starving.”

David dropped the book, looked at the dozen or so pizza

magnets on the refrigerator door, and decided on Marty's Pizza. He started dialing and called out. "What you want on it boss"? He thought about making a big drink.

"How about pepperoni and jalapeno peppers"?

"Sounds good." He ordered a pizza and two six packs of beer while pouring three fingers of Canadian whiskey into a Flintstones jelly glass over one finger of lemon lime soda. Dori was channel surfing when he plopped down next to her on the couch. He started growling like a tiger.

She smelled his breath, made a face, and said "I'm glad I got to you before you got wasted."

He quickly changed the subject. "Hey woman. Who authorized you to manipulate the hand held control mechanism...symbol of male dominance...thing"? He feigned mild anger.

"Bull shit." She stuffed it behind her back.

"Give it back woman." He groped everywhere but behind her and a wrestling match ensued. He always lost as she did not feel restricted by any particular rules of engagement. She just grabbed him where it did the most good."

"Uncle"! She squeezed a little. "Ah! You got me by the Eustachian tubes." He moaned in fear, and wondered if she really knew how close he actually was to a problem.

"Big macho champion wrestler." She enjoyed the power.

"Hey lady. I've never had that particular hold applied to me in the ring before. I don't think there's a counter for that. Uncle! Uncle already."

"No pay backs"? She negotiated from a position of strength.

"No pay backs," he lied.

"And I get to pick what we watch"?

"Yeah yeah! Let go! Uncle! Uncle Sam! Uncle Joe. Uncle whatever you want."

She let him go. He grabbed himself and started talking in a high pitched helium voice. "And what would you like to watch dear?" She actually did hurt him, but he wasn't about to tell her

about it.

“No sports.” She aimed the remote at the screen.

“Yes ma'am.” He laughed and moaned while she flashed through the channels.

The pizza came a little late but it was hot. They drank the first six pack before they got even halfway through the enormous pie. The Jalapeno peppers made them thirsty. David drank four beers, and she drank two. He threw the pizza box on the kitchen table, opened another beer, stuffed some pot in a little brass pipe, and sat down. He offered her the first hit. She waved it off, so he took two or three pulls and put it down. They moved out on the porch to watch the traffic and settled in on the old chairs. The street was quiet except for a siren coming from the direction of the expressway.

“Anything new?” she asked.

“Not really. Well sort of.” He took a long drink from his beer.

“What”? She could sense something.

“Me and Nick...” Here we go, he thought.

“What now”? She got angry.

“We sort of got in a fight.” He looked guilty.

“With each other”?

“No. Not with each other. With a couple of guys outside Artie's.”

“Over what? I can't believe this shit David”!

“Some creeps were sitting in a car. We thought they were casing the place when we saw them.”

“You mean you started it”? He's just a drunk, she thought.

“Shit no! We just went over to see what they were doing there. The guy grabbed me and I escaped.”

“Define escaped”? She was smiling now.

“Escape. You know. Like in wrestling. You get free. You break out of a hold, and it's one point.” He smiled back.

“So what exactly did you do when you...” She made finger quotation marks in the air. “Escaped. Could you be a little more

specific”?

“I broke his arm.” He looked away.

“Fantastic! You broke somebody's arm.” She looked right at him. “God damn it David. Who's arm did you break”?

“Never seen the guy before.” That's the truth, he thought.

“And will you be seeing him again”?

“Oh no. He's long gone,” he lied.

She stood up and braced her hands on her hips like she was ready to fight. “Who appointed you bouncer anyway? Why couldn't you just call the damn cops”?

“Oh they came. They took the guys away. It was no big deal. They must have been stupid to even think about burglarizing Artie's. Max is in there. They've probably never been in the place, or they would've seen Max. That's one big dog.” It's going to be alright, he thought. She wants to believe you. Women always do. He finished beer number five and crushed the can under his foot a little too hard.

“You OK”? She meant it.

He smiled and went for sympathy. “Well. It's nothing. But I did kind of pull my back out when I was throwing the guy over my head.” He rubbed his spine and made a pain face. “Wish you'd have seen it. He left me a big opening, so I had to move fast.”

She laughed and started to rub it for him. “Right here”?

“Oh yeah.”

“Just one thing wrestler man.”

“What”?

She stopped rubbing and looked him straight in the eye. “You have got to pull your head out of your ass, or I am going to trade you in for a more dependable model that I can trust not to give me a lot of God damn surprises. I don't like surprises. You understand? Enough with the booze already. Less booze. Less violence. More love. You like love. I know you do.”

“I know.” I can quit drinking anytime, he thought. It ain't no big deal. The phone rang, and he opened it by his ear. Saved by

the bell, he thought.

“Yo Red”?

“What's up Nick”? He looked away.

“Shit,” cried Dori. She stood right up, yanked the screen door open, stomped through the kitchen, and out onto the back porch. She started crying, and slammed the back door so hard that Nick heard it on the other end of the phone.

## Chapter 6

Murphy and Stone, the cops who were watching Artie's when David decided to be a hero, were off duty. They decided that it was time to find Rodriguez, and sell him something very valuable, his freedom. They knew where to find him. The cops had a 24/7 tail on the bailed out cop killer. Mr. Rodriguez was one mistake away from being back in the hospitality of the city. The street was busy. A late afternoon school bus made frequent stops as Stone scanned the storefronts for the address on a yellow post-it note. The bus stopped every block or so, blocking traffic. Even cops don't pass a school bus. The strip club they were looking for could only be reached by inching along congested side streets. Traffic was slow in there, in contrast to the expressway, that was so close they could hear the swish of the cars speeding by. It sounded like a stock car race. The hot overcast day was a problem in the car. The air conditioner needed servicing.

Officer Mike Murphy usually drove the Ford, but his left arm was in a cast. His boss, Officer Stone, had to drive. Stone hated Chicago traffic. Murphy looked like a cop, but he was actually two inches too short to qualify. He simply greased the medical technician on examination day. What he lacked in height he made up for in weight. He had short red hair, and wore mirrored sunglasses. He got the look from a cop movie he saw when he was a rookie. He was a kid busting hookers and shaking down minor pimps at the time, and he loved the image.

Eric Stone was actually Murphy's boss. He had to pull a string or two to get on the detail. Supervisors don't do stakeouts. He had sworn off Murphy's moneymaking schemes a long time ago, but couldn't resist the opportunity to make a big score. There were gambling debts to pay off because the Chicago Bulls couldn't shoot free throws. He wasn't big, but he could take care of himself, and he put fear on the street before he got promoted to a desk. He was bald by choice. He shaved his head because his receding hair line made him look older than he really was. A comb-over was out of the question. Stone had sunken green eyes and was never without a cheap cigar. The Ford reeked of cigar smoke, and Murphy couldn't wait to get his boss out of the car.

As cops go, they were somewhere in between dirty and squeaky clean. They were former partners in some minor skimming, but this thing was bigger. They knew that Rodriguez would be anxious to buy what they had to sell. The trick was to stay alive and out of prison. There was enough potential profit in what they were doing to retire to the beach for good. They were party to some pretty valuable inside information. They knew that the coke had been moved. They knew where it was, and they were guarding it themselves. The bad guys would do a lot to get back one hundred pounds of pure cocaine.

"I guess that punk bouncer called in sick yesterday," said Murphy, looking at his arm. "Probably afraid to see me. When this is over. I'm gonna..."

"He ain't the bouncer," Stone broke in. "I told you. He's just a regular who tends bar once in a while."

"Then why did he get involved? He's got something to do with the coke in there. Why would he care? He's in the snow alright." Murphy adjusted his sling.

"I don't know. But he don't work there. I checked. He's a teacher."

"Teachers don't hang out in places like that. He's probably a coke head and sells it too. The son of a bitch broke my arm man.

Teachers don't do that either. And now I can't say anything. I Couldn't do shit about it. They'd take me off the stakeout if they found out. Hey! watch out! Where did you learn to drive"? He pointed at a car pulling out of an alley.

"I saw him."

"There's no place to park in here."

"I'll park in a tow zone."

"Right. A black Crown Vic parked in a tow zone in a bad neighborhood. Might as well paint CPD on the side in white spray paint."

"I don't care man. This sucks."

"Go over there. Behind the cleaners." Murphy pointed to a busted up parking lot with high weeds growing through enormous cracks in the concrete. He parked out of sight behind a rusty dumpster and walked the three blocks to the club. There was no neon sign out front. There was no sign at all. Only certain people knew the location, and the owners didn't want any walk-ins. The cops knew where it was, and they always knew the new location when it moved. It moved a lot. The unlocked door led to a moldy bar with a greasy floors made of the original rough cut boards. They walked in and approached the angry bartender with their badges out.

"OK. What"? He turned his back, bent over the cooler, and started clinking long necks.

"We need to talk to Mr. Rodriguez." Murphy sounded confident.

Here was no eye contact. "Even if he was here. Why would he want to talk to you"? He pressed a button under the bar that set off a buzz the back room.

"Because he's out on bail. And if we can catch him doing one little thing wrong. Ding. He goes back to jail. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars." Murphy smiled and raised his eyebrows. He felt a tap on his back, turned his head, and found Rodriguez standing right next to him. The Colombian was backed

up by six well dressed clowns with their hands in their pockets.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” he asked. Rodriguez was tall and middle aged with a high pitched voice. It wasn't feminine, but thin and labored. His shaved head looked funny with his thick black eyebrows and perfect teeth. He wore one of those tropical, almost transparent, white shirts, with white slacks and deck shoes. He looked ready for brunch at the yacht club.

The voice took Murphy by surprise. It took him ten long seconds of silent hesitation before he got on with his business. “Could we talk to you in private”?

Rodriguez pointed to his men. “They can hear anything you have to say.”

Murphy rubbed his thumb on his badge. “This is just between us. You'll understand.”

“I don't talk to cops without a lawyer. Forget about it.”

Murphy forced a smile. “OK. But we're gonna keep coming back at you every single day until you hear us out. It's that important. We ain't wearing a wire. You can search us. You'll understand.” Murphy looked very confident.

Rodriguez waved at the room. “OK cop. Just me and you.” He pointed at Stone. “But not him. Out back. Right now.” He winked at his men. “Search them both.”

There were four pistols on the bar after the searches were over. Murphy didn't even know that Stone carried a back up piece until the searcher slapped a tiny Saturday night special down on the bar next to the service weapons. Even he carries a throw down gun, thought Murphy. The Colombian gently guided his guest through the back door and stepped between a white cargo van and a crumbling stone wall. He felt safe from microphones or cameras because they were completely covered on all sides. He reached through the open driver's window of the van, turned the key to the left, and cranked the radio up to cover the conversation. He spoke freely over the loud Afro-Cuban rhythm. “OK. What you want from me”?

Murphy was excited but kept it to himself. "I'm not here on official business. I've got something to sell you." He smiled and felt so confident that he laughed a little.

Rodriguez shook his head. "Whatever it is, I'm not buying. I know what you want. You want me to screw up so you can send me back to the county. I'm not stupid."

"I ain't stupid either. And I didn't risk my ass just to do the prosecutor a favor. I ain't no saint. I'm not supposed to be here. Think about it. Do you think I'd give you my gun if I was"?

"I don't know you cop. You ain't shit." He took a step back.

"Listen to me! I'm only going to tell you this once. You say no... It's off. You go to prison. And don't forget the part about not picking up the soap." He raised an eyebrow.

Rodriguez had never seen the inside of a real prison, only holding cells. He took another step back. "OK cop! Spill it! And get the hell out of here"!

"I have some information that will get you off." He smiled and nodded.

The Colombian's face got red around the edges. "If this is some kind of cop trick... I can assure you that I can, and will, make you regret ever talking to me. You understand cop." He drew his index finger across his throat.

Murphy softened up and took a beggar's pose. "Listen man. This is the big one for me. I need the money. I need to retire. I expect you to be grateful to the tune of two million dollars. Not just for your freedom, but for one hundred pounds of pure product." His heart raced. He could feel the pulse in his chest, and his temples throbbed.

"I'm listening." Bull shit, he thought.

"This is a complicated situation. After you know what I have to tell you today... You'll be tempted to take it and run. And leave me with nothing. There's nothing I can do to stop you from telling your lawyer what I know. You'd get the charges dropped and be out of the country in a few days. After this, no matter what, you'll

have the information you need to get off. You wouldn't have to pay me shit.”

“Then what makes you think I would”? This better be good, he thought.

“Because... If you keep quiet until the end of the trial and spring my little secret on them at the very last minute... Then you can get off AND get your product back.”

“How”? Never trust a cop, he thought. Never.

“One hundred pounds of pure coke man. You can get it all back.”

“How”? They were both sweating now.

Murphy suddenly realized that the guy just confessed by not denying that the coke was his. He really was stupid. “OK. Here we go. It's your call. I'll bet everything on you being smart. But it's your call. Do you want to leave the coke and run, or do you want to wait for it”?

“How”? He grabbed Murphy by the collar, but quickly released him and stepped back.

“They switched the evidence.” Murphy sighed with relief.

“What do you mean”? His heart jumped.

“I mean they took the product out of the evidence room and hid it somewhere else. I know where it is, and I can snatch it back for two million bucks and a new shirt.” He brushed off his chest.

“How the hell is that going to get me off”? He thought he knew, but asked anyway.

“There's no unbroken chain of custody with the evidence. It's not in a secure place. It's not even with a cop.”

“No shit”? He was elated.

“You could tell your lawyer to check the record right now. He'd catch them cold, and you'd walk away.” Murphy swallowed hard.

“And you think I'll trust you and wait 'till the last minute to get it back. Why do we have to wait”? If he's telling the truth I can walk right now, he thought. But then the greed clouded his judgment just as Murphy had hoped.

“Because if THEY know that YOU know about the switch, they'll just take it back. You'd still get off, but you'd lose the product. What was it? One hundred, two hundred pounds man. The best time for me to grab it is right before the end of the trial. By the time they know it's gone, shit... I'll have it on a plane. That's right after you give me the money. It's chicken change to you.”

“Son of a bitch.” He laughed and felt lucky. Logic told him to let go of the coke and run, but he knew he didn't have to decide just yet. He thinks I'm greedy, he thought, and made himself look angry. “Mr. Murphy. If you're trying to cross me...”

“You're in no danger. You can change your mind at any time. You can spill it, and be in Columbia the next day. Take it one day at a time. You're on bail. You're free to walk around during the trial. You know you're gonna get off. What's the hurry? Take it one day at a time see”?

“Where's my product”? He had to ask.

“Whoa... Think about it. For this to work I gotta stay alive. The cops can't know that YOU know about the switch. And me and the very few people who DO know where the product is... We gotta keep quiet see? I risked everything to be in on the switch. I'm all in. I even picked the place to put it. Two million. It's chicken change to you. Shit. I'll fly out of here on the same plane with you if you want.”

“OK! Alright! One day at a time.” He put his hand in his pocket. “I'd do the same thing if I was you. You got balls. But if I even suspect a double cross, you die. Even if I'm in prison...or dead. You get whacked. I won't have any problem getting it set up that way. Understand cop”?

“Sure. Just please... Please don't get jumpy and spill it too fast. You're free now. No matter what. One hundred pounds man. Think about it. You've got nothing to lose and everything to gain by holding back.”

“Kilos.”

“What”?

“No pounds. Metric system. Kilos.”

Artie wasn't surprised to see Nick and David coming in the front door. The bar wasn't busy yet, and the cloudy weather didn't make anybody want to take their Harley out. It was dinner hour and slow, but Artie knew that the regulars would trickle in later. He was showing Carla how he made pizza. He was showing off by making it on the bar instead of in the office. She complimented him while nibbling on the shredded cheese and sipping a tequila sunrise.

David still couldn't understand why someone her age would go with a man so much older. It had to be for the coke. “Yo Artie what's up man,” asked David.

“Same old shit man. You guys want some pizza”?

He hesitated. “Actually, we wanted to talk to you about the other night.” David looked over at Carla when she wasn't looking.

Artie picked up on it right away. “Come on. You guys follow me. Hey babe. We'll be right back, OK?” He walked around the bar.

“OK.” She didn't bother to look up, poured another drink and squeezed a lime over the glass.

They stepped out the back door and closed it. Artie leaned against the wall and David got right to it. “Are you sure about what the cops told you, about them switching the coke”?

“Why would they lie”?

Artie adjusted his weight and put one foot up on an empty box.

“It don't make sense,” said David. “There's no unbroken chain of custody. If that shit got out...you know. It would blow the whole trial man.” David thought about the cop that he hurt.

Artie looked serious. “Yeah, I thought of that. For one thing, it ain't no skin off my ass. I still get paid no matter what. But I

asked my guy anyway, my guy on the inside. They're sure that nobody could ever find out. After they switch it back I mean. Only a few people know about it, and two of them are sitting in an unmarked car out front right now. They just don't want the evidence to get pinched again. They know I ain't gonna tell anybody. They didn't count on you guys falling into it, but I told them that you guys wouldn't tell anybody. And you wont see. Cause if you do, I'll kill you myself." He laughed.

Nick couldn't stand it. He looked at David. "You mean even before the professor here decided to get involved, you thought the heat would risk losing a cop killer by jerking around with the evidence"?

Artie smiled. "I'll bet it ain't the first time they switched the chicken. Dude, they get away with a lot of stuff every day that people never ever hear about. This is Chicago man. It ain't Peoria." He laughed until he coughed.

"I just don't believe it," said David. What did I get myself into, he thought.

Artie put his hand on Nick's shoulder. "Listen you guys. I'm sorry you got mixed up in this. You were trying to help me. You screwed up big time, but you were trying to help me. I know that. Look here. I'll give you a little taste of the gig, OK? You guys are alright. I'll take care of you."

David held up his hand. "No no. We don't want anything. We're just suspicious of the whole thing. We..."

"Listen," said Artie. "I've never done anything like this before, and I'll probably be sorry for doing it now, but I need you guys on board. You want proof? I'll show it to you. I'll prove it to you."

"What?" they gasped. "We don't want to see anything," said Nick, looking away.

"I need you guys on board. I'll have to blindfold you though. OK"?

"Do what," said Nick. It's time to go, he thought.

"I can show it to you. But believe me, you do not want to know

where this place is. It's been in my family for years. We used to hide booze there. I'm the only person left that can get in. Blindfolds. OK?"

"I'm good," said David. "Let's do it."

"Count me out," said Nick. "I hear my momma calling. You guys knock yourselves out. I don't wanna know." He imagined Al Capone's tunnels.

"It's all good," said Artie. He looked at Nick. "If I show David, If David's satisfied, will you be OK with it"?

Nick held up his right hand. "Hey, I ain't seen nothing. I'm going in here and get drunk. And then I'm gonna act like all this bull shit never even happened. I don't care what the cops did or didn't do. They're the cops. If they want to pull something then I'm sure they know how to pull it off." He clicked his heels and did a weak Sergeant Schultz. "I see nothing." He saluted and walked back inside. They laughed and returned his salute.

David smiled and said, "Let's go. I'm good."

Artie drove David around blindfolded in his car for about twenty minutes with the radio turned up. He knew that David didn't want to peek anyway. David joked the whole time. Artie parked and made him wait while he went around to the passenger door and helped him get out. David held on to Artie's arm as they walked. It wasn't far. A few steps passed. They stepped through a door and went down four flights of stairs. David felt the sweaty old brick wall with his hands as they descended. It smelled like rotten wood and earthworms. At one point he thought he smelled sewer gas. Artie told him when he was at the bottom step. He took two blind steps across the floor and stubbed his toe on a concrete support. Artie laughed and apologized. David heard him drag something open that sounded like a sliding metal gate. Artie told him it was a freight elevator and helped David get in. After a long and shaky decent, Artie took the blindfold off. "You're the first guy besides me to be in here in a long time," he said. "I brought the stuff down here myself. I had to make three trips."

David scanned what looked like an abandoned basement warehouse. “Wow. This is awesome,” he said.

“There's ghosts in here,” said Artie. “Old ghosts.” He led David along a dank, dripping, and narrow hallway. Black mold grew everywhere on the broken concrete floor. Artie's subterranean world was stuck in prohibition with relics of the thirties all around that would certainly excite an antique dealer. Old bottles, empty but collectible, filled dozens of boxes and shelves. David noticed an old Bakelite radio that was so well preserved that it looked like it might still work. David saw what he thought was some kind of air shaft, and decided that they must be pretty deep underground. The shaft had some sloppy red graffiti painted on it, something about the sexual preference of someone named Fred.

“Come here often?” asked David.

Artie laughed. “I don't need this place anymore. I was gonna fill it in, and I still should. If anybody ever found this dump... They could get hurt down here. I saw a show on the cable where people search out these kinds of places. I'm tired of worrying about it. You'd have to work pretty hard for a long time to find this place, but you never know. As soon as this trial is over I'm gonna fill it in.”

“But this is so cool,” said David.

“Easy for you to say. I used to come here as a kid. It scared me then. Now I gotta use it one more time.” Artie pulled open a heavy rotting wooden door and revealed a huge walk-in safe. “Here we are man. It's actually a gun safe,” he bragged, motioning for David to turn around. He went through the combination and snapped the lever. The door worked as good as the day it was made. “There it is,” he said, pushing the big metal door open on it's massive hinges.

“Oh shit” cried David. He gaped at a big stack of gray bricks wrapped in super tight thick plastic.

“One hundred pounds of the product of Columbia,” bragged Artie.

David picked up a brick, felt it, smelled it, and was glad he didn't do cocaine. "I believe you," he said. "The cops gotta have steel balls to do this. Do you know how much this stuff is worth?"

"I sure do. I told you I'd give you a taste of my bill to the city. I ain't doing this for free. They're paying me out of some cop slush fund. Just keep a lid on it, OK?"

"Man, I don't want any money. I'm just mixed up in this shit, and I couldn't believe the cops would risk getting caught doing this without an iron clad chain of evidence...you know...custody thing. The sons a bitches will do anything man." He laughed.

"There's a dead cop. The gloves come off. They won't stop until they get revenge. It could get a lot worse before it's over too. I've seen this drill before. In the fifties they'd just start dropping suspects in the lake until they figured out that they'd got the right guy somewhere in the bunch. They'd kill ten to make sure they got the right one. Dude, I've seen it. I know. They've got politicians. They've got judges. They'll waste your ass if you do a cop and ain't nobody gonna give a damn."

"Unbelievable."

"And remember my friend. I like you. And I'll help you all I can. But if anybody sings, well, the cops are automatically gonna think it's you. You don't want that man. Be very very careful and tell your buddy to do the same. It ain't my ass. It's your ass now. You pissed them off real good. Remember?"

David swallowed hard. "I'm good man, but I need a drink."

Artie laughed. "I'm buying. Lets get the hell out of here. You didn't see any of this right?"

"See what"?

Morning came and David's phone wouldn't stop ringing. He didn't want to get out of bed, but whoever was calling knew he was there and wouldn't hang up. He tried to wait it out but found himself counting the rings. He gave up and answered it. "Hello."

"David."

“What up Nick”?

“You up”?

“I am now. This better be good. What time is it?” He scratched his ribs.

“I think you better get over here man.”

“Why”? His sinuses hurt. His mouth was dry and his lips were cracked.

“It's your paper. Everybody's talking about it. A zillion hits. You have over a hundred responses. Some from Ecuador. They love it in Brazil man. It's on fire. You gotta see this man. I've been up all night.”

“That's why you called me so early”?

“You don't understand professor. You got quoted in the main stream media. You were mentioned on the God damned BBC. From now on I'm your press agent.”

“Oh come on.”

“I saw it. It's on my TIVO. People are sending e-mails to their representatives and shit. They're calling for congress to investigate the oil companies man. I answered some of the early responses for you. I told them who you were, that you were from the University of Chicago, and that you pulled the paper because of pressure from the old guard. They ate it up. You're a movement man.”

“That's not exactly true. I pulled it voluntarily. The dean is gonna be pissed, but maybe he won't find out.”

“Too late for that man. You a star.”

“Shit.” He sat down hard.

“You've got offers to be interviewed. You're news. And I did it all right here on the computer. Blogging is a powerful thing. You gotta get over here right now.”

“OK, alright... Whatever.”

“Bring some coffee, OK? I'm out. And some bagels would be good too.”

“Yeah sure. Let me get a shower and I'll be over.” He laughed.

“Hurry up dude.”

“OK.” David hung up and resisted the temptation to be excited. The net thing was not supposed to get back to the dean, but now it looked like he purposely did it to call attention to the conservatism of the department. Nick was out of line but he couldn't really blame him. That's what Nick does, he thought. He blogs. He thought about his dad and how embarrassed he would be when it got out that his son was on a soap box on the World Wide Web bashing the school. He thanked God that his dad had tenure. It was too late anyway. He might as well go with it. All he really wanted was to be read by regular people. It felt good to imagine his work being discussed in places like Ecuador. The problem of capital flight wouldn't be such a problem there. He turned the possibilities over and over while he showered.

He got dressed, filled a plastic bag with coffee and set out for the bakery. He meant to get bagels but changed his mind as soon as she got there. The hot pastry smells set off a sugar crave. He ordered two of this and three of that and resolved to get up early more often. He was only a few steps down the street when he finished the first chocolate filled long john and licked his fingers before digging in the pocket of his shorts for loose change to buy a paper. He dropped some quarters in the steel box, pulled the lid down and saw a front page color picture of George W. Bush scowling like a freshman that just saw his grades. He mumbled a curse, stuffed it under his left arm and dug three of doughnut holes out of the sticky white bag.

He was so preoccupied while walking to Nick's that he arrived before noticing anything going on around him. The sun was out again. David thought, Two days in a row. It must be a record. A stocky young woman in blue shorts and funny knee socks was on the porch delivering the mail. He wiped his sticky fingers on his shirt and tapped a little rhythm on the front door.

“Come on in! It's open.”

Nick was slumped over the computer typing with two fingers.

His eyes were red and dilated. The place smelled like incense, pot smoke, and air freshener. He looked up. "Oh man. Smell that pastry," he laughed. "Go ahead and put the coffee on. You gotta see this." He squinted at the screen and rolled a wireless mouse over a rubber pad with *Property is Theft* lettered over a picture of Carl Marx.

David put the coffee on, slipped over behind Nick's right shoulder, and scanned the screen. He saw paragraph after paragraph of people fighting each other over something they were obviously very serious about. "Are they talking about me?" he asked.

"Oh yeah. People either love you or want you to die a slow and painful death."

"Who's winning," he laughed.

"Actually slow and painful death is making quite a comeback after your friends in Africa left. I think they went to bed."

"You've got to be kidding." He smiled.

"I kid you not sir. Thanks to your rather provocative piece of work, and my blogger buddies, we've started a regular wildfire. This is so cool." He concentrated on the screen.

"Who voted for painful death?"

"A wide cross section actually. You seem to reach out to a lot of interesting and passionate special interest...factions...people. They love you in the third world but they think you're a card carrying Marxist. Marxists don't understand the firewall thing. They just want the state to take over everything."

"The hell you say."

"There's a group called Energy for Tomorrow. Some right wing think tank from big oil. They've never heard of you, but some of my clever associates couldn't resist sending them thousands of emails all at once with one of those crazy software programs. Now Energy for Tomorrow has volunteered to chair the committee to implement your slow and painful death, as soon as possible, by whatever means necessary." He laughed and

coughed.

“Gee thanks man. I always wanted to make friends and influence people.”

“Is that coffee getting close?” Nick looked up. “Somebody at Habitat for Humanity thinks you're the smartest guy in the world next to Jimmy Carter. Catholic Charities wants you to comment on immigration policy. On the other hand... Somebody Wilson at the American Enterprise Institute says you're giving aid and comfort to the enemy. You're encouraging terrorism, and she recommends a nice room for you in a secret prison.”

“Do what”? He thought about water boarding. “All these people can't be thinking that I'm that important.”

“Shit dude. My people know how to start a frigging brush fire. After we spun the part about the University of Chicago putting a gag order on your ass... It really took off. It seems that just about everybody who ever won a Nobel Prize for economics came from there.” He shook his head.

“I know. I work there. Or I used to.” He took his pen out and started clicking it.

“I think you should know. I gotta tell you. I'm sure that more than a few nasty letters are on their way to the college. People want them to divest from this or that.” He smiled.

“What! Oh great. I'm done now.”

“They seem to have investments in a lot of funny places that are not exactly politically correct.” He looked up.

“Oh no. Shit. Why did you do that”? He clicked faster.

“Listen to this cat from ACORN. *In thirty years of working with inner city populations at risk, I have never been so encouraged. This is new ground, not the same old left versus right rhetoric. This is common sense economics. In the richest country in the world that spares no expense for war, we must reserve a dollar for bread, for shelter, and for a doctor for everyone who needs one. We, who are denied the very necessities of life by a system that runs on greed, we demand just such an economic*

*barrier to restrict the capitalist cancer to market sectors that do not threaten our basic human survival.*”

“Oh baby. That's what I'm talking about,” said David. “Cornny. But that's the idea exactly.”

Nick waved an air bat. “Crack! There it goes! Back! Back! Way back! Kiss it goodbye! Hey Hey! It's out on Waveland Avenue!” They laughed and slapped each other on the back several times.

“Oh man,” said David. “This is so cool. Who'd a thunk it”? He laughed like a teenager.

“This thing's on fire dude. I love this shit. Let's check some of the liberal political blogs.” He clicked the mouse. “This is on *Wake up America*. I know the webmaster. I put your paper up here the first day. You have over a thousand hits and dozens of comments.” He read a post aloud. “*I think the firewall thing is a good idea even if it would create abrupt residual unemployment. We need a real safety net in this time of sending our security to China. Screw the University of Chicago. Let him speak.*”

“Oh shit,” laughed David. “I'm toast alright.”

“The next guy says, *This is obviously an attempt to infect us with more tax and spend liberalism.*”

David made a face. “Jane, you ignorant slut,” he joked, and they both laughed.

Nick read the next one. “*Any time I hear that the government can do a better job of producing a good or service I put both hands on my wallet.*” They laughed again.

“That's bull shit,” said David. “The republicans are the ones who run up the damn credit card. It started with Reagan man. They never bitch about borrowing for war, only social security.”

“Bingo. Look at the next one. *During Clinton we had no deficit and one dollar gas. That old tax and spend argument won't work for republicans anymore.*”

“Zing,” said David. They laughed.

“Check this out,” said Nick. “*This is a truck load of commie crap. Take your flag burning fagot ass to Russia and see how they*

live.”

David threw up his hands. “Can I answer them”?

“Oh yeah. You can put your reply right next to any comment you want... Instantly.” He offered David the keyboard.

“Move over.” David jumped in and typed, *I can assure you that rumors of my being a commie are greatly exaggerated, and as far as the fagot part, you seem to be the one fixated on anal issues.*

Nick pointed at the screen and laughed. “Hit post comment.”

“There it goes. Go baby. Man this is too easy,” laughed David.

“If you just want to add to the comments in general... It'll show up on at end of the string.”

“OK, here goes.” He typed in, *This is David Armstrong. Thank you all for reading my paper. It is not intended to compete with the idea of free market capitalism. In fact, if such a system were implemented somewhere, I anticipate that capitalism would thrive in areas that are not democratically determined to be necessities. Capitalism is a contest. Even in sports there are rules and places that are out of bounds. You can't use a hammer in a boxing match, and to allow it would only hurt the sport. There are plenty of things that entrepreneurs can sell that are not necessities. In this time of great surplus for some and great scarcity for others, we should not be making a profit on the few things that low income people have to buy? A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. All I ask is to fix that link. We don't need to fix the whole chain. All my model will do is prevent capitalism from imploding. I am not a socialist. A real socialist would let it implode. One more thing. The most unlikely place for fascism to pop up today is Germany. Why is that? Because they know fascism. It is my hope that we can learn from the mistakes of others, and spare ourselves the nightmare of what happened to them.*

“Hit post comment.” Nick smiled.

Click! “There it is,” David looked impressed. “I see it.”

“Nice job dude. I like the other one better though. The one

about the guy being fixated on his ass.” He laughed.

“You're just trying to be difficult.” David beamed.

“Bull shit. I'm on your side.” They laughed.

“My side?” cried David. “You just made me the poster boy for why they don't give anybody tenure until they're sure they won't write something crazy.”

“Don't you bail on me now dude. I'm gonna make you famous.”

“That's what I'm afraid of. The good news is that the dean is probably not into blogs. They say he needs help checking his email.” They laughed.

“When I was in college there was no Internet. We typed our papers on typewriters. Researching a paper was a pain in the ass. I can't imagine how I graduated without a spell checker man.”

“Oh shit yes. I love my spell checker. My dad had an old memory typewriter where you could save stuff. We thought it was space age technology man. It had the little IBM ball thing. He wouldn't let us touch it. It cost like a grand. I see them on ebay now for fifty bucks.”

“Welcome to *The Jetsons* my friend. It's time for your fifteen minutes of fame. Oh boy. We forgot all about the damn coffee.”

David went for the kitchen. “Screw the coffee. I need a drink.”

The mayor of Chicago called a Friday morning emergency meeting with the police chief and the prosecutor on the Rodriguez case. He expected people to jump and they did. He was angry about the perpetrator making bail, and his recent public opinion sample, courtesy of his barber shop, was driving him to do something about it. Somebody was asleep at the switch, or somebody got greased. He couldn't believe that anybody had the balls to take a chance like that. The prosecutor couldn't believe it either. The Mayor had called the judge the night before. He told the Mayor that there was no evidence connecting Rodriquez to the

dead cop. The Mayor didn't like it and called the others right away. The prosecutor and the chief told him not to worry. They had an air tight case.

It only took them an hour to reach city hall. The chief and his supervising officer assigned to the case met the prosecutor on the front steps. Chief John Robinson was a big man, and weighed over three hundred pounds. He looked even bigger in his uniform, but it was tailor made, and he didn't look fat. At fifty five, he had certainly paid his dues. He wasn't afraid of the mayor. He wasn't afraid of anything.

Prosecutor Roy Davis was twenty five and not as confident. He knew that losing the case was a slam dunk career killer. He looked like a winner and was politically connected in the African American community. He still had a lot to prove, but he had a lot of support in high places. He was tall and good looking with very dark skin and a low voice, almost in the Darth Vader register.

Officer Steve Samson was a plain clothes undercover vice cop that looked like a north side coke dealer. White, 5'10", 215, full beard, and jet black hair with a curly permanent. He wore five hundred dollar suits to the grocery store. His diamond tie pin was over the top and made him look like he was trying way too hard.

The three men greeted each other formally on the steps of the Cook County Building and went the mayor's office together. The mayor saw them marching up the hall and said, "Get in here and shut the door. Nancy I'm taking no calls. No interruptions."

"Yes sir." They filed in and she shut the door on the little group.

The mayor said, "What's wrong with this picture gentlemen? There can't be bail in a case like this. I won't have it."

"Yes sir. I understand," said the Chief. "But we have the situation completely under control. There's no need for concern."

"Control my ass. The son of a bitch is on the street. We've got a dead cop, and the last time we had this pig cornered some of your people made the damn evidence disappear. We're gonna convict

this son of a bitch, and there ain't gonna be any more screw-ups. You read me”?

“Yes sir,” they chanted.

“Do you people know how hard it is to be the son of a legend.” He thought about growing up as a Daley. “People expect me to be him. They expect miracles and no mistakes. They expect me to have power, and use it to keep everybody happy. They think I can do anything. Like I can waive my magic wand and make everything right. It ain't like it was in Dad's time anymore. He could move the whole city with a wink and a nod. It ain't like that any more. Shit! When that evidence disappeared... People were like... How could this happen in Chicago. How could the mayor let this happen. Surely none of his cops would ever have the balls to jack with him like that.” He looked up. “The other time it happened... Officer John Burns. No telling how much money that son of a bitch stashed in an offshore account before he got sent up. I knew him. I promoted him twice. I thought he was a good cop. He's sitting in prison but he scored big and he'll be out in time to spend it. Now we've got another shot at the Colombian prick that embarrassed me.” He smacked the table. “I want the ass hole convicted”!

The chief cleared his throat and asked,” sir. I don't know a good way to say this so I'll just ask you. Is this place totally secure? I mean... Can you be sure there's no bugs in here”?

“What”! He made a sick face.

“Sir. I'm not taking any chances with what we have to tell you. Can we go somewhere sir?”

“Are you serious.”

“Yes sir. What can it hurt?”

“What is this shit, Watergate. Rosemary turn off the tape. OK people. Follow me.” The mayor took them up to a room on the top floor that was deserted and under renovation. The chief looked around for a place to sit and wasn't worried. He looked forward to what he had to say and was proud of his strategy on

the case. From where they were standing they could see the office workers sitting at their desks across the street behind the giant windows of an old office building. The air conditioner was off in the mayor's little hideout. It was a little uncomfortable and they all loosened their collars. The mayor pulled his tie off and put it in his pocket. He wiped his face and said, "OK what is it?"

The chief smiled and delivered. "Sir. This is Officer Samson. He's been undercover with Rodriguez for a year. No one knows it yet, but we have the shooter's gun with prints all over it."

"What do you mean nobody knows it?"

"Only the people in this room sir."

"The defense doesn't know it? The judge doesn't know it?"

"No sir," said Samson.

"That's withholding evidence"! The mayor rolled his eyes.

"Well sir, that depends on how you look at it," said the chief. "I know it's risky, but this is too important to have stuff disappear from the evidence room before trial like it did before. The same conditions exist."

The mayor looked away. "I don't think I want to hear this."

Samson said, "Sir. We haven't actually found the gun yet."

"What"!

"Well let's just say... The gun just might suddenly appear late in the trial. I'd say there's a real good chance that I'll find it at about that time."

"I'm not hearing this. What makes you think it'll turn up?" He looked at the half painted ceiling.

"Well sir... Rodriguez carries a ten millimeter Glock. I sort of went to Glock and got them, with a little help from the FBI, to make one for me. It's identical to his with the same serial number. Just in case Rodriguez uh...lost his somewhere along the way. You know. If the opportunity arose. You understand. And It did. Here's what happened. After the shooting, he told us to get rid of his gun. Me and his boys took it out on the lake and threw it in. Only it was the copy gun we really threw in. They still think his gun's in

the lake. They didn't even check the serial number. And after I went to all that trouble.”

“Prints huh”? The mayor smiled like he liked it. He thought his dad would have liked it too.

“Well sir. It just so happens that I have real good reason to believe that once I do find this gun, and I turn it in, that not only will it have his prints on it, but the ballistics will match too.” They all laughed like it was already over.

The mayor made a poor attempt at keeping a straight face. “OK. OK. I've heard enough. Which is to say I haven't heard anything. I suppose I should just order you to turn in any evidence that you find right away. Yes... That's right. I order you people to turn in any evidence you find right away. Do you understand?”

The chief saluted. “Of course sir. I understand sir. And I can assure you that if and when we do find anything that could be even remotely related to the case... We'll turn it in right away. That is... As soon as we do find it sir.” He smiled.

The mayor looked disgusted but focused. “And as soon as all this shit is over. Christ! I want that damn evidence room cleaned up for good. I want an investigation that will end all investigations. I want heads! I don't ever want to have a conversation like this again. And I want that son of a bitch convicted! Everybody wants me to do what my father would do. They think I don't know what he'd do. I know exactly what he'd do, and you can't do that shit anymore. A known cop killer walking around free on the streets. Not on my dad's watch he wouldn't. That's why the people loved him and still do. He WAS Chicago.” He teared up. “Now get that son of a bitch convicted”!

Across the street from city hall, in front of the State of Illinois building, a man was talking on a cell phone that had Rodriguez on the other end. He was a male Hispanic in his twenties, wearing

old jeans, a jacket over a white tee shirt, and a Cubs cap. He had been shadowing the prosecutor, but lost him an hour earlier when they both turned the corner at city hall.

Rodriguez drilled him down. "You lost him again. He left through a different entrance. He's probably back in his office by now."

"He has to be inside. I saw him turn the corner, but he never made it to the end of the block. He had to go in the west door."

"He left through another door fool."

"He never does that. He always comes back out the west door. Please. He's still in there."

"I need to know damn it! Go in there and look around."

He scanned the crowd. "I gotta watch the door."

"Do it now. Go in and look."

He made a sour face. "Alright. I'll call you back in a minute."

He snapped the phone shut and crossed the street. The door was stuffed tight with a line of hurried people all trying to get through at the same time. He slid through sideways and immediately came eye to eye with the chief of police, the prosecutor, and Officer Samson. He and Samson recognized each other immediately and the chase was on. He ran right out into oncoming traffic. A minivan screeched to a stop and missed him by inches. Samson drew his gun, pointed it straight up in the air and yelled, "Stop police"!

The stalker dashed into the nearest office building and caught the elevator just as the doors were opening. It was empty. He pulled out his cell phone and pressed his back against the side wall. The phone didn't work in the elevator. Officer Samson crashed into the lobby and saw his prey desperately pumping the elevator buttons to get the door to close. The suspect pulled his pistol and fired four rounds at Samson who jumped behind a square marble pillar. The desperate shots were not well aimed and bounced dangerously around the marble space. Samson went to the floor. He rolled over once and got a stable sight picture. He

shot the guy twice in the chest, knocking him down hard. The elevator doors closed and the car started up. The suspect was wearing body armor. He was alive but stunned.

He struggled desperately with the phone in the moving elevator but it wouldn't work. He was still fumbling with it when the doors opened on the second floor. Samson was already there trying to get a clear shot through a crowd of people standing in the hall. "Get down!" he bellowed. "Down! Police!" Somebody screamed and the group dove to the floor. The suspect threw the phone away and fired but missed Samson who dived to his left. He pointed his gun around the door where he thought the officer was and fired blind. He didn't see the chief taking aim from behind a partially open door at the stairwell. The chief took the shot. The round exploded inside the stalker's skull and splattered the elevator walls with blood and brains. Samson saw the chief gasping for air and putting his gun away.

The chief looked at the stalker's cell phone and asked, "did he get the call off?"

Samson picked up the phone and tiptoed around the brain fragments. He punched in a number several times but it didn't work. He stepped back over the body and away from the mess. "I don't think he got it off Chief."

The chief frowned. "Are you willing to risk that? How you know he didn't blow your cover?"

"I'll risk it. If I don't go back... Shit. Rodriguez will know that he's been had. He didn't get the call off."

"OK. It's your ass." He looked at the blood.

Samson saw him looking. "Man you sure know how to mess up a perfectly good elevator."

The chief smiled. "I liked to have shit my pants across the street. I could tell right away that he made you by the look on your face." He leaned against the wall.

"You OK Chief? You seem a little out of breath there. You want to take the elevator or the stairs?"

"I'll take the stairs. I've seen enough elevators for one day."  
They started down.

"Thanks for backing me up," said Samson.

"No problem. It's my day to rub elbows with the rank and file."

He slapped the chief on the back. "Where did you learn to shoot like that?"

"I worked vice in Englewood. I was a rising star."

"Oh baby. I didn't know."

"Got shot twice. Once in the hand and once in the leg. I was lucky. Been in a few firefights. Shot a couple a guys but never killed anybody until now."

"You OK"? They reached the bottom stair.

"I think I'm gonna throw up, but I'll wait until I get home."

They stepped on the ground floor. The noise was terrible. They went through the crush and slipped into the back seat of the first patrol car they saw.

The chief pointed south. "Get me out of here. No siren. No lights. Just get me out of here."

David and Nick were up late and working on-line. They had a marathon conversation going on with somebody in New York. At two thirty in the morning they were just about to call it a day. They were both so drunk they could barely read the screen.

Nick yawned. "I need a drink."

"Dude you're so wasted. I'm going to bed," said David.

"Hey a little help here." The bottle was out of reach.

David handed it to him and said, "Easy man."

Nick laughed. "Gravity is a wonderful thing." He tipped it up and drank the last three fingers in a half dozen gulps.

"Man, you're gonna be sick again. Don't you know the difference between high and sick?"

"What"?

“When you're throwing chunks in the tub so hard you think you're gonna die, that's not high man, that's sick.” David laughed.

Nick smiled. “Oh but the tub... The cold side of the tub feels so good.”

“You are... A masochist. You know that?”

“Hurt me daddy.” They laughed. Nick squinted at the monitor. “How many hits we got now doctor?”

“Man I don't care. I'm gonna sign this thing off.” David started poking buttons on the computer keyboard.

“We'll be back at it tomorrow man.”

David saw something. “Oh shit. Look at this.”

“What”?

“Look at this shit.”

Nick tried to get up, fell back a little and braced himself against the desk.

David pointed at the screen. “Look at that.” There was a message there from someone with the screen name DeadRed. *You commie bastard. We know who you are and where you are. You wont know the time or place but we WILL deal with you. There is nothing you can do about it. Tell whoever you want about it. It wont matter. Your fate is sealed. When the time comes you will suffer for your treason. And when it happens remember this warning.*

“Bull shit,” said Nick. “It don't mean anything. Anybody can say whatever they want on here and nobody knows who they are. Probably some kids. Let me answer them.”

“This shit ain't funny,” cried David.

Nick got on the keyboard. “Listen kids. Maybe you should get girlfriends or stop playing too many video games or something because this is not a game. Go to bed it's past your bedtime.”

David laughed. “Can you believe that crap”?

“Oh shit,” said Nick. “They're back. Look.”

The screen had a response. *Look Armstrong we know who you are. We know where you are and we're going to teach you a*

*lesson about jacking around with things you can't possibly understand. Did you ever stop to think maybe people like us know some things you don't have access to. We can't let you poke around in places you don't belong. You're screwing things up playing hero. People like you give free speech a bad name and spoil it for everybody. Put your head between your knees and kiss your ass goodbye. Sorry to bring you the bad news Einstein.*

## Chapter 7

That night David had the recurring dream again. It was the first time since he got back from the wedding. He had trouble falling asleep after the late walk home. He couldn't stop thinking about the threat. It had to be kids screwing around. He woke up early and tried to put it behind him. The day went by fast as he picked up around the house.

He read five chapters of a new textbook. Publishers send free samples to teachers, hoping for a class assignment to force thirty students to drop a hundred dollars a copy, only to resell them after the semester for less than half that. He liked the new book, but was tempted to photocopy parts of it and just pass it out. He knew it was illegal, but felt strongly that charging kids a hundred bucks for a textbook had to be a sin. He resisted the temptation and heard his mother say, "two wrongs don't make a right."

He read for hours. In the late afternoon he called Nick. He wasn't home so David decided that he must be at Artie's. He didn't want to call and ask for him because there was an unwritten bar rule against it, so he decided to just walk over. It was close and he was hungry for a pizza anyway. He put on his tiny headphones, tuned the radio to NPR and went out the door.

The war news sounded like any other day over the past few years, a roadside bomb, a suicide bomber at a mosque, and a retired general saying everything was just starting to get better. Civilians were still dying from Agent Orange in Vietnam. Fifty

percent of the CIA mission was being outsourced to private contractors. A low key administration official was demanding more money for homeland security. Some spin doctor was bragging that years had passed since we were attacked on nine-eleven, and her partner was saying "See. It's working."

"What a plan"! David yelled at the radio like a homeless man hearing voices. "If they hit us they ask us for more money. If they don't hit us they ask us for more money because it's working"! He thought about Orwell and 1984. He wondered if the author should have kept his ideas to himself. Maybe it backfired, he thought. Regular people didn't get it. The corporations got it and turned it on the people. Orwell put ideas in their heads. The next guy on the radio started talking about the alleged hidden benefits of globalization and David turned it off, but not before the sponsor, a multinational agricultural giant, bragged about selling soybeans to the world. He had the bar in sight anyway.

Somebody fired up a jack hammer in front of Artie's on his way in. The noise was incredible. The guys in the bar made fun of the man's pink Hawaiian shirt. They knew he was a union man and just doing his job, but he was making their teeth rattle. He could see them carrying on in there, but he just kept grinning and putting a hand up to his ear. David found his bar stool. Nick came out of the bathroom, sat down by his beer and ordered one for David.

David smiled. "Thanks. You know in Iowa it's a law that you gotta wear a sleeveless shirt like Chuck's got on there to run a jackhammer." He waved at Chuck.

Nick laughed. "They obviously never saw Bubba wear his. He'd be exempt." Everybody laughed.

Bubba laughed too. "At least it ain't pink."

"Bubba," said Artie. "There ain't a man in here with guts enough to tell you shit. Even if you walked in here wearing a pink Speedo." Everybody laughed.

Nick laughed. "I've seen his Speedo. It's red." They laughed

again.

“Oh no,” cried Artie. “I'm blind. The mental picture. I just imagined Bubba riding a bike in a red Speedo. I think I'm blind for life.” They all laughed again.

Stan Adams walked in and tried to figure out the joke as he sat down. Artie waved. “What's new Stan? How's it hanging man?”

“My boss died. I got laid off, and I'm on unemployment. In other words, I never felt better in my life.” They all laughed and Stan looked at the TV. “Oh God. You got the politicians on too. God damn vultures. I've been arguing with my wife about politics all day. Same old shit. She wants to vote third party, and I tell her it's as good as a vote for the republicans. We lost the last time by less of a margin than the third party vote.”

“The sons a bitches are all corrupt anyway,” Nick insisted.

Stan jumped in. “That's what the dick heads want you to think. They don't want you to vote. A low turnout helps them. They love that shit.”

David smiled. “That's right dude. You win a cigar.” He leaned closer to the bar.

Stan added, “You gotta hold your nose and vote for the lesser of two evils.”

Nick got mad. “No more! I'm tired of being herded into a corral and branded. They take the left for granted. They play to the frigging middle. We never get anybody like us. The democrats are just republican light. Dinos. Democrat in name only. I'm tired of the same old shit. I don't care if we win or not. We need to punish the sons a bitches.”

Artie yelled, “Screw it! Throw all the bums out”! Half the guys cheered and tapped their mugs on the bar.

Stan got frustrated. “See. That shit plays right into their hands. When the republicans are down they play up the...you know, the all politicians are bad thing. It lowers the turnout. When they're in... Then oh my God, they play up the we have the experience thing.”

David agreed. "I heard that." He was dying to take the debate up to the next level. He held up his right hand like a teacher in class. "Actually the lesser of two evils problem is a side effect of not having a parliamentary system." They all laughed.

"Oh no," cried Artie. "Red's on a soapbox. Drinkers of the world unite!"

David laughed. "No no no. A parliament isn't red. England has a parliament. Most democracies have a parliament. We have a sort of winner-take-all democracy. In a parliamentary system, say, if ten percent votes for the third party, the third party gets ten percent of the power. Not here. A third party just splits one side in half, and the other side wins. It's winner-take-all. Third party candidates split their own side. Look how many times it's happened in recent history. It's a trick. The republicans gave money to the green party last time. They don't like the greens, but they wanted to split the democrats and they did. It worked. The reason you can't vote for the greens is that it's winner-take-all."

Nick laughed. "I know, I know. It's just fixed."

David put his hand back up. "The advantage of our system is that it's harder to change the government. The founding fathers sort of built in gridlock on purpose, but you can't have everything. There's a trade off. You have to hold your nose and vote for the lesser of two evils. And you have to vote. If you don't vote, and you're a democrat, you just voted for a republican. Unfortunately, the dinos know that and they work it. We gotta get rid of the dinos."

Stan said, "Right. Now go tell my wife. But I hope your insurance is paid up if you do. When Clinton went for NAFTA and the so called welfare reform, she swore she'd go third party for good." He finished his beer and slapped his mug on the rail.

David nodded. "She thinks the democrats take her for granted."

"No. She thinks I take her for granted. She thinks the democrats are scum sucking pigs who sold us out." Everybody laughed.

Artie beckoned. "Who needs a beer before I start a pizza"? Everybody held up their glass. The man with the jackhammer finished busting up the sidewalk out front, and things calmed down. The angle of the sunlight coming through the dirty windows cut the bar in half and illuminated the lazy smoke. Artie gave the big Doberman a Slim Jim and made a joke about the size of the dog's testicles. The big dog seemed to understand. Artie patted it's head and went in the office to start the pizza. Nick and David guzzled beer and worried about the heckler that had threatened them on the net.

"It don't mean anything," said Nick. "Somebody's idea of a joke is all."

"Yeah but they called me by name." David widened his eyes and got the hundred yard stare.

"It don't mean anything. Your name's on the paper. All they gotta do is Google it. They can find out a lot about you, any papers you published, where you teach, no big deal man."

"I suppose. It just felt like they knew more about me than they could find out by doing something as easy as that. It's creepy man."

"Paranoia is a terrible thing." They laughed.

"Oh no." David made a scary face. "I'm getting radio stations on my teeth."

"Watch out for those black helicopters man." Nick looked up.

"That's Right. It's a conspiracy. The Trilateral Commission wants me dead."

"Could be the Masons." They laughed. "It's kids. Bunch a kids think that shit's funny. That's all it is."

"Yeah, that's right," said David. "Hey, I almost forgot. Guess what I heard on the radio? You ain't gonna believe this shit. They outsourced half the frigging CIA."

"They what"?

"I ain't making this up. They outsourced like half the jobs to private firms. They aren't filling the civil service jobs when

people leave or something, and all the experienced people are gone now. They're going private with the Gestapo. The average regular government guy has been there less than five years now. Republicans will privatize anything dude."

"Are you really talking about the CIA"? He looked skeptical.

"Yeah, the frigging CIA. The corporations don't just tell the CIA what to do now. They ARE the CIA man."

"Private sector spies."

"Scary ain't it? Can you imagine? Suppose a company is competing for some contract and the competition has a contract with the CIA. If they underbid them, they could end up in a secret prison, standing on a box, with a hood over their head and wires hooked up to their nuts." David threw his arms above his head.

Nick choked a little and spit out some beer. "Oh baby. Who the hell is running this railroad anyway?"

"Don't worry man. It can't happen here." David clicked his heels together and stabbed the air with a Nazi salute.

"Like hell it can't," cried Nick. "I heard some jackass on the cable the other day. The dork was worried about a secret plan to put the next election on hold if there's another terrorist attack or some shit."

"I wouldn't put it past these assholes to just pay somebody to do it." David gulped his beer. "Have you ever seen that stuff about nine-eleven being a set up"?

"Oh man! I don't even want to go there. There's nothing to gain by going there. If it IS true then we're already fucked anyway. If they can do that and get away with it... Then this country is already over man. I'm going to Canada. I'll ride a frigging moose."

"Save me a seat. I'll go with you."

"There you go."

"We'll grow pot. We'll freeze our ass off, but we'll have universal health care. We'll need it for frostbite." They laughed.

The smell of hot bread and tomato spices filled the bar. Big

Bubba rolled a joint and fired it up. The phone rang unanswered for a few minutes before the caller gave up. Nick yelled out, "Dave's not here man." Everybody laughed. He turned to David. "Hey there Red. What else is going on out there in the world. What's in the news at your house?"

David smiled. "Well, It seems people in Vietnam are still screwed up from Agent Orange. They want compensation and our government is still trying to say there's no medical link."

"No shit." He shook his head. "It's a coincidence huh"? They laughed. "Kind of like smoking and cancer was a coincidence."

"What I'd like to know is how we can import food from there after the army sprayed that shit all over the place. Even if you're for globalization, do you really want to eat that shit? I'll bet Bush don't eat it."

"Not me chief. I'll pass." Nick signaled for a beer.

"No you can't. You can't pass. You eat the stuff now because it's not labeled. I think seafood is labeled or something, but I don't think they have to label most of the other imported stuff. You never know where it's from or what they used for fertilizer dude."

"Holy toxic waste Batman. That's it for me and fast food. No telling what's in that stuff." He laughed and made a sick face.

"You mean you don't trust the FDA to protect you. The republicans probably cut their budget a little. They'll buy cheap food from anybody dude. And what happened to the old tough on communism thing. The commies were an evil empire until they agreed to work for nothing."

"That's right."

"The democrats aren't any better. NAFTA happened under Clinton. Now I hear that his wife sat on the board at Walmart. Big union busters. Frigging Walmart dude." He swallowed hard.

Nick shook his head. "They're all crooks. The democrats are republican light. Demoblicans. Screw 'em all."

"See! That's what they want you to do, NOT vote. If you don't hold your nose and vote for the lesser of two evils, it's like a vote

for the republicans. Conservatives turn out to the last man. Low turnout means they win.”

“It's working.” He put a finger gun to his head.

“Or... They throw some big bucks to an anonymous bag man who gives it to a real progressive. He runs like a champ, splits the left, and the republicans win that way.” David stood up and waved for a beer. Artie was busy cutting pizza.

Nick felt his buzz. “Or they just steal the election with rigged voting machines.”

“There it is again. Why vote right? Maybe that's why they stole it. To get you to give up.”

“They stole that fucker man! The presidential election!” Nick slapped the bar. “Nobody did shit. They got away with it!”

“Don't give up. They hope you wont vote. Although, even I sometimes wonder if we should allow the republicans to leave. They know they can't win every time, but they seem to be able to time the losses. They get in, run up debt, max out the credit card. And when they finally do lose they just hand the bill to the democrats. Then, next election after that, they run against the tax and spend democrats who just raised taxes to pay off the republican's bill. It works, they win, and then we go around all over again.”

“That's right.”

Did you hear about the market? It fell big time again today?”

“I have now. You on a roll.” They laughed.

“I AM on a roll. It fell like four hundred points before it recovered. It closed down about three hundred.” David pantomimed a crashing airplane with his hand, finished his beer and motioned for another.

“Shit.” Nick laughed. “What happened this time? Did unemployment go down? The market hates a tight labor market.”

“No. The housing bubble thing. I could see it coming way back. All these baby boomers had all that money in the stock market. Then the tech bubble popped and they pulled out and

started flipping houses. These people have no defined benefit pensions. They literally have to save enough money to NOT work for the rest of their lives before they can retire. They'll never have security. They have to invest in something, and everywhere they go makes a bubble. They went from stocks to real estate. It was like everybody on the Titanic running to one side of the ship and then the other."

"You got that right dude." He laughed.

"See. When the economy tanked the government propped it up with consumer spending. And where did the consumers get the money to spend, they borrowed it. And then when the credit cards got maxed out the boomers saw a million commercials about how to take out a home equity loan to pay off the credit cards. Talk about borrowing from Peter to pay Paul."

"I heard that." He shook his head.

"And then... When that started to dry up they just lowered the standards on who could borrow. They could do all this because the banks got deregulated. They had the interest rates low to suck people in. Variable teaser rates or some shit. They even had loans where you don't pay any principle, just interest. That's not BUYING a house man. That's called renting. So now they're pulling the rug out from under the suckers to get their homes. They raise the interest rates back up and get the homes in firestorm of foreclosures. The distribution of wealth is terrible now. The top ten percent have like fifty percent of the wealth, and they still want to take everybody's frigging house. Just like the dust bowl. Welcome to capitalism. Shelter is a frigging necessity and should be protected from predatory capitalism. This has happened before."

"Amen brother. But you're preaching to the choir." Here he goes, he thought.

David felt the alcohol making him angry. "I like the Amish. The Amish don't charge their kids ten times more for a house than it originally cost to build it. Bankers know their shit is

unsustainable in the long run. Even the Bible talks about having a periodic jubilee. Every so many years...you know. All the debts are off. If you don't do that then eventually one guy will own everything. They knew that in the ancient world.”

“Yes Lord.” Nick forced a smile. “You're on a roll alright.”

David took a long swallow and wiped his face with the back of his arm. “When I was a kid I used to walk past people's homes and think about how somebody built it for five grand and paid it off. Then somebody else bought it and paid every month for thirty years to pay off the forty grand it cost them. Then they sold it and the next guy paid four hundred grand for the same damn house. Now the worst part is that people like it that way. They think it's an investment. They know it's out of control, but they think they can get in on the ground floor and the next guy coming in will make them rich. Dude, that's a pyramid scheme.”

“Shit yes. Well no. Actually...technically... Isn't that a bubble thing.” He looked for an excuse to change the subject. “How about we do some shots”?

David put one foot on the rail. “Now I used to say to myself. I call myself self. Why don't these people realize that if they'd just cooperate with each other instead of competing with each other... Then we'd all be enjoying our paid off homes that we got for four grand.”

Nick laughed. “Oh yeah. I get it. Shelter is a necessity and nobody should be allowed to make a profit on it.”

“Right. Make a profit on something else. If it costs four grand to build it, then freeze the price at four grand forever. We'd all be better off. That's what I used to think when I was a kid. My dad laughed at me and told me all kinds of reasons why it wouldn't work but none of them ever really satisfied me. I kept after it. Finally he just said that this is a capitalist country and that what I was talking about was socialism.”

“And you became a socialist.”

“Yeah, for about six months.” He laughed.

“What happened dude? What changed your mind?”

“I was in this class. I worked my ass off on a class project. I knew I had an A. The teacher decided that we'd all work in groups. I got put in a group with a bunch of losers. We would all get the same grade. Those creeps could have screwed up my grade point average and that wasn't fair. We all got an A, but I had to do all the work. They didn't care what grade we got.”

“Oh man.” He's wound too tight, thought Nick.

“So look. When I interview for a job and they ask me if I'm a team player... Guess what I say. I say it depends on the team.” They laughed like it hurt.

Nick coughed. “Dude! You're wound too tight. You know that?”

“I just talk a lot when I'm drunk.” He finished his beer.

“Yeah. With me it's when I'm stoned.” They laughed. “I get toked up and I can talk all night. I can't shut up.”

The jukebox got louder and the regulars started to trickle in. David worried some more about the heckler on the net. He wasn't used to being the target of hate speech. He didn't think it was kids or somebody's idea of humor. He thought about Europe. His views wouldn't be so radical there. He imagined living in Paris like a poet in exile, and wondered if Dori would go with him. He thought about Jim Morrison's grave. Somebody once told him that French was easy to learn. He realized that he wanted to know more about economics in France. They had to be more progressive. He made a mental note and decided to check it out. David saw Nick paying for a half dozen shots and thought, Oh shit...here we go again.

## Chapter 8

After closing the bar David and Nick decided to check the blog before turning in. They staggered through the alleys singing the first verse of *Free Bird* over and over, never getting the words quite right. Nick sat down on a curb to tie his shoe. He had trouble focusing his eyes and started complaining about it.

David said, "Getting old good buddy?"

"I ain't old, I'm just retired." He laughed.

"You get your pension every month huh"? He was jealous.

"Oh yeah. I paid my dues. Now I'm free. No more bosses. No more paperwork. No more eating shit."

"Did you get a receipt"?

"What"?

"A receipt. Did you keep all the check stubs where they took out money for your pension stuff?" His speech was slurred.

"No dude. Why?" He laughed.

"What would you do if one month the check didn't show up? You call the state and they've never heard of you? Nick who? You say you worked where?"

"Fat chance of that, but that IS scary." He blinked hard to focus his eyes and stood up. They pushed on.

"Today dude. I heard it just happened in Japan. A whole bunch a people won't get their pensions because the friggig government LOST the records."

"No way."

“Way. They're asking for receipts dude.” He laughed.

“There's gonna be a damn big riot. There better be.” He suddenly felt sober.

“It could never happen here right”? David kicked a tennis ball back in somebody's yard.

“Son of a bitch. I'm gonna get a copy of my pension records man. That shit ain't funny.”

“Funny as a heart attack,” he joked. “Come on dude. You can do that tomorrow.”

Nick felt a little sick. “Imagine. You work your whole damn life they don't know you. Shit. There would be a riot if it happened here. And I'd start it too.”

“I know I know. Come on.” He pulled on his buddy's arm. Nick acted like he wanted to fight somebody right there. They went on but he didn't feel like singing anymore. David worried that there would be a lot of hate mail on the net. Nick couldn't believe that he trusted the state that much. The thought of them losing his stuff never once crossed his mind. They walked out of the alley in front of Nick's place just as a yellow cab pulled away.

“My porch light is burned out,” said Nick.

“What”?

“The porch light. I left it on. It burned out already. I bought those new curly bulbs that are supposed to last five years. I got the damn thing not even six months ago.”

They staggered up the stairs and onto the dark porch. Nick fished for his keys.

David whispered, “I think the door's open.”

“Shit,” whispered Nick. He pushed it a little. It opened without the key and he peeked inside.

David grabbed him, pulled him back onto the stairs and begged, “are you out of your mind? Just call the cops man.” Nick went right back up and went inside. The place was a mess.

“See,” said David. “Call the cops. They could still be in here.”

Nick reached into his pocket, took out his little pistol, pulled

the slide back and yelled, "Give it up! Police!"

David got mad. "You can't say that you idiot."

Nick frowned. "What are they gonna do, sue me? Come out or I'll shoot, ass hole. This is my mother's apartment." He waited a few seconds and whispered, "I think they're gone Red." He picked up a beer bottle with his other hand and they started searching rooms. The place was empty but it was all torn up. Chairs were upside down. Drawers were pulled out, and the contents were on the floor. There were holes in the dry wall. Couch cushions were ripped open with the stuffing pulled out. A giant purple bong was smashed on the kitchen floor. A big bag of pot was dumped out across the kitchen table and covered with ketchup. The computer was still working. A message scrolled slowly across the computer screen. NATIONALIZE THIS ASS HOLE.

Nick saw it first. "Gimme the phone. I'm calling the cops right now."

"Clean up the pot first. Is anything missing?"

"I don't know." He put a dresser drawer on the bed and fished through the clothes that were still inside. He checked the pocket of a greasy pair of jeans and found a wad of cash. "Alright!" he screamed. "They didn't find the money."

"Your guitar is still here but where's the amp?" asked David.

Nick looked relieved. "Man that guitar is worth way over two grand. TV, stereo, DVD player. They didn't take anything if they left that stuff. What the hell is going on here dude?"

"Are you sure they didn't take something?"

"My art, the CDs, my collector posters. I don't think they took anything. Look. My papers, my degrees, all here. Let me check the jewelry." He opened his top dresser drawer. "I think it's all here. There's an ounce of pot sitting out on the table and they leave it. They just dump it out. This ain't no kids man. Call the cops."

The Berwyn police were there in minutes. The whole street got

lit up with red sweeping lights. One light was from a patrol car, and the other came from the back window of a white unmarked Ford. The cops only spent a minute talking to Nick before waking up the neighbors. Both officers were back in less than half an hour. Nick got worried about the gun in his pocket, even though he was home, so he slid it under the couch. David could still smell pot but his sensitive nose could smell anything a mile away. Nick started drinking hard. He was so drunk by the time the cops got back that he could barely stand. He spilled a little straight whiskey with every sip. The guys were propped up on the porch steps when the cops opened their books and took down the information. One kept talking to a radio clipped to his shirt. The other cop was in plain clothes and did most of the talking. He stared at Nick. "The neighbors were all asleep and didn't hear anything. Did you say you saw a cab leaving"?

Nick said, "I'm not sure where it came from. It might have been parked or it could have been just passing by. It was speeding up some."

"You need to make an inventory of what's missing."

"I'm not sure anything is missing," said Nick. "I need to look some more, but I had valuables out and they're still here."

"You sure"?

"I'll go over everything tomorrow, but I don't think they took anything. They left a message on the computer man."

"What"? The cop shook his pen.

"They left us a scrolling message. Nationalize this...ass hole."

"What"? He scratched his pen around the paper to get the ink going.

"See for yourself." He pointed at the door.

The officer went in and took a picture of the screen with a small digital camera before coming back out. He checked the image. "I got it. You didn't put that up there"?

"No way," said Nick. "See, we're bloggers. We published a paper that called for the government to take over the oil

companies and shit. And whoever did this knows that.” He threw back his drink and slopped some on his shirt.

The officer smiled. “What? You think this is some kind of computer harassment?”

“I think so,” said David.

“Have you been getting hate mail or something?”

“Yeah, but we thought it was kids until now,” said Nick.

“How would they know where you live?”

“I have no idea,” said Nick.

“Do any of your friends know you guys do this blog thing?”

“I suppose, but none of our friends would do this,” said Nick.

“Man oh man. This is something bigger than that. It's gotta be.”

“What do you mean?” The cop looked like he didn't believe it and was starting to suspect substance induced paranoia.”

Nick looked away. “I don't know man.”

“You think the government is after you or something?”

“No. I didn't say that.”

David stepped in. “Officer, it could be a prank I guess. It had to be somebody at the bar who heard us talking about it or some shit.”

Nick said, “No way. None of those guys would ever do a thing like this. He started to go inside for a refill, stubbed his toe on the stoop and snapped, “No way!” He sat down on the porch rail and held on to the support beam.

“I think we'll take a few more pictures for the report and be on our way,” said the officer with the paperwork. The other officer said something to his radio as they went back in. They looked around for a few minutes and came right back out. The lead officer said, “Come to the station tomorrow and we'll give you a form for your insurance. Otherwise there's nothing else we can do right now. OK”?

David said, “OK. We understand. Thank you officers.” They got in the car, turned off the red lights and pulled away slowly. The lights next door were still on. David pulled out a joint and lit

it up right there on the porch. "I don't care who sees me," he said.

"Shit," cried Nick. "That was no frigging prank. We pissed off somebody big time. I need to move."

"Will you please get a grip. There ain't no black helicopters up there watching us man." He passed the joint.

Nick took it and looked over his shoulder at the neighbor's house. "Who would do this"? He put his sweaty glass on the porch rail and pulled hard on the little stick.

"Nobody I know would do that," said David.

"It had to be somebody from Artie's." He blew the ash off the joint and passed it back.

"Well I don't know who. You got any enemies in there I don't know about"?

Nick said, "No way Jose. What about you? You doing somebody's wife"?

"No way man. I ain't even got a wife. You can call home and ask my garage." They laughed.

Nick said, "Let's check the blog."

"I don't think so. What are we looking for anyway? If there's something on there then what"? David threw the last of the roach over the rail.

"I'm staying at your place until I move."

"Who would gain something by doing this? If they're just trying to scare me..."

"We pissed off big oil. They got juice man. What do you think it would take for them to jack us up anyway? They pick up the phone and get some two bit ass hole to do it for a hundred bucks and a rock." He spit.

"We ain't that important. Are they gonna do this every time anybody writes something they don't like? Bull shit. We ain't the only people raising a bitch."

"You're a teacher at the big college. They can't write you off as a nut. And besides that, they got the bucks to hassle each and every guy they want. I'm moving man. That's it. I'm going to

Florida.” He pointed south.

“Oh come on. We gotta look at the computer. Let's look at it so we can get some sleep.”

They went in and stepped over the stuff on the living room floor to get to the computer desk. Nick sat down and logged on. David poured a drink, set it on the sink in the kitchen and went off to the bathroom. He was washing up when Nick yelled. “Get in here man! Look at this shit”!

David ran out zipping his fly, knocked over garbage pail and looked at the screen. “There's a comment,” cried Nick. “Look. In this format they can put it anywhere they want in the chain of responses. It's right up front. They want to make sure we see it.” He read it aloud. *I hope you got the message tonight. This is just a warning. You are in way over your head. Take down the paper and we will leave you alone. If not, this is just the beginning, and it's your responsibility.*

“Oh shit,” said David. He took a deep swallow of whiskey and water.

“I'm moving out of here. I'm staying at your house tonight.”

“Like they don't know where that is too. I mean if they are who you think they are, which they aren't. Shit, you got me paranoid now.”

“Can I stay at your house or not”?

“Sure you can.” He pointed at the monitor. “Is there any way to have that traced”?

“I don't know.” Nick shook his head and felt a rush of anger.

“Can we just show it to the cops”?

“How about I just print it out”? He looked at the screen again. “Shit! It's gone dude. Son of a bitch. Where is it”? He scrolled up and down but he couldn't find it anymore.

“Bull shit.”

“Oh man. They JUST took it off.” He beat himself up for not printing it out right away.

“Can they do that”?

“Shit yes. You can take anything you write back off anytime you want. You just pull it up, open the edit screen and then delete the whole thing.” He took a big swallow from his glass.

“How do they know we've even seen it”?

“Lots of ways. They could have been watching to see if you were on the blog. They list who's logged on in real time. They saw us get on so they gave us a minute to read it and then took it back down. Easy dude.”

David burped and said, “Look. You're giving whoever is doing this shit a big laugh. It's a joke. They just want us to freak out and it's working. There ain't nobody from an oil company out there in a black helicopter watching us. The only thing they're doing tonight at the oil company is counting our money. This is somebody from Artie's who's real high, and real stupid, and thinks they're real funny and they're not. Whatever you do, when you find out who it is, do not, I repeat, do not, punch their lights out. This is just a real bad joke. OK”?

Nick smiled. “Can we go now? I need to at least try and sleep tonight.”

“Yeah, let's go.” He thought about Dori.

“I'm taking my Strat.” He thought about how lucky he was that the burglars didn't take his guitar. It was a vintage 1967 Fender Stratocaster.

“Good idea. You can tuck it in.” He laughed.

“Very funny dude.”

Officers Murphy and Stone were close to getting off duty from their nightly street watch in front of Artie's. Stone couldn't feel his right butt cheek. Murphy's arm hurt and he was out of pain killers. The bar was closed but the light in the upstairs apartment was still on. Murphy said, “Looks like Carla's working overtime on the old coke head. Ride 'em cowgirl.”

“I hope she don't kill the old fucker before we get the coke,” said Stone. He choked and grabbed his heart like Red Foxx on *Sanford and Son*. They laughed.

Murphy pointed at the window. “That's how I want to go, with a log so big they can't get the lid shut.”

“I guess the meth keeps her up.”

“Yeah, but what keeps him up”? They laughed. Murphy grabbed his injured arm and winced in pain.

Stone said, “You gonna make it.”

“It hurts. The pills don't work like they did at first. I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch. As soon as this is over, I'm gonna make him pay.”

“Go around it. Think about the money.”

“Yeah, that's right. And think about the stupid look on the chief's face when I tell him to take his job and shove it up where the sun don't shine. I'm gonna tell him just what I think about his administration, the God damn promotion, and his big fat black ass. Ten years I ate shit waiting for that promotion. Then they come in and promote all the blacks because when my dad was a cop they didn't get promoted. I shouldn't have to pay for that shit. I was just a kid. They can take their affirmative action shit, and their God damn pension, and stick it up their ass. I'm gonna be on a beach with a hard bellied native broad. I'm gonna send him a postcard from Jamaica.” He laughed and used his good arm to look through the binoculars.

Stone watched a car roll by. “What you wanna see up there, an old man getting a nut”?

“Oh shut up. You're the one that takes all the pictures. The light's out now but I got a good look at her assets. You know she ain't that bad with her clothes off.”

“She's a crack whore.”

“She don't do crack.” He kept looking anyway.

“OK, she's a meth whore. Get her high and she'll suck the chrome off your trailer hitch. What's the difference.”

“Yeah.” Murphy laughed.

“I wish I could go in there and look for the coke while he's busy.”

“You sure it's in there”? Murphy put the binoculars on his lap and looked at Stone.

“I saw it go in there, and it ain't come out yet.” He smiled.

“I hope the guys on the other shift didn't miss anything. They say it's still in there right”?

“Yeah, and then there's the blindfold thing.” He thought about food.

“What blindfold thing”?

“The other day. The other shift saw them. Artie drove the punk around the block for a while. He had him blindfolded. Then they come back, and he takes the guy back in, still blindfolded. Why would he do that. Only one explanation. He showed him the coke. He probably wanted him to think they were somewhere else. Then they come back out. He's still blindfolded. They leave again, and when they get back the blindfold is gone. He showed him the hiding place man. It's right in there and the punk thinks it's somewhere else.”

“Shit yes. But wouldn't he recognize where he was? He's been in there enough.”

“It's probably an underground bunker or something. The fucking place is older than dirt.”

“Shit yes. It IS in there.” Murphy stretched and reclined his seat.

Stone frowned and said, “I'm tired. I hate this shit. Next time we rent the window across the street where we can be comfortable.”

“There better not be a next time. How much time we got left before shift change”?

“About an hour.” He glanced at the dash board clock.

“Let's go get breakfast. We'll be back before the relief gets here.”

“No way.” Stone imagined Murphy doing that a lot in the past. “Is that what you did when you were working for me”?

“Nothing is going to happen. Nobody knows about this but a few cops.”

“You want to risk it for an hour”? He looked angry.

Murphy begged, “My God damned arm hurts.”

“I’ll have ‘em bring you a painkiller when they relieve us. It won’t be long.”

“I just took two. They don’t work. You know I’m gonna kill that son of a bitch.”

“I know.”

Dori showed up unannounced at David’s door early Sunday morning. She knocked five times before he heard it and got the door. She put her hands were on her hips. “Hello ass hole. Remember me”?

“What time is it”? He rubbed his eyes.

“You got a woman in there? I’ll bet she’s going out the back door right now.”

He laughed. “Oh please. Come on in and I’ll make some coffee.”

She nagged him playfully. “Why didn’t you call? I called and called last night.”

“I was at Nicks.”

She walked in the living room and saw Nick passed out on the couch. “Maybe this is worse than a woman,” she said.

“What.” He laughed. “Oh give me a break. Nick’s place got robbed last night.”

“And the dog ate my homework,” she laughed.

“No shit. They trashed the place. They didn’t take anything. They just trashed the place and left a threat on the computer. No kidding.”

“What.” She crossed her arms and leaned on one leg.

He put a finger across his lips and looked at Nick on the couch. “Let him sleep. Let's go out back.” They went through the kitchen, past the dirty dishes, around the garbage bags full of beer cans, and out to the back porch. The old sofa out there was comfortable but ugly with duct tape covering rips in the red plaid upholstery. It smelled a little sour too. The old windows were always open and although the rain never reached the sofa, the humidity did. The screens were old and dirty with little holes here and there from shooting a BB gun straight through them at some cans in the yard. The screens didn't open so there was no other way to shoot from the couch. The whiskey bottle he used for an ash tray was half full of old cigarette butts and tar. David moved it so Dori could put her arm on the table without knocking it over.

She sat down on the couch. “OK slick. What happened?”

“Somebody trashed Nick's place last night. They didn't take anything. I mean he had valuable stuff that was easy to pick up right out in the open. They didn't even take the pot. They just dumped it out on the table and smeared ketchup all over it.”

“Nice touch. Who's pissed at him?” You've got to lose this drunk, she thought.

“Somebody's just playing a joke. They want it to look like somebody's pissed off about my paper. They left me a threat on the computer.”

“Really. What did it say?”

“Nationalize this.” He admired her shape and felt a wave of testosterone run up his spine.

“I read the paper. They won't like it. Do you think... Could it be. Oil companies are powerful David.”

He realized that he was staring at her tight denim shorts and moved his focus away. Eye contact, he thought. “I think one of the guys at Artie's has a weird sense of humor. He wants us to think the CIA is following us, and we're about to be kidnapped by big oil and put in a secret prison in Dumbfuckistan.” He laughed.

“Who did you guys tell about the paper”? She knew he was thinking about sex.

“We didn't tell anybody, but anybody could have seen it. It's all over the net. We've got thousands of hits. And a little hate mail.” He got up slowly, unconsciously adjusted his underwear, stepped inside the kitchen, and started to make coffee. They talked through the door. He took a little green jar of instant coffee off the shelf and peeled back the foil seal. It smelled so rich he could already taste it. He ran some tap water into a large measuring pitcher, poured it in the sink, filled it again, and put it in the microwave.

“Did you call the cops?” she asked.

“Yeah, that's why we were up so late. They thought we were nuts.”

“Oh.” She smiled.

The microwave beeped. He opened it, tried to get the pitcher out, bumped it on the little glass lip and splashed boiling water on his arm. “Shit! Damn it that hurt”!

“You OK”? She got up.

“I'm OK.” He ran cold water on his arm. She came in the kitchen and took out two coffee cups with Chicago Bear logos. She poured the steaming water very carefully, spooned a teaspoon of instant coffee into one, and two teaspoons in the other. She went back to the front room carrying both cups, put them on an end table, sat down on the couch and tucked one knee up to her chin. David came in holding a kitchen towel full of ice on his arm.

“What time did you get to sleep?” she asked. And why wasn't I next to you, she thought.

“Not too long ago. No sleep,” he sighed.

She looked disgusted. “I don't know why I put up with you”? That didn't come out right, she thought. I should have smiled when I said it.

“Hey. I'm sorry. I really am. I should have called.” He reached

for her hand but she pulled it back.

Her anger broke out in the open. She pulled the other knee up to her chin and hugged her beautiful legs. Be strong, she thought. "I never see you anymore David. You don't want to be with me. I don't want you to call. I want you to be WITH me."

"I said I was sorry." He listened to himself talk while undressing her in his mind.

"You think that makes it right. You son of a bitch. My friends are laughing at me. My mom wants me to dump you David"! She teared up.

"Because I'm not Jewish." Bingo, he thought.

"No. Because you're out of control. You think you should save the world. You can't even take care of yourself and you're telling other people how to live. You're a hypocrite." She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands.

"Bull shit. It's because I'm not Jewish. I don't ask you to be Christian do I. Give me a break woman."

"No David. Give ME a break. Sure... At first my mom, not my dad, was against you because she wanted me to marry somebody Jewish. My dad fought for you, and she came around eventually. This isn't about that anymore and you know it."

"OK. OK. Take the knife out. I'm not perfect. I know that."

"WHAT do you know David"? She took his hand and held her breath.

He knew what she meant. "I know." This is not happening, he thought.

"Please David." She locked eyes and wouldn't let him look away."

"Nothing." He wanted to change the subject.

"Bull shit! I know you and you're lying to yourself. You're stronger than that David. Stop lying to me."

"You're overreacting"? He looked angry and jerked his hand back.

"You're no coward. Now tell me what you were going to say.

Just say it David.”

He looked at her flushed with confidence and listened to himself saying, “I know I have to quit drinking.”

She threw her arms around his shoulders and hugged him hard. “I love you David.”

“I love you too.” He fought back the tears but one got loose under his right eye. He was happy but very embarrassed. Then it hit him. Oh my God, he thought. What if I can't?

“I told Mom...she. Never mind.” She got all teared up.

“Cut it out.” He looked for a tissue but handed her a paper towel off of the couch. It was oily so he took it right back. They laughed.

“What did you tell her?”

“Well.” She worried about the little bit of makeup she had on.

“What did you tell your mother.” I can quit right now, he thought. People do it all the time.

“I told her you were drinking because of your mom, and she understood.”

“Oh great.” He thought about withdrawal symptoms. What if I get the shakes right in the middle of a class, he thought.

“She understood David.”

“So now I'm the poor kid crying over his dead mother. Shit Dori.”

Nick suddenly appeared. “Good morning. Hope I'm not intruding. I'm gonna head home and start picking up the mess.” He smiled at Dori. “Did he tell you?”

David answered for her. “She knows all about it.”

“Thanks for letting me crash out,” said Nick. He knew that Dori was angry with him and wanted to escape.

“No problem man. I'll call you later. I need to know how to log on to the blog from the office computer.”

“OK, I'm out of here dude. Later.” He left through the front door.

“Later Nick. ” They were alone. He looked at her and thought

about sex. "Let's go inside."

"No. Let's walk." She dried her tears with her shirt.

She knew what he was thinking about, and he felt transparent. He kissed her hand. "OK. Let me lock the doors."

It started to sprinkle so they took an umbrella with them as they walked north on Gunderson Avenue toward Oak Park. The light misty rain felt refreshing. The street smelled like earthworms and ozone. David said, "We need the rain. It's good for the tomatoes. Back home I used to grow some really big Beefsteak strains, but then I heard not to plant those."

"Why not"? She worried about her shoes getting messy.

"The really big ones are bred for size. The old fashioned ones, about the size of a baseball, they have more nutrients and vitamins." He wanted to talk about booze.

"Oh." She waited for him to open up.

"You're not the only one that worries about my drinking you know. I've been planning to quit for a while now. Sometimes I can't remember the night before. I feel like shit during the day. I'm an athlete and I can't run any more. It's just a matter of time...you know. When to go for it."

"Go for it now." Easy girl, she thought.

"It's more complicated than that." He worried about failing.

"What do you mean"?

The sidewalk was all broken up. It looked dangerous so they moved into the street. He turned around and walked backwards so he could face her as he talked. "I tried to stop twice, once in Iowa, once after I got here. Both times I got sick, the shakes." He wiggled his hands. "I'll have to taper off first."

"So taper off." Here we go with the excuses, she thought.

"I'll have to when I go for it." Don't push me, he thought.

"Why don't you just go to rehab"?

"Rehab is a scam. I never knew anybody who went to rehab that didn't go back to drinking. It costs like thirty thousand dollars and they drink again. If I wasted thirty thousand dollars, I couldn't

live with myself.”

“OK.” Just let him talk, she thought.

They cleared the broken up concrete and moved back up on the sidewalk. David opened the umbrella a little and played with the lock. “I went to a session once years ago. There was this little old lady filling out a form on me. She asked me a lot of stupid questions. I mean really stupid. She probably never had a drink in her life. So she looks down her nose at me. She don't know me. Like I'm some kind of a bum and says, 'How much do you drink?' I said, I don't know. So she says, 'do you drink one drink a day'...yes. 'Do you drink two drinks a day?'...yes. 'Do you drink three drinks a day?' I mean I frigging lost it. I said lady, I spill that much.”

“Oh no David...” She laughed.

“I left and never went back.” He wasn't laughing.

“What did you do when you were in college?”

“Except for race parties, I never drank much in college. I did in high school. Oh boy did I drink in high school. But not in college. I got straight As. You can't do that hungover. I'll tell you a secret too. Grades come from hard work not innate ability.” He shook his head.

“What changed after you graduated?” Now I get it, she thought.

“It wasn't hard anymore. It was easy. I was bored. I need a new challenge. My firewall economy idea is big. It's worth doing. I think I can quit now.”

“I still think you should go to rehab.”

“Rehab is old fashioned. It's still based on the twelve step bull shit. Just pile on the guilt. You know. Like it's a character disorder. It doesn't work. Neurology has progressed way beyond that. Addiction is a brain disease and not a character disorder.”

“You lost me there.” She listened.

“People still think brain problems, physical, biological brain problems, are psychological problems. Before that, in the not so distant past, people thought epileptics were possessed by evil

spirits. Science gets better and better. We understand a lot more about the brain now. There's a school of thought that believes that addiction happens easily to some people because of something chemically different in their brains. They aren't able to experience pleasure properly. I think they call it endorphin theory. Drugs and alcohol can jump start feelings of pleasure temporarily, but in the long run the brain adapts to it creating dependency and tolerance. You end up chasing your tail. I think that's me."

"Can't you just cut back. So you can function better"?

"I don't think so. The changes the brain does to adapt to the drugs are permanent. If you quit for a long time and then start again then you just pick right up where you left off."

"Oh my." Just keep listening, she thought. Don't try and fix it.

"You can't turn a pickle back into a cucumber." He laughed.

"I guess not. So the twelve step thing was the old treatment. What's the new treatment"?

"Good question. It probably has something to do with closing the bar." He laughed. "There's a drug they have now. Naltrexone. It blocks the craving for some drugs and alcohol. Heroin. Morphine. Alcohol. I think it's about the opiate receptors."

"Excuse me"? He's trying to baffle me with bull shit, she thought.

"Opiate receptors. The places in your brain... When stimulated they act like a natural narcotic or something. Like a pleasure center or something. Did you ever hear about the monkey experiments? They hooked up little electrical wires to the monkey's brains. They hooked them up right where the cocaine puts a buzz and then hooked up an electrical circuit switch to a lever in the cage. All the monkeys had to do to get a buzz was push the lever. The monkeys did nothing but hold the lever down. They didn't even eat. They died."

"Ouch."

"Talk about mind control." The rain stopped. He leaned on the

umbrella and used it for a walking stick.

Dori tried the numbers approach. “You say rehab is a waste of money. How much money do you drink in a month?”

He laughed. “I had to date the daughter of an economist.” God she's smart, he thought.

She smiled and stared him down. “Don't tell me you don't count. You count. How much David?”

“In a month. About half a house payment.”

“Gotcha.” Easy Girl, she thought.

He blushed a little. “You could buy half a small bungalow with it.”

“So you're drinking our house?”

“Half of it I guess. My half. I'm not ready.” Don't commit too fast, he thought.

She went for it. “Yes you are.”

“No. I said I'm not ready.” He felt his anger rising and they stopped walking.

“Why David? Why not?” She pushed her hair out of eyes.

“Listen to me. I will soon. Just not right now. Don't push. OK?” Drop it, he thought. Change the subject.

“No David? You know you can't lie to me. Why not right now?” She held her breath.

“Because.” His shoulders dropped.

“Because why David?”

“Because I'm afraid. OK. I'm afraid. Is that what you wanted to hear? Satisfied now?”

“Afraid of what?” She knew.

“Afraid I'll fail. This is serious business. I tried it twice and failed. If I fail again I might give up. If I give up I could die.” He was embarrassed and angry at the same time. Anger was easier. “And who are you to tell me what to do anyway? I did fine without you and I'll do fine no matter what you do.”

She felt shocked and hurt. “You can't talk to me like that mister. You know what you can do with your theories. Why don't you just

act like a man and quit making excuses”?

“Right for the nuts”! He made a war face. “Why don't you kiss my ass”!

“I'm tired of making excuses for you David! Don't you ever talk to me like that”!

“I don't NEED you to make excuses for me lady.” I'm fucked, he thought. Might as well get my money's worth.

“The hell you don't. If it weren't for me you'd be the laughing stock of my whole family. You better pull your head out of your ass mister”!

“Or what”?

“Or we're done. You got that”? I don't deserve this, she thought.

He smashed the umbrella against a street sign. “Go ahead and go! I don't let anybody talk to me like that either! Anybody”!

“I'll just do that.” She didn't want to.

“Go ahead go”! He didn't want her to either, but the pride had them both pinned.

“Fine! Good bye!” She ran back crying.

David headed for the bar while cursing and kicking stones in the street. He didn't feel at all like crying. The adrenalin made him queasy. He felt terrible but told himself over and over that the pain came from anger and not from grief. She'll get over it, he thought. She want's to believe me. They always do.

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David didn't have much fun at the bar and didn't stay long. He was tired and hurt. Nick was there. He told David that people were on the blog screaming about the break in and spinning conspiracy theories. Nick had everybody convinced that big oil was leaning on David. Nobody believed that the timing was just a coincidence. The fact that the paper was banned when David went public and then the break in happened was more than enough for them. An on line petition was circulating. Emails were getting sent to congressmen demanding an investigation. It was a first

amendment issue and Nick wanted a cyber tsunami. David was simply emotionally overloaded and embarrassed. He knew that the school didn't really ban the paper. He pulled it. He thought about how silly he would look if the whole thing turned out to be a prank. He went to sleep worried about hate mail going to the college. One letter would be enough. One email and the dean would want an explanation. His name was on the paper, and he was defending it. He couldn't say he wasn't involved.

Sleep proved to be elusive. He woke several times in the night before surrendering to the early morning darkness and getting up for good. It was so quiet. He made coffee and tried to watch an old black and white movie on the back porch TV. It was about some Nazi spies in England during the war. He liked the setting but the plot was so silly that he switched to the radio. He scanned the AM dial and stumbled over phony preachers and all night trucker music before landing on the BBC.

He liked hearing a world opinion that would at least partially bypass the American spin machine. The little AM/FM radio didn't have a digital tuner, but the weak signal contributed to the cozy atmosphere on the porch. He had everything he needed to be comfortable, and it was cheap if not free. The two new double A batteries in the five dollar radio were the extent of his expense. The porch was a luxury that anyone could afford. The peeling paint didn't bother anybody. The green tiles on the floor were scraps from at least three variations of a similar but not identical pattern. The random placement of the tiles looked almost intentional and were certainly low maintenance.

The coffee tasted so good that he tried to drink it too fast. It was real coffee this time. He sat on the fluffy beat up couch listening to the world news with his feet up on an overturned laundry basket. The windows at night reminded him of a spacecraft flying through the universe at warp speed. The front window looked like a lattice work of clear glass panes like the nose of a World War Two bomber, but it had stars passing by

instead of flak. The little news stories were like passing asteroids as the porch traveled through history. He was flying through time in the front seat on the observation deck of the star-ship earth.

The radio correspondent talked about the war. It could have been any other day in the past half decade. Some troops got killed by a roadside bomb, and a general said the army was just starting to win. Some polls in the US confirmed that the majority of respondents wanted the war to end as soon as possible. The president called it surrender. A major car maker who recently dumped its pension obligations in bankruptcy court was suddenly making a lot of money. Water was being privatized in South America.

The news made him angry, and being addicted to the adrenalin of altruistic punishment, he enjoyed it. It felt good to know he was right. He was proud of himself. Why piss away a perfectly good life without trying to kick some ass against the bad guys. Never sell out. He thought about the unfortunate people who have to tell lies in order to protect a job and how they rationalize it. He believed that there were things in life that were more important than money, and that there were some things that were even more important than survival.

His father used to say that the reason a soldier fights instead of running away under fire is that he is instinctively driven to defend his buddies. David wondered why, if the brotherhood instinct was that strong, that it didn't generalize to politics. People get conditioned to panic too fast and that makes them easy to control. He reasoned that if the people had a real sense of security, if they knew they were going to be OK without compromising core principles, it would be impossible to oppress them. If people didn't fear losing food and shelter then they could tell the boss off when he wanted too much, and the boss would really know when his jokes were funny.

He stared into the darkness with the radio chattering in the background. He was in the zone. Courage is its own reward, he

thought. If you give in to pressure and survive, then you think you survived because you gave in, when in reality you would have survived anyway. Only if you refuse to give in, and then survive, will you see the bluff for what it was. Both strategies are also self fulfilling prophecies, so there's no advantage in backing down from a moral challenge. Whatever you do the first time you'll do every time. He knew what he had to do and was confident that he could, and would, do it without hesitation.

He listened all the way through the breaking news at five before checking in with Nick. His buddy picked up sounding angry. "Yeah what. Hello."

David laughed. "You up man"?

"I am now." He coughed.

"Should I call back dude"?

He looked for his slippers. "No. I need to check the petition. There were lots of hits on there before I went to bed."

"Cool. Were they good or bad"? He wasn't sure if he wanted to know.

"I'll bet a thousand people sent something to congress," he laughed. David imagined the dean getting livid. "I'll bet the college will think twice before censoring any body's stuff now," said Nick. "The first amendment lives."

David collapsed on his seat. "What's going on now Nick? What the hell is going on? You're giving me a heart attack."

"They're writing the college in droves. At least they say they are. They're telling the ass holes to get their pension funds divested from big oil."

"I didn't authorize that! This is not good." David let his hand fall on the table and shook his head.

"What do you mean authorize? They're free to do and say whatever they want. We have no control over them. It's a free country man." He laughed.

"The dean wont see it that way Nick. I'm gonna get fired. I think I'm toast." He thought about an eye opener.

“You gonna bail on us man? Don't you frigging...”

“No way! I placed the order. I'm gonna take delivery. Besides, I can imagine the look on his face when he hears about it man.” He laughed. “I don't have to lie. I never told anybody to write anybody. What do they call that shit? Plausible deny-ability.”

“Uh...not exactly man. I mean...”

“What did you say”? David swallowed hard.

“I sort of told them that you wanted them to write anybody and everybody they could. I figured...”

“Shit! Maybe from now on you could inform me if I say something. OK”? He put his hand on his forehead.

“Sure man. No problem. Oh my God... Shit dude.”

“What now? You are killing me man.”

“Oh shit. Man look at that,” he laughed.

“I can't see it! What”?

“It just loaded. There's a lot of hits on here. A lot of emails to congress. It's so easy to make just a few clicks. Not like the old days when you had to lick a stamp. Sweet Jesus. I can see the totals in real time with this new software. When a reader sends one it automatically adds it to the totals. It's over seven hundred just in Illinois alone man.”

“I can dig it.” He laughed.

“I'll show you when you come by. I'm behind on my own stuff though because I've been working on yours. I write a daily column and this is today. I need a new subject real fast. What's in the news”?

“I just listened to the news. Let's see.”

“I'm pulling up the Trib. This is tabloid shit. Alien chicken wins lottery.”

“It's been done.” David thought for a minute and said, “Credit card companies have a new card that MAKES you save.”

“I don't get it. Sounds like more chicken. Save what”?

David listened to himself talking and thought about Dori. “One percent of every purchase goes into a savings account.”

“So what? That is supposed to make you save”? He laughed. “It's your money dude.”

“Think about it,” said David. “Where do you think the one percent comes from? You borrow it. You borrow it at a high interest rate and invest it at a lower rate. A lot lower. It's a tax on the mathematically illiterate.” He laughed.

“Guess so.” The line buzzed. “Hey dude. I got another call. Hang on a minute.”

“No problem.” He got up. David used the time to go for a coffee refill. He went to the kitchen and fixated on the half empty whiskey bottle on the kitchen table. Temptation probed his weaknesses. He cursed himself for not pouring it down the sink. I can beat you, he thought. He grabbed it by the throat. I can pick you up. I have free will. I can pick you up and kill you with one hand. *Crash!* He whacked it over the counter top and snapped the neck off. Little glass chips exploded in every direction. The clear brown contents bled out into the sink. He wondered if any glass got in his coffee, so he put the cup in the sink and went back to the phone. Nick was hailing him. “You back yet? What else is going on”?

“What? Oh yeah, the news.” He sat down and inspected himself for cuts. “I know. I heard that they're trying to pass a law in New York City. If you film on the street you need a permit and a million dollars insurance.”

“What? You mean home movies too”?

“No shit. If you have a video camera going for more than ten minutes you need a city permit, especially if you use a tripod. A tripod makes you professional or some shit.” He laughed.

“This applies to who”?

“Anybody. I ain't making this shit up dude.” They laughed.

“So if you're on vacation and you shoot film of your kids on the street then you could get arrested? Gimme a break.” He laughed.

“Uh huh.” David put his foot up on a chair.

“So if you film the cops beating the living crap out of Rodney

King... If you're filming and it takes less than ten minutes it's OK. But if they beat him like for a half hour then you could get arrested.”

“10-4,” he laughed.

“That's the craziest thing I ever heard”? He laughed like Jerry Lewis. “I like it. I can use it in my column. It's got legs man.”

David joked, “No shit. Think about it. The republicans say that bribing a frigging politician is protected free speech but filming Rodney King isn't.” They laughed.

“Dude! That's it. That's it dude. That's my column for today. We should ask everybody to go out on the street and make a film of the cops arresting everybody making a film.” He laughed and coughed. “Shit.”

“That's right. A tripod makes it worse. Hey, what's the legal definition of a tripod anyway? If you use an umbrella to steady the camera, is that a tripod? What if you lean on your wife's shoulder? That's no tripod officer. That's my wife.” They laughed.

“No shit. Officer Obie, I can not tell a lie. I put that wife under that camera.” They laughed even harder.

David joked, “Ten minutes. Who's gonna time everybody anyway? Hey your honor man. It was only nine minutes if it was an hour.”

“Dude! They'll have to film the film makers. The cops will have a hand held recorder like a radar gun.” he laughed. “Cops hiding in the bushes with cameras.”

“Think of the potential market in concealed cameras dude. Young man, what's that bulge in your gym bag”?

“No shit,” said Nick. “Assume the position punk.”

David protested, “You know what this shit is don't you. The antiwar marchers are filming the cops beating the shit out of the marchers man. Did you see any of those damn films from Miami? Not on CNN. The Pacifica. Network.”

“And now the news the networks wont show you.” They laughed.

"I've got it," cried David. "We organize. We call for a team shoot, a film in. We use a few dozen people. They start beating up the marchers and we pull out the cameras and start the timers. We change the people behind the cameras every nine minutes. If we have to do that to film the Nazi bastards, then we do it." He laughed.

"Oh yeah. You know I ALMOST hope that this fascism fad lasts a little longer before it cycles away for another thirty years. I want people to remember this shit longer than they usually do. We shouldn't have to do this again. They don't play this crap in Germany anymore dude. Those people remember what fascism feels like man. They tell their kids. And they know it comes from the right wing. They don't get fooled by right wing calls for populism. That's what Hitler did. Populism is on the left."

"I heard that," said David. He moved the phone around to the other ear. "I need to get moving."

Nick imagined that Dori hated him. "So...you know. You gonna call her"?

David didn't know what to say. "Not that it would do any good."

"Bull shit. Call her and apologize. You'll get lucky. They love that vulnerability stuff. I ought to know," he laughed.

"Dude. You have three ex-wives. Why should I take advice from you?" he joked.

"Because if there's a mistake to be made, I've made it at least three times. And those are just the ones I married. Do all the songs on the radio seem to be about you yet"?

He laughed. "How did you know that"?

"That's like asking a blind man... Never mind. I've been there man."

"I should wait a few days."

Nick laughed like he knew what to say. "For a long time I couldn't listen to Free Bird without crying man."

"I should call her." He thought about sex.

“All the songs are gonna be about you. Did you ever notice the difference between black guy songs and white guy songs?”

“What?” he laughed.

“The difference in the lyrics that white guys write, and the ones that black guys write.”

“Like what?” He tried to imagine what Dori was doing. She might be trying to call me, he thought.

“White guys write songs that go like... *I'd crawl a mile, down on my knees, across broken glass, in the rain, bleeding all over myself, with my tail between my legs, just to kiss your ass, if you would onleeeee forgive meeeeeeeeeeee.*” David laughed. “Black guys are the opposite extreme. They write songs that go like... *She's a bitch, she's a ho, fuck the ho, I don't need her ass, she can suck my...*”

David laughed and said, “I never thought of that. You're right. But neither one of them is getting any, or they wouldn't be singing shit like that.”

“That's right.” They laughed.

David joked, “Can you imagine American Band Stand? Hey kids. That was number two by *Donnie and the White Boys*. Let's give it up for *I must have been wrong cause you said so.*” They laughed. “And next we have our number one song by *Busta Cap* called *Bitch I'll fuck you up.*” They laughed again.

“That's right,” said Nick.

“Dude, I gotta go.” David put on a macho voice. “Were burning daylight.”

“Is that Randolph Scott?”

“No, it's the Duke.” He could see the scene in the movie where he heard it.

“Oh man. That's right. OK. Catch you later pilgrim.”

“Until that time my good man. Until that time.” David hung up.

David found his one o'clock class full of curious students who had obviously seen the back and forth on the Internet. He was stunned by some of the questions. He felt like a politician who was fair game for public criticism and expected to defend himself. The thought of planning for Nick's untimely demise briefly crossed his mind as he pushed his way into the classroom.

A woman in the front row waved and said, "Mr. Armstrong we just want you to know that we're behind you all the way. We think it's terrible they censored your paper. Tell us what we can do to help you fight this thing." The class applauded.

"What are you guys talking about?"

"I mean your suspension and all. We're behind you all the way."

He got so angry that he had to check it out right away. "Would you excuse me for about ten minutes? I need to get something out of my office." He marched to his mailbox and found an official looking letter. He stomped into the dean's office without even opening it. He walked right by Shirley and through the open door. The dean was sitting in his chair but faced the wall and showed David his back. He spoke first in a terse tone that David had never heard him use before.

"You are suspended. No hearing until the fall semester starts. You will finish your summer class and remove your sorry ass from this campus. In all my years I have never seen a more ungrateful..."

"What about the God damn first amendment"! David took a deep breath.

He swung the chair around and locked eye contact. "What about slander? And legally I didn't censor you."

"That's right. I withdrew that paper voluntarily."

"That's not what I read on the damn computer. That's not what the parents who call on my phone who want us to divest tell me. I read the damn thing myself David. And I do know how to use a computer you know." His eyes were red like he had been crying.

David shifted his weight. His mouth was dry. "I never said I was censored. A friend of mine implied it... And it sort of took off."

"So you don't stand behind the accusation?" He leaned on his hands with his fingers spread out wide on his desk.

"Yes and no." He's scared stiff, he thought.

"What did you say?"

David took a breath. His palms were sweating so he wiped them on his pants. "You might as well have censored me. My buddy talks too much but I'm glad he did it. I stand behind the whole idea. I never suggested divestiture, but I support it now. You've got your nose up big oil's ass. I hope your damn building is worth it." He sighed and decided he might as well get his money's worth. He knew he was fired anyway.

"For your information, the building is gone for now. I had to put it on the back burner thanks to you. Too much publicity. I hope you're happy." He slapped his hand flat on the desk.

I don't care anymore, he thought. Take his ass out. "I'm glad people are reading my work. I believe in my work. I never should have pulled it. When I came to this school I wasn't even sure that I wanted to be an economist, but I do now. I really do. I don't care where. I'd rather teach at a junior college and have freedom than win the damn Nobel Prize and not believe in my work. Most people never even get an opportunity to go to college. How much is enough? How much is enough before you take what you have and be thankful?"

The dean felt dizzy with anger. "Who in the hell do you think you are to talk to me that way mister! You think that just because I'm a conservative that I don't believe in my work?"

"That's exactly right. You can't possibly believe in all that trickle down invisible hand bull shit. You guys are all alike. You start out telling yourselves that you'll keep quiet until you're the boss, and then later on when you get power, you'll step up and be the hero by setting us all free. You're the boss now. This is later.

Where's the cavalry riding over the hill? There's always a reason to hold back a little longer. One more thing to get done before you save the day. What is it now? A son who needs tuition. A new house maybe. How about a building with your name on it. You know. Paid for by gouging retired widows on a fixed income with exorbitant heating bills? There is a God, and he does keep score." Right on, he thought.

"Get out! Get out of here! I don't have to listen to this!" He stood up and kicked his desk so hard it hurt. His face got so red that he looked like he was having a stroke.

David lowered his voice. He loved the euphoria of the moral high ground. "That sir will be my pleasure. And it will be my pleasure to read all the congratulations that will most certainly be flying around the blogosphere about how they took out your precious building. Stand by for the shake up in the university pension fund. That will be round two. By suspending me you give them confirmation and ammunition for the next round. You didn't censor my paper, but you DID suspend me. The gloves are off now." He laughed.

The dean threw up both hands and screamed, "Get out! I said get out! Call security! Shirley call security"!

David went back to class and took his seat facing the noisy students. His thoughts drifted on the adrenalin. He wondered if he had brought the whole thing on himself. Maybe he subconsciously planned it to happen just that way. He could see that a series of little decisions led up to what happened, but he couldn't think of any one of them he would do differently under similar circumstances. He demanded the freedom to show his work anywhere he wanted. He knew the students loved it. If he were one of them he would love it too. He worried about his dad but didn't want to look back. His father was over the tenure hump. They couldn't fire him anyway. The fight was on and it was time to see it through. He addressed the class.

"Good day everybody. Today is our final exam for the summer

semester. I guess that's why they let me teach today. As you know, I've been suspended." The whole room booed. "It's OK. I didn't expect it but I understand it. I'm afraid I've created a little bad publicity for the department. I guess you guys read the paper. First of all I need to tell you that the whole thing started as a misunderstanding. They didn't censor me. I pulled the paper voluntarily."

A student in an over sized purple tee shirt raised his hand. "Mr. Armstrong."

"Go ahead."

"We heard the oil company trashed your apartment and threatened you."

"No, it wasn't like that. It was my friend's place, and it was probably somebody's sick idea of a joke."

"That's not what I read." He shook his head.

"I know. This thing's really getting out of hand." David blushed.

"What about the petition?" he asked. "Do you agree we should divest"?

"I like the petition. We should divest from big oil." They all cheered and clapped. "I didn't start it, but I support it. I didn't tell anybody to complain to the school, but now I'm glad they did." He smiled.

A scratchy female voice called out from the back row. "Are you going to fight the suspension"?

"I don't know. I just found out about it today. I don't know what I can do about it. I don't have tenure. It's up to them I guess. I don't really care. I don't want to teach where I'm not wanted anyway."

The same voice asked, "Are we going to have the exam?" They all laughed.

"Yes. But first we're going to do the news for the last time. Then, since I'm suspended, we'll have an easy oral exam. That's it. I'll explain later. Who brought the news"?. Hands went up. "Pass

em up. Let's see what we got here.” He stacked the papers as they reached his desk, put on a silly smile and started reading them from the top.

“*Baghdad. US can not account for 190,000 guns in Iraq. According to the military, we can not account for about 110,00 AK-47 assault rifles, 80,000 pistols, 135,000 sets of body armor, and 115,000 helmets. All were issued to Iraqi forces. The weapons disappeared between June of 2004 and September of 2005.* Wow, that's a lot of guns.” They all laughed. “Can you imagine the American officers explaining where the guns went”? He made a serious expression. “Well general sir, I don't know what went wrong sir. They were all ready to help us fight the evil doers and then they just disappeared with the guns sir.” They laughed. “I don't understand it sir. There must be some mistake.”

He picked out another paper. “OK here's one. *Despite calls for action, Illinois governor takes time on rate relief.* I know this one. The republicans signed a bill a few years ago to deregulate Illinois utilities. The Enron guys were behind it. The law just recently took effect, and electricity rates went through the roof. Instead of the democrats running to the rescue they got caught with some campaign contributions from the power company. Now they're dragging their feet and pissing off voters from one end of the state to the other. Welcome to Illinois. They have no state campaign finance laws to speak of. That's the real problem. They tell me that four guys used to run the whole state.”

Somebody did a Three Stooges imitation. “Hey Mo.” Everyone laughed.

David joked, “They had a drive through lane behind the state house for bribes.” A student in the front row in a white jacket over a blue tee shirt raised his hand. David pointed at him. “Miami vice. Go ahead sir.” They laughed.

“My dad follows that story. He works for the power company. I heard they reached a deal with the company to lower the rates and then it died. What gives”?

“What gives? They all give, that's the problem.” They laughed. “They give and give and they expect something in return. I think they had a deal more than once but it keeps getting hung up. Last time I heard they had a deal that had rates going up like a third in three years. That ain't fixing it.” The student nodded.

David picked up the next headline. “Oh boy, look at this. *Importance of liberal bloggers reflected in attention from candidates.*” They all clapped and a few whistled. “Thanks guys. *More than 1500 bloggers are scheduled to attend a yearly convention which has about seventy sponsors including several major unions and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Credentials to the event number about two hundred and fifty. All the democratic candidates are expected to attend. The event has drawn the attention of traditional media executives as campaigns move more and more to cyberspace.*” They clapped. “I like that one.”

David waited for the applause to stop and moved on. “Here we go. *Falling ice chunks hit Iowa neighborhood.*” They laughed. “*Dubuque Iowa. Large ice chunks, one of them reportedly more than fifty pounds, fell from the sky in this northwest Iowa city, smashing through a woman's roof and tearing through nearby trees. Authorities said no aircraft were in the area at the time. Milo Frazier, a local, was nearby when it fell. He was quoted saying 'It was so loud, I thought a plane crashed. I thought about nine-eleven.'* They all laughed. *'They tell me it could have been ice that just accumulated in the upper atmosphere but I don't believe it. They can't tell us everything. National security you know.'*”

They laughed and the white jacket guy jumped in. “Martha I just don't believe it was somebody flushing the toilet at fifty thousand feet. It had to be a terrorist Martha.”

They kept laughing as David pulled out another page. “*Russians invade north pole.* I heard about this. The Russians went to the north pole and planted a flag. Like they were the first

to ever do that. They took a sub to the bottom of the ocean, right under the pole, and left a flag in a titanium capsule. I ain't making this up. They claimed it for Russia. They think they can drill for oil there once global warming melts the ice cap. I mean take a minute and think about it. If we've already burned so much oil that all the ice is gone, the last thing we need is more oil. If we haven't went solar by then..." They clapped. "That's not all. Greenland claims the pole. Canada claims it too. Imagine a war over the bottom of the ocean under the north pole. There's no place left in the world to fight over except there so the damn military industrial complex goes after Santa's back yard. Imagine the spin." He put on a droopy Nixon face and imitated the former president. "Folks if the wrong people get a foothold in there they could be in Jersey before you can say domino theory." They laughed like it caught them by surprise.

David grinned with pride. "Here's a good one. *Monkey unlocks pen, eludes zoo staff. Tupelo Mississippi.*" They laughed. "I love that name too. Tupelo Mississippi. You can't say it without smiling. *The zoo asked local residents to help in the recovery of a white faced Capuchin monkey that unlocked his cage and got away.*" They laughed. "Notice how they spin that. Recovery. I'll bet the monkey didn't think of it that way. He probably wants to apply for political asylum." They laughed. "He was just minding his own monkey business when he got taken prisoner and put in monkey prison. He can't get a lawyer. His people don't even know he's gone man." They laughed. "Somebody call Amnesty International."

David noticed the clock. "Hey we're running low on time already. One more story." He held up a page like a proclamation. "*Research breakthrough. Why people have sex. It feels good.*" They laughed. "OK, who brought this thing in"? A chunky young man in the second row waved his hand. David pointed at him and smiled. He read on. "*Washington. After exhaustively compiling a list of the 237 reasons why people have sex, researchers found*

*that young men and women are motivated to get intimate for mostly the same reasons.*” They laughed and laughed. David held up a hand. *“It’s more about lust than a love connection in the heart. Oh please.”* They all laughed. *“Heeeeeere’s your sign. Can you imagine otherwise? Say there’s this person who doesn’t look particularly attractive to you, you know, but has been so charming. Is that a reason to...”* They wheezed and laughed. David turned to an imaginary person. *“So I just thought... I mean since you’ve been so nice and all. If you’d like... I could... I could jump your bones. Would you like that?”*

Hysterical laughter thundered all the way to the end of the hall. The dean’s staff could hear it clearly. David continued. *“Can you imagine explaining to your partner? Honest hon, I was just doing her a favor. I was just being polite. It wasn’t physical in any way dear.”* The laughter continued. David sat on the corner of his desk and called for calm. Two guys in the front row made a few more silly remarks, and the room came to order.

*“OK folks. It’s exam time. Since I’m suspended we’re going to have an oral exam. I feel like playing ice cream man. I’ll tell you what I mean. When I was sixteen I took a job driving an ice cream truck. I drove around playing ding a ling music in the truck and making cones for little kids. The boss was an undergraduate business major who leased the trucks. He used to weigh the ice cream mix before and after the shift. I wasn’t getting enough cones to the gallon so he told me not to fill the bottom part of the cones where you couldn’t see that you were buying air. I told him to kiss my ass. I wasn’t going to rip off little kids.”* They laughed. *“He fired me but it was only noon. He told me to finish the afternoon and hit the road. I took the truck out to the kids and gave it all away. Free ice cream for everybody. I emptied that sucker.”* They clapped. *“It still makes me laugh. He was so cheap he didn’t want to lose the sales from the afternoon. He should have fired me at the end of the day.”* They laughed.

David smiled. *“Since I’m suspended we’re going to have an oral*

exam. Free ice cream time.” They clapped. “Everybody put your name on your paper. OK? Ready? Essay question. Who was the greatest ice cream man of all time and why?” They laughed. “OK. Got it? Question number two. True or false. Illinois is thinking about the privatization of public roads.” He waited a few seconds. “OK. Question number three. True or false. Mr. Armstrong wouldn't piss on the dean if his heart was on fire.” They laughed and clapped. “Now turn them in and have a nice rest of the summer.” They clapped. “Use the time to read some stuff you actually want to read, and spend time with your mom.”

David knew that Dori had turned off her phone because he tried it once every hour until after midnight. He fought the temptation to go over there and worried about being too angry, not hurt, angry. He didn't drink. He knew better than to get sloppy drunk, but the thought that she could make him stop drinking and still not answer the phone made him livid. I don't want to drink, he thought. This is where she makes me do it out of spite. First she makes me stop and then she makes me drink. She thinks I'm going to sit here sober and watch the damn phone.

David knew it would be hard to sleep without drinking, but talked himself out of taking a drink just to fall asleep. He tried exercise and felt silly doing push ups late at night on the living room carpet. He turned out the lights and spread out on the couch to see if he could fall asleep. The anxiety increased. He tried to make his mind a blank and think about nothing but it didn't work. He tried to remember the relaxation technique that starts with relaxing the toes, and then the legs, and on up. His toes became her toes. He thought about HER legs. His stomach turned upside down with grief. Panic never felt worse. He gave up and turned on the lights. She thinks I'm afraid to go over there, he thought. I'll show her. He scooped his keys from the end table and kicked

the back door open. He got in his truck and slammed the door so hard it sounded like a gunshot.

He remembered the security flask that he kept tucked away behind his seat at all times. It was still full of seven year old Canadian whiskey. Just knowing it was nearby made him feel better. The truck squealed out of the the driveway and accelerated down the shiny, wet street. It was deserted except for the occasional squad car, but he didn't care if he got stopped. He was sober for once and not in any danger of a DUI. Music was not a good idea. Even the talk radio was too much for him so he turned it off. He knew it was emotionally risky to drive by Dori's apartment, but he had to know if she was home. Maybe she would come running out and make everything all right. He imagined them undressing each other in front of the big mirror in her bedroom.

In what seemed like no time at all, he reached her block and parked across the street in plain sight. Her lights were on, so he tried the phone. No answer. He could see her silhouette in the front window through the thin yellow curtains, but she wouldn't answer. Then he saw a second silhouette, and his nerves caught fire. There was no thought process, only reflex. He reached behind the seat and hit the silk. He drained the silver flask with a series long chocking gulps. Just enough whiskey dribbled on his chest to make him smell like a DUI to a cop. He would have to watch his speed. The truck seemed to steer itself as he pulled out and headed home with a brick in his chest. He got angry with himself. What was I trying to find? He thought. I had nothing to gain. Why do guys do that? If a woman is seeing somebody else then catching them only makes a painful scene. If it's over it's over. Some things you just don't want to see. First the cop thing in front of the bar, then the crap on the net, then the break in, then the job, now this. He felt like he was more than entitled to get crawling up the front steps drunk, and that's just what he did.

## Chapter 9

A horizontal morning rain greeted the mayor of Chicago and his chief prosecutor as they ducked out of a double parked limousine in front of a crowded old fashioned diner. They took a booth in the back. Everybody recognized the mayor, but they left him alone. A man in a clean white apron, that he had just put on, barely looked up as he wrote down the order. Mayor Daley ordered eggs and bacon. He was going to eat what he wanted no matter what the doctor said. Prosecutor Davis had the same thing but added a bagel and fruit plate in anticipation of the mayor eating his bacon too. The smell of it frying not twenty feet away was an irresistible temptation.

They were in a real diner with stainless steel everything. The sound of thick china clanking and the funny vocal code they used to yell orders at the cook made the mayor remember coming there with as a kid with his dad and the city bosses. Everybody winked at the mayor's son back then, and there was never a check. A middle aged woman in a hair net came to the table, poured fresh hot coffee and moved on. The mayor eye balled the cherry pie in the pastry case. Prosecutor Davis leaned in close and asked, "Can we talk in here?"

"Keep it low," said the mayor as he waved to some people that he knew.

"Not much to tell anyway." Davis shook a little sugar packet.

"Roy, are you sure about what you told me? This is too damn

important.”

“The officer's been undercover for a year sir. We worked hard on this one.” He tore open the sugar and dumped it in his coffee.

“I know. I know.” He looked worried and thought about press leaks.

“The perp thinks he got rid the piece. I told you right. Our man intercepted it and switched guns before they disposed of it.”

“The perp SAW them throw it away”? He imagined the scene.

“They threw away the wrong gun right in front of him. Identical to his. Threw it in the lake way far out. Way out in deep water. Nobody could ever find it.” He sipped his coffee. “Perp didn't even check the number. Our man had that covered too, identical pistol, same serial number, made special just in case. The only people that know we have the shooter's gun are the undercover officer, the chief, me, and you.”

“The evidence thing. Who knows we hid the junk? Who knows where it is? My God that's enough coke to...”

“Well, there's the three shifts watching it. The guy that owns the place knows. The chief, me, and you. Oh... And a bartender. A bartender found out.”

“What?” cried the mayor.

“Couldn't be helped. He's cool though. Not a threat. He won't say anything. He's a teacher and only a part time bartender. He stumbled across Stone and Murphy staking out the bar. Caught them by surprise and jumped them. The teacher thought they were casing the joint. He broke Murphy's arm and Murphy didn't even report it. Probably too embarrassed or afraid to admit it.”

“Then have the chief take him off. I know that guy and he's up to something. Murphy's dirty.” Daley worried about his blood pressure.

“He's right where we want him sir. Trust me.” He was holding back.

“Ass holes. If THAT can happen...”

“Nobody knows it's there. They say the bar owner is real

reliable. Family goes way back. He says the teacher is OK too.”

The woman in the hair net brought the plates. They smiled and thanked her as she collected a few dishes from the next booth. The mayor asked, “What the hell were those guys doing to get spotted so easy like that?” He picked up two strips of bacon and took a big bite.

“I told you mayor. The guy just stumbled on them when they were watching the joint. He broke Murphy's arm in a scuffle.”

“See. Why not report it”? The mayor jabbed the pepper shaker over his eggs.

“Who knows. He didn't want to call attention to it. Like we ain't going to find out. Wouldn't want to be that bartender when this is over though. He's gonna get pulled over for a tail light and end up with a major attitude adjustment. No telling what they're gonna find in his car either. Something tells me that he'll resist arrest too. You can bet on it.” He laughed.

The mayor said, “No, no, none of that shit. Don't call attention to it. I don't want anything about the switch coming out in the paper anytime now or later. If it wasn't for that damn judge. He let a God damned cop killer out on bail. What are we SUPPOSED to do”? He set his cup down hard, spilling some coffee on his hand. “Damn judge probably has a fat Swiss bank account by now.”

Davis looked at the mayor's eggs and got hungry for a western omelet. “By the time we get the investigation going on the judge, you know. The whole thing will be over and he'll be out of the country.”

“Do it anyway. We can't have this crap anymore.” He finished his eggs and spread raspberry jelly on a piece of white toast.

“Don't worry mayor. I hope they paid him real good because he's gonna need it for a good lawyer. I'll see his ass in court no matter what. And he better bring a crying towel. When I get done with him he'll be afraid to pick up the shower soap in Menard.”

“Bet the boys would love to bunk with a judge.” They laughed.

“I don't anticipate any problems with Rodriguez sir. He doesn't

know we've got his prints and ballistics. Or at least we will have them when the gun gets officially found.”

The mayor put down his fork. “Why not officially find it now?”

“Because we'd have to tell his lawyer that we have it. He'd tell the the defendant and he'd run.”

“Shit yes. I just hate doing it this way.” He shook his head.

Davis looked around to make sure that nobody was listening and whispered, “Nobody will ever know about it or even care. He's a cop killer. Screw him.”

“I don't want it to come up at election time.”

“Oh shit. What they gonna say? That you jacked up a cop killer? This is Chicago. You'd probably go up in the polls.” He laughed.

“Yeah right. I want it buried.” He helped himself to the prosecutor's bacon.

“No problem. No big deal. The gun... It's gonna turn up at the last minute, and it'll be tested right before the trial ends. Officially tested. We gotta have the defendant in the courtroom when he finds out we got it. And then the judge will have to let us hold him.”

“Will he?” He wiped his hands on a napkin.

“We'll have media all over the place sir. Cameras up the ass. He won't let the son of a bitch bail out twice.”

“He better not.” The mayor's eyes narrowed. The judge has nothing to lose, he thought. He knows that I've already got plans for him. He might have a seat booked next to Rodriguez on a plane to Columbia.

The prosecutor whispered, “We've made arrangements just in case.”

The mayor stood up with both hands on the table. He took a deep breath, sat back down and asked, “Do I want to know what you're talking about?”

“No sir you don't. But the defendant wont get far from that courtroom, bail or no bail. Once he knows we have his gun he'll

panic. Even if he doesn't make bail, you know. We think he might make a run for it right there. He'd rather do a suicide by cop thing than spend the rest of his life in prison. He's said that more than once already, and he means it. That's what my undercover man says anyway."

"And if he gets bail"?

"If he gets bail then we've arranged... Well. Let's just say that we think there would be a problem outside the court house, and he'd be in custody one way or another. That's all I'm gonna say."

"You said too much already. I never heard that. Now don't screw up."

"Don't worry." He picked at his fruit.

"You never did explain why DEA wasn't notified. I'm getting some federal heat about it. I told them it was a state thing. You know. They want to know everything we're doing even when it's a state thing. They're all republican ass holes these days. Damn kids fresh out of military school. Potty trained with cattle prods." They laughed.

"Screw the feds sir. We had our guy on the inside right next to the main action for a whole year. We didn't tell anybody. Why should we. No more leaks. Then we found out about the shipment. It happened so fast. There was no time to bring them in anyway. Our man shows up one day and finds out that all that coke just got delivered right there in his lap. He didn't know it was coming. Rodriquez was never in the same room with it. It was a last minute thing, and it would have been gone in an hour. We had to drop the hammer on it sir. Our man called us and said to hit the place immediately, so we did."

The mayor looked scared. "And a cop got killed. A lady cop. Shit." He put his hand on his forehead and leaned on his elbow. "What happened exactly"?

"She was on point when they went in. They were trying to bust the door open with a ram but It was reinforced pretty good. They were in front of the door for too long. When they cracked it loose

somebody opened up with small arms fire from the inside at close range. A round got through and caught her on the side of the head. Nobody saw the shooter, but we know it was Rodriquez. He was the only one shooting. Our man was outside but all the slugs were from the defendant's weapon.”

The mayor felt like revenge. “How did he dump the gun at the scene”?

“We think Rodriquez threw it out the window and through another open window next door. The windows lined up. Ten feet away. Just seconds after they entered the room, an officer looked out the window and saw a woman next door, from the waste up, blinds wide open, sitting on the pot taking a crap. He got embarrassed and turned away. How was he supposed to know? They must have had a prearranged plan. How she knew to be there is some trick. Some kind of signal probably. She got the gun out of the area. She took it to a safe house and turned it over to the defendant's people. They gave it back to him later. Our inside man watched it happen.”

“And then he threw it in the lake.”

“He THINKS he did.” He smiled wide and proud.

“Why can't we subpoena the woman next door”?

“Dead. They took her out right after she gave them the gun. Beat her to death. Not pretty. She got one of them first. The other one bashed in her skull.” He looked away.

“Shit.” The mayor didn't want his eggs anymore. “I want that son of a bitch fried. Not life. Fried.”

“We don't do that any more your honor.” He thought about lethal injection.

“Damn it. Get old sparky out of storage and fry the son of a bitch. No. I'll inject him myself with a rusty needle.”

“I'm afraid you'd have to get in line sir. There's a lot of officers in front of you.”

The mayor threw his napkin down on the plate. “Just don't screw up. Let's get out of here. I've lost my appetite.”

Orlando Ruiz looked out of place on a bench near the Oak Street Beach in the late afternoon, but the location did provide security. A lawyer representing Carlos Rodriguez doesn't take unnecessary chances. Although he was only twenty five, Ruiz looked more like a senator than a cocaine lawyer. He looked sharp in a tailor made pin striped suit, conservative sunglasses, and close cropped hair that was carefully trimmed with a straight razor by an old school barber. He felt funny sitting out there all by himself in street clothes. He looked like a voyeur to the sunbathers.

A cab pulled out of traffic and stopped by the curb. Rodriguez stepped out in his white tropical attire and wasted no time walking directly over to the bench. The lawyer didn't shake his hand. "You wanted to see me?" said Ruiz. "I am at your service."

"They're probably watching me. Maybe filming. I don't want them to read my lips."

Ruiz looked around. "You want to move"?

"No. This is fine. Listen. I got approached by two cops. They said the fools **MOVED** the evidence, and that alone will get me off. What do you think"?

"Sounds too good to be true. Why would they tell you"?

"These two cops, they say they know where it is, and if I don't run, well. They can get it back for me for two million bucks."

Ruiz looked angry. "No way. I don't like it. It's got to be a trap." He put a yellow lifesaver in his mouth.

Rodriguez scanned the beach. "What would happen if you looked into it"?

"If it's true then it could mean a mistrial. You could even get off. If it's not... I don't know. I suppose you have nothing to lose. You know what... It's worth a try. There's nothing to lose by asking about it now."

“Except my product! If I play the card now then they'll back off and I'll lose it. They want me to wait.”

“If they really moved the product then you could walk away clean. Maybe right now. A bird in the hand. Are you gonna let greed stop you from finding out? Let me talk to the judge.” This guy is an idiot, he thought.

“No way. Not yet anyway. If they did move it... Like they say. And I'm gonna get off anyway, then what have I got to lose by waiting a little longer”?

“Nothing I guess.” He worried about being recorded somehow. “But I smell cop.”

“And if I wait, I might still get my product back.” He laughed.

“I suppose so. But I still think it's gotta be a trap. They want you bad. They figure you're greedy. Let me talk to the judge right now.” He popped another lifesaver.

“You are probably right. But not yet. I want to think about it. Why decide before we have to? Maybe being greedy is moving too fast.” He smiled at two black women in swim suits as they walked off the beach with their laughing children.

Ruiz sounded worried. “Do you know these cops, anything about them”?

“No. I've never heard of them.” He shuffled his feet and kicked a little sand.

“Then I know it's a God damn set up.”

“All the more reason to do nothing. What if they're straight up? I could get off and get my property. I have nothing to lose by waiting.” His eyes locked on a toned brunette sunning on her back.

Ruiz insisted, “Look here. We don't need this shit. They don't have a witness in the shooting. They don't have the gun. All they have is you and the product in the same room. They gotta prove who's coke it is. One of the other guys will take the fall for you on that. Were looking at a plea bargain here, a minor charge. You might not even get any time at all. On the other hand, if they

really did move the product, and it's not properly documented, you could get off. Let me talk to the judge, but let me do it now.”

Rodriquez stood up. “No. I think these cops need the money. They want a big score. They want to retire. They see a once in a lifetime opportunity. They know better than to jack with me. Let me think about it some more. I'll talk to you next week. OK?”

“OK. You're the boss. If you change your mind just call me. It's your neck.”

“That's right. No reason to make a move before we have to.” I want my product back, he thought.

Ruiz stood up and put his hands in his pockets. He faced the lake. The wind blew his jacket open. “Can I at least check out a few things?” he asked. “Maybe I can find out about the switch without tipping our hand.”

“Don't tell anybody anything. Not yet. I don't want to scare them away. You leave it alone for now. Listen to me. If I get the stuff back I might increase your fee more than a little bit. I'll make you very happy. Buy your mother a bigger house.”

He smiled. “OK.”

Rodriquez turned around and walked back to the same cab that was still waiting for him. He ducked into the back seat. A new bug in the dome light picked up the conversation between him and the cab driver. The police were recording every word now. The driver suspected no connection between this passenger and the last one who was actually a cop. The plain clothes officer had taken a short ride to a grocery store and then right back to where he started. What he really did was plant the tiny but powerful microphone in the cab. The new bugs had a much longer range and were so cheap that they were disposable.

The Colombian talked up the Cubs who were playing like champions for a change. The driver raved about the contributions of Latin American ball players. He was angling for a nice tip. He didn't care who the passenger was but he looked like money. He was thinking about his daughter's wedding next month and how

much he would have to borrow to pay for it. He sensed his passenger was some kind of a player but didn't ask any personal questions. The driver was funny and agreeable but didn't suck up too much. He dropped Rodriguez at his destination and thanked him for the hundred dollar tip. His daughter was marrying a dentist, and she would never have to drive a cab in the downtown Chicago traffic.

## Chapter 10

### THE LONG TALK

David's father was visiting him when the stock market took a dive. It fell almost four hundred points in the first few hours. They watched the financial networks all through the morning and tried to predict the future. The real time ticker running across the screen reminded David of an electronic monitor in intensive care. He remembered a day in 1987 when the DOW fell out of control. It was caused by a new computer trading program that went Robo-Cop and sold off everything automatically with no human in the loop. People called it Black Monday. The Armstrongs argued about it but never agreed on a specific cause. They drank coffee on David's couch and spent hours listening to market experts blame the latest collapse on the sub-prime mortgage market.

David's father looked out of place in his son's living room, but at least it was tidy for a change. Even the kitchen was clean. There were no dishes in the sink, and everything was in its place. The two economists pontificated about the market situation but sounded rather nontechnical with no one listening. The exchange could have been between any father and son that knew a little bit about fiscal policy. The Armstrongs saw economic issues as moral questions first. Follow the greed. Both men lectured and chastised the pundits as the disaster unfolded. The whole thing mercifully

distracted David from his problem with Dori, but he couldn't avoid it altogether. It was the elephant in the corner.

His dad brought it up first. "Did you call her yet"?

"No. What for?" He forced a smile before his face defaulted back to worry.

"So she can explain about who was there. It could have been anybody."

"Is that what you would do" He hoped so.

He thought for a few seconds and shook his head. "No. Probably not. I was impulsive at that age. I would have banged on the door when I was over there the first time and found out who it was. I probably would have made a fool out of myself. Women love it when you do that you know, provided you do it right." He laughed and missed his wife.

"I don't give a shit. I ain't got no time to play head games. I've got no job now and me and her... We're down the tubes. What a great month. I think I'll take a vacation from all this happiness." He didn't like how that sounded.

He smiled and knew what to say. "No you won't. Where would you go? You'd jump in a bottle. You'd think about her all the time. Maybe you would try and bed down with a stranger to prove something to yourself. That's no fun. You'd regret it. Just skip the impulse. Go around it. And by the way, you WILL be reinstated." He winked at him.

"I'm glad you think so." He felt a little embarrassed.

"I know so."

"Why Dad?" he asked, without expecting a real answer.

"Can't say. But trust me on this one." He smiled, grabbed the back of David's neck and shook him a little. "Why don't you come by the house more often? I'm not far."

"I will. I've been busy Dad." Something on the TV alarmed him. He waved and pointed at the screen. "Oh my God. Look at the damn thing dive. They're right about the bubble. Here we go again Dad. It's a damn casino." They laughed. "That's what I

think about cowboy capitalism. It ain't nothing but casino gambling. Not exactly a firm foundation for an economic system.”

His dad smiled. “Think in the long term.”

“Come on Dad. That's what they always say AFTER the bubble pops. There's always a bubble. Think long term my ass. Keynes was right. In the long run we are all dead. After the crash in twenty-nine it took until the forties or something to recover.”

“Well, there WAS a world war.” He thought about the rationing and the victory gardens.

“I know Dad. But a lot of industries did pretty damn well on the war. When I was a kid they used to credit the war with ending the Depression. If that's true then think how much longer it would have lasted without the war. What a price to pay.”

He's right about that, he thought. “You're pretty hard on Friedman these days huh”?

“Always.” I'm on a roll now, he thought. “I mean everybody knows that the twenty-nine crash happened because credit was too damn loose. People could borrow most of the price of a stock on margin like the boom would never end. There was more money lent out than all the currency circulating in the whole frigging country. Talk about building your house on sand. Then Friedman faults the government for not increasing the money supply enough after the crash. He said he turned a recession into a depression. That's like saying the cause of the D.T.'s is a shortage of alcohol. In the short run maybe but the root cause is overindulgence.”

“I love that analogy. You always say that. Money is like a drug.” How ironic, he thought. “What about today? What do you think happened this time?” He muted the remote control and set it down.

David organized his thoughts and imagined a little outline for what he was going to say. “It started this morning Dad. Two French hedge funds freaked out. They wouldn't let anybody jump

off because they got paranoid about our sub-prime mortgage market. They couldn't figure a value for the stuff. You know. Bundled mortgages. A load of crap. They didn't know what the paper was worth. Then the European Central Bank, the Japanese, and the Federal Reserve all pumped in some money for liquidity.” He laughed.

“And the air came out of the crap. What goes up.” They laughed.

“Oh yeah. I think the bundling thing suckered a bunch a greedy bankers, but now we've got homeowners facing foreclosed that could have otherwise been dug out. They bundle the damn mortgages and sell them to other people you don't know. You don't have any place to go and make arrangements or work out a deal and dig out.”

“That's right.”

“In the old days, if you couldn't make a couple payments, you went downtown to the bank and worked with them. They didn't want your house. Now the mortgage is out of town. It's in China sometimes.” He imagined how hard it would be to evict somebody from that far away.

Mr. Armstrong laughed. “You're so right. It's 1929 de'-ja'-vu all over again. They got greedy for higher and higher returns. Greed is always its own sweet reward.”

“That's right. Bad Karma. Now the liquidity is drying up fast. People are running away from risk in the opposite direction at high speed. Now you won't be able to GET a loan. One extreme to the other. Welcome to roller coaster capitalism.” He laughed.

Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater, he thought. “The good news is that with the exposure of this leveraged buyout crap... You know. The hedge funds game will be harder to do now because they won't be able to borrow the money so easily. They're doing all that leverage shit with other peoples money.”

“Oh please. People forget too fast.” David clapped his hands. “Remember the junk bonds in eighty-seven”?

“Oh my God yeah.” He laughed.

David made a silly face. “Gee Mr. Banker. I need to borrow some money so I can buy a company and trash it and screw the workers and turn a quick profit.” They laughed.

“Oh David please. And now this one. It smells like the same crap. What did they say happened after the French hedge funds panicked”?

David stood up and paced around a little like he was teaching a class. “Before we go there, I wonder if the stage wasn't set by recent political developments. Let's look at the bigger picture. The thinking goes like this. The democrats are probably going to stop the orgy in real estate speculation. They already came out against prepayment penalties and rightly so. Thrift should be rewarded, not punished.”

“That's right.” Here he goes, he thought, shooting from the hip.

“Retail sales came in lower two months in a row. Consumer spending was up because the housing boom made people feel wealthy and not afraid to borrow on their home equity. The TV ads to do JUST THAT went all over the cable. Man I hate those ads. Use your equity like a ATM. Take out a second mortgage to pay off the credit cards and buy more stuff. It's borrowing from Peter to pay Paul.”

“Amen to that.”

“There's also a big spike in volatility. The market moves way up or way down, not straight and steady. That usually means recession. I see them leaning on the fed to cut interest rates. We've got the money DTs. We need a drink. They think liquidity is the problem. They want Friedman. The bartender cut us off so we get a new bartender. We only need a temporary shot, just to keep us from getting the shakes. We just want a soft landing.” David's hypocrisy bothered both of them, but they left it alone.

His dad changed the subject. “I think people are getting jumpy because they don't know what they own. They're in mutual funds and they don't know if they're exposed to the sub-prime junk or

not. I know you're no great fan of mutual funds.”

“I like to control my own stuff.” He pointed at the screen. “They're doing the old take the long view speech now. That's their job. Prevent a run on the bank just like Jimmy Stewart in the movie.”

Mr. Armstrong looked at the screen and made a sour face. “Well today is just not a good day to sell. It ain't worth less if you don't sell it when it's down.”

“But why be in the market in the first place? Bonds are risk free. You can't be greedy about it. Build your house on the rock. If you get a windfall, don't expect it to go on forever. I wonder if the Chinese are heading for a bubble.” He laughed.

“Don't get me started on the Chinese. They have nine hundred billion in US treasury bonds. They have us blocked out. We can't even keep out their dirty food. If we lean on them about that, or about letting their currency float free, they can change the damn bonds to another currency and trash the dollar overnight. They're financing our deficit for God's sake.”

“Let them pay for everything. Charge the war to the Chinese.” They laughed.

Mr. Armstrong crossed his arms. “I hear the president doesn't like the house bill to give financial help to people who can't make their mortgages.”

“Bush doesn't surprise me. He's a lame duck. He answers to no one. I remember saying before the election that if you liked him before the second term then you're really gonna love him once he doesn't have to run again. This is what fascism smells like.”

“I wouldn't go that far.” Here we go, he thought.

“His grandfather was Hitler's banker Dad. This is all about fascism. Big business in bed with the government against the people. That's the official definition of fascism. Take away our civil liberties, start a war for empire, suspend democracy, welcome to fascism.” His anger made him blush.

He laughed. “Now you're paranoid. Take a breath.”

“I'm almost to the point that I want the republicans to win this time. The democrats will just have to clean up the mess anyway. Blame the messenger. They'll associate the democrats with pain. Historically that's the pattern.”

“You could have a point, but is it right to let people suffer in the short run”? He didn't like something about the way that sounded.

“I know Dad. But they trap us that way. That's why the democrats got stuck cleaning up the republican mess the last time. Do the right thing and pay the political price, but I think they're getting wise to it. That's why they want the war to be around for the next election. The damn republicans always factor it in... That the democrats will go ahead and do the right thing no matter what the political price. I'm not surprised the democrats are balking at it this time. We stop the war and then they blame us for losing a war that they started and never should have happened in the first place.”

“So you agree that we should leave the war alone until the election”? He made a painful expression.

“No, but I understand the temptation. If we don't stop it then we bought it. That's the point. The republicans need us to stop it. They're counting on it. Pray for the republicans.”

“And the troops.” He smiled and felt proud of his good son.

“Amen.”

Mr. Armstrong looked around the room and said, “You do a fine job teaching the non-majors. Your students are not going to be economists. Your class is the only economics class they will ever take. How do you explain complex subjects without them knowing the jargon”?

He stood up and paced the floor while rubbing the back of his neck. “I don't know really. I think they like my tone or something. I try and make them laugh. I guess I'm sort of irreverent about the whole thing,” he said smiling.

“Bingo,” he joked. “And you wonder why the dean...”

“I don't like capitalism. Maybe knowing why something DOESN'T work makes it easier to explain it.” He made a strong mental note to remember that line.

“How would you explain what's going on now”? He looked out the front window and listened to the passing cars.

David was still thinking about the new line. “Well, capitalism is basically people trying to get something for nothing. To me it's just people trying to corner some unearned income. Buy something for a dollar and sell it for two. That's not natural and it's not sustainable. The baby boomers don't have pensions. They're trying to make and save enough money in the stock market to never have to work again without lowering their standard of living. That's a lot of money. It's impossible. It just can't be done for everybody. Making money is a myth anyway.”

“I know I know. You don't make money, you take money. You were sixteen when I first heard you say that.” And every day since then, he thought.

“History is on my side. There's only so much wealth and it just gets redistributed. Redistribution, up or down, is just another way of saying that one guy steals from another guy. There's no real wealth creation. Sometimes it looks like a developed country creates wealth, but there's always some wage slave in the third world that they extracted it from. I hate it when they talk that shit like... People are our number one natural resource. Bull shit. Notice what they do to natural resources.” He laughed.

“Long live the revolution,” joked his dad. He saluted and smiled.

“Well shit Dad. The boomers are just looking for a safe place to put their savings. It ain't really up to them where they put it. No pensions. They tried the bull market and the tech bubble burst. They went into real estate and that blew up too. They have to invest in something but they're too greedy to leave it in treasury bonds. They played the real estate game and the bankers won. Capitalism is a casino and everybody can't win. If everybody bets

black when they spin the wheel, and it comes up black, the game collapses.”

“What's the alternative? What should they do now?”

“It's too late now. Nobody listens to people like me when they're raking it in, when the market's up. The time to fix the roof is when the sun is shining.”

“Amen to that.” He laughed.

“It's like Nick says. My friend Nick says that being a social worker feels something like this.” He held a finger up. “People ask you if they should do A or B. You say A and they do B. B doesn't work out at all and it blows up in their face. Then they come back complaining and ask you what you're gonna do about it.” They laughed. “I never told anybody to play the damn market. I told them not to.”

Mr. Armstrong thought about panic selling. “Would you sell now?”

“Hell no. I'd wait it out. The time for selling is past.”

“Right!” He clapped his hands. “Look.” He pointed at the TV. “The feds are injecting more money for liquidity. Look at the banner. We're printing money. That's AFTER like 8 billion from Japan, 4 billion from Australia, and 84 billion from Europe. My God that's a lot of stimulus. They tell me the US sub-prime market could be as big as two trillion dollars, with about 200 billion exposed to the sub-prime risk in this thing.” He pulled up his socks.

“Trillion with a T. And that's before the effect of the panic wave hits.” Everything about the money system is irrational, he thought.

“That's right.” He sighed. “Panic is the real problem. They'll all run over each other and jump off like a bunch of lemmings.”

“What a cluster fuck. Think about it. Remember privatizing social security? Why talk about exposing social security funds to a shaky racket like that?”

“No argument there Son.” He sat down and tried to focus his

tired red eyes on the screen. “You're my David. You have to be right because it's hard to admit it when you're wrong. You're the same rebellious kid that got expelled in first grade for vomiting on the girl's lunch table.” He laughed.

“I didn't get expelled. I was suspended. And I didn't really throw up.”

“You never really took responsibility for that did you”? He kept laughing. “They said you stuck your finger down your throat.”

“You believe what you want.” David got up laughing and went to the bathroom. He sat on the toilet and remembered the day they were talking about. It was all planned in advance. A handful of first grade boys got the idea from somebody's big brother. They filled a balloon with two cans of vegetable beef soup. David tucked it under his shirt, walked up to the lunch table and bent over groaning like he was vomiting. He squeezed the balloon and a very convincing mixture splashed across the table top. That was the cue for the other boys to start picking up little slimy pieces of carrots and peas and feed them to each other while acting like monkeys. David remembered the screams of the little girls and chuckled to himself. Nobody cared that it wasn't real vomit. They all got suspended, and his dad had to come to school and take him home.

David washed his hands and dried them on a new clean towel. He avoided the mirror because he was afraid it would get him to thinking about Dori. He diverted his thoughts, walked back to the living room, stretched out on the couch and concentrated on the ticker running under the female reporter's push up cleavage. “Oil is falling like a rock because of the little crash,” he said. “You don't need much oil if the factories aren't pumping out a bunch of crap we can't afford and don't need. Maybe people can afford to drive to work now.”

“Or heat the damn house,” his dad growled. “Mine leaks.”

“And Dad. Can we please outlaw the God damn hedge funds now? They say that a big reason the market got all pumped up

was because Wall Street likes them. They're doing mergers and acquisitions and Wall Street likes that crap.”

“Oh my God yes.” Vultures, he thought. But real vultures don't kill first.

“First of all, mergers and acquisitions are no more than gobbling up companies and laying off people to make a quick profit on the misery of the workers. Now I hear that the stinking private hedge funds use money they borrow from the stock market to leverage their scams. It ain't even their own money man. Frigging OPM. Other people's money. That's money from PUBLICLY traded companies. I smell the old...what is it? Publicize the costs and privatize the profits routine.”

“Not sure I'd go there. Don't you think this thing is really just another shakeout”? No he won't, he thought.

“It could be.” He was just making conversation.

“OK hotshot. How would you explain a shakeout to your non-major students? A classic shakeout. They happen all the time. First day of the semester. They don't know anything yet.”

“OK sure. Once a market goes up for so long, it runs out of head room. In order for the big guys to keep making even more money, well. They need to scare the little guys away. The big guys can afford to ride out a temporary crisis and take a short term loss, but the little guys freak out. Some people say that shakeouts happen naturally. And some people say they're done on purpose by the big guys. They're right.”

“Right! Like an old fashioned gas war.” He smiled at the thought of the old gasoline price wars with full service stations giving out Green Stamps and free minor repairs. “I'm showing my age. A price war. The big guys operate at a temporary loss to force the little guys to fold. I do know that major corporations are holding more cash in reserve right now than they have for a very long time. They could be in cash in preparation for a shakeout. They aren't stupid.”

“Right Dad. They can see the bubble. Big players know about

bubbles. They know they'll pop eventually. They just get greedy and try to ride it up and jump off at the last minute. God help the widow who trusts her fund manager. Unequal information man.”

He looked disgusted. “Look. There used to be a good reason to use a broker. It's his job to look out for you. You want to do it yourself? That can be dangerous. You play you pay. But that said, forty-two percent of all the mortgages that were taken out last year had less than five percent equity. You'd have to be blind not to see the bubble coming. It's just another damn shakeout. People should just shut up and ride the God damned thing out.” He choked and coughed.

“Shit Dad. Watch your blood pressure.” He loved the sound of his dad swearing like a sailor.

“Well shit. They're up here on the tube calling the Fed Chairman an idiot for not cutting interest rates right now. They want the last guy back. They say he couldn't hit water if he fell out of a God damn boat. You sound like him. You keep flip flopping on me. What ARE you for? What would work? Lower the interest rates to prime the pump or keep them up to rein in loose credit and irresponsible lending.” Pick one, he thought.

“I'm not on either side Dad. Capitalism is flawed. It doesn't work. There's no way to fix it. The patient is addicted to greed. Doc says you gonna die.” He smiled. People get the government they deserve, he thought.

“Stop ducking. What would you do right now? You can't just sit on your ass and let people hit bottom.”

“I'd erect a damn firewall between capitalism and the necessities of a decent human life. Are you listening?”

“I'm listening.” Oh God here we go again, he thought. It's a broken record. He tried to pay attention but he'd heard it all before.

“Protect the first one hundred thousand dollars worth of equity in a single family home that somebody lives in. NOT somebody who's flipping houses for unearned income. They're talking about

extending Fannie May and Freddie Mac protection to the jumbo mortgages. Those are for homes that cost like a half million bucks. We don't need taxes from the working poor subsidizing some ass hole who thinks he needs a half million dollar house.”

“I agree.” This is new, he thought, but not politically possible.

“They're saying this could hurt the New York City real estate market, that it'll fall 20 percent from it. Those people are getting gouged like a million bucks for little rooms the size of a walk-in closet. A home is a place to live not a place to speculate for unearned income.”

I've got him now, he thought. “So you like rent control?”

“Sure I do, if it'll prevent crap like that. If it puts a damper on the racket there, then so be it. Companies need to pay people enough money to live on the local economy or relocate to where they can.”

“Rent control. Now who's for free markets? And nobody's going to vote for that anyway. Companies would run away from big cities alright. And if they do I hope they don't all move to Iowa. I like the cheap prices. They can keep the inflation. It ain't worth it. We have almost everything that they have and it's way cheaper.”

“Our secret will be out Dad.” He laughed. “Don't tell anybody. They're working harder at not working than if they would just do an honest day's work for an honest day's wage.” The phone rang. David answered it but there was nobody there. He had been getting calls like that recently. He thought it must have something to do with the break-in but hoped it was just another prank.

His dad didn't like his funny expression. “And what was that about?” he asked.

“Something wrong with the phone. I keep getting calls for Archie somebody. I reported it. Go ahead Dad. You were saying.”

“Where was I. Mortgages going overseas. Under globalization, if anybody gets a cold we all get it. The damn markets are sick all over the world. It's everywhere. What I want to know is who

bought the bundled mortgages in the first place. They weren't priced right. The banks should have known that. Shirley said some of them were rated triple A. The raters are suspect. Somebody's on the take."

"You know what happened Dad. The banks were under pressure for a quick profit. Same old shit. People watch the stock price. They were trying to ride that mother up and jump off at the last minute. This is the last minute."

"No. Last week was the last minute. Somebody jumped off last week and timed it right. Most people missed it."

David thought about Reagan and said, "They couldn't even have bought those shaky mortgages before the deregulation crap that the republicans rammed through in the eighties. Remember the savings and loan bubble? It came directly from it. Deregulation let them invest in shaky crap, junk bonds. Sub-prime mortgages are just the new junk bonds. The regulations in the Glass Steagall Act were put in after the crash of twenty nine for just that reason. Here we go again man."

"Live and learn." He thought about people always having short memories in a bull market.

"Yeah. The lesson is to not play the stock market with money you need for food, clothing, shelter, necessities." He laughed. "You don't go to the casino with the rent money."

"That's right." He laughed and rolled some invisible dice. "Baby needs a new pair a shoes."

"Yo hip Dad. The stock buyers are taking a chill pill today, and the bond buyers are laughing on the golf course. The turtles are beating the hare. Stocks ain't worth the aggravation right now."

"Depends on the stock."

"Long term talk. When they tell you the crap about stocks doing better than bonds over the long run they don't factor in the stress thing. How much is a heart attack worth. It's a tax on the greedy. Live beyond your means and go for the fences. No fear. If you get pinched just raise the stakes and double down man." He

spread his arms like he was flying. “Vultures circling over the heads of the greedy. That's what I see.”

“Oh please don't get me started.” He laughed.

“Look at the predatory lenders selling snake oil on the tube. Country something... It's on every five minutes. Their stock just took a twenty percent bath.” They laughed. “Justice is a wonderful thing.”

“My turn for the bathroom son. Wait until you get old. I can't go very long anymore.” He got up.

“You ain't old Dad. I won't allow it.” David went to the kitchen and downed a large glass of water. It made him feel funny. He sensed that his body was absorbing it quickly. The water had a slight aftertaste that he hadn't noticed before. It smelled a little bit like chlorine, but it was also a little nutty. He heard his dad coming out of the bathroom and returned to the discussion feeling refreshed.

Mr. Armstrong hit David on the arm with a playful fist and said, “The mortgage thing... I heard they were in front of congress trying to blame the panic on the computers again like they did in 1987. Then it was the automatic trading programs that kicked in. Now they're saying the mortgage bundles were priced incorrectly because they were basing the price on computer models instead of real markets. Blame the computers. It's just a computer error sir.” They laughed. “Somebody wrote the damn program. Computer error? I believe it. Sure. Some computer just farted. Probably sunspots again.” They laughed. “Or the terrorists figured out how to write computer code. Talk about vulnerable.”

“Hush up Dad. What are you trying to do anyway, give aid and comfort to the enemy? Shame on you.”

“Sorry about that.” They laughed.

“Hey I almost forgot,” said David. “Nick said the Securities and Exchange Commission is investigating the banks for hiding the true value of the paper. The bundled mortgages.” He smiled.

“Cooking the books! Surely not.” They laughed. “I suppose

you think it's the system and not an individual. You always did. Blame the system. What have I spawned.” Let the kid preach, he thought. He needs to. It's a hard time for him. “My dear son. You have no faith in capitalism at all do you”? He laughed.

“I suppose not. I know I can't get rid of it, but I would like to see some basic protections. Right now we're paying for the supply side policies of the last Fed Chairman. Lower the interest rates. Let the rich borrow cheap. They'll build jobs and it'll all trickle down. What a bunch of bull shit.” They laughed. “Now they call this a credit crunch, but they're not too far in debt. They didn't borrow too much. The real problem is that the bank won't loan them any more money. They want another cash fix. They want lower interest rates, but now they're even afraid to do that because it'll piss off the Chinese. The Chinese hold a big chunk of the debt. Lowering the interest rate means they lose money.”

“Oh yeah.” But if they screw with us we can default, he thought.

“Part of the supply side crap is just more tax cuts for the rich. We need to put the tax rates back where they were and make the rich pay their God damn taxes again.”

“There you go again, a tax and spend liberal.” They both knew he was kidding.

“Putting the tax rates back where they were is not raising taxes. And paying off the debt is not spending.” Good old Dad. He'll go for a stimulus here, he thought.

Mr. Armstrong wanted to wind the conversation up because he came prepared to do something drastic about David's drinking. He decided to let out a little more line before he set the hook. “Clearly the market is in trouble now. All we need is more pressure.”

I knew it, he thought. Go bigger. “This time it's about the real economy versus the Voodoo economy. There's going to be a backlash to the left. It's happening right now. We're moving from the paper economy to a real economy. People who really make

things and do things will have lots of access to credit. Hedge fund vultures and other exotic investments are out. I remember when they came up with derivatives. They're nothing more than gambling on if something goes up or down. Pure momentum. You could make a derivative fund to bet on anything that moves. It don't mean shit. They said it was more complicated than that but it wasn't. If you disagreed with the experts they said you just didn't get it."

"To you it's all just gambling. Even stocks. It's not easy to argue with you sometimes." He smiled. Just let him vent, he thought.

"I suppose so. To me capitalism is like a bunch of crazy people playing poker and all of them expecting to make a profit and win at the same time. That's what I think about when I hear bull shit like a rising tide lifts all boats."

"Kennedy said that. I thought you liked him."

"Democrats aren't immune. They can be republican light." Or maybe get shot, he thought.

We're getting off track, he thought. I need to make my move. "Back to the question on the table. What's going on in this market right now? Are we looking at a flight to quality?"

He laughed. "See there. A flight to quality. That's what they said when the tech bubble blew up. Why should we have to scramble around in a last minute panic to get to quality? Why can't we have quality all the time? Because people are just too damn greedy that's why. Look how fragile the system is. Everybody wants security but they want to get rich too. They want it both ways. You know how I feel when they talk about privatizing social security? Oh God. Why put our retirement money in a system that's that fragile?"

"The third rail of politics." They laughed.

"No more defined benefit pensions anymore. We get 401Ks and private social security accounts. Most people don't even know enough about money to manage their household budgets, but they

want elderly widows to play the stock market.” He smacked himself on the leg.

Mr. Armstrong looked into his son's eyes. “There is no real security. You know that right”?

“That doesn't mean we shouldn't do the best we can to mitigate the damage. That's like saying life isn't fair. It's not, but It's up to us to make it fair.”

“The African Queen.” He laughed.

“That's right. Now tell me what you think is going on in the market. Give it up. I know you're humoring me. You're a good listener. You let me air out my leftist views, but I know you're to the right of me. I'm listening. What do you think is really happening in there”?

“I think it's either a recession or a big shakeout. The Dow moved double digits in eleven of the past fifteen sessions. I'm worried because this is a real bad time for a surprise. We can't handle any more surprises right now. Hurricane, flood, terrorist attack, and we're in real trouble. I'm in biotechnology stock and municipal bonds, about fifty fifty. I own my home free and clear, and I have a defined benefit pension fully vested. If I had to bet the farm at this point, and thank God I don't, I'd hedge for a recession.”

“You heard it here folks. He said the R word.”

“You're right about the democrats being stuck with the bill. I think the republicans just ran out of the restaurant without paying. They had champagne and caviar. So much for family values.” They laughed.

“You vote republican half the time Dad.”

“Republican used to mean conservative. Balanced budgets and no world police. It meant being thrifty. Champagne and caviar on a credit card ain't republican. I don't know what it is but it ain't republican. Lower taxes and don't waste the taxpayer's money. Lowering taxes and increasing spending on a bad war or anything else you can avoid is just taxing the kids. These ass holes aren't

republicans.”

“Go Dad.” He laughed.

“It's all big money now. Government is for sale. Call it what you want. A bribe is a bribe. The top one tenth of one percent of Americans now make more money than the bottom fifty percent. We haven't seen that kind of inequality since just before the crash of 1929.”

“Who you gonna vote for this time professor?”

“I'm gonna write in David Armstrong, and if they corrupt you... Well I can still kick your skinny little ass.” He smiled.

“Oh you think so do you?” They laughed.

“Who do you think taught you how to wrestle like that. I was your sparring partner up until it wasn't cool to hang out with your dad anymore. About thirteen. Up until then I was your buddy. You could whip any kid in the neighborhood, just like me when I was a kid, solid as a rock.”

“Thanks Dad.”

Here's where I go for it, he thought. “You're a lot like me. You've only got one major flaw.” He laughed.

“What's that Dad?” Please don't go there right now, he thought.

“Drinking.”

David felt like he was falling in a runaway elevator. “I know Dad. I'm not perfect. What's your flaw?” I don't know if I want to know that, he thought.

“Me too. Same as you. Booze.” He laughed.

“Dad, you drink maybe twice a year.” How can I change the subject, he thought.

“Used to be a little more than that. Before you were born. It's in the family. I was drunk every evening. My dad and his dad too.”

“You just quit?” He felt a strange combination of relief and panic.

“Not exactly. It was more like I quit kicking and screaming.” He remembered hiding bottles in the toilet tank.

“Like what?” David really craved a drink after that news.

Mr. Armstrong took his time deciding what to say and had an imaginary conversation with his wife. Honey, he thought. I stuck to it even after you were gone. He put his hand on David's shoulder and said, "Your mother made me quit. Sound familiar? Now it's your turn, but I'd recommend skipping the kicking and screaming part. You're gonna quit anyway."

"Is that what you think"? He laughed because he was embarrassed and more than a little uncomfortable.

"I know you will. You're toast. Your drinking days are over. She's the boss. The sooner you figure it out the better it is for everybody, and the quicker I get in the grandpa business." He smiled.

"So just like that, you expect me to quit right here and now"?

"No. I expect you to kick and scream and make a fool out of yourself first. I think I'd be disappointed if you didn't. I did a real good job on that one. I slapped a cop. I broke a telephone pole with my car and it fell on the hood. It broke the pole and not the car. It was a real car, not one of those piece of shit cars they try and sell you without a frame. It had a steel frame too. That sucker ran."

David was a little stunned. He imagined being a spectator in the front row of an auditorium watching another version of himself acting in a play. "You must know how hard it is Dad. I can't believe you want me to quit right now, just like that"?

"No, not exactly. It's not time yet." He looked like he knew what he was talking about.

"Right. It's not time yet. I need to prepare myself. But that's what I told Dori, and she went off on me, big time, just like that." He stood up fast.

"No no, that's not what I mean. It's not time until... See... First I'm going to drink you under the table."

"You're gonna do what"! He sat down laughing.

Mr Armstrong kept a serious face. "I'm going to match you shot for shot until you throw your guts up. You gotta hit bottom.

Otherwise you'll just go round. I'm gonna speed it up for you." I'm gonna show you now son, he thought.

David laughed. "Is this like when you took me behind the barn and made me inhale a cigar"?

"Did you throw up"?

"I was sick for days." They laughed.

"Do you smoke"?. He smiled.

"I wouldn't have smoked anyway." This is some weak ass shit, he thought.

Mr. Armstrong looked at the ceiling. "I should have done this years ago." He looked over at David and said, "Bar's open. Let's light this candle." He clapped his hands together.

"Cut it out Dad. Think about your blood pressure." He thinks it's funny, he thought.

"I'm serious about this. We're running out of time. Your drinking days are numbered. You're caught between a bottle and a beautiful woman that loves you. I've been there. You're toast. She's got your number and she knows what you're gonna do. She's calling your cards. She told me so."

David frowned. "You've been talking to her about this"?. He felt angry and amused.

"Oh yeah. I talk to her every day. Were on the same team. The home team." He smiled.

"You guys are conspiring against me." He laughed. "I suppose I should be mad."

"We factored that in. Now get the damn bottle. It's time to show you what serious drinking looks like." He said a little silent prayer.

"I will not." Screw that, he thought. That's enough of this shit.

"Come on tough guy. I won't let you chicken out." He looked away.

"I'm not chicken. I get the point Dad. You win. I'll quit already. I'm worried about you. This crap ain't funny. OK"?

"I can hold my liquor a lot better than you." He meant it.

“I believe you, but what gives? You quit and never started again. Even though you're alone. Nobody's looking. Why not?”

“That's for me to know and for you to find out the hard way son. Now set 'em up so I can prove that you're a lightweight and in way over your head.”

David got mad. “I just might do that.” It would serve him right, he thought.

“Do it then”!

“OK! I will. And don't blame me for what happens.” He got up, went to the kitchen, took a fifth of whiskey down from the cabinet and brought it to the coffee table.

Mr. Armstrong said, “I'm not drinking that shit.” He stood up proud. “I've got some real scotch in the car. I'll be right back.”

“You had this all planned”!

“That's right, and you're going down.” He pushed the door open and went down the front steps.

David watched while his dad jogged out to the car and came back with two bottles of expensive looking scotch. He fetched a big two liter bottle of soda from the kitchen and set it on the coffee table. “Here we are Dad.”

“No no. We don't need that. No chaser. This is the good stuff. One shot every five minutes.”

“Are you crazy.” He's serious, he thought.

“Not as crazy as you. You know, I think I'm going to be the best grandpa of all time.” He laughed.

“Well don't blame me when you're sick and out of your mind.” David poured the first shot and slid it over. “Here tough guy. Knock yourself out.”

“Grandpa's prerogative. Bottoms up.” He threw the shot glass back and finished it in one gulp. He pushed it over and said, “You're turn. One shot every five minutes.”

David matched him shot for shot, and It didn't take long for them to get ripped at that rate. It reminded his dad of how easy it is to get to a million dollars by starting with one dollar and

doubling it over and over. They beat their chests and howled as they pushed the limits of self abuse. In less than two hours they were both sick and spinning. David called for a truce. His dad accepted but only after David admitted he couldn't beat him."

Mr. Armstrong declared victory and said, "I feel like shit. I think my hair hurts."

"See Dad. All this time you thought I was enjoying myself." They laughed.

"I was counting on the cavalry being on time." He looked at his watch and thought about his future daughter in law. They had a deal but she was a little late.

David blinked his eyes and tried to focus on the stock ticker. "Oh shit," he joked. "Look Dad. The market ended up closing only thirty points down after all." He held back a belch.

"Yeah but only after massive injections of money from the fed. Looks like the addict got his fix. It was a shakeout alright." He felt nauseous. "This really sucks. I can't remember what I saw in this crap." He steadied himself by stiff-arming a hand on the couch cushion.

"The financial stocks that were in trouble got bailed out Dad."

He laughed. "In other words a lot of people panicked sold them off at a low price, and then a lot of other people bought them on the cheap."

"It looks that way alright. I see your point professor." He smiled and licked his dry lips.

"That, my son, is called a shakeout."

"Dad, you're a genius." They laughed.

"That's why they pay me the big bucks and..." Somebody knocked at the front door. "Hey! That must be the cavalry now. It's about time."

I get it now, he thought. David yelled at the door. "Who is it?"

"It's me you idiot," called Dori. "Open the door."

"Dad. I think your cavalry's here." He laughed.

"Better late than never. Let her in. If she dumps you I'll marry

her myself. I think I'm going to throw up though. What a waste of excellent scotch." He put his hand on his forehead and massaged it.

David opened the door without getting up by stretching his arm to the edge of his reach and turning the knob with the tips of his fingers. Dori stepped in and looked around the room. Her body language let it be known that she was not happy with the extent of the boozing. Without a word and with no hesitation, she took control, confiscated the last of the scotch and marched to the back door. She pushed it open with her foot and threw the bottle outside. It shattered on the concrete driveway. She came straight at David in a squeaky nagging tone. "Are trying to kill your father"? She refused to sit down and kept her arms crossed around her chest while standing over the couch like a pissed off parent.

"He's OK. It was his idea." David laughed.

Mr. Armstrong walked out of the bathroom and leaned against the side of the little open archway between the kitchen and the living room. "You call that drinking? I'm fine. I'm as good as I ever was. Now I'm leaving. You kids make up. And son, you quit the bottle right now or I'll match you drink for drink until you grow up. Understand"?

"Shit Dad. That's the most..."

"I mean it! I'm out of here. Now make up. Life's too damn short." He reached in his pocket and felt his keys.

"You're not driving," said Dori. "I'll take you home."

He looked a little offended. "It's not far. I'll walk. You think I can make it that far don't you? I know the way." He pulled his hand out of his pocket.

"Look out Dad. She'll take your keys." David laughed.

"Your mother took my keys once. Only once. That's all it took." He started for the door.

"Dad..." David blocked his way.

He stopped. "I'm not driving. I'm walking. You kids make up. I'm going to call here in an hour and there better not be anybody

free to get the phone. Life's too short. Make up.” He walked through the open door, stumbled down the first two steps and missed the last one that was a little shorter than the others. He fell face down in the yard and was lucky to miss the concrete. All he hit was wet grass. David picked him up before he could process what happened. He checked himself over and David brushed him off.”

“You OK Dad”? David felt scared sober.

“I'm OK.” He wiggled his arms.

“You still want to walk? I'll walk with you Dad. You still want to walk”?

He smiled. “Yes I do. I have to now. I gotta walk.” His arm hurt.

“Bull shit,” said Dori. “Come on macho man. I'm driving you home or we'll have to follow behind you and make sure you're OK.” Without any further discussion she grabbed both his arms and stuffed him into the front seat of her blue Chevy Cavalier. She watched him put the belt on while she got in and pulled out right after she heard the snap. He only lived a few blocks away, but the wait at the stop sign seemed to take a long time. She double parked in front of his mailbox, opened her door and went around to let him out. He didn't want any help going into the house but was more than a little embarrassed. She was his boss's daughter. Not much was said except for him thanking her. She watched him go in and drove right back.

David sat on the couch waiting for his fresh coffee to finish brewing. He felt guilty but defensive and avoided eye contact. She started right up on him. “You could have said no. But when can you say no? When have you ever said no to booze? That's what he was trying to show you David.”

“It wasn't like that.” He wondered how his dad knew that she was coming over there. The cavalry is coming. If it was a setup then why was she mad.

“You just don't get it.” She looked around.

“What are you doing here anyway”? That didn't come out right, he thought.

“I guess I should have called.” She put her hands on her hips and thought about their prearranged intervention. She got held up in traffic and was supposed to get there before they got too skunked. She had also hoped that David would refuse to drink.

He decided to go for it. “You wouldn't answer your damn phone. I went by your place. I saw you in the window with somebody else.”

“I know that. I saw you out there. Why didn't you come in”? Let him sweat, she thought.

“I didn't want to see that shit.” He sensed hope.

After a long pause she said, “It was Sally next door.”

“I didn't know that.” He tried to hide his joy.

“I know. Why didn't you just kick the door in. I expected you to.”

“You wanted me to?” Oh please, he thought.

“I expected you to make a drunken scene.” she laughed. “Maybe slap me around or something.”

“I'm glad I disappointed you.” He moved closer and reached out to embrace her.

She pushed him away. “No you don't. Put that back in your pocket mister.”

He felt stupid. “I can't catch a damn break. Cut me at least a little slack here. I'm doing the best I can. What do you want from me anyway? Didn't you hear my dad tell us to make up”? He smiled.

“I gotta use the bathroom.” She went down the hall and he tried to assess the situation. He thought about telling her to go but he thought about sex. He thought he would look weak if he came on to her now but she was back and it was only a matter of time. He was sure that the danger had passed and the fight was over. She looked so good and he had nothing to prove by playing games. The anticipation was electric. He worried about his alcohol breath

and got up to find a breath mint when he heard her scream.

“David! David!” She came running out of the bathroom. “Call the fire department!”

He held both her arms down and yelled, “What? What?”

“Call the fire department. Your truck is on fire.”

## Chapter 11

David ran to the back yard. The fire roared out of control. Flames and thick black smoke shot out of the windows. He smelled burning diesel but it wasn't a diesel truck. It ran on gas. He immediately knew it was arson, and he knew what they used to torch it. The fire had already reached such an advanced stage that the windshield exploded right in front of him. He instinctively pulled a tarp from the garage and tried to cut off the oxygen by throwing it over the hood. He knew the fuel tank could blow at any time but he had to try. It was already a total loss but he fought it anyway. David had insurance but he loved his truck like a cowboy loves his horse.

The hair on the back of his neck crackled and curled up, singed by the heat. He got the garden hose out just as the fire truck roared up the driveway and stopped with a pop and a hiss from the air brakes. The first man out of the truck grabbed David and pushed him back. Another man opened a compartment door and ran out a red rubber hand line from a roller on the side of the pumper. He twisted the nozzle to change the flow from a wide fog to a hard straight stream. The single one and one half inch line instantly flooded the burning cab with water. Grey and white steam filled the entire yard. Another man stuck the nozzle of a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher in the broken driver's window and squeezed the handle. He blasted the cab with short honking blasts. Water vapor rolled off the old truck like water on a skillet,

and everyone knew it was out.

David sat on the tail board of the pumper with his head in his hands. A lieutenant in a clean white helmet and a clip board under his arm came over to get the information for his report. He looked straight at David and said, "Arson."

David was startled and said, "What did you say?"

"Arson. Somebody set it. Only diesel burns like that. I can smell it big time. You got any enemies? Got any idea who would do this"?

"Sort of." He had two theories but he was in no mood to elaborate. One was a cop and the other made him look like a paranoid idiot.

"This is arson Son. This is serious. Somebody's gonna buy some hard time. It's a big time felony. Tell me what you know. We're gonna find out anyway."

"I've been having some trouble. Somebody's been playing some pretty stupid jokes or something."

The lieutenant looked angry. "This ain't no joke. This is arson. I could smell the diesel before I got out of the truck. Somebody could have got hurt. And somebody could have died somewhere else because we couldn't get there in time. Because we were here."

"I know." He felt guilty.

"Who do you know that would do this"?. He put the clipboard down.

"Well, it's a bit of a long story." David dared not say anything about the cop's broken arm. "I put a paper about nationalizing the oil industry on the Internet. It seems to have pissed off some people. We've had a break in. I've been getting threats."

"Oh my God. This really IS a long story isn't it"?. He called to his men. "Hey you guys! Go on back! I'm gonna stay here and take a statement"! He motioned for a police officer to come over and one did.

"I'm Officer Johnson," he said.

The fireman pointed at David. “This gentleman has been getting some harassment from somebody. He said there was a break in, some threats, and now this.”

The officer blinked and asked, “Who do you think it is”?

David told them about the break in, the messages on the blog, about his teaching job and even about his suspension. He explained about the building that would no longer be coming from the oil money. He even tried to explain the firewall economy because they asked him about it. He admitted he'd been drinking but denied driving anywhere recently. He even had to deny any history of mental health treatment. The officer made a report but sounded skeptical. He frowned at David and asked, “So... Do you think the oil companies are out to get you”?

“I'm trying not to. Until now I thought it was most likely that somebody that knows me has a sick ass sense of humor, but this shit is no joke.” He tried to look sincere by looking the officer straight in the eye.

“You got any enemies”? I know he does, he thought. They always know who it is.

“I don't think so.” Like I'm gonna tell you I pissed off a cop, he thought. Cops don't do shit like that anyway. He was so confused that he couldn't concentrate. The combination of booze and adrenalin made him short of breath.

The cop looked at the truck again. “Any arguments or fights with anybody”?

“No,” he lied.

“Well, I don't think that writing something on the Internet would make an oil company do something like this. You said there were threats. From who”?

“Somebody wrote to me on the net the day of the break in and said, 'Nationalize this.' ”

He wrote it down. “As in nationalize oil”?

“I suppose.” David thought about the day that he bought the truck.

“Any other messages or communications”?

“Well yeah. People write comments about the paper all the time on the blog.”

“Negative comments”? He flipped a page over the top of his tablet.

“Some positive and some negative. Some would qualify as genuine hate mail, but that's how it is on the net.”

“Did anybody that heckled you identify themselves”?

“No. Of course not. Just screen names.” He smiled and stroked the singed hair on the back his neck. The skin there felt sunburned.

“Have you complained to your Internet provider”? This is weak, he thought.

“Of course not. That's what people do up there. It's not uncommon to say this or that. They can say anything. It's anonymous.”

“So this could be any number of people, but how would they know where you live”?

“Easy. They know where I work. I suppose I could have been followed or something too. It wouldn't be hard to find me.”

“Well, in any event, there will certainly be a further investigation. That's about all we can do for now. We'll have a report for the insurance company prepared. They'll need a report. Meanwhile leave the truck right there. Don't touch it. Don't move it.”

“OK.” David shook his hand.

The officer and the fire lieutenant talked to each other off to the side for a few minutes before leaving through the alley behind the garage. Dori was sitting on the back porch waiting. She called to David. “What did they say”?

“Arson.” He came over and sat down next to her.

They hugged. She kissed him on the forehead. “Oh David. Somebody burned your beautiful truck. I'm so sorry. I know how much you loved that truck. It's arson. No question about it.”

“They don't usually light up all by themselves.”

“First the break in and now this,” she cried, looking at the smoking mess.

“Yeah. But when I find out who did it, I'm NOT gonna be responsible for what I'm gonna do. Hell no. Never jack with a guy's woman or his truck or his mother.”

“Who's doing this David”? He knows, she thought. It's got something to do with that asshole Nick.

“I wish I knew. It might be the cop I hurt, but cops don't do shit like that. They don't have to.” He coughed and tried to spit the bitter metallic taste out of his mouth.

It's Nick alright, she thought. It has to be. “It's got to be somebody on the net,” she insisted. “I read the blog where they argue back and forth about your paper. Some of those jerks can be real mean. They would never talk like that if you knew who they were. They hide behind it.”

“After the break in, when we got that threat message, it disappeared right after we read it. I think it was a real threat. It was like they were watching us to see when we'd find it. We tried to print the damn thing but we weren't quick enough.”

“Can't the police do anything about it”?

He smiled and softly stroked the side of her face. “Don't hold your breath. They don't even take it seriously.” At least the fight is over, he thought.

“We need to show the police what they wrote. Can't we get it back”? She took his hand down.

“I don't know. They erased it. I don't know how to do that.” Maybe Nick does, he thought.

She looked at the ugly black spot in the yard where the grass was burned off, and knew that David would stop sitting out on the porch because it would remind him of the fire. “There's got to be a record of it somewhere,” she said. “It's on a server somewhere. They can find any email if they really want to. There is no permanent delete.” She thought his hair smelled like burning

rubber.

He coughed a few times and beat his chest to stop the tickling sensation in his lungs. “Shit. Anybody can post on there. They can say anything they want, and then just take it back down.” He thought about calling the computer science department at the college for help.

“But how do they know when to take it down David? How do they know you read it? What do...”

“They can tell if I'm logged on. They just wait until five minutes after they see me log on and delete it.”

She thought about it for a second or two. “If we catch it when it first goes up. Can we print it first? I mean be ready to print it right away.”

“I don't know why not. I suppose we can if we're lucky and quick.”

She sat up straight. “Maybe there's another one on there right now. Get the printer ready before we log on. If there's something there, we'll catch it.” She smiled and pushed on his back to hurry him up.

He stood up wiping his eyes. “You know, I think it just might work if we're lucky. They put up a threat after the break in. If it's the same people then they'll put one up after this too. We can snatch it off there. It should work.”

“Sure it will. Come on. Move it.”

They hurried inside. David turned on the printer and waited for what seemed like a long time for the thing to boot up. “You know what else I can do?” He asked. I can log on as a new user with a new screen name. They won't even know it's me. I can print something they posted on there before they know I've even read it.” He smiled.

“That's perfect. Move over.” She scooted in right next to him on the same chair. There wasn't quite enough room for both of them on there, so she threw her left leg over his lap and set off a cascade of testosterone that ran straight up his spine.

He tried to concentrate on making up a screen name. "OK. Uh huh. I know. How about Enigma43? Yeah. Password, Snoopy." He smiled and typed it in. "There. Now they'll flash me an e-mail to register it." He clicked open his mail folder. "There it is. Click on the hyper-link to register. I'm in. Now go to the paper. There. That was so easy. See all the comments after the paper?"

"There must be more than a hundred."

He rolled the little wheel on his mouse. "I'll scroll down to the bottom. Sort them by time." The screen changed instantly when he clicked *most recent*. "Shit! Look at that! That's it!"

"Where?"

"Look." The message was there in its own little paragraph. It was right between a compliment and a link that somebody put up to a research paper on clean coal.

Dori read it aloud. "*Good day comrade. I hear you have a classic pickup. I hear it's hot. God bless America. Quick!*" she screamed. "Print it now!"

"I got it. I got it." He smacked the return key way too hard.

"Hit it again." She jumped up and turned away, covering her eyes. "I can't look."

"Give it time." He listened for the printer to make a noise while holding his breath and beating himself up for not replacing it with a newer model.

"It's not working is it?" She moved her hands away and looked. "Hey! Hit select all!"

"OK. Right." He understood the strategy, pulled the menu down and did it.

"Hit copy." She covered her eyes again.

"I Got it. It's on the clipboard now."

She uncovered her eyes and reached over his shoulder. "Open up a new word processor file." He already had one open. "There. Hit paste."

"I'm saving it." He laughed and poked at the pull down menu. "Save as... Evidence. There we go. Oh yeah. We got it now baby."

He slapped his side. “Print that sucker, yeah”! They cheered.

The old printer squeaked like somebody scraping cheap metal on a chalkboard as they watched it run back and forth across the paper line by line. It was trying to print the whole blog from the opening page to the end so they knew it would take a few minutes. They celebrated and acted crazy, but got quiet when the thing suddenly froze and started buzzing before it got anywhere close to the good part.

Dori choked. “What now damn it”!

David smacked it hard on the side with an open hand. “It eats paper sometimes. It's taking four or five sheets at a time. Now it's out.”

“Oh here. Get out of the way.” She crammed a few inches of paper into the tray and hit the flashing yellow button. Her butt was right in his face while she stretched across the desk to reach it. It pulled her jeans super tight and David loved it. The screen cleared and the motor started again. *Eeek. Eeek. Eeek. Eeek.* She laughed. “Your printer is a piece of dog shit.”

“Remind me to replace it.” He was glad the fight was over. He was sick about the truck but the doctor was in. In a few minutes they had what they wanted, a copy of the threat. He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her in saying, “You know what else? If I do it like that. If I don't log on in my usual screen name, they won't even know I've seen the thing. They won't take it down. We can show the cops.”

“Shit that's right. Call 'em right now.” She pushed his arm away.

David moved a mess of papers and books around on the desk until he found the phone cord and followed it to the source. He scanned a sticker on the wall for the non-emergency number and punched up the Berwyn Police. They picked up right away.

“Berwyn Police Department. Officer Willis. How can I help you”?

“Hello. This is David Armstrong. The police were here today

because somebody torched my pickup and I'm calling in because the person that did it just put a note up on the Internet and they might delete it soon so I wanted to tell you so you could see it before they take it down.” Dori imagined the reaction on the other end and broke out laughing. She put her hands over her mouth and bent over to restrain the reflex. His run-on sentence made him sound like a nut case.

The cop said, “Hold on. Hold on there. Slow down.”

David put his palm over the phone and threw her an angry look that only made it worse. He held the receiver close and said, “I know officer. I'm sorry. This is a little complicated. Should I start at the beginning”? He sat down.

“Good idea. Start at the beginning. You say somebody set fire to your truck”?

“Yes sir.”

“What time was that today”?

“Just an hour or so ago.”

“There may not be a report yet. Who was the officer”?

“I'm sorry. I guess I forgot to write it down.”

“That's OK. Let me look. Hold on sir.” Radio traffic crackled in the background.

David put his hand over the receiver and whispered, “He's going to get the report.” He thought about what he would tell the insurance lady. He tried to remember what was in the truck. He always kept the title in the glove compartment. The cop came back on. “David Armstrong right”?

“That's right.”

“I have it right here sir. Looks like arson. That's not official yet though. You say the arsonist contacted you sir”?

“I think so. He put up a message for me on the Internet.”

“Was it addressed to you directly”?

“Not exactly, but I know what it means. The guy said, *I hear you have a hot pickup commie.*”

“That's it”?

“Who else would say that today? I mean right after the fire.” He started to get angry.

“That's not a lot to go on sir. No way to trace it even.” He thought about the Internet police detail.

“I guess not, but I know it's him. No doubt about it now. I know I'm in danger, and there's nothing you can really do about it is there”?

“This says you had a break in and now an arson. Somebody's not happy with you. All we can do is keep an eye out around your house. Have they ever called you on the phone”?

“No. And I bet they won't either.” He frowned at Dori. She raised her eyebrows and understood.

“We could put a tap on it if they call sir.” I don't know what to tell this guy, he thought.

David was short with him. “No. That's OK. I think it's time to move.”

“Be sure and call us right away if you find out anything else. I'd like to help you but there's nothing else I can think of right now. Keep your doors locked and tell the neighbors to watch the house when you're away. OK sir”?

“Sure. I know you're doing what you can do under the circumstances.”

“Why don't you give us a call tomorrow. We have an officer that tracks Internet creeps that go after kids. Maybe he'd know something we can do. Ask for Officer Duke.”

“Thanks. That's a good idea.”

“No problem. Have a nice evening sir.”

David hung up, looked at Dori and tried to act like it was no big deal. “Can I stay with you tonight”?

## Chapter 12

David woke up on the left side of Dori's bed, the wrong side for his back. He always slept on his arm, the same arm every night, and he always slept on the right side of the bed, so now he was stiff and sore. He watched the morning sun project a long bright stripe across the floor through the opening between the curtains. The sunny zone illuminated tiny specks of weightless dust that are only visible in that kind of light. He blew a long concentrated stream of air across the room and watched them swirl like baby stars in a little universe being acted on by some unseen mover.

Dori rolled out of bed and went to the bathroom without saying a word. David sensed that he was still in the dog house. Even a bad dog gets to spend the night inside if it's raining, he thought. He went to the kitchen, turned on the radio and sat down with the news while he waited for her to pass sentence. She came out and started the coffee without a word or even making eye contact. It was at least five long minutes before he broke the silence. "I take it you don't know what to think either."

"What"? Now it's my problem, she thought.

He made a little boy face. "I want to know what you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking about anything. I'm just trying to wake up." He's got to be hungover, she thought.

"I'm wondering if you're still angry at me. You let me stay. You made love to me. And now I'm thinking, that you could be

thinking, that you shouldn't have because I might take it the wrong way and go on boozing and take you for granted. Is that what you're thinking"?

"As a matter of fact." She smiled behind his back. God he's good, she thought.

"I never said I wouldn't stop. I just said it would be hard to stop cold turkey, that's all."

"OK." She wiped the counter and had trouble picking up the coffee grounds with a wet paper towel.

"So I don't have to stop cold turkey"? He wanted that back.

"You can do whatever you want. I'm not gonna tell you what to do." Nice try, she thought.

He looked disgusted but amused. "Women always do that."

She didn't like it. "Women always do what"?

"That's so manipulative. They decide what they want and then they hem haw around until he thinks he chose it himself."

"Excuse me"?

"The wife wants peas for dinner. She asks the husband if he wants peas or carrots. If he says peas then she just says OK. If he says carrots then she asks what's wrong with peas, or something to that effect, just to keep the ball in the air. She dances him around in circles until he says 'why don't we have peas?' Then she says, 'good idea Dear.' "

"I don't do that. Hand me your cup."

"Yes you do. You all do. It's taught in woman school. They teach you that men think they need to make all the decisions, and if you want something you have to fool them." He laughed.

"You did sleep on your bad side last night. Would you like to go back to bed and try getting up again."

"Depends."

"Oh drink your coffee."

"Can I use your computer then"?

"Already"? She worried about having her computer spied on too.

"I can't help it. I gotta look at the blog and see if there's anything else on there."

"Knock yourself out." He usually starts smoking pot by now, she thought.

He sat down in front of her flat screen monitor. She had his picture framed and propped up next to it. "Oh shit. I forgot the new screen name. I don't want to go through all that again. I'll call Nick."

"Oh great." Why don't you ask him over too, she thought.

He poked the number into Dori's tiny pink cordless phone and Nick picked up. "Yello."

"Hey Nick, it's me."

"Shit. I've been trying to find you man. No answer at your place."

"You know about the truck"?

"What truck"?

"My truck got torched yesterday." Dori threw him a guilt stare.

"Oh shit. Not the Ford? How bad is it? Did you get it out before..."

"Total loss. Crispy critters. I'm hiding at Dori's."

"Man I'm so sorry. Son of a bitch Red. Did you call the cops"?

"Oh yeah. There was a message on the blog about it too. They said my truck was hot."

"Oh my God. So THAT'S what that was. I saw that shit. I get it now. Son of a bitch."

Dori banged some pans around in a way that let David know that he was not going to be spending the day with Nick. David tried to speed up the conversation. "What were you trying to call me about dude"?

"I got a call from the BBC about you."

"The what"?. Dori looked worried.

"The real BBC. Some guy wants to interview you man."

He laughed. "About the paper"?

"Yeah. About the paper, and the blog, and getting fired, and the

break in. Shit dude. He doesn't even know about the truck yet. The whole blog is screaming about how big oil is trying to take out the honest professor.”

“I can't go to England.” Dori threw up her hands.

“On the phone dude. He wants to interview you on the phone. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't officially accept for you. Can I give him your number?”

He threw Dori a reassuring look. “How do we know who it really is”?

“I checked it. I called the number right back and got the switchboard. It's the BBC alright. You're gonna be famous dude. This is your fifteen minutes.”

He laughed. “No shit. When”?

“Today man. As soon as you can. You want to call him back or you want me to”?

“You do it. You already talked to him. Give him Dori's number. I need to prepare some notes. I need all the time I can get. By the way comrade, did you hear that Carl Rove quit”? He laughed.

“Yeah I heard. I'm talking about it a little bit in today's column along with some labor history stuff about Mother Jones.”

“Rove is gone man. What an ass hole. He's an Orwellian evil genius. Bush's evil brain. I'd like five minutes alone with that pig.”

“He's not so smart dude. His goal was to get a permanent republican administration. All that he caused was a permanent democratic administration.” They laughed. “I'm gonna call the BBC guy, and then I'll call you right back. OK”?

“OK thanks.” He looked at Dori and smiled, but he felt like he was walking on rice paper.

“Call you right back professor.” Nick hung up.

David spoke softly. “You won't believe this, but I'm going to be on the BBC talking about my firewall system and I need to...”

“You gonna be sober”? She feared that the pressure would make him put off quitting.

“I don't ever work drunk. You know that.” She thinks I can't control it, he thought. She thinks I'd teach when I was high.

“Maybe the trick is to keep you working all the time.” She laughed.

He got up and started moving things around on the side table. “I need to make some notes. Can you get me some paper?”

She pointed. “Under the phone.”

He found her yellow note pad with the smiley faces on it and started to outline the main points of his plan for worldwide economic justice. He scribbled down personal symbols and talking points complete with 1As and 2Bs. He had barely started when the phone rang back and he snapped it right up. “Hey that you”?

“It's me. You're on the air in an hour professor.” He laughed. “You're global now. Start the damn revolution. This is gonna be so cool. His name is Richard Wells. He covers economics man.”

“An hour huh.” David felt ready. If he covers economics then this will be easy, he thought.

“It's taped,” said Nick. “You can take something out later if you ask them to. You can do this thing Red. Just explain the paper. Tell them about the firewall and how it works. Then call me right back and tell me when he says it'll be on the air. You gonna be famous man.”

“Thanks to you.” He laughed.

“No charge man.”

“Dude. I don't know if I should thank you or ring your neck.”

“Don't you chicken out on me mister. The world awaits.” Nick laughed.

“You ARE nuts. I don't think your mother got enough folic acid or something when she was pregnant with you.” They laughed.

“Yeah probably, but don't tell anybody man. Just call me right after it's over. Shit David. Don't keep me hanging. OK”?

“OK sure. Later on dude.” He hung up smiling.

David smiled like a kid on Christmas and said, “I can't believe

I'm going to be interviewed on the BBC.”

“Oh my God. You weren't kidding were you.” She laughed. “When?”

“In about an hour, over the phone.”

“Live? What station? Can we get it here?” She started to clear the table.

“No. It's not on the radio yet. It's recorded. We'll find out when it's on and tell everybody ahead of time. I think I need to rehearse my notes real quick.”

She thought about being right there during the interview and straightened her shirt like she could be seen on the radio. “I don't have a speaker on the phone. I need a speaker phone David.”

He was somewhere else. “I wonder if I should quote statistics or just be general.”

“Who has a speaker phone David”? She thought about going to the office to get one. She wanted to hear the interview in real time.

“I don't need any notes. I know what to say.” He came around. “What did you say hon”?

“I'm going out. I need a speaker phone.” She grabbed her keys and started tying her shoes.

David looked over for just a second. “See if you can get something to record it on too. If not, then that's OK.”

“Good idea. I'll be right back.” She closed the door a little too hard on the way out causing it to pop back open and break David's concentration. He knew he didn't need to, but he couldn't resist the temptation to write a few more notes. What started as a minor preparation turned into a four page outline. A new idea would intrude and have to be squeezed into the margins. The fear of momentarily forgetting something that he might need in a pinch was annoying.

He felt silly, and he was soon beset by a familiar urge to brace himself with a stiff drink. He realized that he wouldn't be tempted at all if Dori could see what he was doing, and the idea that he

was trying to sneak in a fix really disgusted him. He ran off the temptation by confronting the denial directly. Not today, he thought. Not here. Not now. This is my day, and I'm not going to allow anything to spoil any part of it. I may never have another day like it. I'm going to talk to the whole world at once, and my idea will get a fair and wide hearing. If I screw it up I won't be able to blame it on booze.

He watched the clock and waited for the call. Turning on the radio didn't pass the time any faster. For thirty minutes he tried to anticipate the questions and practiced responding out loud. He enjoyed the sound of his own voice and experimented with it while imagining how it would sound to a commuter listening to a car radio.

Dori came in rustling paper bags, but David didn't notice and kept up his oration. She listened for a minute, cleared her throat and said, "Sounds good dear."

He jumped a little. "I was just..."

"I found one." She put the bags on the table and pulled out two little orange boxes. "I got a phone with a speaker, and I bought this little recorder thing to record it. The lady said it was for like when your ex-husband calls and you want to save it for the judge." She laughed.

Fantastic. Hurry up and plug it in. The interview guy might call while we're hooking it up."

"Are you nervous"? She unplugged the old phone from the wall plug.

"Is a bullfrog waterproof"? He laughed. "I wish I had more notice."

"Nobody knows the thing better than you do. Just explain it like you're talking to me." He ripped the plastic off the phone while she peeked in the kitchen cabinet and confirmed that the whiskey was still unopened. She figured that the odds were about fifty fifty for drinking when she left and couldn't contain her joy. "David! You know what I think? I think you're gonna be famous."

She smiled at him in a way that all men love to see.

“You think so lover”? He felt like a king.

“I know so.”

“I hope you're right,” he said, tugging at his belt and getting up to go to the bathroom.

Dori hooked up her new phone gear and called a friend from work. She asked her buddy to hang up and call her right back so she could test the connection. The return ring made David panic and stumble out of the bathroom while frantically zipping up his jeans.

“I got it,” He yelled, hopping up to the table.

She waved him off. “I'm just testing it already.”

He laughed and begged, “Please don't be too long.”

She smiled and returned to her friend. “I gotta go. I'll call you back and tell you all about it later.” She put the phone on the table where David had his notes arranged in a little semicircle. They took their seats and stared at the clock. They wouldn't have long to wait, but the situation was strange and uncomfortable for both of them. The anxiety had to go somewhere so they poked and teased each other like kids in a junior high school lunch room until the phone finally chirped. David slapped the table. Dori switched on the tape and danced out of the room.

David took three deep breaths and picked it up. “Hello.”

The man from the BBC was on the line. His voice sounded resonant and polished. “Is this Mr. Armstrong”?

“Yes it is. Go ahead.”

“Good day to you sir. This is Richard Wells with the BBC.”

“Yes yes. I've been expecting you.”

“Well then professor. If I may. I would like to ask you about your controversial paper and all the buzz on the Internet. Do you have a few minutes then”?

He swallowed hard. “Sure go ahead. I'm looking forward to it. Thanks for the opportunity.”

“Very well, let's get started. I'm turning on the tape now. This is

Richard Wells and I am on the phone with David Armstrong. Mr. Armstrong teaches economics at the University of Chicago. His paper *The Firewall Economy* has recently created quite a stir on several prominent political blogs. The idea, as I understand it, is to create a hybrid of socialism and capitalism. In his paper he calls for the nationalization of the American oil companies, among other things, and he has subsequently been fired from his job at the university. Is that right sir”?

“I’m not quite fired yet. I’m under suspension.”

“You were suspended for publishing your paper on the Internet after you were forbidden from doing so by the university, is that right sir”?

“No, not exactly. They asked me not to publish it in a professional journal. It was put on the Internet by a friend of mine who is a rather prolific blogger.”

“I see. And I take it the university did not approve of that? Do they have a policy of censoring what the faculty can publish on the Internet”?

“I don’t think so. This is the first time I’ve heard of any such thing.”

“And then there are the conspiracy theories that speculate that you have made some very powerful enemies in the oil companies who do not wish you well. I understand your home was broken into. I have read in more than one place that you are being stalked on the Internet, and that your car was burned.”

“Truck. It was a truck. News travels fast. My friend’s home was broken into. We’ve seen some threatening messages on the blog. They seem... Whoever it is, they seem to take responsibility for what’s happening.”

“Are the police involved”?

“Yes of course.” He heard Dori swearing about something in the other room.

“Have they, the people taking responsibility I mean, have they identified themselves in any way”?

“No, not exactly.” Please ask me an open ended question, he thought.

“Well anyway I understand that the university is now the target of much criticism around the whole issue. Isn't there is a petition to get them to divest from non-renewable energy and big oil”?

“I heard something to that effect, but that did not come from me.”

“I understand your caution professor, but do you really think you are actually being stalked by the oil industry”?

He sighed. “I don't know. I can't see why I would be that important to them. Even if I'm not their favorite person, I'm just an academic. What do they want from me? What do they want me to do”?

“Surely you can see why they might be concerned about all the activity you stirred up on the blogs. I understand that a fair number of people are writing their congressional representatives about you. They agree with you about the government taking control of energy production.”

“I understand. But I don't want the government to take over everything. I only want them to regulate necessities. Energy is a necessity. You can't live without it. The price is very high and the rich pay the same price as the poor. With finite resources, you know. That's a recipe for disaster.”

“Or a revolution”?

“This is already a revolution. It started in 1776 and it's not over yet. We could still lose it. We get closer to a monarchy all the time.”

“You can't blame us this time.” They laughed. “Without being too technical sir, could you explain your economic model for our listeners? What is it about your firewall economy that is so controversial”?

“Well I know why it's different, but it shouldn't be controversial. It should appeal to capitalists too. I built that in.”

“How's that”?

“It leaves far more room in the economy for capitalism than is available even now. It just restricts capitalism to luxuries and prohibits the market exploitation of necessities.”

“I see. That does sound like a new idea. I've read your paper and I found it interesting. Could you explain it a little more for our listeners that haven't read it”?

“Sure. In simple language, my position is that there are basically only two kinds of national economic systems; open market capitalism, and planned, government managed economies, socialism if you wish. I'm not talking about democracy or totalitarianism here mind you. Most people equate socialism with totalitarianism. Those are different issues altogether. I'm for democracy in all things. There are countries that are socialist and democratic at the same time. My position is that all economies are actually mixed economies. There are no economic systems that are purely socialist or capitalist. The problem is that these two models are incompatible. They don't mix well. The left is always trying to pull the thing far enough to the left to cover necessities, and the right is always trying to pull us far enough to the right to protect fairly earned wealth and private property.”

“I understand. But if capitalism and socialism are incompatible then why are you for a mixed economy”?

“I'm for a split economy with a firewall between luxuries and necessities. Two economies running parallel if you will. Historically, socialism does a much better job of providing a safety net for the necessities of life. Capitalism does a better job motivating people to innovate, take risks, and work hard. Why not have a centralized planned, public sector, market to provide necessities, and leave everything else for the so called free market? I want to keep them apart. Maybe mixed isn't the right word. Part socialist and part capitalist, but they can't play in the same yard at the same time.

“I see”? He laughed.

“The profit motive shouldn't be allowed anywhere near

necessities. Look at our health care system. We spend more than anybody else and still have one third of the population without any coverage at all. That's what happens when you let greed get too close to a market for something that people can't refuse to buy. Nobody should be allowed to profit on something like that. On the other hand, if you corner the diamond market, then more power to you. Nobody ever died from lack of diamonds. We need a rational firewall between the private and public sectors.”

“And what about oil”?

“The energy that's used for necessities like home heating should be not for profit. Gas for your speed boat is fair game. Right now, if a corporation buys a three martini lunch, the fuel it takes to drive to the Hooters is deductible. A kid that drives to a minimum wage job every day can't deduct the fuel cost for that. It's just not rational.”

“At this point I suppose a classical socialist would ask why you would favor any capitalism at all.”

“Because pure socialism would cause capital flight. The rich would take the money and run. The socialists don't need to bankrupt the rich just to cover necessities. I'm not trying to make the poor and the middle class rich either. I'm just trying to get a real safety net in place. Necessities should be out of bounds, but everything else can be fair game. It won't create a classless society, but it will provide a reasonable level of security for everyone without scaring the rich folks away.”

“Who decides what qualifies as a protected necessity and what is considered a luxury”?

“Good question. Democracy. The people do. Instead of voting for a person to go and vote for them on every issue, the people could vote directly on the issues themselves. Our technology has rendered representative democracy unnecessary and inefficient. Every budget line item could be voted on separately and frequently. That is, if we can get the fraud out of electronic voting, and we can. We can leave a paper trail. Instead of voting

for a person that you hope will vote for national health care, you can vote for the line item expenditure to be treated as a necessity in the budget. People could vote up or down on a number of line items at the same time.”

“A line item veto for every voter”?

“Exactly. You could split your vote up anyway you want, and not have to search for a candidate that feels exactly the way that you do on every issue. Every voter has a perfectly designed representative, themselves.”

“What happens if... Well. After all the voting is over, and we find that everybody voted like anything and everything is a necessity, and there isn't enough money to pay for it all, what happens then”?

“The other good question. In my model there has to be a balanced budget by law. If at the end of voting the budget doesn't balance, and a tax increase is rejected, then we have to vote again, and again, until we have a balance. That will motivate people not to ask for more than they actually need.”

“Sounds like my house.” He laughed.

“Right. That's how a rational family decides how to set the family budget.”

“Well then professor. Let's see where you fall. Are big homes a necessity or a luxury, in your opinion”?

“Make that three good points. You don't have to vote up or down on all homes large and small. You could set aside a number, say \$150,000 worth of equity that's protected as a necessity, with anything over that being a luxury. That's real democracy. Many things are debatable. Is a cell phone a luxury? Not by me. Is the Internet? I don't think so but you might. Heart drugs that are generic? Yes. Viagra? No. New brand name heart drugs that aren't any better than the generic? Not by me, but it's up to the people. If they want to give up something else to get them, whatever that may be at the time, then they can vote that way.”

“What about the BBC”? They laughed.

“I vote necessity. Private media shouldn't be a monopoly. Capitalism won't work with information anyway. People are just now figuring that out. If I sell you some information I give it to you, but I still have it. There can be no scarcity and therefore no supply and demand. Everybody's looking for an economic model for information. How do you get paid in the information age? You work for the government who pays you a salary, and then they give the product away to the people for free.”

“Sounds like the original BBC. It's more private now. And what about commercials?”

“Not on the news.” They laughed.

“Very good indeed. I have another question. Now that communism is dead and capitalism is the way the third world is moving, how do you see your model being received?”

“First of all, socialism is not communism. I'm for democracy. But socialism is not dead. Capitalism didn't defeat socialism when the Berlin wall came down. The USSR wasn't brought to its knees by a morally superior economic system. It was brought down by force. The Russians couldn't build weapons as fast as our military industrial complex without going broke. All that proves is that we screwed them before they could screw us. You know, when the Berlin wall fell, all you heard in the media was that communism was dead. Look at China.”

“Oh my yes.”

“They're kicking our butt now and they're communist. We're out of oil and Russia is sitting on a huge lake of the stuff. We spoke too soon. Has China really gone capitalist, or are they just fooling us? Communists are raised to believe that capitalism is greedy and evil. Then they see us force Russia to go capitalist. They saw it in China. They could be taking us on in a more subtle way. They still believe capitalism is flawed. We try to shove it down their throats and they say, 'you want capitalism? Here it comes.' Rather than trying to out-build us with military hardware, they just lull us to sleep and bleed us to death with our greed.”

“Oh dear.”

“They make our food now. It's polluted, but it's our food. When we spend more than we make, they buy up the debt. Soon we may be dependent on them to the degree that our national security is at risk. They don't have to shoot at us. They can pull the rug out from under us at any time. They're chess players, and we're poker players. They can survive on much less. We're spoiled and greedy and they know it. They can, and will, use it against us. People in communist countries think capitalism is smoke and mirrors. They didn't just all of a sudden stop believing that. They know that when the USSR collapsed; all it really proved was that we temporarily, only temporarily, had bigger guns, and that we would break the frigging bank to keep it that way. I'm sorry. Can you bleep that out”?

“That's quite alright.” He laughed.

“Now we spend a million dollars on a missile to blow up an old pickup truck from space. They're chess players. That's like sacrificing a queen for a pawn. I'm telling you man, they're doing a rope-a-dope on the international chessboard. Whoops. That's a mixed metaphor. Anyway, they bet on us getting too full of ourselves, and so far it looks like their strategy is working.”

“Do you think the trend toward privatization is peaking”?

“I hope so. I never thought they would privatize the army. Look at all the mercenaries. Talk about a threat to national security. A private troop can quit. What if they privatized the whole army, and the troops went out on strike during an actual enemy attack”?

They laughed.

“They would certainly be negotiating from a position of strength.”

“That's right. They're even trying to privatize the roads now. Selling public property. The governor wants to sell the lottery. The lottery can go, but keep the roads.”

“My dear professor. I can see why you're not a favorite of the neoconservatives.”

“Their policies are more fascist than conservative. When you have big business in bed with the government at the expense of the regular guy, that's fascism. I feel like I'm in prewar Germany. The elections are fixed. Government is for sale. Wars of imperialism. They raided the treasury for the rich. Nine-eleven gave them an excuse to go for it. Now the democrats will inherit the aftermath and be associated with hard times, while we tighten our belts to pay for the war.”

“You really think there's a fascist conspiracy”?

“I don't know. But there's enough evidence out there already to justify doing everything we can in case there is. I even heard a rumor that they might call off the next election, you know, given some quote unquote, emergency. I wouldn't put it past them.”

“Like a terrorist attack”?

“Who knows? They could just make one up. I think they call it a false flag operation. They might not even have to fake it. Something could really happen. We're not exactly loved around the world after the neocons did their thing.”

He laughed. “Mr. Blair certainly paid a price for his friendship with Mr. Bush.”

“Many thanks to my friends across the sea. I was glad to see that the English were not taken in as easily as we were. They know a thing or two about fascism and imperialism.”

“You're welcome sir. But let me ask you. Your views are certainly a minority opinion in the United States. How do you feel about your surprising popularity on the Internet and the controversy surrounding your paper”?

“With all due respect, how would you know if my position was a minority opinion? From CNN? How about FOX? We have no unbiased media left in America, with the exception of say Pacifica. You know, Democracy Now. For all I know most people agree with me. We don't even get the real BBC TV. We get BBC America. Even PBS has been partially corrupted. Big media is an important part of our right wing conspiracy. We never leave home

without it.”

He laughed. “What do you think history will say about the Bush administration? Do you think it will be remembered as the worst administration of all time as some have suggested?”

David laughed and tried to remember his notes. “Let me list a few things. This is the Bush legacy. Tax cuts for the rich that trashed the economy. A preemptive war. Torture. Less separation of church and state. Less privacy. Rejection of the UN and the World Court. He doesn't like the world court but he likes the World Bank.” They laughed.

“He appointed Paul Wolfowitz to run it.”

“That he did.” David laughed. “The world hates us. Terrorist attacks are up since the neocons got in, not the other way around. They got in, and then we got nine-eleven. Terrorists actually love Bush. He's great for recruiting.”

“I can imagine.”

“What else is different? Military spending is way up. Health care coverage is way short of the mark. No bid contracts to cronies are rampant. He actually tried to privatize social security.”

“That didn't get very far did it?”

“Thank God. We now have four consecutive years of increases in the percentage of Americans living in poverty, and the top ten percent are wealthier than the bottom half of the entire population.”

“The shrinking of the middle class.”

“All this happened behind the smoke of nine-eleven. Bush... Instead of standing up like FDR and saying 'all we have to fear is fear itself'... He said, 'be afraid'. He stoked the fear to cover a move to the extreme right. Thank God he's finally run out of momentum. People need to read history. We've seen this play before folks.”

“Do you see change on the political horizon?”

“Sure I do. But I don't think it's time to relax. He could still attack Iran. He could pull a Gulf of Tonkin and just attack.”

“You are referring to the incident that started the Vietnam war.”

“See. You have to say that because there are still people out there who don't even know that much history. We know now... It's been out for a long time that it was all made up. Nobody shot at that boat. How many Americans know that the actual incident that started the Vietnam war was a lie? Bush could just say the Iranians shot down a helicopter or something.”

“Or an Iranian speedboat attacked a ship.”

“Exactly. Right now Bush is actually using the Vietnam war as a reason NOT to leave Iraq. This is classic Carl Rove crap. The trick is to attack the opponent's strong point. The democrats are falling for it too. We've been waiting a long time for the people to see Iraq as just another Vietnam and blame Bush. Now Bush is saying that Iraq IS another Vietnam, and the democrats are saying it's different. Sure it's Vietnam. The lesson of Vietnam is that wars for empire, in addition to being immoral, do not work.”

“I suppose that all nations are tempted by thoughts of empire at some point.”

“Bush is a draft dodger and a hypocrite. How he can get in front of the VFW and talk that hawk stuff is beyond me. Why do they even let him in the building? Even Hitler was a veteran.”

“Oh my.”

“Rove read Orwell and Sinclair Lewis too. He thinks *It can't happen here* and *1984* are reverse blueprints for the RNC. They threw out the constitution. They ignore the law. They're off the scale now. They must be desperate but that's the scary part. They could do anything. They know their time is running out.”

“What do you see happening now”?

David took a deep breath. “I think it's important to prosecute all of these people no matter how long it takes, even after Bush is out of office. We should bring every charge to every member of this gang and prosecute every crime, every cover up, no matter how long it takes. If we don't... I don't see how the United States could ever fully recover. We'd never be the same again if any one of

these people gets away with anything at all. You know what I mean. It would only encourage other people to try it again in the future.”

“That might take a while.” He laughed.

“Dear God. A kid who sells drugs on a street corner gets more time than somebody in high office that commits treason. These crooks raided the treasury, and very few of them are likely to pay much of a price for it unless we find the resolve to stay after them. It CAN happen here.” Calm down, he thought.

“You are referring of course to the book by Sinclair Lewis. I believe it was a fictional account of a Nazi takeover in the United States.”

“That's right. I'm reading it again right now and the parallels are amazing. I think Carl Rove read it and wagered that he could pull it off just that way. He thinks he can get away with it because most people didn't read the book or something. He's certainly got the cross wrapped in the flag thing going on.”

“In the book, Sinclair Lewis says that if fascism comes to America it will come as a cross wrapped in a flag. Isn't that right”?

David laughed. “That's the idea. I'm not sure that's an exact quote. I hear Huey Long also said something like that too.”

“Rove courted the fundamentalist Christian vote.”

“Oh yeah. The evangelicals. They used to be called the moral majority. If that ain't Orwellian I don't know what is. And now I hear Carl says he's an agnostic. Didn't anybody ask him before now? He advises Bush to say Orwellian stuff. It reminds me of old southern politicians who used to play word tricks on uneducated voters. 'I have been told that the wife of my opponent is a thespian.' And that sort of thing. Orwell wrote *1984* to prevent the misuse of language, but his book may have actually encouraged it. It's like a book on how to protect your house from a burglar. Thieves read it too.”

“I suppose so professor,” he laughed. “I think Orwell is more

popular today than when I read him in the sixties.”

“People are starting to realize how right he was. These are historic times. It's no coincidence that the concentration of wealth at the top hasn't been this bad since just before the Depression. But I think we may have even gone beyond the conditions of that time. A lot of things are even worse than they were then.”

“Such as?”

“Our soldiers can't even get out of the army when their hitch is up. They just keep them. They're only supposed to do that during a real war, like in World War Two. You could be drafted for the duration of the war. But this war on terrorism thing will never be over. The troops could be held like slaves, indefinitely. The only reason we don't see more people in the streets right now is because there's no draft.”

“The all volunteer army.”

“I'm not so sure about the volunteer part. These people aren't really free to choose. They're under duress. They need the money and the benefits. The good news is that the African American community didn't fall for it this time. During Vietnam, Blacks were like eleven percent of the population and thirty percent of the army. Now they're about the same proportion in the army as they are in the general population.”

“I see. I didn't know that.”

“Their parents tell them not to go. The army is running commercials targeted at minority parents to get them to change their minds and let their kids enlist.”

“I've seen some of those.”

“Troops are in very short supply. They had to use the National Guard and even a lot of mercenaries this time. Can you imagine being in the guard and serving next to a mercenary that makes a thousand dollars a day? I'd be pissed. Some of these people are on their third tour and they're not even in the regular army. The guard is supposed to be part time. Even the regular army used to have it better than this. During Vietnam you did your year in combat and

you were done. Bush needs to drive a jeep down a main street in Baghdad and see what it feels like.”

He laughed. “They could paint *Mission Accomplished* on the jeep.”

“That's right. The hawk needs to walk the walk. This is what you get when the companies that supply the military are in the private sector. As long as war is profitable, the arms makers will find a way to start another one. No war, no profit. Some things just don't work in the private sector. If we privatized our fire departments and paid them by the fire, the firemen in low fire zones would be torn between arson and poverty.”

He laughed. “So you're for the nationalization of the arms industry, the military industrial complex. Your President Eisenhower would approve.”

“Defense is a necessity. Necessities should not be prey for profit seekers. It's a matter of national defense too. It makes us weaker. Why let rich capitalists rip us off in war time? Look at the no bid contracts. What if we lost a war because we wasted a large chunk of our industrial resources? We could lose because we bought hardware that wasn't the best. We don't get the best stuff. We don't even get the most economical stuff. We get what the K Street lobby tells us to buy.”

“And I understand the practice is perfectly legal.”

“Legalized bribery. Look at the body armor. The best body armor is Dragon Skin. It's made in California. It's not cheap, but being expensive doesn't usually stop the Pentagon from buying something. The troops don't get Dragon Skin. They get the old stuff. Parents are having bake sales to buy the good stuff for their kids, and then the army tells the troops they can't wear it. The mercenaries that guard the big shots can wear it, but not the regular army. I'll bet Bush wears it if he's in a danger zone.”

“Indeed. And that reminds me. I see that the delivery of your new blast resistant vehicles has been delayed.”

“Yeah, I saw that. I don't think the answer is to build stronger

and stronger vehicles. The enemy will just ramp up the explosives. The answer is to stop driving down a road that's not secure. The answer is to get out of there. I think some contractor sees an opportunity to sell us an endless stream of ten million dollar trucks. That's what I think."

"I was a small child here when the Germans were bombing. Everything was rationed. My parents grew vegetables on every little spot of earth. We grew mushrooms under the front porch. The cost of the war is amazing."

"We should be rationing gas right now instead of making poor people pay three dollars a gallon to get to work. Rich people can burn it in their yachts during a war and pay the same price." He thought about FDR.

"Do you think Iraq is about the oil"?

"Sure it is, but not the way people think. The big hang up seems to be privatizing the oil over there, and the Iraqis won't do it. They know what's going on. But you know what, I think big oil actually succeeded at... They achieved their real goal. The goal wasn't to pump the Iraqi oil but to keep it in the ground. It's simple supply and demand."

"To keep the price up"?

"Bush is an oil man. The more oil that's on the market the lower the price. Bush profits just by stirring up the world and causing panic. The more panic the higher the price. He gets them to cut off their own supply. The Saudis kept the Iraqi oil in the ground through sanctions. Then, just as the sanctions were to come off, here we go with the war. Now they can't pump it because of sabotage. Any idiot can just cut a pipeline way out in the desert. Come on folks. The goal of the Bush gang is not to steal us some cheap oil. He loves three dollar gas. He's an oil man."

"And so is the vice president."

"People think they're out to save us from high prices. When have the republicans ever shown us any human compassion for

the regular guy? What an enormous character discrepancy.” David laughed until he coughed.

“Let's stay with that. We run a lot of stories on the BBC about Iran. The vice president is all but calling for military intervention there. The majority of Americans do not agree with him. Don't you think public opinion will preclude an attack by US forces?”

“Since when did public opinion matter to him? The majority voted against Bush in the first election. Public opinion voted him back to Texas. He doesn't even have to run again now. He thinks he can start any war he wants.”

“My dear professor. Surely you don't think the administration would go it alone.”

“Oh God. I think a lot of the troops would probably go AWOL. I think they'd just go home. Or go to Canada. I hear we have over ten thousand deserters now. That's a whole division for the army. You won't hear that on CNN. The people who went to Canada during Vietnam were pardoned, and this group will eventually be pardoned too.”

“Your people seem frustrated with the democrats. They won a majority in the last election and a mandate to stop the war, but the war goes on. There are more American troops over there now than before the election. How do you feel about that? How would it be different under your firewall system? If I understand you correctly, the voters could simply refuse to fund the war.”

“First of all, the democrats don't have sixty votes and I understand that. Bush will veto anything. I do wish they would try harder to persuade a few more republicans to get on board. I hope the republicans pay for it big time in the next election. I do think there's more that the democratic majority can do though. They gave up too easy. They should walk out or something. Throw blood on the steps.”

“Oh my.”

“I think some of the democrats aren't really FOR stopping the war. I'd like to see them singled out and replaced at election time.

To answer your question about the firewall system, it's easy to imagine that if the people could vote frequently on individual budget issues, you know, rather than just periodically on candidates in general, then I think the war would already be over."

"I understand."

"But look at what we have to do to stop it. We have to control both houses of congress with sixty votes in the senate. Then we have to hope our representatives will vote down the funding. It only takes a few bribes from the other side to screw it up. We should be able to vote directly on the funding. So much for wedge issues. It wouldn't matter if your representative was a democrat or a republican, whether they were for or against abortion or gay rights, or any other single issue. We could just stop the money and stop the war."

"A line item veto for each individual voter."

"A line item vote. We sort of do that now. If a senator gets a million emails to vote up or down on a bill, well, they'll usually follow public opinion. We vote every day in reality. Congressional staffers know that only ten percent care enough to write. They multiply each letter by ten. They get ten emails, that's a hundred votes. They get a thousand emails, and you get their attention."

"You are listening to the BBC. We are talking with professor David Armstrong about his controversial economic model to construct a legislative firewall between markets for necessities and luxuries. Now professor, the Internet is certainly making a big impact, wouldn't you agree"?"

"Sure. Congress is supposed to have control of the purse, but the Internet will eventually give the people control of the purse. We have a representative democracy. It was the only thing practical at first. When the country was founded it was very difficult just to travel to the congress. They went by horse and buggy once a year or something. It took weeks just to get there.

Individual voters couldn't vote on every single issue. The idea was to elect a representative to vote for you. Hopefully, they voted the way you wanted most of the time. That's not very precise and certainly vulnerable to corruption."

"The news traveled slowly too."

"That's right. A person might never know how their representative voted. Now that we're past the horse and buggy days, you know, it's practical for individuals to vote more frequently. I like to use the analogy of a mutual fund manager. People who have their retirement money in stocks don't have the time to vote on every buy and sell decision. They appoint a fund manager to vote for them. But what if you had to pick a manager every four years and you couldn't change one between cycles. What if you had absolutely no say in what they bought or sold with your money on a daily basis and you couldn't fire them on the spot. That's the way it is with politicians. They can turn on you and and duck it for years. People have short memories too."

"I see. That's an interesting comparison. Before we go, let me ask you about the current banking problem. Banks are in trouble. We even had a run on a bank here. It started in the US markets with sub-prime mortgages. What is your opinion about what went wrong and what will happen now"?"

David laughed. "You had a run on a bank alright. And what did you do? You nationalized it. That won't happen here under this administration. Deregulation caused all this crap. The republicans are always deregulating things. They did it during Reagan and we got smacked with the savings and loan crisis. I like to call Reagan the starter president for the neocons."

He laughed. "You mean like a starter wife"?"

"Bingo. Dubya is wife number three." They laughed. "Republicans hate federal regulation. This time around they relaxed the rules on sub-prime mortgages and now here we are again. Those damn rules were put there after the crash of 1929, and they were put there for a reason."

“They were removed under Clinton I believe.”

“That's right. He signed it, but it was republican legislation. Bank deregulation always was on their to do list. Lots of democrats need to get fired for bending over for that one.”

“So it passed with support from the democrats.”

“Yeah, and then a lot of greedy people made some very bad loans. The market found out and it fell, but not before a few very rich people stashed the cash. They buried it in a great big mason jar under a tree by the 18th green at the country club.” They laughed. “The market freaked out. The Federal Reserve pumped in some money and now the market's up and down. If you don't like the market then wait fifteen minutes. My gut tells me that they just put lipstick on another pig.”

“Then we haven't seen a bottom yet?”

“No way. I think it also might have something to do with some upcoming legislation in congress to punish China for currency manipulation. Congress wants to do something about it but they're stuck. I hear China holds about ten billion in sub-prime mortgage debt. If we lean on them about their currency, you know, they could retaliate by refusing to buy our mortgages. China finances a lot of our deficit. That's just another cost of the war. I see bad times ahead, but I hope I'm wrong. My father says the whole thing is just another shakeout.”

“Your father is a professor of economics at the same college?”

“That's right.”

“What exactly is a shakeout?”

“When the big guys in the market want to get their hands on the stocks that the little guys won't sell. They take advantage of a manufactured downturn to get them on the cheap. They put the market in a dive and scare the little guys off.”

“I see. He thinks that's what this is.”

“Oh yeah. Business as usual. Welcome to capitalism.” He laughed.

“What does your father think of your firewall economy

model”?

“He thinks I should avoid controversy, stop rocking the boat, get married and put him in the grandpa business.” They laughed.

“And what do you think of that”?

“I think he's probably right.”

“Well Mr. Armstrong, thank you for talking to us here at the BBC. Good luck to you sir, and good luck with your work.”

“Thanks for the opportunity. I enjoyed it. Bye.” He hung up the phone and let out a long sigh.

Dori came in clapping her hands. “You did it David”!

“How did I do”? They hugged.

She couldn't hold still. “You did great. I was sure he'd get you to endorse Hugo Chavez or something and make you sound silly, but you were great.”

“He was fair. That was a lot better than it would've been on our media.”

“Now watch 'em cut it up and edit it.” She laughed and chopped at the air in front of her.

“No shit. I could be on prime time sounding like a dope in a matter of hours.”

“How do you feel”?

“My heart's thumping a mile a minute.”

She put her hand on his chest. “When is it going to be on the air”?

He laughed. “I forgot to ask. But Nick will know.”

She thought about the adrenalin and the stress. “Do you... Baby... You OK”?

“Do I feel like a drink? Oh yeah, but I'm OK.” She sat on his lap and put her head on his chest. Everything was happening so fast that he didn't have time to process it emotionally. Suddenly he remembered. “Did the tape work”? He picked up the recorder, and it was still running.

“I think so?” she said as she reached in and pushed the rewind button. They watched the tiny numbers roll for a few seconds

before she poked the forward button with her thumb. The interview conversation filled the room.

“Yes!” he shouted, shaking his fist in the air.”

She laughed and applauded. “Let me make a copy of it. I want to play it for Dad.”

He smiled. “Oh sure. Especially the part about the Grandpa business.”

“You think he'd like that?” She laughed and retied her shoe.

“I hope so”?

She straightened up and beamed. “Oh David. I know he would. But it's a big responsibility.” She kidded, scanning him up and down. “You think you're up to the job mister”?

He felt lucky and cracked his knuckles. “What do you think”?

“That depends on what you're packin' there Mr. Chesterfield. Regular or king size.” They laughed.

“I've been doing alright so far. How am I doing there coach”?

“I don't know,” she laughed. “I think we need to work on it. Practice makes perfect you know.” They laughed.

He tickled her mercilessly and joked around as she led him down the hall toward the bedroom. He saluted the wall and declared, “We gonna do it until we get it right.”

An hour later they were still in bed. He was giving her a foot rub when the phone rang. “No no no,” she begged. David not now. Let it ring. That feels so good baby. Please let it go.”

He picked it up, and it was Nick. David sensed that he just wanted to know how the interview went. Dori slapped the bed and went to the kitchen. David tucked the cordless phone under his arm like a football and went to the living room. He stretched out on the couch, put the phone against his cheek and sang, “Waz up Nick man.”

“Waz up Red”?

“I did it man. I was on the BBC, but I forgot to ask him when it was going to be aired.”

“Tonight at 11 on BBC World Service.”

“Dude! I knew you'd call them.”

“I called man. I had to know when it's on. All the people who just read my blog know. And now you know too. How did it go professor”?

He made reassuring eye contact with Dori. “I wasn't nervous like I thought. It was fun. I can't wait to hear it.”

“We should listen to it at Artie's with all the guys there man.”

“No no. Not Artie's. Can you come over here”? He frowned. “Too much shit going on. They broke in your place and I had an Arson. I feel safer here.” He smiled at her but looked guilty. “Honey is it OK if Nick comes over when it's on”?

She made a sick face. “OK. Tell him to make sure that he isn't followed.” She stuck out her tongue.

“She says to make sure you aren't followed.” Nobody laughed.

Nick dreaded going to Dori's. “Uh... OK man. Can't be too careful I guess. I guess I'll see you then dude.”

“10-4 dude. Until that time good buddy.”

“OK professor. Later bye.”

“Later dude.” David hung up laughing. Dori was gagging herself with a finger down her throat.

Abe Goodman hung up the phone on his desk. He had been talking to his secret low level contact at the CIA. He met the man in college. They sat next to each other in a math class when they were both undergraduates. Shortly after the young Goodman got his first teaching job, he got a call from his old classmate who had just joined the CIA. After an appeal to his patriotism, Abe agreed to pass on information about campus radicals. He rarely had anything to report that couldn't be found in the newspaper. He sometimes had no contact at all for long periods of time. He didn't like calling the CIA, but this time he had to know if David was in danger.

The agent checked a database and assured him that no action was being taken against David by anyone at the CIA, but he did find a file being compiled at the Chicago branch of an agency that he didn't want to talk about. According to the file, David was OK. The trouble with the break-in, the fire, and the threats, were probably not coming from big oil, little oil, or any other corporate shenanigans. The theory had been discussed but ruled out. He assured the professor that he would monitor the situation until he knew who it was, but his preliminary conclusion was that it was some student who didn't like his grade or something. A grateful and relieved Dr. Goodman thanked him several times before hanging up. Dr. Goodman called his daughter right away.

She picked up. "Hello."

"Hi hon. This is Dad."

"Hi Dad."

"Hon, I just got off the phone with some of my police friends, and they don't think there's any conspiracy by the oil companies to get David or anything like that. They think it's probably just a disgruntled student or some kind of stupid prank is all."

"OK Dad. If you say so. But this is some pretty serious stuff for a student to be doing over a lousy grade." She looked over her shoulder at David. "Hon, you got any old students that are pissed at you"? He shook his head. "He says no Dad."

"OK hon. But you never know with this kind of thing. I had a kid once. He got angry and had fifty pizzas delivered to my house."

"I remember that. All of them with anchovies. I hate anchovies," she laughed.

"Anyway, you tell him to be careful."

"You tell him Dad. He's right here." She smiled.

"No no. I don't want to talk to him right now. Just tell him to be careful."

"I will Dad. And thanks. And Dad, uh, I think you might want to listen to the BBC tonight. Turn on the radio at eleven on the

BBC World Service.” She smiled at David.

“Why”? He felt funny. Her tone made him sense that something was up.

“David's on the program talking about his paper and getting fired by you guys.” She winked at David and he laughed.

“I didn't fire him! The dean fired him God damn it. He said I fired him? He said that on the air”?

“Sort of.”

“Son of a bitch! Is he crazy. What's next. The dean! BBC! He's going to find out about it. Somebody's going to hear it and tell him about it alright. Shit. He might even hear it himself. I think he listens to the damn BBC at lunch. Oh my God. Well I guess we're all in the God damn news now. And don't think we can be pressured into taking him back either. Does his father know about this”?

“Not yet Dad. It just happened.” She laughed.

“I'll call him right now. I'll call him myself. Why can't people just... Shit! What else did he say on the damn radio anyway”?

“He said you were the best boss in the world, and he's sure you'll eventually calm down and bring him back before the fall semester starts.”

“Very funny.”

“I love you too Dad. Be sure and listen now.”

“Oh, I'm going to listen all right.”

“Thanks Dad. I'll let you go now. Thanks again.”

“Yeah right. No problem, bye.” He hung up.

She laughed and applauded. “God that was fun. He really lost it. I wish I could have seen his face. There was this dead silence. I mean when I told him about you saying that he fired you... On the radio... On the BBC. I think he crapped on himself.” They laughed and hugged. “He doesn't think you're being followed by the oil people. He thinks you just pissed off a student or something.”

“No way.”

“You sure about that”? She made a serious but funny face. “Maybe you spurned an advance by an infatuated young thing, and you didn't even know it.”

“I would know that.” He shook his head.

“Ha! How wrong you are there, big boy. Women always know.” She laughed. “But men are really dense when it comes to that sort of thing. They never know.”

He looked insulted but amused. “Bull shit. I know that's not true.” He considered the implications of her being right.

She posed. “OK. What did you think of ME at first.”

Be careful, he thought. “I thought you were hot but real spoiled, and I didn't have a chance with you. You didn't even like me at first. I was so sure that you were out of my league, you know, I didn't even try to impress you. I didn't want to start babbling and make a fool out of myself.”

“See what I mean. The truth is you had me from the first time I caught you looking at my legs. You couldn't help yourself and you were embarrassed.”

“No shit”? He laughed.

“Yep.”

“You saw me looking”?

“Oh yeah. And so did everybody else.” She laughed.

“Son of a bitch. So you were putty in my hands, but I missed it? You didn't act like it.”

“I was tastefully hard to get. But you smelled so good. There's something about a hunk in a clean shirt. And what a nice hard tush you had.” They laughed.

“I had no idea. You must be right. Guys can't tell huh”?

“Thank God they can't. Now think back you stud muffin. Did you spurn a student somewhere along the way”?

“Not a chance. I would have known.” They laughed.

“Forget it. How could you tell if a student was coming on to you anyway? You wouldn't know it if it hit you in the chops.” She waved him off.

He thought about her liking his butt and was plotting for sex a little later in the day, but he didn't want her to sense it. He tried to change the subject. "Speaking of... Oh never mind. Let's look at the blog."

She knew what he was thinking about and just smiled. "I'll get it for you," she said, and sat down at the computer to log on. Her home page loaded up instantly. The little pop-up blocker noises reminded her of bugs flying into a bug zapper. She skimmed the breaking news and announced, "The congress is still going to bust the attorney general. The republican senator who got busted in the airport bathroom says he's not gay. Bush wants more money for the war and... Oh shit."

"What?" He leaned in.

"Finkelstein's classes at DePaul have been canceled."

He squinted and read it twice. "Oh no. But They said they were going to let him finish out his contract."

"Not now I guess."

"Ass holes." He slapped the desk hard. "He deserves tenure. If they can do that to him, then I'm toast."

"I don't know. You're not taking on the entire Israel lobby babe. You're only pissing off the neocons and the oil companies." They laughed, "Nobody messes with the Israel lobby for very long."

"Oh my God yes. That's one powerful club."

She shook her hair out of her eyes and scrolled down. "He should have been more careful, that's all."

David raised his voice a little. "All he said is that some people overuse antisemitism."

"That's not why. He's counting Jews."

"But it's easy to fall into that. Anybody could. Look at all the Jews in the neocon movement. Less than one percent of the entire population is Jewish. I saw a list once. It looked like half of the original neocons were Jews. I even started counting them myself at one point."

"No shit"?

“No shit. But after I looked into it more deeply, you know, I came to a more complicated opinion.”

“That's right dear.” Since when is getting into a marathon argument about religion with my dad looking into it more deeply, she thought. “What's complicated about your opinion?”

“I don't think there's a conspiracy with the Zionists and the neocons. The Zionists... I think they're just everywhere. If the republicans are in power then they'll be there. If the democrats are in power then they'll be there too. If there's somebody on the media spinning anything, right or left, they'll be involved. They don't seem to be about the right or the left. They're only about Israel. They're sort of paranoid after a history of oppression. They cut corners, but they just want Israel to stay where it is. They could give a shit about right or left. They think that it would only take one administration to be anti-Israel and they would be in exile again. They have a Palestinian problem, but they're too paranoid to back off.”

“No shit.” She looked up. “You figured that out all by yourself. You're a frigging genius.”

“They know Finkelstein's right. They just want him to shut up.”

“Brilliant deduction,” she laughed. “Please tell him for me.”

David looked worried. “You too? So you understand how much trouble the Zionists are causing around the world, but you still want Israel to go right on doing the same old shit.”

“I didn't say that.” She pushed his shoulder playfully.

“Sorry. What DO you say then?” Be careful, he thought. Don't piss her off.

She smiled. “I want peace. Everybody wants peace. Every time we get close to real progress some ultra right wing ass hole screws it up. But that's no reason to give up on the country. People are going to eventually figure it out. Right wingers love the terrorists. The terrorists keep the extremists in power on both sides.”

“I heard that.” That's my girl, he thought. “Nine-eleven helped

Bush. And rockets into Israel helps the right wingers in Gaza too. A bunch of God damn fear mongers on both sides.”

“And what would you do about it Mr. President?” she laughed.

He stiffened up. “Let me do my Nixon.” He made a constipated face and put his arms up while waving victory symbols with both hands. He pushed out a fat lower lip and grunted, “Let me just say this about that.”

She laughed. “Keep the tricky Dick impression. Don't quit your day job. I'm serious here. What do you really think?”

“OK. You asked me, so here goes. The Jewish people, the Christians, and also the Islamic folks are all really just branches of the same religion. Monotheism. One God. The rest is just details. Unfortunately, there's a long history of people killing each other over details. I think they used to go to war over whether or not the trinity was one thing or three different things. They actually killed each other over that.”

“The Christians did that”?

“That's right. When I see people being pushed to do something like that I suspect it's just political crap covered in phony religion.”

She pushed her hair behind her ears. “So what's the answer. How do we get to peace over there? They all think God gave them the same patch of land.”

“The leaders of all three branches of monotheism should get a vision and declare that God doesn't want anyone to kill anyone else over land. No matter where it is, God wouldn't want that. Can you imagine God dropping in and asking us to explain how we got to the point where we thought it was OK to spill blood for dirt? Even worse. There are people who believe God actually WANTS them to do just that. Anybody who claims to speak for God and calls for war has got to be an atheist AND a slick politician.”

She smiled. “I'm impressed. I thought you would just say that Israel doesn't have a clear legal title to the land.”

“They don't, but we could fight forever over the same piece of worthless desert. There's plenty of land for everybody as long as they're not so picky about where it is. The only reason they fight over that spot is because they think it's Holy ground. There's no such thing as Holy ground. It doesn't matter where Jesus walked. What matters is what he said.”

“So you're not antisemitic”? She smiled.

“Of course not.” He sighed.

“My mom thinks you are.”

“Go figure. You know, there are more people in Israel that agree with me about religion and politics than there are here.” They laughed.

“She probably thinks you want to convert me to Christianity.”

“Tell her I think we're all the same religion. To me it's just a denomination thing. Like a Baptist marrying a Catholic. Nobody has to convert to anything. The kids would be Jewish anyway. I think it's a mother's side of the family thing isn't it”?

She laughed. “Don't get me started on mother stuff. So now that you understand us professor, don't you think that Finkelstein should shut up? He might have a point, but he's just stirring up shit. He could be more pragmatic. Shouldn't he consider a different strategy”?

He laughed and scooted his chair back. “No way. I understand why you say that, but no way. Hitler silenced the opposition. Finkelstein can say what he wants. The man has courage, and the end doesn't justify the means. We can have peace without being slick about it. The best strategy is just to tell the truth. He's a brave man.”

“And so are you, even though you're wrong about Finkelstein.” They laughed.

“Thanks anyway. We don't have to agree on everything.”

“That's right.” She made eye contact. “You really gonna let the kids be Jewish”?

“It ain't up to me. I defer to you. Now if you were a Druid then

that might be a problem. No kid a mine is gonna be a Druid.”

“Well, I am a tree-hugger.” They laughed.

“You're my hot little tree-hugger. God you're cute.” He slid his arms around her waist and sang his favorite Steve Miller lyrics. “Really like your peaches-wanna shake your tree.”

Nick showed up good and stoned at Dori's place a few minutes before the broadcast. He was surprised to find David sober and refusing a toke. Nick was flush with pride over a very positive response to his new blog article about mercenaries in Iraq. He wrote about a trend by US private security companies to employ third world labor on the cheap to guard the US green zone, and then abandon them if they get hurt. They allegedly payed men from Peru about thirty dollars a day to do a very dangerous job and refused to take care of them once they were disabled. Nick couldn't wait to tell David about it, and he got all worked up describing the Peruvians with missing arms and legs. They had no access to medical care, and many would never work again.

David was disgusted. “Son of a bitch. The only good news is that it shows the real face of capitalism, a race to the bottom. Get the cheapest labor in the world. Exploit the weak and the poor. How can they live with themselves. They sucker the poor into guarding the very people who exploit them. They hire them to dig their own graves.” He threw his arms in the air.

“I don't believe this,” said Nick. “This shit is is a new low. My taxes subsidize slavery. We're talking minimum wage mercenaries man. Minimum wage on a third world scale even. They'd pay fifty cents a day if they could.”

David checked Dori's face for a read on her reaction to Nick being there. “Just when you think the sons a bitches can't sink any lower.” He shook it off. “Let it go for now man. The show is coming on and I just want to enjoy it.”

Nick considered rolling a joint on the porch first but decided to wait. “That’s right dude. Turn it on.” He leaned back in his hardwood kitchen chair and angered Dori by lifting the front legs off the floor.

She fished around the tuner for the BBC and hoped Nick would fall over backwards and crack his head on the table. She smelled pot smoke on his clothes and worried about David being tempted. How could he be around Nick and stay sober. If only the druggie would move to Wisconsin, she thought. Maybe Madison with all the other lefties.

David scanned Nick’s new blog on Dori’s computer while they waited for the radio. “Hey dude.” He laughed. “I see it. This is incredible. Getting any action on this one yet?”

“Scroll down dude. It goes on and on. People screaming about mercenaries and privatizing the army and shit.”

David shook his head. “It’s even worse that that man. We’re not talking about some former Green Beret getting a thousand dollars a day here. These people aren’t volunteers. They’re under duress or undue influence or some other illegal contract shit. They’re so poor. How can that be a free choice. They’re really just slaves fighting wars for a tiny minority of rich ass holes who stay as far back from the front lines as possible. They’re not even citizens of the country they’re fighting for man. Slaves fighting for the empire. In this century even”!

“Welcome to Rome dude.”

“Man, some things NEVER frigging change.”

Nick held up a hand to the preacher. “I heard that. And just when you think they hit bottom, they find a new angle. Check this out.” He took over the mouse and scrolled down a few paragraphs. “Look. The government of Peru ratified some international treaty banning mercenaries. The US didn’t sign it of course. Well anyway, they were trying to enforce it and stop the American private security companies from recruiting in Peru right. It was working for a while. And then all of a sudden the

government stopped enforcing it.”

David frowned. “Imagine that. I think I smell a rat.” They all laughed, even Dori.

Nick rubbed two fingers together. “It wouldn't take much dude. A bribe. Maybe just the threat of trade pressure.” The radio got loud.

David thought hard. “This could be legal even. The pigs are getting so rich they're getting above the law in some of these small countries. What's to keep some rich guy from moving to the Caribbean and setting up his own private army of mercenary slaves? Slavery still exists man. Without slavery capitalism would never have been able to take root in the first place. They call it different things, indentured servitude or whatever, but it's still some form of slavery.”

Nick laughed. “That ain't news. Even now we're all just wage slaves. Who's really free to quit working for the God damned system anyway? We have to play, but we don't have to like it. Even criminals are doing their part for the man, and they don't even know it.”

Dori broke in. “Quiet! It's on. Here it is. Be quiet.”

The three of them watched the radio and listened to the interview with only the occasional comment. Dori watched David's face. She knew he was thinking baseball like he always did in his competitive mode. She chuckled several times when she could anticipate his answer to the interview question but was surprised at his restraint. She could imagine him giving much more dramatic answers to core questions that were important to him. He was trying not to get passionate. He was holding back and she put it to him. “Hey there mister. You gonna take this punk down or what”?

“I'm waiting for my pitch babe. I'm feeling him out”

“That's right baby. You the man.”

If David was nervous on the air he didn't sound like it. To her he sounded like he was chatting on the front porch with a

neighbor. She imagined him doing just that on a porch in Iowa with one hand cranking a wooden ice cream bucket, not the plastic kind, a wooden one without a motor. She admired him as he watched the radio, but he seemed more embarrassed than proud. He looks like a shy little boy, she thought. He would never have done this without Nick's encouragement. He was perfectly content to remain obscure with his Utopian ideas.

The interview flew by and ended, only lasting about ten minutes after the edits. David moaned. "Shit, they really cut out a lot."

"I thought it was great," said Nick. "The guy seemed to go for it big time. It sounded like an endorsement to me man."

"Didn't you expect them to edit it?" asked Dori.

"I didn't give it a thought."

She hugged his shoulder. "Be glad they didn't take it out of context and distort it like they do all the time. It went great and you didn't sound like a conspiracy nut. That's what I was afraid they'd do."

"Why would they do that? It's the BBC. It ain't FOX" He thought about his job.

Nick laughed and looked at Dori. "Naive isn't he"? He waved at David. "Man they do that all the time. Even the BBC is a corporation man. The only guy it doesn't work on is Michael Moore. I saw him once on CNN talking about his movie. He chewed them up so bad. He won't even let them record his interviews so they can't play with the tape."

"Like they just did mine"?

"Yep, like they just did yours, only you got off easy. I'll bet you won't be so lucky next time."

Dori laughed and insisted, "Then next time, if there is a next time, no tape allowed."

Nick protested, "No no no. We don't want to chase away publicity. I can handle it."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Dori. The phone chirped and

she snapped it up like she knew who it was. It was David's dad. "Hi there professor. Did you hear it"?

"I sure did hon. I thought he did well. Was he nervous"?

She looked at David. "Ask him yourself. He's right here."

"OK, put him on."

David stood tall. "Hello Dad."

"Hello Son. I thought you were great. Were you nervous"?

"Shit yes I was nervous." Everybody laughed.

"I couldn't tell Son."

"I didn't want to ramble on and sound like a nut so I kept it close to the vest."

"You did it right. I'm proud of you Son. I've done a lot of things in my day, but I never got on the BBC. You were talking to the whole world. You should be proud."

"Thanks Dad."

"Now listen. You need to know what's going on. I'm afraid you have the dean in a bit of a bad place. More than one big shot administrator is pissed at him about the whole situation. He looks bad. The money, the building, the first amendment, censorship, it all stinks and the smell is spreading fast. You were on the BBC for Christ's sake. He's accusing you of taking cheap shots at him, but nobody's listening to his excuse. It serves him right."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. What we expect... Well, I think he'll try to find a clever way to make this all go away. They'll probably tell him to reinstate you, but he'll want it done in a way that saves face. I'll bet there will be some review board that will overrule the suspension on a technicality or something."

"Then I'm supposed to apologize and make nice right"? He laughed.

"Sure. You still have to work with him you know."

"No I don't."

"That's up to you Son, but think it through with a calm head first. No matter what you do I'm with you. It's your call. You want

to make him sweat a little.” He laughed.

“Oh yeah.” He smiled at Dori and gave a thumbs up.

“I thought you would. What are you going to do? What do you want?”

“I get an apology. It can be private but I want him to blink.” He smiled. “If I don't make him blink he could come back at me later. If you get caught robbing a bank you should have to do more than just give back the money. Tell him I said that if you want. In those exact words. OK?”

“My pleasure. And once again, I thought you were great Son. Now don't be a stranger. I gotta go. I'm gonna call Abe.”

“Thanks Dad, bye.” He hung up and said, “I think I'm gonna get my job back.”

Carla DeAngelo drove her yellow cab like a moonshine runner being chased by the cops. She preferred the heavy old traditional model cabs that could take constant abuse without incurring too many major repairs. It had a few dings and scratches because she never hesitated to use the bumper to make a point. The neighborhood by Artie's bar was part of her territory, and all the regulars knew not to park next to the big yellow monster. Artie saw a lot of Carla, but he avoided riding in the cab after surviving his first few trips. It was actually lucky for her that he did because things happened in the cab that she didn't want him to know about.

It was Monday morning in early September and the college students were back. That meant a lot of fares. She saw them hanging out in front of the blues club on Roosevelt road like they did every semester. She made a lot of money on Saturday nights when the bands packed them in. To her the blues was a suburban white kid thing. The kids were almost all white, but the musicians were almost all black. The white students thought it was cool to

get crazy with the blues, and the black students had mixed feelings about it. Maybe it was cool and maybe it wasn't. Carla wondered what it would look like to watch black musicians play George Jones and try to sound just like him. Would it be a tribute or an insult. Only one black man had ever done it. She started singing *Kiss an Angel Good Morning by Charlie Pride* when her cell phone rang, not the regular one, but the private phone she kept under the seat for tricks. She knew who it was before she answered it. "Yellow."

"Yo Carla."

"Talk to me."

"I got a couple a guys over here asking for you. Can you swing by"?

"Do I know them"?

"No. They act like first timers but Benny sent them. I called him and he said they're OK."

"I don't need any new action right now. I'm busy with something else." She sighed. She didn't want the action but knew she had to make time because of who sent them.

"Well it's Benny," he said. "What you gonna do"?

She sighed. "OK... Shit. I'll come by in about ten minutes."

"OK great. I'll send them out back."

She closed the phone, put it back under the seat and stopped at a red light for a screaming fire engine. She watched it pass before driving three blocks and turning into an old alley covered with chunks of broken glass. Nobody used it anymore, but it led directly to the back of a pizza place owned by two guys that sent business her way. Delivery was temporarily unavailable at the restaurant, so she parked in the empty spot that the delivery guy used before he got sent to Pontiac Correctional Center for killing a guy who tried to rob him with a screwdriver. The jury decided that nine shots from a revolver constituted excessive force. He testified that he didn't want the man to suffer, but the judge not at all amused. The fact that reloading was involved only made it

worse.

Carla picked up the cell phone, let it ring once and hung up. Two young white guys came out through the kitchen door and got in the back seat. The taller of the two was a jock wearing a varsity football jacket emblazoned a big letter N. The other guy's suit and tie made him look like he just left a corporate board meeting. She drove out of the alley without even saying hello and started cruising the streets. The guy with the tie avoided her gaze in the rear view mirror and looked out the window while the jock did the talking. "You Carla"?

"Who's asking"?

"Benny sent me. We're having a frat party and we need some girls. Can you help us"?

"That depends. Let me see some ID." She reached behind her head without taking her eyes off the road and snapped her fingers. Both of them put their drivers licenses in her open hand. She pulled into a laundromat parking lot and stopped behind a blind corner to check them out. Nobody said a word but the jock laughed. She finished looking at the IDs, handed them back and said, "You've done this before, huh slick"?

"Huh? Oh yeah. But only at parties. I don't have to pay for it. This is just for the brothers."

She laughed and handed them a photo album of her strippers in costume. "Take your pick. If the ones you want are available then it's five bills a dancer for the afternoon. That's for stripping only. Anything else is between you and them. It's usually seventy five for a blow and one fifty for sex. You need one dancer for at least every five guys at the party. That sound OK"?

"Sure sure," said the jock, pulling the book away from his buddy. "They look great. That nurse can take my temperature anytime man." They laughed.

"They're all pros so no bull shit. You understand guys? They bring their own security. You don't want to piss him off because believe me... He will not hesitate to jack you up. He holds the

money.”

The jock asked, “What will they do and what won't they do”?

Carla didn't like his tone and counted to ten before answering. “You like it kinky huh big guy”?

He laughed. “Will they play horsey”? He was getting worked up.

“Easy cowboy.”

He pointed to the picture of a platinum blond in a black negligee. “Look at the tits on that one. I'm gonna make her remember me man.”

Carla didn't like the setup at all and was ready to call it off, but she didn't want to embarrass the guy that sent them. She called over her right shoulder. “How many guys you gonna have at this party gentlemen”?

The guy in the suit answered, “Twelve guys. Just the seniors.”

“OK. You'll need three or four. Take your pick and show me the money. I got things to do.”

The jock laughed and mocked her. “I'll bet you do.”

She came back at him. “What do you mean by that mister”? I'm gonna kill this ass hole, she thought.

He laughed again. “I don't mean anything. I know your time is money. How many tricks can you do in an hour anyway? A bill and a half a pop? Say three an hour. That's a lot a scratch for laying on your back. Some of us have to work for a living. Of course you can't do it forever. You gotta be sure and save some of it I suppose.”

“You got it all figured out huh”? She dug her nails into her hand so hard that it drew a little blood. I'm done with this pig, she thought. It's all over for him. She knew exactly what she was going to do.

The jock was clueless to her anger. “I know about hookers. I took a psychology class when I was a freshman.”

She grinned. “No kidding. What did they say”?

He watched the traffic and described the lecture. “Most hookers

are lesbians. They get abused by a man when they're real young, so they really hate men. They have cognitive dissonance.”

“What the hell is that”? Let him run with it, she thought. This guy's thick.

“Cognitive dissonance. That's when you have two ideas in your mind that are incompatible and it causes anxiety. One of the ideas has got to go. They get resolved in funny ways sometimes. Like the two ideas, I screw my stepfather, and I don't like it. You can't stop screwing the guy because he won't go away, so you start believing you like it. It makes you feel powerful too because you can control men with sex. That's why some women become hookers. It's all a big rationalization of past abuse.”

“No shit”? She reached for the phone under the seat and imagined him explaining to his parents how he got arrested for soliciting a prostitute.

He went right on digging himself in deeper. “Then they get hooked on drugs. They have to do drugs to live with themselves, and then they have to turn tricks to get the drugs. It's a vicious cycle.” He stared at her short denim skirt in the mirror.

“No kidding. I never took psychology, but I think I understand.”

The jock felt lucky. “Tell me. Can I ask a personal question? Do you enjoy it or not”?

She almost stopped the cab. It took all her nerve to hold back. She couldn't believe he was so stupid. “Well cowboy. Since you took psychology, I'll tell you a secret. I do enjoy it.”

“I could tell.” The other guy couldn't believe his buddy was that stupid.

“I'm sort of a nymphomaniac but only with good looking guys. No wimps.” She found his big eyes in the mirror and winked. The other guy was too embarrassed to speak. He elbowed his buddy in a desperate effort to get him to stop, but the varsity fullback was beyond reason. She giggled like a bimbo and asked him, “How do you like it”?

“How do I like it”? He could feel his own pulse.

“Tell you what,” she said. “Let me call ahead and get us all a room. No charge for sex the first time. We'll get high and I'll give you both a quickie.”

“No!” said his buddy.

“Oh yeah,” said the jock. He chucked his buddy hard on the arm. “You can wait outside if you want man. I'm gonna take her up on that right now. My balls are gonna explode.”

She pushed the speed dial on the phone and called Officers Murphy and Stone. The two plain clothes cops were sitting in the car outside Artie's when they heard the phone fire up and play a funny version of Bohemian Rhapsody. They had a special number for snitches, and Murphy snapped it up.

“Yo.”

“Hey Fritz this is Carla.”

“What's up Carla”?

“I got a hot John boy in my cab that wants to party. Is it OK if I take a break”?

“You OK”? He winked at Stone.

“Yeah sure. Just a little cognitive dissonance is all.” She watched the jock in the mirror. “How's your dog Fritz”?

“You've got a John that's a problem and you want us to take him down.”

“That's affirmative. I'm about ten blocks away and I should be there in a minute big guy.”

“We can't leave here right now, but I'll hold him for you and we'll have somebody else transport him. You sure you're OK”?

“I am now. And thanks boss. You the best pimp in town. I'll send him over to you with your cut. I'm gonna do him for free. I'm gonna rock his world and give him something to write home about.”

He laughed. “Be careful what you say. He can't be that stupid.”

“I wouldn't be too sure about that boss. I have you in sight now.”

Murphy said, "Have him show me the money. I need to see the money or it won't stick."

"That's a big ten four. Here you go." She slapped the phone closed, stopped the cab across the street from Murphy's Crown Vic, looked the jock right in the face, and smiled. She pointed at the Ford. "That's my pimp. I'll do my cut for free, but you gotta give him fifty bucks. OK"?

The other guy looked at the jock in disbelief. He had no idea what was happening but was strangely fascinated by the whole thing. He didn't say a word when his buddy jumped out of the cab and walked right up to Stone in the driver's seat. He lowered the electric window and slowly turned his head. The jock spoke first. "You the pimp"?

"What you want"?

"You want this or not"? He held out two twenties and a ten.

"What's that for"?

"For banging your bitch over there ass hole. You want this or not"?

Murphy flashed his badge. "That's what I thought. Now why don't you have a seat here in the back and a nice officer will be around in a minute to pick you up. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney. You have the right to have your attorney present during questioning. If you can not afford an attorney one will be appointed for you. You are under arrest for pissing off... I mean soliciting a prostitute. Do you understand that"?

"Oh no."

"Yeah that's right. You must have really pulled her chain man. What did you do anyway"?

"I didn't do anything. She said she'd do me for free."

"Get in slick. Sit down and shut up. I'll be right back." Officer Stone came around and stuffed the jock in the back seat. Murphy slammed the door and walked over to the cab. Carla rolled down

the dirty widow. He rested his elbow on the roof and leaned in close. "Hey Carla. You OK? What the hell did he do"?

"He's a jerk, a real out of control jerk. Stupid too. He talked out his ass. Nobody talks to me like that. The son of a bitch deserves to get taken down"!

"You really want me to take him down for that"?

"Hell yes I do! Take his ass down"!

He pointed at the guy in the suit. "What about him"? The dazed young man held his breath.

"He's OK. It's his friend that needs a God damn attitude adjustment. Take him down before I shoot the wise ass son of a bitch. Nobody talks to me that way. I'll pop a cap on his sorry ass. I don't have to listen to that shit. Put him in a cell with somebody big and ugly and real lonely. I hope he tells his new bunk buddy he's got cognitive dissonance. Shit man, I gotta get out of here before Artie comes out and sees me."

He laughed. "OK killer. We'll take it from here." Murphy saluted and walked back across the street. Carla took off in the cab. She bumped the curb with her right rear wheel going around the first corner and swore like somebody had intentionally thrown something in her way.

Stone and Murphy transferred the jock to a plain white Ford that pulled in behind them. They didn't give the arrest another thought as they resumed the boring curbside surveillance of Artie's secret cocaine stash. They talked about the Cubs. They talked about ungrateful kids who were clueless about the sacrifices of heroic fathers. They bitched about having wives who didn't understand cops. They didn't understand why women would marry cops and then be surprised by the problems that go along with being married to one. Stone got all worked up about it all the time. "It's the same pattern," he said, throwing his hands up and

smacking the dash.

“I know,” said Murphy. He knew the speech.

“First they have a fetish for a cop, then they date one, then they marry one, and then it's like, when are you gonna be home? They think it's like the movies.”

“If they didn't think it was like the movies there would be no cop fetish in the first place. We'd all be single and screwing Carla's hookers. We'd be drunk all the time, and our livers would fall out at forty. We'd have season tickets to the Bears, but we'd wish we were in the burbs with a wife and kids watching the game on the deck.” They laughed.

“Grass is always greener.”

“Sure is.”

The phone went off and Murphy let it ring twice before answering it. “Yeah.”

“You taking good care of my property”? Murphy recognized the high voice as Rodriguez himself. He sounded nervous and angry and was coughing on and off as he spoke.

“Sure we are. What's up”?

“I just want to make sure you dicks are playing straight with me. You get funny and you die. You understand cop”?

“Hey relax. You need to stay cool for both of us. We need each other. We're both on the same side. That's a lot a money.”

“Listen to me cop. If what you say is true, that they switched it, then I can go to my lawyer right now and tell him about it, and I'll be home in one day.”

“Without your property.” Murphy looked at Stone.

“Listen. I want you to go and get it right now. Just bring it to me and you'll get your cut. Get it now.” He coughed uncontrollably.

Murphy waited for him to stop. “No way.”

“Why not”?

“Because I said so.”

His voice got pinched. “Who the hell do you think you're

talking to? I could make one call and take you out right now. You will show me some respect.”

Murphy grimaced. “Be careful what you say on the phone man.”

“Are you taping this? You could be dead mother...”

“Wait wait! No tape. Just relax OK? Take a God damned breath.”

“Why CAN'T you get it now? I don't trust you cop. I don't need this shit. I know a set up when I see one man. Why can't you just go in and get it right now? Convince me right now or I'm gonna hang up right here and pull the chain.”

Murphy could tell the guy was too greedy to just let go and walk away from all that money. His voice sounded confident. “We have the whole thing planned and timed. If we wait until just the right time, right after you walk in the courtroom on the last day of the trial, it'll go down smooth. We'll all be out of the country before the smoke clears. If we move any sooner then they're sure be on to us and you'll be a fugitive. If you wait 'till the judge releases you then you'll be out of here free and clear. Your property will be waiting for you at home. Understand? That's all I can tell you right now, except me and my partner want you to throw us a big ass party on the beach when this is over man. We want the best of everything, food, booze, drugs, women...”

Stone broke in. “Don't forget about the boat man.”

“That's right. We want one of those cigar boats with a Brazilian supermodel on board.” They laughed.

“You think this shit is funny! You're a dead man if you're lying to me man. Even from prison...” He coughed. “I can do you with a three dollar phone call. I don't trust cops. Don't even think about playing with me fool. I can, and will, take you out.”

Murphy shook his head. “Come on man. We're partners. Give me a break already. Take me out... Don't you think I know that? Why do you think I set it up this way. I bet everything that you'd figure all the angles right. There's no pressure on you. You don't

have to work with me at all if you don't want to. I wanted it that way so you didn't HAVE to trust me. You can bail at any time.”

“Maybe I will.”

“And you lose all that property. I lose my nest egg, and I have to play cop for ten more years. Can't you tell that I'm on the level. Think about it. I could take all the coke and split, but I don't want you for an enemy. I want you for a friend. Maybe we can do business again later. Please just frigging relax and take it one day at a time. This time next year we'll both be on a beach in Brazil slapping bronzed butts and eating caviar for breakfast. You think I wanna risk that”?

“You sure my property is safe.”

“Positive. I'm watching it twenty four seven. I even have somebody on the inside next to the caretaker.”

“How close”?

“Real close.” Be careful, he thought.

“Close as in... On the premises?” He coughed hard.

“Closer.” He looked at Stone who was shaking his head.

“How close”?

“Close like next to him between the sheets close”!

“Cops.” He laughed.

“We're on the same side on this operation sir. You keep quiet and it'll be the last one for me. I'm just trying to get over. Just like everybody else.”

“I'm good for now cop. But you lie to me or I see any little thing I don't like, and you'll be dead before you know what hit you. You hear me cop”?

“You want me to say I'm afraid of you? OK, I'm afraid of you. But you feel jumpy, you call this number. Don't spring the surprise again until it's time...” The phone went dead. “The son of a bitch hung up.”

Stone asked, “You think he'll bail”?

“If he does... I'll kill the son of a bitch myself. Even if we have to keep the coke and sell it ourselves.”

“Are you crazy. I don't want to be on the run from a cartel.”

“He won't bail. He's too greedy, and it's personal too. The thought of losing all that coke bugs the shit out of him. All those people are greedy. He's used to getting everything he wants. He'll wait for it. The hard part is collecting the money and not giving him enough room to hit us after he's got it. I'll have a backup plan ready just in case.”

“What plan?”

“I don't know yet. I'm working on it.” They laughed.

## Chapter 13

The evening weather was warm and clear when David walked up his father's front steps. The yard was still green from the summer. It was mid September so most of the flowers were gone. The light smell of mint was just barely noticeable as he passed a pile of freshly cut weeds. The source was one of the unwanted plants that grew out of control between the fence and the house. The mint was probably planted there by a previous owner for kitchen use, but David's father thought it was just a weed. He watched his feet on the old steps. The original bricks had a few cracks, but they were the kind you didn't repair without a specialist to match them. It would look silly to have new brick next to the old on such a classic Victorian home.

His father came out to greet him on the porch. "Hi Son. Sit and talk a while. I don't get much of a chance to talk to you since you got famous." He laughed.

David stretched out on one of the green Adirondack chairs facing the street and put his feet up on the porch rail. "Did you say famous or infamous"?

"Famous of course." He laughed.

"Smell that mint Dad? The weeds you cut. Some of that is mint."

"I don't smell anything. Anyway I just got off the phone with the police. They haven't got any leads on who burned up your truck. They think it was some jilted female student or a kid with a

bad grade.”

“I don't think so Dad. I can't remember anything like that. I've never failed anyone. No student ever had a crush on me.”

“Is that right? Is that what you think? Maybe that's it after all.”

“No way Dad.”

“You don't always know. It happened to me once. A girl got infatuated. I never had any idea she felt that way. Not a bad looking young lady either. She wrote me years later and said she was crushed that I rejected her. I had no idea. If she came on to me then I missed it. She was thirty years younger than me.” He whistled like a construction worker.

“And you missed it huh.” He laughed.

“I wasn't looking. Better I didn't know about it anyway.” They laughed.

David listened to the rumble of car tires on the brick street. “I hope it's something like that. I hope it's a student. If it's not... What do you think about the conspiracy theorists on the blog thinking it's big oil?”

His dad leaned back and looked down the street. “I can't believe that. The timing was just a coincidence. It must be a student. Some of these rich kids think they're above the law. Spoiled brats. I understand your worry though. Nationalize oil, man that's radical.”

“Shit Dad. It's only radical here. Did you know that gas is subsidized by the state in a lot of the middle eastern countries? Our individual drivers are competing with the wealth of entire nations for enough unleaded regular to get to work. If the other guys nationalize... How can we compete if we don't nationalize too?”

“I know. I know. Take it easy. You've been through a lot lately. And be careful of that.” He pointed at the porch rail where David had his feet. “It's loose.”

David smiled and put his feet down. “I'm just burned. With all that's happened... I'm just tired of all this shit Dad. I hope it's over

now.”

“Me too. You ready to teach again?”

“Yeah buddy. I promise to stay off the soapbox too.”

“Oh no, you can preach. I just wanted you to give up booze, not your big mouth.” They laughed. “You were great on the BBC. You made a lot of sense.”

“Thanks Dad.” He felt proud but embarrassed.

“The radio guy. Notice that he didn't try to spin you as a radical? He was transfixed. You were very convincing. You convinced me. Oil SHOULD be nationalized. It's a matter of national security, and I'm proud of you for having guts enough to say it.”

“There's one vote.” He felt wonderful.

“By the way. Dori says you have a recurrent dream about your mother. Would you like to tell me about it?”

David was blindsided and spoke too formally, like he was being cross examined. “It's nothing. It's quite normal I hear.” He looked at his hands.

“I just thought you might want to tell me about it. Is it always the same?”

“Yes.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Not at all.” He smiled.

“Will you tell me what happens in it? What it's about? You don't have to.” He rolled down his sleeves and buttoned the cuffs.

David sighed and let go. “It's OK. It's not a nightmare or anything. It's me and Mom and I'm just starting school. Before she got the cancer.”

“The stuff that's in it... Did it actually happen in real life or just in the dream?”

Dori told him everything, he thought. “It happened. I remember the day clearly. I remember everything she said. Not the exact words, but almost. We were just walking around the back yard. I saw the dried skin of a bug. It shed it's skin and that preserved the

shape. It looked like a monster in a cheap drive-in movie.” They laughed. “She told me it was a Dog Day Cicada. I asked her if it was dead, and she said nothing ever dies. She said it just moved on and changed to another form. It was still alive somehow even if we couldn't understand exactly where or how.”

“That's her alright.”

“She went on about metamorphosis or something, but it went right over my head. I didn't get the analogy until much later. I asked her why she thought nothing ever died and I talked about my dead cat. She talked about things I didn't understand, but I just knew she was right about everything. She was so smart. I'm still turning her words over and over.”

“Welcome to the club.” He smiled.

“She thought that if a person passed on new ideas, and everybody does, then that person is immortal. Like your ideas are your soul.”

“I remember” He teared up and fell in love with his wife all over again.

“She kept asking me if I was understanding her. I really wasn't, but I told her I was. I wonder if she knew somehow. It was like she was giving me something to take care of. She talked about philosophers trying to solve the problem of the existence of God with words. She said words don't perfectly express ideas, and when you pick them apart too much you just start chasing your tail. God is perfect. You can't explain something perfect with imperfect words.”

“Oh my yes. We're definitely talking about the same person.” He wiped his cheek with his sleeve. “Best friend anybody ever had.”

David put his hand on his dad's. “She said humans aren't smart enough to prove it or disprove it either way. I think I remember everything she said. To her an atheist is a fool that's been seduced by vanity. An agnostic is something else, but an atheist thinks he's so smart because he thinks he's proven that God doesn't exist.

Humans aren't smart enough to prove anything that big. And since there's just as much reason to believe as not to believe, the addition of any tiny amount of faith is enough to break the tie. A mustard seed. Did she tell you that too”?

“She had more than a tiny amount of faith. She had it all figured out alright. She was complex, but she had all the loose ends covered. She loved talking about it too.”

“She liked talking about the Santa Claus conception of God. For years I didn't understand that one. Then I found it again, and of all places, in a book by a raving Christian fundamentalist. The idea is that God doesn't intervene in day to day affairs. If you think you got promoted because God smiled on you then you have to blame God for the disasters too. God doesn't give people cancer or punish people with hurricanes. God doesn't intervene in war either. People do wars to each other. This world is a test for us to pass. It's all about growing out of competition and toward cooperation.”

“I've heard that before too. Moral evolution. And the Santa thing, that's the problem of evil in classical western philosophy. Kind of deep for a little kid.” Another tear started to well up and he turned away to clear it.

David felt real peace. “She thought we're all working over a perfect safety net but we don't know it's there, like a kid learning to ride a bike with a parent's hand ready to grab it. She thought that when a rabbit gets eaten by a fox that it doesn't hurt because the brain endorphins are there to keep it from suffering. Just as a cicada has no knowledge of the next stage... Of the next reality. We don't either. Everything is the way it's supposed to be. We just don't know that it is.” He laughed. “She had it all figured out alright, and she wanted me to keep it going.”

He stood up and paced. “That's faith. Did she talk about string theory? She drove me crazy with string theory. If you were into that stuff they thought you were nuts. God doesn't play dice. Now it's mainstream physics. Did she bug you about that too”?

“Later she did yeah. She was way ahead, huh.”

He put his hand in the mailbox and found nothing. “What did she say about string theory? Did you get it? I've never really understood it.”

“To tell you the truth, I still can't get my head around it without tripping a few circuit breakers. She went on and on about parallel universes and Star Trek stuff. People think of God as high in the sky. With parallel universes and lots of dimensions God could be sitting right next to you.”

“Oh yeah. She used to tell me to behave myself because God might be closer that we think.” They laughed. “Everybody loved her. When you got depressed she'd widen your perspective. She'd say something like... 'So you think you're so smart that you can see down the whole road ahead of you for the rest of your life and on and on forever. Like there's no curves in the road at all. You think you can see all the way to the end of time and it's all a straight shot. Nobody can see that far. When was the last time you got surprised about anything at all? That's when you should have realized that there's curves in every road.' ” They laughed. “My wife, she was so smart that she knew how dumb that humans really are.” They laughed. “I'm glad she got to you too.”

“I think about her every day Dad. She left me with a sense of peace. She's right. Everything is the way it's supposed to be. Nothing ever dies. God has his hand on the back of the bike. He doesn't take everything out of our way because he's letting us learn. Being a good parent isn't always a popularity contest,” he joked.

“God says this is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you.” They laughed.

“I was so young Dad. She knew she didn't have long to go in this dimension, and she wanted to plant her seeds while she could. That's why she was talking about things I didn't understand at all.”

“Maybe so. But you remembered and figured it out later.”

He thought for a long minute. "I never told anybody this before Dad. After she died, I kept writing down stuff she said as I remembered it. I kept a little notebook. I'd wake up in the morning and write stuff down before I forgot it. I kept it under my mattress. Later I made a backup copy. I was always thinking about it and having imaginary conversations with her. I was a little preoccupied." He laughed. "Especially in a boring class. Once I asked a teacher if the holodeck on the Enterprise was a parallel universe. He jumped all over me and told me I was reading too many comic books." They laughed and slapped a high five. "Mr. Hart. He looked like Wally Cox. Never took a shower. I also told him South America looked like it fit up against Africa like a puzzle piece, and I know he thought I was an idiot."

"Oh boy." They laughed. "At least you found out later."

"I was in junior high. I saw it in a text book. I was pissed man. I raised my hand and told the science teacher I was robbed. I thought of that first."

"I remember that. You were in the seventh grade."

"Did you believe me"?

"That you figured that out by yourself"?

"Yeah."

"No. I thought you were just trying to impress me, but later I heard that lots of kids saw the same thing. The teachers didn't know." They laughed.

"I suppose."

It got dark and the street lights came on. Mr. Armstrong hoped the talk made his son feel better. David looked like he might be feeling a little too sorry for himself, so he wanted to keep him talking. "The recurring dream thing fascinates me son. How about some coffee"?

"It's not a dream. It really happened. It's a memory."

"You remember details. Does it ever change at all"?. He got up to make coffee.

"Not really. Well sort of. There's times when I remember

things... Little things that sort of fill in the gaps I guess.”

He stood in the door. “I’m going in to make coffee.”

“Not that French stuff I hope.”

“I got some from the doughnut place. You’ll like it.” He went in but left the door wide open so they could keep talking.

David got up and started poking around the porch. It was the open air kind without screens. There were hooks on the ceiling that used to hold a swing, and he thought about finding another one to replace it. Maybe a big one, big enough to sleep on. Music suddenly started. Brassy swing music came from next door. It was loud but all the lights were off like nobody was home. His dad left the spitting coffee maker and came back out. David pointed next door. “You hear that”?

“Stu likes Tommy Dorsey. It’s kinda loud though.”

“It’s loud alright. The frigging lights are off. Somebody’s either getting laid or killed.” They laughed.

“He’s seventy nine. It could be both.” They laughed again. “Coffee’s on.” They sat up on a solid section of porch wall and David kicked leaves out of the little drains at the bottom. He leaned against a big square pillar and grabbed a flag holder for balance but it broke off in his hand.

“Oh sorry Dad.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s a cheap one.”

“It broke off at the base.” He handed it over.

“I haven’t had a flag up since nine-eleven. Everybody bought one.” He dropped the bracket in the hedge. Now where were we? I know. The problem of evil. Don’t you think it’s a little inconsistent...you know to say that on one hand God doesn’t intervene on a daily basis...and also say that God has his hand on the bike. Like a secret safety net?”

“I think that in the long run...in the larger perspective...that God has the net out for us. But on a day to day basis we’re on our own. You don’t want to steer the bike for the child but you do catch it if the child steers too far.”

“What's too far?”

“Only God knows.” That's a circular argument, he thought. “I'm sure that when the hurricane blows your house away the natural tendency is to think God should have intervened. But who knows. The net is probably right there. It just seems like panic time.”

He smiled. “God won't give us a cross we can't bear.”

“That's right. Even if we don't know it.” He's got me in a corner, he thought.

“Well Son.” He combed his hair with his fingers. “That's easy to say and impossible to prove. Be careful not to blame the victim. Sometimes it feels like God has bitten off a little more for me than I can chew.”

“And then no one is more amazed than you when you chew it.”

“I suppose. Did your mom tell you that too?” He got up to get the coffee.

“I don't know. I think you said that. You always said two wrongs don't make a right. That really stuck with me.”

He called from the kitchen. “You don't want sugar do you son”?

“No Dad.”

He came out with two big stoneware mugs, and was suddenly confronted by an angry elderly gentlemen in the driveway next door. The old man was dragging an enormous golf bag on wheels. “Armstrong are you deaf”?

He looked at David. “My God it's Stu. I thought he was inside. He's been out all along.”

The man yelled, “Can't you hear that”?

“The music,” laughed David.

His dad joked, “I thought you were in there having a wild party Stu.”

“With the lights off? There's a timer on the damn thing. I can't find the instructions. It must have kicked itself on again. Why didn't you let yourself in and turn it off before I get a ticket for

disturbing the peace”?

“It's not that loud Stu. It sounds great.” He laughed and watched the man drag his bag up the steps. He winked at his son. “I thought he was in there. The dog probably shit on the carpet from nerves. Poor little thing. It was probably barking the whole time and I couldn't hear it.”

“Don't worry about it Dad. The dog has got to be used to it.” He laughed.

“I suppose. Can we eat now”? He craved pasta.

“OK sure.”

“Step into my kitchen and watch me work.” They walked through the living room, passing by the wall of degrees and family pictures. David shook his head at an old black and white photo of his dad with Nixon and Ford. His dad closed the kitchen windows. The radio on the counter was tuned to a talk station. The moderator said the fall weather was getting colder, and that predicting the severity of the upcoming winter was the game of the week with the commodity traders downtown. Corn was double the price of last year in anticipation of the rush to ethanol.

David sat at the kitchen table and watched his father chop vegetables with his big expensive chef's knife. He loved to it show off. It was hand forged with a full tang and a Swiss logo. It felt good in his hands and he never let it stay wet. David checked the time and asked, “Can I help you with anything Dad?”

“No thanks I'll get it.”

David went to the sink and started to draw a glass of water. He filled a red plastic tumbler, looked through the back window and saw something moving in the yard. He shook it off and refocused, but he saw it again. A man in the alley got behind the garage. “Hey Dad, you expecting company”?

“No.” He scraped up the onions.

“I think somebody's sneaking around behind the garage.”

They leaned over the sink and tried to scan the yard. “I had some kids take some stuff out of the garage a couple years ago,”

he said. "The door is right out there in the alley. Anybody can get in there without being seen."

David saw red and sensed another attack. "Here we go again Dad." The excitement felt good.

"You think"?

"I don't know, but I intend to do something about it this time."

He pulled David's arm. "Oh no you're not. I'm calling the police." He grabbed the kitchen phone and hit 911. David rifled through the hall closet for a weapon and settled on a seven iron. He jumped through the front door, ran full speed down to the corner, broke right twice, and came sprinting up the alley with the golf club cocked and ready. He ducked in and out of garbage cans and lawn mowers until he reached the garage and pressed himself against the back side where he could approach from the rear.

He heard men talking inside. The thought that he was in the right no matter what he had to do made him euphoric and dangerous. This was his dad's property. He crashed through the door holding the seven iron high above his head and ran directly at two startled men who were peeking through a dusty little window. He brought it down full force at the first man's shoulder and just caught a glimpse of a pistol coming out from behind the man's back. The golf club missed the guy's face by less than an inch and bashed against the wall near an exposed joist. The gun exploded with a massive dead thud and completely lit up the small garage. David felt like somebody hit him in the shoulder with a sledgehammer and passed out. The last thing he would remember was a whoosh of static, like thousands of tiny sparks, as the neurons shut down in a smooth sweeping wave. It started on one side of the brain and cascaded over the top until he lost consciousness.

His dream was not a dream at all but a nothingness with no apparent time passing, one of those rare blank dreams where it seems like you blink once and wake up. When it happens you sleep for hours, but you feel like it's only been a few seconds. He

regained consciousness in the hospital to see Dori and his father standing over him. He started to speak but it came out funny. Dori put her hand across his mouth. "Don't try to talk. You're OK. You just got out of surgery. You got shot in the shoulder. They took the bullet out. You lost some blood but that's all. Didn't hit anything vital." She teared up and his dad took over.

"You're OK. The doctor said you're built like a tank. The bullet bounced off your collar bone. It broke the bullet but not the collar bone. Go figure. Said he wouldn't believe it he didn't see it himself. Says you have a massive collarbone, like a Neanderthal." David smiled inside. "It's not time to talk yet son. Take it easy. You bent my seven iron around something. You owe me a new one." He swallowed hard. "My God I'm glad you're on our side. They had to pry it out of your hands. Go back to sleep. I love you Son." Suddenly a male nurse with a shaved head came in and pushed them both out. He told them to wait a few hours but not to leave until the police talked to them again.

David floated in the chemicals and hallucinated. He was obsessed with what he had just heard. The way they said it bugged him. He didn't GET shot, somebody shot him. Getting shot seemed to imply that it was an accident. That was no accident, unless you think it was a mistake to confront the intruders. Given the circumstances, he was sure he made the right decision. It wasn't like there was a lot of time to decide. It was a judgment call. Never look back, he thought, just like in wrestling. You shoot for the take down. If you miss, the last thing you want to do is spend even one second beating yourself up or you'll be vulnerable. What you do is hope your opponent is relishing the moment and shoot again. You might just catch him in a moment of expensive celebration.

He remembered the gun. It was a common black semiautomatic pistol. He tried to remember details but the chemicals were playing tricks. He remembered the flash and knew he would never forget the heavy thud made louder by the concrete floor and

bare walls. He moaned, “The son of a bitch shot me” to himself, over and over, as if it meant something a little different each time. “The son of a bitch. He shot me. He expected me to die. He actually tried to kill me. I should be dead right now. That lousy son of a bitch. He almost... He pointed a pistol at my face and pulled the trigger. I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch.”

The young professor passed in and out of consciousness for hours. The pain was there but it didn't bother him. He felt like a spectator to the whole scene, but the thirst was beginning to come to the surface and that was unpleasant but interesting. It reminded him of the feeling you get when you scratch an itch and it hurts but it feels good too. It almost makes the itch worth having. Dreams seemed to happen when he was awake but not when he was asleep. He knew from neurology that all people dream every night. Everybody dreams but they don't always remember it. Thinking about that reminded him of an idea that fascinated him as a child. Maybe the dream world is the real world and the waking world is a dream. He thought about quantum physics and parallel universes. He imagined that God was sitting right beside him. It seemed appropriate to ask God to give him a miracle just in case that sort of thing actually happened.

Next it was Einstein's statement that God doesn't play dice. He tried to imagine how God could play dice anyway. Suppose God was just hanging around heaven with some angels and wanted to join in their dice game. They would only be playing for points and enjoyment of course, but how could God play when God knows what the next number will be before it happens. Maybe God can turn the powers on and off. God can do anything. A temporary switch off would be in order. But what would it be like for God to play WITHOUT turning the powers off. Could God block his own thoughts. It must be like trying to play chess with yourself. The only way to do it is to purposely not think about the strategy of the side you're not playing at the time. Trying to think about nothing is almost impossible because thinking about not

thinking is still thinking about something. God doesn't play dice. Is that because God doesn't want to or because it's no fun. Would Jesus play dice. Would he play and let you win. Would Moses shoot pool. If he could part the Red Sea he could surely drop a nine ball on the break.

He started dreaming about his mother. He couldn't see her but heard her voice dressed him down and reminding him that two wrongs don't make a right. She was angry because he attacked a man with a golf club. David argued his case. "Mom, give me a break. How much can a guy take? The break in, the fire, and now this. Am I just supposed to just sit back and watch? When can I defend myself?"

He knew the answer. "The question doesn't make sense to me," she said. "You were never in any danger. Do you want to have blood on your hands forever?"

"Mom."

"I told you. Nothing ever dies. God will catch you."

"Come on Mom. There's a reasonable limit. It's only natural to defend yourself."

"Nature is what we are put on the world to rise above."

"You and Hepburn. You should have been Amish."

"Wonderful people. They're all here."

He realized that he was dreaming but didn't want to stop. He tried to imagine what the conversation would sound like. "Mom."

"Yes dear."

"Does God play dice?"

"What kind of a silly question is that?"

"I mean chance, randomness. Is there really anything random in the universe?"

"Yes and no."

"Is it possible for me to understand what you meant by that?"

He suddenly realized that he was talking to the face of a young doctor who was trying to get his attention. David tried to speak but the words didn't come easily. The doctor tried to wake him by

announcing in a bold clear voice that he was going to be fine. The doctor examined David's bloodshot eyes with a little black flashlight. David tried to smile but fell right back to sleep. The doctor clipped the flashlight to the pocket of his light blue lab coat, opened the door, and shooed off a small gathering of police that wanted to talk to his patient.

It took another four hours of waiting before Officer French of the Oak Park Police Department got in. David knew he was a cop as soon as he saw him, a muscular fellow in a short sleeve white shirt, navy blue pants, shiny black shoes, and a gold badge. The officer flipped open a steno pad and took the cap off of a cheap ball point pen. "Hello Mr. Armstrong. I won't ask you how you're feeling. I know you just got shot."

David pulled his sticky lips apart and spoke. "I didn't get shot. Somebody shot me."

"I'm from the Oak Park Police. I won't stay too long, but I'll be back to follow up when you feel more like talking."

"Fine." Holy cow, thought David. He looks like a young Bob Hope.

The cop smiled. "Did you get a good look at the man"?

"Two men. I didn't get a good look at their faces. I didn't get a good look at them at all. It happened so fast."

"You swung a golf club at them." He wrote while he talked.

"Yeah. I saw them looking at the house and just went for it. A lot of crazy shit has happened lately."

"I know about all of it. You sure you never saw them before"?

He put a hand on the bed rail.

"I didn't get a good enough look to tell."

"What color hair? How tall? What were they wearing"?

"Just street clothes...uh. Dress shirts. I don't know what color. I didn't flip the light on. They were both about my size I guess. It was all of maybe ten seconds and he shot me."

"You hit him with the golf club"?

"I don't know. All I saw was the gun coming out and the flash."

“You saw the gun. How well did you see it? Can you describe it?”

He tried to relax and remember without trying too hard. “Ordinary. It was a black semi-auto. 1911 style. I've seen them before in lots of places. I've shot them before.”

French took out his service weapon. “Like this”?

“Exactly like that one. I know what it is. It's a nine millimeter Beretta isn't it”?

He turned it around. “You sure it looked just like this”?

“Positive. I've shot one before. No kick. I could tell by the shape of the grip. It's Army issue. It replaced the .45 right”?

He nodded. “Military and police model.”

“And the government too huh? CIA, FBI.”

“Yes. But you didn't see it for very long. It could have been a lot of other models. It's a common shape. Do you think the FBI is following you”? He kept his eyes on the pad.

“Shit man.” He smiled. “Even if I did, I wouldn't say it.” He rolled over and looked at the ceiling.

The officer wrote as he spoke. “I know about the paper, and the college, and the fire, and the nationalization of oil. I know about all that stuff. I don't believe the government is out to get you.”

“What about the oil companies”?

“I don't think so.” He put the pad down.

David rolled over and faced him. “Somebody's after me. Who the hell would do this? You tell me.”

“I think you're right. Somebody's doing something crazy. We'll find them, and when we do, we'll charge them with attempted murder. This ain't no prank anymore.”

“It never WAS a prank was it”? For the first time he realized that somebody had really screwed up their life over him. Somebody was going to prison for a very long time. “It's not a prank at all.”

French looked away. “I don't think so. I'll be back tomorrow and touch base with you again. We'll get the guy. It's only a matter

of time.”

David felt vulnerable. “What’s to keep him from walking right in here and finishing the job?”

“Two things. One, he needs to get a bigger gun.” They laughed. “Doc says the slug bounced right off you. You’re a lucky man. Second, we’ve got you covered with officers inside and out. There’s one right outside the door twenty four seven. And nobody gets in the building without being checked by our people downstairs. Just in case you actually are being stalked by a pro, but I doubt it. Too sloppy.”

David smiled. “Well good then. Now please find the sons of bitches. I’m tired of this shit. I just got my job back you know.”

“Congratulations,” said French. He waved and left the room.

He slept lightly for another six hours and woke up to see Dori wiping his forehead. He watched her for a while before letting her that know he was awake. She’d been crying and her eyes looked tired. Her hair was a mess, and she looked like she’d slept in her clothes. He whispered with his eyes closed. “There’s a spot of something. It looks like chocolate on your cheek.”

“Hey, you’re awake.” She caressed his face.

He opened his eyes and smiled. “It’s over there.” He pointed at her right cheek. She wiped it away and frowned.

“I’ve been eating out of a machine in the lounge.”

“Fresh machine or gas station stale”? He squeezed her hand.

“Fresh. The machine gets a lot of traffic. It’s in the waiting room next to surgery. It might as well be stale. Nobody would notice anyway.”

“A worry lounge.” He looked around for the bathroom.

“They ought to put a track in there,” she joked. “All they do is pace. Thank God I don’t smoke. They have to run outside. There’s a clock in there that must be the slowest clock in the world. They should take it down. It just makes the time crawl.”

“I guess.”

She kissed his hand. “You can’t help but look at the damn thing.

If it had a second hand it would be even worse.”

He wanted a hug. “How long was it? How long was I in surgery”?

Her eyes rolled back. “You don't wanna know. They said you were never in danger, that the bullet missed everything important, but I don't know why it took so long? Maybe they get paid by the hour.”

“I gotta pee. Help me to the bathroom.”

“You have a catheter. You pee in this bag.” She pointed to a plastic bag hanging on the bed rail. Go ahead and pee.”

“No way. I can't pee with you here.”

“You've been doing just fine until now.” She laughed. “You're fully functional. All your important parts are working.”

He laughed and coughed a little. “As the owner and caretaker of my body parts, well, I would just like to say that I consider all of my parts important.” He laughed a little more and felt the drugs keeping him sedated.

She kissed him on the lips. “You know what I mean. How do you feel now”?

“I'm fine. How do you feel”? He meant it.

“I'm just relieved that you're OK, but I'm waiting until I'm sure, and then I'm going to get so pissed that you'll wish you were dead.”

“You're mad at me? I didn't shoot myself.”

“I'm not mad yet. I'm still worried. Worried trumps pissed.” She looked at the wall.

“Well you might as well go ahead and get pissed. I'm fine. I must have really screwed up again like usual. I know I'm lucky. I didn't see much. I was there but I missed the whole thing.”

“The golf club was real bent up. They said you missed him. I can't believe you actually took a golf club to a gunfight.” They laughed. “Mr. America thinks he can hit a bullet with golf club.”

“I didn't even know he had a gun. I...”

“You assumed.” She looked hurt.

David looked away in disbelief. “You're actually pissed at me.”

“After all that's happened lately, shit. You go running in there without knowing what's going on and try and brain the guy.”

He grinned and held up pinch fingers. “Missed it by that much.”

She snapped. “Next time call the damn police! That's why we pay them! They have guns already”!

The officer guarding the door peeked in. “Everything alright in here folks”?

Dori blushed and David laughed. “Yeah, we're OK officer,” she said. “He's doing fine.”

A very attractive Blonde nurse with big blue eyes and long lashes came through the door and asked everyone to leave. She had a killer figure with hard sexy legs and a perfect smile. David was amused and felt compelled to make up a joke about a sponge bath, but he didn't. Dori left the room to call her boss. The nurse adjusted the wires connecting David to the beeping machine and told him to relax. I like her, he thought. She doesn't look like a health club babe. She looks like the woman all the health club babes are trying to look LIKE.

She stared at the wound and joked, “How's my macho wrestler professor doing now? You know as a golfer... We'll don't quit your day job yet.”

He held up two fingers close together and did a Maxwell Smart imitation. “Missed it by that much.” She laughed in friendly but professional way. He adjusted his skimpy gown to cover up the gap exposing his butt.

“You don't need to be modest with me mister. I was with you in surgery. I've seen everything there is to see. I've seen parts of you that you will never see.”

“Oh my God,” he laughed. “You're OK nurse. Rumors of you being a Nurse Ratchet are greatly exaggerated. I'd say you qualify as a first class Nurse Good-body though.”

She smiled and fluffed up his pillow. “Why thank you sir.”

He felt guilty and embarrassed. It's OK, he thought. I'm just playing catch and release. "You mean to tell me that all I have to do is get shot, and I get to be fussed over by you"?

"Sure do. And you get to see my husband too. He's your surgeon."

"Oh shit." He laughed and slapped the hand rail. "I thought I was doing pretty good too. I guess the sponge bath I've been thinking about since you came in is out of the question now."

"Hey no problem. I think I should warn you though. The last guy that got too pushy, and my husband found out about it, he left here after an extra surgery, and with so much hardware left inside him that he sounded like a shoplifter sneaking out of the flatware department." She smiled.

"Oh shit." They laughed.

The nurse sat on the bed and started taking his blood pressure. She used an old fashioned pump with dials instead of a digital readout, and that pleased him. She pressed the stethoscope on his wrist and pumped the needle up until she heard his heart beat stand out. She wrote the numbers in the chart and followed the second hand on her flashy watch to get the pulse. "So professor, tell me about this thing you wrote on the Internet. I hear you took on the oil companies and now they want to kill you."

"Who told you that"?

"It's all over the hospital. Actually, the lab guy printed your paper off the net. It's in the coffee room. We have a huge laser copier in there."

"Cool." He smiled. "It's a big machine? Maybe you can run me a batch too."

"It's big alright. Looks like somebody parked a Hummer in there. It's down half the time though. I've got a cheap little one at the nurse's station that always works."

"Have you read the paper"?. She must work out every day, he thought.

"Not yet. Tell me about it."

He was happy to show off. "It's no big deal. It's an economic strategy to reconcile socialism and capitalism."

"What do you mean that's no big deal? Sounds pretty radical to me there professor."

"It's not radical. In this country anything short of all out extreme wing nut capitalism gets spun like it's the beginning of the end. I advocate separating luxuries from necessities and treating them differently. It's OK to make a profit on luxury cars but not on bread."

"Sounds reasonable. Why do they want to kill you"?

He had to remind himself to keep his eyes up and away from her breasts. "I'm not convinced that anybody wants to kill me."

"Oh yeah... I hear you want the government to take over the oil companies."

"I do." She likes the danger, he thought.

"It's none of my business, but If I were you... Well professor, I've got news for you. Somebody IS probably trying to kill you. You're not paranoid. It's not paranoia when it's real. There are coincidences and then there's Exxon. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes, not for one minute. You better be careful out there." She wrote in the chart.

"The guys in the garage, they were watching the house, that's all. If they wanted to shoot me they could have done it way before then."

"I hear there's lots of people reading your paper and demanding that their congressmen do what you want. I hear there's a movement to get your school to take money out of this or that company over it."

"That's right."

"Your fiance said you stopped an oil company from giving big bucks to the school. You got fired and only got rehired after you went on the BBC and gave the school some bad press. The Oak Park Police think somebody's trying to kill you, but they can't figure out who. There's a guard on your door, and all sorts of cops

are asking the staff questions about who tries to visit you.”

“Guess I should be careful huh”? She digs this shit, he thought. She's got a James Bond fetish.

“If I were you, I'd put a pebble on my car hood and check to see if it's still there before I turned the key.”

“I can't.” He smiled.

“Why not”? She pushed a reset button on the monitor.

“Somebody already torched it. They burned my truck up.”

“Oh my God. What did I tell you?” He's not smart enough to be a professor, she thought.

“It was beautiful, a fully restored old Ford pick up. An '86 step side 4x4.”

“Not with the wood bed”? She smiled.

“How did you know”?

“My dad had an 85. That was one cool truck.”

What a babe, he thought. “What color”?

“Red.”

“Mine is blue. I mean it was blue. It's all black now. I'm gonna get another one just like it even if I have to build it up with junk yard parts.” He meant it. “What do you drive”?

“We have a Mercedes convertible.”

“Wow, what a car.”

She adjusted the tubes coming out of the IV bags. “It never comes out of the garage. We live two blocks from the hospital and take the train downtown. My husband is like an old lady who buys new furniture and covers it with thick plastic. He'd be the first one to admit it too. That car, he's afraid it'll get wet or dirty. It has less than a thousand miles on it for Christ's sake.”

“Does he sit in the garage and make racing car noises.”

“No, but he gets it detailed all the time.” They laughed.

The door popped open and her surgeon husband came in smiling. “Hey what's all the noise in here”?

She laughed. “We were just talking about you doctor.”

He was a regular looking guy with a tan that didn't come from a

tanning coffin at the mall. “Doc you're a lucky man,” said David.

He smiled. “She told you the one about the guy that walked out clanking like a silverware shoplifter. Didn't she?”

He laughed. “Yeah doc she did.”

“It's not true. I'd never do that.” He smiled and crossed his fingers behind his back. “How you feeling?”

David thought for a minute. “I'm OK doc. When can you bust me out of here?”

“Couple days I think. The bullet didn't hit anything important.”

“Why does everybody say that? When it's your body, every frigging part is important. A guy gets shot up in a western... 'You OK Tex? Yeah I'm OK. It's only a flesh wound.' Flesh is important man.” They laughed. “Especially when it's your own.”

“What I mean is, It could have hit something even more important. I guess I won't say you were lucky.”

“Thanks doc. I don't exactly feel like buying a lottery ticket.”

The doc thought about the shooter and a possible motive. “I read your paper professor, and I think you should know. I'm a republican.” He smiled.

David made a funny face. “Shit Doc. Did you read it before or after the surgery?”

He grinned at the chart. “After.”

“Thank God for small miracles.”

“Actually I liked it a lot. Don't think just because I'm a doctor that I'm against public sector health care. Medicare is public.”

“Right on Doc.”

“I'd rather work for the government than a bad insurance company. It's the HMOs that are getting rich anyway. I can't give an aspirin without getting permission and going through three levels of review. I get second guessed all the time.”

“Did they ask you if my gunshot wound was a preexisting condition?” They laughed.

“Not yet.”

David tried a silly monotone voice. “Policyholders are required

to give at least 24 hours notice before being shot, and patients must use an in-house provider, or one from the list approved by our claims specialist who is not a doctor and does not play one on TV.” They all laughed.

The nurse added, “And there will be a five hundred dollar copay if you don't call before you get shot.” They laughed.

The doctor waved. “Don't laugh too soon. It's always something. Hey...I agree with you about the oil companies. They're wrecking the economy.”

“I'm not so sure the oil companies are out to get me Doc.”

“Well you're the only one who doesn't think so. By the way, there's a reporter from the Trib trying to get in to see you. We threw her out twice. If she gets in she's not supposed to be here. If you see her then call the guard. She won't get past the desk, but I thought I'd tell you anyway.”

“OK doc. How will I know it's her?”

The nurse joked, “You'll know her alright. Real short brown hair. She don't give up easy.”

The intercom beeped and a man said, *Doctor Baig to report to surgery*. David thought about his dad. “Hey Doc, when am I OK to see people?”

He finished the chart and handed it to his wife. “You're doing fine. I'm going to let family visitors see you. I'll be back tomorrow. I'm not worried about you this time.” He held out his hand and David shook it.

“Good good. Thanks Doc... And hey uh... Can you take the pee tube out yet? It's kinda weird.”

“I suppose so, sure.”

They worked on David for a short but painful few minutes to remove the catheter. He was embarrassed but glad to be done with it. The nurse pushed the squeaky door open and held it with her foot. The doctor left joking about never being home.

The officer on guard came right in. “There's a guy out here that wants to see you. Says his name is Nick something. Says he's

your friend. Is he OK”?

David thought quick and faked an expression of panic like a closeup in a Hitchcock movie. He put a finger across his lips. “Shh... Come in officer. Shut the door.” The officer stepped inside but looked skeptical. David tried to think up a name. “His real name is... Well he goes by... Oh never mind. Listen, this guy thinks I owe him money, but I don't.”

“Excuse me.” He frowned like he didn't need the hassle.

“Uh yeah. That's right. See me and him... We sort of... Lets say we were sort of in business together.”

“What kind of business”?

“I don't think I want to get into it right now, but I want you to watch him see. He may try and take me out.”

He wasn't fooled. “Bull shit.” He took a step back.

“Officer you have no idea what kind of a dangerous character you're dealing with here. When I think of some of the things he's done. Oh my God he...”

“Is that so? Then why didn't he seem nervous? I mean he wasn't afraid to talk to the detectives.”

“What detectives”?

“He's been sitting in front of a computer in the lounge for an hour with the homicide squad. They don't act like he's a problem.”

“Holy shit,” laughed David. “He's a slick one alright. I'll bet he's already got their social security numbers man. He's probably...”

The door popped open and Nick barged in with a notebook computer under his arm and a power cord wrapped around his neck. “Very funny professor. I heard the whole thing through the door.” David laughed. “Now I'm public enemy number one.”

The officer frowned. “You guys OK”?

David grinned with delight. “Keep your ear next to the door officer. I don't trust this guy.” He laughed until the stitches gave him a sharp sting. The cop laughed and went back to his hard plastic seat.

Nick looked around. "Where can I plug this thing in"?

"Right here." David pointed to an outlet on the other side of the bed.

Nick untangled a long cord with a heavy plastic brick in the middle of it. He jammed one end into the wall socket and the other into the back of his computer. The back of the laptop was warm to the touch, almost hot. "I don't trust the battery in this thing anymore. I keep thinking it's going to catch fire. I think the more you charge and recharge it.... This one runs for an hour or so before it croaks on me. Piece of shit."

David got comfortable. "You been watching the blog? What are they saying about me up on there comrade"?

"Oh my God dude. That's what I've been trying to get in here and tell you. You ain't gonna believe this shit. We're talking to the God damn shooter man."

"Say what"! He sat up too fast.

"Dude! The cops and the shooter are sending messages back and forth on the frigging blog. I ain't making this up man."

"Are they tracing it"?

"Untraceable."

"You're kidding right"?

"Nope. Completely untraceable. It's not hard to do. There's a lot of ways to do it now." He raised the computer lid and started to log on.

"You're like doing the broadband hotspot thing."

"Uh huh."

"I still can't believe they can hide like that. You sure it can't be traced"? They could if they wanted to bad enough, he thought.

"Dude, they can just find a public place with an Internet hot spot or any number of ways. It's easy. They can go to a library."

"So it's like the movies. The shooter is taunting the cops through ads in the paper, but now it's in real time."

"Uh huh." He scrolled down the long chain of comments without looking up.

David strained to concentrate through the fog of the pain killers. “Maybe I can talk to the son of a bitch myself. Is he still on there?”

Nick pointed at the screen. “See here. The cops are talking to him.” He passed the computer. David squinted uncomfortably at the flat screen, and Nick pointed to the spot.

*Cap22: I shot the pinko son of a bitch and you can't do a fucking thing about it. Next Time I'm not going to miss. I'm going to shoot him twice. I'm going to shoot him in the crotch just to watch him suffer and then I'm going to blow his fucking head off.*

*OPPD007: You want to tell us what all this is about? What are you doing this for?*

*Cap22: Look cop..... I'm not going to tell you anything that would give me away.*

*OPPD007: Then why are you talking to us? Does it give you a hard on or do you just want to get caught?*

*Cap22: Save the crap. It won't work on me. Let's jut say I know the drill.*

*OPPD007: OK then. Tell us what you want us to know. It's your ball.*

*Cap22: Tell that pinko fagot that this is America and we don't play games with people like him and his sorry ass economic terrorism. This is a free market system and we intend to keep it that way. If the government owned the oil we'd have ten dollar gas. We won't have some government bureaucrat setting the price. He's a fucking terrorist. He's an enemy of the people.*

*OPPD007: You read his paper and that's what you think he's up to?*

*Cap22: That's right. He's a closet communist. Private property is the American way. If the government controls the oil they control everything. Socialism won't work in America. There will always be someone like me to step up and do the right thing. That's why we have the second amendment, to protect us from*

*being taken over by totalitarians. We've got more guns buried in the ground than some third world armies. It only takes one patriotic American at a time.*

*OPPD007: So you're a one man show. You got tired shooting beer cans off the fence so now you're going to kill a terrorist and get on CNN.*

*Cap22: Who said I'm a one man show? A lot of big people are on my side. Money is no object to these people.*

*OPPD007: What people?*

*Cap22: Nice try. It doesn't matter to me what you or anybody else thinks. You'll never find me. Do you have any idea how much money we're talking about here? Nationalize oil.....these people can snap their fingers and make anybody they want disappear and nobody is going to be dumb enough to ask any questions. They're huge.*

*OPPD007: Are you, or are you not, saying that you are working for an oil company?*

*Cap22: Oil company shit. This is bigger than one company. You think there's a bunch of separate companies out there that operate independently and compete with each other like they're selling widgets or something? Oil is oil man. Oil is life. Without oil we just die. You don't fuck around with oil. A single life don't mean shit.*

*OPPD007: First of all, if the oil companies wanted to hire a hit on somebody why would they hire somebody who likes to brag on the Internet? Second, why would they care about what a teacher says in a chat room? I think you're a kid and you live in your mother's basement.*

*Cap22: Mother fucker!!!!!!! I can off this pig and talk to you play by play at the same time right through the whole damn thing and then just sign off and you'll never ever find me. I want the commie son of a bitch to suffer.*

*OPPD007: Sounds personal, not professional.*

*Cap22: I love my country. It's personal that way.*

David looked at Nick and asked, “Can I talk to him myself right now?”

Nick slapped the bed. “Sign in and knock yourself out man.”

David made up a screen name and registered it. A confirmation message appeared in the mail folder. In the time it took him to click it and wait for it to load he had a new handle. He jumped on the conversation.

*Pinko1: Hello there. May I cut in? This is David and I'm getting bored with this shit. Listen ass hole.....I'm not a communist but you certainly are a fucking idiot. You're not working for any oil company. If they did want to hit me.....which they don't...they'd damn sure hire a professional and professionals don't brag on the Internet. I don't know who you are yet but if you're the dick head that shot me.....when I do find you I'm going to fuck you up so bad you'll be eating through a straw. You hear me mother fucker?*

*OPPD007: David get off and let us handle this.*

*Pinko1: I have a right.*

*Cap22: That's right fagot. I'm going to make an example out of you. You're gonna pay the full price for treason and I get to watch you die. Welcome to America you marxist piss bag.*

*Pinko1: Marx is capitalized stupid. This guy's got a hand in his pants officer. He gets his cookies off on this shit. OK I'm off. But if you don't find this ass hole before I do I'm not responsible for what I'm going to do to him. Don't forget I'm watching this shit too.*

*OPPD007: Get off David. Cap22 what do you want from all this”?*

There was no reply. Everybody waited. After several minutes the officer in the hall got angry and pushed the door open. “Nice job you guys. He's off now.”

Nick protested, "So what. You can't trace him anyway, can you"?

"Not if you scare him away we can't. If we keep him talking then it's only a matter of time until he slips up and tells us something we can put together."

"Oh how would you know," laughed David. "You ever do this before"?

He made a serious face. "I do this every day. I catch Internet predators."

"Was that you on line"?

"My partner back at headquarters. He's on the radio. He wants me to throw you out the window now. The janitor says it's painted shut or something." The cop shook his head and put his hands on his hips. "I can't keep you guys from watching what we say, but whatever you do, please don't log on again, OK?"

David smiled and lied. "Yes sir Officer sir."

"Yeah right." He waved them off on his way out.

David didn't even get a chance to use the bathroom before Dori pushed her way in and gestured like she desperately wanted to whisper something to him.

David rolled out of bed and kissed her in passing. "I'll be right back. I gotta piss like a racehorse." He tiptoed into the bathroom and snapped the door shut.

Nick scooted his chair around to face her and tried to ask, "What ya whispering ab..."

She hushed him up with a be quiet stare. They sat mute until they heard a powerful flush and running water in the bathroom sink. David walked out holding his gown together, crawled back into bed and pulled the blanket over his legs. He threw Dori a pitiful look and begged, "Hon can you please bring me some pajamas?"

"You don't wear pajamas. You pass out in your clothes." She pointed at the door and whispered, "There's a man out there who wants to see you. He's from the government."

Nick asked, "How do you know that?" He looked at Dori like she was a child.

She wanted Nick gone. "Because he showed his badge to the cops out there, and they looked real impressed."

David got serious. "What did he say"?

"He's from the United States department of something or other. Defense, I think."

"Holy shit man. This might not be too good," said Nick. "I don't think this administration likes you professor."

David laughed. "They ain't gonna shoot me in the hospital dude."

"Yeah, that's right man. They take you to Cuba first."

Dori begged, "Don't talk to anybody without a lawyer David. You don't have to do anything." She fired a drop dead look at Nick.

He ignored her and joked, "They don't let you have a lawyer anyway. They just say you're an evil enemy combatant, bad guy, whatever, and take you away. They torture you by pouring half gallon jugs of water down your throat."

David laughed. "Oh right. I'm sure that's what he's here for. I don't think so."

"You never know these days," said Dori.

David thought about getting a lawyer. "It's getting ridiculous out there alright, but you can't believe anything you hear on the God damn media anymore. They love spreading fear. Nazis run on fear. They've even got the democrats in congress afraid of them. The Nazi bastards. If they want a piece a me, then bring it. Let the guy in. I want to know who he is right now man."

"OK man, but watch your back," said Nick. He opened the door and motioned to a middle aged man in a navy blue, pin striped suit.

The stranger marched in and shook hands all around before pulling up a chair. He had a wire in his ear and wasn't at all shy about what he was there to do. He seemed to order David more

than ask him. “Mr Armstrong would you mind if we talked alone for a few minutes please sir”?

I don't work for this guy, thought David. “She is my fiancée, and he is my press agent. They can be here. I tell them everything anyway.”

“I understand. But for right now could I please speak to you alone? Please.”

Nick and Dori hurried out through the partially open door. Nick put an imaginary phone to his ear and winked at David as he left. The stranger spoke in casual a way that made David feel at ease. “Mr Armstrong I'm Craig Benton. I'm from the Pentagon.”

“The what”? David blushed.

Benton flashed a gold badge from the Department of Defense. “The Pentagon. I'm here to see if I can help you.”

David felt his palms start to sweat. “Sure you are. Why should I trust you”?

“I can understand if you're feeling a little paranoid. A lot has happened...”

“Who exactly do you work for at the Pentagon? What branch? Army? Navy? Air Force”?

Benton looked amused. “All of them actually. They all come under DOD.”

“Are you CIA?” He wiped his hands on a napkin.

“No. I'm not from the CIA. I represent the military. I work on special cases dealing with national security. That's about all I can tell you.” He forced a little smile. His lips were smiling but his eyes were not.

David held his anger down. “What's next. Now I'm a frigging threat to national security.”

“On the contrary son. You're just the opposite.” Benton expected his man to respond to praise. They always did.

David held up a hand. “What?” he wheezed, fighting a tickle in his throat.

“You probably think everybody in the Pentagon is a carbon

copy of the administration don't you? You think every officer in the military is a republican and a hawk, no matter what, like they have some kind of litmus test for hard line conservatism." David nodded yes. "You probably think they're all just looking out for themselves, and they'll take any position, good or bad, to get promoted. We have political factions on all sides in the Pentagon just like anywhere else. We even have generals that are democrats. Maybe they don't go around wearing their politics on their sleeves, but right now there are just as many people in the Pentagon who don't support the administration as those who do."

"It's not known for it's progressive bias." He laughed.

"That's right, but guess what the back room skinny is on your nationalize the oil thing professor"?

"They think I'm a commie that needs to be sent to a secret prison." He laughed.

Benton got serious. "Have you considered the implications to national security of the consolidation of the world's oil supply into fewer and fewer private hands"?

"I would say it makes us less secure."

"So would I. A damn sight more insecure." He thought about jet fuel and cargo planes moving tanks to the desert and back.

David clapped his hands. "Hey hey, that's great. Does everyone at the Pentagon think that way"?

"Some do and some don't. The ones that do are right. Most of the ones that don't are probably lying. More than a few are just clueless."

David laughed at the idea of a clueless general. "It's hard to agree with a pinko in front of your boss right"?

"If you said the sky was blue, well, they'd probably go on the record against you." They both laughed. "But privately they'd agree with you. We can't have a few wealthy individuals controlling the fuel supply and squeezing the army for windfall profits."

"Well I would think not." Oh my God, he thought. They like it.

Benton got serious again. "I'm here to make sure nobody gets to you."

"Then you DO want me alive." He grinned more from nerves than anything else.

"I do." He didn't smile.

David looked at the door and wondered if he'd just been duped by a pro. "So the Pentagon wants me alive. Wow, this is..."

"I didn't say the whole Pentagon."

David made a worried funny face. "Some of them want me dead"? He ran a finger across his throat.

"Of course not." He lightened up. "But there's a theory that if you get killed, martyred sort of, then it would probably just blow back on the energy people and then the oil would get nationalized anyway."

"Oh shit. Not my strategy." He felt dizzy.

"Don't worry professor."

"But you're here officially right"? David looked him up and down. "I mean you've got official orders and whatever"?

Benton hesitated. "It doesn't work that way exactly. We don't put everything on paper. Anything ugly happens, or you go to the press, you know, and I disappear with no trace."

David laughed and snapped his fingers. "There goes the movie rights."

Benton smiled. "Come on professor. What do you want for nothing? You'd think keeping a guy alive would be enough to make him a satisfied customer. I'm just going to hang around until we find out who's trying to take you out."

"And where are we at with that? You think you know who it is yet"?

"Not a clue." Benton subconsciously buffed a shoe on his pants.

"Is it oil"? Maybe he's big oil, he thought.

"So far, every inquiry in that direction comes up negative, but we continue to investigate every angle. It's only a matter of time.

We'll find out the who and why, and then you can go back to teaching impressionable young kids about the evils of capitalism.”

David spoke in a half whisper. “You know, my dad thinks it's a former student.”

“Could be but I doubt it. The profilers say no way. A student might slash your tires but murder is extremely rare, not impossible but rare. This is uncharted territory in a way. You've sort of invented something that could make a lot of people happy and a lot of other people angry.”

“That's right. But this time the regular guy gets to be happy and not the other way around.”

“A new invention that's good for some and bad for others in unexpected ways. It reminds me of *The Man in the White Suit*.”

“The what?”

“It's an old British movie. The whole textile industry gets turned upside down because a man invents a kind of indestructible cloth that never wears out. People spend less on clothes but all the textile workers get laid off. The unions want him dead.”

“Oh no.” He blushed. “I like unions.”

“See. If you nationalize the markets for necessities, and take the profit out of it, then consumers will love you, but the merchants that sell the stuff will hate you. People that sell luxuries will love you though. The power company will not be happy and...”

“Good. Screw the power company man.”

“Wait a minute. Not so fast. People make a lot of money in necessities. Your pension fund probably has power company stock. The pension fund managers don't want the profit to be taken out of that. Big enemies and big friends here. No in between. You leave luxuries alone. People who sell corporate jets to rich people would love you, but oh my God, the drug companies would take a giant beating under your plan. The

insurance companies would be completely out of the health care business altogether.”

“Screw them too.” He laughed.

Benton smiled. “You're like the inventor guy in the old movie alright. The idea to split the economy by luxuries and necessities, private sector and public sector, it's original but dangerous. The woman that I was assigned to before you had the same problem. All you jokers do. That's my specialty, protecting people who come up with unpopular ideas that actually help the military and national security. You folks tend to become easy targets.”

David felt a strange combination of emotions. “What did she invent”?

“A better birth control.” They laughed.

“Oh my God man. How does that help national security”?

“You'd be surprised. You know how much money we spend on military dependents”?

“Holy cow. You want to sterilize the troops”? He made a snipping motion with his fingers.

“Of course not. The troops can have all the children they want, but every dependent costs a fortune. It's the unwanted pregnancies I'm talking about. No birth control is one hundred percent effective. Even the pill is only ninety seven percent. Three percent of all our dependents is a lot of people. That amounts to millions we could save to spend on other things.”

David took a sip of water through a straw. “What did she invent”?

“A little valve that's surgically inserted into the vas deferens that allows a man to turn it on or off.”

“What”? He laughed.

“It's simple really. When you get a vasectomy they cut the tube that carries the sperm. People don't like to do that because it's almost permanent. Once it's been cut it can still be surgically reattached, but it's a hassle. With this you can reverse it in five minutes in a doctor's office. It's a little plastic sleeve that comes in

two halves. You put both halves together around the vas deferens and glue them together. There's a little valve that pinches off the flow when it's closed, and you can open it back up without surgery when you want to have a child. The tube is never cut." He smiled.

"Wow that's cool. An on and off switch for your pecker. Male birth control with no hormones and it's reversible. Mothers could install it on their horny sons at puberty. They could lock it down for the teens and turn it back on when the kids get married."

"A fine idea."

David laughed. "Somebody was against it though, huh."

"Oh man. Lot's of groups were against it. What is it about sex in America anyway?"

"Enough to want the guy dead"? Catholics have a few wing nuts too, he thought.

"You can guess the spin professor. The government will make us get them, and then they'll tell us when to turn them on and off. You'll have to be paid up on your child support to get it turned on. Convicts won't be allowed to reproduce. The government will prevent minorities from..."

"When did all this happen? I never saw any of that stuff on CNN. I guess she never made it to the media. Is she still alive"?

He laughed. "Very alive."

David sighed and rubbed his shoulder. "So why no valves then? Sounds like a winner to me man."

"A major drug company gave her five million and a lifetime job for the patent and her silence."

"You can buy a lot of silence for five million bucks." They laughed.

"You sure can. Tax free too. Off shore thing."

David slapped his forehead in frustration. "The whole frigging country is for sale."

"Tell me a country that isn't professor. The only difference is the amount of money involved. See, we have more of it than the

other guys.” He rubbed his fingers together.

“Yes sir buddy. The more money that changes hands, you know, the more you attract the scum.”

What a sheltered brat, thought Benton. “Hey now. It's rough out there. All the greens are still kids. Wait until they have three daughters in private colleges. They all eventually want a home in a gated community. They think they're going to change the world when they're freshman, but your idealistic students get compromised along the way professor.”

David hesitated. “You know what, I really don't think my students will get compromised. I think they're the golden generation. I really do. You should hear them. History moves in cycles, and they're on deck to be reformers.”

“All teachers think that.”

“I suppose, but these people are really different. They're perpetually talking to each other on the net, sort of living together in cyberspace and planning the frigging revolution. One of them goes to the john and everybody knows it.” They laughed. “I'll show you.” David slid the bed table over and stroked the touch pad on Nick's computer.

Benton laughed. “Computers make a difference alright. I remember three copies and carbon paper. When I was in school, you know what, we had to be in the same place at the same time. Now they podcast the lecture and you don't even have to go to class.”

David found what he was looking for. “Here we go. Let's see who's on here. There they are. See”? He pointed to a long row of stacked paragraphs. This is our virtual classroom. Watch this.” He pecked a few keys.

*darm1: Hey you guys. Are you reading my assignment or just goofing off?*

*SharonB87: Professor we were just talking about you. How you feeling? When are you coming back to class?*

*Butkusdude: Hey hey.....we heard you got shot trying to hit a*

*three iron. Nobody can hit a three iron man.*

*darm1: I'm OK....it's only a flesh wound...and for the record it was a seven iron.*

*Butkusdude: That's great. Hurry back. The sub talks in a monotone.*

*SharonB87: Glad you're OK. There was a rumor the dean had you shot.*

*darm1: No, it wasn't him. Give him a break. He did give me my job back.*

*SharonB87: He had a little help from Danny and the guys who got the parents to call in and ask about divestment.*

*darm1: I better be careful what I say on here. This stuff is forever you know. It's always on the record somewhere. What's going on today over there? I'm flat on my back, but I'm going over the wall tonight. I'm busting out.*

*Butkusdude: We're going to Sam's and stuff envelopes for the Green Party. He bought a keg.*

*darm1: Greens huh. I'm still torn between holding my nose and voting for the one that can win or voting for the best one. The third party vote could have tipped it for the democrats in 2000."*

*Butkusdude: Professor we won in 2000. They just stole it anyway.*

*darm1: I know. It still stings. I heard Nader on a podcast the other day.....he gave a good argument against the hold your nose strategy. Historically most progressive legislation started in a third party movement...the progressives at the turn of the century. If those voters hadn't voted their conscience they wouldn't have accelerated the progressive legislation we got a little later when the democrats picked it up.*

*Sharon87: So we have to lose before we can win. Sounds Orwellian to me. We needed those Nader votes and he was arrogant not to step aside. It could have prevented ALL this.*

*Butkusdude: Ralph is right. There's no end game to the lesser of two evils strategy thing. The system is so fixed against third*

parties.....we never get a progressive anyway. We can't win. If we run a third party candidate we lose. If we hold our nose we still lose because we get a whore who sells us out. If we have to lose then let's lose with a real progressive. That's why half the people don't vote. If the people who stay home because the left can't win would just vote.....we'd elect a progressive every time.

darm1: So optimistic. Butkus has been playing without his helmet again. He's got dane bamage."

Sharon87: I think it's the alcohol. How are you going to vote this time professor"?

darm1: You guys aren't using the abbreviations, codes, 'cause I'm on here huh? Me and my BFF are off the hook on this vote. It's not close. Any democrat will win big. I get to vote green. Now if it was close again this time, I'd probably have to hold my nose like I did in 2000. But the democrats caved on the war. My gut tells me to punish them. My rational side says hold your temper. I'm glad it's not close. I want to slap the shit out of somebody about the war.

Butkusdude: I'll hold 'em for you professor. When you coming back to class?

darm1: I don't know but I miss my own bed. This one's not too private.

Butkusdude: Professor who do you think is stalking you? We started a pool. I've got ten bucks on British Petroleum. Did I spell that right? BP

darm1: My dad thinks it's a former student who had a crush on me or something like that."

Butkusdude: My man...you rock."

darm1: No way. That couldn't be it. I'd know.

Sharon87: Bull shit. Men never know.....and they think they always know. You could have snubbed her and you still don't know it.

darm1: All the women say that alright.

Sharon87: I still think it's the insurance companies. You piss

'em off when you talk about national health care. Look what happened to Hillary and the single payer thing. They shook her up good. Now they've bought her off too.

darm1: But they didn't shoot her.....and she's a lot more important than me.

Sharon87: The insurance companies have more money than the banks. With a single payer plan there's no Blue Cross. You ain't exactly making friends there professor.

darm1: They don't have to shoot me. They can just raise my deductible and say that a gunshot wound is a preexisting condition.

Butkusdude: LOL. That's right man: "Sir did you have this attack in or out of our service area?"

darm1: LOL. They charge 4 bucks for two aspirin.

Butkusdude: Right before surgery they ask you: "You want anesthetic with that sir? That's extra."

darm1: OMGY.....They even took the bullet. I want it. The cops took it.

Butkusdude: "Evidence man. Maybe you'll get it back. You could put it on a key chain. Imagine being at the bar next to a honey and she asks you what it is. What a great lead-up. You a hero. It's a slam dunk from there man."

Sharon87: Oh please.

Butkusdude: Bling.....I'd put it on a gold chain.

Sharon87: You've been playing without a helmet alright.

darm1: I gotta go. My bodyguar---

Benton grabbed David's arm and stopped him short. They smiled and he typed again.

Pinko1: My doctor needs to talk to me. I'll be back here later. Butkus put your helmet on man.

Butkusdude: OK coach. Take it easy.

Sharon87: Same here professor. Get some rest. Glad you're OK.

darm1: Later guys. Thanks.

David looked at Benton and said, “Sorry. I guess I need to be careful not to mention you.”

He laughed. “It's OK. You're doing fine.”

“I can't believe I'm being guarded by the Pentagon. I thought you guys would want me arrested.”

“Some of them do, maybe half the handful of guys who read it. I'm from the other half. You're kind of a complex guy. How would you describe yourself anyway? Are you a socialist?”

David laughed. “I wish I was. That would make it easier, but I can't get myself to go there. When I read what the socialists want I just can't agree with them. I don't like class, but I'm not for a flat wage system either. People who work harder should make more money. I want a fair system. Ours is far from it, but merit should still be rewarded.”

“Sounds like a meritocracy. Dangerous territory.”

“I don't think the naked market alone should decide how much a person gets paid. Real merit and hard work should pay better than goofing off. Some people work hard but their pay doesn't match their real worth. I don't think baseball players should make what the market will bear. They make way too much. But who's going to do eleven years of medical school if there's no economic reward in it?”

“Agreed.”

The hospital intercom came on. *Announcing the birth of Annie May Jameson, a nine pound three ounce baby girl just born to Mark and Susan Jameson of Berwyn.*

David continued. “Some parts of the market need to be out of bounds to free for all, cut throat, no holds barred competition.” He held out his hands and insisted, “I'm not advocating for anything we don't already do right now. I just want to do it more rationally. There's a reason why we don't let emergency room doctors shake down car accident victims. But still... How can I explain it. We don't apply that kind of reasoning to other areas. It's wrong to

allow haggling in the ER because emergency care is a necessity, and in that situation, you know, the seller has a huge unfair advantage.” Benton laughed and David sped up. “We need to protect other necessities in the same way. The rational way is to find a way to decide ahead of time, like I said, to decide what is or is not a necessity, and then protect that product or service from exploitation by the few at the expense of the many.” I hope that was clear, he thought.

Benton thought about the sales tax on food and smiled at David. “You’re not a loose cannon professor. You explain yourself well.” Don’t pour it on too thick, he thought. “You know what, I guess that IS what we at least TRY to do now. We try to protect necessities but in a haphazard way. I agree one hundred percent. You just want a more rational process to get there. To be deliberate in deciding what to protect. It’s more efficient.” That was way too thick, he thought.

David ate it up. “You did your homework on this case. That’s it exactly. You get an A.” He laughed.

“I think you’re on to something simple but very clever. What happens now is that some unimportant area, thing, market, gets protected by the government because some senator gets a contribution from a special interest group while a more important area goes unprotected.”

“Exact-a-moon-do,” he said, chewing one syllable at a time. “You know the friggling oil hit another all time high today.” He shook his head.

“Shit son. You know how much fuel it takes to get a God damned B-52 in the air, just to take off? Not to go anywhere, just to take off. You could run a stinking SUV all year on that much fuel.”

“That’s a lot a gas.” Motorcycles and bicycles, he thought. If there’s a real war we’d ration it like FDR did.

Benton thought about Kuwait. “When we need a B-52 in an emergency, well we don’t need the fuel to cost more than the God

damned plane.” They laughed. “Going bankrupt can be a real threat to national security. Just ask the Russians.” He choked himself and made a funny face.

“Oh man. I remember that Star Wars shit. Bonzo really faked them out of their jocks with that crap didn't he”? He laughed.

Benton laughed so hard that he had to make himself stop. “Let me tell you. I was there. Nobody was more surprised...” he coughed. “That the dumb asses took the bluff, and just folded, than Reagan himself.” He cleared his throat. “It was obvious that we didn't have the technology to shoot down missiles with other missiles. Even if it did work, all you had to do was flood the air with decoys. Even my mother figured that part out. They must have thought we had a secret weapon or something.”

“An ace in the hole. I guess poker players do beat chess players once in a while after all. Bush is trying to do it again, but they ain't blinking this time huh”?

“Fool me once.” They both laughed.

Benton liked David but couldn't understand why he was so far to the left. He's shooting flies with a cannon, he thought. Even his superiors at the Pentagon were split on the young economist. Benton's mission objective with the young professor depended on which one of his bosses he was talking to at the time. He tried to appeal to David's apparent respect for private property. “Are socialists really for completely level wages”?

“You know what, that's a hell of a good question. I didn't think so, but I checked out some website the other day, world socialist something, official home page, whatever. It's an old organization. I mean there it was in their manifesto thing, a wageless society. That's gotta be some trick. We have that in rural areas. It's called being Amish.”

Benton laughed. “Might be nice. No phones.”

“I don't know about that. I read about them. They're not Luddites. They don't reject all technology. They pick and choose.”

“Sounds reasonable but boring. I'd miss a lot of things I like. I

guess you'd have to be brought up that way.” He thought about good whiskey and watching movies on his new wide screen, high definition television.

David imagined reading with candles. “Be nice to be green and off the grid. Part of me would like that.”

Benton looked at his watch. “Everybody can't live that way. Good thing we ALL don't go there. Somebody's got to live in the real world. They won't fight. What if an aggressive country invaded us, and we were ALL in the turn the other cheek mode? What would the Amish do then”?

“I guess they'd be slaves making B-52s for the enemy in a sweat shop somewhere in occupied Illinois.”

“Amish B-52s.” They laughed.

“Probably be the best built B-52s ever man,” joked David. “They'd probably be high on quality and way too low on quantity. Too slow. The enemy would end up so frustrated they'd have to outsource the work anyway.”

“Oh sure. I can imagine they'd do some real creative sabotage too.”

David laughed. “You know what the invaders would call the Amish don't you”?

“What”?

“Insurgents.” They laughed loud enough to disturb the staff outside. A nurse peeked in and returned to her rounds.

“That's right professor. You got me there son. That's the truth alright.”

The door slid open and the police guard signaled to David. “There's some people to see you professor. Guy's name is Artie. You know him”?

David smiled wide. “Oh yeah. Send him right in.”

In came Artie and Carla. Artie smelled like vodka, and Carla sort of hid behind him and looked around the room like a nursing student on a tour. She looked at the walls, the equipment, and the floor, but she wouldn't look directly at Artie's wounded buddy.

David joked, "Hey, look who they let in." He smiled and took Artie's hand in both of his hands.

Artie winked at him. "I heard you got shot Red. Told you to keep away from those desperate Oak Park housewives man." He smiled.

"Yeah right. I took a golf club to a gunfight is what I did." They all laughed.

Artie leaned in close and grinned like they both got away with something. "It appears the guy needs to bring a bigger gun next time tough guy." He made a finger pistol and shot David point blank.

David snatched the imaginary bullet out of thin air and said, "For my next trick." Everybody moaned. He introduced everybody all around and gave the Pentagon man a teacher's identity to avoid any questions. He hit Artie on the back. "What's going on at the bar these days boss man"?

Artie grinned just thinking about the crazy story he was saving for David. "Well let's see. There's a pool on you Red. The smart money says you're about to disappear at the hands of some multinational corporation that's gonna plant you in a brand new football stadium, about fifty feet under the end zone. Then there's the ones that think you'll get a free ride to the bottom of Lake Michigan in a fifty five gallon drum."

David blinked. "What do you think boss"?

"I think you're crazy but you got real stones. That goes a long way in my family. You can fight in my platoon any time man. I think they better not underestimate you again. That's what I think." Everybody agreed. "But hanging around your dad's garage like a damn pervert stalker, shit. That ain't no pro. No frigging way a pro would do shit like that. If it WAS a pro... Dude, you wouldn't even see it coming or know what hit you. Some jack ass is pissed at you, that's all. Gotta be some stupid jack ass."

David laughed nervously. "Yeah, that's what I think too. No big deal. So what are the bar flies up to anyway? You keeping them

honest in there big guy”?

“Ha! I got a story for you man. Tom Cantwell lost a bet to his brother Frank over some crazy ass baseball game statistic or something. I really don't understand exactly what they were betting on. It was something about RBIs or some shit. Well you know those guys. They don't need the money so the bet was about which one of them had to show up at happy hour in full drag from head to toe.” Everybody laughed uncontrollably.

David imagined the picture, coughed, and said, “I can't go there in my mind. I'll go blind. Who lost”?

Artie shook his head. “Everybody lost. They do that crazy shit every once in a while. Those knuckleheads lose some bet every once in a while and have to dress up for something. Usually it's a Bear game. You just haven't seen it yet. Neither one of them makes a very convincing transvestite. I mean they could shave their frigging legs.” Everybody laughed.

“Was it crowded”?

“Pretty much. Well anyway, here comes Tom and he's all dressed up with no place to go in his shiny black miniskirt and heels. Some of us thought he was getting into it a little bit too much even. I don't care how ripped he was. Well then, we all get real stupid and Bubba decides to do the Crocodile Dundee thing and grabs him right in the crotch.” Everybody laughed and David winced. “Well see, he realized what he did about a split second after he did it, and shit! I mean the whole place exploded man. We completely lost it. It was just an impulse thing. I mean he knew there was a horse in the barn and he still just reached over and grabbed a handful. He was real drunk and I could tell by the look on his face that he regretted it right away. I felt so bad for him man.”

David could only imagine the embarrassment. “Oh shit” was all he could say. He laughed so hard he worried about tearing his wound.

Artie put on a girly voice. “Well then. Everybody starts talking

like an interior decorator and shit, and they won't give it up." Everybody laughed. He coughed and started talking straight again. "Bubba gets pissed, but that just makes it worse and they won't let it go." David put his head in his hands. "Then Tom starts dancing around and sitting on everybody's lap and saying big boy this and big boy that. Everybody's stoned and flaming up the place like Truman Capote. I ain't making this up Red. And then, oh my GOD. In walks Herb the regular beer man, who just freezes at the sight of it and shits on himself man." Everybody laughed until they cried.

David asked, "Not the old guy with the attitude?"

"Oh yeah. I mean he just froze up. I mean this is the same Bud man who's been delivering to us for thirty frigging years. He knows everybody in there man, or at least he thinks he does." Artie laughed.

David squealed, "Oh my God! I just talked to him. The guy with the army tattoos right?"

"Herb. Oh yeah, that's him."

"Oh no. I missed the whole thing." He laughed.

"You missed it alright. He takes one look around the room and says, 'What the fuck IS this? Now look here people... I'm gonna go out and get back in my truck. I'm gonna sneak a pull on a half pint and smoke a cigarette. Then I'm gonna come back in here and change this keg. And when I do, I wanna see all you ladies on your own bar stools.'" Benton lost control and laughed by himself. Artie wiped his eyes and went for the big line. "He points at Tom and says, 'I want that Suzy Q outta here! And I want everybody's hands on the bar where I can see 'em.' " Everybody laughed uncontrollably.

David was laughing so hard he could barely talk. "Oh stop it."

Artie shook his head and looked at the ceiling. "Well then Tom... He just runs out the front door all red in the face, and we all fell apart. We frigging lost control man. I thought I was gonna die. Over a bet! He lost that bet big time man. He really paid for it

too. His brother actually felt sorry for him and yelled at Bubba for grabbing his crotch.” They all laughed again. “People I’m telling ya... I never seen a beer man change a keg so damned fast in all my life. It was hysterical man.”

David took a breath. “Sorry I missed that one. It’ll be a legend for sure.”

“Oh shit yes. I wish I had a picture.” Artie smiled. “We missed you Sunday when we were watching the game Red. I guess you’re too big and famous for us now huh?”

“No no. No way man. I’ve been kinda busy.”

“I guess getting shot, and canned, and torched... It takes up a little time. Jesus Red.” Artie worried about their little secret, but he wasn’t about to bring it up in front of the others.

David spoke softly. “It’s more than that. I kinda quit drinking.”

He laughed. “Why should that keep you out of a bar?”

“It’ll feel funny.”

“Oh bull shit. We’re your friends. We don’t care if you drink or not. We just care if we drink.” Everybody laughed. “You can keep right on buying us drinks just like before. Were else you gonna get a pizza as good as mine anyway?”

“I heard that.”

“I’ll even wash my hands next time. Besides that... I’ll tell you a secret buddy. I make more off the video games and the pool table than the beer. People don’t run bars to make money. That’s a secret too. We do it because it’s a perfect excuse not to work. I get paid to party. But don’t tell anybody. I got a reputation to keep up.”

“Sounds good to me boss.” They shook hands.

The surgeon came in wearing a ridiculous looking black lab coat. “What is this a convention or a conspiracy?” he joked.

David laughed. “Doc are you trying to tell me something?”

“What do you mean professor?”

“You don’t go to see a patient in a black lab coat. You’re scaring me here.”

He pulled it tight and inspected it. “It’s not black. It’s navy blue.

White is boring.”

“I like it,” said Artie. “All it needs is a Harley patch.” Carla laughed.

The doctor smiled. “Actually, I have a Sportster in my garage. My wife won't let me ride it anymore. It's an old one from the sixties.

Artie said, “Please don't use old and sixties in the same sentence Doc. A 60s Sportster. I think I bought one of those new.”

The doctor stomped his foot down twice. “It's real hard to start, but once you kick it really hard a couple dozen times... Anyway, it runs as good once as it ever did.” They all laughed, especially Benton who was trying to keep a low profile.

Artie said, “you're alright Doc. Bring that old bike by the bar sometime, and we'll tune it up for you.”

“Thank you sir. I might just do that. Now all you guys need to clear out so I can look at this wound.”

Artie waved and said, “Sure Doc.” He looked at David. “Red were gonna have a party at the bar just for you when you heal up. You don't have to drink but I better warn you ahead a time man, we're calling it a nineteenth green party. You know, in honor of your garage golfing.” They all laughed. “All the guys are planning to bring their own seven irons. There's gonna be more golf clubs than Augusta. No golf balls allowed though. They'd get loaded and start breaking shit.”

David saluted. “OK boss man. I'll be there. And thanks for coming by.”

“See you later Red.”

Artie and Carla left but Benton stayed behind. The doctor looked at David and said, “It's OK, I know who he is. You can't keep secrets from the doctor.” Benton nodded and smiled. The doctor fussed with David's bandage. “Let me look at this wound. One more inch to either side... Well, it looks OK. Any pain?”

“Hell yes there's pain.” They all laughed. David feigned disgust. “You and the dentist. I go to the dentist. He grinds on my

jaw with a diamond drill that's going like Mach five, and then he asks me if it hurts. Here's your sign Doc.”

The surgeon laughed. “Well it looks good anyway. I'll let you go soon.”

“That's great Doc.”

He put his hands deep in the pockets of his funny looking lab coat. “I'll check in on you tomorrow. Try and get some rest.”

“OK Doc. Thanks.” The doctor left and David's laptop started beeping to signal an incoming email. He ignored it at first, thinking that it had to be a personal email because blog messages didn't beep like that. It's probably a student, he thought.

Benton was interested though. “See what it is.”

“That's my personal account. It's not the blog. The bad guys are on the blog.”

“You never know. Could they dig up your personal email too?”

He thought for a second. “Probably. Should I change it?”

“I don't think so. The more they talk to you the better for us.”

He pointed at the laptop.

David slid it across his legs and raised the bed to just the right angle. He moved the cursor with his thumb and double clicked on the little mailbox icon. There were two emails and one was from Dori. He clicked it open and saved it. Benton was right. The other one was from the stalker. “Son of a bitch! Look at that.”

*Hello dead man. Thought I'd check in and remind you that I'm still here. Enjoy your little vacation because the fun is only just starting. I'm watching you right now. I can see who goes in there and who goes out. I could kill you right now. I could poison your food. Maybe I'll shoot you through the window. I won't do it yet. I want you to suffer a lot more first. This is so much fun. Have a nice day ass hole. Sleep tight.*

David tried to be cool and asked, “Can you trace this shit?”

“Yes and no.” Benton read it again and again.

“What the hell does that mean”?

“I mean so far it's untraceable. It's not hard to hide, but he could get lazy and slip up. My people are watching everything, and they're probably trying to trace this right now.”

“But it's not hard to stay anonymous huh”?

“Depends on how bad he wants to hide. He doesn't know that we have pros watching. He could slip up and just send you something from his cell phone or something even dumber than that. He'd be in custody in five minutes.”

The tips of David's fingers felt numb. He rubbed them together and said, “That's good. That's real good. Didn't I see this plot in a movie”?

“Oh yeah. I suppose you have, but this is real.” And the good guys sometimes lose, he thought.

“Real is fun too. When do we get to the part where they send in the slinky hot babe to seduce Bond”?

“That's my part. I'm Bond.” They laughed.

*Bang!* The door flew open and smacked the wall hard. It broke the little stopper that wasn't designed for abuse. Dori ran over to the bedside crying and started slapping David in the face. The Pentagon man reflexively slid his hand inside his jacket and put his finger on the safety of his sidearm.

David was shocked. She was hurting him. “Woman! What the hell are you doing”!

“You lousy piece of shit...hypocrite lying stinking bastard”! Benton gently restrained her in a chair.

She dried her eyes. “I just opened my mail. I had it on my front seat. I know all about Carla David.”

“You what”? Now he was pissed.

“At least you didn't pay the God damned bribe.”

“What bribe”!

“I just can't see how could you even think about that scuzzy bitch? She's your friend's girlfriend for God's sake.”

David watched Benton want to be somewhere else and

grabbed Dori's arm. "What the hell are you... I have no idea what you're talking about." His shoulder throbbed in pain. He could feel every pulse beat.

Dori threw a big yellow envelope on his lap. He bent back the ears on the little butterfly clasp and pulled out a half dozen snapshots. He saw two people getting involuntarily photographed after what was probably a good romp. The woman was Carla and the man was him. They were in bed with a black satin sheet pulled up to their necks. The woman was screaming and he looked bored.

David knew it had to be a forgery. "Oh please. Where did this shit come from?"

"You know where it came from you ass hole." She cried real tears with her face in her hands. "You got caught. Oh God. They tried to blackmail you and you refused to pay. Read it!"

David read a note typed on the back of one of the pictures.

*Sorry to have to do this. You're a nice lady. He wouldn't pay up. We gave him a chance. We were not fooling. David...This Bud's for You.*

"This is at Nick's," he cried.

"Of course it is. That's his bed. You guys always stick together. You're all just animals. I can't believe this. Look at that scuzzy bitch!"

"It's not me damn it! I'd never..."

"Don't you yell at me!"

"It's not me damn it! I think I'd know! It's my face, but I wasn't there. It's pasted on there or something." He tried to get out of bed but Benton held him back. He looked in David's eyes, saw hysterical anger, and believed him right away.

Benton took control. "Wait a minute. Give me those. It's got to be a fake." He snatched the prints from David and went to the back of the room to talk to someone on his wire. He came right back and said, "My man will be here in five minutes. We'll have them checked right now. Everybody relax. They don't even look

like a very good forgery. I've seen a lot better. It's supposed to look like they got interrupted but she's screaming and he's calm. I don't think so. Looks like amateurs.”

“You really think it's forged?” cried Dori. “Is it easy to do?”

“It depends on the quality. This one looks like a cheap shot. I've seen a lot of these.”

“How long will it take to find out”? She dried her eyes on a sleeve.

David exploded. “What do you mean how long! Who cares how long it takes. It's not me damn it”!

She felt confused and angry. “I believe you. I do David. I'm sorry. I was just so hurt.”

“That was the idea wasn't it? You gave them what they wanted alright. Shit.” He stared at the ceiling and felt entitled to his anger.

A short little man in a white shirt and wrinkled slacks came in panting like he'd been running. He took the envelope from Benton and asked, “Is the guy outside OK?”

“He's OK. He knows. Can you scan those in the car and transmit them from here”?

“I'll give it a try. If they don't go I'll have to take them downtown to a better scanner. I'll scramble the transmission to Langley, but that will take a little longer.”

“Do it. Make it so. We've got the time.” Benton pointed to the door and the man left without a word.

David said, “He's close huh? You've got a car outside.” Dori went to the window.

“We've got you covered professor. Your tax dollars at work.”

Dori started sobbing again, and David waved her over to the bed. She walked into his arms with her hands over her eyes. Benton winked at David and stepped out.

## Chapter 14

Officers Murphy and Stone were laughing it up in the cruiser outside Artie's bar when the private phone went off under the seat. Murphy knew who it was before he got it up to his ear. He answered it casually. "Yo."

"I want my product now."

"Look man. I can go in and get it anytime you want. But think it through. You're real close to trial. If you can just wait that much longer... You don't want to be a fugitive. You can leave clean AND with the product."

He lowered his voice like he was trying to sound confident. "That's what you say cop."

Murphy didn't like sucking a drug dealer's butt and tried to sit on his anger. "Number one sir, I'm not a cop anymore. I'm on your side now... And so is my boss. We've been through this already, but I'm gonna tell you one more time. We planned this out. Were gonna cash in big and blow on down to... Well never mind, it's not important where we're going. This is something we're doing for you, AND for us. Figure it out man. Without us you'd be looking at a long stretch in a federal pen."

"I never had to trust a cop before, and I don't HAVE to now. If you cross me..."

"Why would I lie? To get you busted? You're already busted man. We want the God damned money."

"Look cop!..." He calmed down quickly. "Get me my product

right now see... And there's another million in it for you. That's a lot a scratch for a doughnut diver like you. What do you say hot shot”?

“I'd say you're putting a little too much of the profits up your nose. We do it my way or we don't do it at all. Just do what I tell you. You want to leave here clean. And besides that, nobody would notice, you know, if me and my partner get pissed, we can just sell the whole shipment somewhere else. We don't want to, but we will if we have to.”

“No you won't. You do and you're dead.”

Murphy crossed his fingers and held them up. “I'd rather do it with you than without you. I don't want you for an enemy, but I'm selling this junk to somebody. We can't go back now. Why don't you just do what I say and we'll both get over”?

“If anything goes wrong you'll be...”

“Save the threats. You're scaring me already.” He looked at Stone who was obviously thinking about bailing out.

“I mean it cop. Lie to me and you'll find out just how serious I am”! He hung up.

Murphy threw the phone under the seat. “He ain't gonna do shit except what I tell his greasy ass to do.”

“You sure about that tough guy”? Stone laughed.

“Screw him. We do it our way or no way. If he wants a piece a me then let him come and get it. Grease ball.”

Stone laughed in pain. “Get real. Would you trust us if you were him”?

“What trust? We've got nothing to gain by lying to him. Anybody could see that.”

“It doesn't matter. He runs on his gut. All the facts could be there and he could still act on impulse.” He dug at a mustard stain on his shirt.

“If he does I'll be ready. If it's me or him... I'm tired of holding his hand anyway.”

Four motorcycles in single file roared into Artie's parking lot.

Stone said, "It won't be long now and we'll be laughing all the way to the bank in Brazil. Think of all those bare asses on the beach in Rio man. We'll be American millionaires. We can have anything we want."

"Oh yeah." Murphy admired the Harleys and imagined himself riding down the beach with a hot babe holding him tight around the waist.

Stone grinned. "No more roll calls."

"No more stinking administrators at roll call." They laughed.

"I'm gonna take the first week, and just prop myself up at a five star table and spend about ten grand on fancy food."

"Oh shit yeah."

Stone waved at the sky. "I'm gonna fly to Paris for lunch."

"And be back before dinner." They laughed.

"I'm gonna get one of those fast boats like on Miami Vice, minus the alligator." They laughed. "I'm gonna fill it up with French wine and babes with real tits and cruise the whole Caribbean."

Murphy laughed. "We can pull up and dock it at the Super Bowl." Both of them yelled in unison, "DA Bears!" They laughed and slapped a high five. Murphy felt a shot of pain run through his bad arm but he didn't care. He was dreaming and all he could see was the ocean.

Dori and David were playing with the controls on the hospital bed when Benton came sauntering in with the photos and some fresh coffee. He handed them to David and sat down sipping his Styrofoam cup.

David could tell that it was good news and asked, "How did they do it?"

"Cheap Photoshop trick." He smiled and produced a copy of what the original photo looked like before somebody pasted

David's face over it with a digital editor.

David coughed. "That's Nick"!

Dori leaned over and looked. "It's Nick alright. What a slut."

Benton bragged about his lab. "Took them all of sixty seconds. A really lousy forgery. You can even see the lines with a good magnifying glass. Crop off one head and add another. It's digital, but the code is still in there. You can reverse it."

"They must have known that we'd find it," said David.

"Maybe. They might have just wanted to slap her around for a while, like that's funny."

"Honey I'm so sorry," said David.

How was I supposed to know, thought Dori. She stiffened up and said, "No, I'm the one that's sorry. I should have guessed. It just shook me up. I wasn't looking for anything like that. They caught me off guard."

"It's not your fault." David scanned the pictures again and frowned. "Hey, my picture, I've seen it before." Benton knew what David was thinking and started laughing."

"What is it?" asked Dori.

David got up. "I know I've seen that picture before." He grabbed his jeans off the side table and took his wallet out. He showed his drivers license around and they all had a good chuckle. The head shot they used in the forgery was David's drivers license picture. David pointed at the little mugshot. "How?" he asked.

"That's not hard to do," said Benton. "It's like a public record really." He shook his head.

David got serious and pointed at the forged version. "There's three people in that room. Nick is poking Carla, but both of them are kind of busy. So who took the picture? And would somebody please tell me why, well you know, why didn't he tell me about it"?

Dori laughed. "I think that's kind of obvious don't you"?

"She's Artie's girlfriend for God's sake. Artie doesn't know, and

I'm not going to tell him, but Nick's got some big time explaining to do man."

Dori laughed. "What do you expect him to say? I told you he's no good. Just stay away from him David. He's nothing but misery."

"He's my friend. Look at all he's done for me."

She glanced over at Benton and back to David. "FOR you, or TO you David"? Benton silently agreed.

David felt defensive. "I gotta hear his side of it now. There's gotta be more to it."

Dori stood up angry. "What side David? He's screwing her. She ain't giving him a cab ride under that damn sheet. Scuzzy bitch. From the minute you told me about her, and Artie, I just knew it. She's trouble. I was right about her, and I'm right about Nick too. When will you ever listen to me"?

"I have to hear his side of it"! She sat down fast and he lowered his voice. "I owe him. I owe him at least that much. You know, he just had to be real drunk. He wouldn't do that to Artie."

"That's no excuse."

David got embarrassed. That stupid son of a bitch, he thought. Now I'm defending him and I feel guilty. "I just can't see him doing that. Maybe they pasted his face on there too." He looked at Benton who shook his head no. "Well he better have a damn good reason. Give me the God damned phone. I'll find out right now."

Benton said, "Whoa now. Hey there. I think you better calm down first."

David didn't know what to think. "Would you guys mind leaving me alone for just a minute."

"I'm gonna get a soda," said Dori. She got up and held the door for Benton who went out and sat down next to the officer guarding the door. David felt sick to his stomach as he punched the little numbers on the phone. His values were under attack from the man rule. There are some things that you just don't do to another guy, even for sex, even if she initiates it. He finished

poking the number and Nick picked up. David heard loud blues music playing but Nick turned it down.

“David! I was just gonna call you man. The paper's got a bunch of brand new hits from South America. Somebody even did two Spanish translations. You're a hit in Ecuador. Go figure.”

“Hey that's good.”

“They all want to read your book, so I think you better write one dude.”

Just say it, he thought. “Nick we need to talk.”

Nick sobered up. There goes my buzz, he thought. “What's the matter”?

“You're screwing Carla.”

“Oh shit Red. Is that all. You scared me. That don't mean nothing man.”

David held his breath before asking. “Why Nick? What about Artie”?

“Artie doesn't know.” He turned the music off.

“Duh! That's the point ass hole”! *Clank*. His big cowboy buckle hit the hard floor when his jeans slid off the hospital table.

“No dude. I mean Artie doesn't know about HER. I mean... I always knew. A lot of people know. Artie doesn't know though.”

“What the hell are you talking about”?

“Carla, you know, she's a pro. She's a hooker. Actually she's more than a hooker. She's a pimp really, or a madam I guess.”

“You're kidding me right.”

“I've known her for years. She left and went to the west coast for a while, but she's back now. See, Artie never knew her before. He doesn't know she tricks, but he's probably the only one that doesn't. I can't be the only guy in the bar that knew her before. Lot's of them probably know. I ain't the only one that's...”

“And nobody told Artie. I can't believe this shit. This is gonna...”

“Dude! You want to be the one to tell him? I sure don't. If anybody else in there knows, shit dude. I'm sure they ain't gonna

tell him either. I don't wanna fight his ass. No way dude. You ever heard of kill the messenger.”

“That poor guy. It'll break his heart man. She's jacking his brains out, and he thinks she's on the level. My God, she's so much younger though. What did he expect anyway”?

“I was hoping she'd move on before he found out. He's a big boy. He can take care of himself. So dude, it was you they sent the pictures to huh? The guy just busted in and took my picture in the sack. I thought somebody was gonna blackmail me to keep Artie from finding out. I mean in comes this dude, right in the front door, and he starts taking pictures. I didn't have a stitch on. I've never been so damn scared. My pistol was in the drawer, but he was gone before I could do anything anyway. Why the hell would they send the pictures to you anyway”?

“They didn't send them to me. They sent them to Dori”!

“What the hell for”?

“They sent them to her but they pasted my face over your face. She got the shock of her life.” Thanks to you, he thought.

“Oh my God. Oh shit. I'm sorry man. But then, how did you know it was me? Did you recognize my room or what”?

“My driver's license photo over your face. Some cheap Photoshop trick. The cops used a good computer and digitally reversed it, thank God.”

“The Oak Park cops can do shit like that”? I gotta be more careful over there, he thought.

“That's right,” he lied.

“So it was the same people, the same as all the other shit then. They just wanted to shake her up. Ass holes. Man I'm so sorry. How could I know”?

“Yeah right. So how long you been poking her? Better yet, WHY are you poking her”?

“She's a hooker David. Just please don't tell Artie.” Nick felt stupid for trusting her to keep quiet.

“All this time man, you're banging his woman and you're just

sitting there eating his pizza like it ain't nobody's business.”

“No no no. It's not like that at all man.”

“Why is it not like that? What part about...”

“Look here. I was doing her a long time before any of you guys even knew me. I hadn't seen her for a while. She went to the west coast. Before that I'd see her every once in a while. She was at all the crazy parties back then. She was a lot a fun man.” He remembered having sex with her on LSD. “Now look. She came back, but she was already with Artie before I saw her again, before I even knew she was back. I didn't say a word to her. I just kept quiet. Then the other night, she was dropping somebody off down the street is all. She was driving her cab and it was after midnight. I was sitting on the porch and she waved. I waved back and she came over. We got high and the next thing you know... Well what was I supposed to do man”?

“You shouldn't have done that man.” Weak, he thought. No guts.

“Well it wasn't like we didn't know each other and shit. She never told me she quit tricks. She's a hooker. He's a coke dealer. I hadn't been laid in months and I'm supposed to run away. What do you think she does in that cab anyway”?

“Look what happened to Dori! She cried man.”

“How was I supposed to know that was gonna happen? Shit Red. I'm sorry man. I said I was sorry. Now what was I supposed to do”?

“And what am I supposed to do? I just can't believe you'd defend that kind of bull shit behavior. Just forget about the whole God damned thing then.” He thought about hanging up.

“You want me to hate myself? OK, I suck. At least now Artie won't find out.”

“Lucky for you dick-brain. What would you tell him anyway”? David made his voice sound pitiful. “ 'Don't kill me Artie. Everybody knows she's a hooker, and I forgot to tell you.' Oh please.”

“He's a big boy Red. He'd probably kill her before he'd kill me anyway.”

David suddenly imagined a problem and said, “So right now Carla is just sitting there waiting for somebody to send a copy of these God damned pictures to Artie.”

“I asked her that. She wasn't worried then. She's still with him too. I don't think she gives a shit. She just laughed when the guy ran out of the bedroom. She said not to worry about it, you know, that it was probably a joke.”

“Do not, I repeat, do not tell her the pictures were for Dori.”

“No way. I wouldn't think of it.” I don't need this shit, he thought.

“And stay away from that woman until she decides to leave Artie alone.”

“OK OK. Don't worry. I will. The whole thing's over man.”

David was still angry and tried to pick his words carefully. “I wouldn't go around Dori for a while either.” Like never, he thought.

“Sure dude. Tell her I'm really sorry. I didn't know the pictures were for her man.”

“She'll figure that out later. But right now do me a favor and stay away from Carla.”

Nick took offense and thought, Who is he to tell me who I can sleep with anyway. He sighed and said, “Hey no problem. Man I really AM sorry.”

“Me too and I gotta go now. The doctor's here.” He hung up mumbling, “Stupid ass hole.”

David tried to watch TV but couldn't concentrate. He shifted his hips around the hospital mattress to find a comfortable spot. The bed was too soft, and the rails blocked any attempts to hang a leg or an arm over the edge. The adjustable angle helped a little, but he couldn't sleep sitting up. He was busy punching up a pillow when Dori and Benton rushed in. They jabbered about technology and slid chairs over to the bed. Dori winked at David. “They

traced the computer babe.”

David clapped his hands. “The computer they used to... To doctor the pictures”?

She grinned and made him wait for it before saying, “That would be the one.”

“Man that was fast. How...”?

Benton waved. “No big deal. Computers leave all kinds of digital traces in the code they generate. You'd be surprised. Anything digital can be reversed.”

“Who's machine...”

“We don't know that for sure yet,” said Benton. “We may never know.”

“I thought it was no big deal.”

Benton thought about the implications of the preliminary evidence. This could be a real pain in the ass, he thought. “We know who bought it, where and when.”

David felt confused and angry. “Well who bought the God damned thing then”?

Dori whispered so the officer on guard couldn't hear. “The Chicago Police Department.”

David swallowed hard and looked at the door. “Cops”?

Benton tore a page from a little note pad and started writing so David could see.

*We know it was sold to the Chicago Police in a big batch of computers and other stuff in 1996. It's since been replaced. They gave some of the old computers to schools. Some were bought at auction on ebay, and the cops just took some of them home. No way to tell where that one went exactly. The computer program that doctored the photos was bought very recently at the Mall of America up north. The paper they printed the pictures on, very common. Same for the envelope. Berwyn cops don't know that we know where the machine came from, that it was a police unit. Chicago cops don't know either, same for Oak Park. Keep it quiet.*

David wrote under that. *Do you think it was a cop?*

Benton started talking about the Cubs to distract the guard and scribbled, *I don't think so. Why would a cop be that sloppy? There's a million computers out there. Why use an old police computer? Probably somebody who bought it at auction or who got it from a cop third hand. Anyway, keep it quiet just in case. With a little time we can even trace the ink.*”

David wrote, *Fingerprints on the pictures?*

Benton wrote, *Clean. Not even a fiber. Not sloppy there.*

Dori thought about the guard and spoke up to break the silence. “This is stupid. I think it's the God damned oil companies. The sons of bitches are above the law. They have people killed every day in Africa for twenty bucks and a case of beer. They can do whatever the hell they want. It's not like this screwball administration is going to prosecute them. They named an oil tanker after Condoleezza Rice for God's sake.”

David laughed. “You go girl.”

“They send CIA guys to overthrow people in South America over a whole lot less. I say it's the oil barons. Come on David. It's simple. You started a nationalization buzz. They probably have a computer program that searches emails for key words like *nationalize* at like a zillion bits per second. If the words *nationalize* and *oil* appear in the same sentence then it kicks out a marker. I don't like this shit at all. What has to happen before you wake up. They're admitting it openly on the net, in public. They're taking responsibility.”

“It could be anybody posting that crap. It can't be real. That's not how it's done. Ask him.” He pointed at Benton who motioned for quiet and threw a nod at the door.

“He's got a point,” said Benton. “Some parts of it look professional and some don't. But so far it doesn't fit the profile for what you're talking about. Not to mention Congress,” he laughed. “It's not a good time for the oil guys to be doing something that bold. Politicians would love an investigation like that, big oil

putting hits on critics. That could be a hot election issue back home. Oil is trying to keep a low profile right now, and why shouldn't they? They're in the big money right now brother."

"That's exactly why," said Dori. "The time is ripe for what David is calling for. We're paying through the nose for heating oil, and a select few get all the God damned money."

Benton lowered his voice another notch. "That's a good point too. Our private oil has to compete with state owned companies, you know, or at least companies that are subsidized by the state. That's unfair competition in my book. The other guys are not about to go private, so we have go public or get our ass handed to us."

"So much for free trade," said David. "And maybe I do need to worry. A few desperate jerks with unlimited money might do anything. Might even toy with the victim for a while just for fun. They're gonna fight dirty. No matter who hates them, they ain't about to just walk away from a cash machine like that."

Dori slapped her forehead. "Duh... Thank you. Let's just take a long vacation."

Benton joked, "Hey hey, now you're talking. I have to stay with you no matter where you go. It's on Uncle Sam. If you go to some tropical beach... How about the south of France?"

She laughed. "Come on David."

David slapped his wallet. "For how long? Nothing is going to change before we get back anyway."

Benton laughed. "I was hoping you wouldn't see it that way. I need a free vacation."

"I'm going back to my class. I'll be the first pistol packing teacher at the University of Chicago man."

"No way. I don't think so," said Dori.

Benton said, "It's OK. I'd take your class, but I don't think Uncle Sugar can afford the private school tuition though. What is it now anyway? That bill is more than some people make in a whole year."

David laughed. “It's on the house man. No tuition for you. Stay close and don't fall asleep.”

## Chapter 15

Just before lunch, Detective Dan “Lefty” Sutherland of the Oak Park Police Department got a call at his desk. The amputee detective lost his left arm to a mine in Vietnam. The nickname, affectionately earned at the police academy, was well known and widely respected across the west suburbs. Lots of cops knew him as an umpire and president of the police softball league. His one armed antics behind the plate were animated and sometimes hilarious when he threw the signals for balls and strikes. The morning had been hectic, and he was in a hurry to meet some people for lunch at his favorite deli. The phone interrupted him as he stuffed little packets of diet salad dressing in his shirt pocket. He hit the speaker button and looked at the clock. “Sutherland.”

“This is the switchboard sir. We have a call holding for you. Says he knows something about the shooting in the garage. Says he'll only talk to you sir.”

“OK, OK. Put him on.” He sat down and put his feet up on an open file drawer. “Sutherland. How can I help you”?

“Yeah Sutherland. See... I want to tell you something about the shooting the other day.”

“OK, I'm listening. What is it. Can I have your name sir”?

“I don't want no cops bothering me.”

“What's your name sir.”

“Never mind me. I don't need no cops poking around. Understand”?

“So why are you calling me then”?

“I'm doing you a favor, that's why. Look... I know a cop cruiser when I see one. It didn't belong there. It was parked three blocks away, you know, a big black Ford. A big tank. When you guys gonna get some different cars? There was cop stuff inside it. A red light in the back window, you know.”

He was too hungry to finesse the call. “OK so what”?

“That car was gone right after the shooting man. I walked down there to see if anybody that I know got hit. Word was, a local guy got shot. I saw the car sitting there just before the shooting, and there was nobody in it. When I went back, a few minutes after the shooting, well, it was gone. That car had to leave right after the shots were fired man. I felt funny about it when I first saw it. We know an undercover car when we see one man. The neighborhood watch lady took the plate number down. She's a real snoop.”

He looked at the clock. “It was a police car. So what”?

“I'm telling you man... That car had something to do with the shooting. Nobody ever saw it around here before. The cops were staking out the place before the shooting went down. The guy that got shot, he's that teacher from Berwyn that got his truck torched. We've got scanners too. Later on a guy across the street told me he saw the Ford leave in a big ass hurry, like right after the shots were fired. He saw two guys take off that had to be cops. No lights, no siren man. Just two guys running like hell and burning rubber. He swears it was over fifteen minutes before the ambulance and the squad cars got there after that too. The cops were involved. Maybe the cops did the shooting.”

There goes lunch, he thought. “The witness, will you give me his name”?

“No thanks. Who knows what kinda shit... I don't want anything to do with the cops. They ain't getting MY name either. I know a guy that knows the guy he works for man. Word is, you know, the teacher guy, he pissed off the oil companies and he's on his way, what's the word, to a revision.”

“You mean rendition.” He reached for a cold cup of coffee.

“Whatever man. You guys are probably helping the government anyway, but just in case you ain't, I just thought I'd let you know about that unmarked car sitting there.”

“You need to give me the plate number or I can't...”

The man read the number only once and hung up before Sutherland had a chance to read it back from his pad. He left the number on his desk and dashed out to lunch. He wasn't far away, but the call made him late to the deli. The prefabricated small talk of the other cops bored him. He was soon alone when the others finished eating and left. The call about the unmarked cruiser bothered him all the way through the salty corned beef. He would run the number as soon as he got back. It might rule out the conspiracy theory, and if the feds were snooping around he wanted to know about it.

The trip back was even shorter. He reached his desk but didn't even sit down. He just grabbed the paper and pushed his way along a busy hall to a room full of computers. He typed in an access code that they only give to a few detectives and found a match almost instantly.

“Shit,” he whispered to himself, realizing that he had a problem. It was a police car all right. It belonged to the Chicago Police, and the record showed who it was assigned to at the time of the incident. He knew Murphy and Stone from the softball league. Although not quite friends, they saw each other a lot and frequented the same bar. It was one of a half dozen dart bars that cops frequent after softball games and before going home after a late shift. He wanted to talk to them off the record first. If they were working with the feds then it would just end there. He wasn't going to pay an official visit. They'd do the same for him. Maybe they could get him a homeland security gig on the side, he thought. The extra money would be great for paying down debt. He thought about hooking up with them after work and picked up the phone to call a friend at the Chicago PD.

A man with a raspy voice picked up the phone in a room filled

with radio chatter. "Homicide. Officer Ryder."

"Hey Norm what's up"?

"Hey Lefty. How you doing there ump? I been meaning to talk to you about that last game. Brian was actually safe there man." Two men started yelling at each other in the background about being on time.

"Bull shit. He was out by half a step easy. You were just drunk. But anyway, why I called you, I've got Cub tickets that Stone might want. What's his shift assignment now"?

"Are they good seats? Na, what am I talking about. Every seat's... There ain't really a bad seat in there. If he don't want 'em, I do. He's on the late shift on stakeout duty. He gets off at like three in the morning and shit now."

Sutherland waited for a passing siren on the other end. "Late shift... God he must have pissed off the Pope. What did Murphy do now man"?

"I don't really know. It's hard to tell with Murphy. You want his cell number"?

"Yeah sure, go ahead." He took the number down, thanked him and hung up. He punched in the number, got a recording and left a message. "Hey man... What's up. This is Lefty. I need to talk to you guys. I know you're on the graveyard shift, but if you'd stop by Uncle Charlie's for a minute before you go out I'd appreciate it man. I'll be there anyway. No big deal but I need to see you guys, OK? What the hell did you do to pull the graveyard shift anyway? Whatever it was I hope it was worth it, but next time call me so I can have some fun too." He laughed. "Be careful out there. Later man." He hung up frowning.

Detective Sutherland spent a good part of the afternoon poking around in the duty files and searching active cases in the computer. There were no official stakeouts going on in Oak Park or Berwyn. If Murphy and Stone were up to something then it had to be for the feds. It made him angry to think the federal government would do something in his area without telling him

about it. He called a source he could usually rely on at the CPD, but he couldn't get a straight answer as to what Murphy and Stone were up to just outside the Chicago city limits. He called the Mayor of Oak Park who sounded nervous and said he knew nothing. The mayor of Berwyn wouldn't return his calls. The good detective was sure he was being kept out of the loop, and the more he thought about it the more angry he got. He had no idea of what he was getting into, but he didn't care. It was time to confront Murphy and Stone directly.

He waited an hour in the back corner booth at Uncle Charlie's like a hunter in a deer blind. At 3:30 in the afternoon the sun was already projecting long shadows across the red tiled floor. He resisted the temptation to call them, not wanting to spook his prey. There was nothing to do but drink. By 4:00 PM he knew he should slow down, but he kept sipping scotch and soda until the courage afforded him the luxury of ignoring reasonable alternatives to direct confrontation. He was in Chicago territory, but somebody was keeping him in the dark. He wanted to know who it was, and why, before he left.

Murphy and Stone suddenly appeared and sat down in the booth. Stone slapped him hard on the back and said, "Whats up Lefty?"

"Hey, I'm good. What about you guys huh"? He choked on the scotch and a little bit trickled down his lip.

Stone said, "Same old lame shit man. Same shit, different day."

"I hear you guys caught the late shift," he laughed.

Murphy said, "Yeah, I guess so. Happens once in a while."

"You're on a stakeout in my yard man. What's up with that"? This better be good, he thought.

Murphy looked at Stone and said, "We're not supposed to say, you know. But I can't believe they didn't tell you, of all people. Can you keep a secret"?

"You have to ask"? He frowned.

Murphy smiled. "No big deal actually. Were just staking out

Artie's is all. I thought you'd know, or I'd have told you man."

"Why you busting a snowman in Berwyn? It ain't your yard." My God, he thought. There IS a problem here.

"Well see... Artie... You know... It's a DEA thing now. It's not just local. I mean he's got a shit load of product going through there now. No more small fish. He moves a lot of..."

"No he doesn't." Sutherland shook his head. "He used to man, like twenty years ago, but now he's small potatoes and he supplies his friends is all." He was immediately sorry he said it. I might as well go for it now, he thought. "Look. I know you guys. We've all been around. What's going on? There's no drug stakeouts going on in Berwyn or Oak Park right now. I'd be able to find out."

"Take it easy," cried Murphy. He panicked and thought, He's got us nailed. Now what am I going to do about this dumb ass.

"You guys are in my yard. The guy who got shot in Oak Park, he had a phony burglary and an arson recently. He's a God damn bartender at Artie's, and now I find you guys staking out the joint in secret. Lots of my people can't even give me a straight answer. Your frigging car was MADE. Shit, you were parked a few blocks from where the guy was shot. You were seen leaving the scene before my people even got there man."

Stone was ready to run. Murphy just laughed and said, "Looks funny don't it. You think we shot him or something? Shit man. We ain't shot nobody in weeks." He laughed.

"What the hell is going on with you guys? I'm not jacking with you. I'm your brother. I just want to know. You can trust me man." He lied but had never felt more justified.

Murphy joked, "Lefty, I think you're drunk man."

"I'm drunk all right." He thought fast. "And I'm in trouble."

Stone reached his hand across the table and tried to act sincere. "Hey man. What can I do bro"?

Tell them anything, he thought. "I owe some money... Gamblers. It just sort of got out of hand. I got on a streak. I was up fifty thousand, then a hundred and fifty thousand. I should

have quit there man, but I didn't. See, I started playing around on the pro poker circuit. I was kicking ass big time, you know, in a qualifying round. I was going to Vegas man. One, two, three terrible hands. I lost it all, you know. I was gonna quit right there, but these wise guys wanted to back me. I was drunk, so I took their money. Never play drunk. Shit! I knew that. Well, I just kept losing and they cut me off. I just needed a little more table time. Look... They're gonna jack me up if I don't find a hundred grand.”

Stone cried, “Holy shit Lefty.”

Murphy thought he saw an opportunity and said, “Lefty, look brother. Let's go upstairs and talk business. I think we know a way to help out, but not here.”

He was way too curious to worry about the danger. “Alright, cool. I thought you guys had to have some kind of action going on.” They shook hands all around. “I can keep a secret, and I won't forget this you guys.”

They climbed an old staircase that smelled like cat urine and stepped out on a sticky tar paper roof. The building next door was taller, and it's chunky brick wall was covered in graffiti. Somebody had painted a masterpiece with blinding synthetic colors that embellished one giant word, *RAGE*. It stabbed at every suburban light rail commuter twice a day as they passed within a few feet of it on the creaky elevated tracks. Sutherland had seen it a thousand times before. Murphy put his hand in his pocket and opened the safety on his backup pistol.

Sutherland thought he heard the click and instinctively asked, “What are you guys up to man?” He put his arm over Stone's shoulders and felt a desperate combination of shame and anger.

Murphy didn't care what he said and almost willingly telegraphed his intentions. “We're staking out Artie's see. There's a shit load of pure coke in there. Not his coke though. It's the evidence from the Rodriguez case downtown.”

Sutherland froze. “Holy shit.”

Stone stepped over pigeon droppings and said, “Not a word of

this to anybody man.”

The cornered detective was desperate to talk his way out of there and started begging. “No way man. I’m good. I get it. The evidence already disappeared once. They were afraid it would happen again huh”? He was ready to run, but there was nowhere to go. That’s what I get for giving these jerks a chance to explain, he thought.

“That’s right,” said Stone. “They thought it might grow wings again.” He laughed.

Sutherland spoke too soon. “But that’s a mistrial man. The chain of custody thing. You can’t let a coke dealer watch state’s evidence.” This is bull shit, he thought.

Murphy laughed, “You can if nobody finds out.” His hand caressed the pistol in his pocket. He kept a finger on the safety.

Sutherland lost it. “What’s with the bartender! He got shot. Who’s messing with him and why? Tell me the damn truth.”

Stone knew it was all over at that point. Sutherland would not be allowed to leave. Murphy would certainly kill him, and it wouldn’t be pretty. He walked back to the stairway, went down to the bar, and left them alone.

Murphy couldn’t resist bragging before he did the deed. “I shot the damn bartender.”

“What the fuck”! He smiled and tried not to show fear. It’s one on one now, he thought. He’s going to kill me if I let him. It’s me or him, and I’m going to have to take his ass out. I’ll have to make the first move. No witnesses. Self defense. I can prove a motive because he shot the bartender. I can move first.

Murphy had no remorse about what he had to do. He should have minded his own God damned business, he thought. Now I’ll tell him why. “Listen bro, let me start at the beginning. We knew they were planning to hide the coke because the Captain had to get volunteers to watch it. Only a few people knew. We just volunteered.” He smiled proud. “We went to Rodriguez and made a deal. We told him about the switch and the chain of custody. He

knows he's going to get off. The last day of the trial, while he's dropping the bombshell, we'll snatch the coke. We've got somebody on the inside. Rodriguez walks and we'll sell him the coke for two million tax free. We'll all be on the beach in the Caribbean the same day. You want in"? He held out his hand.

Sutherland didn't shake it. "Where's the bartender come in"?

"He knows too much see. He just don't know that yet. We're just sitting there watching Artie's and he ran up to the car and started jacking us up. He caught my arm in the window and jumped on it before I could... I had to stay quiet about it too."

"He broke it." Sutherland laughed to himself.

"I couldn't say shit, and then Artie tells him about the God damned coke! He agreed to keep quiet... Oh right. Him and Artie are close, but the son of a bitch is a commie anti-Christ or something."

"You mean anarchist."

"Yeah whatever. Anyway he spreads his commie bull shit all over the Internet and attracts a lot of attention. No way he can keep quiet. I almost took him out right there, but Stone wanted to go up on the computer and read his shit. We found out about him. We got lucky too. He'd already pissed off the oil companies big time. They had a motive, so we just went ahead and ran with it, you know, like they had a contract on his sorry ass." They laughed. "Blame it on OPEC man."

Sutherland was desperate to run for the stairs but couldn't decide when. "You gonna take him out"? He was terrified and it showed.

"Hell yes I'm gonna take him out, you know, when the time is right. I'm having way too much fun playing with his head though. He probably shit himself. Everybody in the whole God damned world, they'll think he got thumped by the Arabs or something." They laughed. "How lucky can a guy get bro"?

"You're one lucky son of a bitch." He laughed as hard as he could.

I'll throw him off the roof, thought Murphy. He won't know what hit him. "So Lefty, my brother. We'll cut you in big. You in man? We gotta let you in now."

"What's my take"? Sutherland played along while resisting the impulse to throw the first punch. The minute I see both hands, he thought.

"Three way split. Even all the way around. You know too much so I have to let you in. No big deal. You'd do the same for me."

They laughed and hugged like they meant it. Sutherland could feel the gun in Murphy's pocket. "Man I just need the money. I'm in real trouble," he pleaded.

"I heard that good buddy." Not for long you're not, he thought. The el train went crashing by, and Murphy covered his ears.

Sutherland decided to run. "Me being in on it, It's OK with Stone then right"? He turned to the stairs and reached for the door, silently praying that his hastily contrived ruse would be believed just long enough for him to make a dash for the bar. Murphy wasn't going to let him reach the stairway. He took a deep breath, pulled his gun and bashed in Sutherland's face with three blows from the side of the pistol. Sutherland tried to cover himself, but Murphy just rammed his head into the crumbling brick wall. Blood ran down it and pooled on the sticky black roof. Lefty collapsed into complete unconsciousness and fell face down on the tar.

Murphy had a hard time moving the unconscious man over to the rail. He didn't even bother to look around for witnesses. He rolled his old friend over the side, gambling that the fall would be ruled the cause of death. He grumbled to himself and said, "By the time they figure it out I'll be long gone anyway." The space between the buildings was only about three feet wide. He pushed it over and watched it fall. *Thump*. The body hit hard, rolled over, and came to rest in some tall grass. Murphy saw Lefty's face looking up at him and got winded worrying about the risk. It would be a long time before somebody found the body, but every

cop in the state would be looking for a missing detective.

He ran down the stairs and grabbed Stone. They jumped through a back door by the kitchen and took off in the car. They were three blocks away when Stone finally spoke up. He didn't have to ask what happened. "Somebody had to see us with him! We're fucking toast now man! What the hell are we going to..."

"Shut up! Get a grip! We can cry about it later! At this point we'll just have to sweat it out until the trial. Maybe nobody noticed us."

They passed a regular patrol car and ignored it. Stone begged, "We should just go for the coke and split, right now, just take our chances with the greaser."

"Not yet. Let's see what happens first. Look, we were way in the back of the bar. He was drunk. If they ask us...well. We saw him go up there to throw up or something. We don't have to figure it all out right now, and we're almost late to the stakeout. I just don't want to attract attention. No lights. Just step on it. Just go."

David finished his hospital breakfast of ham and eggs with a little help from Dori who talked him out of his bagel and cream cheese. She warned him that the cream cheese might be poisoned, and that she was duty bound to test it first. It doesn't hurt to be good looking in this world, thought David. You can't say no to cute. It makes you totally defenseless. He hoped to get discharged and was feeling good about getting back to the classroom. He had a revolution to run now and wanted to take a more active role.

Dori had other priorities. She wanted a normal life, and her initial response to the whole price of gas revolt was something like, "If you don't like the price of gas then ride the train and let's get married." She was satisfied. He had his job back. He was sober, and it looked like he was going to stay that way. The recent string of crises had pulled them closer together, but she knew it

wasn't over yet either. She considered asking him to take a teaching job in Iowa but wasn't at all sure about it. Maybe the trouble wouldn't follow them there. Maybe the cause of the trouble was only a local thing. She thought about Benton interfering with their privacy and smiled when the pentagon man's phone went off. She hoped it was somebody calling him away. He took the phone out of his pocket and walked over by the bathroom. They watched him mumble and scribble notes in a little yellow pad before returning with a disgusted look on his face.

He sounded like a newscaster. "Somethings happened. A detective from Oak Park was just found dead in the city. He fell, or was pushed, off the roof of a bar. It's not on the local news yet, but it will be in an hour or so. It might be related. There may be reporters up here soon, so we might need to move."

"Oh my God," said David. "Too damn many coincidences for Oak Park. Shit people."

Dori panicked. "It's no coincidence already! I don't like this"! She looked like she was going to be sick.

Benton steadied her. "Look. We don't know if it's related yet. We're trying to find out right now. If it is a problem, no big deal. It just might be time to move, that's all. We have the building covered, but you can't be too careful."

Dori popped up from her chair. "It never stops." She tried to breathe. "But what..."

"The guy was real drunk," said Benton. "You never know... It's a bar. People drink in bars. The guy was popular. Three kids too. A straight shooter." He shook his head. "No enemies according to our initial information. Still... Christ, you never know. Sometimes you'd never suspect somebody could be wrapped up in any kind of low life crap, and then you find out they've been dirty all along. Still, nothing like that ever happens in Oak Park, right. Crazy shit is happening all over the place now. The burbs are no place to hide anymore."

“The break in and the fire were in Berwyn,” said David.

Benton laughed. “That's right across the street.”

“Berwyn is right across the street from Cicero too, but there's a big difference between Berwyn and Cicero. Right G man.” They laughed.

“Big Al is alive and well I guess,” joked Benton. “Cicero... I hear they elected a hooker as mayor a while back.” He laughed. “Not a mayor that turned tricks... A real hooker who ran for mayor and won.”

“Which came first,” joked David, “The politician or the sleaze?” They all laughed. “Hey now... I'd trust a hooker before a politician any day. At least a hooker is honest about whats going on.”

“Same old stuff. It's just more unpredictable now,” joked Benton. “What did they say in that movie? It used to be that when you bought a politician they stayed bought.” They laughed. “Anyway, I'll know in a few minutes if we need to move. There's more than one hospital in Chicago. You can take your pick professor. It's just a precaution.”

The conference table at Police headquarters in Oak Park wasn't big enough to seat all the officers waiting in the hall for the chief's emergency meeting. They wore black arm bands on their left arms in respect for their fallen comrade. Building maintenance brought in some folding chairs and made two tight rows across the side wall under a big glass trophy case. It was filled with sports trophies and vintage photographs of the town square in 1900, the first police station, the first school, the Unitarian church, and a fleet of old squad cars with one way radios.

Chief Bud Hearn was done crying by the time he started to speak. He was more than ready for action and revenge. There was an open microphone on the podium, but he didn't need it. “Let's

just cut through the crap you guys. The Mayor says... No. I don't have any time for his damn procedure shit. Screw the book. This is personal. I will, without hesitation, smack the first man senseless that even considers the possibility of a suicide or an accident here.”

The room roared with approval. An officer peeked in from the hall and called out, “Chief the mayor is holding on line one.”

“God damn it”!

“Sir he wants you in his office right now sir. He's got the press in there.”

“For Christ's sake man! Can't you see what we're doing here? Tell him I'm in an emergency meeting. No no. Tell him to go fuck himself”! The room exploded in cheers and stomping feet.

“Sir I can't tell him that sir...”

“The hell you can't. Tell him I said that. Don't change a God damn word. That's a direct order. Tell him to unzip the fly on his fat pants and stick the phone up his ass.” Everyone applauded including the messenger.

“Yes sir. I sure will sir.” He ran down the hall.

“Now where was I. What we've got here is a cold blooded cop killing psychopathic mutant. We are gonna take the son of a bitch out hard and quick.” They all stood up and cheered until the chief waved them to their seats.

“I'm gonna make this short and sweet. There's no way that Dan Sutherland would take his own life. There's no way that he would go up on that roof alone, you know, and absolutely no way he would fall by accident.”

Somebody yelled, “Shit no!”

“I don't care how drunk he was. That man did not fall off that roof! He was murdered. We don't know why, not yet, but we will, and soon.” He sighed. “Look people. I can tell you that he was not working a case when it happened. He was doing the department budget for next year. The timing makes me crazy. There's outside crap going down all over our yard, and if this murder doesn't have

something to do with that bartender getting shot I'll kiss your ass.”

The room buzzed with little whispers, and a Sargent spoke up. “Sir what about our other cases?”

“There are no other priorities right now gentlemen. The gloves are off. Listen people. Start with everybody that talked to him that day. Why did he go down there? That's not his regular bar. He never goes there. Check all his records and his log. Get his phone calls. If he bought a hot dog that day I want to know what he had on it. Lean on anybody that was within a mile of that bar. Take his vehicle apart. Take prints off every inch of it. And I cleared it with CPD. We can take the whole bar apart too. Their evidence guys are already done with it, and they didn't find shit. It wasn't like they...”

“Oh please,” interrupted an officer. “Those idiots couldn't find water if they fell out of the boat.” Everybody laughed except the chief.

“Gentlemen, I don't have to tell you what we have to do now. I know you'll do right by him. Do what you think he'd have done for you. Find the piss bag who killed our brother, and when you do... Well all I can say is... I hope he tries to run away.” They screamed and shook their fists in the air. The Chief went out of the room rubbing his eyes. He took three steps down the hall and punched the wall so hard that he almost broke his wrist.

## Chapter 16

Carla was driving her empty cab unusually fast on Ashland Avenue when the news broke on the radio. “WBBM news time. It's nine thirty. Police are investigating the death of an Oak Park detective found dead last night at a popular night spot frequented by off duty police officers. Officer Dan Sutherland apparently fell to his death from the roof of Uncle Charlie's at 989 South Wabash sometime between three PM and midnight. A police spokesperson stated that they have not ruled out fowl play. He declined any further comment as the investigation is ongoing. Officer Sutherland was a seventeen year veteran of the Oak Park Police Department and is survived by his wife and three daughters. Funeral arrangements have not been finalized.”

Carla mumbled, “son of a bitch.” She immediately concluded that Murphy knew something about it. The phone was no good for what she wanted to do but the cab was already headed in the right direction to go by his apartment and confront him anyway. She did twenty miles per hour over the speed limit along the big wide boulevard but so did everybody else. Ashland Avenue was a long major street that ran in a diagonal direction from the the northeast to the southwest and was a convenient shortcut to his place.

Carla thought Murphy would probably still be in bed but she guessed he wouldn't mind her dropping in. They were business partners. She passed a slow garbage truck like it was standing still but got distracted and dropped a lit roach on her lap. She

screamed like she was on fire and slapped her legs. “Shit!... Oh shit”! The first impulse of a cab driver is to let it burn and resist the impulse to swerve without checking the mirror. She skidded over to the curb and pulverized the little red smoking dot with her foot. The all too familiar smell of burning carpet made her feel a little guilty and about driving stoned. An elderly woman waiting at a bus stop across the street saw the whole thing from behind three giant shopping bags, congratulated herself for using the bus instead of a cab and laughed while Carla squealed off into traffic.

There was no place to park the big yellow tank in front of Murphy's apartment. She had to use a strip mall five blocks away. Murphy lived on one of those super narrow ancient streets with insane parking on both sides. The smart thing to do if you lived there was to drive a beater because new cars didn't stay new for long, especially in the Chicago winter. Walking up to the door she could see that most people knew that. Some of the cars looked pretty sad. Murphy let her in. He was awake, watching TV and eating jelly filled long johns.

“Cops,” joked Carla. “Face down in the donuts.”

“I'm off duty.” He grinned. “It don't count when you're off duty. The one's with sprinkles, they're raspberry inside. Have one.” He put a sticky finger in his mouth and pulled it out slow, sucking it rather suggestively.

“This one”? She lifted it up and took a big slow bite.

“Oh yeah,” he moaned. She traced the tip of her tongue along the edges of the pastry, and they laughed at themselves.

“Want some coffee kid”? He pointed to the half kitchen.

“Sure. Straight no sugar.”

“What's up with you”? He pushed himself over to the counter and poured a cup of very strong coffee in a mug with a logo from *Mr. Auto Parts*.

“I'm working right now. I'm in the cab. Listen. The radio just said they found an Oak Park cop dead at Uncle Charlie's. Fell off the damn roof. Southland I think. You know him”?

“Sutherland.” *Bang* He dropped the mug in the sink and cracked it. “Shit”! He quickly pulled down another cup and filled it, leaving the sharp pieces in the sink for later. “I knew OF him, you know, didn't know him personally.” He panicked and couldn't believe about how fast they found the body. He had a hard time controlling his expression and was starting to sweat under his arms. Carla watched him take off his bath robe and sit down at the kitchen table in a sleeveless white tee shirt and red boxer shorts.

She sensed that he knew something and probed a little further. “I didn't know him either. He wasn't ever around the girls. There's just so much crazy shit gone down lately. You know, I just thought you...”

“I said I didn't know him. They say he was a great guy but I didn't know him.”

He said WAS, she thought, like he already knew about it, but he looked surprised when I told him. She noticed little beads of sweat forming on his neck and kept pushing. “I don't like the timing. Look partner, if we're gonna get that coke out of there without a hassle then we don't need any more attention. Know what I mean”?

He remembered how the body looked when it fell and how he turned away when it hit. “You just leave it to me, and do what I tell you to do, and we'll be fine.” His fear turned to real paranoia. Things have to be different now, he thought. I don't trust her to keep quiet any more. Things are getting way too damn complicated. He forced a big grin and laughed. “That all you came here for hot shot”? He looked at her breasts.

“You horny bastard.” She waved him off. “That's all you think about.”

“Come on girl.” He motioned toward the bed room. “I'll give you a back rub. One of my long hard ones.”

She played along. “You son of a bitch. You got me now and you damn well know it too. You know what driving that cab does to my back. You win. She pushed her chair back and bumped the

bedroom door with a hip shot while pulling her sweat shirt over her head. He turned her around and kicked the door shut behind them.

“Hey! Uh uh. Me first,” she protested. “You promised.”

Murphy was only acting and didn't have sex on his mind at all. He was too paranoid. The horny bit was just to distract her. Having to kill Sutherland made him so angry that he was almost tempted to grab the coke and make a run for it. He would hold her prisoner and kill her too if he had to. “Come here sugar,” he said.

“Slow down there mister. This ain't a race.” She leaned back on the bed and held her legs high in the air so he could pull off her jeans. He skinned her like a catfish with one long pull of his good arm and threw the jeans over his shoulder. She turned around on the bed, reached behind her back to pop the clasp on her bra, and was in the process of pulling an arm through a strap when she felt a cold handcuff snap around her wrist. Murphy quickly locked the other cuff to the bedpost. She laughed to buy time but didn't know what to think. “Well cowboy. Shit kicker. This here's a new one on me. You been watching cop porn or what. Oh officer! Don't! Don't officer please”!

He laughed and slapped her butt. “I'll be right back. You're my prisoner.” He went to the other room and started going through her purse where she couldn't see.

She called through the door. “What the hell are you doing”?

“I'm looking for a rubber.”

“This shit hurts. Hurry up.”

“Now who's in a hurry.” He fished through her purse but found nothing unusual. He leafed through her address book without knowing why. He spilled her pot, scooped most of it up and put it back in the plastic bag. She had a brand new cell phone with all the bells and whistles and a button labeled messages. “I gotta take a piss,” he yelled. “Be right back. Get started without me.” He laughed.

“Hurry up. This shit hurts.”

He went into the bathroom, turned on the water, put his ear up to the phone, and listened to one recorded message after another. It was all guys asking for women, but then he heard something that shook him hard. *Carla this is Nick.* He stopped the recording. That's the bartender's buddy's name, he thought. The social worker. He flipped through her phone book without finding anybody named Nick and pressed the play button again. *I wanted to talk to you. I really enjoyed having you over the other night and I don't want you to be a stranger. I still remember the old days and the parties on the south side. Remember when we stole the disco ball? Anyway give me a call, OK. Don't be a stranger. Bye.*

Murphy laughed at the idea of Carla screwing Nick, but his paranoia kicked in. Wait a minute, he thought. She's screwing this Nick guy, but she didn't tell me. She knows I shot the guy's buddy, and I'm supposed to believe that she'll be cool about the coke and not let it slip. And now she's curious about Sutherland too. What if she even suspects it was me? She could bail, and then what? She's got to be suspicious or she wouldn't be here now. What the hell is she up to? Maybe she wants the coke for herself. She's all set up to snatch it. If I got pinched for the cop right now, Christ, she could run off with it all by herself. She's going to turn me in. She's here to get the proof.

Murphy stomped into the bedroom with a vengeful look on his face. She took one look at him and her mood fell from confused fear to stark panic. He sat on the bed, grabbed her free arm, twisted it, and extruded the words through his tightly clenched teeth. "Do you really think I'm stupid"?

"What the hell are you talking about! What's the matter with you"! she cried. After all the trouble that she'd been through, after all the close calls and hard tricks over the years, this was different. For the first time in her life she was actually afraid for her life.

Murphy begged, "You come over here and the first thing you

ask is about that dead cop. What exactly are you trying to do”?

“Oh my God. What the hell are you...” He just confessed, she thought. He's actually involved in Sutherland's death, and I'm in big trouble. The cuff made her fingers numb and tingly. Maybe I can talk my way out of here, she thought. Oh my God, he killed a cop. A cop killed another cop.

Murphy slapped her face on an irresistible impulse. “God damn it! You think I had something to do with it don't you”! He was instantly sorry and wanted it back. “Shit I'm sorry. Damn it woman”!

She made herself laugh. “Oh come on. Cut it out. This shit ain't funny anymore. I hate this kinky shit. Getting spanked don't get me off. Are you gonna fuck me or what. Come on over here.”

“Never ever trust a woman,” he said. He started pacing around the room while thinking about lethal injection.

“What the hell did I do”? She let some anger show.

“What have you... Have you said anything? I mean.... Shit woman. You had to be there to understand what happened. There was nothing I could do.” This bitch knows way too much to live, he thought. I've gotta do it. I've got nothing to lose”?

“I didn't say nothing to nobody. I just figured it out. You're an idiot, you know that. Get hold of yourself before you screw the whole thing up. Half that God damn money is mine, and I ain't gonna give that up.”

He leaned over the kitchen table, picked up his service weapon, put a round in the chamber and pointed it at her face. “Just tell me what you know.”

“Don't shoot! Don't shoot! Damn you Murphy! What the hell do you want to hear anyway! You stupid ass hole! You want to hear me say I think you killed a cop! You crazy bastard! OK then! I think you killed a fucking cop! Now shoot me or get that thing out of my face before I MAKE you use it”! She started to cry. “I'm in the coke thing with you guys, but I ain't got nothing to do with that other shit. You better kill me right now cause I ain't

gonna go down for killing a cop. I wasn't sure it was you that did it when I came over here, but I sure as hell am now.” She pushed the gun aside. “You want to kill me, go ahead and pull the trigger. Who's gonna get the coke out of that God damned bar now dick-head”? She felt a strange sense of calm.

He lowered the gun. “You are I guess.” Or you're dead, he thought.

“After all this why should I? Nobody puts their hands on me like that. Maybe I'll get it for you and maybe I won't.”

“Listen up! You're gonna do exactly what I tell you to do, unless you want to take a little one way ride in the country.” He tried to think his way around the problem. Everything was changing so fast. The job was so well planned but the nosy detective knocked him off balance. Now it was one bad move after another in a desperate attempt to stop the bleeding. He told himself to slow down and not try to solve everything at once. He knew he needed her. Maybe the soft approach would work, but his first impulse was to scare her and she was already too pissed for that.

Carla got tired of being naked. “If you're gonna shoot me do it now. If not, just give me something to cover up with.”

Murphy picked up her clothes and tossed them on the bed. He unlocked the cuffs and said, “Go ahead and get dressed. I don't know what I'm going to do with you yet, but you'll be fine right here until I decide.”

“That's kidnapping damn it”! Her eyes filled up.

“It's already kidnapping stupid. I already restrained you.” His expression flipped from anger to depression. “Why does everybody have to go poking around in my business. I didn't ask for this. I don't want to hurt anybody.”

What am I, she thought, his mother now? “Look man. You killed a cop. Cops don't kill cops. Nobody kills cops. You just don't know when to stop. You just keep upping the stakes.”

“Listen to me. I worked my best years for that political

cesspool of a department. Best cop they ever had, but who got promoted. The God damn relatives of politicians, that's who. Four times I got passed over, you know, every time the same thing. At first I thought it was no big deal, there's enough for everybody. But when I got passed over by that son of a bitch Miller... Jesus Christ. Everybody knows he's dirty as hell. He's been taking money since he was a soft tailed rookie. He's on everybody's pay roll. His father was the same way. The whole God damn system is dirty. All those years and I've still got nothing to show for it. I didn't make the rules, but now it's my turn to get paid. Now it's my turn."

She zipped up her jeans and kept one eye on the gun. "Miller used to shake down my girls."

"Yeah I know. He didn't want money. He just liked free tricks."

She smiled for real. "You know how they got rid of him"?

"How"?

"Shirley chased him around his van with a razor."

"No shit." They laughed.

"She plays a very convincing bug. She'd yell, "I'll cut your balls off you pig"! She made a slashing motion with her hand that made him wince.

Murphy thought Carla was trying to get his guard down, so he played it safe. "Put out your hands." He opened the cuffs back up.

Carla begged, "We don't need those. Think about it. I can't get the coke with those on anyway. And besides, if I was gonna run, I could just do it then." The calm feeling returned. The courage came so easily that it surprised her, but she embraced it and liked the way it kept him thinking. She finished straightening her clothes, looked at the little hole in her jeans where she dropped the roach in the cab, and wished that she'd stayed there.

Murphy cuffed her back to the bed. "I'm gonna keep these on you until I decide what to do. I'm tired of everybody throwing shit at me all at once. I need time to think. You ain't going anywhere until I figure it out."

She heard *The Price is Right* on the TV in the other room and thought about her purse on the table in there. “Give me my purse.”

“No way.” He picked up the end of the bed to see how heavy it was.

“I just want to get high. I feel like shit.”

“I ain't taking off the cuffs every time you want this or that.”

“I just want a joint. Roll me a joint while you figure out, you know, that I'm cool about the cop and shit. Can you at least do that?”

He fetched the purse, sat on the bed, carefully took out the pot and began to separate the sticky buds. He tried to hurry, but it took him three tries to roll a sorry looking joint without breaking the paper. He ran the wet stick across his lips and caught sight of his partner looking through the back door window. He could just see Stone sitting on the end of the bed with a bag on his lap.

He laughed at Murphy, pushed the door open and started joking around. “Hope you don't get picked for the next round of piss in the bottle. I guess your drug testing days are over, but you could have waited until we're in the clear.” He closed the door behind him.

Murphy couldn't help feeling guilty for rolling a joint in front of his boss. “It ain't for me damn it.”

Carla heard him coming and called out, “Stone, Stone... In here.”

Murphy blushed while Stone peeked in the bedroom and started shaking his head. Carla was cuffed to the bed and he knew by her expression that it wasn't voluntary. Murphy felt like smoking the joint himself.

“Now this is kinky,” said Stone. “What is this, some kind a rape fetish or hurt me daddy bull shit. Get a hold of yourself man.” He took Murphy out of the room and whispered, “We need her damn it. What the hell are you doing?”

Murphy printed a little note on a paper towel. *She knows too*

*much*. He motioned at the back porch. They went out and stood by a corner post with a rusty old rain gauge nailed to the side. The porch smelled like old garbage and damp wood.

“What the hell is going on here?” cried Stone. He scratched his arm where a mosquito bit him and thought about West Nile Virus.

Murphy shook his head in disgust. “She heard about the cop on the radio, and she comes running over here asking me one question after another. Dumb bitch. I didn't know what else to do. It's all coming apart so God damned fast.”

“You told her?”!

“She was real suspicious. I couldn't just let her walk around suspicious. She could start talking, you know. No telling what she'd do. I'm just watching her until I figure it out.”

Stone felt numb. “So you just kidnapped her! Unlawful restraint. Assault and battery. Why not go for aggravated sexual assault! That's great man. Now who's gonna snatch the God damned coke?”

“What the hell was I supposed to do? She's on to us. She knows man.”

“You idiot. Now what are we gonna do. We had it pegged. She's screwing the guy. All she had to do was take the shit. It don't get no easier than that. Maybe you ought to take her place. I'm not sure he'd like you though. You're ugly AND stupid.”

“Kiss my ass.” He shoved Stone away.

“Hey! I'm your boss, remember”?

He smiled a little. “Not any more you ain't. I'm your partner now slick. Whatever happens to me happens to you, see. And don't you EVER forget it.”

Stone wanted out more than ever but put off weighing his options until later. “OK partner. You the man. What we gonna do? Let's look at the cards. We can't turn back now. Thanks to you we're sort of committed. You the man alright, but remember this. If we go down, shit. I ain't doing no hard time in no pen. I'd rather shoot you first. You know what happens to cops in prison.”

What a lightweight, he thought. “That's all bull shit. They've got a special place for cops. What do they call it. Some kind of protective custody or something.”

“Yeah maybe, if they like you, but who do you think decides where a prisoner goes? You know, what joint you get assigned to? The Department of Corrections does, that's who. It's completely up to them, not the judge, not the jury. And you are special now. You ain't just some cop dealing snow anymore. You killed a cop. They got a special place for you alright. If I kill you first, and I will if we go down, I'd be doing you a God damned favor.” He laughed.

“Kiss my ass.” Murphy didn't know if he meant it or not.

“I saw one of those special cells once. Tiny concrete room. Solid steel door with no bars man. Very little light. Nothing in there but an iron bed and a steel pisser. No mattress even. They slide your food through a slot, that is, after they do whatever it is they feel like doing to it. You make some noise or throw a fit, oh my God. They come in orange riot gear and beat the crap out of you with sticks. Nobody cares. They cover you in mace and shoot you up with drugs that make your tongue drag the floor.”

Carla started yelling a string of threats but they ignored her. Murphy waved it off. “Not me man. I ain't playing that shit. I'd kill myself first.”

“Oh no you don't. You even SAY that you want to kill yourself and they strap your naked ass to a steel bed behind a big glass window in the psych ward so everybody can laugh at you. They sell tickets. You pull that suicide shit too many times and you NEVER get out again. When your prison time's up they just commit you to the Department of Mental Health. They lock you up in the bug house and throw away the key.”

Murphy shook it off. “They ain't taking me that way, not ever, never.”

“I got us both covered numb nuts. I've got a plan. If we get cornered see, first I shoot you, and then I run like hell and they

gun me down like a mad dog. We'll never see the inside man. I ain't going to prison and have to explain to everybody and anybody about the coke and your ugly ass for the rest of my miserable life." He held up an imaginary pistol. "Where you want it anyway"? They laughed hard.

Murphy declared, "I guess we'll just have to win then." He rared back and kicked the post as hard as he could. He cracked the wood and hurt his foot, but the adrenalin made him feel better.

A power company van went down the alley. They waited for it to pass like they were being watched. Stone shook his head. "You really did it now. What are we gonna do with her? Are you done with her? Who's gonna snatch the damn coke if she doesn't"?

"I don't know. Let's just bust in there and take the shit out ourselves."

Stone thought fast. "The last time I talked to her, well, she couldn't tell me where it is. She doesn't know for sure where it is. That's what I think. She told me it's somewhere in the building. That's all she knows so far."

Murphy looked up and waited for a screaming airliner to pass on a low approach to Midway Airport. "You mean she hasn't even seen it yet"?

"He already told her it's in the damn bar. All she's gotta do... She's gonna get him to show it to her, and then just put a gun on him and take it. That's all."

"And what if he don't show it to her"?

Stone laughed. "He showed it to the teacher."

Murphy saw another angle. "How do you know that"?

"She told me he did. Artie showed it to the professor. The teacher knows where it is man. If he'd show the teacher, if she asked him to, he'd show her. She's jacking his brains out for Christ's sake."

"She WAS jacking his brains out... Until I had to... Shit! We can't trust her anymore. If we let her go now, and the filthy bitch goes right to the cops. I know she would man. Son of a bitch"!

Murphy spit into the yard. “Maybe she knows where it is already. We could beat it out of her, you know, and then get rid of her.”

“Hell no. We ain't gonna kill her. We can hold her until we go.”

“We've got nothing to lose damn it. I say we smoke her AND the teacher, and be done with it.”

What you mean we, thought Stone. Not me. I don't have any blood on my hands. He thought fast, trying to divert Murphy. “Look. There's a barn out back of the rifle range. Nobody goes there. We can keep all of them out there until we go. Carla, the teacher, and his friend too.”

Murphy anticipated the satisfaction of revenge. “So Artie showed it to the teacher huh. That's it! I'll make HIM tell us where it is. The piss bag broke my arm, and I couldn't even report it. I couldn't do shit, until now. ” He laughed hard.

“I don't know man. We can't just pick him up. He's got a federal guard on him.”

“Shit that's right.” Murphy thought hard. “Use your juice. What can you do”?

“Nobody's got that kind of juice. Tell you what. Let me find out who's watching him, and we'll go from there. Meanwhile, we have to get her out to the range and hide her before she does anything else. She can make a lot of noise from here.”

“I guess you're right.” Murphy thought about how he got caught up in such a rotten situation and how each of his bad choices seemed deceptively logical at the time. He looked across the alley where the weeds were over six feet high and imagined how easy it would be to just crawl in there and hide like a kid playing fort in the summer time. There was no place to hide and no going back. “Oh my God,” he cried. “This is just getting more complicated all the time. It's like quicksand”!

Stone tried to keep him calm. “Take a pill. The trial will be over soon anyway. The big day approaches. My guy tells me it's wrapping up right now. The same day the defense goes in there for their final argument, wrap up thing... We'll tip off the Chico's

lawyer, and he'll drop the bomb about the switch. That's our signal to take the coke and go. The judge will HAVE to let Rodriguez walk, and we'll be waiting for the guy with his coke. He's gonna be one grateful millionaire.”

“That's the good news. But somebody has to stay with crazy momma in there the whole time UNTIL then. How we gonna do that”?

Stone didn't trust anybody but himself. “I don't know. I suppose I could take some vacation time. I could swing it with my boss, so you get the stakeout all to yourself. They don't need two people out there. Ain't nothing gonna happen anyway. I don't see any problem with you watching it solo.”

“You might as well burn your vacation days, huh.” They laughed. “They ain't gonna pay you for them, and you won't need them where we're going. Use 'em or lose 'em.”

“I can think of a lot better places to spend a perfectly good vacation day than in a barn with a hooker tied to a chair.” They laughed. “But we gotta move her farther away from here.”

“You gotta help me,” said Murphy. “She's crazy. I can't control her and drive at the same time. I'd need a muzzle and a straight jacket or some shit.”

Only because you're an idiot, he thought. “Give me a break,” laughed Stone. “I can handle her.”

“I'm telling you man. Don't turn your back on her out there alone. She'd do anything to get free. And partner, whatever she says, don't forget man, you're not irresistible. Don't be dipping your wick.”

“You gotta be kidding. Listen, I don't know why we can't just put her up somewhere out of town in a motel.”

“Because I don't want her within a mile of other people or a phone. You gotta watch her all the time.”

Stone thought about *Psycho*. “There's gotta be a nice motel off a side road somewhere with little cabins or something. We could rent the whole thing, you know, no other guests.”

“And cut the phone line? No. That won't work. What about the guy at the front desk?”

“We could tell him that were gonna run some johns through there and to stay away, you know, give him a few bucks. That ought to do it.” Carla started screaming again and they smiled at each other. “You know what. If we make her comfortable and give her a little party out in the woods, she'll be less likely to pull any shit, and be more likely to tell us where the coke is too. Catch more flies with honey.”

Murphy beat his fist into his open hand. “I've got a party for her alright. She'll tell us what we need to know. She'll tell us all right. If I have to peel the skin off her... She'll tell us.”

Stone thought about killing Murphy when it was over. “Are we gonna take her with us when we look for a place to keep her?”

“No no. We only need a few hours to find a place. She'll be OK for that long. I'll leave her cuffed and turn the stereo up real loud. Let her scream if she wants to.” He laughed. “If she don't like the plan I'll put it on some lame ass CD that she hates and set it to repeat. She ain't going anywhere for two hours.”

Stone looked skeptical. “You better be right.” He didn't like Murphy's plan. If they let her smoke she could set a fire, but if they took her lighter she'd be pissed enough to do something really crazy. Only Murphy could piss her off enough to set fire to the same bed that she was cuffed to, he thought.

## Chapter 17

Murphy wanted to drive, so he took a pain pill for his throbbing arm and jumped on the expressway. He navigated the main roads for an hour before taking a random exit and running the big cruiser down a series of two lane highways up around the Wisconsin state line. He enjoyed looking for the perfect spot to entertain a hostage. The GPS in the car helped them find some old roads that were left for dead when the interstate went in. These were former main highways with deserted motels catering to fishermen or the occasional truck driver who was both lost and tired. Stone wanted one with at least some degree of comfort, and Murphy wanted to be close to food and booze.

Stone kept insisting, “No dumpy shit. Find a clean one. I’m the one staying out here, and I ain’t sleeping with fleas.”

“That ain’t as important as being close to food, being able to get stuff without attracting attention. The more times we have to go out, for whatever, the more chances she has to make a move.”

Stone scanned the billboards. “I think I can control her.” He shook his head and picked up a messy sandwich.

Murphy saw a sign for Wisconsin cheese. “Man, I think we need to pick up the bartender and his friend too. As soon as we get a chance, we should pick ‘em all up. Take ‘em all off the table until it’s over.”

“Three against one huh? I gotta watch the whole bunch. What if they rush me?” He took a bite out of his sloppy wet Italian beef

sandwich and it fell apart. "I shouldn't have dipped it," he laughed.

They got stuck behind an old Chevy Impala that was pulling a boat. They couldn't pass because of the blind spots, and that held them to a slow crawl. Murphy joked, "We could put them all in separate rooms. You know, keep them apart."

"Be harder to watch them that way."

Murphy strained his neck to see around the boat. "Come on Homer! I'm gonna pass this turkey if I have to... Well, how long before the trial ends anyway? Did they say?"

Stone wiped his cheek with a napkin. "Could be a week or two is what I hear now. The prosecution's been done for weeks I guess. The defense just needs to wrap up, oh, summation or something. I hear it don't look too good for Rodriquez without the switch thing though. He's gotta be itching to drop the chain of custody card on the Judge. He really needs an ace in the hole, and he has no idea that the evidence cops set it up that way. He's getting killed in the media. The paper's already got him tried and fried."

Murphy laughed. "So we just gotta get crazy momma to tell us where it is, and right now. That's all there is to it." He waved at the boat.

"The sooner the better man."

The Chevy strained to make it up a steep hill. Murphy tried to pass but pulled right back in. "What if Artie moves the shit?"

"Why would he do that? Watch it man! You're too close."

Murphy backed off and gave the boat some room. "Maybe he'll get suspicious when she don't come around for a few days."

"God, I hope not." He threw a pickle out of the widow and licked his fingers one by one.

"Look at that," said Murphy. He pointed to a sign for a motel and bait shop that looked like its last paint job was done in the Roosevelt administration. *Indian Cove Motel* had vacancies and a price of \$28.00 a night. Murphy turned right and followed the

blacktop west just like the sign said.

Stone protested, “It didn't say TV. There's no fucking TV. Come on man. Don't just go to the first dump we see. I gotta stay there.”

“Shit partner... You can bring your OWN TV. I'll get you a portable satellite dish if you want. We can afford it.” He laughed.

Murphy saw the motel sign. They turned in to a four cabin paradise next to a heavy equipment junkyard. It was overgrown with weeds and didn't look like it would be very busy in any season. Stone watched Murphy park the cruiser a short distance from the office and tried to think of a better reason to look for different hideout. They got out and walked across the dusty lot. It was empty except for a late model Jeep a red ATV with four flat tires. The man behind the counter looked like he needed a drink and reminded Stone of Foster Brooks, the stand-up comedian who played the boozier. The walls were covered with snap shots of people holding up fish. It was a motel, a bait shop, and a boat rental. Huge metal bait tanks hummed and bubbled with aerators to keep the minnows alive.

The counter man apologized for refusing Murphy's handshake, turned down the radio and showed them his dirty hands. “Sorry I can't shake your hand mister. Been mixing up the recipe. Catfish can't resist it. It stinks though. People come from all around to get it. He held up a wide mouth mason jar full of brown dough. They caught the Wisconsin record flat-head on it about two years back, out on the Rock River.”

Murphy could smell the rancid cheese bait from where he stood. “It stinks bad enough to smell it underwater all right.”

The old man spoke a little too loud like he was hearing impaired. “Tried using rubber gloves for a while but I think the smell of the gloves got into the bait. Fish can sense it's not natural. Didn't seem to work the same.” He sniffed the jar. “There's pig blood in there. Pig blood works the best.” He laughed. “You guys need a room? You can have your pick. It's off season now. Weekends, we still get some action, local kids, but

not during the week. Bass are kinda slow right now. Try pitching a jig and a pig. It's supposed to be top water time, but they're catching three pounders on black jigs with a natural pork trailer."

Murphy smiled and asked, "How many rooms you got?" This is perfect, he thought.

"Got four. Three for rent, and I stay in one of them. You ain't dressed for fishing. You folks having a party"?

"Yeah sort of. We need them all for about two weeks."

"Hot damn. All three cabins, two weeks, sure. I'll give you a weekly rate too. Sometimes we get big parties from the base. You guys don't look like sailors though. Two weeks huh"?

Murphy made eye contact. "You know... We ARE sort of having a party, but that kinda depends on you. Depends on how much you care about what's going on at the party."

"You ain't meth cookers are you? That's the one thing we don't need."

"We're not meth cookers. We've got some girls. They're pros and they need a quiet place to entertain their guests. You know."

He laughed and wiped his greasy hands on a rag. "Is that all? We used to have a couple a girls here. Never had no problem with 'em. One of 'em weren't too bad lookin' either. No big deal. I might need a little tip for the sheriff though. That OK with you"?

Murphy pulled out some cash. "No problem man." He peeled a couple of hundred dollar bills off a money clip and held them out, but the man just motioned for Murphy to put them on the counter.

He held up his sticky hands. "It'll take me a good hour with the Lava soap to get the stink off." He laughed. "The keys are on the beds. You checking in now"?

Stone said, "We'll come back with the girls later tonight. We won't bother you at all."

"Yeah sure. OK. Glad to have you. Just ring the bell if you need anything. If I'm out on the lake then just write me a note."

Murphy laughed. "OK... And thanks man."

They walked out of the office and looked at the cabin next to

the car. Stone opened the screen door and stepped in. It was basically a bedroom with an adjoining bath. He could see a big sag in the bed and knew it would be uncomfortable without even sitting on it. Murphy laughed at the rusty bathroom fixtures. The shower consisted of a moldy plastic curtain hanging from a pipe above the tub and a hand held shower head. The glass block windows over the toilet were cracked. There was an old TV on a press wood desk in the main room. Stone pointed at the rabbit ears with aluminum foil extensions and said, "No cable."

Murphy laughed. "What no mini bar? Where's the mint? Call room service."

"Very funny. What am I supposed to watch, infomercials?"

"I told you, they have these little portable satellite dishes. My uncle has one. He takes it camping. It has its own stand. I'll put it outside and run a line in. You can watch pay per view screw movies if you want to. That's what he does."

"That old TV won't take it."

"Then we'll bring our own. No big deal. Don't you ever go without TV?"

"No. Why should I?" He drew a finger across the dust on the end table.

"It's all commercials now. Maybe the other cabins are better anyway."

"I doubt it man. This ain't Vegas. People staying here are either fishing or asleep, or both." He laughed.

Murphy inspected the tiny green refrigerator. "I hope they don't keep the stink bait in here." He opened it and found it empty and warm. "It isn't even plugged in."

Stone laughed. "Who needs a fridge when you've got a fifty gallon plastic cooler anyway?"

"No way dude. That's the live well." They laughed.

Stone got homesick for his man cave with a wet bar and a real beer tap. "I don't know if I can do this for two weeks man." He looked down at the cigarette burns on the filthy old carpet.

Murphy tapped him on the shoulder. “Think about the money boss.”

He smiled wide. “I KNOW that's right. Let's get it on. We'll do it here, but let's get moving. Our lady guest is probably getting restless about now.”

“She's fine. She can pull the bedpost close enough to the pot to piss. I put four sets of cuffs together. She's got her pot, a bottle of red wine, and HBO.”

Stone got worried again. She had her lighter, and he could easily imagine her setting a fire. “Four sets a cuffs huh. Hope she can't reach the damn phone.”

Murphy waved him off. “I took it out and put it away. Come on boss. Let's go get your new room mate.”

“Are you sure, you know, that we can hold her here, quiet?”

Murphy went for the door. “If she screams shoot her. When we get the bartender we won't need her anyway.” He smiled. “Let's go. The quicker I get her secured the quicker I can pick up the other two.”

Stone got in the car, pulled his seat-belt across his lap and admired the fall colors. The wind was unpredictable but clean and fresh. He loved Wisconsin, and the faint smell of fertilizer reminded him that he was leaving the area forever. They took off for Chicago and almost immediately passed a road house with a portable marquee on a pull behind trailer that spelled out the name of the band. *Ollie's Polka Express. Saturday. No Cover.* Murphy pointed at a spray can painted, green camouflage pickup with a bumper sticker that said *I love animals. They're delicious.* They laughed and Stone yelled, “Get 'r done!”

The back road traffic consisted of a church bus, the occasional combine, and a few empty grain trucks. Murphy gunned the big ford and headed back to Chicago as fast as he could go in between the slow pokes. The cruiser roared like a tricked out stock car sucking air and gulping fuel. They made good time getting out of the woods. They were approaching the interstate

and were heading for an on ramp when a deer froze in the middle of the right lane. Murphy swerved around it without even touching the brake but that caused him to mount the ramp way too fast. The force of the turn pulled them hard to the driver's side and made Murphy bump his bad arm on the door. "Ah!" he screamed. "Crazy deer"!

Stone laughed. "You want me to drive now Mario"?

"Hell no."

"You didn't tell me it was a hunting trip. Next time we use a gun." They laughed. "Stock car deer hunting with Mario what's his name."

"I think Mario drove formula one. Anyway, can you imagine the paperwork if I hit that thing. We ain't even supposed to be up here. We should have taken YOUR car." He laughed.

"Yeah, that's right. But you drive like shit." Stone checked the time on the dashboard. "Let's just get on it. She's probably set fire to your dump by now."

Murphy laughed because he hadn't thought of that. "You want speed. Hang on dip stick." Murphy kicked it way past ninety miles an hour and locked in the cruise control.

The drive back took longer than expected. They made a quick stop for gas, but the lone cashier was all tied up with a long line of people buying lottery tickets. Murphy had to grab a sandwich so they didn't pay at the pump. Stone watched the news on a silent TV while an old woman dropped sixty dollars on the big Lotto. Oil was over ninety three dollars a barrel and climbing fast. Men in torn flannel shirts bought smokes at the counter for over four dollars a pack. Stone was sure that three dollar gas would soon be back to stay.

They paid seventy five dollars to top off the cruiser and got back out on the interstate. Stone worried about Carla most of the way, and Murphy sensed it. Traffic slowed them down until just after dark when the Sears Tower came into view. The urban streets were a little deserted. They made it back to the

neighborhood without catching a single red light and pulled up to Murphy's place.

The stereo was a lot louder than he remembered setting it, but he knew that no one could hear her if she screamed. They hurried up the stairs. Murphy's chest thumped a little when he looked through the bedroom door and didn't see her on the bed. He ran right in and *Whack!* He instantly saw stars. Something blunt and heavy hit him square in the face. She had been hiding behind the door and still cuffed to the bed when she clocked him half senseless with a hardwood plank from his top dresser drawer. He grabbed a fistful of hair and swung her over to the bed, but not before she drew blood with her nails. Murphy climbed on top and started rabbit punching her hard and fast.

Stone ran in, turned the music down and screamed, "Stop it! Stop it now man! Let her go damn it"! He ordered Murphy out of the room, and he complied with what was left of his former boss's authority.

Murphy wiped his neck and looked at the blood on his fingers. "Bitch! She cut me man"!

"What did you expect her to do, make us dinner"?

"Shit it hurts." He felt the pistol tucked in his belt behind his back.

Stone got frustrated. "Maybe we should, like reconsider, and pick a more remote location."

Murphy listened by the door, but Carla wasn't making a sound. "I don't know. Maybe. I didn't expect her to try anything. We weren't gone that long."

Stone looked at Murphy's bloody neck. "I take it you didn't cuff both hands."

"How was she supposed to go to the can without a free hand? Bitch. I should have let her piss on herself. From now on we cuff both hands."

"What am I supposed to do at the motel when she has to go? Do I need a matron"?

“Leave the door open. What else can we do”?

Stone looked angry enough to quit. He turned away and took a deep breath. “I can't believe this crap is happening to me. The sooner it's over the better. We might as well wait until it's real late to put her in the car.”

Murphy thought about plan B and asked, “You know what. What do we know so far about the guy watching the teacher in the hospital”?

Carla started sobbing in the bedroom. Stone vowed to shake off Murphy forever after he got paid. “The fed? I need to check in on that. They might have something for me by now. I gotta check in.”

“Yeah but use the radio. No phone trace.”

“OK, sure. I'll be in the car.”

Murphy heard Carla crying face down on the bed and stretched out on the couch to guard the door.

## Chapter 18

Chief Hearn got mildly annoyed by a tap tap on his door at Oak Park Police Headquarters. “Come.” He didn't look up and kept shuffling papers and coffee cups on his massive desk.

The intruder was a desk officer. “Chief, you got a minute”? He was jumping the chain of command.

“Make it quick.” He looked up and smiled at the nervous officer.

“Chief, I'm sorry. We got a call you should know about. I mean right away sir. A Chicago cop, Officer Ryder, he called and said he remembered Lefty calling down there at CPD the same day he was killed. It might be nothing, but...”

“It's OK son. You did good. Go ahead.” He perked up.

“He said Lefty asked for an Officer Stone.”

“OK.” He stood up tall. “What was he calling about”?

“Ryder said he was looking to get rid of some Cub tickets. We're checking it out right now. Thought you'd want to know sir.”

“Shit yes. Check the phone records. Check anything you can think of.”

The officer felt a little embarrassed. “Way ahead of you Chief.”

“Don't hold on to it. Bring it right in to me, even if it's nothing. You never know until you look.”

“Right Chief.” The young man leaped into the din of the noisy office and forgot to close the door.

Stone stayed outside on the porch while Murphy was having it out with Carla. He had to turn the stereo up until the speakers distorted just to cover the noise. She was cuffed to the bedpost by both hands now. He stood over her shaking the board that hit him and threatened to return the favor. *Whack!* He slapped it hard on the bed and made her scream. “Bitch! I ought to put you out right here and now.” He threw it on the floor and reached for his pistol.

“Go ahead and shoot me! Quit fucking around! You're gonna shoot me anyway. You're a God damned cop killer. You're as good as dead anyway. I ain't afraid to die.” She looked down in disgust. “At least I never killed anybody. You're a dead man.”

“Shut up”!

“Fuck you Murphy! What have I got to lose now? You make me laugh.” She spit at his face.

Murphy put his hands around her throat and started to squeeze. He started light and gradually increased the pressure. She bucked and kicked her legs, but he got on top of her and started smacking her across the face left and right with both hands. Stone broke in and tried to pull Murphy off by his hair. “Stop you idiot! Stop it now! Stop it”! His adrenalin helped him pull his out of control partner free and onto the floor.

Murphy screamed, “I'm gonna kill the bitch before she makes any more noise”! He reached for his gun again.

Carla begged, “Stop! I'll be quiet you SON of a bitch. Leave me alone. Just leave me alone.” She started crying like a child. Murphy and Stone started to leave the room but Murphy suddenly spun around and *Thud*, punched her square in the mouth and kicked the door shut as hard as he could. *Ahhhhh!* She screamed behind the door.

Stone just sat down on the couch and seemed to give up. “God damn it. Are you through now Rambo”?

Murphy rubbed his knuckles. “I'm good. What did you find

out? Who's the guy watching the bartender”?

“Feds alright, big feds.” Stone looked worried.

“We knew that already. What feds”?

“Nobody knows. Very secret. I don't like it at all.” He wiped his shoes with a paper towel and picked something muddy off the left one.

Murphy got impatient. “CIA, FBI, what fed”? He threw up his hands in frustration.

“Nobody knows for sure. The guy says... HE says he's from the Pentagon.”

“Pentagon! What the... No way man. I don't believe it. What's the Pentagon want with the teacher. They wouldn't protect his ass. He's some kind of commie fagot for Christ's sake.”

“I don't know. Pentagon, that's what he says. It's classified way up over my pay grade man. I didn't even feel comfortable asking around about it. I'm telling you man, we're not gonna get to the teacher.” He lowered his voice and pointed to the bedroom. “She's all we got. We better be nice to her man, or we ain't gonna find out where the shit is.”

Murphy nodded at the back door like he wanted more privacy. They got up and made a quick check on Carla. She was still sobbing, had a bloody nose, and turned away when they backed out. Nobody spoke on the way to the porch. Stone closed the solid back door behind him, looked at Murphy and begged, “We need her man. I'm telling you, she's all we got. The teacher's not an option, and you ain't gonna get a word out of her by force.”

“Oh bull shit. She's human. Give me an hour alone with her where nobody can hear us, and I'll make her tell us where it is.” He smacked his fist into his hand. “She'll break.”

“What are you gonna do now slick, water-board her”?

“I didn't think of that.” They laughed. “But she's not running this God damned job. I am. She'll do what ever I tell her to do.”

Stone tried to finesse his way around Murphy's ego. “If you're the boss see... Well then you have the responsibility not let the

little head do the talking for the big head. She knows you're in control. It's YOU that don't believe it. Money talks. Just offer her more money. How much were you gonna give her to swipe the coke anyway”?

“A hundred grand. Why”?

Stone slapped himself on the forehead. “You cheap, dumb ass punk. She KNOWS how much the coke is worth man. She ain't gonna keep quiet over a dead cop for that kind of scratch. Man that's chicken change.”

They got quiet while some young kids on BMX bikes rolled down the alley in front of them. Murphy asked, “So what you think, say, double it”?

Stone made eye contact. “Full share.”

“Ouch! There goes a big chunk of my portfolio.” He knew Stone was right and joked, “With that color of money she could set up a pretty classy stable in the Caribbean huh. But that ought to be enough juice to get her on board for sure.”

“It might have been cheaper if you hadn't screwed up! It aught to come out of your share. You threw a cop off a roof, and then you beat the shit out of our inside girl! If you...”

*Thunk.* They both flinched when somebody slammed a car door close by. Murphy lowered his voice. “Lefty was dead on to us. He had us made at the shooting. Then Carla, she just came right out and told me she quit because I killed Lefty. The bitch figured it out. What was I supposed to do man, let her go to the cops”?

Stone looked away. “How do you know she would have gone to the cops”?

Murphy tried to remember. “It was like... Like I couldn't risk it. I had to think fast.”

“Thinking fast is not exactly your strong point. I'm going in.” He reached for the door. “Let me try.” He went back in alone and stepped softly to the bedroom. Carla wasn't crying. She looked angry but composed. He closed the door and sat on the bed.

Carla held the bloody sheet on her nose and begged, “What do

you want now”?

“I just want to talk to you. I'm sorry about Murphy. He's an idiot.”

“Save the good cop bad cop shit for somebody that ain't been around as long as I have.” She shook her head and felt insulted. “You just wanna know where the coke is? Well, I ain't gonna tell you. He's not gonna let me go in there after it now anyway. He's afraid I'd run. He's gotta go in there himself but there ain't no way.” She laughed. “Even if he knew where it was, shit man. Artie's gonna blow his fucking brains out as soon as he knows he's a dirty cop. He can too. He's backed up by the downtown machine. Murphy's the one on the wrong side. The good guys asked Artie to do this. He can shoot Murphy and ain't nobody gonna care.”

Stone thought hard. “Well Artie, see, it's not his coke. Lead starts flying, he won't risk his life for it. He won't fight.”

“Yes he will,” she laughed. “You don't know Artie.” What am I doing, she thought. Let Murphy go in there and find out for himself. Let him get shot. “No, you're probably right. He won't fight. Why should he risk his life. Murphy could probably just walk in and take the shit.” She couldn't help smiling.

Stone saw through it. “Nice try. You're gonna get it for us, and you're gonna get rich. Don't you want the money anymore”?

“Hell no. I don't anymore. I didn't sign on for no dead cop. There's nowhere to hide from that. They're gonna follow you until they get you man, but not me. I don't have shit to do with no dead cop.”

The wheels were really turning for Stone now. “What if the cops, what if they THINK you did”? He smiled big.

“Bull shit. That ain't gonna work on me. You'd do better with a rubber hose.” She was bluffing and hurting bad. Her resistance was gone. One more punch and she'd have to give it up.

Stone stayed after her but in a compassionate way. “You're in this just like we are, all the way in. You might as well get paid.

You can't turn back now.”

Stay cool and work it, she thought. Play a new angle. My best shot is to try and regain their confidence. They were afraid to let me go in there by myself after Murphy knocked me around. If I tell them where the coke is they could just take the information and kill me. She upped the stakes. “I ought to just take my medicine and quit right here. Besides that, he's only giving me a hundred grand. That shit's worth a fortune.”

She's gonna do it, he thought. “You're right. I told him it wasn't enough. Look, the way I see it, you might as well go all the way. What if we give you a full share”?

“I'm listening.” She could sense an opening, and tried to mask her approval by thinking about the beating.

Stone smiled. “More money than you ever dreamed of. You could set up a real nice business on the beach with that. You could get the best girls.”

She got ruffled again. “Do you actually think, with all that money, that I'd still be turning tricks? I'm a writer you know. I could live like Hemingway and still have enough money to set all my people free from one hell of a hard racket. I'd set them ALL up first. Set for life.” She blew her nose in the bloody sheet.

“Well sure. That's a lot of money.”

She fought the temptation to anticipate the money, thinking that Murphy would never let her see it. She was just going along for a chance to escape. “OK then. I'll do it for a share, but he'll never go for it.” She shook her head. “Can't you let one of my arms free so I can light a joint”?

Stone yelled for Murphy. “Hey! Come in here man”!

Murphy waited a few seconds like he wasn't listening behind the door before he came in. “What”?

“Cut her loose.” Stone winked at his partner.

“The hell you say.” He tried to act surprised.

“Cut her loose man. She ain't gonna run. She's going in by herself. We're giving her a full share.”

“No you don't. Bull shit. No fucking way. I'm not letting her go in there alone after all this shit.”

Carla begged, “I just wanna smoke a joint. Can I please just smoke a joint while you guys work it out?”

Murphy insisted, “She ain't leaving our sight, and I ain't giving her a God damned full share for just fucking telling us where it is.”

Carla begged, “I'll go in and get it if you want. It's up to you. I can be in and out of there in a half hour. If you do it, go in there yourself with a gun out, there's gonna be a big ass fire. He's old but he's a bad dude. And he loves his Thompson.” She smiled.

Stone asked, “Semi-auto right?”

Carla laughed. “Full-auto. It's old. Been in his family a long time.”

“Bull shit,” said Murphy. “That's not legal. It's a federal offense.”

Carla laughed. “He sleeps next to the God damned thing. Calls it his Chicago typewriter like it's a gangster movie. Can I please smoke now?”

Murphy got her purse and dropped it next to the bed. Stone got Murphy's handcuff key and unlocked her wrists one at a time. Murphy kept one hand out of sight and on his gun. He wanted her to run. She shook out her arms, sat on the edge of the bed and grabbed the main stash from her purse. Crushing the pot between her fingers and picking out the seeds took longer than she wanted, and it made her question the quality of the smoke. “At least the price was right,” she joked.

She tried not to look at the cell phone sticking out of her purse, but Stone saw it too and slipped it in his pocket. He apologized. “Look, we don't have to figure all this out right now. We're all gonna be partners, but let's just take it slow and go one step at a time OK?”

Carla smiled but Murphy stormed out mumbling, “I think I'm gonna be sick.” She's gonna run, he thought, and I'll have to kill

her. The best strategy is to lock her down and grab the teacher. Murphy didn't care who was watching David, and he didn't like being second guessed. I'm the one who thought up the operation in the first place, he thought. It took guts, and that's what we need right now. The guy has got to come out of that hospital soon, and when he does, we should just grab him. It might be as simple as hanging back in the lobby and looking for an opening.

Murphy washed his hands in the sink and thought about how easy it was to scare David on the computer. He could get to him anytime without giving his identity away. The sense of anonymity gave him a rush. He pulled a phone from his jacket and decided to do it again just for fun. It took a few minutes, but he punched in a short message.

*David, this is a friend. Hope you see this before he does. The Pentagon man is not from the Pentagon. He's not from the government. He's there to kill you. This is the only message I can send. Delete it quick and run when you can. Don't use the airports. Drive out of state. If a cop tries to stop you, don't stop. Don't use a credit card. Don't use the phone. Just run. Watch the news. Come out when they catch the assassin. It won't be long. My conscience is clear now. Good luck. Delete this right now. They will see this before long. Get away as soon as you can.*

David almost deleted the message before reading it. He didn't recognize the sender and didn't know what to think. It might be a prank, but how did the sender know that Benton was supposed to be from the Pentagon. Running was an option. He already had an escape plan ready just in case he wanted to make a mad dash. With nothing else to do, there was plenty of time to perfect it. Why not just run and see what happens, he thought. He wasn't under arrest. Benton surely wouldn't shoot him. If he really was an impostor then running away was an excellent idea. He had nothing to lose, and he wanted to get away from the spotlight

anyway. Benton looked at him curiously, and David quickly put the phone away. "My lady misses me," he joked.

"That's nice. Wait until you get married. Everything changes." He laughed like he should know.

"That's what they tell me man." He mentally reviewed his escape plan.

Benton made a note on his pad to have Langley see who David's last call was from. "Marriage, it's easier to find a woman that doesn't like you, you know, and just buy her a house." They laughed.

David shook his head. "What do they say. Let me think... Oh yeah. They say that when she walks in the bathroom while you're taking a crap, the honeymoon's over."

"That happened yet"? He smiled.

"Not yet."

"It will. After you're married. And oh man, forget about sex."

"I've heard that one too." He listened to himself talk, thinking about how he could distract Benton long enough to make a run for the stairs. It seemed almost too easy, so he went for it. He grabbed his wound and screamed, "Ahhh!"

"Hey, you OK"?

"Yeah it's nothing. Ah! Oh shit. I'm sorry. It really hurts. It's like somebody keeps stabbing me or something." He tried to look like he was struggling to cover up the pain.

"I'll get the doc." Benton leaned out the door and waved at the nurses station. The surgeon's wife was only a few steps away and came right in. "What is it"?

David pointed to his shoulder. "It feels like... Stabbing pain. It comes and goes."

"Anywhere else"? She pulled out a cell phone and popped it open.

"No no, I'm fine." He tried not to look at Benton.

She spoke softly on the phone. "Doctor your gunshot wound has a lot of pain." She paused. "Yes. Right away." She put the

phone away and said, "He'll meet us in x-ray."

David begged the nurse. "Does this mean I can't go home yet"?

"Not until we find out what's going on. It could be an infection. If it is... Well then going home is the least of your worries." David admired her sharp eyes as she shifted into command mode and half shouted an order through the open door. "Take him to x-ray right now." She lowered the bed and asked, "Are you OK in a wheel chair?"

"I'm good," he said, sliding his legs over the bed and onto the floor. He watched Benton from the side, but told himself over and over to wait for an opening and not to run until the time was right. The chair arrived, and the nurse helped him into it while Benton whispered to his people on the wire. She wheeled him out and straight down the empty hall, right past the nurse's station and a food cart that smelled like macaroni and cheese. A man with a box full of long florescent light bulbs held the elevator. Once inside and behind the closed door, no one knew what to say. The car stopped on a floor that looked just like the last one. A woman in a lead apron held the door to x-ray and waved them inside.

The nurse put Benton in a hall chair. "You'll have to wait here sir. Radiation." He got back up, went in anyway, checked out the room and left. David sensed an opening and his heart sped up. He scanned the room meticulously in a way that was obviously indifferent to what the others thought. He fixated on the only other door in the room, but it wasn't being used. The room was crowded, and the door to the hall was blocked by a huge metal cabinet placed right in front of it. He could pull the steel monster out of the way, but he'd look pretty silly if the door behind it turned out to be locked. There's got to be another way, he thought.

The technician woman pulled David's gown away from his upper body and positioned him for the x-ray. She took the picture from behind a lead wall and went in the back room to develop the film. David moved to the seat next to the cabinet and pushed on it to see how heavy it was. It felt like a refrigerator, but he thought

he could move it if he had to. He leaned on the corner slow and hard, but it didn't budge. He tried again, a lot harder. It made an awful metallic scraping sound on the stone hard floor but gained about an inch of clearance, more than enough to get a good grip for the next try. The technician suddenly returned, and David felt the sinking sensation of raw panic.

She wasn't concerned and didn't seem to notice. "It'll be about fifteen minutes. You want a magazine"?

"No... No thanks," he said, amazed that she didn't say anything about the noise. He watched her go back to the film and tried to move the thing again. It moved over a foot, and well past the point of no return because it dug a big chunk out of the floor. David slid behind the cabinet with his bare butt pressed against the window glass. He thought about how it must look from the hall, like some kid mooning a copy machine. He braced against the door and gave the cold steel monster a big push. *Brang!* Everything inside it spilled out at the same time and crashed to the bottom. It sounded like hundreds of surgical instruments falling on broken glass. He panicked and twisted the door knob as hard as he could with both hands. It was locked.

David heard somebody shouting orders and lots of quick slapping footsteps in the hall. Everything went into slow motion like a dream where your feet don't work and you can't run away. *Crash!* He grabbed a big stainless steel tray and smashed it through the window just above the door knob. The glass cracked, but the metal safety mesh kept it from shattering. He jabbed the tray through the chunks and cleared out a small space. Barefoot, half naked, and in pain, he carefully reached through the jagged hole, unlocked the door and ran for the back stairs. He pulled the stairway door open and instantly sensed that he would be outside before anybody could catch him.

The good professor did the stairs two at a time. He broke out a side door and covered about six city blocks before he even dared to look back. No one followed, but he felt vulnerable running

down the street in a hospital gown. His lungs started to hurt. He slowed down to a walk, tasted fear and started running again. He considered looking for a cop but didn't dare try because of the warning in the note. He ran for another few minutes and pulled up completely exhausted. His wound throbbed in waves of stinging, hot pain. He braced his hands on his knees, panted convulsively to glean some oxygen from the stale city air and thought about how ridiculous he looked.

The embarrassing spectacle reminded him of a news story about hospitals dumping homeless people back on the street. Some of them were disabled and still in a hospital gown with no place to go. The street shelters that take care of them sued the hospitals to make them stop. It gave him an idea. He knew that a shelter would give him some clean clothes if he could find one. He could lose the gown and be less visible. Going straight home would be dangerous. They might be watching the place and maybe Nick's too. He decided to find some clothes first. He would approach the house at night, and then just hang back and watch from a distance.

A cab stopped a few blocks down, so David took a chance. He clutched his skimpy cover and slowly approached the dirty yellow van. He was astonished when the driver didn't pull away. "I need a little help," he begged.

"I can see that," he said, and waved him in.

"They dumped me out of the hospital like this. I don't have any money. Is there a shelter close by"?

"Just off Western Avenue. I'll run you over."

"I don't have any money. I can walk. Where's it at"?

The cabbie waved at the back seat. "It's OK man. It's not that far. It happens all the time."

David got in and covered himself. "I really appreciate this man. They didn't even give me my clothes."

The driver pulled away and shook his head in disgust. "Seen it before. I just don't know how some people can live with

themselves. You OK? What were you in there for anyway”?

“Got shot,” he said proudly.

“Oh man... None of my business.” He smiled.

“It was all just a misunderstanding.” David laughed at himself.

They got stuck behind a line of cars at a red light, and the driver spoke again. “Where do you stay? You on the street”?

“Not exactly. What would you say if I told you I'm being chased by the government”?

“I'd take you to a different hospital.” He smiled.

A guy on a motorcycle jumped the line and zoomed around the cab. David tried to see if it was one of Artie's gang. The driver checked his passenger's face in the mirror. David smiled back and said, “I'm only kidding.”

“Yeah I know. You don't look the type. I get my share of homeless secret agents. I'm a cab driver you know. We've got ESP about stuff like that.”

“I'll bet you do. Where do you take the guys, you know, that ARE hiding from the CIA”?

“If you're a vet, well, the Hines VA hospital is out on Roosevelt Road. The VA psych. If not, you know, the ER at the hospital makes a referral or something. Depends on the season. In the winter everybody wants a nice warm psych bed. There's only so many beds, and the competition gets rough. You gotta be suicidal or a good actor in the winter.”

“Jesus.”

“In the summer it's easy because the hospital needs the head count. Most of the bugs would rather sleep outside in the summer though. Winter comes, the old hawk comes out, they start hearing voices again.”

“Man that sucks. What a system. Welcome to capitalism everybody.”

The driver laughed and stopped at an old storefront. The original bricks were painted over in various shades of red. There was no sign, nothing to identify a shelter. You have to know

where it is if you need to use it, thought David. A friendly young black man with dreadlocks and a clipboard came out to the curb. The driver pointed at David and hailed the shelter man. "This is Mr... I'm sorry. I didn't get his name. This gentleman got dumped out of the hospital and needs some clothes."

The shelter man's face telegraphed what he thought of hospitals that would do that. He smiled at David. "Hi there. My friends call me Turk." He sound's white, thought David. "Come on in and we'll fix you up."

David climbed out and thanked the driver again as he pulled away in search of a paying customer. He followed the man with the crazy hair inside and tried to act normal. "Why they call you Turk? That your real name"?

"Short for Cold Turkey. I kicked heroin a long time ago."

David felt stupid for asking. "Hey... I'm sorry. I didn't know."

He just smiled. "It's OK man. Everybody knows. What happened to you anyway? You don't look like a regular customer. We don't get many sober white guys with sharp hair cuts and expensive dental work."

David looked at the gown. "Looks pretty silly huh"?

He offered David a seat. "Looks like you went in for a vasectomy and changed your mind at the last minute." They laughed and shook hands.

David was tempted to spill it all, detail by detail, just like it happened. It was easy to trust a guy like Turk, but he felt like a guy who just got sent up for a petty crime and had to embellish his story to avoid embarrassment. He wouldn't believe the truth, he thought. I can't tell him that I'm running from the pentagon. He'd think I'm nuts. Better play it smart, get the clothes, and split.

David looked around. The whole vibe of the place changed him. He felt guilty and wondered what would it be like to be really homeless, alone, broke, naked, sick, and addicted. It was terrifying. He decided to tell Turk just enough to get the clothes. "Well see... It's like this. I sort of pissed off the wrong people."

Turk just grinned. "You got no place to go"?

He thought about Dori and said, "I got a place to go. I just need some clothes."

"Got any money"?

"Not exactly. I have a credit card, but I can't use it right now." He thought about his wallet back at the hospital.

Turk led him to a room full of clothes piled in boxes. He turned on the light and said, "Most of this we give out. Stuff gets sold for drugs, but we still do it. I need coats right now. Weather will be bitter soon. This kind of winter kills people man. Serious winter. Wet cold. It's the lake."

David remembered a guy he saw sleeping in the park on a frozen bench. "I never could figure why anybody homeless, who didn't have a job to hold him here, you know, would stay in Chicago in the winter. I mean, if you have family that's one thing, but if you're alone..."

"They can't just leave man." He noticed David's butt hanging out of the slit in the back of his gown and pointed to the back of the room. "We've got everything sorted. The underwear's over there in the blue box. It's new. Take two or three pairs of shorts. The socks are next to them. I'll leave you alone. Go ahead and help yourself. Take your time. Come out to the counter when you're done. I just need to mark the stuff off the inventory."

"Thanks man. Thanks again."

"No problem. Glad we could help." Turk went back out front. David promised himself that he would come back to the shelter after the trouble was over so he could donate some new clothes. The first pair of jeans that he tried on fit perfectly. There were lots of shoes but not too many sneakers. He settled for a pair that were in fair shape but a little too tight. He topped the whole thing off with a blue sweatshirt and felt normal again. The shoes started to stretch out a little. He threw the hospital gown in the trash on the way up to the front.

"That didn't take long," said Turk. You can take more than one

set if you want.”

“Thanks man. This is all I need. I'm just trying to get...” He hesitated, not wanting to say anything that would leave a trail for Benton or anybody else.

“You sure you got enough? Better take a coat. I got a nice one here.” He set a red plaid, fleece lined jacket on the counter.

“I suppose you're right.” David put it on and it felt good. “Thanks again man. It might get cold tonight.”

“You need a place to sleep? You can sleep here. I'm making chili tonight. Best in town. You can ask anybody. Should have a full house for dinner. We've got a massive collection of movies on disc too. Guys bring them in. Just don't ask me where they got 'em.” They laughed.

“Thanks but no thanks. I've got a place to go.”

“Are you hungry”?

“I'm good. I ate at the hospital. I'm going to a friend's place now. I just didn't want to show up naked.” They laughed. “Thanks for fixing me up though.” They shook hands and Turk signed his work with a nonjudgmental smile.

David left and took an indirect route to his father's house. He enjoyed the walk and took his time, using the little side streets that most people would avoid in a car. It took him almost an hour to get to the neighborhood, and getting there made him worry about surveillance. He hid in the back alley and watched the house beside a privacy fence a hundred feet short of his dad's gate. He put his hands in his pockets and found a water bill addressed to the shelter guy. David remembered arriving in the cab. The red plaid coat was the same one that Turk was wearing when he greeted him in front of the shelter. It was the guy's own coat, he thought. What a guy.

He felt guilty like a burglar staking out his own father's home. The sun was going down, and the house was all dark. There were no cars parked out front at all. David got suspicious. He couldn't remember a time when the street was so deserted. His gut told

him to get out of there. Things were getting crazy all over, and whoever was doing it could be watching the house. Somebody turned a kitchen light on a few doors down. He decided to see if the neighbor knew anything. It was straight shot across the yard to her back door, so he moved in that direction.

Murphy and Stone were watching him from the big black Ford. They were hidden behind a garage not two hundred feet away. Murphy stomped on the gas. The cruiser erupted into a tire screaming monster, raising up and spitting gravel in every direction. There was only one way out. David knew they were on a dead end alley, so he ran straight at the car. At the last possible second he jumped aside and slipped right past them. Their prey was gone before Murphy could get the car turned around. David quickly hid himself by squeezing his body under a Lexus about two blocks away. It was leaking oil. He couldn't help but think, "Why is a Lexus leaking oil?" The question was followed by a sobering revelation. The daredevil dive was unnecessary. He didn't have to run directly at the car after all. Only the car was pinned in by the dead end. He could have jumped the fence.

The engine on the Lexus smelled hot, so he stayed clear of the catalytic converter. The Ford ran up and down the street several times before they gave up looking. The street was quiet for a long time before David even dared to peek out. It was almost too silent. The waiting passed very slowly, his neck hurt, and he needed to decide where to go next. He toyed with the idea of going to his office. He knew he could sleep there, but they would almost certainly be watching the college and probably Dori's place too. The feeling of helplessness made him angry.

He listened carefully to the diesel engine of a city bus coming down the street in his direction. He thought it would stop if somebody was standing there waving, so he decided to go for it. He rolled out from under the oily car when the bus was about a block away. The Ford was gone. The bus driver got on the brakes, abruptly stopped the bus in an intersection, and let his desperate

passenger jump on. David felt good just long enough to remember that he didn't have any money. The bus pulled away as he stood there desperate for words. "I don't know how to tell you this." The driver kept his eyes forward. "I don't have my wallet."

"Is that so"? The driver swung the big wheel around a busy corner. A strange hand came from behind David's arm and handed him the two dollar fare. It was attached to a smiling teenage kid with braces and a Sox cap worn backwards. The driver saluted the kid and stopped to let another man off at Dunkin Donuts. David didn't know what to do so he just said, "A Sox fan?" David sat down across the aisle from him.

The kid got right after the Cubs. "You know why Cub fans always think they're in first place"?

David knew the punchline but he bit anyway. "Why"?

"Cause they read the paper upside down." They laughed.

David said, "Thanks for the fare man. I really appreciate it." The kid nodded and turned up his earphones. The glow of the streetlights reminded David of Iowa. His shoulder pain started to come back, but he didn't even have an aspirin, and he suddenly realized that street people don't have easy access to a medicine cabinet full of cheap over the counter drugs. You get a headache, you just suffer.

The bus picked up a woman with two small children. He thought about the black Ford and how it looked like all the other cop Fords he had ever seen. He knew it was a police cruiser, but he still didn't make the connection between the car and Murphy. They all looked the same. He remembered how easy it was to pick out the undercover police cars when he was a kid. They were easy to spot. Everybody had whitewall tires except the undercover cops. They had plain black tires and ran around looking stupid in dark suits like the *Blues Brothers* or the *Dragnet* guys. They had short hair and skinny ties until the *Serpico* movie came out. They changed their look after that, but they kept the big Fords. The cop style changed all over the country, but in Iowa it took another

twenty years to catch up.

David tried to decide where he would spend the night, but it was hard to concentrate. A rather large man a couple of rows back kept ranting to his friend about Bush, the power company, and nine-eleven. Both of them were African American, middle aged men. They were loud, in complete agreement, and not at all concerned about who overheard them. The larger of the two men did most of the talking. He held up the facts one by one, and his assistant nailed them to the wall with a "That's right," or an "I heard that". David tried to block them out, but they got under his skin with their self-assured economic expertise. They didn't know he was an economist, and he wasn't about to tell them. It was the one man's arrogance that grated David. The two men laughed at anything and everything, going back and forth like a preacher and a congregation.

"Jessie told the truth about New York," said the wannabe preacher. They laughed hard.

"I heard that," said the other guy.

"Now just what did he say that wasn't true"?

"Not a thing."

"He could have said ANYTHING else and nobody would have cared, but piss THOSE people off and look out man." They laughed and slapped hands.

"Sweet Jesus. That's right. Nothing ever changes."

Preacher yelled, "Remember the old neighborhood"?

"I do. And I know where you're going now." They laughed.

"Grocery store, cleaners, almost every shop, owned by them. Then once they get rich, it's off to the burbs man."

"I was there too." They laughed. "They like the color of our money alright."

The words ran out of David's mouth before he could muster up enough patience for another attempt at distracting himself. He turned around and fired. "Could you guys please give us a break."

The preacher's buddy apologized. "Sorry man. You don't look

Jewish.” They laughed like they couldn't help it.

“I'm not. But you guys sound like a couple of Neo-Nazis or something.”

The preacher showed the whole bus his forearm and asked, “Do I look like a Nazi?”

David said, “Everything you say, you know, it's the Jew's fault.”

The preacher stepped up to the plate. “OK. What have I said that isn't true?”

David dug in. “That's not the point.”

He looked at his buddy. “Shit. If the shoe fits man.” Even the bus driver laughed.

David played the authority card. “I teach economics. The situation is more complex than that.”

“Economics huh,” laughed the preacher. “I hear we've got a new fed chairman now. Same old shit. A Jew replacing another Jew. They're less than one percent of the population but they run all the money. Nine people on the supreme court, two Jews. What did they bring us? Nukes, invented by a Jew. Chemical weapons, a Jew. The Palestine problem, the whole mess in the the middle east, the war. All the wars have something to do with it. I was in Vietnam. Kissinger ain't no Baptist, and I know a bull shit artist when I see one.” The bus driver laughed. “Who's the war for if it ain't for the Jews and the Saudi royal family. We voted the democrats in to stop the Vietnam war. We got more God damned war than ever. The Iraq war... The Jews WANT the war just like it is, and it ain't gonna stop until they say so. You think Hillary is gonna stop the war? She runs on Jew money from upstate New York man.” The other guy laughed as hard as he could.

David wanted to call him a racist but stopped short. “You sure got a Jew thing.”

“There he goes. Now I'm antisemitic. Hitler was antisemitic too, so I must be a Nazi. Do I look like a Nazi? The Jews can get away with anything, and if you don't like it, shit, you're a Nazi.”

David saw the preacher's mistake. "You generalize to the whole group. Why do you just say Jews, like they're all the same? Why not right wing Jews, Zionist Jews, or whatever. Not all Jews. There's just as many, if not more, left wing Jews. They're the frigging majority in Israel. And don't forget, Jews were at the front of the civil rights movement too."

Preacher smiled. "Oh Lord Lord. Tarzan done swung in on a vine and saved us from that mean old lion AGAIN." The preacher's buddy laughed first. The bus driver just lost it and pulled the big rig over to let an elderly woman off. She shook her head and wondered why she had to pick that particular bus.

David insisted, "It shouldn't be about religion, or race, or sex. It should be about class. A very few HAVES control all the money. They love to get one race after another, black against white, women against men, straight against gay, old against young, whatever. It's the rich against the people man. That's the real problem."

Preacher laughed. "Then why are there so many Jews in bed with the rich? Talk to them first. I've got a list of all the original members of the Bush gang."

David said, "I know, the neoconservatives. Party for a New American Century or some shit."

Preacher set the hook. "Half of them are Jews"!

David got even more defensive. "Most of them are white males too. Does that mean it's a race thing? I've seen that God damned list. It bothers me too. You've got a point, but it's really more complicated than that."

"Then how do you explain it? Shit man. Can you imagine what people would think if half the bankers on Wall Street were black, and the average black man made twice as much money as a white? The Jews get WAY more than their share of the pie."

"I heard that," said the other guy.

David appealed to the historical perspective. "OK, so the Jews are a little paranoid. Maybe paranoid ain't the right word 'cause

when the tiger is really out there it ain't exactly paranoia. Anyway, all through history people are trying to wipe them out. I think that, well, no matter what, they're going to be invested in the winning side. Be that the left or the right." The preacher laughed and David continued. "I think, say if the green party all of a sudden got strong and just took off, you know, we'd wake up one morning and find a thirty percent Jewish membership in the greens. I can't say as I blame them. They bet all the horses. Where in the world they get enough people, money, and time to cover all the angles I do NOT know, but they always get them covered. They don't care as much about left or right as they do about Israel."

"That's right. Screw the Palestinians."

David took the hit. "I don't know. My guess is that being in bed with the extreme right bothers them, but they hold their nose and vote for who's going to be in control. If they should get caught with a republican or democratic administration that doesn't strongly support Israel, oh my God, they fear for another real bad time in their history. We tell them to do right by the Palestinians, or people will hate them. They're used to being hated. Maybe they think they can choose between being hated and having Israel, you know, or being hated and not having Israel. Nobody ever split any hairs over ethics when it was time to do right by THEM."

"Don't tell ME about justice! The Jews say they had the Holy land first. How far back you want to go anyway. Nobody wants to give upstate New York back to the Indians." Everybody laughed.

"There you go," said David. "You got me there."

The preacher and his buddy were getting close to their stop so they stood up to get off. The bus pulled up to a CTA booth. The men waved their respect, smiled, and stepped off. The buss chugged away. David regretted not having enough time to tell them about the middle ages, how the Jews were not allowed to own land, and how they started trading because they couldn't farm. He felt the warm coat against his ribs and suddenly

remembered that he still had no place to go.

The bus passed a elevated train stop where he saw a young couple hug and say goodbye. He decided to sneak in to Dori's no matter who was out there watching. Maybe he could walk right up in his new clothes without being noticed. He could call first, but that might give him away. Hunger distracted him, but it gave him an idea. Who wouldn't draw attention to themselves by going in to her apartment building? A pizza man. He knew of a pizza place a few blocks away, but he didn't have any money. Then it came to him. He didn't need a pizza, just the box. He could fish one out of the dumpster in back of the restaurant. Convinced it would work, he got off the bus at the next corner and started walking to the train.

David had fun jumping the turnstile at the train station. He picked an empty car and sat down by a window just as the squeaky giant jerked into motion. He savored the freedom. The ride was like an adventure movie. He imagined a trench coat bad guy lurking somewhere, watching for him, peeking over the top a newspaper, but seeing him too late to pounce. He would trick the guy into getting off the train, and then wave back at him from the inside as it pulled away.

The train approached the loop, the center of downtown Chicago. The streetlights refracted little rainbows on the smeared window glass. David remembered learning to stand on the train without hanging on to something in the first few days of moving to the city. At first he was all over the car, but now he could stand and surf with the best of them. He listened to the wheels and began to imagine how good it would feel to put his arms around Dori's little waist. The train passed by the locally famous RAGE graffiti sign. He looked at it without giving it a second thought, completely unaware that it was right there that Murphy killed Officer Sutherland. So many people passed it regularly that it was no longer the distraction it once was. It was just another scream in the landscape of urban decay.

David had to do a transfer to get to Dori's, but changing trains to go up north from the loop was just another fun scene in his imaginary movie. He got off on an underground platform in the heart of the downtown area. The concrete steps smelled like fried urine and were less than a hundred paces from the expensive stores on the street above. David knew why. Nick told him about it in a rant about homeless people in the loop. The city had recently closed all the public toilets at the request of the merchants. This brilliant move caused an interesting phenomenon. Street people were now getting regularly busted for indecent exposure. David remembered Nick saying, "If you gotta go, you gotta go somewhere. They don't bust them for going. They bust them for showing."

The underground platform was illuminated in a dull, putrid shade of artificial yellow. It made David so depressed that he wanted to get wasted. Maybe the government puts secret mind control light ray emitters in these places to make people drink, he joked to himself. We have a revolution, but nobody comes because they're drunk. The distant sound of an approaching train made him dream about the Doppler effect, and that somehow led to a momentary obsession with efficiency. Drinking is not an efficient way to live, and I'm an economist, he mumbled to himself. I'm drinking a house. A person could pay off a whole house if they drank iced tea instead of booze. It's like getting paid to not drink. You don't even have to show up anywhere or fill out any stupid paperwork. You get paid big bucks to NOT do something that's no good for you anyway. That's about as close to free money as you can get.

The incoming northbound train screeched to a hard stop on the platform, but it wasn't empty. There were shoppers, joggers, suits and ties, all stuffed together like a Tokyo rush hour. David got on, but there was no place to sit. He was lucky just to get his body inside before the doors closed. He saw a piece of overhead rail he could grab on to, but it was on the wrong side of the car. He

couldn't get his wounded side arm up that high, and turning around was out of the question. It would put him face to face with an extremely attractive woman with legs to die for. He imagined himself in a Cary Grant movie. *I'm sorry my dear. I know I'm close enough to kiss you, but I'm shot you see. I got shot defending America from Fascists.* He chuckled to himself and was loving her breath on the back of his neck when he realized that she was actually trying to talk to him. He tried to twist around to see her, doing the best he could under the circumstances. "Are you talking to me"?

She frowned and whispered, "You're bleeding."

David got momentarily swept away by the image of a leading man getting mothered by an innocent sexy actress. "Oh that... It's no big deal."

"Yes it is. You're bleeding on my coat."

He jumped back. "Shit! I'm so sorry." She lost her balance momentarily and steadied herself on the arm of a young man sitting nearby. David leaned back against the crowd to give her some space, and tried to wipe the blood off her collar with his bare hand. I'm damn sure not dressed like a movie hero, he thought. And I hope the people at the shelter washed these clothes. He thought about Turk's coat that was now stained with blood and moved in close to her. "I just got out of the hospital," he whispered.

She gave him a big stack of paper napkins and said, "Lucky for you, I just came from dinner."

He stuffed the wad under his shirt and pointed to the stain on her coat. "That will never come out. I'm really sorry. I'll pay for it." He imagined a rich husband asking his trophy wife about the blood and being told that a homeless man bled all over her on the train. He felt more embarrassed than ever, and just knew she was thinking about blood borne pathogens.

She just laughed and joked, "I think they should have kept you in the hospital a little longer. You're not done yet. Cheap bastards."

What's your HMO? Remind me not to use them." They laughed.

"I sort of left without permission. I miss my lady. I'm headed that way now."

She smiled approvingly. "I know the feeling."

The train slowed down abruptly, pulling everyone forward. David said, "Ah sure. He's a lucky guy."

She tried not to notice that he needed a shower. "My husband and I are never apart. He's my best friend. We have a business together."

David tried not to babble, to act no differently than if she was wasn't a sex bomb ready to explode. He spoke without making eye contact. "That's great. What kind of business is it"?

"We sell real estate in Uptown."

"Uptown huh." He wondered if she could smell him, and wished he could have showered before breaking out.

"We rehab buildings, you know, make them into nice condos and resell them." She could see confusion in his face. He was trying way too hard not to look at her breasts.

"That's great," he said. "I've been in some of those. Great big lofts. Not cheap though." A big ripoff, he thought.

"We enjoy it. It's not cheap to fix them up though. The city... The building codes are really murder." She knew he was uncomfortable, but she was already closing in on her stop. She pointed at his bad shoulder and smiled. "You take care of that now OK"?

David felt small. "Thanks again... For the towels I mean." He just smiled and watched her step off the train. She chuckled to herself and turned a few heads as she disappeared into the chaos of the crowded platform.

## Chapter 19

Benton went into his new hotel room, stretched his sore legs out on a wonderful goose down comforter and wiggled his toes. The Chicago Hilton was not an authorized billet for anyone of his pay grade at the Pentagon. He had to dip into his own pocket to stay there. The plastic chair at the hospital was uncomfortable, and he felt entitled to a little luxury. He even chose a more expensive lake view over a city view, and he got one near the top floor too. Even the bed faced the lake. He propped his head on an enormous satin pillow, watched the flickering ships between his feet and dialed in some smooth jazz. The lake looked like an endless exotic sea, like it didn't belong in the Midwest. Christ, he thought. This pond is way bigger than you think. From up here you can almost get a good idea of how big it really is. The water disappears over the horizon, and the other shore is in a different state.

He practiced deep breathing to blow off the stress of losing David. The scenery almost made him want to live in Chicago. Halloween was over and gone, but it wasn't that cold yet. The heavy air made him think about his high school football games and feeling up Sally Hopper in the bleachers. The jazz on the radio sounded erotic. A stream of red tail lights lined up Lake Shore Drive like arterial blood flowing to the north suburbs. Benton poured five fingers of cheap French wine into a crystal water glass, popped a chilled shrimp in his mouth, threw the

toothpick in the can and called his wife. He stared at a funny looking pleasure boat trying to fight against the wind out on the lake and finished his first drink. He congratulated himself for bringing his own wine. The house prices more than high, they were insane.

She picked up. "Hello."

"Guess where I am?" he joked.

"Oh no. Not again."

"What do you mean"? He smiled.

"Don't tell me. They sent you to... God damn it! You just got back Craig."

"Ha ha. I'm not exactly in Iraq." He laughed and imagined her up there with him and undressing in front of the big window. If anybody in the harbor had the luck to focus a telescope up here, he thought, she'd be one hot attraction."

She relaxed at the sound of him laughing. "Where are you baby"?

"I'm in bed in a Hotel. Not just any Hotel either. Senators and ambassadors stay here. I'm at the Chicago Hilton."

"They paid for that"?

"Not exactly. Don't ask me what it costs." He laughed at himself.

"That's not the guy I know. You going crazy on me? I think you..."

"Fly out here tonight. Let's get drunk and make love three times. I'll blindfold you in front of the fridge, like the movie, and feed you the room service menu one bite at a time."

She growled with pleasure at the thought of it. "Oh cut it out. Why tempt me when you know we can't? That's mean."

"Let's play. What you wearing right now"? He gulped the wine, choked a little and spilled some on the white comforter.

She sensed his fumble and sat down. "Are you drunk"?

"Not yet, but you better hurry. Call a cab and go to the airport. I'll rub your feet for an hour. 60 minutes. I'll even let you run the

timer.”

“That's it. Where's my purse. You got me,” she laughed.

“Yes. Go ahead and fly out here.”

“Are you nuts? What did you do, mistake a Viagra for an vitamin again”?

Their sixteen year old daughter heard that as she walked by and did a double take before giving her mom an “oh please.”

She cupped the phone and said, “Your dad wants me to fly to Chicago tonight.”

“Mom... What about my party”? But then she thought, what am I doing. Let her go. “Oh, never mind. Go ahead Mom. Sounds like fun. We'll be OK. I promise.”

Mom's radar went off. “Craig, I can't come.”

He laughed through a mouth full of peeled shrimp and tiny ice cubes. “Why not”?

“Mary's party wouldn't have any adult supervision.”

“So what, I trust her,” he lied.

“Devon is coming, remember”? She frowned.

“Oh shit. No no no. Better make it next time. Oh my God. Not Devon.”

“Yeah, I thought so.”

“Look.” He paused for a sip. “I might be in Chicago for a while. Maybe after the party, when it's over, you could come. I can't spend a week in this place though. They charge for the toothpicks.”

“Get us a good place though. I'll just come out tomorrow. Sounds real nice honey.”

He felt the rush. “Say come one more time and breath a little.” They  
laughed.

“OK hon, yeah. Let me see what's going on first. My assignment sort of got away from me here.”

“What you say dear”? She looked around the corner to see what her daughter had on as she stepped out the front door.

“Never mind. I’m in a hurry. I gotta check in with work. I’ll call you tomorrow and tell you where to meet me. OK? Love you.”

“OK. Love you too.” She hung up.

He punched up his work number too fast, got it wrong and had to redial. He needed to get the talking done before drinking any more wine. The phone at the Pentagon didn’t even ring once before they picked up.

“Where are you Benton? Your phones off. Never do that.”

“The teacher got away at the hospital.”

“I know. He’s not far from you. You want the coordinates?”

“No I don’t. I’m beat. He’s not going far. Just put a tail on him and I’ll pick it up in the morning.”

“We already did. There’s a car on him now. He’s moving north on public transportation.”

“He’s going to his girl’s place then. No big deal.” He looked at the beach.

“OK then. So get over there and pick him up.”

What an ass hole, he thought. “No... I want him happy. Let him get laid. He won’t be leaving there until morning for Christ’s sake.” Benton put the phone down and poured more wine. He could still hear the Langley guy complaining. It sounded like a little man on the table. “He ran from you Damn it. He doesn’t trust you. He’s exposed to the shooter. Whoever is tailing him could take a shot before then.” Benton picked it back up and said, “What could I do, jump in front of the shot without even knowing where it’s coming from? Twenty people couldn’t prevent that. I didn’t tell him to run. They can shoot him anytime if they really want to. I don’t want to sit in a car all night. Give me the number of the car watching him. If he moves... Oh never mind.” He kicked the bed.

Langley shifted gears. “Calm down. I suppose they can watch him with or without you.”

“Right. I’m going to bed. I can be there in minutes if he moves. I’m parked in an underground garage that shoots right out to a

main artery.”

“Your coordinates look expensive all right.”

He lowered his voice. “So I'm at the Hilton so what?”

“You've probably got the French Ambassador next door or something. Uncle Sugar ain't gonna pay for that.” He laughed.

“I know that ass hole.”

“Gotta be a little girly action in there somewhere. Yummy yum. You can trust me sport. What's she look like? It's the new babe from accounting isn't it? Nice ass.”

“Shit no.”

“Marcie what's her name. She's really been checking you out man. Oh boy. Like we didn't know. Everybody knows it. Oh my God yes.”

Benton kidded him back. “For your information, I'm doing special duty for international relations, and it's classified. Need to know basis only.”

“Right. And I suppose that's why you're in a five star hotel.”

“It's not just for me.”

“You're flying your wife out. What a nice surprise. You threw me there for a minute. Nobody takes their wife to a Hilton.”

Benton laughed. “That was the plan, but she can't leave right now. Our daughter is having a party and we don't want to leave her alone.”

“Oh man. I understand. I've been there alright. Why don't you have her doctor implant a homing chip under a tattoo or something. We can track her from here.” He laughed.

“Don't think I haven't already thought about it.”

“Me too. Anyway, the teacher is still moving north. I'm watching his little blinking light right here on my new laptop. We all got new ones, and we billed Harry's secret slush fund. No way he's gonna bitch. He's not even supposed to have it.”

“You dog,” he laughed.

“I'll have the guys in the car keep you informed. He's probably going to his girlfriend's place for sure.”

“Yeah OK. They can call me. I'll call you back when something changes.”

“Yeah sure. Take care.” He hung up.

David thought there was a better than average chance that somebody had to be watching him step off the train. He had only a few blocks to cover, but it was getting colder and the night wind increased the temptation to take chances. The little umbrella busting tornadoes coming off the lake made walking difficult but gave him an excuse to hide his face under his collar. He pushed his hands deep into the outside pockets of his coat, felt some paper and pulled out a twenty dollar bill. He thought about Turk. He give me his coat, and he slipped me a twenty too, he thought. He didn't believe what I told him about not needing any money. He thought I was broke. No dumpster diving for a pizza box today. I can get a real pizza, and I'm so hungry that it won't go to waste.

He got about one block from the restaurant before the anticipation of the chewy delight nagged him into jogging. He stopped at a crossing light in front of a liquor store just across the street. He tried not to look at the booze, but when the light changed he turned around just froze. The liquor store window was full of generic cigarettes and ads for scratch off lottery games. He broke, went inside, walked up to the counter and asked for a half pint of Jack.

The clerk asked, “Did you say pint, or half pint?” He had a cigarette in his mouth with a three inch ash on the end that seemed to defy gravity.

David forced himself. “Shit. I'm sorry man. I just want quick picks, five bucks worth.”

“OK, sure thing.” He attacked the lottery machine in a flurry of muscle memory, and the ash fell on the floor. The box squeaked and rolled out pink and white slips. He handed the tickets to

David with fifteen bucks in change. "It's up to fourteen million," he said.

David took the tickets, walked out without saying a word and crossed the empty street. The big steel door at the restaurant was heavy. He had to pull it hard to get it closed behind him. He scanned the chalk board menu hanging above the cash register, but he already knew what he wanted. The smell of fresh baked bread made him dizzy with hunger. He asked for a large pepperoni pizza but forgot to order it to go. It came out on a pizza pan, so he apologized to the guy at the register and asked him to put it in a box. The man politely obliged, but he got real confused when his customer sat right down in the first booth and dove right in. With three pieces gone and a slice sticking out of his mouth, David jammed the box under his arm and headed out for Dori's building nearby.

He walked up like he lived there, stopped at the wall of mailboxes out front and buzzed every apartment intercom but hers. Several voices simultaneously asked who it was. He said "Pizza man," and the door lock popped open. He hit the stairs running, laughing, and anticipating sex all the way up to Dori's landing. He stood to the side of her door to avoid the fish eye peep hole, tapped a little rhythm on the wall and held the box in front of his face.

She answered the knock. "Who is it"?

"Pizza ma'am."

"Wrong door. I didn't order a pizza."

"Gas man ma'am. Meter reader."

"What"?. She yanked the door open.

David ran in yelling "Land shark! Land shark"!

"Shit David! God damn it. You scared the hell out of me." She embraced him and shut the door hard. He turned her around, grabbed the back of her belt, lifted her up on her tiptoes and moved her toward the bedroom. She slapped the walls and protested, but he didn't care. He got her pinned on the bed and

went right for the snap on her jeans, but she knew right where to tickle him to repel the advance. She got a foot against his butt and tried to push him over the side screaming “Stop it David! David stop”!

“Please lady. Help me out here. Can't you see I'm dying.” He laughed and leaned back to get his coat off.

She broke completely free. “Were you followed? Somebody's got to be out there watching this place David.”

“I don't care anymore. Just take me. Have your way with me. I'm your slave.” He got the coat all the way off and bled a little on the bed, but he didn't care. “Baby I'm so randy my balls are gonna explode. You gotta help me or I'll go blind.”

“David no. We gotta get out of here. They probably saw you come in.” She pushed him away, stood up and pointed at the door.

He slapped the bed. “So what if they ARE. I'm the pizza man. They think you ordered a pizza is all. Nobody saw my face.” He posed like a mug shot.

“You're a pizza man alright. A pizza man that came in and didn't come out.”

“So what! I'm on a mission from God.” He stood up, pulled her in close and buried his face in her breasts.

She jabbed his ribs. “We gotta get out of here NOW David.”

“Right now”? He grabbed her butt with both hands and made a desperate face.

“Now.” She tried to wiggle away. “They're probably coming up the stairs. You came in, but you didn't come out.”

“Fifteen minutes. Just fifteen minutes please. The pizza guy is a slow change counter see. He had to use the bathroom. He had to use the phone too.”

“No David.” She twisted away and went for her coat.

“Come on honey. Pizza guys get lucky sometimes. Everybody knows that. He's in there a half hour, so what? She invited him in for a quickie. It could happen.”

“Not here it couldn't.” She walked over, kissed him hard on the

lips and pulled back fanning her face. "I hope you're happy. Now I'm gonna explode too. Soon as we get away from here I'll help you concentrate."

He groaned in anticipation. "Oh baby. Let's go before I pass out. All the blood in my head went south."

"You ain't gonna pass out." She laughed.

"Easy for you to say." He cracked the door, checked the hall and pulled an arm through a coat sleeve. "All clear."

They started down the hall, but David stopped short and went back for the pizza box. She unlocked the door, watched him dash in and out, shook her head and locked the door again.

"That smells good," she said. "I'm hungry." She opened the lid and laughed. "You already ate it. You brought me a pizza and ate the thing before..."

"Not all of it. I've never been so hungry." They walked down the stairs to the laundry room. "I didn't eat it all. I was hungry." He looked at the row of shiny white machines, thought about sex and made close eye contact. "You ever do it sitting on a washer, you know, on spin cycle? Oh please help me." He bit his lip and smiled like a clown.

"No." She tickled his ribs to move him aside, stopped by the side door and scanned the parking lot. "They gotta be watching. They gotta be out there. Even if they're not, well, we can't take any chances. It would be so easy to just shoot at you from anywhere."

"We can't use your car," he said. "That's what they expect."

"Can we make it to the alley? It's like thirty feet away."

He put his hand on her back. "Let's wait for a car, and then just duck behind it when it crosses the lot."

She brushed at the droplets of dried blood on his chest. "How do you feel?"

"I'm good." He kept scanning the alley.

"Why did you run away from the hospital? You just took off."

He turned around sharply. "I got a message. My Pentagon

guardian angel ain't no angel.”

“I knew it.” A rush of anger went up her spine. “Why would the Pentagon...”

“I need my wallet. It's in my pants at the hospital. I don't have any ID at all. I can't even use my credit card because I don't know the number.”

She watched a woman get into a car in the alley behind her house. “I've got a credit card,” she laughed. “And I'll bet I can remember your number in a pinch.”

“Why your card? I don't see how that's any different. They can track us by your card the same as mine. What ever happened to cash”?

“No problem. I'll just get one big cash advance.” The woman drove off in the other direction.

“I don't want you to. It feels funny.”

“Bull shit. It's my money. I'm going to the ATM and pull out some cash. What are they gonna do, trace it to the ATM by my apartment? I live here. And I know your credit card number anyway, but we need the actual card for the ATM.”

David felt funny like he was already married and nobody bothered to tell him. “You know my what”?

“Men are so... I know the number already. I didn't memorize it. I just know it. You send me out for this and that. I know the number.”

“Shit lady. It's like twenty numbers long.”

“Sixteen to be exact, not counting the little security code thingy on the back.” She concentrated on the alley. “There's a car coming. Wait for it. Now David.” They ran outside all bent over like the Marx Brothers and pranced along next to a slow moving Nissan. The woman driving it suddenly recognized Dori from the building and threw a little can of mace on the floor. They both just waved and smiled at each other. Dori held David's hand to slow him down as they ran down the alley like fugitives. They didn't look back until they were a dozen blocks away and completely

out of breath.

Benton turned out the lights in his fancy hotel room and watched the moonlit lake. He was half asleep and very comfortable when the phone startled him. He knocked over his little travel clock trying to find the little thing in the fluffy down comforter. He found it, sat up angry and answered. "What"?

"He's moving sir." It was Langley's night car calling from the street.

Benton flipped the light on. "So what. Follow him."

"You wanted to be informed sir. He's definitely moving."

"Is she with him"?

"I don't know sir."

Benton didn't want to go anywhere right then. "You can't lose him. The doc put the homing chip in. Is it working? How long was he in there"?

"Just a few minutes sir. He was in and out. The chip works fine."

"He didn't even stay long enough to... He knows he's being tailed."

"Looks that way sir. He's on foot. He's not far away, but he's moving fast. Probably running as fast as he can."

"What direction"?

"Wait a minute sir. He stopped. By the coordinates, well, I think he's at an ATM machine. Yeah yeah. Langley says it's an ATM location. They're tapping it now. They can see the numbers in real time. They're passing it to me. I can see it too. He's using his girlfriend's Visa right now sir. Eight hundred cash advance. That's her daily limit. He's done."

Benton laughed and looked for his wineglass. "So they're going to dinner and a show. Just follow up close. Watch his back, and call me in the morning."

"Sir it wouldn't be that hard for a pro to just pop him off with

an easy shot. I could hit him from here with a golf ball and a slingshot.”

“We don't know if it's a pro.” He sipped the last drop of wine.

“No sir we don't, but it could be. And if it is, bang. It wouldn't be hard to do. Shouldn't we try and pick him up sir? We could...” He paused. Benton heard the men in the car shouting at each other. “Go! Damn it go! Jesus! He's getting away. He's moving way too fast sir. It has to be a vehicle. He probably hailed a cab. Gotta move sir.”

“Relax. Where's he going to go. He can't shake us. That's why Uncle Sugar let you borrow his car. You don't need me yet. I'm staying right here. Just call me before you decide to ruin my evening by picking him up.”

“Yes sir.”

Benton closed the phone and rolled over on his back.

Murphy went to the stakeout and left his partner to guard his problem. Carla didn't like being babysat by Officer Stone or anybody else. She was running out of pot, and getting high with a cop watching her do it made her uncomfortable. They stared at each other until early afternoon before going to the market for supplies. Carla got a big bag of raw shrimp and some fresh vegetables. Later that evening they cooked dinner together just like a regular couple, regular except for the fact that she was his prisoner. The time passed very slowly for both of them. There was nothing to do but talk, and the only thing they agreed about was that Murphy was an idiot.

Stone sat down with his dinner in front of the TV. Carla ate standing over the stove, gorging herself on spoonfuls of shrimp and dirty rice. She pulled a shrimp tail from between her teeth and said, “This is all bullshit you know. I ain't gonna bust out on you.”

“You tried too hard before. He's never gonna trust you now.”

“I was pissed. I've got no reason to run anyway. I'm clean. I

didn't kill anybody. I can prove that Murphy was holding me if I have to. If the cops hit us... I'll say he held me and I'm in the clear. I win both ways. If I stay and cooperate, you know, I can still get the coke and get paid. I get an equal share now. That's a lot a scratch. He didn't have to beat me. He just had to pay me, and he did, thanks to you." She walked in front of the TV and looked straight at Officer Stone's tired, blood shot eyes.

He blinked. "If you run... I WILL shoot you. Don't think I won't. No bullshit. I'll take out my pistol and pop a cap just as fast as Murphy would. So please don't run." He looked away.

She laughed. "Trust goes both ways mister. How do I know he won't kill me after it's over"? She leaned on the kitchen sink.

"He needs you."

"Not after it's over he don't."

"He'll be so God damned far away from you by then. We got it all worked out. Next step in the plan, well, we take you to a motel tonight."

"What"? She laughed.

Stone tried to read her face. "We can't stay here. We booked a motel out in the country."

"Bull shit. Who do you think you're dealing with here. I ain't stupid. If you're gonna kill me you're gonna have to do it here. I'm not gonna help you get the body out to the woods." She looked at the door.

Stone made an understanding face. "Oh come on lady. Who's gonna get the coke? And besides that, cops don't need to go to all that trouble." He laughed. "Just kidding. I'm gonna watch you there. Murphy won't be there to cause trouble. It's safer that way."

"For who"?

"For everybody. Or you could just tell us where it is and we'll go get it right now."

"I'd rather wait it out in the motel. He'd kill me right after I told him. And even then he couldn't get it out of there by himself. He'd find a way to get shot. Artie sleeps with one eye open."

“Whatever you say.” He imagined her in bed with the old biker.

“Murphy is that stupid. I ought to let him get shot.” She lightened up. “Motel huh. I need a vacation anyway. I want one with a pool. When we going”?

“Right away. We sort of put down a deposit already.” He smiled. “You'll just love the view of the lake.”

“You gotta stop on the way so I can get some pot. I need to go by my place and get some clothes too.”

“You can buy clothes anywhere. No way on the pot. I'm a cop remember.” He laughed.

“Then just let me out a block away from my connection, and keep me in sight. Only take a second.”

“I can't see you if you go inside. I'll just pull over somewhere. You can get a bag on the corner. I'll wear sunglasses or something, but make it quick. I can't believe I'm doing this.” He stood up and started putting his stuff in a gym bag.

“Street corner pot sucks, and it's way too expensive. I'm your prisoner. You guys gotta pay for it. Murphy pays.” She put on her coat and grabbed her purse. “Has this place got a pool or not”?

He laughed. “Not exactly.”

## Chapter 20

Chief Hearn was the first police chief in Oak Park to come up from the ranks. He didn't get there by politics. He had a real connection to his men, and Lefty Sutherland was his friend. The Chief was still awake and pacing his living room after midnight when the phone rang. *Thump*. He smacked his shin on the coffee table while picking it up. "Hello"!

"Chief. This is Jaspers at the station."

He sat on the couch and rubbed his leg. "Go ahead."

"We just heard from the phone company."

"Yeah what"?

"Sir, we have confirmed that the day Lefty died he called an Officer Murphy CPD and left a message to meet up at Uncle Charlie's. Lefty had some tickets to give away." The chief picked up one of his many remotes, pushed a button and turned on all the lights in the house at once.

"Are you absolutely sure"?

"Yes sir. We have a tape of the message now."

"You sure it's Lefty"?

"No question at all sir. The guy that took the call swears it was his voice. He identified himself in the message too. Sounds like Lefty to me sir."

He stood up and started pacing again. "It could still be somebody framing Murphy."

"I don't think so sir. They guy that took the call, he knows,

knew, Lefty from way back.”

“Lefty called him right before he was killed, and he didn't report it right away. God damn it! Call the CPD switchboard. Patch me through to Officer Murphy right now. I don't care what he's doing. I don't care where he is. Do it right now.”

“Should I tape it sir?”

“That's right. Hell yes. Tape the whole God damned thing.”

“Yes sir... It's dialing. I've got the switchboard.”

“Get him on the phone!”

“Randal is talking to CPD right now sir. They're switching us. They say he's on stakeout. There it is. That's his duty phone ringing now sir.”

He picked right up. “Murphy.”

“Officer Murphy this is Chief Hearn. Sorry to bother you so late.”

Murphy sat up straight and checked his rear view mirror. “No problem sir. What can I do for you.”

“I hear you're parked in my yard. I called around today. You and Officer Stone have been working out of bounds. You're staking out Artie's bar. What's going on?”

“I think you better call my boss on that one sir.”

“Actually that's not why I called. This is the second time today your name has come up. My people say you got a call from Officer Sutherland the day he died.”

“That's right sir. He had some tickets for me.”

And the bastard didn't report it, he thought. “Did you take them?”

“No sir. I didn't want them.”

“Too bad. I thought that if you saw him that day, you know, he might have told you something, maybe a lead.”

“No sir. I'd have reported it if he did.”

The Chief's blood pressure shot way up. He could feel the pulse in his neck. “So you didn't meet up with him?”

“No sir. I didn't want the tickets. I told him I had other plans.”

“He called you, and you told him you didn't want the tickets. Did you talk to him again at all after that”?

Murphy felt like he was going to throw up. “No sir.” He wiped his sweaty hands on his pants.

That's all I need him to say, thought the chief. “OK Murphy. Sorry to bother you so late. Carry on.”

“Yes sir.” Murphy hung up.

The officer doing the taping screamed. “We got him Chief! The tape of the call from Lefty... Murphy wasn't there. He didn't answer. They didn't talk. Lefty just left him a message. How could Murphy tell him that he didn't want the tickets unless he talked to him again later? He's gotta be lying about something.”

“Maybe Lefty called him back later.”

“Not on that phone sir. It could have been a different phone but... No. Not likely. We've got a complete list of Lefty's calls, and he only made one to Murphy. He's lying sir.”

The chief sat on the arm of his couch and looked at the deer rifle hanging over the fireplace. “He sure is. You guys did a great job. I love you guys. Get me CPD again. Call Chief Robinson at home right now, but don't tape it.”

“Yes sir. Way ahead of you sir. It's ringing. Still ringing...”

“Robinson here. This better be good.”

“Sorry to bother you chief. This is Bud Hearn in Oak Park.”

“I'm sorry Bud. What can I do for you”?

“I think I know who killed my officer.”

“Who”?

“Your man Murphy over here in my yard. That's who.”

“Actually, he's working Berwyn across the street.”

“I just found out about it. I called around today. You're staking out a bar that's out of the city limits. I had to call in some chips over there just to find out about it. Your Officer Murphy... He's on that watch. My dead officer called him the same day that he died and left a message to meet up at Uncle Charlie's about some tickets. I just called Murphy. He admitted that Lefty called him

and offered him some tickets. He claims he told Lefty that he didn't want them, and that they never hooked up. The tape shows they never spoke on that call. Lefty just recorded a message. Murphy lied. The bartender saw two guys with Lefty in the back of the bar before he went up to the roof. Almost nobody but cops go in there. No IDs on the two guys yet, but I think Murphy did the murder or he knows who did."

"Holy shit."

"Can I pick him up now"?

"Your man Lefty could have called Murphy back later."

Chief Hearn counted backwards from ten so we wouldn't scream at the Chicago Chief of Police. "Don't you think I checked that. Too many coincidences. That God damned Berwyn stakeout has something to do with this. We both know that now. You don't have to pull the plug. Just give me Murphy and get another man in there."

Chief Robinson thought about the press attention. "No can do. Listen. This is a complicated situation. I owe you. There's something more than you know about going on over there. I don't want to call attention to it. I need a week is all."

"No way. Get another man in there. I'm gonna pick up Murphy right now and confront him directly."

"No no no! Wait a minute. I'll put a real hard tail on him. As soon as I can, you know, he's all yours. He ain't going anywhere. It's better for you guys to pick him up anyway. My God. Murphy's a little dirty, but he ain't no cop killer. You really think he did it"?

He stared at the ceiling. "Of course I do." This guy is covering up something really embarrassing, he thought.

"Son of a bitch. Why would he do it? For what"?

"I don't know chief, but he sure as hell just lied to me. I know he did."

Robinson suddenly knew that he had to get the prosecutor to do something aggressive to get the trial done before Murphy's problem made the papers. "I'll put my own personal tail on him

right now. I'm sorry Bud. I know you were friends.”

“Yes sir. We were.”

“I want to talk to you first thing in the morning. Is that alright?”

“Yes sir. I'll be there.” He hung up, threw the phone against the wall and started to cry uncontrollably.

David and Dori had a good night in a motel they found less than a mile away from her place. They slept well, and it was close to noon before their feet touched the floor. David hung her fancy underwear on the minute hand of the wall clock like a victory flag before falling asleep. Articles of hastily abandoned clothing lined the green carpet from the door to the bed. David found the little coffee maker, loaded it with the complementary packet of motel dark roast and ignored the little green bag of decaf. She slithered up behind him, slid her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek against his back. “You feel like a tank,” she laughed. “What strong back muscles you have professor. Can I stay after school and clean your erasers?”

He smiled and whispered, “Your motor's running. And you missed me while I was out saving humanity huh. I missed you too.” David heard the cleaning crew stirring across the hall and went to the door. He spoke to a man leaning on a mop and smoking a hand rolled cigarette. “Morning you guys.” The man moved the laundry cart aside and turned around. “Don't bother cleaning this one,” said David. “Were staying another day. OK?”

The man put out his smoke like a kid caught in a high school school bathroom. “Sure sure. Have a nice day sir.” He saw a little dried blood on David's tee shirt, but he didn't want to think about it.

“Thank you,” said David. “He closed the door, jumped back into bed and turned on the TV news. “Call room service. Let's eat.” Dori stretched out on her back across the foot of the bed and sucked in her tummy so she could zip up her jeans. David pointed

at her waist. “A flat stomach like that you still go out and buy jeans one size too small.” He reached down and pinched her butt.

She stood up and snapped a hip to one side. “How they look”? David grabbed his heart and panted. She danced around like a hot Latin diva. “You want maybe I should get some sweat pants and sensible shoes”?

He went into his best Ricky Ricardo. “No no Lucy. Ay-Yi-Yi. Lucy Lucy. Come back a to bed.” He started howling and playing air congas on his knees.

She brushed him off. “Put that banana back in your pocket. We gotta go right now.”

“What for”?

“Come on David. We really gotta go. We'll be late for the rally.”

“What rally”? He got up slowly.

“Your rally silly. My little surprise. One-o-clock sharp at the administration building. My dad's pissed about it. This is going to be so much fun.”

“What fun? Just what exactly are you... What the hell is going on”?

“A rally for you and your crazy friends. Nick got the permit for it. It's a rally to start the AES. The Association for Energy Security. There's supposed to be a few thousand people show up with radio and TV too. We almost got Nader, but Nick sent him a email and Ralph don't do emails.”

“Holy shit lady. And when exactly were you going to tell ME about it”?

“Mr. Pentagon secret agent man told us to wait.” She drew a glass of water from the bathroom sink and drank it down in three gulps.

“Wait for what? Was I supposed to be there? I don't get it. What exactly did Benton say”?

“Pentagon dick head said it was a security problem. He didn't want anybody to know where you were going to be in advance,

not even you.”

“That's a good idea anyway. I never know where I'm going to be in advance.”

“He didn't want you to tell anybody. Nick's got a big speech about you getting shot by oil company snipers or something. I would have told you anyway. I was going to surprise you, but you took off out of the hospital. Benton didn't want you to go. I think you and your bodyguard were supposed to watch it on TV from the hospital or some shit.”

David almost fell down trying to pull his pants on. “Let's go. I'm going alright.”

“Sure you are baby, but we need a disguise.”

“No no no. No disguise. I'll make one hell of a dramatic entrance.” He danced around the room waving both hands in the air.

She frowned. “Oh no you're not. And you're bleeding again.” She pointed at his chest. “Shit David.”

He looked at the wound in the mirror. Blood seeped through his tee shirt. “It don't hurt,” he said. “I could go as a bloody zombie.”

“Halloween is over. How about ski masks? We need a couple ski masks.”

“We ain't robbing a bank.” They laughed.

“It's cold anyway,” she begged. “Nobody will notice. And if they do, so what? It's a revolution.” She pushed one arm through her coat sleeve.

“Let's get a movie camera and film it.”

“No Baby. I'm hungry, and we've got just enough time to grab something on the way. Put the key on the desk. Do we need to check out or something?”

“We're not coming back? I told them we were staying.”

“We gotta keep moving around. No two nights in the same place. It's a Chicago tradition since Capone.” She opened the door and peeked down the hall.

He checked his pockets and instinctively felt for his wallet that

wasn't there. "Hang on. I'm coming," he laughed. "Don't start the revolution yet."

She laughed at his childish expression. "Let's go baby. Dori need food."

He laced his arms around her waist, slid his hands into the back pockets of her jeans and kissed her.

Benton checked out of his mini paradise the next morning and waited on the curb for the surveillance car to pick him up. It was right on time. He didn't think the two men inside looked old enough to drive. He flashed his ID at the driver, but the young man didn't want to look at it. He put it back in his pocket, fumbled with the rear door and settled into the back seat. He could tell that the men had been up all night from the wrinkled clothing and the body odor. The driver took off and checked his rear view mirror. Benton knew they were headed for the Dan Ryan Expressway from the way the driver angled for the far lane. He shook hands with the other man and asked, "Where we going guys"?

"University of Chicago," said the driver.

"He went to his office"?

"No," said the other man. "He's at a deli right now, close by, but there's a demonstration for the nationalization of oil on the campus lawn at one."

"Guess he's headed there huh."

"What do you think?" asked the driver.

Benton imagined the worst. "This is not good. Whoever the shooter is, they could get a good shot from there." He scanned the traffic. "That's a real dumb move on professor pinko's part."

"That's right," said the man in the passenger seat. He laughed and shook his head. "We're on the short hook now. And what makes this idiot so God damned important anyway? So he gets hit. So what. He's just another radical punk. Why is Uncle Sugar

even protecting a jerk like that”?

Benton put his hand on the driver's shoulder. “Anybody pushing for lower oil prices is a friend of the Pentagon. Think about it. Planes, tanks, trucks, even this car runs on oil.”

The driver gunned it and whipped around a semi that was wandering all over the road. He cracked his window a little and yelled over the road noise. “Suppose he pissed off the oil guys, so what. They don't have to shoot people. They have easier ways of taking care of business.”

Benton laughed. “Well somebody's shooting at him. They'll probably try it again, and this little shindig today is as good a shot as they're going to get.”

The driver pressed a finger on his earphone and listened to his GPS controller. “They're moving east, probably a cab, toward the college. They're heading that way alright. Quick, what's my turnoff”?

“Fifty Fifth Street east,” said the guy in the passenger seat. “Here it comes. Stay in this lane.”

He accelerated down the off ramp and locked up the brakes at the stop sign. A street vendor selling tee shirts tried to look in the tinted windows. The driver clicked the power locks and said, “This is ghetto shit. Harvard of the Midwest my ass. Were in the frigging ghetto.”

“Not where we're going,” said Benton. “And this used to be a rich area too. Look at the size of those houses. These apartment houses used to be single family homes.

“This is crazy,” said the other man to the driver. “What's Langley say? Do they see any threats in the area? We can't cover a demonstration with three people.”

“Low level threat is what they say,” mocked the driver. “No threats on the screen at Langley. Of course, that's what they always say right before all hell breaks loose.”

Benton laughed. “It don't matter anyway. My guess is, you know, whoever the shooter is, it's not somebody with a file at

Langley. Half the time I think it's somebody watching *Taxi Driver* and whacking off, and sometimes I think it's a pro playing dumb. These oil peckers have a shit load of motive, unlimited funds, and plenty of time. Christ, they could find a patsy to do it, and then hire a punk to shoot the shooter. They could take it out of petty cash.”

The driver laughed, “They could hit the patsy, and then spin him off as a nut. Wouldn't be the first time.”

“That's right,” said Benton. He pointed at the sprawling green lawn of the University. “There it is man. Plenty of grassy knowles. Park over there on the street, and leave enough room to get out in a hurry.”

The three man security detail parked next to a fire hydrant and got out. The driver slipped an old parking ticket under the wipers. They hurried along with the crowd, weaving in and out of students with homemade signs. Protesters collected between the columns of an administration building. They had a podium set up on the front steps and a big red white and blue logo across the front that said *Nationalize Energy Now*.

Benton scanned the crowd and started complaining. “Looks like a few thousand people. Maybe three or four thousand, but we can't really cover this.” He pointed along the perimeter of the lawn about one hundred yards away. “There's a clear shot from behind those trees.”

The driver took off his mirrored sunglasses and bragged. “If it was me, shit, if it was me, I'd just walk up front and pop him and disappear. The sidewalk is right behind there. It's a clear shot out of here. Off the lawn and straight into a maze of confusion. No way we can cover this shit. If somebody really wants to take him out... The cops probably didn't even sweep it for bombs.”

“Shit. That's a real good point,” said Benton. “I didn't think of that. I was going to stay close to the stage but screw that shit. I can watch it blow up from here.”

The driver lingered on a young woman's breasts from behind

the safety of his shades and asked, "Is your little anarchist going to speak to the masses"?

"I doubt it. He'll be in disguise I'll bet. She will too."

"Bet I can spot him," said the driver. "Are we gonna pick 'em up"?

Somebody thumped the microphone three times to see if it was working. "No," said Benton. "I don't want to pick him up like this. He doesn't trust us now. We're just guardian angels right now."

"The driver's partner got irritated. "We can't protect him if he won't let us. Whatever happens, it's his own God damned fault. This is bullshit. If he gets hurt, shit, they'll blame us. I hate this. A ton of responsibility and an ounce of authority. We can't help him if he won't let us."

"He's just paranoid," said Benton. "Shit's been happening all around him. He doesn't know what to think, and neither do I." He pointed at the front row. "Check out the signs." People waved homemade posters at the media table. *No More Blood For Oil. Three Dollar Gas and Billions for Bush. Nationalize It. Biofuels Are NOT Green. Stop Globalization Now. Public Resource/Private Windfall.* Benton remembered his talk with David and silently agreed with every sign.

Both of the surveillance agents laughed, and the driver said, "Man, they're just pissing up a rope."

Benton imagined the worst. "They're pissing off the wrong people alright. Some crusty old Texan with a bad prostate, some big political contributor jerk. He sees this shit and freaks out. You know what I mean." They all laughed.

The driver joked, "That's right. T Bone Slim Pickins or some shit."

Benton shook his head. "It don't really mean that much, but some fat cat sees this shit on CNN and oh my God. He calls his congressional yes man, committee chairman, or whatever and throws a fit. Then he calls his broker and says dump my oil stock

because I'm gonna get nationalized. He owes a favor to his bookie, so he tips the guy off to the inside information. The bookie let's it slip. There's a run on the market, and off we go to the God damned races."

The driver laughed. "Oh my God yes."

Benton laughed. "Now our professor see, he graduates himself to an obscure shit list known only to a few folks that don't exactly have to ask permission to go to the bathroom anymore. Next thing you know, look out. Three of the professor's close buddies get implicated in a child pornography ring, and they all turn up dead in the wreckage of a small plane that crashes in North Dakota." They laughed so hard that some people in front of them turned around to look.

"Oh that's right," said the driver. "And then the oil companies blame international terrorism and beg congress for an earmark to stretch concertina wire around their tool sheds." They laughed and slapped the driver's back.

Benton pontificated. "Gentlemen, what we have now is a whole lot of old farts out there on life support running things from hand carved lawn chairs on tax sheltered islands. And thanks to the miracles of modern medicine, they are not completely dead yet. They live in bed a lot, but they watch the tube. And they will continue to bite us as long as they can still find the button on the speed dial. They see this shit and they start calling people who are not exactly in any position to tell them that they're overreacting." They all laughed. He pointed at the CNBC crew standing next to a long table labeled WBBM. A gray haired man on the podium started speaking over the PA system like an announcer at a rock concert.

"Good day everybody, and thank you all for coming. This is being taped for CSPAN, so we will begin on their signal. Are we on the air? We are. Welcome to the rally everyone. I'm Sam Sheridan. I am associate professor of political science here at the university. We are here to advocate for the nationalization of the

energy industry.” The crowd applauded politely. “I understand that our oil baron president is having a rally on the other side of campus called energy, is the children learning.” The crowd laughed and applauded. A small group of students whistled and hooted until he raised his hand. “We are here today to start a national movement to take back the very life blood of our economy. To take it back from a very few who would exploit us with no mercy.” They applauded. “As you know the price of oil is about to hit one hundred dollars a barrel. And right now, not five blocks from here, a gallon of unleaded gas is selling for three thirty five a gallon. As we continue to pay more and more for energy, and everything else that comes from it, the profits of the major oil companies continue to soar.” The crowd booed. He raised his hand. “In the last election we elected a lot of democrats to congress. We expected them to come riding over the hill like the cavalry and save us from the robber barons. Somehow between here and there the people we elected ended up on the robber baron payroll.” Everyone applauded, and people with signs shook them in the air.

Benton's driver put his hand to his ear and whispered, “Sir. Langley says he's here.”

“Where”? Benton kept his eyes straight ahead as if David was watching him.

“Three hundred and fifteen yards due east of us. These GPS trackers are so cool.”

The three men casually scanned the crowd. Benton found his target, casually turned his back and joked, “Oh man that's weak.”

“What?” begged the driver.

“Check out the two ski masks by the hedge.” They turned slowly, and Benton joked, “Only two ski masks in the whole crowd. It ain't that cold.”

“One of them has a nice ass,” said the driver.

“Which one?” joked Benton. They all laughed. “Back up slowly until we can keep them in sight. Get him in front of us.

Tell Langley we're good to go.”

The speaker at the podium waited for the applause to stop and continued. “You know folks, the Romans were used to administrations like this. They had a way of getting to the bottom of things. If something didn't smell right, you know, it was follow the money. Who benefits. They would certainly be suspicious of this unelected rogue administration of oil men. Remember seventy five cent gas under the last administration”? The crowd cheered until he raised his hand. “Oil prices have quadrupled since the fall of Baghdad. Who benefits? The oil producing countries benefit. Except for Iraq. All the oil producing countries have gotten richer since the invasion. Iraq used to produce oil, but now it has to import it.” The crowd applauded lightly.

The speaker took a sip of water and went on. “The administration has sold us the clever lie. A lot of republicans and democrats hold their nose and support the war because they think it's about cheaper oil. It's not about cheaper oil. It's about keeping the price of oil high. Iraq is a danger to big oil because it can pump a lot of oil on the market and depress the price.” People applauded and cheered until the speaker raised both arms. “The lie was easy to swallow because stealing oil is a selfish thing to do, and it's easy to believe that this evil administration would go to war for a selfish reason. The people thought, well he's a crook, you know, but he's keeping my gas price down. He's stealing gas for me. The joke's on them. It's on all of us. The war was to stick us with three dollar gas. They didn't fail. Everything happened just like they wanted it to.” The crowd roared.

“All confidence games run on greed, and this one's a classic for the history books. People think the president is an idiot. He's not an idiot, but he plays one on TV.” They laughed and applauded. “An idiot couldn't pull off such a clever scam. The people think he screwed up everything he tried to do. They're wrong. He did everything he wanted to do, and he got everything he wanted. He's an oil man. He doesn't have to win a war. He just needs to

stir up trouble somewhere and keep it going long enough to drive up the price of crude.” They applauded until he waved for them to stop. “People please. He has an MBA. I think he understands the law of supply and demand.” They laughed.

He sipped his water and shook hands with some people around him. “We all know who benefits. But what are the costs? The number one problem with high priced oil is our national security. We need oil for defense. The oil we buy for the army is in the private sector. They don't care if we lose a war or not. They profit either way. If we win, fine. If we get our butts kicked... They can push a button and wire their money overseas.” A few people applauded nervously and sporadically. “The greed of these people never ceases to amaze me. I wouldn't put it past them, if we lost a war, to come back after the surrender and sell oil to the people that beat us.” People laughed and applauded. “Are we blind”!

Benton leaned over toward his men and said, “He's good. He's real good.”

The speaker looked directly at the cameras and continued. “The Saudis love this war, and they love this administration. They benefit more than anyone else from one hundred dollar oil. The King is flying around the world right now. He's warning the west to give him protection from the revolution that is about to explode under his feet.” A few people applauded. “And he will get whatever he wants. But don't think for a minute that the western nations think he can survive. He will be overthrown. It's a tiny minority against a huge majority. It's only a matter of time for the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, but that won't keep our military industrial complex from selling them a lot of nasty hardware. We know, and they know, that the very same hardware they sell these people today, it will eventually be shot right back at our troops after the revolution, but they don't care. All's fair in war and global markets.” People applauded. “They run ads for the defense contractors with flags and eagles all over the place. Those are private, for profit, corporations folks. They don't care about

America first. They care about the stock price. Remember now. If we lose a war, you know, they just push a button and send the money overseas.” Sustained applause reverberated across the lawn. He had to raise his arms several times before they let him continue.

“You know, most people assume that our defense contractors are Americans. A private company can be bought and sold by anyone. We might try to keep foreign interests from buying it, but there are always ways to hide who really owns something. Suppose the Chinese just went out and bought our defense industry”? The crowd booed. “It could happen. What if they bought our banks? It's happening right now. If we got attacked, oh man. We would have to beg the Chinese for a loan to defend ourselves.” They booed again. “That is unless of course it was the Chinese that were doing the attacking.” He sipped his water and cleared his throat. “Step one. Buy the other guy's army. Step two. Invade the other guys land. Would the Chinese let us buy THEIR military? How about their banks? I don't think so.” Everybody laughed and cheered. CNN quit filming and started to pack up.

“Our banks are in trouble now. They made a lot of shady loans with creative bookkeeping, and the bubble popped. Now we have these things called sovereign wealth funds circling overhead. What's that? It's basically, usually, a big investment fund from another country, sometimes an oil rich country, that's backed by the government. It sort of IS the government. To compete with a fund of this magnitude is essentially to compete with an entire nation. Now we hear that such a fund is trying to buy a big stake in our biggest bank. Why not. They can get it on the cheap now. It's easy with the stock price down in the mud. The fund I'm talking about is from Abu Dhabi. You know, the capitol of the United Arab Emirates. They want to buy Citibank, or at least to be the largest shareholder.” The crowd booed. “If they do, and they will, then they will bump a rich Saudi prince into second place.” They booed again.

He stared at the media table. “Listen to me. Private investors, no matter how big, or how benevolent, can not, I repeat, can not, and will not, compete globally with whole countries. Welcome to globalization folks.” People cheered and booed at the same time. “Today we are a country where four hundred people, unelected people, control half the money. We are an entire country owned and controlled by a few individuals. It doesn't matter how rich they are, or how small the sovereign nation competing against them is, it's still an entire country. Unless we narrow the wealth gap, they will lose, and we will lose.” The crowd cheered. “We must nationalize critical sectors of our economy to compete with other nations that are already nationalized in these markets. Eighty per-cent of the world's oil is nationalized right now. People in Venezuela are paying seventeen cents a gallon for gas. Any whole country is stronger than an individual. Global markets can not be fair if everybody doesn't play by the same rules. We didn't get to set the rules. We tried but we failed.” People laughed. “We are not going to convince the other eighty per-cent to go private. We need to compete against other governments with the full power of our own government, the government of the United States of America. Not the weak and selfish power of a few private individuals that may or may not put their patriotism before their own personal gain.” People screamed and waved their signs at the cameras.

“Certain things, the most important things in life, should not be exposed to the selfish exploitation of private interests. When I grew up in the mid-west, you know with Ozzie and Harriet.” Everyone laughed. “When I grew up, well, the republicans were always warning us that the government and the public sector were not as efficient as the private sector. According to them, the wisdom of the day, we desperately needed to undo, you know, reverse all the big government stuff that FDR did, and let the private sector do what it does best, give us the most stuff at the lowest price. That's what they said. They got their way. We tested

their theory alright, and it failed miserably.” Everyone applauded. “Oil is private but it's never been higher. When I say they got their way... I mean they REALLY got their way. Even the army is about half privatized now. My God... The army! It costs a thousand dollars a day to keep a private mercenary in Iraq. I never imagined. Somebody pinch me. I never imagined a war in the US fought with mercenaries. What have we become! Are we the Roman empire! If we are, God forbid. If we are, then we're not even as good at it as they were. They co-opted the people they invaded. They made them Romans. But even the Romans failed at empire. We all know what happened to them. We know what happens to all empires. Nature somehow prevents that kind of exploitation. You see, cultures evolve too. Ideas evolve. History is telling us that imperialism is going extinct. It does not, never did, and never will work! The administration knows that. The oil companies and the defense contractors know it too. Yes they do. But they think they can sell the whole thing short and make one last big raid on the treasury. The vultures see a lot of profit to be made from the chaos they create, and they are going to get as much of it as they can. Dear God ! And they will too! Unless we stop the greedy minority from exploiting the majority.” The crowd roared. A bored child holding a *NO BLOOD FOR OIL* sign squirmed around on her mother's shoulders and waved at a roving photographer.

The speaker looked elated. “My friend David Armstrong has a new idea that has really taken hold. He couldn't be here today, but it is his idea that I put before you now.” He leaned out over the podium. “The idea that a truly rational economy is one that treats necessities and luxuries differently. Certain things should be protected from the greed of the private sector. Certain things should be out of bounds.” He imagined David listening from the hospital. “There is a healthy discussion going on in the faculty lounge about David's thesis. Is it really a new idea? Even Adam Smith, who David is no fan of, even Adam Smith, the father of

economics, he talked about a firewall to protect people from extreme capitalism. But breaking down the markets into rationally determined discrete categories of luxuries and necessities, and managing them in completely different ways, that is original. He doesn't adjust the whole economy to the right or left. He puts necessities on the left and luxuries on the right. He doesn't waste money giving somebody something they don't need, and he doesn't FAIL to help somebody with something they do need, because he doesn't waste any money in the first place." The crowd applauded for a short time and then stopped in funny way that let the speaker know they were confused.

David whispered to Dori, "That's great. Did I say that?"

She pulled at her itchy mask. "Can I take this damn thing off now? It's messing up my hair."

"Nobody can see your hair if you leave it on." He laughed quietly.

The speaker felt confident and turned it up a notch. "National defense is a necessity! Everyone would agree that defending ourselves is a necessity. We are low on oil. Who consumes the oil? Is it the SUVs"? He paused and smiled. "The number one consumer of oil in the world today is the United States military! A C-130 cargo plane gets three gallons to the mile. Not three miles to the gallon. Three gallons to the mile. Think about it. Our million dollar tanks get two gallons to the mile. The price of oil in the private sector is controlled by supply and demand. The military uses half the oil. If you control the military you control the demand. Worse than that, thinking about enemy nations, if you control the supply you control the United States military. Both the president and the vice president are oil men. They didn't stop being oil guys when they got into office. They start wars to run UP the price of oil! Up, not down. The oil that we need to defend ourselves should NOT be in the private sector"! The crowd applauded until the speaker stepped out from behind the podium.

He walked to the front of the crowd and patted his lapel mike to check it. “Again, the president is not making war to push the price of oil down. He is making war to keep the price UP! And in doing so he is making us LESS safe, not more safe. He knows that, but he doesn't care. Oil stock comes first. He should be arrested.” They cheered and would not stop. He waited for an opening and waved his hands. “I know I know... Thank you.”

Benton shook his head and said, “Here we go boys. This is about more than oil. It's start the revolution time. It'll never work here though.” He kept his eyes on David. The last thing that Benton wanted to see was his man pulling off his mask and rushing the stage.

The speaker asked, “What about the roads. Would we privatize the roads? How would you like to pay a toll every time you drove out for bread and milk”? They applauded. “Necessities don't work that way. Nobody wants that. What if your house caught fire and the firefighters pulled up to your burning house, jump out of the truck, and ask you to pay first”? They laughed. “Do you have fire insurance sir? Are you covered? Big joke, but it's no joke. The big joke this campaign season is, you ready for this, the woman that called in on CSPAN live, the republican line on the CSPAN call in show, and said 'Don't let the government mess with my Medicare.' ” The people at the table around him applauded. “That's what she said. These people complaining about big government, they should think about all of the things the government does for us that we just take for granted.”

He sipped his water and wiggled his toes. He was so high on the adrenalin that he forgot he even had notes. “Time goes so fast. The conclusion is simple. Necessities don't work well with profiteering. It's time to protect necessities. Necessities are out of bounds. We can't get them all out of the private sector at once, but please, we can and will start with oil. Please check out our website for information on what you can do to help. This thing is really taking off. Now they tell me... There are already so many

emails going to members of congress about us. No kidding. They assigned a special crew in the senate office mail room... building... thing... just to manage it. Just for us. Keep it up people. Today we're on CNN and CSPAN. Also, my friends at Chicago Independent Television are here. Love you guys. They are at small c, Chicago dot indymedia dot org. I hope to see you all again soon. We can, and will, take our country back. Thank you all for coming." The crowd applauded, and lines of people started forming at the podium.

The driver snapped at Benton. "He's moving sir."

"I can see that."

"We gonna pick him up"?

Benton watched David and Dori shuffle through the crowd. "No," he laughed. "He's OK. Langley said no threats in the area, right"?

"That's right sir."

"Then we just shadow him."

"Yes sir." Benton waved them on and started to move. They followed from a safe distance behind, ducking in and out of people milling around, hanging back and keeping a clear line of sight.

Almost everyone at the rally left the area through the same gate. David and Dori stood out in their ski masks as they passed through it. Officer Murphy was there too, and not far away. He leaned on the fender of a stolen red Pontiac parked a few hundred feet away and tracked them easily with a pair of small binoculars. Murphy knew they would be there, but he didn't count on such a weak disguise. He got in the car, started the engine and wrapped himself in white Arab headgear complete with two black rings. The costume was authentic. He thoroughly researched the Saudi look on the Internet before making it himself. He watched the ski masks pass through the gate, but cursed his luck when they turned the wrong way for what he had in mind. He started to follow, but rather than make a U-turn, he just backed into traffic and took off

in the other direction without even checking his mirror. He had to stop almost immediately. He got stuck behind a school bus in heavy traffic going the other way.

The kids in the bus pointed at his Arabian headgear. His bumper to bumper driving made them nervous. The bus started to move. Murphy pulled out to see what was coming, and a delivery van almost sideswiped him. He tried it again with the same result and lost a hubcap. The bus stopped at the next corner to let some children get off and made him wait again. He got out of the car and looked around the bus just in time to see the two ski masks getting into a cab in the middle of the next block. David pulled his mask off, and Murphy panicked. He got back in the car, drove around the bus on the right and caused several pedestrians to run out of the way. The bus driver tried to read Murphy's plate number but failed.

David and Dori watched the red Pontiac chop down a traffic sign and shoot straight at them. Murphy ran over everything in his way, bouncing the car up and down like it was disposable. The cab driver saw him coming, jumped out in the street and ran for his life without even closing his door. The Pontiac smashed into the cab on the left rear side and threw David hard against the back of the seat. The impact knocked the taxi sign off the roof, spun the cab half way around and whipped the driver's door back so hard that it broke a hinge. The Pontiac kept running but Murphy's bad arm hit the dash. The thick dull pain radiated up his spine and made him sick. He rubbed his eyes and watched in disbelief as David put the cab in reverse and backed straight into the Pontiac's radiator like a demolition derby shot at the Iowa State Fair. The impact caught Murphy trying to shift into reverse. He cracked his head against the door beam and passed out.

He woke up a few seconds later and gave chase, but David was three blocks away doing over seventy miles per hour and trying his best to attract a cop. He scanned the side streets as carefully as he could while he ran all the stop signs. Nobody came close

enough to hit him, but he stopped at a red light anyway. Murphy closed the gap to only four cars back. Dori saw him and screamed, “Go! Go! Forget the light! Go!” He tried to move but got tangled up in the intersection. He weaved around some angry drivers who beat their horns and gave him the single digit salute. He broke out to a clear street ahead and hit it hard with Murphy closing fast.

Dori begged, “Don't stop! No matter what, don't stop”! She braced her hands against the dashboard.

David screamed, “Here he comes!” and grabbed the gear shift on the column. He manually downshifted the automatic transmission to try and force a little more acceleration out of the heavy beast. He got a little more torque, but the red Pontiac had more power, and Murphy pulled right up behind him. David saw Murphy's flowing white headdress in the mirror and considered the implications of being killed by a terrorist, but the thought of an Arab in a beat up Pontiac made him skeptical. He looked again and saw a pistol braced against the driver's mirror. “Get Down!” he yelled. Dori screamed and tried to dig a hole in the floorboard. David cut it hard left and hit a street-side wastebasket that flew up and bounced off Murphy's windshield. It cracked the safety glass into a honeycomb of little pieces that didn't shatter but blocked his view. Murphy screeched to a stop and cleared the glass with the barrel of his pistol.

David saw him stop and screamed, “I got him! Die you stinking bastard”! He slammed the transmission into reverse for another radiator shot and stomped on the accelerator. The drive wheel spun hard. The rear end seemed to leap in the air but didn't go anywhere. A thick cloud of blue smoke poured off the burning tires.

She popped up. “What are you doing!” she screamed.

“Hang on! I'm gonna hit him hard.”

She got back on the floor. “You're going the wrong way again”!  
*Bang!* David smacked the Pontiac dead on and stalled out the

cab. He tried to restart it and turned the lock so hard he bent the key. The engine spun freely but it wouldn't catch. Murphy felt numb after the tremendous hit. It knocked out his back window, rolled up the hood and jammed a fender against his left front tire. David slapped his wheel, pumped the accelerator and turned the key again. The engine started instantly. He cut the wheel as far as it would go and accelerated, pulling his bumper apart as he took off for the expressway. A little blue station wagon nearly hit him in the first intersection. He watched it pass behind him in the driver's side mirror, and tried to calm down. The wagon cleared the intersection only to reveal the Pontiac closing in fast.

Thick steam rolled off Murphy's crumpled hood, but his car was still running. He ran right up behind them and laughed as he bumped David's trunk. He backed off to get some running room and then rammed David's left rear fender hard. Dori knocked her head against the bottom of the dashboard. She screamed, wiped her head and stared at the sticky blood on her fingers. Murphy jabbed his pistol straight through the windshield chunks fired wildly, but his aim was off. The impact from the crash made him weak. He kept blinking and wiping sweat off his face. The good cop part of him suddenly realized that he forgot to check his field of view for pedestrians before firing. He put the pistol on the seat, concentrated on driving and adjusted the two black rings on his bloody headgear.

David drove onto the expressway with Murphy closing in fast and *Boom!* Somebody else hit him when he was watching Murphy. It was the Pentagon crew. Benton's driver had t-boned the cab in the rear passenger door on his own initiative. They were surprised, but all three men saw it coming in time to jettison their coffee before impact. Benton beat his fist on the dashboard, and the driver shouted, "Splash one!"

"You idiot!" yelled Benton. "Get on the other side of him."

"I'm trying!" said the driver.

Murphy clipped an ornate concrete light pole but didn't lose

any speed. He zipped off the access ramp and refused to stop for a construction barricade blocking one of the two lanes. He ran over an orange sawhorse and nearly broke an axle on the pothole it was covering. There were three cars in the chase now. They weaved in and out of southbound traffic on the Dan Ryan Expressway all the way past the old Robert Taylor projects. They flew past a cop who was bent over writing a ticket and too busy to notice.

Dori sat up straight and tightened her seat belt. David flashed her a goofy look but quickly turned his eyes back to the road. "You OK?" he asked.

"Hell no. I'm not OK. Get me out of here David."

The thought that a crazy Arab had taken a shot at his girlfriend infuriated him. "If I had a gun... God damn it! I'd stop right here and shoot that mother right in the..."

"Look out David"! She waved at a slow moving Toyota and covered her eyes.

"I see him." He pointed to a parking lot off to the side. "I'm gonna pull in over there and run on foot. We can split up then."

"I don't want to split up David."

"Damn it. He'll go after me. He'll follow me."

"No David! Oh God... I think I'm gonna be sick."

He looked over his left shoulder and saw the Pontiac following a good distance behind. It was smoking badly but still making highway speed. "Over there in that lot," he said. "We'll dump it there and jump on the train." He drove down a short street and screeched to a stop in a crowded CTA parking area. He didn't bother parking the cab properly. They just bailed out like it was on fire and left it running with both doors open. A north bound train pulled into the platform almost too soon to reach it, and David cursed the timing. It could be fifteen minutes before the next one. There was no way to know. They ran for it, and Dori beat him to the platform. He saw the Pontiac turning into the lot just as the woman driving the train keyed her scratchy mike and warned everyone that she was about to close the doors.

They scrambled in and sat down facing north. Dori put both arms around David's chest and wept almost silently. They attracted the attention of a quiet passenger in the crowded car who looked at her watch, pretended not to notice, and stared at the cars running alongside the train on the expressway below. A fat man with a cane saw the beat up Pontiac racing past the train with smoke pouring out of the hood and laughed so hard he dropped his stick under the seat.

Murphy had no windshield left to speak of, and he was running at high speed. He tried to keep the flapping headgear out of his eyes while screaming at Stone on the cell phone. "I have him in sight now! I'm still with him! If he gets off... I've got him!"

"What about the feds?" asked Stone.

"I can shake 'em. They ran into the cab, and then they disappeared. I haven't seen them for a while, but shit, they gotta be back there somewhere. We haven't made any turns. I'm coming up on a train stop now. I'm right under them. I don't even have to get out. I'm pulling off."

"Don't loose 'em... God damn it"!

Murphy could see the entire platform from the street and carefully scanned the dozen or so people who got off the train. He quickly backed up and took off. "They didn't get off. Next stop maybe. I'm moving." He got back on the expressway and ran parallel to the tracks, ducking his face in and out of the blinding smoke. He screamed at Stone. "I think it goes underground soon! I'm gonna guess... I gotta take a chance... That's where he's gonna get off. If I'm right... He's mine."

"God damn it, don't shoot him! We need him alive," yelled Stone.

Murphy put the phone close to his lips and spoke normally. "Not for very long we don't. He's a dead man."

"Do NOT shoot the..."

"It's personal now man."

"Murphy... You crazy mother..."

Murphy tossed the phone on the seat and checked his mirrors for the feds. He didn't see them but they were still there. They could follow the smoking wreck from space if they really wanted to. Benton's driver stalked it perfectly and kept just enough road between them to be invisible until the moment of truth. They had enough electronic toys on board to stalk anything that moved. They could call in an air strike from space on a rabbit in the desert. They could say the word and stop the train. The mood in the car was excited but professional.

Benton said, "I never saw a Saudi drive that bad before." They all laughed. "That ain't no Saudi. That's an amateur just like I said it was."

"Or a pro trying to look like an amateur," said the driver.

Benton looked at his watch and said, "It's not a pro. Langley would know if a pro was around." He pointed forward. "Watch it now. Don't get too close to him."

David and Dori watched the Pontiac take off on its way to the next train stop, and emerged from behind a support beam on the platform where they were hiding. Murphy didn't see them get off the train. David made a good call. If Murphy didn't see them then they were home free. If he did see them then all they had to do was wait until he left his car to run after the train. At that point they could just step back on and go. Dori laughed out loud and waved at the car. They tap danced down the steps and ran through the gate. David wondered if two white people running at full speed in a black neighborhood was a good idea. He slowed down, began to walk normally and started shivering because his coat was still on the train. Dori let out a victory wail, slapped him hard on the butt and wiped the salt out of her eyes.

Murphy made it to the next stop. He abandoned the Pontiac at the underground station, pushed his way down the steps and pulled off the headgear. He knew the feds were close behind. He watched the northbound train unload and didn't see David. He ran up and down the entire length of the platform twice. He stuffed

the bloody headgear into a big green wastebasket and startled a man standing next to it. Murphy recognized him. "Cramer!" he said.

"Murphy"! he screamed. "What you want"?

"Damn Cramer. What in the hell are you doing here? I thought you were in Menard."

"I'm on parole." He held up both hands.

Murphy spun the guy around, pushed him into wall and started to search him. "I sent you to prison last year. How could you be out? You should never be out. You been feeling up any disabled kids lately, on film, mother fucker!" He carefully went through the guy's pockets.

"Leave me alone. I'm on parole man."

Murphy pulled out a plastic bag full of new syringes. "What the hell is this"? He shoved the bag in the man's face.

"I'm clean man. Come on Murphy. I'm clean. You know I can't drop dirty when I'm on parole man."

Murphy got an idea. "You're gonna drop alright. You're gonna piss in the bottle today. And if you're dirty... Oh yeah. You're going back to Menard for a long LONG time. Pervert mother fucker."

The guy's face got red. "OK! Shit! So what! I'm dirty... But I ain't done no kids. I'll never do it again man. I swear. I'm just dirty. I get high but no kids. Give me a break Murphy. Come on man. It's just..."

Murphy grabbed the guy's collar. "Shut up and listen to me. I want you to do something for me."

"Sure. Anything man."

"Shut up. There's no time." He pulled the Arabian headgear out of the trash and gave it to the guy. "Put this on."

"What the..."

"Put this on damn it. It's a training movie for homeland security."

"No way."

“There's no time to explain. Would you rather piss in the bottle? Do like I tell you. The camera's almost here.” Murphy pulled the thing over the man's head and looked around. Nobody was looking. He took out his pistol, cocked it and offered it to the guy. “Here. Take this.”

“Gun! I can't. I'm on parole.”

“Relax. It's OK. They're blanks. It's just a movie. OK?”

“Uh...”

“It's cool. Just do what I say. You're an actor now. Some guys are gonna come running at you. Just put the gun in the air, yell DEATH TO AMERICA, real loud, and keep pulling the trigger. Shoot the blanks. OK? We're just making a training movie for the academy. It'll be fun.”

He calmed down and smiled. “Yeah. OK. Cool.”

“You sure you got it”?

“I got it. You gonna let me go, right”?

“Sure. I'll be right over here.” Murphy took off.

The Pentagon crew hopped off the stairs and ran down the platform. Benton's driver saw what looked like a terrorist on a hair trigger, pulled back the slide on his pistol and took aim with both hands. “There he is”!

Murphy's pervert saw the gun and smiled. He put the pistol in the air, yelled “DEATH TO AMERICA!” and pulled the trigger. Benton's driver shot the guy five times before he heard his boss yelling at him to stop. Murphy counted the shots as he left the stairs and stepped out onto the street. It started raining, and a car spun its wheels when the light turned green. He walked across the street trying to convince himself that he just did the state a favor.

## Chapter 21

The hard autumn wind kept banging tree limbs against the side of the cabin where Carla and Stone were hiding just over the Wisconsin state line. They gorged on takeout chicken and watched *Boogie Nights* on a little DVD player hooked up to the motel TV. Carla tried to get Stone to take a pull on her pipe. “Come on Stoney. Lets get stoned,” she laughed. He said no for the third or forth time. “I know you want to,” she laughed. “There ain't gonna be no drug tests no more for you man.” She coughed and blew a long cone of skunky green smoke across the room.

“It's been a long time,” he said.

“I know you want to.”

He thought about partying in high school. “I had to give up a lot a things to be a cop.”

“You're retired now. There ain't no going back.” She loaded the pipe and packed it down with her thumb. She fired it up and hit it hard to get it going before passing it to Stone. He took a big long Bogart and held it in for as long as he could stand it. He finally gave in to a raspy cough but fought it off and hit it again. He made a funny constipated face, passed the pipe back and twisted the cap off his next beer. He twisted it so hard it hurt his thumb.

Carla smiled. “Pretty good shit for right off the street huh. It usually gets stepped on pretty bad, you know, before it gets sold that way. Right off the curb. It helps when the guy selling it knows you though. What do you think”?

“I heard it's stronger now, and it is. Used to be, well, you had to smoke a whole joint. This stuff, a couple hits and I'm thick as a brick. Makes you hungry though.” He laughed and lifted two chicken legs out of the box.

“Oh yeah,” she said, taking another hit. She struck a big kitchen match and drew it across the pipe to keep it going. The flame jumped up between pulls.

Stone felt like talking. “I remember... Man it made me horny. Hungry and horny. Screw like mad and then eat the refrigerator.”

She patted her hip. “I know I know. I smoked all the time...gained way too much weight. That's how I got strung out on meth. You don't gain weight like you do on weed. Can't be fat in this racket. But the meth, oh God, it really jacked me up. My pimp in California tried to KILL me man. I was lucky to get out of there.”

Stone picked up the remote and shut off the DVD. The screen changed to the news channel running a commercial for reverse mortgages. “Jesus, that sucks. Tried to kill you. He got wired up pretty bad I'll bet. Strung out on super speed.”

“No shit.” She pointed at the TV. The scene had changed to a CNN helicopter streaming live video from high over the loop. “Something going on downtown. Ain't that were Murphy is?” she laughed.

“Yeah. It sure as hell is.” He pointed a drumstick at the screen. “Turn it up.”

The announcer sounded like she was sweating caffeine. “This is CNN with breaking news in Chicago. Let me tell you what we know at this time. There is a police cordon around downtown Chicago. All expressways have been blocked by checkpoints, and all outgoing vehicles are being searched. We are just getting word now that the terror alert level is going to be raised, but we can not confirm this yet. Ohare airport is closed. The FFA is scheduled to make an announcement momentarily. We expect all flights to be grounded shortly across the country. We're going live on the scene

to Ann Hopkins in a police helicopter. Ann, can you hear me? What are they telling you”?

The reporter spoke over the rotor noise with the picture periodically breaking up. “Thank you Mary. The Chicago Police initially reported that a terrorist attack on the subway was aborted by agents of the Department of Homeland Security. That is, in cooperation with the Chicago Police and other agencies that they would not disclose. Apparently, credible sources say a middle eastern man opened fire on the subway a short time ago.”

“How many casualties”?

“We don't know yet. We've been told it was a single terrorist with a fully automatic weapon, probably an AK47. The attacker was apparently killed by federal agents who were following him.”

“There were federal agents guarding the subway”?

“Well Mary, that seems to be a sensitive subject. We asked the spokesperson for the police that very same question and they would not confirm or deny, uh, that the federal people were guarding the subway. Our sources say it was an ongoing investigation of a sleeper cell, an operation in progress, and federal agents have been monitoring the terrorists here in Chicago for some time. A known cell. They were about to take it down when this happened.”

“So it may be that they waited a little too long on this one.” The picture went to a split screen showing both women at once and running a banner that said *Suicide Bomber Killed in Chicago Subway*.

The woman in the helicopter looked like she was having a real good time. “Again, it's too early to tell. Our sources say, but we can not confirm, that the cell, they were plotting to release nerve gas at the Sears Tower.”

“Nerve gas”? Stock footage of the nine-eleven attacks started running next to a picture of the Sears Tower.

“That's right Mary. The kind used in the attack on the commuter train in Japan.”

“Sarin”?

“That's right, but I must repeat that we have no confirmation yet.”

Back at the cabin the conversation got serious and intense. “Son of a bitch,” said Stone. Murphy's down there. I told him to forget about the teacher, and now he walks into a frigging gas attack dirty bomb or some shit.”

“Germ bomb.” She chuckled nervously.

He pulled out his cell phone and called Murphy's number. His unpredictable partner answered right away. “Yo.”

Stone could hear road noise in the background. “Murphy”!

“What?” he snapped back, cruising comfortably along with the flow of traffic.

“You OK”? He turned down the sound on the TV, saw a banner running under the Chicago scene and stopped to read it. *Televangelist and major republican campaign contributor Arnold Love sued by publishers of the cartoon, THE PENGUINS OF MADIGASCAR. Love allegedly condemned the cartoon as anti-Christian, citing references to “The Sky Spirits” as an attack on monotheism.* He laughed and spoke into the phone. “Murphy, you OK”!

“I'm OK. I missed the son of a bitch, but I'm good.”

“What the hell happened”?

“I followed him, but the feds got in the way. They must think he's pretty damn important.”

“Did they see you”?

“Man... They don't know WHAT they saw. I really did a number on 'em. Talk about timing.” He wiped the sweat off his forehead with a dirty napkin.

Stone looked at Carla and shrugged his shoulders. “Did they see your car”?

“No no. I borrowed a car”?

“Did you get rid of it”?

“Yeah. No big deal. I got rid of it. I had to borrow another one

though. I'll dump it when I get back to where I parked my car by Mickey's garage."

"Did you see the TV"?

Murphy fished around the unfamiliar dashboard for the temperature controls. "Now when was I gonna do that"?

"I think you better turn the radio on. While you were downtown... You missed it alright. The jerkwater bastards tried to blow up a biological weapon or some shit under the loop. They shot the place up man."

Murphy immediately knew what happened and laughed so hard he left his lane. A potato chip truck had to swerve out of his way. "That was me."

"You idiot! You shot up the God damn station? Please tell me you didn't." Carla threw up her hands in disbelief.

"Actually, well... How can I put it. I didn't fire a shot in there, you know, myself personally."

"But you were there? You were part of it"?

"Yeah. I was there all right. I saw... No. I heard the whole thing. I'll explain later." He found the heater and turned it off.

"Holy mother of... I don't think I want to know. What about the stakeout? You know you're on duty in a few hours."

"Yeah. I know. I gotta go. I gotta take this exit. I'll call you later boss."

"You better." Stone turned off the TV and tossed the phone on top of it. He looked at Carla and shook his head. "The son of a bitch says he saw the whole God damned thing. I told him to leave the teacher alone. He missed the teacher, and there was a terrorist attack. He had something, but God knows what, to do with it. The feds messed him up. They got in his way or something."

She laughed in a satisfied way. "I wish they'd blown his frigging head off."

"When this is all over, if we get out of this alive, I think I'll shoot the son of a bitch myself."

All the early afternoon drinkers at Artie's watched the breaking news on the big TV like it was the end of the world. They were reliving nine-eleven, and it was in Chicago this time. Artie waved at the screen and mumbled, "This is not happening."

Junior Gunderson thought about his six kids. He shook his fist and yelled, "That's it! We gotta get tough now. No more screwing around. Nerve gas! They're all coming from Pakistan. Even Obama said we need to get some serious boots on the ground in there."

Tom Cantwell, fresh from three lines of cocaine in the back room said, "Yeah, and what about the Iranians and that loud mouthed jerk"? Everybody cheered. "We're gonna wipe the smile off that greasy little fagot's face. He was one of the original hostage takers at the embassy."

Artie couldn't take his eyes off the TV. "I just can't believe this shit is happening here." He filled two glasses of beer without looking down. "Beer's on the house," he announced.

Frank Cantwell, also fresh from the back room, stood up and said, "I'm going back in."

His brother Tom started laughing and asked, "You're gonna do what?"

"I going back in the army. I'm gonna personally shoot that lousy rag-top son of a bitch"! Everybody that heard him cheered.

"No you're not." His brother shook his head and gulped his beer.

"Why not"? He sat down.

"First of all, shit, you're too old."

"They have waivers for that now." He looked confident.

"Next, you can't pass the drug test." He put his finger to his nose.

"I'll be clean. I'm a lawyer now. They need lawyers."

"Oh please. You can't last more than an hour without a latrine

anymore. It ain't like a commercial airliner. You'd never make the flight over there without hanging it out the window." Everybody laughed.

Artie stayed mesmerized by the TV and didn't hear what they were laughing about. He just kept mumbling, "I just can't frigging believe this."

Murphy made it to the stakeout on time. He waved at the day shift as they pulled away and parked in their spot. His instincts told him that something wasn't right. The usually half empty street was crowded, and he felt like he was being followed. He didn't think it would do any good to circle the block first. Anybody tailing him would know where he was going and maybe even why. Things seemed to be falling apart fast. All he wanted to do was get on with it. The trial would be over soon and without much warning too. He knew it was only a matter of time before they pulled him off the stakeout. Somebody was already asking questions about the dead cop. Everything depended on finding out where the coke was before the trial ended.

Time passed slowly. There was nothing to do in the car except turn the whole thing over and over in his mind. Should he try and grab the teacher again or just rely on Carla to tell him where the stuff was. He wanted the satisfaction of getting back at David, but shooting at the guy wasn't working as a strategy to get him to cooperate. He didn't trust Carla, but scaring her just made her dig in. He feared that he might have to kill her after it was over anyway. Even if they gave her a full share and she cooperated fully, she could still talk to the police at any time. She might get busted later for something else and have to give them up to get a lighter deal.

Murphy imagined the scene in the garage and wanted another shot. He decided to go after the teacher again, but he knew the guy would be harder to find after all the commotion. The kid took

the bait. He fell for the phony note and ran from the feds. He ran like a scared rabbit, but he might go back to them too. Murphy didn't know what to do except resist the temptation to push his way into the bar and look for the coke. He'd have to kill Artie, and Artie might get him first. The old snowman wasn't likely to get caught with his pants down. He probably had the coke buried in the wall somewhere. Murphy couldn't be sure of anything. If he killed Artie before finding out where the coke was he might never find it. The old building was a good place to hide something, and time was running out.

A plain clothes rookie cop in a white 1973 Cadillac Fleetwood pulled over and parked three blocks behind Murphy. The big tank dripped oil and looked anything but inconspicuous. The chief sent the young officer in there to watch Murphy. The kid felt important looking through the binoculars and talking on the radio like a forward observer in some great battle. He keyed the mike, cleared his throat and whispered to the dispatcher. "Murphy just pulled up."

"Can he see you"?

"No way. I'm in a real good spot."

"Remember now, you're just there to watch him. If he moves, at all, call for back up."

"Affirmative." He peeked over his newspaper and thought about the things they lectured about at the police academy. Murphy's Ford had no dents. It didn't fit. Every other car was either dirty or damaged or both. He turned up the dashboard radio and heard the WBBM guy giving an update. The president was going to make a statement about the terrorist attack on the train. The announcer's voice was familiar and comforting. He said the airports were flying again, but the increased security insured a three hour delay at the terminals. Some middle eastern men were taken in for questioning at Ohare. They were booked on flights to Yemen and were thought to be members of a charity that was funneling money to terrorists. The rookie peeked at Murphy

through the binoculars. He looked like he was trying to sleep. A delivery man rolled a hand truck full of beer right past him and in through Artie's front door. Murphy never saw him.

Benton and one of his men sat on a motel bed and stared at a laptop computer. They had the subway shooting on tape. The young man smiled at his superior and said, "Roll that thing. The lab guys briefed me, but I haven't actually seen it yet."

"It's not very good," laughed Benton. Langley tried to fix it. It's better now, but the first guy, he's blocked out by pedestrians. It's just a cheap subway camera. Poor resolution. The cameras are a lot better in New York." He opened a picture file. "Here's a blow up of the side of his face. Look at his right hand. He's passing the gun to the shooter."

"Why wouldn't the shooter just carry the gun in himself?"

Benton stared at the Arabian headgear. "Don't know. You said the cops turned the weapon over to us. Where's the gun now?"

He put his feet up. "On its way to the FBI from Langley."

Benton noticed that the guy's socks didn't match. He had one black sock and one dark blue. "What did the Chicago cops say about it?"

"They never actually examined it. They just signed a release. I took it off the guy and sent it to Langley. It's a nine millimeter Beretta with the serial number filed off."

Benton smiled. "Langley got it first. The FBI might not like that."

"They're good with it. They're gonna help us figure out the serial number. They told me, well, there's not a good chance of matching it to the shooter though."

"Why not?"

"The FBI lab, they can get the number off it, no problem, even if it's been filed off. But what these guys do, the guys who buy untraceable pistols, they go to a gun dealer who does it for them.

They have like a couple dozen pistols mixed up in a basket, you know, with the numbers already filed off. The buyer pulls one out at random. Nobody knows who took what. It ain't cheap either. When we catch a gun dealer filing serial numbers, oh God, he goes up for a very long time. But still, not much chance of tracing this one, fast anyway."

"What about the slug"?

"Big match there. They recovered the round he fired. It matches the slug in the teacher's shoulder. Same gun."

"Oh yeah! What about the dead guy? Do we know who he is"?

"The guys in the lab, they've been all over the film. They can ID half the people on the platform. You were right too. He's no Saudi. Some local pervert out on parole. DOC mug shot."

"What about the other guy? He's the guy we were chasing. Who's the first guy, the one that brought the gun in"?

"No ID on him yet. Almost all we see is his back."

Benton got impatient. "The shooter looks surprised. They're not partners. The guy that fired in the subway, the shooter, he's a patsy. Looks like a last minute patsy too. How did the other guy ever get him to put that Arab shit on and fire the weapon"?

"Who knows."

"He runs into the subway, takes off his headdress, puts it on the pervert, tells him to fire in the air, and he does it. Holy shit." He wondered if the guy was slow. That might account for the perverted part too, he thought.

"The FBI will know. They'll find out if he had any links to any radical Islamic groups."

Benton laughed. "No way Jose. They don't recruit perverts."

"Maybe they just paid the guy. Maybe he's a disposable stooge, you know, like Oswald."

"I don't think so. Our man, the first guy, he's an amateur but a lucky one. He's not from big oil either. If he was, well, this thing would be over by now. Langley says there's no pro's on the radar."

"Where's the teacher now"?

Benton laughed. "He's here. They're in this motel. Room 402." He smiled at the guy's mismatched socks.

He knew Benton was laughing at his feet, but he didn't care. "I don't see why we don't just pick him up and take him back into custody. We can't protect him like this. He almost got killed today."

"I don't think so. The first guy, he's the one stalking our beloved professor. He's just an amateur, and the professor's paranoid of us anyway. We can watch him from here. Chicago cops, they can handle the stalker."

"I hope you're right."

Benton pointed at the computer screen. "The kid's with his girlfriend now, and she slows him down. The homing chip we gave him at the hospital, it's the latest version. It's accurate to within one meter. If he so much as goes to the ice machine, or to the bathroom, or even if he rolls over in bed, Langley tracks it." They laughed. "They read his frigging biological signs. They can tell when he's sweating. I'm not kidding. Not only do they know if he's having sex, they know the position. I think they even know if it's a God damned blow job. Houston we have ignition." They laughed.

"Or... Houston we have a problem." They laughed like teenagers.

"Get out of here," said Benton. "I'm gonna call my wife."

The guy jumped off the bed and said, "Houston...what are you wearing?"

Benton laughed and pushed him to the door. "Go on. Get out of here slick. And keep your radio on too."

Dori lay flat on her back in room 402 with David wiping her bloody forehead. The TV news reminded her of a surrealistic film she once suffered through on a girl's night out. They were running a twenty second video loop of a dead terrorist being wheeled out

of the subway. The caption said the president was about to speak. She looked at her lover's dirty face and said, "I'm scared. Maybe we should go back to the Pentagon guy. Maybe the message that said Benton was after you. Maybe it was a fake too."

"Oh God. I just don't know." He stroked her hair. "I'm afraid too. Maybe we need to split up."

"No way. You're my protector. I go where you go." She pointed at the TV. "Look."

The president approached the podium in the White House press room. He put his hands together and said, "Good afternoon. The attack in Chicago today proves what my administration has been saying all along. We are at war. We are at war with the Islamofacist extremists that will continue to bring evil to our shores unless we confront them on their home shores, home soil. We need to get them where they live. Take the battle to them instead of to us. While the democrats practice obstructionism with the funds we need to supply our troops in the field, in harm's way, our best and our brightest are dying as they run out of ammunition. I demand that... I call on the congress to do their duty and appropriate the funds I have requested for our operations in the middle east." A small crowd applauded off camera.

"Today we were attacked again," he smirked. "Critics who denied that nine-eleven could happen again have been silenced. My sources tell me, they say the religious fanatic that brutally attacked innocent civilians in Chicago today is suspected of having direct connections to extremist groups in Iraq that are bringing explosives across the border from Iran. We will not let this stand. I will not stand by and let our troops be attacked from across the Iranian border without doing everything I can as your Commander in Chief to get at the source of this evil. We will confirm the source of this attack, and we will strike hard, no matter where it is. I will now take a few brief questions." He pointed to a reporter in the front row. "Helen."

"Mr. President. Do I hear you right? Are you going to attack

Iran over this? Is the attacker Iranian”?

“My sources tell me he is suspected of being associated with a charity front that is, well, actually funding a group, an associated group that is bringing weapons across the border from Iran.”

“But is he Iranian”?

“As you already know, there is an ongoing investigation, and I choose not to comment on that at this time. I can neither confirm or deny that at this time.”

“Sir, I believe you owe the American people a better answer. Are you going to attack Iran”?

He looked annoyed and tried to smile. His lips went along with it, but his eyes did not. “The investigation is ongoing. We do not anticipate that in the near future. However, well, that being said, you see, all options are on the table.”

Helen yelled, “Mr. President! Your information on this man! What exactly are your sources”?

“That's classified of course. Next question.” He pointed to a man in the back row.

A bald man in a shiny suit stood up. He sounded like a bad actor reading a script in a hurried monotone. “Yes sir. What about the rumor that you have identified this man as one of the original members of the cell that took responsibility for the train bombing in France”? He sat down.

“No comment.” He pointed to a young woman from Fox News.

“Sir, thank you sir. Is it true that the vice president has been taken to an undisclosed location as we speak”?

“That is not true. I know where he is.” Everyone laughed. He backed up and started to leave. “Thank you for coming.” He walked off abruptly and turned his back to calls of “Mr. President. Mr. President.”

Dori said, “He didn't say unknown location. He said undisclosed location. He could be in an undisclosed location and Bush would still know where he is.”

David laughed. “Hey girl. You are good. But I'm not sure he

knows the difference. Now how did we get here from there? Where are we now? The guy in the subway wasn't a terrorist. He wasn't trying to blow up the train. He was trying to shoot me. They have to know he was chasing us. The trouble followed the train."

"I'm confused. The whole thing got blown up into all this. Who is Bush listening to? The president's an idiot." She laughed.

"He's not stupid. He loves this shit. Stir it up. Fear shocks people into obedience. Panic sends up the price of oil. When we all calm down, shit, you think it's over, but he still gets away with another scare. This crap ought to be good for a few dollars a barrel. Unleaded goes from three to four dollars. People panic. Then it slides back to three and a half, and we say thank God."

"That's the truth." She probed the bump on her head, rolling her fingers over the little dome to estimate its size.

He looked at her matted hair. "How do you feel"?

"I'm OK. I'm just tired."

"Are you hungry"? He picked up the phone.

"Not really. I'm too nervous to eat anyway. Can I call my dad"?

He imagined someone listening in and getting a fix on his location, but there was no way he was going to say no. She came first. He would do anything to make her comfortable. "Sure," he said. "If you want to." It's not a good idea, but if you want to..."

"I just have to. He's gotta be worried sick."

"Go ahead. It'll be alright." He got mentally ready to move again.

She dialed her father but he wasn't home. She waited for the recording to finish and tried not to cry. She heard the beep and pushed the words out like a diver coming up for air. "Dad I just wanted to tell you we're OK. Do what I tell you. Erase this recording after you hear it, and tell anybody that asks you that I'm staying at a friends and you don't know where, because you don't. We're OK. I'll explain later. Bye Dad. I love you."

David turned up the TV and got excited. "Oh my God Look!"

he shouted. "It's the rally on CNN." He pinched the little volume button again and overshot. It got too loud and he backed it off.

Dori smiled and scanned the crowd. The network started running a ten second video loop of a sign wielding student shoving a cop while being arrested. The sign said something about the end of the world. "Did you see that?" she laughed.

"When did that happen? I didn't see that." He stood up and tried to remember. "I never saw that. I think that was stock footage or something."

"Me too... Me either. We were there the whole time, from before it started. We could see everything. Well, unless it was out on the street somewhere maybe."

David sat down and threw the remote on the bed. "Here comes the spin. Watch this guy."

A network reporter stood in front of the administration building wearing a windbreaker and holding a cordless mike. The rally had just ended. People passed behind him and waved at the camera. The smiling reporter made his pitch. "The Chicago police estimate the crowd today at two to three hundred people."

"Bull shit," snapped David. "There were a lot more than that."

The wind blew the reporter's hair across his face. "Among other things, they called for the Government to take over the oil industry. Police say the event was attended by a loose collection of fringe groups. Anarchists, antiwar groups and socialists were here. There were a few arrests, but police were able to control the disturbances. They were in sufficient numbers to take care of the situation without any serious injuries or property damage."

A man at the network desk broke in. "Disturbances. And then the terrorist attack downtown. Are the police saying anything about a possible connection"?

"No. I asked them that. The Chicago Police tell me there is no connection. A captain did tell me, off the record, that the suspect, the shooter in the subway, was part of an ongoing investigation. They've been watching the guy for months. They decided they

had to take him down now because it was nearing the time when he was going to execute his plan.”

“The Sears Tower”?

“Off the record, that's what they tell me. Some sort of nerve gas attack.”

“My God. The Sears tower. I don't even want to think about how many people are in that building at any one time.”

“That's right.” Somebody on the campus lawn started a gas powered leaf blower, and a flock of pigeons took off behind the reporter's head.

The network cut to a stock picture of the Sears Tower. “We have to go to a break now. Anyway, it's a good thing the first responders did their job in Chicago today. Chalk one up for the Chicago Police. Thank you Skip.”

The reporter nodded with two students behind him waving at the camera.

Dori pushed David's back. “Did you see that lying shit”?

“I was sitting right here,” he laughed.

“The rally, it made the news big time though. It was a great turnout.”

“What did you expect? How many did they anticipate”?

“I don't know.”

“The news always lies about it. You gotta get ten thousand people to show up for them to say a thousand. Unless you're a republican that is. Then they count all their heads twice, and then multiply by the square root of Pi or some shit.” He laughed.

“It was a big turnout anyway. You struck a nerve alright. I'm so proud of you David. You're the man I want to get old with.” She kissed him on the lips.

He framed her face with his hands and looked straight into her eyes. “When you said that. What you said. I felt so... I mean...” He forced it. “It made me sure that I'm the one that gets to be your old buddy.” The words didn't fit and he wanted a do-over. She snuggled her head against his chest and squeezed his ribs so hard

that her arm strength surprised him. He kissed the top of her head and decided that he wouldn't change a word even if he could.

## Chapter 22

Benton joked with his men on the radio. They were angry and amazed about the president's press conference. "Hey Cobra, Did you see that shit?" he asked.

"Sir... He just went to the can. This is Underdog."

"Yeah Underdog. You see that shit"?

"Yes sir, I sure did. The president... I can't believe it either sir. He's been briefed. He knows it's a pervert. Langley knows. The FBI knows. Everybody knows. He's gotta know. He's just using it. God damn politics."

"Unbelievable," laughed Benton.

"He's implying an attack on Iran sir."

"Unfrickingbelievable."

"Who's in charge of this flea circus? If you don't mind me asking, my God, what the hell are we doing out here sir"?

Benton thought about resigning. "Unfrickingbelievable is what it is."

"You gonna call somebody sir? What should we do"?

"What can we do? Watch the teacher. If the damn world blows up, it blows up."

Underdog thought about covering his ass. "I can't believe this shit sir. This ain't no Tom Clancy novel you know. This shit is real."

"Hang in there mister. Calm down. Have a drink and keep your radio on."

“Yes sir. I think I'll just do that. We're standing by and I'm clear.” The radio sound went to white noise.

Benton pitched his earphone on the night stand and turned off the TV.

Murphy was half asleep in the Ford when the phone woke him up. “Yellow,” he said.

“It's me.”

“Rodriquez. What's up man”? His pulse jumped.

“I just wanted to talk to you. My lawyer says we are done in a few days.”

“I know.”

“I did my part. I didn't say nothing yet. You ready to do yours”?

“Sure I am.” He looked at Artie's empty parking lot. “I'm watching it right now. I could get it tonight if I had to,” he lied.

“You better be sure Murphy, cause if you screw this up, no matter what happens to me...”

“Relax...”

“You the one that's nervous. No matter what happens to me, if you screw me, you will die a most painful and slow death. Do you understand cop”?

Murphy hated sucking up to anybody. “One more time. The day you play the switch card, that's when I move. If I move before that, you know, it won't work. They'd know something was up.” He imagined clever ways of killing Rodriquez. “Don't worry about me. You did your part and I'm gonna do mine. I'll have my man get a message to you about where to meet up. It'll be on a sunny beach and far away from here my friend.” He laughed like he meant it. “We'll have a party. I'll be rich, and you'll be free and have your shit back. You pay us off... And you never see us again. OK”?

He sensed Murphy's uncertainty. “I can always find you.”

“I said relax. I've got...” Rodriquez hung up.

The anxiety made Murphy sick to his stomach. He looked at the bar again. It wasn't busy so he dialed Artie's number.

"Artie's bar. Your husband just left. He's on his way home," he laughed.

"Artie this is Murphy." He changed hands with the phone and put his wallet in his coat pocket.

"Yo Murphy. Something moving out there man? Nothing moving in here."

"Just us hungry cops. Can you make me a pizza? I'm not supposed to leave the car."

"No-prob-lem-o. One masterpiece coming up. What you want on it? I got some homemade pepperoni. My dad made it last night. Real fresh. No preservatives."

"Sounds great. Put peppers on it too. Pepperoni and jalapenos. Ain't that the specialty of the house"?

"Lots a guys like it that way. Be about fifteen minutes. I'll bring it out. You want a beer? I won't tell."

"Better not. I'll take a big soda though."

"I remember. RC. You like RC. I've got some too."

"Oh yeah. Thanks man." Murphy hung up. He started to dream about what he would do with the money like people do when they fantasize about hitting the lottery. He imagined himself skimming across the ocean in a high speed racing boat and learning to fly so he could fish from a float plane. Next, he was flying over the Rodriguez home and dropping a bomb on a coke party by the pool. The time passed quickly. Artie came out hugging a giant pan covered with wax paper. He didn't want to dash right over to the Ford, so he jogged down the other side of the street and crossed at the light. Murphy watched him balance the soda like the pro that he was. The big bartender knew every hiding place on the street and disappeared momentarily before popping out of a narrow space between two storefronts and climbing into the back seat. Murphy turned around and said, "Oh man. Smell that sucker."

"I brought you a big one. I'm hungry too."

“Let me pay you for it,” said Murphy.

“Hell no. I never ate on a stakeout before. This is so cool. Even if I am watching my own place. When do we watch the woman strip through the telescope, you know, like the movie?” They laughed.

“That's what everybody thinks.” Murphy took a paper plate from Artie and stacked three big pizza slices on it.”

Artie started looking at second story windows through imaginary binoculars. “What's that movie with what's his name? They watch that babe strip, and then the one cop beds her down?”

“Stakeout.” He laughed.

“I loved it when he fell asleep, all night in the sack with her, and then the shift changed.”

“Damn movies. It never works that way on a real detail. It's way too boring for words. Time goes slow. Your butt hurts. Usually one guy sleeps at a time.” He chewed the hot pizza very carefully, but he was too hungry to wait.

Artie watched him tear it up and smiled. “I suppose you're right. Anyway, I hear the trial's about over. You're probably glad to get it over with huh?”

“Oh yeah. I haven't pulled a sleeper shift for years. I paid my dues years ago man.”

“Switching the coke, seems like a lot a trouble to go to, but I guess you guys know best.”

“Oh shit. You don't know the half of it. There's been more than one light fingered Louie in THAT evidence room. We had to be sure this time.”

Artie chewed and talked at the same time. “I can dig it. You deserve a raise though. All this crap, and then Red broke you're arm. Bet he's on YOUR shit list. I'm real sorry about that man. It's all my fault.”

“No no... Hell no. No hard feelings. The teacher, he didn't know what we were doing there. Then he got famous. You know, with the oil revolution thing. Trouble seems to find you when you

try and overthrow the damn government.” He laughed. “What an idiot.”

Artie wiped his fingers on his apron. “Looks like he's real good at pissing people off. I haven't seen him. Rumor is, he's on the run.”

“I heard he got shot,” joked Murphy. “Forgot to duck or some shit.”

Artie patted Murphy on the shoulder. “That's not all. He must have really pissed off somebody who gives a shit with that Internet crap. He's famous alright.”

Murphy looked for a way to change the subject. “He still come around”?

“Not for a while. He's too famous for us now.” He laughed. “I saw him in the hospital right before he took off. He had the feds guarding him up there, and he just took off. I don't understand what the hell is going on.”

“What about his buddy”?

“He still comes in all the time. His band, he's even playing right over here, right down the street tonight. At Fitzgeralds.”

Murphy gulped the big soda and put the plastic lid back on. “He's in a band”?

“Oh yeah. He's a blues dog. Used to play a lot in the sixties. Played with some big people too. We used to see him all the time down on Rush street in the late sixties. He still plays now and then, here and there, especially Fitzgeralds. It's still one of the best blues gigs around, and it's right here. Right down the street. We get pretty busy after the band stops too. Suburban college kids.”

“Used to go there myself years ago.” Murphy remembered dancing with easy college girls that all seemed to be named Brandy or Jennifer. “Remember *Big Twist*”?

“You remember them?” He smiled.

“Shit yes.”

Artie loved talking about the band because they partied with

him, bought a lot of coke and always paid with cash. “They used to play free in the Park over here once a year. They're actually from southern Illinois, down by Carbondale. We used to close the bar for the park concert every year. Took the whole gang over there man.”

“Oh yeah. Sounds like a riot.” Murphy was glad that Artie didn't bring up Carla.

They joked around like neighbors until the the pizza was almost gone. Murphy went on and on about how good it was and offered to bankroll a restaurant. He even contemplated buying the recipe and running a tourist trap somewhere. Artie got thirsty and started to excuse himself. He pulled on the back seat door handle but it was locked. Murphy saw him pulling on it and hit the release button. Artie remembered that cop doors lock automatically. He felt a strange sense of panic and said, “Nice talking to you man. I better get back behind the bar.”

Murphy saw his forced expression and got the feeling cops get when people avoid them socially. “Thanks again man. I appreciate it. Great pizza.” Artie jogged away. Murphy watched him slip between the buildings and reappear a minute later on the other side of the empty street. He stopped outside the bar to greet a customer going in. The man was dressed in leathers with an American Flag on his back. They pushed each other affectionately around until Artie surrendered and held the door open.

Murphy swung his binoculars down the street toward Fitzgeralds. Young people lined up on the sidewalk were being carded as they passed by a blackboard easel that served as a marquis. He tried to read it. *The Silver-back All Star Reunion Band* with live blues 9 to 1. A big bouncer with massive tattooed forearms checked IDs and made change from a small metal box. Murphy zoomed in on some of the women in tight jeans. The adrenalin from the day's events affected him in a funny way. He didn't know if he wanted to sleep or run a marathon. His arm hurt

too. He watched the dance crowd coming and going for a couple of hours. Girl watching gave him something to do while fantasizing about being rich, but it wasn't long before needed to find a bathroom. He decided to take a look inside the club and see if Nick was actually playing in there like Artie said he was. He locked up the cruiser and crossed the street.

The bouncer was nowhere to be seen, so he didn't need his badge to get in. He was too busy checking out the women on the way to the bathroom to even glance at the stage. Murphy laughed. It was wall to wall babes. He watched a tall blond in a skimpy top working behind the bar and watched her reflection in the mirror as she bent over to pick something up. She reminded him of his first wife, and it made him feel young. He picked his way through the tables to the back of the room. The band came back from a break, and people cheered. He got in line at the bathroom, leaned against the wall and faced the stage. A woman yelled *Free Bird!* and everybody laughed.

The bass player started warming up. Murphy felt the wood under his feet resonate with the low notes. The whole room was an instrument. The crowd clapped in rhythm and whistled at the stage, while the sound man counted into a microphone. The drummer spattered around the tom toms and kicked the bass drum with a deep, "*Thud...thud thud.*" The line moved along, and Murphy got his turn at the urinal. He straddled the messy drain and tried to read the scratchy graffiti right in front of his face. A toilet flushed. The room smelled like pot and disinfectant.

The crowd screamed, and the singer stirred it up. "OK! Here we go! Were gonna start with a tune written by a friend a mine. *Blue Side a Town.* One, two, three, four." One of the guitar players did a classy intro riff, and the band took off like a syncopated train. Murphy zipped his fly and wiped his hands on his pants. He stepped out and scanned the stage. Nick was up there playing guitar just like Artie said he would be. He checked his watch and tried to find a good spot to stand. He saw some

people looking at his pistol, so he showed them his badge. It made him feel uncomfortable, so he moved to a table in the corner.

The dancers partially blocked his view of the stage, but he could still see Nick sawing away up there and having a great time. The volume was a little too loud for the size of the room, but the music was tight. Murphy loved it. It reminded him of better times. He waved off a woman waiting tables when she signaled for an order. He couldn't drink because he'd already flashed his badge. The old memories came back, but the girls seemed much younger and a lot rougher than they used to be when he and his rookie class buddies were in there. It was still the place where yuppie white kids went to hear the real Chicago blues. It was a nice place with great atmosphere, not too stuffy, but not trashy either. They even had imported beer before it was cool.

Murphy realized that he would never see the place again. It hurt. It was a lot to give up. He watched the dancers and considered the implications. Even though things have changed since the sixties, Chicago is still a world class blues hub. If a British rocker is in town and he wants to do the blues, he probably goes to Fitzgeralds, or Buddy Guy's, or one of the few old spots left where it's not uncommon to see big stars shooting pool right next to you. The famous places used to be on the south side, but nobody wants to go there any more. The white kids catch the blues bands in the suburbs, and sometimes the only black people in the club are in the band. Murphy missed the old clubs on the south side and remembered sitting ten feet from Muddy Waters when he was too young to drink. The whole thing depressed him. He tried to stare at the blond behind the bar again, but she was too far away for a proper fantasy.

He listened to the band longer than he thought he should. An hour was a long time for a tinkle. They started playing a song that he knew, and it reminded him of a lifelong desire to learn the guitar. He took another look at Nick bending the strings and

promised himself that he would take it up now that he had the time. He started picking his way out through the crowd, sliding sideways and excusing himself as he stepped over people and violated their personal space. A pumped up, tattooed bouncer opened the heavy wooden door for him. Cold air rushed in, and Murphy ducked out as the big gorilla bid him a good evening in some sort of thick Russian accent.

Murphy checked the area around the cruiser. The street was deserted, and he was pretty sure that nobody would know he was away for so long. He felt the keys in his pocket. A big motorcycle revved up and down-shifted into Artie's parking lot. He knew it was a Harley without even looking. The pipes sounded modified and less than legal.

The rookie cop in the Fleetwood watched Murphy climb back in the Ford and decided that the veteran cop had been drinking on duty. He looked at his watch and noted the time on a little green pad. Murphy thought about David's friend Nick. He wanted to stop him after the band finished and make him say where David was. It was risky. It might even get back to Artie, but something had to be done. Time was running out. He pulled out his private phone and called Stone. It rang several times before he finally picked up.

“What. What.”

Murphy yelled, “Damn it boss! You asleep?”

“Hell no.” He was stoned and very drunk.

“Is she asleep?”

“No.”

“What's she doing?”

Murphy heard him cover the phone with his hand and whisper, “He wants to know what you're doing.”

“Hey! I heard that. What the hell are you doing over there?”

Stone laughed. “We're not doing anything. We're just sitting here contemplating the universe.”

“You're drunk.”

“That's affirmative.”

“You're gonna pass out, and she's gonna run right out the God damned front door.”

“Negative,” he joked.

Murphy tried be cool. “You gotta be careful with her.”

“Yeah right. Actually... Oh who cares anyway. I can't lie to you. You caught us in bed. We were just shooting speed when you called.” She laughed.

“Ass hole.”

“We're fine Dad. What you want”?

Murphy heard Carla laughing in the background. “Look here. The teacher's social worker friend, the Nick guy, he's playing in a band just down the street. I'm gonna question him after they close.” He rolled up the window and sipped his cold coffee.

Stone got serious. “That's way too risky. Don't do it man. He's too close to Artie. If he gets suspicious...”

“I gotta do something! I don't trust your drinking buddy there, miss hot pants to...”

“Don't do it man! What you gonna do anyway? You gonna question him or threaten him”?

“I'm just... I have to see if he knows where teacher is, that's all.” He clenched his fist a little too hard, dropped the phone, picked it back up and set his coffee down. “You still there man”?

Stone smiled at Carla and started showing off. “Think about it first, dumb ass. For once in your miserable life, think before you act. That social worker guy knows the teacher broke your arm. He was there. He's gonna think you want to jack him up. He knows the teacher don't... He don't wanna see you man. You go running up in the guy's face. He ain't...”

“I've got no choice.”

Stone took charge. “We don't need the teacher that bad.”

Murphy whispered, “She can hear you.”

Stone laughed and winked at Carla. “She's in the can.”

Murphy imagined the worst. “Jesus! Is there a window in

there”?

Stone laughed. “I can hear her singing in the shower. I don't hear any broken glass.”

“Be careful God damn it. I mean it.”

“Yeah sure. I'm just kidding. Take a breath.”

Murphy swallowed hard. “Stay awake. Don't let her fool you. I'm gonna talk to this guy. If he tells me where the teacher is... I'm going right after him, right here, right now.”

“But he's got feds watching his ass.”

“Screw the feds.” Murphy hung up.

The dance ended, the crowd evaporated into the night, and the guys in Nick's band congregated around the side door to the parking lot. Friends of the band rolled speaker cabinets off the stage and out to an old panel truck. Nick put his arm around a happy young woman he met on the first break and shared a joint with. They were feeling the joy and ready to walk over to his apartment a few blocks away. The band manager went looking for the club owner to get the money. They had a fresh pint of Jack Daniels propped up on the front seat of the truck, and all the musicians took turns at it. Nick's new friend didn't need any. She was so high that anything and everything made her laugh. She tried to kiss him and nearly fell down in the gravel. He held her up by the waist and yelled inside. “Hurry up in there Murray! Show us the money! Betty says hurry too”!

She leaned back in his arms and batted her eyes. “I'm Betty Ford,” she said. “That's my real name. No rehab jokes. Where we going hot shot”?

Nick grabbed her butt and tried to kiss her. “I don't live far,” he said.

She pushed him away and teased him. “You married? You look married.”

“No baby. I'm not married.” He smiled and slid his hand up

under her jacket.

She grabbed his wrist and pulled it out. “You ever been married?”

He called out to the band. “Hey you guys. She wants to know if I've ever been married.”

They broke out laughing and slapped each other around. The drummer said, “He's been married so many times we stopped counting.” Everybody laughed. “Whatever you do, oh my God, don't marry him. It ruins everything.”

“How many times has he been married?” She laughed.

“What do you expect?” joked the bass player. “He's a musician ain't he.” They laughed again.

Nick defended himself. “You guys are so full of it. I used to have a real job you know. I'm retired.”

The bass player said, “Save yourself honey, before it's too late. We think he buries them in the basement. They won't eat the mushrooms.” They all laughed and made choking sounds.

Nick let go of her and said, “You all are just jealous.” He pointed at the drummer and took a cheap shot. “The last time he got lucky, you know, Nixon was president.”

The bass player tipped it in. “And she looked like Nixon too.” The drummer chased after the bass player with a symbol stand and nearly ran into Murphy walking onto the lot.

Nick couldn't believe it. “Oh my God. Yo Officer Murphy... You...”

“Hello Nick. You guys were great.” He put his hands in his pockets.

The other musicians ducked around the other side of the truck and out of sight. Nick's lady friend went too. The bass player whispered “Cop”? The drummer shrugged his shoulders and tossed a little bag of pills in the bushes.

Nick smiled at Murphy. “Were you in there? I thought you might be. Being so close and all.”

“Yeah. I was just down the street watching Artie's, you know,

lousy stakeout. I heard you guys playing and I just wanted to say hi.”

“OK.” Nick had no idea what to think. He heard feet shuffling in the dirt behind the truck and imagined the band running away. He got pissed and decided that his sex kitten wasn't coming back. He didn't care what Murphy wanted, and he wasn't going to hide his anger.

Murphy ignored the people running away. “I need to touch base with you Nick. Why don't you have a seat in my car for just a minute.”

“Hell no”! I can outrun this prick, he thought.

“No no. It's not like that. I'm not supposed to be away from the car, that's all. Just take a minute. It's just routine. OK”?

Nick thought about it for a while, but followed Murphy over to the car. He had no reason to fear him personally. The crazy cop was pissed at David but not him. He sensed no real danger, but the intrusion made him angry enough to kick ass if Murphy started it.

“Get in,” said Murphy. “Just make yourself comfortable.”

Nick's concentration sharpened. The adrenalin sobered him up but ruined his buzz. The police car made him a little paranoid. He didn't have any drugs in his pockets. They were in his guitar case and locked in the truck. Murphy wasn't after drugs anyway. He flopped down on the seat and growled, “OK Officer Obie. what's up then”?

Murphy smiled and threw one arm across the seat-back. “You guys were great. I didn't even know you played.”

“Yeah sure. I've been playing a long time, well, since I was a kid. I still play out but not as much as I used to.”

“No shit. Man you were great. I really liked it. Artie told me you were over there.”

“Yeah.” He looked embarrassed.

“So Nick... You seen David lately”?

He took a sip of coffee. He sat up sharply. “No... Have you”?

“No Nick. I haven't seen him. Just tell me what you know. Do you know where he is or not”?

“If I did, and I don't... I'm not sure I'd tell YOU about it anyway. I trust you about as far as I can throw a burning bag of horse shit.”

Murphy looked at his short barreled shotgun clamped to the dash. “Hey hey. We're on the same side. What happened before don't mean shit now. There's no way you guys could have known who we were and why we were there and shit.”

“You must think I'm real stupid. Don't piss down my back and tell me it's raining. I pulled a pistol on you guys. What the hell are you gonna do after the trial's over? You're gonna want to get even just like any other pissed off cop would do.” Nick couldn't believe what he just said.

Murphy coughed. “No. No way. But I need to know where David is. Somebody's trying to kill him. It's our duty to protect him.” Headlights from a passing car blinded him temporarily and made him cover his eyes.

“David doesn't want your protection.”

“I want to hear that from him. That's all I want. Tell me where he is.” He looked serious.

“I don't know.”

“Then how do you know he doesn't want my help? I was hoping we could do this the easy way.”

Nick made a fist. “Shit! Here we go again with the God damned rubber hose routine”! He put his hand on the door handle and tried to think. He was glad he didn't have his little pocket pistol on him when Murphy showed up.

Murphy smiled like he had a trump card. “You see, under normal circumstances, I wouldn't even bother with such a little thing as...”

“As what”! He was ready to fight. It was a matter of principle.

“I can take you down anytime I want for various drug offenses. You know that.”

“Is that all,” laughed Nick. “You gonna bust me for possession? That's weak. Screw you Murphy. I ain't telling you shit. You can kiss my ass.” He offered his wrists to be cuffed.

Murphy turned away. “Oh come on Nick...”

“I told you the truth man. I don't know where he is. I really don't.”

“Murphy smiled like an understanding father. “I believe you. I really do. But he'll come around sooner or later. You call me and tell me. I can help him. It's my job.”

Nick laughed. “Oh please. Can I go now?”

Murphy popped open the rear door lock. “Call me man.”

Nick jumped out, slammed the door as hard as he could and jogged back over to the side door of the club. It was locked tight. The truck was gone too. He knocked a few times and the bartender let him in. “Did they leave without me?” he whined.

“Well,” she said. “They left you a message in case you came back. I'm supposed to tell you to meet them tomorrow at rehearsal. They've got your money.”

He felt stupid and abandoned. “Shit! I didn't do anything either. God damned cops.

## Chapter 23

David and Dori lounged around in their motel room all morning. They took a chance by staying in the same place for two consecutive nights. It was safer to move, but they were tired and didn't want to. David surfed the TV news tickers. Dori tried to get his attention while crunching down on a little bag of sour cream and onion chips she got out of a vending machine. "David," she moaned. "What's going on baby? Talk to me."

"Chavez asked the Saudis to sell their oil in a mixed basket of currencies instead of just dollars."

"Is that a big deal"? She opened a warm can of orange soda that fizzed up and went everywhere. She tried to get it over the sink. David handed her a bath towel.

"It's a big deal alright. Oil is traded in dollars. To change that would hurt us. The Saudis said no. At least the king said no. Good thing they don't ask the people what they want. The DOW fell below twelve."

"Just because of that"? She wiped her lips.

"They say Chavez wants his own nukes." He shook his head. "Who knows what to believe."

"You think he means it"?

"I don't know? Same old scare tactics. Nukes pointed at us again. Chavez this time. Who knows if he really did say that. Could be a load of propaganda. Even when I see the guy's lips moving, who knows what he's saying. I don't speak Spanish. I'm

just supposed to trust the interpreter. If he did say it, that he wants nukes, he's probably bluffing. Saber rattling. Bush don't care. He loves it. The scare just runs up his oil stock some more."

Dori didn't hear him. She got distracted by a fast food commercial. "I'm hungry," she begged. "Let's go eat. We can take a chance and go to Chinatown."

"If you want to. There's probably nobody watching. I'm not worried," he lied.

She saw worry in his eyes. "Yes you are. What are we going to do? We can't run forever."

"I know, and I've been thinking. We gotta call the Pentagon. It's the logical thing to do. Benton, well, if he's a fake, then they'll know it. If he's not, OK, then they'll know that to. The problem is, Christ, I just don't know WHAT he is."

She sat on the bed. "OK. I'm listening. I think he's a fake, but I'm listening."

"What do we know for sure. Somebody wants to shoot me. If the government is after me then I'm dead no matter what. If big oil is after me, and Benton was assigned to protect me, then they fooled me into running out from under my protection. I need the truth on Benton. The way I see it, we need to confront the Pentagon directly."

"You can't just call the Pentagon and ask them if Benton really works there"?

"Why not? I've got to figure out who's doing this shit. If it's big oil, well fine then, it's not the government. If it's Benton by himself, without the Pentagon, then he's gotta be on the take from somewhere. Maybe he's a double agent for J. R. Ewing or some shit."

"Suppose the tip was real. Suppose Benton IS after you. Who tipped you off about him? How would they know? Why would they tell you? What's in it for them"?

"I don't know. My brain hurts. We'll just have to keep moving until I figure it out, that's all. We don't have to do anything yet."

We don't have to solve it today. I'll tell you what I DO know. Every time I let my guard down somebody shoots at me.” He stared at the news ticker running across the TV. *New Study Links Chemical in Marijuana to Lower Rates of Breast Cancer.* He turned it off and said, “What we need is a secure computer connection.”

Dori remembered what her cell phone bill looked like. “I'm not so sure they can track or bug my cell phone.”

“If they know who you're going to call ahead of time, they can just tap that number. They'll be watching your dad, yeah, and my dad too. We need a computer or something. I don't know anything about encryption stuff.”

“We don't need that. We can text with my cell phone. We can even post on the blog.”

“Not with YOUR phone. I don't even want to turn it on. They know that phone by now, whoever they are. They know when and where you bought it. They know what color it is. They know when the battery is low. I don't trust it. I wish we didn't make the call we did. We need a secure computer.”

“If you say so.”

“There we go. A new computer would be secure for a while. We can talk to the Pentagon. We can read the blog. We can talk to Nick.”

She thought about Bonnie Parker writing to the newspapers while Clyde was robbing banks. “We can talk to everybody. We can tell our side of the story. Unless... Until they track it down.”

“It's gotta be hard to track a new machine if you do it right.” He relaxed and smiled.

“If we buy one then they'll know where and when we got it.”

“And which one. I think they have ID codes buried in them. I heard about that. Every computer has its own digital signature or something. They can read it when you're logged on. They know what machine it's coming from.”

“But can they tell where it is”?

“I don't know. I think we should use Internet cafes. We could send little short messages and keep moving around. Maybe I'm being too paranoid, but the government don't tell you what they can and can't do.”

“It's worth a try. There's a list of places like that in the yellow pages. Hand me the phone book.” She stood up and straightened her top.

“Artie's got broadband,” he joked. “We could live there.” He handed her the thick heavy book from a drawer in the nightstand.

“Very funny.” She started thumbing through the pages. “We could sleep on a pool table and shower in the crapper.”

Benton sat quietly in a fluffy brown recliner in a motel room that was a little nicer than where David and Dori were staying. He sipped his orange juice and read a story about Iraq in Time Magazine. He was alone because his partners had to go in for mandatory training. They were attending their yearly one day session on sexual harassment. Rather than fly all the way back to the Langley, they decided to catch a class at the nearby Great Lakes Naval Station and get it signed off there. Benton was reading about oil contracts in Iraq when his earphone started buzzing. He knew it was Langley calling, but he wanted to have the day to himself and had to hide his attitude when he picked up. “Benton.”

“He's moving sir.”

“Moving where”?

“How should I know sir”?

“You guys... Can't you back off a little? He's probably going to the ice machine.”

“No sir, he's moving. He's going out sir. He's outside already.”

Benton didn't bother to sign off. He jumped out of the recliner, grabbed his windbreaker and went down the back stairs. He reached his car in seconds. It was unseasonably warm and he

didn't need the jacket, so he threw it over the seat. Heavy traffic kept him pinned in the driveway while he watched his targets jogging away at a good clip. They ducked in and out of places that no car could follow. Benton surged out in front of a red tiny Miata. The driver knew better than to play chicken with a bigger car. Benton broke out and the chase was on. David took Dori's arm and pulled her through the front door of a high rise office building. Benton thought they would just run through the lobby, and he guessed right. He caught sight of them running out a side door and shagged along about two blocks behind. They jumped into the first empty cab they saw, and the driver took off right away. Benton fiddled with his wire while stuck at a red light. He heard an approaching fire truck but couldn't see it. The street smelled like diesel smoke and sewer gas. He raised the window and calling in. "Langley, do you copy?"

"I copy. They're moving west on..."

"I know, I know. I have them in sight." The firetruck went by.

"You got 'em sir"?

"They're in a taxi up ahead of me." The light changed and the traffic started to move. Benton followed three cars behind, but the cab hugged the right lane and was easy to follow. He could overtake them anytime he wanted to by forcing his big car into the left lane and coming up alongside. A bike messenger cut him off, and he instinctively whacked the horn before he could stop himself. "Oh! That was REAL smart!" he yelled. "Look at me. I'm following you."

The cab driver could see that her two passengers were nervous. They were constantly looking around and slumping down on the seat. She didn't care why. It was all in a days work, and she just wanted a tip. She broke the ice with, "Hey... You're in the Cash Cab! A game show where you get to ask me easy questions, and if I get 'em right you get to give me money." They all laughed.

"Where's the disco lights?" asked Dori. The driver started blinking the dome light on and off. They all had a good laugh.

The driver looked over her shoulder and asked, “You guys said Chinatown right? Anywhere special in Chinatown?”

“Anywhere is good,” said David. “We don't even know where we're gonna eat yet.”

The driver raced through a blinking yellow light and said, “You could eat at a different place every day for a month down there and not go to the same place twice.”

“I know a place on Lawrence,” said Dori. “They have a fantastic general's chicken.” She looked at David for confirmation.

“That's good. Drop us there.”

“I think it's fifty something west,” said Dori. “It's got Chinatown in its name. It's a red and green sign I think.”

The driver hit a pot hole and laughed. “That's easy enough.”

Dori watched the sun popping in and out of the clouds. That's the way it is here, she thought. It's always cloudy by the lake, but you can drive an hour away from it in any direction and the clouds disappear. “The lake likes its clouds,” she said.

“What?” laughed David.

“The lake is always cloudy. It likes to wear the same clouds every day. Like a teenager with a favorite old worn out jacket. It even sleeps in its clouds.”

“That's nice,” said the driver.

Dori went on. “I had one when I was a kid, an old jacket. It's the worn out part that you like, that makes it comfortable.”

“That's right,” said the driver.

“My mom got so sick of it. I wouldn't give it up, so she burned it.” She looked at David for sympathy.

He got distracted by the smell of spicy meat and vegetables frying and said, “Driver. Follow that smell.” They all laughed.

“I smell it too,” said Dori. “We can get out right here.”

The driver pulled over. Dori peeled off a few singles for the tip. She handed them across the seat to the driver and held the door back for David as he stepped out. The driver waved and

thanked them as they joined a line of people going inside. David grabbed a big brass handle on the front door to the restaurant and it pulled hard, but it didn't move.

Dori laughed and pushed it open with little effort. "It opens IN," she laughed.

"Thanks coach." He followed her up to the counter. A young man walked them to a nice table near a window. They got seated right away because the lunchtime rush wasn't there yet.

Dori sat down and asked, "What do you feel like today professor?"

The waiter came through a swinging door and stepped up to the table with a pen and a pad. "Ready to order?"

"Generals chicken," said David.

"Me too," she said. "And could we have some... A large order of crab Rangoon too.

"Sounds good," said the waiter.

"Ice tea for both of us," said David. The waiter smiled and went back into the kitchen. "I love crab Rangoon way too much. I could eat a ton of that stuff in one sitting. There goes the low fat diet."

"There's no calories in it if you're running for your life," she laughed. "It don't count."

"Oh sure. OK."

She made a funny face. "Scientists say that the adrenalin produced by being stalked by the bad guys accelerates the metabolism exponentially and burns off the fat molecules at a rate roughly equal to four to the seventh power." They laughed.

"Science! She blinded me with science." The waiter brought the tea, and David started gulping it down like a dying man stumbling out of the dessert.

Dori thought about the booze and wanted to encourage him, but she couldn't decide how to bring it up without scraping a nerve. "So how you doing with the, er, drinking?" She made a light face.

"I'm good. I thought I'd get the shakes, but I didn't."

“You feel OK?”

“I think so. Maybe the booze was just a nervous tic or something. I'm a little obsessive compulsive. I think I'll substitute compulsive gambling,” he laughed.

Thank God he didn't get pissed when I asked about it, she thought. “You feel better now?”

“I think so. I read that the best way to quit was to not think about it though.”

“Think about what,” she laughed.

He stared at the kitchen door and asked, “You ever have sizzling rice soup?”

Benton couldn't see the front door of the restaurant from where he was parked, but he didn't have to. The GPS guy on the other end of his wire would tell him when to move and in what direction. He spent the time checking out women going into the restaurant. It was already too cold for short skirts but not cold enough to cover up. He enjoyed the fashion show knowing that the approaching winter would put girl watching on hold until spring. He compared two women waiting for a bus and wondered about the color of their eyes. Somebody reached over his windshield. He'd only been there fifteen minutes, and the meter cop gave him a ticket. He was in some sort of delivery zone. Feds didn't have to pay parking tickets, but he still wanted to jump out and argue. The cop didn't even look at him and walked away smiling.

The boredom made him yawn and turn on the radio to check the baseball scores. He suffered through sleazy commercials for gold futures, a free Vegas vacation with a captive sales pitch, home equity loans, furniture rental, reverse mortgages, copper bracelets that cure arthritis, and the army. The pitches finally stopped, but the breaking news was about a new way to make stem cells without using human embryos. He pushed the talk

button and spoke to his tracker at Langley. "They've been in there an hour and..."

"Not moving. Must be good food or poor service or both."

"It's not busy. They're feasting and I'm out here sitting at the curb."

"Go on in and join them," he laughed.

"I wish I could. I'm eating an old sandwich I got at the the gas station last week."

"Some of the things we do for our country man. Why don't you send your crew out for some ribs or something"?

"I'm solo today. They went up to Great Lakes to get their sensitivity training. Nothing worse than an insensitive assassin."

"Sexual harassment training. I did mine already. I kept the answers to the test too. What's the right answer? If a sharp young woman in your office refuses to give you a blow job in the conference room you should back off, assume she's gay, offer her a promotion, or transfer her to Minot North Dakota."

"All of the above and..."

"Hold on there," he interrupted. "He's moving sir. Yeah. He's on his way out."

"I'm out of here." He started the car and put it in gear.

"He's moving north. He's outside the building already."

"I'm moving." He drove past the front door and turned right at the next corner. "I don't see him yet."

"You're right on him. You're way too close."

Benton drove by and saw them standing between a concrete wall and an old garage. "I see them. I'm backing off. They're still on foot and it makes it hard to shadow. Too easy to overshoot. I wish they'd get back in a cab. It's too damn hard to follow anybody in here. I gotta get out of the car."

"They're moving west."

"I see 'em. I'm getting out." He parked the big tank in a Wendy's lot and took off on foot. He struggled to walk and speak into the wire at the same time without drawing attention. "I'm on

the street. I've got him in sight, but if they so much as get on a bus I'm screwed.”

“Don't get too... You're still too damn close. I'm telling you. They'll see you sir.”

“Jesus. Just relax. I'm good. They're moving west.” He caught his breath and hung back behind a big shrub until the distance opened up a little. David and Dori broke into a fast walk. Benton tried to remember a visual image of where he left the car and started walking again. The street got busy. It was easier to hide in the crowd without falling too far behind. He could stay close for quite a while with no problem. A bus stopped right next to David, but he didn't seem interested and walked right by. They were moving at something close to a normal speed but not stopping at corners. They weren't stopping for anything, and Benton broke a sweat trying to keep up. Big dogs barked at him as he passed. Somebody was burning leaves nearby, and the smoke made him sneeze. He stopped to wipe his nose and lost sight of them. He immediately asked for help. “Shit. I think I lost...”

“South, south. They went south, but they stopped already.”

Benton ran across the street and hid behind the corner of a building. He peeked out in their direction but didn't see them. “They're gone...”

“They're twenty feet from you. You're too damn close sir. You need to hang back. Listen to me. No mater what, you're not going to lose contact. I can tell you where they are. That's why they pay us the big bucks. They don't call us the satellite cowboys for nothing.”

Benton scanned the area and decided that they had to be inside the only working storefront on the street, and he was right. He walked by the front window of the place and saw them inside talking to an employee. It was some sort of coffee house with a sign that offered free broadband access. “I got 'em Stu,” he bragged.

“You're way too close sir. Twenty one feet.”

“They're inside. It's a little geek hangout or something. They'll be in there a while, and I'm gonna go back for the car. Tell me if they move. I'll risk it. They ain't going anywhere in five minutes.”

“Understood sir.”

Benton retraced his route at running speed and set off the same string of dogs in the opposite direction.

The internet cafe was full of day traders and kids surfing for free porn. Dori hung on David's shoulder while he punched up Nick's instant message code. He was home and answered right away.

*rtnickstr: Red Man!...oh my God it's really you dude. You OK? You have anything to do with the gunfire downtown at the train dude?*

David typed with two fingers. *Pinko1: Yes...and never mind where I am.* Dori looked relieved.

*rtnickstr: I thought you were mad at me dude.*

*Pinko1: No no. I'm just a little busy. Somebody's trying to kill me.“*

*rtnickstr: OMG*

*Pinko1: Rumors of my untimely demise are greatly exaggerated though.*

*rtnickstr: LOL*

David got confused and looked at Dori. “Laughing out loud,” she said.

*Pinko1: Sorry dude. I don't know the codes.”*

*rtnickstr: Laughing Out Loud. Where are you? How can I help you? You suck...you know that. I'm sick with worry.*

*Pinko1: I'm not going to give away my location. They could be watching.*

*rtnickstr: Fucking Murphy came to see me at the gig man. I thought he was going to slap me around trying to get me to give you up dude. I guess it's better that I didn't know where you were but I'd never tell him shit. You know that.“*

*Pinko1: He still pissed at us?*

*rtnickstr: Screw him! Why haven't you contacted me like this by now? Dori called her dad and said you were OK. That's all I know.*

*Pinko1: Afraid to use the phone or computer or anything. Can they track it? I'm in a public Internet access place thing.*

*rtnickstr: I don't think they can do that...easy anyway. Why don't you just get a prepaid phone?*

*Pinko1: Why?*

*rtnickstr: Not traceable I think.*

*Pinko1: You sure? I can't take any chances.*

*rtnickstr: Oh yeah. All the drug dealers do it that way. They're cheap too.*

*Pinko1: What if it runs out of time. Is there a contract thing? Will they check my identity? Can I pay cash?*

*rtnickstr: Prepaid phone cards at the gas station. Cash.*

*Pinko1: You sure they can't be traced?*

*rtnickstr: Dude...two million crack dealers can't be wrong. Cash...no names. More expensive though. Another tax on the poor. No credit...pay a higher rate. Welcome to capitalism man.*

*Pinko1: I heard that. I think I feel safer now.*

*rtnickstr: I can't believe this shit. You sure you're OK man?*

*Pinko1: Got chased and shot at again...looked like an Arab driving like a suicide bomber. No shit. He jumped us after the rally.*

*rtnickstr: You were there at the rally?*

*Pinko1: They can read this but they can't tell where it's coming from right?*

*rtnickstr: I guess so. I think it's possible that they could read it if they're watching me...but I don't see how they can find the source...fast anyway.*

*Pinko1: I better be careful what I say...but what do you know? Tell me what you know.*

*rtnickstr: Oh yeah. The rally went off well. Shit load of people over there but the count got shorted in the media big time. We got*

*thousands to sign the petition to nationalize oil. Tell me what happened in the hospital when you took off.*

*Pinko1: I got a tip that the Pentagon man wasn't really from the Pentagon and he was going to take me out. It might have been a bluff to get me to shake off my protection though. I still don't know. As soon as I ditched him I got shot at again.*

*rtnickstr: You want him back? I can find him for you.*

*Pinko1: No no...I don't know what I want to do yet. But at least now I can communicate. How we doing with the blog thing on the net? Are we still famous?*

*rtnickstr: Conspiracy theorists all over it like flies. Did you have anything to do with the shooting at the train or not?*

*David looked at Dori. She shook her head to say be quiet. Pinko1: Dori says hi. We will be staying on an extended vacation for a little while longer...understand?*

*rtnickstr: That's right. I don't blame you. I would too.*

*Pinko1: Tell everybody we're just laying low until they catch the guy who's trying to shoot me in the ass...the SOB who shot me in the garage. You heard any more about that? Do they have any leads yet?*

*rtnickstr: Oak Park Police told me they're working on it 24/7. You still famous oh red one. You the man.*

*Pinko1: Yeah right. I gotta go. I'll move...change places for the next message. Later crazy man. Be careful and stop driving with your dick out the window.*

*rtnickstr: That's a big roger there comrade...but you know I ride a bike. Take care of yourself man.*

*Pinko1: Then watch that chain dude.*

*Rtnickstr: If I could reach the chain I wouldn't be riding a bike. Later.*

*Pinko1: Later*

Benton started the car and tried to hear his tracker's directions

over the engine noise. “Hold on. What did you say”?

“He's been on the net chatting with the social worker guy. It must be a broadband hot spot. They left. He just signed off, and they're moving again. Get after him.”

Benton drove off at a casual speed. He ran the canine gauntlet again but this time from the safety of his four wheeled bullet proof bunker. “What did he say to the guy”?

“You were right. Somebody got to him, told him you were an impostor, an assassin. That's why he took off on you.”

“I knew it! Where are they going now”?

“They stopped about two blocks south of your present position sir. They're not moving at all now. His pulse is 85. He's not in a hurry. He hasn't broken a sweat.”

“I see them. Yes! They're at a bus stop! Just what I wanted, easy to follow.” He stopped and looked at the gas gauge. “I'm low on fuel. I can't stop for gas now damn it.”

“You're in Chicago there boss. You can't afford gas,” he laughed. “What is it now, five bucks a gallon”?

“Last I saw it was a three and a half. I can't stop now.”

“Jesus, the kid's right sir. Even Uncle Sam can't afford the shit anymore. There we go. He's moving again sir.”

“I see it. They got on the first bus, and I'm only four cars back. Maverick's engaging and I got radar lock. I'm too close for missiles so I'm switching to guns.”

“Don't get too close,” he laughed.

“I'll drop my gear and he'll fly right by me.”

“He's right in front of you Mav.”

“See there. It works every time.” He watched the bus shake as the engine strained in first gear. It got up to speed, charged a yellow light and left Benton stuck at the first light. He watched the big white monster lumber on so slowly that he didn't worry about losing it in the goofy traffic. It would be harder not to overtake it when the driver stopped to pick up passengers. His back hurt. He thought about how good it felt when his wife gave

him a deep muscle massage. He watched the smiling shoppers pass in the crosswalk and envied people with regular jobs who get to come home every night.

## Chapter 24

The old TV in front of Officer Stone had a problem with the vertical and horizontal hold. It was so old that it had tubes. The news at nine rolled up and down with stops and starts. Carla put her smoldering pipe in the ashtray, slapped the cabinet on the side and made the picture worse. The tiny room was dark even with the lamp on. They were way out in the country and well beyond the range of any urban light source. Carla had Stone all loosened up. The former cop and retired hooker were drinking heavily and smoking up the tiny room. It was all they could do to distract themselves from the nervous boredom of waiting for Murphy to either screw up or make everybody rich. The ugly room smelled like burning skunk and Carla's imported incense. Stone said it reminded him of cat urine and started bitching at the TV. "Can you turn that shit down?" he begged, staring at the news reader's breasts like a moving target. She wore a man's sport coat over a stretchy white tank top and a push up bra. "I don't want to watch the damn news anymore."

"Use the remote," she joked. She pulled on the pipe until her cheeks caved in and tried to hold down a big toke without choking.

Stone tapped the screen. "Little help here."

She exhaled and got startled by a short angry knock at the door. They both jumped up. She tried to hide the pot under the couch while Stone fanned the air with his hands. He peeked through the

side window and saw a squad car parked right out front. “Get in the back and stay quiet,” he said. She took her purse in the bathroom and clicked the lock shut. Stone smiled and opened the front door. It was a county deputy. “Evening officer.”

“Evening sir. I need to talk to the lady.” He looked serious.

“Uh... You mean...”

Carla walked out of the bathroom fussing with her hair and went right over to the door like she owned the place. “Evening officer.”

“Ma'am would you mind taking a seat in the car? I need to talk to you alone.” He tipped his hat. Stone could feel his heart stop. There was nothing he could do about it. She could spill everything and just walk away if she wanted to.

Carla laughed. “Why sure honey.” She winked at Stone, but it didn't make him feel any better. He wondered if the sheriff actually got paid off or not. The motel dude could have just pocketed the money without telling sheriff anything about the girls coming in. Maybe he paid the Sheriff like he was supposed to and the deputy just wanted a blow job or something. He thought it might be a shake down for more money and seriously considered taking off, but there was no back door and obviously no fire code enforcement. The bathroom had a little window over the toilet, but it was way too small for a man to crawl through. All he could do was wait.

Carla got in the front seat of the police car barefoot. The radio popped on and off with local banter about a domestic disturbance and a DUI. She laughed at the big deputy straight away. “So osssifer, what's up? You here on business, or is your business right here”? She slapped her leg.

“No thanks. I just wanted to make sure you were OK.”

“What exactly do you mean by that? I'm better than OK,” she teased.

He frowned and went around it. “I know what you people are here for.”

“You here to bust me”?

“Relax. It's OK. The old guy that runs this place, he sometimes looks the other way when the working girls party in there. It's OK as long as they don't tear up the place or let any underage boys come around. Sheriff gets a cut. No big deal.” He took his hat off and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Then why are you talking to me now? We paid him already. You shaking us down or what”? She tried to find the number on the car so she could commit it to memory.

“It's nothing like that. No skin off my nose. I don't care what happens between consenting adults, but sometimes the girls ain't so free to choose if you know what I mean.”

“Oh.” She relaxed a little. “You mean...”

“Last year there were some girls up here, real young. They were from overseas somewhere. Bangladesh I think... And one from Thailand. Later on I found out about it. One of the guys that went in there, a local guy, he didn't know how old she was, but he felt bad and gave her a hundred bucks to tell him what happened to her. The girl told him she answered an ad to be a maid and they kidnapped her. Said they threatened to kill her parents if anybody found out, and then she begged him to keep quiet about it.”

“Oh no.”

“You read about that kind of stuff, but you never think it could happen here. They were like slaves.”

“Oh my God no.”

“By the time I found out about it they were long gone. Now I check. Sheriff don't want any of that shit. He was so pissed, you know, but what could he do? He didn't know how old they were. Now we check.”

“I get it. That's good. You guys are alright.”

The radio called for every available officer to respond to a domestic disturbance. He keyed his mike and said, “Unit 2. 10-4 dispatch.” He turned to Carla and asked her directly, “Could you leave if you wanted to?”

“Oh yeah.” She laughed to herself because she actually could now. “Nobody's holding me. Thank you for watching out for... For the women overseas. You know, if tricks were legal then that wouldn't happen. It's only when you make it illegal that shit happens.”

He shook his head to say no. “Yeah, same story with the pot huh? You might want to open a window in there,” he laughed. “It's OK though. I don't care. But I gotta go now.”

“Hey no problem. Thanks for everything.” She got out and closed the door. Stone saw her wave as the patrol car backed up. The deputy hit the lights and took off down the blacktop. She opened the door and laughed at Stone's expression of panic and desperation. He looked awful. She fell on the couch and threw her arms up over her head.

Stone felt weak. “What the hell did he want anyway”?

“He wanted to make sure I was free to go. See if you were holding me against my will and shit. He don't like, you know, slavery.”

“Well you ain't stupid. You could have split.”

“Stupid huh. Screw you.” She grinned and reached for a beer.

“No no. You did the smart thing. You didn't run. You could have... And you didn't.”

She pulled the tab off the slippery wet beer can and wished that Murphy was there to see her prove her loyalty to the job. “God damn it man. I told you I was in. Didn't I”?

“You want that full share. That's what you want. You can buy a lot a wacky weed with all that green.”

“That's right. And now I'm gonna get it for sure. A full share. I proved you can trust me. You tell Murphy.”

“Son of a bitch. You bet I will.” He slapped the arm of his chair.

She stretched out on the old green couch. “Now you know I was on the level. What DID you think”?

“I thought you were in. I really did.” He lied.

“So now we can get the hell out of here. Right?”

“Not so fast. I don't know about Murphy yet? No telling what he thinks.”

“He's paranoid. Afraid of his own shadow. He's just wound too damn tight for modern civilization. He'd be fine out in sticks all by himself, but put him in a room with two other people and there's gonna be a problem. He needs to breathe into a paper bag once in a while. Shit.”

“He killed a cop. How's he supposed to be calm? You scared the shit out of him asking about the little problem he had at the bar. I'm just glad he didn't kill you back there.”

She hid her true feelings. “He's not THAT stupid. He needs me man. I can walk in there and right back out with the coke.”

“Not exactly. It'll take a truck to carry all that powder.”

“Then back the mother up to the back door. I can get him to show it to me, and then...” She stopped smiling. Moving it is a problem, she thought.

Stone felt optimistic. “You don't understand about Murphy.”

Carla ran her tongue carefully along the seam of a newly rolled joint and said, “He'll come around I guess.” She lit up and passed it to Stone.

“What you gonna do with all that money honey?”

“I told you already. I'm gonna write steamy novels and use the coke money set my women free. We're all gonna retire like royalty and never have to work in the business again. I think I'll buy a yacht and sail them around the Caribbean for a solid month. We'll have expensive wine and a gourmet chef.”

“And sexy toy boys to wait on you,” he laughed.

“No men on board. We'll get a woman captain too.”

“Oh my God,” he laughed. “I can imagine some guy on a dock watching that ship come in and tie up.”

“Yeah, that's right.” She looked at his conservative shoes. “What YOU gonna do?” Stone tried to pass the roach. They pressed their index fingers together to transfer the fragile butt

safely.

“Oh baby. What am I gonna do. I'm gonna hire a psychotic cannibal to kill Murphy for getting me into this cluster fuck. I want the guy to eat him.” They laughed. “Nobody was supposed to get hurt.” He turned serious. “Murphy's an idiot, but I'm a bigger idiot. This is not the real me. It all just sort of happened around me and trapped me inside.”

“Tell me about it. All I agreed to was... I was just gonna snatch some coke that would have been destroyed anyway. It was just evidence they were gonna burn up in an incinerator.”

“Hell yes. I know how you feel.” He wondered if she really liked him or not. She's probably just dancing with my ego, he thought. “We've got a lot in common. How about we go dutch on Murphy's hit man”?

“Now that's a tempting proposition. Tell you what. You give me twenty bucks and I'll do it myself.” They laughed and shook hands like new friends in a strange place.

---

David and Dori settled in to a new motel about five blocks away from the last one. They got all propped and reclined like Romans on the queen size bed to watch TV. The floor needed vacuuming after a recent popcorn fight that started innocently but got out of control. They were pitching single kernels at open mouths. Dori got frustrated and threw a handful. David found the range and the gloves were off. The resulting escalation took only a few minutes to run its course. It left them with no clear winner and an unstable peace. David ate little burnt kernels from the bottom of the bag and watched her from a safe distance. She started jabbing buttons on the new untraceable phone like someone playing an African thumb piano.

David made small talk. “Who you talking to now babe”?

“I already talked to Dad. I'm calling Jean.”

“Be careful what you say on there. They can't trace the phone,

but you could give us away by what you say. You know, little pieces of information.”

She concentrated straight ahead. “I know.”

“Find out what's happening with my case in Oak Park.”

“Already did. No leads yet.”

He came closer. “You didn't call the cops”?

“I read the newspaper on here. They said...” He tried to snatch the phone but she pushed him away. “Get your own mister.”

He waited for another opening. “You're using up all the minutes talking to your girlfriends about who's doing who on the soaps or some shit.”

She held out a fist full of prepaid time cards, and David went for it. He pinned her hand against the bed with his leg, tickled her armpit, grabbed the phone and ran in the bathroom. “David!” she laughed.

“You'll never take me alive copper”!

“Come on David.” She beat on the door.

“Go away. It's my turn”! He sat on the pot and fumbled with the new gadget to find the local news.

---

Benton swiped the key card to his new room one floor up from David in the same motel. He threw his coat on the bed and called in. “Langley you copy”?

The tracker answered in a calm but mysterious tone. “I'm sorry Dave... I can't do that.”

“Come on man. You've been watching too much Sci-Fi crap.”

“I'm here good buddy. I've got some good news too.”

“Bring it.” Benton sat down on the edge of the dresser.

“Teacher bought a cell phone. I think he believes it's untraceable.”

“You got a fix on it”?

“We do. They're blabbing away like nobody's listening.”

Benton laughed and thought about the technology. “He doesn't

know how easy it is to listen in. If we know where he is, where the signal is coming from, shit anybody could do it.”

“Right you are,” he laughed. “Your two partners, your crew, they took a little detour on the way back from their warm fuzzy sensitivity training. I think they reached a higher state of awareness. I traced their signal to a *Hooters* on the interstate and threatened to tell their wives AND their girlfriends. I put 'em back to work listening to the professor's phone. They're in a van about three blocks from you right now. It only took like five minutes to find the guy's signal. His girl's on the phone all the time. I've got the number right here. You can call him yourself if you want to.”

“No no no. Not now. They'd just change phones.”

“So what? We can get on any phone he uses.”

“I don't want them to know it's not untraceable.” He unbuttoned his shirt. “Are they safe? I'm supposed to be protecting them. Any threats in the area?”

“Nothing at all.”

“That's what they said just before somebody shot at him too. Langley ain't perfect.” He pulled his belt off and hung it over the door knob.

“That's why we sent your people out there boss. Boots on the ground.”

He pulled off his pants and hung them over a chair. “Tell me right away if he moves. I put a little fly camera on his door. I can see anybody coming or going. Anybody shows up, I'll be right there. But tell me anyway if he moves. And get somebody to figure out who's after him. Who's the damn shooter?”

“When you shoot the shooter. When you kill the trigger man... Just check his ID.” He laughed. “What about the pervert in the subway?”

“A patsy. A dumb patsy, but a patsy.” He scratched his back against the bathroom door frame like a bear on a tree.

“We've got you covered there big daddy sir. If you want to listen in on the red professor you just tell me and I'll patch it

through.”

“I need to eat something and take a shower before I call my wife and find out if she's left me yet.”

“Later chief. I'll be right here.”

“Thanks man.” He took his wire off and started the shower.

The rookie cop watching Murphy at the stake out got bored and frustrated with the assignment. He watched Murphy talk on the phone. He watched him eat. He watched him go into the alley and come back after relieving himself in a blind corner. He logged the time and description of everything that Murphy did, but real police work didn't seem so adventurous to him anymore.

Murphy wanted to call a specialist at the department, a computer geek that was supposed to be an off duty hermit. Everybody thought he lived in his mother's basement and played video games all dressed up like Spock, or at least that's what he was doing the one time that somebody went over there to find him. Murphy didn't really like the man, but he needed a favor and the geek was the was the only guy that could help him. He looked up the extension in his notebook and punched it in, bypassing the switchboard.

The geek's phone went off on the other side of his room. He pushed off and rode his office chair on wheels across the hardwood floor without standing up. The push was just enough to reach the phone without putting a foot down. He picked up the old black receiver and tucked it under his double chin. “Sandler.”

“Sandler, this is Murphy.”

“What you want Murphy?”

“I need a favor.” He braced himself a little.

“What else is new. You guys only call me when you need a favor.”

“It's your job. That's what you do. You do computers.”

“I do systems. Systems analysis. Secretaries do computers.” He

laughed.

“Listen up. I need you to find a suspect. The feds are watching the guy. They know where he is. I want you to hack your way into the feds, you know, and find out where he is.”

“What else is new. Anyway, I already know all about the teacher. Stone called me first. No way Jose. I ain't interested.”

“Sandler... I need to find this guy. It's important.” Murphy checked his temper.

“No way. You don't have authority. You want me to hack into a federal computer and...”

“Listen Sandler. I've got your back on this. You're covered man. It's approved all the way up. Listen to me buddy. It's no big deal. I'll take full responsibility.”

“That's what Stone said too. No way I'm gonna do that now. I gotta play it cool. I don't trust you, and I'm too close to retirement to stick my neck out for you or anybody else.” At least not for free, he thought.

Murphy thought fast. “Bull shit Sandy. That ain't why. I don't think you can do it...”

“Oh right. You know I can do it. Nice try but it won't work. Better get out the rubber hose.”

Murphy laughed. “No shit. I really don't think you can do it. You ain't got the guts. You've got the equipment and the software, but you gotta get aggressive. Me and Stone, we got on your computer when you were on vacation, you know, when you went off to the Star Trek convention last year. We got the bank numbers for my ex-wife. You can find anything with that system if you've got the balls. Let me come up there. You can take a lunch break and leave the door unlocked. I'll do it myself.”

“No way Jose. You'd never even get close to a federal server. Even I couldn't do it before... Before I got a certain disc from...”

“See! You dog you. I knew it”!

Sandler rolled his chair over to a wide screen monitor and started typing. He leaned closer to the receiver and asked, “Why

should I help you? I could go to jail man.”

Murphy sensed that the guy was easily led. “You won't get caught. You never get caught at anything. You hacked the grade on your promotion score up to an A and didn't get caught, didn't you”? He was just guessing.

“I did not. Kiss my ass Murphy.” He's bluffing, he thought. He couldn't know about that. There's no trail, and the test proctor died two years ago.

“Suppose I could prove it”? He laughed.

“That's weak man.” He quickly checked his digital personnel file to see if anyone had been looking at his score. “Nice try. N-n-n-no way man.”

The guy's stutter reminded Murphy of Porky Pig singing *Blue Christmas*. “Come on sport. Be a cop today. We're on the same side good buddy. Official unofficial business. I just want you to find out where the God damned teacher is. Nobody cares how you do it. He's a damn commie terrorist. Be a hero man. Shit.”

Assert yourself, he thought. Ask for what you want. “You gonna owe me big. You understand”?

Murphy made an sour face. “Whatever you want man? Name it.”

Sandler looked at his reflection the door glass. “OK then, well, I want to bowl on the Strikers.”

“No way! That ain't up to me. Get real.” He sighed.

“I'm throwing a 233 average now.”

“The Strikers are more than just the best damn bowling team in the history of the department. They're, you know, a legend. It ain't up to me. They gotta vote on you anyway. You know how those guys are.” No wimps, he thought.

“I practice three times a week. There's an opening now, and my average is way good enough.”

Murphy almost told him to shove it. “You don't even drink. They go out after hours and get real wild ass crazy. You wouldn't like it at all.”

"I'll help you and you help me. I just want a fair shot. I know they have to vote on it. All I want you to do is put in a good word for me, that's all." He held his breath.

"And what if they vote no"?

He sat up straight. "It's OK. I'll still help you."

"You sure"?

He started typing again. "I'm sure man. All I want is for you to say, you know, give the guy a chance."

"OK. It's a deal," laughed Murphy. "Call me back when you know where the teacher is."

Sandler brought up a green screen that looked like machine code. "I already know."

Murphy shook his head and laughed. "Son of a bitch."

"I've been following him since Stone called. I want on the Strikers. I knew you'd help me. A deal is a deal man."

"Where is he? I can't believe this sh..."

"They're in a motel just south of the loop. They just bought a cell phone, and they think it's untraceable. The feds can hear it. The fed guy that's watching him, he's in the same motel as the teacher and his girlfriend. Probably bugged the room. Listening to them screw."

"The fed... He's not WITH the teacher"?

"The teacher got spooked and took off. Somebody got to him or something. He don't trust the Federales now. He's on his own."

"Oh my God yes! Can you follow them if they move"?

"Oh yeah. No problem. I've been tracking them solid ever since Stone called. Easy job. You know, there's a Striker meeting next week."

"Yeah sure." Murphy looked at his watch. He had more than two hours to go on his shift. "If he moves... You can tell me right away"?

"I've got your number. You going over there and pick him up now"?

"Not right now, but I want to know where he is all the time."

Twenty four seven. Can you monitor him at home when you're off duty too”?

“No problem. My home system is even better than this one. It's the software that counts anyway. I made a lot of it myself, but I also know who to ask for help if you know what I mean.”

“You dog you.” He laughed.

“Like you said... That's what I do.”

“OK then Sandy. You the man. I'll be checking in every so often. Stay sharp until we skin the chicken.”

“Just don't forget your end of the deal.”

“Don't worry.” Murphy hung up and yelled “Yes!”

The rookie in the Fleetwood got bored and started reading a magazine. He didn't see Murphy hang up and punch in another number. His meticulous logbook didn't seem so important anymore. The street was deserted. Swirling gusts of wind made the hanging stoplights swing back and forth on sagging cables. Murphy kept watching them. He sure didn't want to be under one when it fell. The big lights seemed way too heavy for the creaking supports. He started the engine, cranked up the heater and said, “Come on. Pick up the God damned phone.”

Stone picked up. “Yo.”

“I know where the teacher is.”

“Here we go again.”

“What”?

“How many times... How will I ever get through to you. We don't need him.” He cupped the phone. “Hang on a minute.” He winked at Carla and went into the bathroom for privacy. The shower smelled like rotten wood, and there were mouse droppings on the floor. He closed the door and sat on the toilet. “Carla's OK,” he whispered.

“How do YOU know? Wait a minute... Oh shit! Did you shag her man”?

“No. I didn't shag her, but that's more than I can say for your sorry ass. Listen. A local cop stopped by here. Scared the shit out

of me. He wanted to talk to her alone and there was nothing I could do about it.”

“What the hell”! Murphy felt like he was having a stroke.

“She could have walked away, but she didn't. She didn't sing. She's IN man. We can trust her. She really wants a share.”

Murphy felt relieved, but he still had lots of adrenalin left. “God damn it. I told you man. I don't WANT to give her a God damned share. I want the teacher. Why waste a third of the take.”

Stone flushed the toilet to cover his voice. “Listen to me asshole. I don't trust YOU anymore! Don't be so greedy. You run on impulse. You want the money but you want revenge on the teacher even more. That's what's gonna kill us man. Be honest with yourself about the teacher. Do you want to capture him or kill him”?

“First I grab him. Then he tells me where the coke is. Then I kill him. The son of a bitch hurt me! And I couldn't say SHIT about it man! I'm a cop, and I had to eat that shit”!

“Let the teacher go. We don't need him now.” He flushed the toilet again.

“No way. He's mine.” Murphy smacked the dashboard as hard as he could and accidentally honked the horn. The Fleetwood rookie heard it, looked at his watch and picked up his log.

Stone reached out and wiggled the door knob to make sure the bathroom door was closed. “Take a breath partner. Calm down. Just calm down. Where IS the guy anyway? You said you knew.”

Murphy tried shake the pain out of his hand. “He's in a motel downtown. I got the computer fagot to hack into the fed computer.”

“Sandler? I talked to him already. The punk told me no.”

Murphy braced himself and said, “He wants to bowl on the Strikers.”

“And you told him he could. It's not up to you. You can't speak for them.” He turned on the water in the sink.

“I told him I'd vote yes, that's all. Give him a good

recommendation. He's a good bowler and he's listening to the teacher's phone for Christ's sake. I'd have promised him anything. Teacher's mine now." He laughed. "When I get off duty I'll just set up outside the motel."

Stone gave in. "This could be it, or it could be the end. Be careful. The last time you almost killed him."

"I was only trying to scare him, to get him to cooperate."

"By shooting at him"? He laughed. "That's really gonna make him cooperate."

Murphy felt better. "Seemed like a good idea at the time." He laughed in a sadistic way that made Stone nervous. Murphy saw something moving in his side mirror. Another big Ford just like his rolled up and parked. "Hey hey hey. Here comes my relief. They're actually early. I'm out a here man."

"Just call me when you get set up over there. And God damn it, think first this time. Be careful."

"Right." Murphy closed the phone and put it in his shirt pocket. He waved at the relief car, pulled away from the curb and drove east on Roosevelt Road. The Fleetwood followed from a safe distance behind.

## Chapter 25

The man behind the counter at the old motel finished washing up and sniffed his hands for the smell of catfish bait. The screen door to the office had a broken spring and wouldn't stay closed. He kicked it open, stood in the door and looked across the empty parking lot. The old fisherman was getting a little suspicious of his guests. Where were the other women? Where were the customers? He expected to see cars in the parking lot and a half dozen girls. There had been only one car since they checked in, the deputy's squad car, and he didn't stay very long. Something wasn't right. He went behind the counter and called the cabin. The funny sounding tone startled Stone, but he picked it right up. "Hello."

"This is the manager."

"What can I do for you"? He frowned at Carla and pointed at the office.

"Everything OK with you folks"?

"Sure. Why do you ask"?

"Well... Where's the girls"?

"Oh. Is that all." He sat down on the couch and put his free hand across his forehead.

"I figured you'd be busy by now. Business looks pretty slow. Ain't everyday we get busy. I was looking forward to some activity." He smelled his hands again.

"Oh sure. I expect... Well, it'll be picking up real soon. The

regular girls are off doing a retirement party.”

Bull shit, he thought. “You sure about that mister”?

“Sure I'm sure. What's it to ya? What do you want”?

“I don't see no girls except the one, and I don't think she's a working girl. I think you guys are cooking dope in there. That's what I think. We don't allow that shit.”

“No no no... No way man,” he laughed.

“If she's who you say she is, you know, let her prove it. Let me talk to the girl.” We'll see if she's a hooker or not, he thought.

Stone put both hands over the receiver, leaned over to Carla and whispered, “He wants to talk to you.”

She took the phone and answered in a clueless tone. “Well hello there.”

“Hi there... I was just wondering... I mean since it's not too busy right now...”

“What can I do ya for”? She winked at Stone, and he immediately knew what the old guy wanted.

“I've got a hundred bucks. How about we have a little party for a couple hours? Just come around back.”

She put her hand over the receiver and whispered, “He wants me to do him alright.” Stone tried not to laugh and shook his head. “Uh gee... I don't think so man.” She poked her finger in her mouth like she wanted to throw up.

The old man looked at the clock over the minnow tanks. I knew it, he thought. They're cooking dope again. “What do you mean no, you're a hooker ain't you”?

“I'm the boss. The women work for me. I don't do tricks anymore. See... I'm retired.”

“Bull shit. You ain't no hooker. You people better not be cooking up no dope in there.”

Carla got angry. “Dope! What the hell are you talking about? We ain't into that.”

“Then why are you up here? There ain't no girls, and you ain't who you say you are. I've seen this shit before. We had cookers

try and get in here last year too. Sheriff ran 'em off.”

Stone grabbed the phone and begged. “Now look mister. When the girls get here you can have your pick, no charge, on me. How's that”? The guy hung up, and Stone put the receiver back in the base upside down. “Horny old bastard,” he laughed. “You'd probably kill him anyway.”

She laughed nervously and sat down on the couch. “Sure is a randy old dude.”

“Probably hasn't seen a woman in twenty years.”

“I wonder why”? She laughed. Stone worried about the old man snooping around. Carla lit a joint with the flame of a fat blue candle she kept burning nearby.

He looked at the door. “Murphy's missing ALL the fun.”

She looked around for her drink and hit the roach, but the resin on the tip tasted bitter. She put it down and wiped her lips. “I don't miss him.”

“You know what he asked me? He wanted to know if I was sleeping with you.” He smiled proudly.

“Oh, I figured that. He's jealous. He's fucking crazy is what he is. He figured I'd soften you up, seduce you and take off.

“Why would he be, you know, jealous of that? Pissed I can see, but jealous”?

“We go way back. I've been doing him off and on for years. I did him the first time in junior high school. He was better then.” She laughed.

“Oh my God... Junior high school.” He laughed.

“We go way way back. He used to send me guys. That way I didn't charge him. Years later, he's still coming around like I'm his property. He's basically an ass hole.”

“He's an ass hole all right. But junior high... Shit that's awful young.”

“I think it was the eighth grade. No big deal. I could take it or leave it. Then I got strung out though, the first time. It was mostly booze is all.”

“I'm really sorry.”

“Oh shit”! She jumped to her feet screaming and waving at the curtains. They were lit up with flashing red and blue lights.

Stone ran to the window. “Son of a bitch”! He peeked through the gap. “It's crawling with cops.”

Carla ran into the bathroom to flush her stash but decided to hide it instead. She took down the shower rod, pulled a rubber cap off the end, and stuffed the pot inside the rusty metal tube. She quickly forced the rod back up by jamming it in place with three sharp blows from her open hand. The bathroom door flew open, and a shotgun wielding cop in a blaze orange hazardous materials suit screamed, “Get down on the floor! Put your hands behind your back”! She got down on her stomach, put one hand behind her back and one on the tub to keep her face out of the filth. He stepped over her back and cuffed her without another word. His hands were shaking. He lifted her to her feet and pulled her through the smoky living room. It was hard for the cop to move and breathe in the clumsy suit. He stumbled all over her going through the front door. She shook herself loose and sat down on the hood of a squad car.

Stone had a short little cop all up in his face. “I want to see some ID”! He wore a blue police shirt and jeans with his badge clipped on his belt like a prison warden.

“I don't have any ID.”

“What do you take me for ass hole. I want to see some ID right now.”

“I don't bring ID when I run tricks. I'm a cop in real life, and I don't want my department to find out I'm running whores on the side.”

“Very funny. I ought to bust you for saying you're a cop.”

“I am a cop, and I've got a pair of blue pants to prove it too. What the hell are you doing? You already know why we're here. And we paid for protection.”

“Not for cooking dope you didn't. Where's the girls”? He patted

the badge on his hip.

“They’ll be along. You looking for love? Can’t you wait that long?” The other cops laughed.

“You ain’t got no girls. The one girl you do have... She refused to do the manager.”

Stone shook his head. “They don’t make that color money.” All the cops laughed, and one of them unlocked Carla’s cuffs.

The short cop blushed a little. “He said you were cooking dope in there mister.”

“Shit no. He’s just pissed. Have a look yourself. If I thought he was that upset I’d have called him a cab to Vegas.”

The man in the hazard suit went in for a few minutes and came back out shaking his head no. The cops got back in their cars. The short cop smiled and said, “He’s an old man. We had some cookers out here more than once. Girls are one thing, but cooking dope... That shit is...”

“I know,” said Stone. “I understand. Forget about it man.” The cop got back in his car and left. Stone stood there watching as they circled around the lot and disappeared. The whole thing was over in about fifteen minutes. He walked back in the cabin and saw Carla coming out of the bathroom shaking her little plastic bag.

“It’s getting busy around here,” she joked. “Can I ask a question?”

“Sure what?”

“If we’re supposed to be hiding, then why did you guys tell everybody in the county that you were running a warehouse out here?”

“Now that’s an excellent question. It starts with an M and ends in disaster.”

“I figured that.” She started collecting the stuff she needed to roll another joint.

“Well you have to understand. It all happened so fast. It wasn’t like we had a lot of time to plan or anything. Murphy thought

that, you know, he was sure you'd try to escape. He didn't want the manager snooping around. There had to be a reason the old fart would believe, why we needed him to stay away. Murphy paid him to get lost in case..."

"In case he had to smack me around." She frowned.

"Look! I was just as pissed as you when he... Well maybe not quite as much as you. He didn't have to do that. I knew you were going to be in with us from the get go. It was Murphy. He's crazy and you know it."

"What an idiot." She licked a yellow rolling paper and stuck it to a second one. "So you paid off green teeth so nobody would come snooping around. I don't think it worked."

"I think you're right." He laughed.

"Officer Stone, I think it's time to move." She blew on the wet joint and twisted the ends.

He knew that Murphy would want to be consulted first, but he didn't care anymore. "Time to check out," said Stone.

"Time to get out a Dodge." She lit up.

Stone looked her over and grinned. "Sure you don't want to go around the world with green teeth first?"

"Ah"! She gagged on the smoke. "Oh please."

"We can move. It's OK. We can go somewhere nice. No big deal. We can check in anywhere we want. Maybe a heart shaped bed and a sauna." He took the joint and examined it like he'd never seen one before.

"We can check in at my place. That's where my stuff is. You can sleep on the couch."

"Yeah. I would, but Murphy wouldn't like it."

"He can sleep in the car for all I care. This shit is ridiculous. Why can't he just lighten up?"

Stone passed the joint back and said, "He don't trust you after he..."

"He's right. Things have changed between us. He hit me. Nobody hit's me. I cut a guy once for that. I'm gonna be good for

right now, but he better get used to the idea that he's gonna pay me a share.” She started putting her coat on.

Stone wanted to take her somewhere private and have his own party. He took one last look around. “God what a dump. We're out of here alright. I think I'll just tell him later that we moved. He's gonna freak.” He gathered his things from the table and stuffed his pockets.

Carla went to the car and tried the passenger door, but it was locked. Stone pushed a button on his key ring and popped it open. He threw his jacket on the back seat, got behind the wheel and pulled his door shut with the seat belt hanging out. He fixed it and started the car at the same time. Carla lit up the biggest joint that Stone had ever seen. He gunned the engine just as the light in the office came on. Carla laughed and said, “Green teeth is up. Let's roll.” She passed the joint to Stone. He dropped it on his shirt and burned a little hole in the pocket. He knocked the ash to the floor and didn't give it another thought. They took off south without a destination. Stone was glad that Murphy didn't know where they were. He needed a break, and all he had to do was stay off the phone.

Dori changed the dressing on David's wound. He sat cross-legged on the motel bed and argued with the bloggers in real time. David knew he was out of touch with cell phone technology. Texting was new to him, but he found it strangely addicting. He felt safe as long as he didn't give away his location. There were conspiracy theories going around about who was trying to kill him and why. People wanted to speculate and vent their anger on big oil, the CIA, the administration, the electoral college. Even the Masons got picked apart. David tried to calm people down, but anything he said just made them even more certain that he was being told what to say by the authorities. Nick was no help at all. Nobody enjoyed the excitement more than him.

David looked in Dori's eyes and laughed. "This thing is full of nuts. The next thing you know I'll be living in the forest with big foot and D.B. Cooper."

She peeled back the gauze and inspected his wound. "Most of them think it's big oil."

"What about you lady? Who's the real boogie man?"

She dipped a big ball of cotton in alcohol. "Why not OPEC? I think OPEC could kill the Pope and get away with it." She dabbed the crusty mess, and he winced in pain.

"The Pope huh. No way lady. He's protected by the Swiss Guard. The guys with the funny skirts and giant spears."

"See what I mean?"

"It's not OPEC anyway. I just can't believe I'm that important to them or anybody else. It's a paper. It's just an idea, a way to do a budget for Christ's sake. Nobody can make anybody nationalize anything. They can't kill you for what you believe. They don't jail people for who they are, only for what they do."

"Oh yeah," she laughed. "Tell that to the guys in secret prisons, CIA lockups overseas. They just grab your ass and off you go. Go directly to jail. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars. What do they call that?"

"Rendition," he laughed and shook his head. "Two hundred lawyers is what you need."

She taped the new dressing. "That's right. You don't have to actually DO anything. It's a mind police thing."

"Round up the usual suspects. But I didn't advocate violence."

Dori squinted at the tiny screen. "How can you read that thing without going blind? It's so little."

"It's high resolution. You get used to it. Look at this shit," he laughed.

"Read it to me." She got up on the bed with her back against the headboard and put a big green pillow behind her neck.

David circled a finger around his ear. "This guy here... He's in Paraguay. The president and the vice president bought a huge tract

of land there last year. He thinks they're building an underground arsenal and shit.”

“Yeah right.”

David scooted over closer to her. “I asked him if he's seen anybody digging yet. He writes back. He says it's all just disinformation or something, and then he goes into numerology shit. I mean this guy is talking to Elvis on the other line man.” He laughed.

She said a little prayer to herself and petted his back. “You're so tight.”

“Nerves.” He kept pecking away.

“How are you doing with...” She made a bottoms up motion.

“OH I'm fine.” He didn't look up.

She rubbed harder and faster. “You sure? All this stress. I've been terrified you'd...”

He stopped. “No no, actually the opposite. I feel like US Grant.”

“What”? She laughed.

“General Grant in the Civil War. They used to call him a drunk, but he never drank when his wife was with him. He never drank when there was a battle going on either. He only drank when he was bored. He didn't drink to cover stress. I think I'm like that too. This is no time to be cloudy. I need to stay sharp.”

“What about when this is over”? She wanted that one back.

David got silly and tickled her feet. “I'm going to marry you and stay sober forever. I'm going to get fat, gamble, chase women, and take up sky diving, but I'm done drinking.”

“Stop it.” She laughed. “Suppose you did start a movement. Would that keep you sober? What would it take? How can I help you”?

“Lots of steamy sex”! He smiled and kept tickling.

She fought back. “You kicked the booze. You're free of it now, but you're holding out for sex”? She laughed.

“No. I was just thinking about sex. They say guys think about

sex every seven seconds.”

“Well do you”?

He put on a mindless expression and said, “What?”

She laughed, pointed at the phone and said, “Put that thing away and come to bed.” He held the phone out to the side. She tried to snatch it away and failed.

He turned his back and started poking the tiny keys. “I can't stop. It's like eating peanuts. I'm running out of minutes anyway. We need more time cards.” Dori pulled her tee shirt over her head inside out and tossed it on his lap. “Oh shit,” he laughed. “You mean come to BED.”

“Come to bed and keep me warm professor. I'm ready for my pop quiz.”

He turned the phone off and put it on the night stand. She spanked the mattress hard right next to her hip. He got out of his pants faster than a sailor jumping overboard and slid under the sheets. She pulled his head against her chest and ran her fingers through his hair. “I had the dream again,” he said.

“When”?

“Last night and the night before too. Actually several times.”

“Oh David.”

“It's like they say about your life passing before your eyes. Sometimes I remember little things I haven't thought about for decades. Vivid with incredible detail. Just as clear as if it were yesterday.”

“Like what”? She kissed the top of his head.

“Like on the first date when you kept changing the radio station in my truck. Remember? It's a man rule... Sort of. You never get a second date if you mess with the radio. It's a control thing.”

“I got a second date,” she laughed.

“Doesn't count. You looked so hot I was defenseless. I couldn't concentrate. There were no witnesses, so I made an exception. Usually a guy thinks, well, if she messes with the radio she's gonna be giving directions in bed. Do this... No not there... Over

here... Not too hard.”

“Come closer,” she said, pushing her hips against him.

He saluted. “Command me you sexy thing.”

“You can drive big boy.” She propped herself up on an elbow, reached across his chest and pulled the lamp cord.

Murphy woke up angry. He already knew they abandoned the hideout. He called Stone before he went to sleep and found out all about it. They moved without even consulting him, and he had to call three times to get his partner to pick up. Murphy thought Stone sounded drunk on the phone, and Carla worried him more than ever. She had to go. He would beat the information out of David and cut her lose without paying her a full share. It meant a bigger pot and he got to reeducate the teacher who broke his arm. In all his years as a cop nobody ever got away with anything like that. A Chicago cop could serve up disproportionate payback and nearly always did.

He reached under the mattress, pulled out a little silver key and went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. The gloves were off. He cleared the shelves by stacking all his junk on the toilet tank, and some of it fell to the floor. He took a rusty screwdriver from the top shelf and backed out the screws that held the cabinet to the wall. One by one the little pig iron support brackets fell in the sink and rattled around. The cabinet was still stuck to the wall, so he slapped it loose and set it down in the tub. He reached into a fist sized hole in the wall behind where the cabinet was, and peeled the duct tape off a little metal box behind the stud. It contained a little green notebook with Murphy's private phone numbers. He flipped past the hookers and the bookies and the lawyers who kicked back referral fees for phony car accidents until he found what he was looking for, a seven digit number that was in code.

Decoding took a few minutes. The code had three layers of

security, and you had to know a key word to set up the numbers. He always kept the key memorized and religiously changed it once a month. He never wrote it down. The phone numbers in Murphy's book could send a lot of people to prison, but they were a powerful tool when he needed a little help from the people who had the guts to slap the tiger. He read the decoded number to himself three times and flushed it down the toilet. He dreaded making the call even though he knew that it would just be a recording at first. These were very very bad people, and he didn't want anybody to have any kind of proof that he had ever talked to any of them.

He pushed the numbers hard and slow. There was no voice message, only a beep. He tried to speak with confidence when the tape cued up. "Hello I didn't get my paper today, so call me back please." He set the phone down and thought about the money. Murphy was calling someone he had never actually seen before, and he flinched a little when the phone rang back right away. He picked it up slowly and listened first without speaking. A calm voice said, "Who is it?"

"This is Mr. James Madison."

"Hang on. This might take a minute." Murphy knew the guy was looking it up.

"Take your time."

After a long wait the voice was back. "OK Madison. We haven't heard from you for a while, but the boss says to talk to you."

"Mr. Anton said to call you when I need you." His hands were sweating and he couldn't sit still.

"What you got?"

"I need some information from a guy. A friend of his is hiding some coke in his bar that doesn't belong to him. I want you to pick him up and squeeze him until he tells you where it is."

"And then what? What do we do with him then?"

"Kill the son of a bitch."

“It's gonna cost you this time. We don't work cheap anymore. The boss is kind a backed up too, with all the north side crap. A couple a guys get their asses sent up, and the whole God damned crew wants to bust a cap on the next guy up the ladder. Lot a heat right now. You want to nibble at the menu that's great, but you want the full dinner you're gonna have to pay a premium.”

“Don't worry about the money. Just be careful with my information. And don't kill him until he tells you where the coke is. OK?”

“Hey no problem. They always talk. Sometimes we have to help them remember the words, but they always sing.”

Murphy laughed at the thought of it. “Get him to sing and bring down the curtain. Name your price.”

“For you, fifty.”

“No problem. Done. Tell me what to do.”

“Remember the program. We don't take no pictures. No chopped off fingers or any other crap like that. No trail. Just leave the cash and the details about the guy in the drop spot. We'll leave a confirmation message for you when it's done. You know where the drop is now?”

“I know where it used to be.”

“Tell you what. Just give it to Terry at the meat market. Tell him Dirk sent you. You know Terry right?”

“Shit yeah. I went to school with him and his brother.” He laughed.

“That's his dad. Terry senior's in Pontiac. He caught a bull shit possession case, but it's his second strike. This is Terry junior. Just say Dirk and bring the cash in old twenties. Fifty grand.”

Murphy held his breath. “I know how to do that. But I guess I forgot to mention. I can't pay you until I get the coke.”

He laughed and started hacking like he had needles in his lungs. “Shit! God damned cheap ass menthol smokes.” He coughed and spit. “The boss, he said you always pay off. You can pay after, but make it a hundred grand.”

Murphy felt better. “No problem at all. It's a sure thing. It can't miss once I get the information. Just don't take him out until he sings.”

The voice sounded lower and older. “He'll sing alright. But you know what happens if you screw up.”

“You know me. I never screw up. I've never let you down, and you've never let ME down either.”

“That's true. It's been a while, but it's good doing business with you again.”

Murphy laughed like a nervous teenager. “You guys are the best in the business.” He wiped his forehead.

“When do you want this unfortunate accident to happen”?

“Yesterday man. Right now. Just do it. I know where he is all the time, twenty four seven. I'll get the details in right now.”

“OK then. We're open for business. Make your move. I'll get a team right on it.”

“Thanks man. I really appreciate it.” Murphy hung up and took a deep breath.

## Chapter 26

David had to have the news on all the time, even while playing early morning chess with his girlfriend. He simply muted the sound to turn on the closed captioning service. Dori got ahead of him and traded even pieces while he looked at the screen and made hasty moves during the commercials. The news looked the same as any other day in the Bush administration. People in orange jumpsuits protested in front of the White House against the administration holding people in Guantanamo Bay indefinitely. The government announced it would only give mortgage help to those people who were not already behind on their payments. OPEC said it would not increase production but, oil prices rose only slightly because the American oil companies suddenly revealed millions of barrels of hidden reserves. Chicago gasoline prices hovered at three and a half dollars a gallon. Schools asked for more money so they could afford to run the buses. The president's own intelligence people admitted knowing that Iran quit its nuclear weapons program in 2003, but the president refused to change his mind on the war when confronted with the revelation.

The chess game ended abruptly. The distracted professor traded one two many rooks and got beat by a young woman wearing nothing but an oversized Walter Peyton jersey and a beautiful smile. "Checkmate!" She laughed and gave him the raspberries.

He admired her perfect legs and grinned. "You suckered me."

“You can't trade even, as in EQUAL, pieces when you're down a piece.” She shook her head. ”Stupid male ego. You can't win by force. Women should run the world.”

He looked at the TV. “How much do I owe you now anyway”?

“You used to win once and a while. I'm ahead by six games now. A hundred dollars a game. Six hundred bucks.” She held out her hand.

“I'll win it all back. Double or nothing”? He started putting the chess pieces back in line.

Dori waved him off. “No no. I need to go to the bank.” She looked at her watch.

“Should we risk it”?

“We have to. Were broke. No more sidewalk ATMs. I need to get a big chunk, and it's safer to make one big trip.”

“You're getting good at this shit. You feel like a gangster's babe in the twenties. You're hiding out with your fugitive bank robber stud, you know, deadly Dave. You'd die for him. It makes me horny.”

“No,” she laughed. “I actually I need clothes. I refuse to wash my underwear in a sink.” She started picking up dirty laundry. “I'm tired of wearing the same stuff.”

“You've got more clothes than a frigging department store, and we can't go anywhere near your place. It's a shame to waste money. Your closet looks like a fashion show. Nobody has more stuff.”

“You haven't seen my mother's closet. She's got more shoes than Imelda Marcos. Stuff she's never worn and never will. Expensive gowns, hats, oh my God. If she got a call to be at a black tie dinner at the Russian embassy in fifteen minutes, oh my God, she'd be ready in ten. Anyway, I've got a perfect excuse to buy some new stuff. Look at my shoes.” She pointed to her tennis shoes under the nightstand.

David slapped his forehead. “Oh man. There actually dirty.” He imitated a valley girl in a squeaky voice. “Oh pa-lease. They're

totally gross. I just couldn't like, gag me, wash them. Eeeuuu! I need new shoes." He laughed.

She didn't laugh. "They're worn out David."

He picked one up and turned it upside down. "I've seen more miles on a... How long have you had them anyway?"

"I don't know." She lied.

"I do. I was there. You got them, let's see, we were in summer school, just a few months ago."

She grabbed the shoe. "It's my money. If I want to buy shoes..."

"Hey," he laughed. "I'm only kidding." He turned off the TV and stroked her back. "Let's go to my bank this time. I don't like being a kept man."

She turned around and slapped his butt. "If there's one place they expect you to go it's there. We'll go to my bank. I'll just cover up. Hand me my pants." She pointed to a pile of clothes in the corner.

He tossed the jeans over and struck a tough guy pose. "You can go in and I'll watch the door. We can play gangsters. You get the loot and we'll make a run for it. I'll ride on the running board so I can shoot back at the cops. We won't stop until we cross the state line, and then we'll make out in a field like Bonnie and Clyde."

"Too kinky for me." She laughed. "You're really getting off on this shit. Let me slip into my red dress and I'll take you to the movies." She took her jeans into the bathroom and shut the door.

They left the motel a few minutes later and waved at the line of taxis waiting curbside. The first driver started to pick them up, but moved on suddenly after the cabbie behind him flashed his headlights and cut in. The second driver was so fat his massive stomach seemed to jam the steering wheel. He had a front seat passenger who avoided eye contact and kept busy with a clipboard and a felt tip pen. The driver looked straight ahead and asked, "Where to?"

Dori slid across the back seat and said, "Just take us to the loop. We're going shopping." Something didn't feel right to her.

She looked for the driver's ID, but it wasn't where it was supposed to be. "Where's your ID?" she joked.

The driver pulled out into traffic and laughed. The other man put the clipboard down, produced a stub nose revolver and apologized. "The boss wants to see you guys. It's no big deal. It don't mean shit. Stay calm. You'll be in and out a there in half an hour."

David got so angry he could barely breathe. He balled up his fists and screamed, "Well shit! You mean to tell me the son of a bitch is gonna show himself! Is he or is he not the greasy prick that's trying to kill me! This is kidnapping! Who the hell IS the God damned boss anyway?" He was ready to break somebody's neck, and it felt good.

"Calm down," said the gunman. "We can do this the easy way, or we can make everybody have a real bad day. I'm just doing my job. Just be quiet and it'll be over in a little while. It's no big deal." He lowered the gun to his lap.

Dori winked at David. She made a chill out face and said, "I think this is a dream I saw in a suck ass B movie. If I don't like a movie I get up and leave." They all laughed.

"Can I ask where we're going?" David demanded.

The driver motioned for his buddy to put the gun away and said, "The boss lives across the lake."

"In Michigan!" screamed David. "Across the lake is Michigan. Your gonna drive all the way around the lake?"

"It's a short trip in our boat," said the driver. The passenger laughed.

Dori didn't want to go to Michigan and tried desperately to think of a way to distract the kidnappers. She wanted David to attack the guy and tried to tell him that by digging her nails into his upper thigh. The pain was more than she intended. He pulled away and almost screamed. Her expression left no doubt about what she was thinking. She wanted to fight back by whatever means necessary. They silently agreed and looked for an

opportunity to strike out.

David decided to act like a wimp and fake a heart attack. He grabbed his chest and tried to sound like Woody Allen. "Hey you guys. Come on now. I'm not used to this." He winked at Dori.

She played right along. "Oh honey, where's your heart medication"?

He got hysterical. "Oh my God! Oh my God! I didn't think I'd need it to go shopping. Oh my God"! He started panting about twice every second. Dori scratched around in her purse for the imaginary medication.

The passenger waved his pistol at her. "What are you doing lady"?

"I'm looking for his heart pills and a paper bag. He's hyperventilating for God's sake." Note to self, she thought. Put a gun in the purse. Screw the law. Keep a gun in the purse."

The gunman got annoyed. "Calm down lady," he begged. The driver handed her a greasy Hardee's bag with melted cheese on it. David grabbed it and put it over his face. The smell of stale burgers was disgusting, but he used the opportunity to watch the gunman in the mirror. He thought about gangster movies where the bad guy gets strangled from behind with a necktie or a small rope. He even remembered to loop it once for maximum effectiveness. Dori watched everyone's eyes. She knew they were underestimating David and braced herself for what he might do when his wrestler mode kicked in. David kept blowing up the bag, but he slipped one hand in his pocket and popped the cap off his pen. Dori watched him put his head between his knees and start honking like he was going to throw up. The guys in the front seat looked disgusted and more than a little distracted. She whined and put her hand on David's back. He scribbled something on the bag and let her read it before stuffing it under the seat. It said *Jump out at the first light*.

"He's really sick," she begged. "You're killing my husband! What do you want with us anyway." She didn't know what else to

say, so she pointed her finger at the gunman like it was loaded with a lightning bolt and yelled, "God will get you for this!" That always worked for my mother, she thought. David had to hold back a chuckle, but it seemed to rattle the guy.

"Look lady! I'm a Catholic! You can't talk like that to me."

"I hit a nerve, huh? Your conscience is angry."

"Shut up lady. I'm not kidding. I'm Catholic and that shit ain't funny."

She threw up her hands. "And I'm Jewish. And I guess that explains everything huh"?

"Everybody shut up!" screamed the driver. He passed a bicycle messenger and looked in the mirror. "Now listen. When we get to this red light I want to warn you guys not to try and jump out. People try that shit all the time. The doors are all locked, but I'll still shoot you if you try it. I ain't got no more time for this shit. It's just a job. If I let you get away before the boss talks to you he'll fire me on the spot. If you want to be a dead hero go right ahead. It's all part of my job. I've done it before and I'll do it again. I ain't gonna think twice."

David turned up his wimp impersonation. "Oh please sir. Can't we talk about this? There's no reason to scare us like that. My chest is real heavy now. Oh my God I'm gonna die"! He grabbed his chest and slumped over coughing. "Oh my God"!

Dori covered him with her body and yelled, "Take him to a hospital right now! This is murder"! She kissed the top of his head and whispered, "Take slow breaths dear."

The cab slowed down, turned into Jackson Park Harbor and stopped at a red light. Nobody went for the door. The water looked rough with foamy little whitecaps all the way to the horizon. Only the bigger boats could go out. The smaller boats bobbed up and down at the dock. The driver had to suck in his fat stomach to turn the wheel. He weaved his way through the parking lot and stopped in the shadow of what looked to David like a small ship. The gunman got out, stretched his legs and

opened the back door. David got out first. Dori stumbled over the shoulder belt and tried to think of a way to use the cell phone in her purse. The kidnappers led them down a long pier past a dozen or so sailboats with masts as tall as flagpoles. They stopped at a forty foot cigar boat. The fat man smiled and slapped the ladder.

David grabbed Dori's arm and bellowed out, "Remember what I said at the chess board?" She nodded. They were playing chess in the motel when he got her to agree on what to do if somebody tried to make her get in a car. He took his advice from Artie. The safest strategy is to refuse to get in. Make them shoot you right there on the street in front of witnesses or let you go. The odds are best for survival if you have the guts to refuse to get in. If they get you out in the woods then the odds are bad. Dori panicked and went for the cell phone. The driver saw her reach in her purse and ran right over. She got the phone open and was trying to punch 911 when he pushed her. The fat man knocked her right off the pier and onto the deck of the boat ten feet below. She landed hard but didn't cry out. The phone and the purse went into the water. David jumped right after her but landed softly by rolling with the impact and grabbing a line. He crawled over and put his arms around her on the slippery wet deck. She was only slightly hurt but very angry.

The fat man screamed, "Just get your asses below right now! Keep your hands where I can see 'em." The gunman stepped off the ladder. He pushed David past some plush red seats and down below deck. Dori came in and sat next to David. Two big engines spun up and whined like a 747 on the runway. The boat headed for deep water, slowly at first and then with a huge burst of acceleration. The driver opened a small cabinet and got out an old beat up .45 semi-automatic. He didn't look nervous at all. He knew the drill. First you tell them they're going to die no matter what. Then you wait until the last minute and offer to spare them if they talk. After they talk you just throw them overboard in the middle of lake Michigan. Almost all of the victims were gang

bangers who got caught skimming. It wasn't like anybody was going to call out the Coast Guard to search for them out there. The assassins never even knew who was paying them. They provided a traditional service that went back to the paddle wheeler days. You had to know the right people, but it could be done.

Dori looked at the .45 and said, "Come on now. Tell us the truth."

"What you want to know lady"?

"Where are we really going? What are we doing here? Who's the boss"?

"There ain't no boss. I'm the boss." He laughed so hard that his neck got red from lack of oxygen. He ran a finger across the inside of his collar and stretched it out.

"What do you want with us"?. She felt warm sweat run down her arms. David prayed for an opportunity to make a move.

"We do a service. I'm afraid your time is up."

She stood up fast. "Just like that"!

He cocked the slide on the .45 to put a round in the chamber and pointed the gun at her chest. "Lady we can do this right here if you want." She sat down.

David cursed himself for missing the chance to rush the guy when the gun wasn't ready. "At least tell us why," he joked. "Somebody's been trying to kill us. We just want to know who it was before we die. I know it ain't you. You're just a hired hand. Who you working for"!

The fat man looked almost empathetic. "I don't know who it is. I'm just doing a job. I don't WANT to know, and it's better that way. I don't know who. I don't know why, and I don't care. You should be more careful who's cab you get into slick. It was too easy. I didn't think it would happen that quick. You turned a week's work into a day. You didn't even look."

The engines slowed to a crawl and then to idle speed. David looked through a small window. His captor didn't object. The

cigar boat stopped alongside a much bigger vessel, and a man on the bow threw out a line. David couldn't see land anymore. The big boat reminded him of some kind of fish factory ship. It smelled bad but not like fish.

The fat man waved his pistol at the door, and everybody knew it was time to move. David helped Dori stand up. She was crying. They took their time coming out and had no trouble climbing a ladder hooked over the side of the big ugly tub. They stepped on deck and got dragged below to a empty room with rusty steel walls. They saw daylight for only a few seconds before the door banged shut. The heavy steel hull moaned against the wind, and somebody outside laughed as he snapped a lock on the door. They hugged in total darkness. Dori felt helpless and completely terrified to the point that she just wanted it all to end as soon as possible. She put her hand on David's shoulder and tried to laugh. "Penny for your thoughts."

"I'm not afraid to die. What worries me is not knowing if it was big oil or not."

"Of course it is. Who else would go to so much trouble"?

They sat on the floor and David caressed her face. "How are YOU doing"?

"We're not gonna die today. I'm too mad. I'm gonna scratch their eyes out."

"I believe you."

"I wish we'd slipped away in the night and got married. You know, we didn't make love last night."

"What"? He laughed.

"You stayed up all night reading the news and arguing with left wing insomniacs on the blog. It could have been our last night together. I hope the frigging news was worth it."

"Oh my God lady." His eyes started adapting to the darkness.

"You're a news junkie. You can't leave it alone. What the hell is different from one day to the next anyway. Some troops get blown up in a roadside bomb. The democrats fail to stop the war. The

Enron guy stays out on appeal, and the frigging gas goes up another nickel.”

“I quit booze and now you need something else to pick on. Is this your way of convincing yourself we're gonna make it outta here? I watch the news a lot, so what. Everybody should. With the way things are, you know, it's important to stay on your toes. Lousy bastards. You know how they squeeze the price of gas up? They turn down the refineries. They own the damn refineries.”

“Don't change the subject. The tube... You don't have to watch it all the time.” She felt sick and put her hand over her face. “What the hell is that awful stench? Yuck! I think I'm sitting in some kind of rancid crap. I can't see a thing.” She felt her wet butt. “What the...”

He wasn't listening. “We haven't built a new refinery in like ten years. It's easy to drive the gas price up by shutting down the old ones for maintenance. Turn off the spigot. Most of them are in the gulf too. Oil people love hurricanes. Big ones, little ones, ones that never hit. It gives them an excuse to turn off the supply. Greedy bastards.” *BOOM!* He kicked the wall and got startled by the deafening clang that reverberated all around the ship. They heard feet clomping around on deck and muffled voices screaming at each other. “God damn it Sam! Go down there and do it now”! David took her tiny hand and said, “I think we need a plan.”

“A plan would be nice.” She felt a strange sense of calm.

“OK. Here's the plan.” He listened to the direction of the footsteps. “The boat that brought us here, we jump in it and take off.”

“No way they're gonna let that happen. If we...”

“Listen. We need a code word. When one of us says bingo, then we go for it.”

“Good word, bad plan.” She laughed. The footsteps got louder and stopped.

David hugged her tight. “Listen. They WILL make a mistake.

When it happens, I yell bingo and then we jump.”

“Let's just get it over with.” She squinted in the dark and tried to remember where the door was. “I suppose it's better than cooperating with an execution.”

“There you go girl. If you must be eaten, you know, make sure you don't get eaten on the day you taste the best.”

“Hey, I'm impressed. But I forgot who said that.”

“My mother always said that.” He laughed. “I thought she said it.”

Dori put her hand against the wall and stood up slowly. “How long are they gonna keep us in here anyway. The jerk said they're gonna kill us. What the hell are they waiting for.” *BANG!* She slapped the wall and screamed, “Come and get us ass holes! What the hell are you waiting for”!

“Hey, you're right,” he laughed. “They're not ready yet. And why should we wait until they are”? *BANG BANG BANG!* He kicked the steel and yelled obscenities inferring incestuous behavior between the captors and their mothers. He called them cowards and dared them to open the door. The voices on deck got louder, and somebody rattled some keys outside. The padlock snapped. The door swung open and the light momentarily blinded them. An angry deck hand stepped in and pointed a large nickel plated revolver at the floor. He waved the shiny barrel toward the light, and David got up. The guy yelled, “You in a hurry to die! OK then. Get your ass on deck. You can die right now.”

Dori crossed her arms and refused to move. “Go ahead and shoot me you lousy coward! You need that gun for courage! You ain't shit! David could break you in half with his bare hands. He's a wrestler. Go ahead and put the gun down. I dare you! You ain't got the guts to fight him.” She laughed. “I dare you.”

The guy didn't blink. He just calmly tucked the pistol in his belt and looked away for an instant before whirling around and punching David right in the mouth. He fell back against the cold steel hull but bounced right back at his attacker. He dove for the

legs but he wasn't quick enough. The guy took the gun out of his belt and cocked the hammer with his thumb. David put his hands up, smiled at Dori and said, "Gee thanks."

She glared at the guy like she could scratch his eyes out. "He's still a stinking coward"!

David wiped his hands on his pants, took her arm and led her out into the light. They moved across the deck to a slippery ladder that led to the upper level. Dori went up first, followed by David, and then the gunman. Somebody in the pilot house closed a window. Dori shaded her eyes as they walked across the upper deck. David spun around and caught a glimpse of the cigar boat tied to the starboard side, but the guy jabbed him in the ribs to keep moving. He needed an opening, any opening, a chance to jump in the boat, a way to die fighting. The man with the pistol was the only guard on the deck. The rest of the crew watched the whole thing from the pilot house. He waved the gun at the pitching deck. They sat down and huddling together against the wind. The goon stuck the gun in the air and fired a single shot.

David smiled and asked, "Is that a 357"?

He pointed at David's face and laughed, "Why?"

"Good size round. I don't want to suffer."

"I'm not gonna shoot you," he joked. "You're going in the water. No bullet holes, you know, in case they find the body. And they won't either. We're way too far out, and you can't be too careful."

Dori shivered. "You're gonna make us walk the plank?" laughed David.

"Yep. We do it all the time." He pointed at the whitecaps. "Now that's cold. You won't last long in that water. If the cold don't get you, shit, you'll die of exhaustion trying to swim back." Dori looked at the crew up in the windows and wondered if they had any other guns pointed at her.

David got ready to die fighting. His face was as pale as wax. "And what if we don't feel like swimming"?

The goon looked offended. “Then we throw your ass overboard. Either way you swim.”

“You do this a lot”?

“I'd say we've got it down to a routine.” He laughed.

David winked at Dori. “It looks like you were right about what you said down below.”

She looked at the cigar boat. It was only tied to the rail by a single line. She stepped closer to the gun and said, “I don't think I want to go into that water. I think you can kiss my ass.”

“Oh lady. Don't tell me you've got a problem with that”? He laughed. “Can't swim”? He waved at the pilot house. “Let your wrestler boyfriend paddle for you.”

*THUMP!* She kicked him in the crotch as hard as she could and yelled, “Bingo!” The blow hardly moved the guy, but he didn't shoot. David took her hand. They jumped over the side and landed squarely on the deck of the cigar boat. Hysterical laughter erupted in the pilot house.

The gunman said, “Here son. Let me help you with that.” He untied the line from the rail, and the boat floated free.

David knew something was wrong. “Jesus Christ. I know you ain't gonna give up that easy. We ain't going in that water. I thought you didn't want any bullet holes.”

The goon smiled. “What you gonna do now slick”?

David whispered, “They don't want to shoot a hole in this fancy boat. I'm gonna make him get down here, and then I'll kick his ass.” She backed up against the wheel, put a hand behind her back and started groping for the starter.

The gunman laughed. “The key's under the wheel lady.” She looked. “Turn the key and push the green button.” The key was already on. She mashed the button with her thumb and held it down hard. The engine started right up, and the guys in the pilot house laughed hysterically again. Dori couldn't find the throttle or begin to know what to do. David was afraid to move. It was too easy. The gunman waved them on and said, “Go ahead and go.”

David didn't know what to do. He just looked at the guy said, "You can't shoot the boat can you? It's way too expensive."

The gunman leveled his heavy revolver at the engine and fired six shots. *Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham!* The engine just stopped. He smiled at David and said, "It's stolen. We didn't even have to gas it up. That's not that expensive." The men in the pilot house laughed so hard it made Dori smile.

David yelled and shook his fist at the pilot house. "Cheap bastards! So we go to the bottom of the lake in a stolen boat!"

"That's right," said the gunman. "No bullet holes. Just in case the fish don't want to eat you. No boat. No nothing. It's a nice touch, don't you think?"

"They could still find the boat. What about the bullet holes in the boat?"

"We'll, it's kinda deep here. They've never... They haven't exactly brought one of ours up yet. Lot's of old wrecks down there."

"You forgot the concrete overshoes. What about the bodies?"

"I don't know. None of our customers ever washed up on the shore that we know about. It's a big lake man. They sink at first. If they do float, well it's not for long. I think they get all rotten and sink or something. Fish food."

"God damn it. Who hired you? Who am I gonna tell anyway? It don't matter now. I've got a right to know before I die."

"We never know who hires us. It's better that way."

*Tweet!* An alarm sounded. Men in the pilot house screamed at each other like it was the end of the world. All the engines started. A man stuck his head through a tiny window and screamed, "Chopper! Let's go! Get the hell out of here now!" The anchor broke the surface and scraped across the hull. The sound of helicopter blades got progressively louder. David held his breath and accepted the idea that the goon would shoot him before the cavalry got there. The gunman looked back and forth between the boats. "Leave them!" screamed the man in the window, waiving

his binoculars toward the horizon. “We can come back for them later”! He lifted the glasses to his face and scanned the helicopter coming in fast. He saw an orange stripe and screamed, “Coast Guard!” The barrels of three AK-47 assault rifles appeared on the front rail. Somebody pushed the throttles all the way down, and the old boat roared off toward the shore. It was no contest. The helicopter didn't bother to give a verbal warning or even a shot across the bow. The aircrew opened up with small arms fire and peppered the tub from bow to stern. The chopper pilot saw muzzle flashes coming up from the target and banked right. He put on a little altitude and hovered a safe distance away.

David and Dori watched the whole thing from the forward rail of the dead cigar boat. They screamed and shook their fists like the Bears got a first down on the Green Bay ten yard line in a snowstorm at Soldier Field. They had no way of knowing that Benton was directing the helicopter from a digital link in his car. He was parked at the sailboat marina in Jackson Park Harbor and could see the whole thing developing on a twelve inch plasma screen on the front seat. He wiggled his ear piece and talked to the pilot like they were standing next to each other. “Confirm your visual ID. Can you see them? Are they OK”?

“Yes sir. A male and a female meeting the description are standing on the deck of the cigar boat. I think it's dead in the water. The target craft is still moving at full speed. The Coast Guard is taking small arms fire from the target sir.”

“The target... Are you sure my people aren't on board? What are the people on the cigar boat doing”?

“Waving at us sir.” He laughed. “I'd say we've got a couple of happy campers down there.”

“Excellent! Stand by Coast Guard. Langley confirm the fix with my coordinates. Where are they now”?

“We're good to go big time. The Coast Guard helicopter is directly over them now. They're waving at it to pick them up. Oh yeah. It's them alright.”

“Coast Guard. Are you over them now?”

“Coast guard. That's affirmative.”

“Langley, do you have a good lock on the target?”

“Affirmative. We have a lock on the ship. Request permission to fire.”

“Stand by to fire on my command.”

“Yes sir, standing by.”

An unmanned Predator drone circled over the lake with a missile locked on the escaping ship. The drone was too high to be seen from the deck of the tub, but it could send real time high resolution video to Langley. They could see the helicopter, the cigarette boat and the target boat on a giant overhead screen with superimposed coordinates running along the top and side. The cross hairs painted the target running for shore.

Benton had a boss listening in too. Even he had to ask for clearance. “Permission to fire,” he asked. “Zulu Alpha Baker Foxtrot Hotel. This is Vulcan.”

A clear bass voice responded, “You are go to fire Vulcan. You are hot.”

The prop-wash from the helicopter hovering over the cigarette boat blew Dori's hair straight up in the air, but she didn't care. She jumped around laughing and screaming like a lottery winner while screaming at the escaping tub. “You Better run! We're still here! She shook her trigger finger at the boat. “God will GET you for this”!

*KABOOM!* The ship exploded. The boat instantly vaporized, and a powerful shock wave knocked her down to the deck. She looked up and the ship was gone. Everything seemed to get still except for the chop chop of the helicopter blades and David moaning like he'd just seen a UFO. Dori examined the tip of her finger and showed it to David.

“Jesus”! He laughed. “Don't point that thing at ME”! He covered his face and tried to hide behind a swivel seat. “How in the hell did you do that anyway”? They laughed and looked up at

the clouds. "That didn't come from the chopper," he said. "It came out of nowhere."

Benton saw the explosion on his portable screen. The briefcase monitor had one less blip on it. Langley congratulated him. "Target destroyed sir. The helicopter is picking your people up right now."

"Understood. You can tell the press, well, tell them the Coast Guard said it looked like a boiler explosion." He laughed.

"Yes sir. Coast Guard, do you copy"?

"We copy. It looks like they cooked the boiler trying to get away alright. It'll be in my report."

"Serves them right," laughed Benton. "Good job everybody. I'm clear."

David and Dori rode the rescue sling up to the helicopter one at a time. They were shivering but clear of the icy water. The crew wrapped them in blankets and made a run for the Chicago skyline. The chopper flew under the radar by staying just above the surface of the water. The pilot wanted to make it hard for anybody to track where he took the survivors. They were over the shore in five minutes. David looked back in the direction of the fancy cigar boat and yelled at the pilot. "What about the boat! It's stolen! It's drifting away"! The pilot waved like he didn't care.

The copilot wiggled his microphone said, "It'll get picked up. We know who the owner is from the number." David took Dori's trigger finger and showed it to the crew. He jabbered about what happened, but they didn't get it. Dori made her hand into a mock pistol, stuck it up in the air and blew across the fingertip like a smoking barrel. The whole crew laughed without knowing why. The pilot closed in on the landing zone. He lingered over a big circle on the roof of a hospital building and then lightly touched down. Benton emerged from behind an air conditioning tower, ducked under the moving rotor blades and jumped on the chopper. The pilot waited for him get in and then took off straight up.

David freaked. "Oh my God." Dori flashed him an *I told you*

so look.

Benton buckled in and tapped one of the orange suits on the back. The guy braced himself on a seat back and turned around. Benton pointed to his ear and then to David. The crewman opened a compartment and got out two white flight helmets. Benton thanked him and put one on. He tossed the other one to David who quickly pulled it over his head. He had a little trouble figuring out the visor. Benton fixed it for him and plugged in the microphone cable. They could hear the pilot and the whole crew on the intercom. Benton spoke first. "Can you hear me David"?

"I can hear you. What about Dori"?

Benton waved at the crewman and pointed to Dori. The guy took out another helmet, stepped over David's outstretched legs and placed it very carefully over her tiny head. She loved it. He plugged the mike into a steel box under her seat and winked. She started yelling over the rotor noise, but she didn't have to. "Hey hey! Can you hear me"! It was deafening.

The whole crew jumped back and pulled at their ears. David threw up his hands. "You don't have to shout," he laughed. "There's a frigging amp in there. Just talk normal."

"OK. Yeah. I hear you."

The flight was bumpy and the sheer vibration of the helicopter made David uncomfortable. He had never been on a helicopter before and didn't know what to expect. It seemed to rattle the little bones in his inner ear. The fact that it was an involuntary trip didn't help either. Images of south American political prisoners being kicked out without a parachute didn't seem so remote anymore. He gathered himself and threw Benton a pitiful stare. "How did you find us?" he demanded.

Benton smiled and apologized, "Sorry. Classified. Why did you run"?

"I got a message that said you were going to kill me, that's why."

"I know all about it."

“Well are you”?

Benton flashed an understanding smile. “Going to kill you... Of course not.” He squirmed in his seat. “We're on the same side.” Dori shook her head and looked away. “Prove it then,” snapped David.

Ten seconds of silence seemed like an hour. Benton finally said, “I'm afraid you'll just have to trust me. I need your help.”

David considered making a run for it as soon as they set down. He imagined Dori blowing Benton away with a lightning bolt from her finger. He looked at the door, turned sharply toward Benton and begged, “What the hell do you want from me now?”

Benton looked like he had all the cards. “Your buddy the political science teacher, the one that did the speech at the rally...”

“Sam”?

“That's right. Sam Sheridan. I'm afraid he's in trouble.”

“Bull shit. What kind of trouble”?

He wiggled his mike. “Real trouble. It seems... Well... He's taken your little revolution to nationalize the oil pretty seriously. He's been kind of crazy aggressive with it. He's demanding divestiture for one thing. He wants the university to break all ties with anything or anybody that has anything at all to do with private energy companies. They give the school a lot of money for research.”

“No shit.”

“Well son, he got fired.”

“What! No way man. They can't do that. He's tenured.”

Benton looked like he cared. “That's not all. He's really flipped out. He's up on a hill next to the Lamont refinery with a fifty caliber sniper rifle and a sack full of armor piercing incendiary rounds. He's not duck hunting up there son.”

“Oh my God.” David lowered his voice and put his guard up higher.

“One shot in the right place and we've got one hell of an explosion just outside a major city. Home grown terrorism. This is

not good.” Benton had his doubts that the big rifle was actually capable of setting off the tanks directly, but he kept it to himself. Opinions at Langley varied. The incendiary rounds might do it, but probably not by shooting directly into the tanks. He continued to play up the danger. “I wouldn't want to be within a mile of that place when it goes up.”

“Oh my God,” cried Dori. She could see them blaming David and prosecuting him too.

Benton pointed south. “The refinery... It's not quite all the way to Joliet. It's by Romeoville. We should be there in a few minutes. We've got plenty of time.”

David couldn't concentrate and looked a little sick with worry. “What exactly do you want ME to do”?

“Talk him down of course. He trusts you. Stop him before he ruins his life. At least any more than he already has. SWAT held their fire. They could have shot him by now, and the only reason he's still alive... They're waiting for you. I asked them to. My neck's in play. I took full responsibility. I could end up flying a desk in Dumbfuckistan. See there. I really AM on your side professor.”

David felt sicker. The adrenalin gave him heartburn. “He wouldn't really do it. He's just desperate, trying to make a point.”

Benton got frustrated. “Well shit. He fucking succeeded. It's time to stop this crap son. Make him stop. We think... We're sure he won't shoot as long as you're up there with him, and then the SWAT won't take him down either. He left a big note. He won't let anybody talk to him or come any closer, but you're his friend. He won't shoot you. You the man now. The note said that if the police move in he'll fire into the tank farm and explode the fuel. It's insane. And I'll tell you what else is insane. I just can't believe they can sell incendiary rounds, armor piercing ammo, on the open market. That round will go through a vest like it ain't even there. It can stop a tank for Christ's sake.” He yelled at David like he was a boot camp recruit who needed a push. “Listen up son!

You in or out”!

“OK OK. I'll do it. It's probably a mistake, but I'll do it.” Dori wasn't on board at all, and her expression showed it.

“Good man! You'll have to walk part of the way in though. We'll get you in as close as we can.”

David scanned Benton's face for any sign of deception. “Can I trust you”?

Benton put his hand on his heart and threw down his last card. “David... We know who shot you.”

Dori waved her fist. “Who is it!” she demand. “Who is it”!

“A Chicago cop named Murphy.”

“Oh my God,” said David.

“I knew it,” she screamed. “David broke his arm.”

“The Chicago police will pick him up. Murphy gets around. The gun that shot you in the garage is the same the gun they took off the dead guy in the subway. He had Murphy's gun, and he fired it at the police. I think Murphy set him up, but he had to be desperate to use his own gun. It must have been Murphy chasing you on the expressway. The dead guy in the subway, he's no Arab. How Murphy got him to play terrorist, that I don't know. It's pretty weak no matter how you turn it. He's a smart cop. He could have done better.”

David shivered and pulled his blanket tighter. “This movie is getting way too complicated man.”

“Tell me about it,” said Benton. “The complicated part is that I need you to get that fifty caliber pop gun away from your friend.”

“Artie doesn't know about Murphy,” said David. “I gotta tell Artie. Can I make a phone call”?

“Knock yourself out.”

David dug out the cell phone and called the bar. He got a recording and waited for the beep. “Artie, this is David. Murphy shot me. Watch your back. Check your email right now man.” He hung up and sent a quick text message that explained everything in short phrases. He told Artie about the refinery, why he was

being flown there, that he didn't trust Benton, and that if anything happened to him he wanted people to know the truth. He asked Artie to pick him up at the refinery and help him get him away from Benton just in case things went bad. He pushed the send button, smiled at Benton and said, "Wonderful thing email."

## Chapter 27

Murphy read about the bad news in a message he found in the bus station locker that served as his underground mailbox. The assassins failed. David didn't talk, and he was very much alive. Murphy ran out of the building and drove away at high speed in order to make shift change at the stakeout. He turned on the siren and arrived on time with a few minutes to spare. The Fleetwood rookie was there waiting for him. He always parked the Cadillac in the same spot to make it look like the car's owner lived nearby. The early shift saw Murphy coming and took off. Murphy rolled right by the rookie and parked in the oily spot where the other shift had been. Their soda cans and paper trash crunched under his wheels. The phone rang right away. He took his time, thinking it was Stone, and settled in first. It wasn't Stone.

“Murphy.”

“Whoa. Rodriguez. How you doing man”? He clenched his jaw and braced himself for the hassle of calming the guy down again.

“It's time Murphy.”

“What time is it man”?

“It's time to get my product back. That's what time it is. We go in for the final session tomorrow. I already told my lawyer about the switch. He's gonna spring it on the judge first thing in the morning. It's time for you to put up or die man. Right now.”

“Right now huh.” Sweat ran down his forehead and stung his eyes. He wiped it away and rubbed his hand on the seat.

“Right now man! Today! Do it now! You CAN do it right?”

“Sure I can. I'm there now. I'm looking right at it.”

“That's good for you officer.” He laughed. “Where you gonna meet me?”

Murphy thought fast. “Uh... Grant Park. Right after the court lets out. I'll be in a red jogging suit.”

“You sure?”

“What you mean sure? Don't you like red?” He tried to laugh.

“Murphy... If you... If I even think you're gonna cross me... I waited for your cop ass. I did what you said. I didn't want to, but I did it. I'll personally...”

“Hey. Hey. Chill partner. Just bring me the God damn cash. Unmarked bills.”

“What bring? I thought you wanted to meet up on a Jamaican beach or some shit. I didn't like that anyway. We do it here. You better be alone though. If I even feel watched, you die. I'll...”

Murphy lost it. “You'll what! I'm your fucking partner now ass hole! Right after court! Take a pill or something! And don't forget the...” Rodriguez hung up. Murphy threw the phone on the floor, put two extra clips of ammunition in his pocket and felt the safety on his new pistol. The street wasn't exactly deserted, but it was still asleep except for the rookie in the Fleetwood. The kid watched Murphy jump out of the car and run straight in the bar.

Artie washed glasses and waved at two of his three customers saying goodbye on their way out. He saw Murphy and said, “Look what the dog drug in. You want a pizza?” Murphy motioned toward the office. Artie wiped his hands on a towel and came out smiling and shaking his head. The old bartender sensed that something was wrong and felt good about the pistol tucked behind his back in a clip on holster under a sweatshirt. The last customer left. Murphy closed the door and locked it. Artie sat down behind his desk.

“You packing?” asked Murphy.

“Sure why?” His teeth smiled but his eyes didn't.

Murphy opened his jacket and exposed his pistol. “Put it on the desk.”

Artie reached down, took a little Saturday night special out of an ankle holster and set it on the desk. “What's wrong man?” he asked. “This ain't like you.”

Murphy picked it up and put it in his pocket. He looked embarrassed. “I'm here for the coke.”

“Well, I figured that since you took my gun, well, you ain't exactly here on official business.” He laughed and felt good about the other gun behind his back.

“Don't try anything stupid. I've got people outside ready to come in here shooting if I don't come out in a few minutes.”

Artie got pissed. “You shot David didn't you”?

“God damn it man! Nobody fucks with me”!

“You were after the coke all along.” He shook his head and felt sorry for Murphy.

“Look! I know it's on the premises. I had somebody. I had a...”

“Hey! I know about Carla.” He tried to laugh. “Guess I'm not really irresistible after all. I knew it had to be something else besides my good looks. I thought she might be after the coke, but she wouldn't even do a line of MY shit. She didn't want any coke. All she did was smoke weed. I never should have told her about it. Did she tell you where it is”?

Murphy waved his gun. “Go get it.”

Artie laughed at Murphy's nerves. “It's right behind you. Go ahead and take it.” He pointed at six cardboard boxes stacked up in the closet. Murphy felt around, looked in the first box, and saw the bricks. The adrenaline rush felt good. The bricks were tightly bound in a thick, clear plastic wrap and marked, *Evidence*. He took out a tiny brown pen knife and cut in to one, spilling the chalky white powder down the side. He tried to taste it and got it all over his face.

Artie laughed and asked, “Can't you leave a brick for me there hot shot? I kept it nice and safe for you man. They won't know

how much you took, and I sure as hell won't tell 'em.”

Murphy set the open brick on the desk and laughed. “I'll let you keep this one if you help me load it. This shit looks heavy.”

Artie laughed again. “No problem officer.”

Murphy took Artie out to the Ford and let him in the passenger door. He wasn't about to take his eyes off the big bartender until he was ready to leave. The Fleetwood rookie watched him drive around back and called it in on the radio. The back steps went right up to the office. Murphy parked close enough to make it easy to throw the boxes onto the back seat. They had the stuff loaded in less than five minutes, but Murphy got worried. He thought the whole thing was going down way too smoothly. Carla had insisted that Artie would put up a fight. He thought about the Thompson. He knew that a chopper could cut his car in half as he tried to get away, and the idea terrified him. He pointed his gun at Artie and forced a crazy smile. Murphy didn't say another word. He just got behind the wheel and took off down the alley like a kid stealing a Lexus. Artie laughed and watched the burn out. Murphy forced his way into traffic and raced down Ashland Avenue like the world was after him. He dashed in and out the slower traffic while fumbling with the phone to call Stone. He seriously considered stopping the car and moving the boxes from the back seat to the trunk. Stone picked up.

“Stoner here. The smoker you drink the talker you get. That you Murphy?”

“Where the hell are you”?

“We moved again. We're at Carla's place.” He laughed.

“You what! Are you crazy”! *Bang!* Murphy hit a pot hole deep enough to bend a rim. “Son of a bitch”!

Stone winked at Carla and laughed. “Hey boss. She's OK man. We can trust her now. She really proved herself.”

“You idiot! Did you poke her”?

“How many times do I have to tell you...”

“Shut up! It don't mater now! I got the stuff”! He ran up on a

slower car and checked his speed.

“The hell you say.”

“I got the dope. I got it with me. I just went in and took it.”

Stone sat down hard. “You got it! Holy shit! All of it?”

“All of it. It's time to get out a Dodge.”

Stone braced himself for the bad news part. “What about Rodriguez?”

“Oh screw him. We don't need Pedro now.”

“No way. We can't... We ain't gonna sell that shit ourselves. Just take the fee. How much money is enough for you man?”

“I'm only kidding,” he laughed. “I told Pedro I'd meet him in the park. The trial is gonna end tomorrow. We'll do it right now and be on the next flight out.” Murphy wiggled the steering wheel and it felt gummy. “Shit... I think I'm getting a flat. I hit a pot hole big enough to swallow a pig.”

Stone wanted to slow things down before Murphy screwed up. “Tomorrow huh... Holy shit that's fast. Where you at now?”

“I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Come out back and help me unload this shit. I can't leave it in the car for one second. No no. Better yet... Meet me at the Best Western. We'll get a room. Half an hour from now.”

“Yeah sure. I'm moving right now.” He hung up.

Reporters blocked the steps of the Cook County Courthouse at 26<sup>th</sup> and California waiting for Rodriguez and his lawyer Buzz Kleintop try and get into the building. The old stone building was famous for being the busiest felony courthouse in the country. Reporter's from several TV stations were already in front of their cameras. They filled the time by talking about the Capone trial and other ghosts of the old building. A CBS reporter translated the Latin inscriptions on the front. She pointed to the eight sculpted figures above the limestone columns and told the world that they stood for law, justice, liberty, truth, might, love, wisdom, and

peace. Her spin alluded to what everyone already believed. Not only was Rodriguez guilty of running coke, he probably shot the female officer during the raid. The judge was under suspicion for letting a cop killer out on bail, and everybody wanted the court to switch the jury like they did to Capone.

Somebody yelled, "Here they come." A taxi pulled up and the crowd surrounded it. Kleintop got out, stiff-armed the crowd and covered the defendant's back as they ran up the stairs. The reporters pushed back. Each one tried to goad Rodriguez into saying something, anything at all for a sound bite and a chunk of tape on the nine-o'clock news. All they needed was a word or two. They could loop it around and around while the reporter talked about what grade school the dead cop went to. They could interview the crying mother and bring in an expert to blame the crime on immigration policy. All they needed was a word or two from the perpetrator, but Kleintop was too fast for them. He had his client safe inside before the guy could say anything.

Rodriguez looked like a pimp at his daughter's birthday party. His light blue suit didn't go well with his red tie and fancy basketball shoes. They took their seats in the courtroom but had to pop right back up when the judge came in. The bailiff started the all rise routine, but the judge waved him off. Rodriguez was slow to sit back down, almost to the point of being disrespectful. He scanned the entire room but found no sympathetic faces. He thought about the irony of the situation. These people wanted coke. They paid him to take the risk of getting it for them so they could stay safe in their hypocritical little lives. He delivered, but now they hate him and treat him like an evil predator. He thought about prohibition. People are going to get high. They vote to make it illegal, and then they pay somebody else to take the risk. When the supplier gets caught they spit on him and feel superior. White collar criminals get a slap on the wrist, and street corner kids get ten years hard time for selling a ten dollar rock. He felt angry but confident. He knew he was leaving there a free man

because of the switch. He felt like standing up and telling the whole gallery to kiss his ass. The judge put his papers down and looked at Kleintop who was more than ready to make his move. He smiled and said, “Your honor, may I approach the bench?”

“You may,” said the judge. He signaled for both attorneys to come forward. They moved up and stood there with their hands folded behind their backs. “What is it Mr. Kleintop?”

“Your honor, I have some new evidence.” He expected the prosecutor to flinch, but the man just smiled.

The judge smiled too. He looked at the prosecutor and said, “Gentlemen we will meet in my chambers. Right now.”

Kleintop tried not to panic, but something was very wrong. His thoughts raced as he got up and left the courtroom, discretely popping Tums along the way. The judge unlocked his office door and seated the lawyers in front of his colossal mahogany desk. The chairs were set up so the judge had the high ground. He was barely five feet tall, and that was with four inch heels on special shoes. Kleintop didn't know what to do with his hands, so he dug his nails into the arms of the chair. The prosecutor looked way too relaxed and confident. Kleintop knew that Rodriguez shot the policewoman in the raid. He was protected by attorney client privilege, but his conscience still bothered him. It was hard to live with the contradictions. I'm just doing my job, he thought. Everyone is entitled to a defense. People are innocent until proven guilty. If the system wasn't designed that way then lots of innocent people would be wrongly convicted. Guilty people get off sometimes, but the end doesn't justify the means. He looked at the prosecutor and said, “Nothing personal counselor.”

He smiled. “Do what you have to do.”

Kleintop thought about the dead policewoman and how he was helping to free her killer. An officer is dead, he thought. And all for drugs. Lousy drugs. The cop would still be alive if drugs were legal. It's a public health problem, and they send in the frigging Marines. And why did they send the woman in first. She probably

volunteered to take the point just to impress the macho bastards. What did they expect to find in there anyway. They kicked in the door all vested up and armed to the teeth. Rodriguez would have feared for his life. They could have shot him down like a dog with no questions asked. That's the way it is here. The whole damned system is corrupt. It's kill or be killed. There's no good guys or bad guys, just survivors. It's not my fault, and I didn't make the rules.

The judge sat down, sipped his fresh coffee and smiled. "OK Kleintop. What you got."

"Your honor it has come to my attention that someone has tampered with the evidence. I have it on good authority that the police moved the evidence and put a substitute in its place in the evidence room. There's no chain of custody your honor. I respectfully request..."

"That's a very serious accusation," laughed the judge.

"Yes your honor." He looked at the prosecutor who didn't look surprised.

The judge took another sip and said, "We would have a problem alright. If it were true."

"Yes your honor."

The judge looked at the prosecutor and bowed. "What does the state have to say to that"?

The prosecutor felt like a deer hunter with a clear shot, no wind and lots of time. "Your honor I have a certified chain of custody. In anticipation of this moment we took extra precautions in every possible way, every step of the way."

Kleintop felt his heart fall and addressed the prosecutor who kept looking straight ahead. "What exactly do you mean by... In anticipation of this moment"?

He wouldn't look at Kleintop, and kept his eyes on the judge. "We always take extraordinary care with the chain of custody your honor, with any evidence we have." The judge laughed in an unprofessional way, like he enjoyed it too much.

Kleintop stood up and begged. "But your honor... I know... I found out about the..."

"If you are referring..." The prosecutor cut him off. "If you are referring to the rumor that the police moved the evidence in order to prevent another fiasco then I can tell you, I have it on good authority, that the rumor is completely false. I have even heard another rumor, that I can not confirm or deny, that the police purposely leaked the rumor of a switch in order to create disinformation for any prospective thief." The judge laughed again.

Kleintop let his guard down. "Do you know how hard it would be to keep something like that a secret."

The prosecutor continued. "I also can not confirm or deny that only a handful of people had access to that information. If it did happen." He smiled at Kleintop.

The judge turned to the prosecutor and asked a question he obviously already had the answer to. "Mr. Prosecutor do you have anything else"?

"Yes your honor I do. I have also been made aware of some new evidence just this morning. The evidence proves that Mr. Rodriguez was the shooter and was personally responsible for the officer's death."

Kleintop stood up and yelled at the judge. "That tears it! Your honor this is highly irregular"!

The judge just frowned and said, "I agree counselor. Welcome to Chicago. Now sit down."

"But we don't even have a weapon." He threw up his hands and sat down.

The prosecutor stood up waving a document. "Your honor I am informed that just this morning we came into possession of a weapon that can be traced to the scene, to Mr. Rodriguez, and the ballistics are a perfect match."

Kleintop looked at the prosecutor. "What a God damned coincidence. How you gonna prove it's his gun"? He wanted that

one back. It sounded like an admission of guilt.

“Your honor we have the testimony of an undercover officer that witnessed the attempted disposal of the weapon. This officer will testify that it belonged to the defendant. He observed the defendant carrying it on a daily basis. He was inside the gang for a solid year.”

“Wait a minute!” yelled Kleintop. He ignored the judge and went after the prosecutor. “And NOW the weapon turns up. You knew where it was all the time. That's withholding evidence from the defense.”

“Your honor I can assure you that we only learned of the discovery of the weapon this very morning.”

The judge laughed. “Oh yeah. I'm sure that's right. Welcome to Chicago where shit happens. You know what else. This trial ain't over. We've got a new ballgame. We will return to the courtroom now gentlemen.” He laughed and shuffled some papers like a kid playing at his father's desk.

Kleintop couldn't feel his legs on the way out. He thought about pushing the argument that the state withheld evidence. It gave him something to fight with, but faking the switch was a brilliant strategy for the police. The judge was dirty. He took the bribe for bonding out the defendant, but that was all he was good for. He evidently had no problem with finding him guilty. The fake switch was a clever diversion because everybody knew the evidence room had been robbed before. The cops had to take precautions. They had to do something, and the ruse was easily believable. They had the gun too, and Rodriguez would run if he found out. They faked the switch to keep him in town. They must have bet that he was greedy enough to wait for the coke if he thought he was going to walk no matter what. Kleintop knew what he had to. It was time to cop a plea. Rodriguez wasn't going anywhere. All that was left for him was to avoid the death penalty. Maybe the state withholding evidence would create enough leverage to get that done. Governor Ryan put a moratorium on

executions right before he got sent up anyway. The political climate was against it.

The lawyers returned to their seats just ahead of the judge. Rodriguez saw Kleintop trying to look away and started to panic. He grabbed him by the arm and whispered, “What? What is it. What happened in there?”

Kleintop froze. He looked at the bailiff, turned back to his client and said, “Look man. They suckered you. It's not MY fault. You fell for a fake switch. There WAS no switch. I believed you and you were wrong.”

“What”? His face got very red.

Kleintop didn't care anymore, so he dumped it out. “Look. They had the real stuff in the evidence room all along. It was a trick.” Rodriguez stood up slowly, and Kleintop backed up. “They have the gun. Ballistics too. They know you're the shooter. We have to plead out to avoid the death penalty. You gotta do everything I say. It's over. Your life is in my hands. Now sit down.”

Rodriguez decided right then and there that he wasn't going to see the inside of an American prison no matter what. He threw his chair at the bailiff and tried to run out. He had no way of knowing that the very same police entry team that broke down his door and lost the officer was waiting outside for just such an opportunity. The officers couldn't believe their luck when they heard the commotion in the courtroom. A screaming mob crashed through the door and they instantly leveled their sidearms at Rodriguez. A cop yelled, “Give me a reason ass hole!” Rodriguez grabbed a red headed woman by the neck and tried to push his way through. The mob attacked him from behind. He had a piece of her torn blouse between his fingers when he hit the floor and broke a rib under the weight of one of the biggest gang tackles in the history of the courtroom.

The team leader yelled “Get down! Get out of the way!” The angry officers jumped in and indulged themselves in the strategic

opportunity provided to them by the limited visibility at the bottom of the pile. Everybody got their licks in and Rodriguez passed out. The cops knew the fun would be over just as soon as they got the cuffs on the defendant, but as luck would have it the pair they selected for the job continued to malfunction again and again. The bailiff approached an officer who was kicking Rodriguez in the head and offered him another pair. The officer thanked him, put the cuffs in his back pocket and continued to thump the defendant like no jury in the world would convict him. Flood lights from several TV crews came on and blinded everyone in the hallway. Somebody yelled, "Clear!" and the party was over. Mr. Rodriguez was in custody for a long time.

The judge relaxed his grip on an antique civil war pistol he kept holstered under his robe. He looked at the camera crews standing in the door, smacked the gavel down with his free hand and said, "Welcome to Chicago everybody. Now get those damn cameras out of my house."

## Chapter 28

The room service coffee at the Best Western tasted bad, but Murphy needed the caffeine. He spent the night on the phone trying to find a buyer for the coke, to take a chance and unload it all at once. Stone tried to calm him down and threatened to walk out if they didn't wait at least a year before selling anything. Carla wanted to be somewhere else. Murphy sat on the night stand with his feet on the bed calling number after number, but there were no takers. The low price and the size of the deal scared them all away. Even cons know when a bargain is too good to be true. The more he lowered the price the more suspicious they got. Murphy was good for a straight deal, but it smelled too much like he got pinched and was looking to set somebody up to save himself.

After a long night of junk food and heavy drinking, Carla and Stone started to nod off. Carla feared that Murphy would cut her out anyway after doing the job alone. She couldn't imagine how he got away from the bar without getting shot by Artie. It bothered her a lot. She had to make sure that Artie was alright, that Murphy didn't just shoot him in the back. She walked right up in his face and said, "I can't believe he just gave it to you."

"I had to lean on him pretty hard," he lied. "He shit himself."

"I doubt it. You sure he didn't trick you? Maybe he cut it and gave you half or some shit. He knows how to cut it." She smiled at Murphy's red face.

He looked down. "I doubt it."

“You didn't even test the shit. It's still in the car. I thought you were gonna bring it in.”

“I don't have time to load it back up, you know, if we have to get out fast.”

Carla looked at Stone for support. Murphy had nothing to lose from another murder. She tried to keep him thinking about other things. “I think you should test it first.”

“Na. Whoever buys it'll do that. You can bet on it.”

Stone broke in. “Why don't you have somebody bring us a test kit from the lab? Somebody owes you a favor.”

Murphy thought hard. “I really don't want to expose myself right now.”

Stone scratched his ribs. “What about what's his name, Digger, whatever?”

“I don't know if he's still got access to the good kits.”

He pointed to the phone and slapped Murphy's good arm. “Call him and see. He won't say shit. Nobody would believe him anyway.”

“Go ahead,” insisted Carla.

Murphy looked up the number and made the call. “He could at least bring me a street kit,” he mumbled.

The phone picked up. A man with a nasal voice said, “Randolf.”

“Digger”?

“Yeah. Who's this”?

“Digger this is Murphy.”

Officer (Digger) Randolf waved around the room to attract attention before responding. “Murphy”?

“Yeah. It's me man. I need a favor.”

“Shit Murphy. I'm on duty now. What number you at man. I think you want me to call you right back. You really do.”

“You can't talk”?

“That's right. Give me ten minutes.”

“OK. Write this down and call me back. It's a cell phone.”

Digger took the number down and hung up. Carla and Stone fell on the only bed in the room with their clothes on. Murphy was sober but delirious from caffeine and adrenalin. The phone rang back in exactly ten minutes. Murphy didn't know it yet, but his guilt was already out. The whole department knew. Digger went right to the top when Murphy called, and the chief immediately ordered him to call back and set Murphy up. All the cops already knew what happened at court. All the pieces came together. The fake switch was a diversion, and Rodriguez tried to run out of the courtroom. The coke they hid in Berwyn was fake, and Artie knew it all along. The rookie in the Fleetwood saw Murphy snatch the dope, but he lost him in traffic, and every cop in Cook County wanted to be the first one to find Officer Murphy.

Digger played it cool on the phone. "Murphy"?

"It's me. Can you talk now"?

"Yeah I'm good." He tried to sound bored. "What you want man"?

"I need a test kit. I'm stalking a bust, but I need to know the quality first."

"No problem. Come on down. I'll get you one." He waved desperately at the all the cops to keep quiet. They were trying to get their forced entry gear on before they moved out, and they couldn't find the battering ram.

Murphy tried to sound like an old friend. "I can't get away right now partner. I'd lose the guy. Bring it to me here, and I'll make it worth your while."

"I can't exactly get away right now. When I get off duty... I'm sort of staking out this guy. He's doing my first wife, and he's no good for my son. I'm on my own time. It's a little pet project of mine. You understand." Digger felt like he had a largemouth bass chewing on his line, and he didn't want to set the hook too fast. "What are you up to anyway? I'll bet it's crazy, well, knowing you. What's the angle"?

"Oh you know." He laughed. "Same old shit. Different day."

“Tell you what. I'll bring you a test kit, you know, but I want a cut.” He crossed his fingers and held them up high for everybody to see.

“I don't know WHAT you're talking about.” He laughed. “What you want from me Digger?”

“I don't want to know anything. A couple hundred ought to get me there in a few minutes though. How's that?” He made an ugly face like he was in pain. All the cops had their entry gear on. They looked like something out of *Star Wars* meets *Blade Runner*, and they were ready to rock.

“OK. Two hundred. Bring me a test kit right now. OK?”

“Sure thing, and thanks. Where you at?” Murphy told him the address and the room number. Digger stood up, carefully printed everything on a yellow sticky note and read it back. Murphy thanked him and hung up. Digger slapped the phone down and held the note high above his head. A chubby sergeant snatched it out of his hand and ran through the door yelling, “Go! Go! Go!”

Murphy wondered how Stone could possibly sleep at such an important time. There would be plenty of time for that later. He balled up some paper and threw it at the can across the room. It fell short. The room was so messy that he even considered picking it up. The almost metallic smell of pot and incense reminded him of Saturday night make out parties in high school. The boys always went there convinced they'd get lucky, but they almost never did. The real heavy drinking started after they gave up trying. Murphy remembered the drill, and it backfired on him once when he gave up too fast and chugged a pint of vodka. Super hot Mandy Brown let him chase her into an upstairs bedroom, but he was too far gone to do anything about it. He called her the next day and tried to keep it going, but he never got another chance. Mandy was the one that got away. Murphy laughed at his drunken partners sleeping on the bed. Carla had all the pillows.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* Someone knocked hard, and it didn't sound like Digger. Murphy froze momentarily, and the others jumped

out of bed. He ran to the door and looked through the peep hole to see a parking lot full of cops, and they were coming in. Two big officers lined up a battering ram and hit the door. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* They bashed in the door so violently that they broke one of the heavy brass hinges completely off the jam. Eight cops charged in with their guns in the air. They moved in single file and swept the room by the numbers. The leader drew down on Stone and Carla because he couldn't see their hands. He dropped to one knee and screamed, "Get on the floor! Now"! Murphy used the opportunity to run in the bathroom and lock the door like a wife in a domestic disturbance. Stone and Carla begged for mercy and threw up their hands. Four angry officers cuffed them and dragged them outside in less than thirty seconds. Carla cut her head on the bed lamp, but nobody cared. Sargent Tibbs, the officer in charge, pushed everybody back, kicked in the bathroom door and jumped to the side. Everybody saw Murphy's reflection in the mirror on the wall. He got down in the tub and put a gun to his head.

"Drop it!" yelled Tibbs.

Murphy tried to make himself small and yelled, "Get back! I'll do it! I don't care anymore"!

Tibbs scanned his officer's faces. They obviously didn't have a problem with that. He smiled at them and yelled, "Throw the gun out Murphy! It's over now! Give it up"!

"What for?" cried Murphy.

Tibbs swallowed hard before saying what he was trained to say. "Because it's a permanent solution to a temporary problem." Somehow that doesn't seem to apply to the present situation, he thought.

Murphy waved his gun and begged, "I'll DO it man!" He pointed at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. "*Bloom*"! Plaster came down in the shower.

Tibbs hugged the wall and screamed, "Why! Why in the hell did you do it man! Tell me your side of it. Take your time. There's

got to be a good reason for it.”

Murphy watched the mirror and put the gun back to his head. “Nobody was supposed to get hurt. It all just fell apart on me. I just fell in deeper and deeper man. It wasn't my fault”!

Tibbs tried to sound interested. “Why did you shoot the teacher”?

“He broke my arm. He hurt me man, and he got away with it. I couldn't even report it.”

“Because you were on the stakeout. They'd take you off. And when Lefty found out about it you...”

“I didn't THROW him off the God damn building. It was an accident. He started it. He was gonna go to the Captain.” He held the gun close to his face and tried to find he courage. “Son of a bitch”!

Tibbs couldn't think of anything else to say, so he improvised. “Listen to me man. Here's what you're gonna do.”

“What”? He lowered the gun a little.

“You're gonna play the bug.” Tibbs looked around, and the other officers didn't like it. They turned away and shook their heads in disgust. “Do what I say buddy. It's your only chance.”

“OK. I'm listening.” Murphy wanted to believe him so badly.

“Listen to me and do what I tell you. You've been hearing voices. The voices told you that certain people are out to get you man. The voices, they told you to shoot the teacher because he was going to kill the Pope. You heard the voices say that when the teacher broke your arm. He was going to shoot the Pope, and Lefty was going to help him.”

Murphy put the gun on his lap. “That's right. I get it now.”

“They'll send you to Chester. It's no big deal.”

“The bug house in southern Illinois”?

“That's right. It's not a prison. It's a mental hospital. That's where they send people, you know, that hear voices that get them in trouble.”

Murphy imagined the worst and freaked. “I ain't going! I can't

do no time man. I killed a cop. They'll make me a zombie, a vegetable"! He put the barrel in his mouth so Tibbs could see it.

"No they won't. Stop it. It's not like that there. It's not a joint. There's no screws, no prison guards, just hospital people. They can't hit you. They don't even have sticks or mace. They're not cops either. No uniforms. That's where people go that get off with, what do they call it, not guilty by reason of insanity. They have other people in there that killed cops too. It's no big deal. It's just routine for them. It's not punishment. It's treatment."

Murphy really wanted to make it work. He decided on a miraculous recovery after the trial and an early release. "OK. You're right. I get it now. It's my best shot."

Tibbs stroked the safety catch on his weapon. "Tell the doctors you hear voices that tell you what to do, and don't change your story. No matter what. If they want to give you drugs you gotta take 'em, but don't change your story at all. They look for that shit. Now throw out the gun." Tibbs smiled at the other officers.

Murphy had second thoughts. "Oh my God. They'll me shoot me up with drugs until I cant walk. I can't do it." He pointed the barrel at his face.

"You have to God damn it! That's the plan. It's the only way, and you're screwing it up already." He waved at the team to stay back.

"Shit!" screamed Murphy. He spun the pistol across the bathroom floor and put his hands behind his head. Tibbs flew around the corner, closed the door behind him and scooped it up. He put his own gun away and thought fast. They were alone with no witnesses, and nobody saw him touch Murphy's gun. He had gloves on too. There would be no prints on Murphy's gun but Murphy's. Tibbs stood there savoring the possibilities to make sure his ass was completely covered. It was. He smiled at Murphy and said, "You know what buddy. I forgot something."

Murphy looked worried. "What"? His hands shook almost uncontrollably.

“You can't go to Chester after all.”

“Why not”?

“Wrong diagnosis. They don't treat what you got.”

Murphy got pissed. “Well shit! What the hell have I got”!

Tibbs aimed the pistol straight at Murphy's chest. “A gunshot wound. A self inflicted gunshot wound. That's what you got.” He squeezed the trigger. *Bloom!* The bullet went through Murphy's upper right thigh, broke his femur and dropped him back down in the tub. He grabbed his crooked leg with both hands and almost passed out. Bright red arterial blood squirted through his fingers and pooled around him. Tibbs turned the gun on himself. He pressed Murphy's pistol against his vest, squeezed the trigger ever so slowly and *Bloom!* The impact slammed his spine against the door frame and momentarily numbed his legs. He saw stars. The slug didn't go through his body armor, but it knocked most of the wind out of him instantly. He heard the cavalry coming and kicked Murphy's gun over by the tub. The team rushed in screaming and jumped all over Murphy. Tibbs propped himself up, gasped for air and forced himself to whisper, “The ass hole shot me. He shot himself... Then he shot me.”

The team piled in the tub and beat Murphy hard. It took at least six full whacks to the head from a bloody baton before he passed out. An officer kicked the gun out the door and yelled at his radio. “Officer down! Send an ambulance”!

Tibbs got his wind back when they carried him out and put him on the bed. He wheezed like an exhausted runner. “Murphy shot me. Kill the son of a bitch.”

A young officer came over and examined the wounded Kevlar vest. He stuck two fingers in the hole, pulled out the slug and showed it to Tibbs. “You OK”?

“I'm OK. It felt like somebody knocked me off a motorcycle with a lead pipe or some shit. That's when I fired back. Did I get him”?

“He's alive. You hit him in the upper right leg at six feet. Six

foot shot and you missed by a yard. You could have blown his damn head off.”

“Give me a break here. He shot me first. I had to disarm him wounded. Try that sometime. So I missed his head. Getting shot threw me off a little bit.” Everybody laughed.

One of the officers in the bathroom tending to Murphy yelled, “He’s bleeding out!”

Tibbs laughed and yelled, “Anybody know first aid!” Everybody laughed. “I’m just kidding,” he joked. “I know first aid. To stop the bleeding... First... Let’s see... You need to try direct pressure first.”

The guy standing over Murphy said, “But it’s all yucky down there. Doc says you gonna die.” The laughing got hysterical.

Tibbs smiled and yelled, “Put pressure on the femoral artery!”

“He doesn’t have a female artery”! They all just completely lost it.

Tibbs couldn’t resist. “Elevate the wound”!

“Shit boss. I can’t. I’d have to turn him upside down to do that.”

“Then you gotta put a tourniquet on the leg above the wound.”

“I told you already. It’s all yucky there man.”

Everybody laughed, and somebody yelled, “Medic!”

Tibbs laughed so hard it hurt his back. “Then put the God damned thing on the other leg! Put a tourniquet on something! I don’t care where”!

Somebody whistled and yelled, “Put it around his God damned neck!” Everybody cheered.

Tibbs stared at the ceiling and yelled, “Is he dead yet!”

The guy in the bathroom hesitated but announced, “Not yet. I’m still getting a pulse. Jesus! You missed his balls by a few inches.”

“Well you know how that is,” laughed Tibbs. “It’s a small target.”

*Bang!* The front door popped open. Two paramedics ran in pulling a collapsed cart. Tibbs pointed to the bathroom, and another officer helped him up. His legs seemed to work, so he

followed his crew outside. He walked over to the ambulance, reached in the driver's window, turned off the engine and said, "This ride ain't going anywhere." He pulled a handle under the dash and popped the hood. Two more officers came over and joined in. They ripped out a handful of plug wires, closed the hood and stood there innocently waiting for the patient to come out. Murphy emerged with one of the paramedics squeezing a rubber bag to make him breathe. The officers slid Murphy into the ambulance and watched the driver try to start it. Nothing happened.

Tibbs kept a straight face while he talked to the driver. "I'm calling for a backup."

The driver threw his hands in the air. "I can't believe it. I left it running. It was running when we went in." He keyed the mike called his dispatcher. The other paramedic fussed over Murphy in the back while the cops hid their faces.

Tibbs joined some cops by the door and whispered, "I don't think they make these rigs like they used to fellas. And I don't think Murphy's gonna make it without our help either." Everybody smiled. "Just follow me." They almost laughed.

The backup rig got there in less than ten minutes, but the officers wanted to slow things down. They surrounded it, helped the driver out and pushed him aside. Another group pulled Murphy out and carried him away without extending the legs on the cart. They put three officers on each side of the stretcher like pall bearers at a funereal. "Be careful," said Tibbs. "Don't drop him. Be a shame if we all lost our grip at the same time." He winked and counted, "One, two, three..." *Bang!* The cart fell on the concrete with a sickening crash and flipped upside down, pinning Murphy under it. They picked it up just like that, with Murphy upside down, carried it over to the loading door and threw it in the ambulance like a duffel bag full of softball gear. The paramedics went ballistic, but the officers simply took over the vehicle and wouldn't let anybody else on board. They didn't

even bother to strap down the cart.

Tibbs got behind the wheel and drove away with the paramedics banging on the windows. He left the parking lot doing less than twenty miles per hour and yelled at the guys in the back. "Is he dead yet"! Everybody laughed except Murphy, but he wasn't feeling any pain.

The ambulance dispatcher came on the radio. "Bob, are you in route"?

Tibbs keyed the mike and boasted, "Bob's not here man." Everybody laughed and the dispatcher heard it.

"Who the hell is this"?

"What"?

"Who is this? Bob... Is that you"?

"Bob?" said Tibbs.

"Yeah Bob"?

He paused and said, "Bob's not here man." They laughed so hard that Tibbs couldn't hear the radio. He waved at them to be quiet.

"Cut it out," moaned the dispatcher. "This is on tape for Christ's sake. Who is this"?

"OK. It's me. Now what's my fastest route to the hospital there radio dude"?

"Just stay off the expressway. It's bad news right now. Twenty minutes from your location."

"10-4." Tibbs pointed at the expressway ramp and declared, "We go that a way." He could see the traffic all stacked up with slow moving cars and panel trucks. He looked in the mirror and yelled, "Is he dead yet"!

"I think he's coming to"!

Murphy woke up. He opened his eyes, realized the nature of the situation and said, "I'm gonna kill you. If I get out of this, when this is over, no matter how long it takes, I'm gonna shoot each and every one of you guys."

Tibbs heard him and yelled back, "Officer Murphy! I can

assure you that we are going to do everything we can to keep that from happening sir”! Everybody laughed and Murphy passed out.

People on the expressway slowed way down when they ran up on the ambulance from behind. They didn't know what to make of an emergency vehicle crawling along at twenty miles per hour. They simply respected the siren and wouldn't pass. People up ahead moved to the right. Tibbs had a clear shot in front of him, but he wouldn't speed up. Traffic backed up as far back as they could see. It was so crowded inside the ambulance that the driver couldn't see very well, and that made it hard to drive in a straight line for very long. There weren't enough seats to go around, so the men bounced around in the turns. Tibbs yelled back, “Did you tie him down good!”

“Not exactly.” They all laughed.

“That so”! He darted three lanes to the left, lined up a pothole big enough to break an axle, mashed the accelerator down and yelled, “Hang on!” The sudden acceleration caught the guys in the back by surprise. Some of them fell on top of the patient, and *Bang!* The front end went straight up in the air. Everything in the back that wasn't tied down flew forward. A little hand held fire extinguisher cracked the windshield and only missed Tibbs by a few inches. Murphy's unconscious body slammed into the tool cabinet. Tibbs laughed and yelled, “Is he dead yet!”

“I think that did it... Wait a minute”! Murphy tried to move. “I think he's moving”!

Tibbs looked in the mirror and yelled, “Oh my God men! I think he's trying to escape”!

Four officers pulled out their Tasers and lit him up at the same time. It sounded like popcorn popping as he convulsed and passed out again. One of the officers tiptoed across the bloody floor and felt Murphy's neck before announcing, “Pulse is faint, but it's still there.”

“Shit,” cried Tibbs. “We're almost there too. I need ten minutes.” He looked around and asked, “Is anybody hungry? I'm

hungry.” They all laughed. “Let's get some food.” Everybody joked around while he rolled down an exit ramp, turned off the emergency lights and got in line behind an airport taxi at a White Castle drive through.

The ambulance dispatcher came on the radio asking, “Unit 5... Why have you stopped? Have you been in an accident?”

“They've got GPS on this thing,” laughed Tibbs. “They know everything. What ever happened to privacy. Somebody find out where it is and fine tune that sucker for me.”

The officer in the passenger seat leaned out the window and found a little plastic dome on the roof. “I got it!” He steadied himself by hanging on to the outside door handle and smashed it flat with three overhead whacks from his night stick.

Tibbs keyed the mike and said, “Dispatch... This is Unit 5. You're breaking up.” Everybody laughed. The line moved forward one car length but not fast enough for Tibbs. He hit the siren. The entire line of cars took off. He pulled up to the speaker and said, “Hello Castle. Is White there?”

“Can I take your order sir”?

“Give me a case of sliders with cheese. Uh... Eight orders of fries and eight medium diet cokes.”

“I want chicken rings,” said the officer in the passenger seat.

“And an order of chicken rings.” They all laughed.

Tibbs drove up to the window and handed his credit card to a young man with spiked blue hair. The kid wore an ipod and shook his head to a fast tune, but he handled the food with enough skill to navigate around the little wires attached to his ears. He handed the credit card back to Tibbs, stared at Murphy and asked, “Is he dead?”

“Na,” he laughed. “He's just hungry.” Tibbs passed the burgers and drove off with the unit smelling like disinfectant and fried onions. They only had a few blocks to go, so he took his time and crawled around the side streets. He looked at his watch and begged, “Is he...”

“That's affirmative! He's done! Scratch one cop killer”! They all cheered.

Tibbs slapped the dashboard. “Yes! Think of all the money we saved the taxpayers. Eat up gentlemen. We're there. I can see the ER.”

Somebody joked, “Maybe you better turn the lights back on boss.”

He hit the lights, accelerated up the hospital driveway and skidded to a stop in front of the big glass doors. Three men in blue lab coats ran to the back of the ambulance and opened the doors. Murphy's body was still on the cart, but everything else was on the floor. A loose oxygen bottle rolled out and fell on the concrete by an attendant's feet. “Son of a bitch!” he yelled, and stuck his head inside. “What the hell happened in here”? The cops tried to look away.

“We got in an accident,” sobbed Tibbs. “It was terrible.” Somebody laughed.

One of the attendants took Murphy's pulse and said, “This man is dead.” The other two jumped in behind him and started CPR. The leader yelled, “Get him inside!” They slid the cart out of the ambulance, shook the legs down until they locked and rolled Officer Murphy's corpse through the automatic doors. The officers disappeared around the corner. They were done for the day. One of the ER guys came back out to check on the empty ambulance that was still running. He looked around the corner and saw them standing on the sidewalk, cokes in hand, hailing a cab.

## Chapter 29

Two helicopters flew southwest out of Chicago carrying Dori, David, Benton, and a half dozen other men in civilian clothes. They were trying to get to the refinery before Professor Sam Sheridan blew it up. All the crew members were Pentagon people except the pilots who were civilian contractors. There were so many people on board David's bird that he could barely see out.

Benton waved at David, wiggled his mike and said, "This won't be good for your organization I'm afraid."

David laughed. "What organization?"

"The Association for Energy Security."

David got defensive. "I think that's just the name Nick used to get the permit for the demonstration."

"I know," said Benton. "But it's a real movement now. Or at least it was until this."

Dori locked eyes with the government man and scanned his face with the lie detector expression she inherited from her mother. "Why did we switch helicopters? This one says channel four."

He looked away, pinched his mike and said, "The Coast Guard can't go where we're going."

"They're news choppers," laughed David. "You're using news choppers to hide who you are. So much for the black helicopter theory. What did you do with the reporters?"

"Classified." He laughed.

David looked at the young, athletic crew. “These guys ain't from channel four.”

“That's right. They work for me, and this is serious business. Now listen up. We need you to stop your radical professor friend before he screws the pooch. He's threatening to open fire on the refinery. He's got a .50 caliber sniper rifle with armor piercing incendiary ammunition. He's...”

“Rifle! One rifle can't hurt a frigging oil refinery.”

“This one can, and thank the NRA. It's really a military weapon, and it ought to be banned from civilians. It is in some states. See, it's not for shooting people. It's for stopping tanks, machinery, you know, equipment. The round is as big as your hand. The same round they use in fighter planes.”

“.50 caliber machine gun.”

“Oh yeah. It'll go right through some pretty thick steel, and then it starts a nasty fire. It's impact effective way out to more than a mile, and it'll fly a whole lot farther than that. Way farther than that.”

David felt skeptical. He didn't think Sam Sheridan was into guns. “Where would he get a thing like that?”

“You can buy one from a skinhead at a gun show in Oklahoma. No questions asked.”

He shook his head. “In the parking lot? Out of a trunk?”

“Oh no, inside. In front of everybody. Perfectly legal. You can mail order the ammo from a damn catalog. I'm talking .50 caliber rounds here. You know, the same rounds we used on F-4s in Vietnam.”

“To kill tanks.”

“Charlie didn't have too many tanks. We lit up more than one fuel dump that way though.” He made a simulated mushroom cloud with his hands. “Your buddy ain't got a machine gun, but it only takes one hit in the right place.”

David felt responsible. “OK, OK. We've got a problem. This is not good.”

“He's in a shit load of trouble alright. A threat's one thing, but understand me mister, if he touches off even one round down there, even a warning shot, he's toast. I can't help him. There's no way to make it all go away. Even if he gives up, well, he's gonna do time. And if he fires one round, in any direction, he'll never walk out of there.” He looked at Dori for help. “Do you understand?”

“Bull shit,” cried David. “You can't just gun a man down without...”

“Oh yes I can! And I will too! I'm doing him a hell of a favor by waiting this long. I could take him down right now. This ain't the movies, and he really screwed up. He's considered an enemy combatant now. He ain't got shit for rights anymore. This is a new world, and he's a terrorist under international law.”

“He's an American citizen for Christ's sake”!

The chopper descended, and Benton saw the ground coming up fast. He knew they were approaching the scene and running out of time. “Listen up and listen good,” he said. “I can, and I will, shoot him down like a dog if he so much as fires one round in the air. I ought to do it right now. He's in the cross-hairs, and all I have to do is push a button. I'm giving you one chance to talk him down. My ass is really hanging out for you. I can't have even one round going off anywhere around that fuel. I'm giving you fifteen minutes and not one minute more. If he doesn't surrender by then, I mean it, he's a dead man where he stands. Do you understand?”

David felt trapped but ready to do anything to get away. “I understand.”

“Look at me,” said Benton. “Now tell me what I just said.”

“He's got fifteen minutes to surrender or you open fire. He goes to jail or he dies. He miscalculated, and there's no going back. He can die with people thinking he's a terrorist, or he can tell his side of it in court.”

Benton admired his character. “I'm sorry David. I'm afraid he's given your movement some very bad press.” The helicopter spun

around for a better angle.

“He's not the movement. He's just one guy.”

“I'm afraid you're a little naive. That's not the way it works. He's just made the nationalization of oil thing synonymous with an international conspiracy to make war on the United States. That's some extra shitty PR. By the time the oil people get done spinning this one, and they'll never get tired of spinning this sucker, everybody's gonna think you guys are the second wave attack rolling in from Al-Qaeda. Your movement is over, done, stick a fork in it. The oil barons are jumping for joy as we speak. They hit the jackpot.”

Dori started crying and hid her face. “Look,” begged David. “The guy lost his job and flipped out. People will understand that.”

Benton looked at his watch and waved at the pilot to set it down. “In twenty four hours every little detail of his life will be on TV, old and new, true and false. In a week they'll have him attending a Muslim school in Pakistan. They're gonna find traces of explosive residue in his car. His next door neighbor will look amazed on camera and say he suspected nothing, you know, but even that will work against him because it implies guilt.”

“It's just not right,” cried David.

“Oh come on professor. Do you know how much money we're talking about here? Everything the guy ever wrote will be gone over with a fine tooth comb.”

“He's a professor. It's his job to write.”

“That makes it easy. Politicians know better than to write down what they think, let alone publish it. I'm telling you professor, this is it for him. He's got one chance and one chance only to walk out of here alive. You've got to get him to put the gun down. If you fail, and fifteen minutes goes by, get the hell out of the way. You understand?”

“Don't go down there,” cried Dori.

“He'll be fine,” Benton insisted. “They can shoot the fuzz off a bug's ass at half a mile and not hurt the bug. I'll keep my word.”

But remember, I don't want even one round going off around that fuel. Fifteen minutes tops. Not one second longer.”

The helicopters set down on the far side of a hill covered with dead grass and leafless brush. The runners bounced around on a rutted out truck path and whipped the loose dirt into a little brown vortex. “He's on the other side of the hill,” said Benton. He pointing to a bend in the road that disappeared to the left, and handed David a semi-automatic pistol with two extra clips of ammunition. “You know how to work this”?

“I've shot one before yeah, but I don't need...”

“Oh yes you do. Never trust a desperate man.”

“He's my friend.”

“I'm your friend. Just hide it. You never know what people will do when they panic. What if he flips out on you? I've seen it happen before, and I'll see it again. He wants to make a big splash. He might shoot you, and then the fuel, and then himself.”

“Take it,” cried Dori. “Go ahead and take it.”

David threw the extra clips on the helicopter floor, slid the pistol deep inside his pocket and took off running.

“Time starts when you get there!” yelled Benton. “We can see you! Fifteen minutes from the second you make contact! Not one minute more! Do NOT, I repeat, Do NOT let him even POINT that thing at the fuel”!

David waved him off and settled into a comfortable pace. The road was little more than a one way truck path with two ruts of dried mud and private property signs spaced out at regular intervals. The air tasted like sulfur and diesel exhaust. He imagined the shock of seeing his friend get killed right in front of him. The scruffy old hill didn't seem like a good place for a sniper to hide, but that's where Sam decided to go. He didn't really need to be concealed to make his point anyway. All he had to do was threaten to shoot at the tank farm. David had mixed emotions about the whole thing and seriously considered ducking out. He was disgusted with Sam for pulling such a desperate stunt. The

reputation of the movement was probably trashed. It felt like an opportunist had rushed in and hijacked the movement while he was preoccupied with staying alive.

He rounded the corner, got dizzy and worried about being out of shape. His back hurt from the canvas helicopter seat, and he was thirsty enough to go back for a canteen. The temptation to take off was too strong to ignore without thinking it through. David and Sam were friends. They were politically similar, but that was all. They had no verbal agreement about anything. They hadn't even talked about the movement, and now David was supposed to rush in and rescue the guy. The movement was important now, and he wanted to distance it from Sam's little unauthorized publicity stunt. He thought about how it got started. The movement just sort of happened by itself, and he didn't worry much about it at first. Nick was the organizer, and other people did all the talking, but he wrote the paper. He was the one that went on the BBC. He was the first one that spoke out against the oil money leverage at the university. Everybody else just piled on. That must be the way it is with popular movements, he thought. All it takes is one lose idiot to try and speak for the cause, and you're done.

It didn't take long to reach the site. He turned the corner knowing full well that Benton's people were watching him on video. He got behind a thorny brush pile, pulled the pistol out of his pocket and felt it in his hand. The feeling was so powerful. This was real, nothing at all like shooting cans off a fence. Part of him actually wanted to shoot Sam for ruining his party. The big rifle didn't scare him. The pistol made him feel invulnerable, and he couldn't imagine being killed. The intoxicating effect of the loaded sidearm gave him a righteous sense of entitlement. He stuffed the gun back in his pocket, immediately heard something moving behind him and turned around. Sam stepped out of the brush cradling the biggest gun that David had ever seen and said, "What gives David? What's with the gun? Did you come up here

to shoot me or what”?

“Of course not.” He put his hands out in front of him and tried to smile.

Sam shook the massive rifle and set it down. “Mine is bigger than yours.” He laughed.

David relaxed. “Talk about overcompensating. It's so ugly too. Where in the world did you get that damn thing”?

He patted David on the back. “Last year, well, at a gun shop in Texas, on vacation. We were shooting up the dessert, you know. We got to drinking tequila up on a massive hill over a big lake, sort of taking potshots at ducks with some .22s we bought at Walmart.”

“That ain't no .22,” he joked.

“Yeah. We were shooting these little target rifles off the hill and onto a lake about a half mile away. A long way for a .22. Nobody around for miles. We had a clear view all the way. You could see the bullets drop like water out of a hose and predict where they would hit with amazing accuracy. We'd just walk 'em up on the ducks like artillery.”

“Oh my God.”

“It was way out of range, but we were having a ball, and Pete Winger suggested we get a bigger gun. We passed this gun shop earlier on a beer run, so we went back down there. We told the lady we wanted the biggest gun in the house. She pulled this thing out of the back, and we all just shit.”

“Holy...”

“It cost fourteen hundred dollars. There were ten of us, so it came to a hundred and forty bucks a piece. The rounds, they cost like five dollars a piece man.”

“I can't believe you bought that damn thing.” He laughed. “It looks like a cross between a hunk of railroad track and an anti-aircraft gun with a scope on it.”

“David, you have no idea man. Once you shoot one of these bad boys... Oh my God. It's really fun.”

David looked at the refinery, checked his watch and shook his head. "This is not exactly my idea of fun."

Sam turned around and kicked the dirt. He thought about his job, got choked up and almost cried. "Shit David. I feel awful. I'm so damn pissed. I can't believe they fired me man. I've got tenure." He shook his fist at the tanks. "I was never really going to shoot at the damn thing. I just wanted to make a point and do it publicly. The dean. I'd like to see his face when old numb nuts turns on the tube and sees this shit. Everybody's gonna know he's on the take. What are they saying now anyway? Is it in the news yet?"

David got angry and changed his tone. "Christ man! Do you understand what you're looking at here? You're going to do TIME." He looked at his watch again. They had two and a half minutes left.

"I know. I just don't care anymore. They can do what they want with me. I had tenure man. I'll be flipping burgers now. Seven years of college and ten years of teaching a classroom full of rich kids who vote republican only because their daddy does. The facts don't change them. Facts have nothing to do with it. Politics and religion get imprinted in kids by the time they're eight years old. It's a sensitive period or something, just like language. It's over before puberty. You grow up in a republican fundamentalist home, and you end up a snake handling war monger. What can I do?"

"We don't have time for a God damn therapy session Sam! They gave me fifteen minutes, and it's almost up now! They're gonna shoot you man!" He pointed over the horizon.

"I told you. I never intended to pull the trigger. I'm not gonna do it."

"It doesn't matter! We're out of time! Listen. If you don't walk out right now they're gonna shoot you down like a dog mister."

His face got white. "They can't do that. I haven't fired a shot."

David grabbed his arm and shook it. "Where in the hell have

you been Sam. This is post nine-eleven man. They'll do whatever they want.” He took out his pistol and held it up so the sniper could see it and threw it down the road.

Sam put his arms out like Christ on the cross and offered himself to the unseen shooter. “I don't care! I had to do this”!

David looked at the massive tank farm with the company logo painted on the tanks. He pointed to the plant and yelled, “Look at that!”

“What”?

He danced around in a sort of crazy celebration. “Citgo”!

“So what”?

“Dude! It's a Citgo plant! These are the frigging good guys! Hugo Chaves! Socialist! Venezuela man”!

“Oh shit! I didn't think of that! It's the closest refinery. I just looked in the book and...”

“This is Venezuelan oil! Remember when Chaves offered to give us heating oil for the poor? He's an advocate of nationalization! He hates capitalism man”!

Sam fell into an unbearable level of embarrassment that bordered on the suicidal. “Son of a bitch! God DAMN it! Son of a BITCH man”! He picked up the giant rifle, stuck the barrel in the ground and left it standing straight up like a marker for a fallen soldier. He showed his empty hands to the sky and said, “Let's get the fuck out of here.” David waved his hands over his head to signal they were coming out. They jogged down the road against a crazy head wind blowing leaves in their faces. David slowed down to a fast walk, pulled out his phone and called Dori.

“David!” she screamed.

“I did it! Tell them not to shoot! We're coming out! It's over”!

“Hurry David! Oh God hurry”! She hung up and screamed, “They're coming out! They're coming out now! Don't shoot!” Benton nodded his approval and kept talking on the radio. She pushed his shoulder hard and got right in his face. “Call them off damn it”! He turned away and just kept talking on his mike. One

of the pilots throttled up and prepared to take off. “What the hell are you doing!” she screamed, sensing betrayal. A crewman pulled her aside, and the helicopter went straight up. She broke free, slapped the crewman's helmet and hurt her hand. The chopper reached an altitude of one hundred feet and hovered over the two surrendering men. Dori saw rifle barrels in the open door. She tried to get to her phone, but the crewman grabbed it and put it in his pocket.

Benton stepped off the other chopper while talking on his radio like a football coach on the sidelines. “Set it down and take them into custody.” He looked at Dori and yelled, “Abort!”

The pilot of the hovering chopper looked down at the two men he was supposed to kill and spoke into his mike. He knew the conversation was being recoded. “Sir my orders are to...”

“Don't shoot,” said Benton. “I'll take full responsibility. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir... I copy. Aborting.”

David and Sam were already five hundred feet away from where they left the guns in the road. They had their hands over their heads and were clearly surrendering when they heard a vehicle coming up the road at full speed. David got up on a fence post and looked for the source of the commotion. What he saw was a bunch of guys in a big yellow Hummer flying over a big bump and landing one wheel at a time. It had to be Artie's cavalry riding to the rescue, but the men in the chopper were not about to let anybody get that close to the scene. They opened fire with a light machine gun, and the hummer skidded to a sudden stop. The engine died smoking, all the doors flew open at once, and a dozen bikers ran for cover. Artie tried to dig a quick foxhole with his fingernails. The Hummer caught fire under the hood and looked ready to explode. Artie froze, but several of his friends took off down the road on pure adrenalin. They weaved around as they ran, but the chopper didn't shoot. They came across the guns that David and Sam had abandoned in the road, and two of the

retreating heroes picked them up before taking a defensive position behind some trash metal that was actually no protection at all.

David was still trying to surrender to the helicopter when the pilot saw two guys hunkered down behind the trash. They were fooling around with the rifle, so he took evasive action and called for help. The other chopper came in low and almost clipped a power line when the pilot set it down in the swirling dust. Benton jumped out and ran over to take the surrender personally.

“It's over!” yelled David.

Benton trotted up with open hands and apologized with all the sincerity of a used car salesman. “I'm sorry David. I really am. But I'm afraid it's more complicated than that son.”

“What the hell does that mean”? He felt a sinking sensation in his chest.

“Oh come on professor! What the hell did you expect! You pissed off some really big and angry dogs. This kind of shit ain't up to us anyway. It's way over our pay grade son. Everybody's got a boss, even me. My boss made me set you up.” He sighed. “You know what, I'm a soldier. I get an order, I say yes sir, and I carry it out.”

David looked at Sam's guilty face and immediately knew he'd been betrayed by both of them. “Oh my God! You son of a bitch! I'll say you weren't going to shoot! You weren't going to shoot alright! You fucking set me up! For what! I never ever...”

“He had to,” said Benton. “Sam... Go ahead and get on the chopper.”

“Oh no!” insisted David. “I want to hear it from him”!

“I can't.” cried Sam. “They won't let me man. I can't talk about it. To you or anybody else... Ever.”

*Pow!* David punched Sam right in the face. Benton got between them and pushed Sam toward the helicopter. He grabbed David's arm and begged him to understand. “We had to find a way son. You think you know everything. You don't. There's always things

the government knows, you know, that they can't tell you. Did you even once think of that? Sometimes we have to act on things without a public explanation. If you knew why you'd agree, but you can't know everything. You don't have a need to know, and taking care of the country ain't always a God damn popularity contest anyway."

"Sam was my friend. How did you get him to do that"?

"Oh please. We found some dirt on him and made him a deal with no back door."

"What dirt"?

"That's part of the deal. We never tell, and he gets the witness protection program. Standard stuff. We get him to set you up, to make you look like a terrorist on CNN, and he gets a nice little pension to spend on cheap booze and Mexican girls for the rest of his natural life. And nobody ever knows his dirty little secret."

The chopper crew looked restless. David wanted to run, but he had to know more. "I can't believe this shit. At least tell me this, the truth. Did he really have a secret, you know, or did you ass holes make one up FOR him"?

"That, of course, is classified. And it don't matter anyway." He waved at the crew, pointed to his watch and held up five fingers.

David felt sick. "Man, I actually thought you understood. How in the hell do you live with yourself. I believed you when you said the Pentagon don't like private oil any more than I do."

"I do agree with you son, but your plan won't work. There's the little problem of capital flight. People start talking seriously about the nationalization of anything that lucrative, and the money goes overseas in a heartbeat."

"That's bull shit! Here we go again. I don't want to steal from the rich. We're not going to confiscate the oil, just buy it out."

"Yeah right. This is America professor. It ain't some experiment in social engineering. This is a capitalist nation, the most private of all economies. A handful of very smart and powerful people have most of the money. You can bitch about it all you want too,

but it's still their money. They can take it and leave.”

“Bull shit. They don't scare me. Screw capital flight. I'm so tired of hearing that crap. Let the ass holes leave! Let 'em take their stinking money and get the hell out the country. They own us now as it is. What have we really got to lose? Let 'em take the God damn money. They can't take the important stuff anyway. They can't take the infrastructure. They can't take the buildings. They can't take the fucking land”!

Benton hated this part of his job but pushed on. “Oh come on David. Relax. Take a breath and let it go.”

“Hell no! They can't take the fucking land”!

Benton laughed and looked at the pilot who was waving impatiently and pointing to the sky. He shook his head and said, “They can sell the land to the Chinese if they want to son.”

“No they can't. Not if we don't let 'em. Not if the people get power. We can make it illegal to own land if you're not an American if we want to.”

“Not likely.” He laughed.

“Remember now Mr. Pentagon, G man, sir. The rich would be gone. They couldn't buy the law anymore. We could start from scratch. We've got the infrastructure, the natural resources, the best workers in the world. We've got the United States Military too. They can't take the B-52s with them. We've got the muscle. Screw capital flight. Throw the sons of bitches out, and see if they don't come running back. Capital flight my ass. It's a big ass bluff. They ain't going nowhere man. Even with nationalized oil, this country would still be the best place in the world for the rich to live, and they know it. It's just a bluff to keep the people down. We deserve the same guarantees that other countries have, and even after we get them, even then, the rich will still be way better off here than anywhere else. Other countries would tax them even more.”

The helicopter pilot throttled up to get attention. Benton laughed and stepped back. “Well shit...at least you won't be here

to lead the revolution my friend.” He smiled, heard a second set of rotors and looked up. The first chopper popped in and out of view just down the road. The other pilot was chasing the two guys in the brush who still had the big rifle.

David faced Benton and held out his hands. “You going to shoot me or what? I guess a dead terrorist would be a lot easier to smear on TV than a live one huh.”

“Actually...that was the plan but I think I know a better way.”

Bang! Bang! Bang! The other chopper opened fire on Artie's men. Bullets tore right through the metal trash they were hiding under. One guy covered his head while his buddy tried to find the safety switch on the strange bulky weapon. An orange suited figure stood in the door of the helicopter and sprayed the ground with an M-16. Both men were slightly wounded by flying debris. The guy with the .50 took a bullet in the ankle. He tried frantically to work the bolt on the thing without exposing himself.

“Is it loaded!” yelled his buddy.

He slid the bolt about half way back, saw the biggest bullet he had ever seen in his life and said “oh yeah. It's loaded alright.” He closed the bolt, pointed the barrel at the helicopter, closed his eyes and yanked the trigger. *Phoom!* The thing went off in his arms and nearly broke his collarbone. The round hit the tail rotor and tore out a chunk of airframe as big as a garbage can lid. The helicopter spun out of control and started dropping like a wounded goose. The pilot tried to head for something flat but there was nothing he could do. The rotors hit the ground first, spun the fuselage over on its side and crashed it against the side of the hill. Nothing happened at first but the ruptured fuel tank dumped its contents all over the hot engine. The crew fell out and bounced straight down the hill breaking a few bones but letting gravity take them to safety. The engine caught fire with a whoosh like somebody threw a match on the grill and exploded in a big yellow fireball. Little pieces of burning debris started a dozen brush fires and everything suddenly got incredibly quiet.

David saw the whole thing and got up screaming, “Oh my God! Oh my God!” Benton pushed him down from behind, pulled out a strange looking silver pistol, aimed it at the young professor's chest and fired. David felt numb, tried to sit up and passed out.

## Chapter 30

May 6, 2010.

David knew he was waking up from the recurring dream, the one with his mother and the bug, but he wasn't ready to go back yet. He knew it was no use trying to stay asleep. The realization that he was dreaming made it impossible to keep it going any longer. He opened his eyes and saw Dori crying. She kissed him a half dozen times and said, "Welcome back lover."

He looked around and decided that he was on some sort of hospital plane, probably military. "Where am I"?

"Oh David, Honey, this is a military airlift, a flying Air Force hospital. We just took off from Germany. You're going home."

He heard the technicians clapping and noticed one civilian suit sitting at the foot of the bed. "Home from where"?

"Hang on baby. You've been in Russia."

"Russia? Oh my God." The crew laughed.

"You've been in a coma in a Russian hospital." She kissed him again."

He looked at the suit. "Benton shot me. That's the last thing I remember."

"He didn't shoot you really. It was a tranquilizer dart. He kidnapped you."

"To Russia"?

"Benton is, or was, a spy. A Russian spy, double agent, or

whatever.”

“Oh my God.”

“The Russians say they kept you in a medically induced coma, like suspended animation or something.”

He tried to sit up, but got the spins. “I don't remember anything at all. The last thing I remember was getting shot. Sam set me up! How long have I been out”? The crew laughed again.

“Get ready. Here it comes. You've been asleep for about a year and a half.”

“No way. What day is it.”

“Wednesday. It's the sixth of May, two thousand ten.” The crew clapped.

“You're not kidding are you. It was like no time passed at all. Who won the election”?

“Obama won.” Everybody laughed.

“Yes! Oh my God yes.”

“Not even close.”

“So he's been in for a year and then some. Did he stop the war yet”?

“No. He spent the first year passing a health care reform bill. It was bloody. It passed, but we didn't get a public option.”

“Shit. I suppose we can fix it later. What happened with my movement.”?

“It's sputtering along without you. Dad and I have been busy holding up the fort. You can go back to work after the doc says you're OK.”

“How did Benton... And the Russians... What would the Russians want with me”?

The suit waved at Dori. “David, this man is here to debrief you. He's from the Pentagon. He's Benton's boss. He'll explain, you know, fill in the gaps.”

The suit went over and shook David's hand. “It's good to finally meet you professor.” He returned to his seat at the end of the bed, and the medical crew left. Dori got up and took David's hand.

"I'm supposed to leave you guys alone." She kissed him and let go. "I'll be right up here. You ain't gonna believe this shit, but I told you Benton was no good." She went forward mumbling, "You ain't gonna believe this shit."

The suit broke the ice. "Where should I start"?

"Benton was a Russian spy"?

"It happens sometime, even with all the security checks, some of them infiltrate us, and some of our people do the same to them."

"How did I get out of Russia"?

"The new administration negotiated your release. The president supports your nationalization cause. He'll never admit it in public, but he does."

"Oh my God."

"Don't ask him to help you or endorse you. You're just a rescued hostage, and no civilian is going to know who really had you, well, except you and your soon to be wife. Do not, repeat, do not tell anyone what you know. If you support the president, and you do, if you support him then help him by keeping it a secret. He had to go out on a limb for you. Everybody thinks you got kidnapped by terrorists from Indonesia."

"Why Indonesia"?

The suit laughed. "Why not"?

David felt a little turbulence. The nose of the plane went up about ten degrees. "Sure, sure. I understand, and I'm grateful."

"That's good. Don't change your mind for a movie deal or a bag of cash from the media. There's a plan for that, and you wouldn't like it."

"Hey. No way. I'm good. But look... I can understand why the radical right would want me gone, but you'd think the socialists and the communists, the left, would want me to succeed. I'm not a socialist, and I'm certainly not a communist, but I AM trying to move my country to the left, a little bit anyway."

He pulled on his tie. "That's the big question son. The short

answer is that the radical left hates you.”

“What?”

“That's right. They see your ideas as putting a band aid on capitalism. They figure your economic firewall would postpone the fall of capitalism and the birth of true communism by a hundred years.”

“You know what, they're right.” He beamed.

“They think liberals like you screw up the world by wasting a perfectly good crisis. The system crashes, and you guys rush in and slap on a temporary fix. They want it to crash, so their system can move in and fill the void. They see it as historically inevitable, and liberals like you and FDR keep putting it on life support. That's what they say on the far left.”

“Extremes are bad in both directions. They're right about me though. I haven't given up on all capitalism, just the predatory kind. But why didn't they kill me, and why did they keep me asleep?”

“We don't know. We have theories. It might have been an experiment. There is probably a mixed opinion over there about you, some factions for and against you. If you saw nothing, well, you can't prove where you were.”

David tried to sit up again with the same result. “Man, this feels weird. I must be way out of shape. I've been out for a year and a half and I missed a lot. Obama won. What else happened? Dori said it wasn't even close.”

“We had an economic meltdown, and the republicans lost. There were some insiders betting against, or shorting, the sub-prime housing market. They knew it was a bubble ready to pop, so they shorted it with credit default swaps, or some other crap I don't understand. We got close to the election, and the democrats pulled away in the stretch. When it became clear that Obama would win, well, they popped the bubble and handed him the biggest mess since the Great Depression.”

“Ouch.”

“The republicans got fighting mad and took the gloves off. The conservative majority on the Supreme Court ruled that corporations have the same rights as individuals, and blew out all the campaign finance regulations.”

“What! Oh my God! These are the same republicans that hate advocacy judges or whatever they call them, judges that try and change the law. That's changing the law in a massive way. This is not an umpire calling balls and strikes. This is changing the rules to help the rich.”

“Lots of people think so.” He thought about corporate lobbyists working for China.

“What else is going on?”

“The democrats are working on a financial reform bill, but it ain't pretty. Bank lobbyists are all over them of course. They don't want the loopholes closed, and neither do your Russian comrades. They're watching John Wayne and rooting for the Comanches.”

“Incredible.” David scratched his arms and felt like he needed a bath.

“Ivan thinks this is the end of capitalism. The last thing he want's is Obama to succeed in fixing it. Bush bailed out the banks initially, but Obama kept it up. They gave a ton of free money to the big banks. Not the little banks. Too big to fail. It cost the republicans the election, but now they can play Obama as the guy who bailed out the fat cats. They trapped him big time. If he reverses course and the economy tanks, they'll blame him either way. He was the last one to touch the ball before it went out of bounds. They bounced it off his head.”

“That's a great analogy.”

“I've got a better one. I saw a cartoon with two pug dogs. One asked the other, 'What happened to Obama's popularity?' The other said, 'Bush set the White house on fire, Obama put it out, and the republicans slammed him for using up all the water.’” They laughed.

“Shit. That's right, but I smell big trouble. If they don't actually

fix what's causing these bubbles, then according to the cycle of history guys, the historians who say history goes in cycles of about a lifetime, we are due for a depression and then a world war. I hope they're wrong."

"Me too."

"Boom time. Take the rules off. Depression. World war. Put the rules back on. Boom time again. Around and around."

"Could be."

"Got any more bad news"?

"Well professor, it's time to tell you about the oil."

"Well, I know they didn't nationalize it. What's the price of gas"?

"Three bucks a gallon, but that's not the problem."

"What"?

"We had a spill. An offshore rig blew up, and now the entire Gulf of Mexico is full of oil."

"Oh my God. How full"?

"Worse than the Exxon Valdez. You ready for this. A private company put in the safety system, screwed it up, and caused the spill. The other private company, the one that owned the rig, they thought it was too expensive to put in a backup system to stop a leak, and they got burned. Everywhere else but here, in Europe I guess, they have laws requiring a back up system, but our law doesn't require it. At least that's what my boss said. There's your argument for nationalization."

"The profit monster strikes again. Who get's the bill for cleaning it up"?

"The president says the company does, but there's no way they can afford it."

"The taxpayers pay. Privatize the profits, and nationalize the risk." David pointed to a water glass with a straw in it. "Can you hand me that"?

"Doc says you can't drink yet. They said it's like coming out of surgery. They waited until we were airborne to start giving you

the antidote or something, a little at a time.

“God I'm thirsty. Well, the gulf being full of oil, does that have anything to do with the timing of my release?”

The suit smiled. “Not officially, but if you should use the opportunity to bash the oil companies around over this, let's just say the administration wouldn't object.”

Davis smiled. “He supports nationalization. He'll say so too.”

“Hell no. He's a politician. He's never going to say that on the record, but my guess is, well, he's probably not for complete nationalization, but he'd like to see the government control the part of the oil we need for the military. He's also for alternative energy, so he's not going to hate three dollar gas. Low gas prices would kill research into new fuel sources.”

“Can I go back to sleep now?” They laughed.

“What are you complaining about? Go back to your teaching job and run your movement. You're safe now, as long as you stay away from crooked cops and drug dealers.”

“That's right.”

“You can run your movement now and keep your job too. You ain't going to be real popular with the right wing school you teach at, but hey, you ain't exactly in bad shape either.”

“That's right.”

The suit pushed a button and everybody came back. Dori kissed David and hugged him hard. “I love you baby.”

“I love you too. Let's get married right here and now. This is a ship, an airship. The captain can marry us.”

“No. We have reservations to get married on the ground. I set it up. All I need is you.”

He tried to pull her close. “I see. That sounds great, and I want to talk to you about something else.”

She teared up. “Shoot big boy.”

“You know how I loved it at the University of Iowa, how it was simpler there and everybody got along, and how I can go back there and teach forever and get tenure, and marry you, and get a

big house with a dozen motorcycles in the garage, and have kids, and get them little motorcycles, you know.”

“I sure do. You don't need the University of Chicago. Who needs all the politics anyway. You could be dean at the U of I.”

He clapped his hands. “Bingo. That's what I wanted to hear. Let's move to Iowa. I get to go home. Can we go right now?”

“No.” She laughed and spun around.

“Why not?”

“Because I'm in law school.”

“Not...”

“At the University of Chicago.”

“Oh no.” They laughed.

Somebody yelled, “Oh my God no”! The crew behind them crowded around a guy on the radio like somebody just attacked Pearl Harbor.

“What is it,” asked David.

A nurse turned around and said, “The Dow just fell a thousand points in a few minutes, and then it went right back up for about half of that. They say a trillion dollars evaporated in like five minutes or something.”

David laughed and said, “Welcome to capitalism.”

### About the Author

Joe Phillips is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. He received a Bachelor of Science degree in Sociology from Illinois State University with High Honors in 1980 and a Master of Social work degree from the University of Illinois in 1983 with a specialty in National Social Welfare Policy. He worked in child welfare before beginning psychiatric social work at the Veteran's Administration, the Illinois Department of Human Services, and eventually the Illinois Department of Corrections. He is retired from Chester Mental Health Center, a maximum security psychiatric hospital in Chester Illinois. He is also the bandleader, lead singer, and guitar player for The Belleville Blues Band in Belleville Illinois near St. Louis.

### Another Disclaimer

I just saw one of John Grisham's disclaimers at the end of one of his books so I decided to add another one like it. Here goes. I made all this stuff up. It's fiction. Obama didn't free my protagonist and the mayor of Chicago didn't look the other way when the cops bent the rules. All the stuff in here that people did was made up. Just because Berwyn is a real place does not mean that they did drugs in a bar there. You know what I mean, but this is because lawyers exist. It reminds me of a paint ladder I saw once that the manufacturer printed THIS IS NOT A STEP on the little fold out shelf that holds the paint can. Here goes. This stuff is not true.